World Under Seige

by grecianviolet

Summary

The Avengers are losing the war. The world has begun to surrender to Loki and his army. After surviving on her own, Jane Foster finds herself under the control of the man who is trying to bring her world to its knees.
Chapter One

This fic is an exploration of the dark what-if? of the Avengers. What if, instead of coming together and kicking ass, the team found themselves hunted down and on the run? The first inspiration for this story originated in the Thor universe, since I like Jane Foster and the Thor dynamic. I don't know where Jane will end up, as Thor is one of those fandoms where I like heroine/hero and heroine/villain with equal preference. I hope you enjoy the story!

~*~

When Thor disappeared from Earth (Midgard, she supposed it was, too) Jane Foster threw herself back into her work. Every night, she tracked down the pressure differentials that heralded an approaching storm and recorded the night skies underneath them, hoping and praying that the strange constellations that had attracted her to the phenomena would reappear.

They did not.

Darcy stayed with her until the end of the summer, driving the van while she recorded, measured, and photographed. While she continued to complain bitterly about the safety of driving a van into the whirling heart of a storm, she never refused to come with Jane, nor did she go to bed early when Jane stayed awake, developing and analyzing the masses of information taken from these storms.

SHIELD had been surprisingly helpful as well, offering equipment (even some spectrometers that Jane hadn’t known to be in existence), vehicles, and extra research personnel. She refused. Not that she carried a grudge, but she didn’t trust them. Even Agent Coulson showed a squirrely kind of urgency in her presence. They wanted Thor back just as badly as she did, but Jane knew that they didn’t want him back for the same reasons.

Something bad was either on its way, or coming soon.

She couldn’t think about that. She just wanted him back…whatever had sparked between them during the three days they had spent together, she didn’t feel whole without it, and she wanted it back. Sometimes it felt as though she were crawling around under her own skin, searching for something that should have been there, but wasn’t.

She wondered if he felt the same. She alternately hoped that he did, and hoped that he didn’t. If she was this miserable, it was hardly fair to hope that someone else was too. Then again…

She tried not to think about it.
Three months went by, and eventually Jane conceded defeat…sort of. She turned her concentration on the Einstein-Rosen Bridge. If the bridge was not going to open from Asgard on its own, then she would find a way to open it. Her theoretical models grew to frightening levels of perplexity—even Erik had to shake his head after a while and leave her to her speculations—but no matter how she tried to make it work, she was short one massive power source.

Theoretically though, her pathways were a beautiful quantum roadmap to the stars. The information Thor had given her, anecdotal as it was, had pushed her mind onto entirely new pathways, and with entirely different premises about the nature of energy and the universe, she had come to some impressive conclusions.

SHIELD agreed with her. One month after she started her theoretical research, she got a call from the infamous Tony Stark, who was apparently also affiliated with SHIELD, and he brought her to New York City, where SHIELD finally introduced her to the Cosmic Cube, the strange item that had stolen Erik from her for so many weeks during the past four months.

Jane forgot to be angry with him in her fascination over the Cube. It took her 48 hours to read through all the accumulated research that SHIELD gave her access to, and on the morning of day three she marched into the lab, flashing her newly-laminated ID card, and told everyone to stand back.

_This_ was the key. This was the energy source and the manipulation potential both. Jane took measures and consulted with Tony—the Cube’s foremost specialist, despite Erik’s important contributions—and laid a proposal in front of Nick Fury one week later.

When the notoriously difficult-to-please SHIELD headman okayed her project, Jane felt another thrum of worry. After four months of being left on her own, out of the loop, away from the tremendous discover that the Cube represented…

Something big was happening. They would never have brought her in otherwise.

The night before the activation of the portal, Jane did not sleep. She wandered down to the lounge, which was always open, and found Tony Stark and Pepper Potts curled into each other on one of the wrap-around sofas that overlooked the city’s gleaming skyline. They separated when she entered—Pepper tightening her neat bun, Tony fumbling with the buttons on his shirt—and Jane felt her worry fade as her heart gave a knifelike expansion, gutting her with its sudden movement.
She wanted him back. Nothing else mattered.

Which was why, when morning dawned and black-suited agents that she had never seen before came to collect her and transport her out of the city, she screamed and lashed out and swore like she never had in her life before.

When she saw Erik waiting for her on the runway next to a nondescript private jet, she spat vitriol with all the strength she could muster and almost took out one of his eyes with a swiping fist.

Afterwards, she would look back on those passionate hours and wonder if she had ever felt so strongly about anything in her life before. She would wonder how such words came to her lips, how she could have behaved so to someone who had done nothing but love her damn near all her life.

Then she thought of Thor and their almost-had, their never-was, and she did not wonder anymore.

When he landed on the planet, drawn down the pathway opened by her research, she was not there. She knew that he had arrived, but had no idea if SHIELD had told him of her existence. She wondered if he thought of her, or if the threat that suddenly crashed down on them all had wiped her from his mind.

The thought of intergalactic war terrified her. Every morning when she woke up, she stared at the concrete wall of her room in the SHIELD compound in Uppsala, Sweden, and felt a dull blankness settle over her, blunting all emotions except fear.

That fear made her hands tremble when she washed her hair in the shower, made her feet uncertain when she trudged to the research laboratory to study the temporal holes ripped in the fabric of her world by the portals opening all over the planet, and made her heart lurch and stutter in her chest as she watched the media reports of the strange worldwide events.

Jane Foster was afraid. But what made it even worse was not knowing if he even thought about her, if he feared for her safety, if he had asked to see her…or not.

They did not tell her. She did not ask.

At the start of the Avengers War—which was what the newsrooms had started to call it, before they all went dark—Jane Foster merely continued the research she and Erik had been assigned.
They could not fight, but they could try and help the Avengers (help Thor, her mind insisted) by finding predictors that could keep them from being outflanked by Loki’s movements.

Eventually, despite Erik’s less-than-enthusiastic nature, Jane did manage to find certain anomalies—in atmospheric pressure, go figure—that appeared every time Loki was about to launch a magically-dependent assault.

She did not know if Thor knew of her contribution, if he knew that she had helped turn the tide of their battle…she hoped he did. She couldn’t fire arrows, or fly, or turn into a green rage monster (oh, Tony) but she could help him fight.

But two weeks after her discovery, none of it mattered.

Because Loki won.

~*~

Stockholm was far enough away from Uppsala to be a decent hiding spot. The Swedish government had surrendered early to Loki after the breaking of the Avengers Initiative, and even though Jane knew that he had issued orders that any members of the SHIELD research facility were to be turned over to him, she did not think they would find her.

The two SHIELD agents who had stayed behind when the evacuation command had been given must have done their jobs and wiped all computer records, because to Jane’s knowledge, no warrants had been issued for her, Erik, or any of the other researchers or security on staff.

Jane stuffed her chilly fingers into the pocket of her gray jacket and walked faster. She wondered what had happened to those agents—just as she wondered what had happened to Tony, and Pepper, and Steve Rogers, and Clint BartonNick FuryNatashaDarcy and Thor, Thor, Thor—but she stopped herself.

There was no use in wondering. There was nothing she could do.

She ran up the four flights of stairs to the apartment she shared with Erik. Everyone around them seemed to share the tacit assumption that the two of them were in some sort of illicit relationship—the older Swedish man and the young American—but no one asked any questions.
No one seemed to be curious anymore. Everyone seemed to be waiting for the other shoe to drop, for the war still raging in other countries on the planet to be over, and for someone to tell them that it was okay to think and feel again. The prevailing opinion in Sweden seemed to be that it didn’t matter who won…just as long as stability could reappear.

Jane thought sometimes that she might hate everyone in Sweden. And Finland, and India, and all the countries in Africa, and Argentina, Brazil…she couldn’t even remember all the countries that had surrendered thus far. She hated them all.

She slammed the door behind her and dropped her backpack onto the kitchen table with a thud. Erik didn’t even turn his head; he was used to her moods. Besides, he was busy listening to the one radio station (government run, overseen by the Kree-Skrull enforcers Loki had deployed in every conquered nation) still left in existence.

Jane still did not speak Swedish beyond the basics, but she didn’t need to; she heard the announcer’s timid, warbling voice and knew that he was spewing the same garbage that he had been for the past six weeks. Loki would bring the war to a swift close and bring the peace and strong rule that everyone on Midgard required….blah, blah, blah.

“I don’t know how you can listen to that crap,” she gritted out, yanking the zippers on her bag open and starting to unload the groceries. “It’s the same old stuff.”

Erik did not answer. Jane shrugged her shoulders and plopped the canned fish and soup onto the pantry shelves. This last run had taken nearly all their savings—infation was through the roof and most of the neighboring countries were embroiled in fighting and not able to think about exporting—and she had no idea what they would do when this two-week supply ran out.

The possibility of starving to death no longer made her afraid. It pissed her the hell off.

She picked up a can of herring and hurled it at the radio. It spat sparks and lurched sideways off the coffee table.

Erik did not answer. He did not even move. Jane’s rage faded as concern rushed to take its place. Running to the living room, she grasped her old friend by his shoulders and gave him a gentle shake.
“Erik?” she murmured, trying to catch his eyes, “can you hear me?”

It was like talking to a puppet. His head rolled gently on his shoulders when she moved him, but his eyes remained focused on some sort of middle_distance, not registering anything, and not blinking, even when she snapped her fingers. Jane started to panic; she didn’t speak Swedish… how could she call an ambulance?

As she turned to go for the phone, she felt fingers close around her wrist, and nearly screamed.

“I’m all right, Jane,” the words were precise, almost annoyed.

“You were not!” she insisted, closing her hand over his fingers, “I came in, and you didn’t say a word, and you wouldn’t look at me even when I was—”

“I am fine.” Each word was as precise as a note on a scale. He stared at her, the corners of his lips turned down in an expression of disapproval she could never remember seeing from him.

Jane let out a shaky breath and collapsed onto the sofa next to him. “I’m sorry,” she said, burying her face in her hands, “it’s just,” she breathed again and tried to get a hold of her riotous emotions, “we’re out of money and running out of food, and I have no idea where anyone is and you’re not talking to me! And we can’t get information about how…how anyone’s doing because of this stupid government administered stuff!”

Erik did not answer. Jane grasped one of his hands in both her own, seeing streaks of her tears drying on the wrinkled skin of his wrist and she went on, “Why can’t we try to get over the border? We could go west, head towards Oslo—Norway hasn’t surrendered yet!—and then we could try and join up with…with everyone else. We could help them!”

“Jane,” his voice was flat, reproving, “there’s no getting out of this. We would never make it across the border; the Kree-Skrull are everywhere.”

She drew back, slowing drawing her hands away from him. “You don’t even want to try?” she asked, quietly. “You just want to sit here and eat soup and listen to the radio and wait for our world to end?”

He didn’t even flinch. “There’s no sense in trying. We’d both get killed.”
Jane stood up, feeling as though she were standing in front of a stranger. Those eyes were not Erik’s eyes. She had no idea where he had gone—who was she to judge how someone dealt with these crazy circumstances?—but she could not stay here.

“I have to try.”

The expression on Erik’s face hardened suddenly, and turned sharp. She felt as though he were actually looking at her, as he had not looked at anything for the last few months, but rather than feeling relieved at his sudden awareness, she felt a sudden lance of panic.

Her lips twitched, but other than that, she kept still. She spoke quietly.

“I won’t take much of the food; just enough to make it to the border crossing,” she backed off towards the kitchen and started to put some of the cans back into her bag, “and you can keep all the money. Somehow I don’t think those monsters will accept bribes.”

Her not-joke made no impression. Erik’s eyes stayed with her, sharp and calculating. Her stomach felt full of lead. How had she not noticed that she was living with a stranger?

“I’ll leave tomorrow morning,” she finished, zipping up the bag and leaving it on the floor next to the kitchen counter, “so if you change your mind, you can come with me.”

He said nothing. She walked past him and had to fight her gut instinct to keep her eyes on him at all times. It was only when she shut her bedroom door behind her that she felt the cold sweat of horror break out over her forehead, and she pressed her shaking fingers to her mouth to keep from screaming.

That night, like many others before, was spent in sleepless restlessness. Jane moved quietly around the room, packing her warmest, smallest clothes—two outfits was the most she wanted to bring—as well as rolling her printouts of research into tight tubes and packing the bottom of her bag with them. She made two electronic copies of her hard drive and secreted one in the most unnoticeable pocket on her backpack, and hung the other USB drive on a chain around her neck.

The rest of the night, she spent studying maps of the possible areas she might try to cross the border. Internet communication had been down since the surrender, but there were a few old almanacs left in the apartment by the previous tenant, and Jane traced the faded pictures with her
finger, committing the strange names of the towns and hamlets on either side of the crossing to memory.

Not once did she discern a noise from the other side of the door. Not a sigh, a snore, a footfall, or a door closing. For all she knew, Erik was still sitting on the couch like a puppet without its master, staring at a radio that was long silent. Jane shivered.

When dawn finally peeked around the blackout curtains in her window, she shouldered her bag and eased the door open, breathing a silent sigh of relief when she did not see Erik in the living room, or the kitchen beyond. His bedroom door was shut, and she considered knocking…but no. Whatever had happened to him, this Erik was not the one she loved and depended on. Until he was that way again, she could not trust him.

Her feet were silent as she crossed the apartment. Everyone had learned how to walk silently over the last few weeks, but if Jane had not been so focused on her feet, she might have been able to grapple with the shape that lunged at her from behind the kitchen counter and clapped a cloyingly-sweet rag over her mouth.

Her vision tunneled and went dark, but what frightened her most was the voice that was at the same time Erik’s and not Erik’s, hissing at her:

“Oh, no, darling. You’ll not go running back to him.”

~*~

Jane’s memory of the trip was a haze of fuzzy images punctuated by jabs from a needle.

She saw the inside of a ship, but not the kind of ship she knew; one that was piloted by the nightmare Skrull who hissed and chattered at each other as they walked deftly between the consoles. As soon as she opened her parched mouth to scream, Erik’s hand was pressing down on her arm with enough pressure to bruise bone, and her vision went dark.

Then she was on a boat—a small one, for she felt the spray from the ocean—and she had enough time to sit up, though her stomach heaved as she did it. Jane thought she was going mad, for there, right above her, was the golden torch of the Statue of Liberty. The torch was there, while the head was nothing more than a crumpled, smoking ruin. She gasped and felt a wrenching in her heart. The pain in her chest drowned out the one in her elbow as someone drugged her again.
The third time she woke, Jane did not stop to take stock of her surroundings. She launched herself upright from the medical gurney—they had not strapped her down—and scattered nurses right and left as she bolted through the open doorway, her IV ripping a bloody line down the crux of her elbow and the back of her hand as she ran.

Her legs were so weak that she was not really running; she was simply delaying her fall. Eventually, her own exhaustion caught up with her and she crashed to her knees, and the doctors were able to drag her backwards without too much resistance; she could not even yell for help.

Back on the bed, looking at the faces around her, she realized that yelling would do no good. These people were human, but what deals they had made with Loki she could not know. She only knew that they looked at her with eyes that were stripped of emotion.

Jane couldn’t help herself; she was too frightened to be angry.

“Please,” she whispered, as the needle came down once more, “please.”

They did not say a word.

~*~

Her eyes fluttered open.

She was lying on a white sectional sofa, her head propped up on one of the armrests, and there was light coming through the windows. It was a gray light—pale, as though the sun had abandoned all efforts to get through the cloud cover. It was February, but she was not cold, even though she wore only a t-shirt and some cotton pants; this place, unlike all the others she had found herself in since the start of the war, clearly had enough money to be adequately heated.

Jane blinked, and shifted, trying to take discreet account of her body.

Her arm hurt, and a glance from the corner of her eye showed a thick bandage wrapped around her palm and one around her elbow. Otherwise, from her toes to the top of her head, she felt all right. There were a few bruises here and there, and her knees were sore, but she felt all right. She must not have been unconscious for too long…but then, how long does it take to travel from
She sat up, slowly. The sedatives in her system made for a slightly woozy feeling behind her eyes, and her stomach warned her not to try running again, but her feet had enough strength to flex underneath her and get her upright.

Jane looked around the room and wondered at her overwhelming sense of déjà-vu.

Kidnapped, dragged halfway across the world…and here she was, in Tony Stark’s penthouse lounge! There was the dartboard where Clint had beaten them hollow, even after four shots…and the bar where Tony had insisted on juggling bottles of vodka until they all shattered…and the pool table, where she and Erik had talked string theory until the wee hours…and the sofa—she turned around and stared at it—where Pepper and Tony had cuddled and made her weep with jealousy.

That unbelievable bastard.

Her anger threatened to swamp her; her stomach roiled and her feet fumbled for purchase as her vision blurred with fury, but she hugged it to her. For whatever reason, she had been brought here, to the epicenter of the conflict, and whatever lay ahead, she would need all her anger to get her through.

“May I offer you a drink, Miss Foster?”

Damn her, but she flinched at the sound of that smooth voice. How many times had she heard it, flowing from that eerily beautiful face broadcast on TV, and felt sick with hatred or sorrow as she listened to its lies about truces and peace and then watched her world blown apart?

Loki. She turned, and raised her eyes.

He stood by the bar, at ease in a high collared dark green tunic and black pants. Runes stitched in silver ran around the collar and in two columns down the front of his shirt, and Jane picked out meanings here and there—spells of protection and summoning, mostly—before she looked up and met his eyes.

“Water, please.”
The even tone of her voice shocked her, but she noticed that his eyes widened momentarily as well. Clearly, she wasn’t just astonishing herself; but she kept her smile of triumph on the inside.

*Suck on that, creep.*

His expression of surprise vanished in an instant, and he inclined his head towards her in a mocking half-bow.

“As my lady wishes,” he said, and summoned an emerald-studded silver goblet out of empty air, offering it to her. His still posture told her that he had no intention of being enough of a gentleman to carry it to her; if she wanted it—and her body screamed for hydration—she would have to go to him.

Jane had no experience dealing with warlords. Or villains. Or psychopathic madmen. But she had the distinct sense that playing along would probably be safer all around. Her sore knees creaked as she moved, and she reached out with her right hand before remembering it was bandaged. The goblet was too heavy for the injured arm, and she grabbed at it with her left hand, a quiet “ow” escaping her mouth before she steadied the cup.

She took a deep swig of the water before forcing herself to lower the cup and breathe deeply. Drinking too fast after dehydrating would give her indigestion, or worse…she counted fifteen before raising the goblet again and taking two shorter pulls of water. Between her lashes, she could see Loki’s vibrant green eyes studying her actions, and almost choked on her swallow.

She breathed again, and set the goblet down. There was a long moment of silence.

“Thank you,” she said. The words were reflexive, not heartfelt, and she stepped backwards, placing another two paces between herself and his stolid countenance. Her eyes dropped to the carpet, and she focused on trying to sort out her riot of emotions.

“Look at me,” the command was soft, but no less a command for that. She almost felt the strands of magical influence he was rumored to wield plucking at her skin, wheedling her to do as he said.

She felt her heart beat sharply, twice. She took a quick breath.

“No.”
The silence was awful; she waited through it, somehow not caring if he killed her, because if she were here, then her life was done anyway…

“Miss Foster,” the smooth voice was rough now around the edges, and she gritted her teeth and kept her knees from shaking, “look at me.”

She bit the inside of her lip; her knees were shaking now. “No.”

He lunged forward, faster than she could react, and her chin was between his long fingers, biting bruises through the tender flesh. Her eyes met his, brown against the green, and she felt his power tearing through the borders of her mind, ripping through memories as easy as he might tear the physical neural tissue.

Images passed before her eyes as he dragged them up: her hands, soldering a piece of equipment, Erik’s face, smiling at her, Darcy sticking her tongue out behind her iPhone, Thor smiling, Thor laying his coat over her, the night sky and Thor’s hands, sketching the branches of the World Tree…

Jane yelled, both her hands coming up to push his forearms away from her, and she lurched backwards, breaking the connection between the two of them.

“Those are mine,” she gasped, left arm grabbing at a barstool to keep herself upright, “how dare you?”

He laughed. It turned her stomach, the callous cruelty of the sound, the high pitch, the edge of hysteria that danced the periphery.

“How dare I?” He asked her, parroting her words in her breathy, offended tone, “Why should I not? You,” he snarled, the mirth of his voice turning instantly to disgust and malice, “are nothing. Your kind used to worship me as a god. Gods owe their supplicants no explanations.”

Jane stared at him, anger rising to meet his. “You aren’t a god. You’re just a pathetic little boy, lashing out at everyone that never did you any harm. An entire race that never did anything to hurt you. Your brother, when all he did was love you—”
His hand rose, and she felt the impact of the slap even though he did not touch her. Her head whipped to one side and her skin burned.

“You know nothing of me. Or of Thor. Or of anything beyond your pathetic store of mortal knowledge.” He drew closer to her, and she could not move, even when he laid his cold palm over her lips. “You know nothing,” his voice was soft, though his eyes were deadly, “so you should say nothing.”

And when he took his hand away, Jane found that she could say nothing. She opened her mouth and tried to speak, and then tried to scream, but not the slightest whisper came out. She touched her throat and could not even feel her vocal chords responding; he had paralyzed them. She looked up at him and bared her teeth in an animal snarl.

“Yes,” he nodded in satisfaction, “until you can learn to speak with humility and respect, I think you will stay silent. Now,” he smiled, the grin nearly splitting his face in two, “isn’t this a pleasant scene? A beneficent ruler and a…properly discreet supplicant, sharing a friendly drink in comfortable surroundings. Don’t you agree, Jane?”

Though she had no idea whether he would understand the gesture, Jane flipped him off.

He laughed again, but the sound was not so urgent as before. It was lazy, mocking.

“I must say, I had expected more of the erudite Miss Jane Foster. Everyone I have spoken to thus far has nothing but the highest praise for you. And your mentor, Erik Selvig…” he sighed, shaking his head, “he thought the world of you.”

At the mention of Erik, Jane flipped him off with both hands.

Loki stopped smiling. “Do that again, and I will cut those fingers off.”

Angry as she was, she did not doubt his word. She closed her hands into fists and ground her nails into her palms. He picked up where he had left off.

“Yes indeed, everyone has the highest opinion of you, Jane,” he took his glass of wine and sat on the sofa, staring at her still where she stood next to the bar, “the man of iron, his little redhead lover, the archer, and the assassin…once the screaming stopped, that is, they all had nothing but
good things to say of you.”

Jane did not look at him. She closed her eyes, feeling as though she might faint, throw up, or both. Tony…Pepper…Clint…Natasha…oh God, half of the Avengers! It couldn’t be true, she thought quickly, he was just saying it to throw her off, to get what he needed from her. She had to be tough; she had to hang in there. She opened her eyes and faced him, doing her best to keep her face nonchalant.

She lifted one shoulder in a so what? gesture.

He laughed again, the sound now full of genuine amusement.

“You know, I didn’t think you’d be worth keeping around, Jane Foster,” he said, eyes sparkling—Jane was struck by how truly happy he seemed—and grin boyish, “not after I’d used you as bait for Thor, that is. But now,” he stood and took her face in his two hands again, “I think I may have to keep you. You have no idea how quickly one can get bored with peons.”

Lost fingers or not, Jane struggled to get away from him. But his hands merely slid from her face to her shoulders, and her body froze in place. She bit the inside of her lip to get some control; if he tried to invade her mind again, she would have to beat him back, somehow. He could not ransack her memories like this…they were hers, they were all she had left of the world he’d destroyed…she would not let him do it.

But that was not his intention this time. He only studied her face, taking in every feature; then patted her shoulder with one hand and broke the holding enchantment. Jane stumbled two steps backwards and almost fell; this time, it was her weak right arm that stopped her. Though her cry made no sound, he still saw the expression of pain.

He snapped his fingers, and two Skrulls entered the room. He motioned with his head and they crossed the space to take each one of Jane’s arms.

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“Take her back to the doctors and have them do something about that arm. Then take her to her room.”

They started to drag Jane away—she could no more resist them than a rag doll—but Loki’s voice stopped them once more.
“Miss Foster?”

She turned, and stared at him.

“I think next time I will let you speak. But do remember what I said about respect and humility, hmm?”

She clenched her fists, took a deep breath, and gave a sharp nod.
The two Skrulls walked Jane down the corridor after a trip to the doctors for some Percocet for her aching arm, frog-marching her at a pace just beyond the natural stretch of her legs. She clamped down on her pain and clutched at the bottle of pills in her hand, willing herself to focus on her feet and the hard edges of the plastic and not the warm trickle of blood she could feel emerging from under the edges of her bandages.

What was the point, she thought sourly, of taking her to the doctors to fix her arm only to rip it open again?

She would have raised the point, if she could have spoken. Then again, she was almost positive that, whether the subject of Loki's orders—and apparent care—or not, they would not mind hurting her in the slightest. After some of the news reports she'd seen, she was certain that they could snap her neck and leave her dead in the hallway if she so much as looked at them the wrong way.

Maybe it was better that she couldn't speak. Although even considering the idea that Loki might have done her a favor by taking her voice away was enough to make her give herself a swift mental kick.

Jane had completely lost track of what level of the tower they were in, but she could not recall seeing these doors before. Eventually, they brought her to the last room on the left, unlocked it, and tossed her inside. Jane barely had time to regain her feet and turn around before the door shut and locked soundly behind her.

She gripped her arm and winced as she saw the blood running down her forearm. It would be another few minutes before the medication could conceivably kick in; she would have to tough it out.

"Jane?"

The thin voice, coming from the corner of the small room, made her jump. She whipped around, and saw a disheveled red head of hair sticking up from behind a camp cot. Her mouth dropped open, and she mouthed, "Pepper?"

"Oh, Jane," the usually manicured secretary climbed to her feet and rushed out from her hiding spot, "are you all right?"

Jane let the other woman fold her arms around her, and felt tears pricking hot at the corners of her eyes. She hadn't been hugged...oh, she probably hadn't been hugged since Darcy embraced her at the end of the summer—"so long, it's been...something"—and sped off towards her senior year at New Mexico State. She brought her arms up to grip the rough material of Pepper's shirt, and shook her head, silent sobs jerking her lungs and shoulders.

"Oh, you're bleeding," the other woman moved swiftly, pulling the pillowcase off her pillow and leading Jane to sit down at the edge of the bed. "Let me take a look."

Pepper deftly unwrapped the medical gauze and gasped at the bloody gashes in Jane's elbow. "What on earth happened to you?" she asked, tearing the flimsy material of the pillowcase along the seam.
Jane opened her mouth, and closed it. She let out a silent sigh of frustration and motioned to her throat with her left hand, shaking her head. Pepper's forehead scrunched in confusion.

"You can't speak?"

Jane nodded. Pepper sighed, and wrapped the torn and folded material securely around Jane's arm, tucking the edges in tightly. Once she was satisfied that the wound was covered, she reached into the drawer of the night table next to the cot and fished out a paperback book and a golf pencil, its tip blunt and almost nonexistent.

"I'm sorry," she opened the book to the blank end page and gave Jane the pencil, "it's the best I can do. I think they swept the room for anything that could be used as a weapon; no pens, no light bulbs, and except for the beds, nothing metallic…believe me," she shook her head, "I've looked. That was wedged behind the headboard, so I think they missed it."

Jane scribbled, _Loki's spell, can't speak. What's happening?_

Pepper read her words and scowled. "That asshole."

Jane cocked her head and gave the woman a thumb's up. She didn't think she'd ever heard the other woman swear before…an impressive feat, given the fact that she was responsible for looking after Tony Stark. A weak smile teased the corners of her lips.

"Well, he is," Pepper gave her an answering smile before going on, "well, you've missed a lot. This may take a while."

The physicist looked around and gave an exaggerated shrug: _what else is there to do?_

Pepper was pretty good at reading lips, it turned out, because she laughed bitterly and said, "You're right. All right; you know that it was almost right after Thor came back to Earth that we suffered the first major assault; Natasha went missing and we had to leave New York after a week so that it wouldn't sustain any more damage.

"We evacuated to a SHIELD safe house in Berkley, near where Dr. Banner did most of his original gamma research, and regrouped. For the next few weeks, there were skirmishes in major cities all over the country; it seemed as though Loki were trying to test the strengths of each individual team member, because the type and intensity of the attacks was never the same.

"Natasha resurfaced in New Mexico, and Clint went after her…" for the first time in her grim recital, Pepper's voice faltered, "Tony told him it was a bad idea, but he was determined to go…” she was silent for a moment, then gave a shaky sigh and went on, "and that was the last we saw of Clint."

Jane squeezed one of Pepper's closed fists with her good left hand, trying to give her strength.

"Tony went after him, along with Steve and Thor," Jane's hand flinched and she struggled to rein in the wild beating of her heart. Pepper gasped, "I should have told you at the start! Jane, as far as I know—although I've been a prisoner for three weeks now—he's okay."

It was Jane's turn to give a shaky sigh. She nodded: _go on._

"Anyway, they went after him, but they didn't find him. And…at the same time, Skrulls hit our compound in Berkley. That was when they got me, although I don't know if they managed to get anyone else. I didn't see anyone else, either on the transport ship, or since I've been here."

Jane scribbled, _"Is that all you know?"_
The other woman nodded. "That's pretty much it. Since they put me in this room, I haven't gotten out, and no one except the guards have come in to give me food."

"No Loki?"

"No, thank God," Pepper ground out, "I don't think I'd be able to keep myself from going for him. I don't even know why he wanted me captured; but I don't think it was a random event. But nothing's happened...that I know of, at least."

Jane smiled again. Something about no longer being alone was helping her regain her courage. But her smile faded as she remembered something Loki had said during their nightmare conversation:

_The man of iron...once the screaming stopped, that is, they all had nothing but good things to say of you..._

Oh God.

Loki had Tony...and Pepper didn't know. Jane broke out in a cold sweat, and her hands shook.

"Are you all right?" Pepper's hand moved to her forehead, "You look terrible! Is it your arm, because I have some water, you could take another pill..."

Jane shook her head, mind racing. Should she tell her? After all, it was clear that Loki had lied about torturing Pepper, and from the sound of it, he'd never even spoken to her—so it was possible that Tony was fine and still fighting with the other Avengers.

Then again...she would not have thanked Pepper for hiding the truth about Thor from her—whatever the truth might have been.

She wrote, _"I think Tony's been captured."_

It was Pepper's turn to shake. Her voice was a thin wisp as she said, "How do you know?"

_"He might be lying, but Loki mentioned that he had you, Clint, Natasha, and Tony as prisoners."_

"Oh, God," Pepper gasped, "What else did he say?"

Jane would have given anything not to think for one more moment about the conversation between herself and the mad god. She skimmed over the more terrifying moments—her most precious memories littered before her like so much refuse, his long fingers bruising her jaw, that unhinged laughter, _I will cut those fingers off_—and tried to dredge up the important parts.

_"Only that he was going to use me as bait for Thor. Seems like it worked for Clint, and maybe Tony."_

Pepper moaned, burying her face in her hands. "That's why he took me," she cried, tears blurring the edges of her words, "oh Tony..." she trailed off, and Jane could only wrap her arms around her shoulders and rock her slowly, trying to soothe her unfathomable sorrow.

"Do you..." she sniffled, trying to force back the emotion, "did Loki say whether he was all right? Do you know if he's okay?"

_Once the screaming stopped, that is..._

Jane swallowed, and shook her head, lifting her shoulders in helpless confusion. It would do no
good to relay her suspicions of torture, especially if they were nothing but a horrible invention on the part of the trickster god. There was nothing either of them could do about it.

Or was there?

Jane Foster had always refused to believe that the events of the world were beyond her ability to control. It was the only way she could continue to pursue her line of—what most other scientists called crazy—research, and not imagine that she was going off the deep end. It was the only way she could have continued to look up at the night sky each night after Thor's disappearance and believe, without a shadow of doubt, that she could rip the stars apart to find him again.

If she was justified in her research, and if she truly had opened the pathways between the stars, then she could figure out a way to get them out of this room. If the other Avengers were in this tower, she and Pepper could get to them, set them free, and together they could escape and rejoin the others.

It was no more difficult a job than engineering an Einstein-Rosen Bridge. Jane smiled, with a hard edge to the expression. She had already done that.

She shook Pepper's shoulder, "We have to get out of here. We can find the others and get them out too."

"How?" the other woman's red curls bounced as she shook her head, "I've been over and over this room until I wanted to scream; there's no way out! And the Skrulls are much too strong; we could never get past them."

"We'll figure out a way. We have to try."

Pepper sighed, and swallowed what seemed to be another denial. "All right. We'll try."

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Over the next hour, Jane milked every piece of information about their situation in Stark Tower out of Pepper.

Their room had been one of the servants' rooms; though Tony had most of the help he needed from Jarvis, he also required assistance from a human staff; their room had belonged to the butler. Apparently, the entire floor was the temporary home of some seven different staff members; Pepper suspected that all those rooms had been repurposed as prison cells, but she had never heard anyone else moving around, and the Skrull only ever stopped at her door.

Their floor was connected to the other levels of the building by private elevators which only operated under special staff keys; but if they had a key, they could access any area of the building they wanted.

The tower's interactive AI had been deactivated. Pepper had tried all the voice commands and codes at her disposal, but Jarvis had never made a peep. Jane latched on to this tidbit:

She was running out of paper, but this was important: "If we got Jarvis working again, could he operate the staff elevators without a key?"

Pepper nodded, "He could, but that still wouldn't help us get out of this room. That lock on the door is no technology I've ever seen; it's definitely from the Skrull. And who knows what spells Loki has put on it? Every time I tried to even touch it, it threw off so much heat that I burned my hands." And to illustrate her point, Pepper showed off one pink and blistered palm.
Jane ground her teeth. This plan would have to operate in several stages; on her last few inches of clean paper, she outlined her scheme to Pepper.

Step One: she could try to reactivate Jarvis by manipulating the controls via the butler's interface on the wall. Either the Skrulls had no idea what it was, or Loki had missed the discreet panel in his sweep of the room, but it looked intact. Jane was not a mechanical engineer, but years of putting together her own gadgetry had given her a feel for how machines worked, and it was worth a try.

Step Two: if she could get Jarvis to respond, she would order him to prepare the staff elevator at the end of the corridor. Then, she would have him trip some sort of internal alarm to attract the guards.

Step Three: she and Pepper would incapacitate the Skrull guards and make a break for the elevator.

Step Four: find the Avengers, and go from there.

Pepper took one look at her outline and said, "This is insane."

Jane huffed and arched one eyebrow, clearly communicating: you got a better idea?

"No, but this could easily get us killed! And you have no idea if you can even get Jarvis to respond to you!"

Her lips thinned and she stared hard at Pepper. The other woman finally sighed and said, "I know, I know...what have we got to lose? Here," she pulled two bobby pins from her bedraggled hair, "see if these will help you out at all."

Jane smiled, and hopped up from the bed. Now that she had a direction, something to do, she barely felt the pain from her sore arm. That, or the pain pills had finally kicked in and she was legitimately starting to feel better. Either way, she thought, she was going to try her damndest to get out of this room and get Thor and the rest of the Avengers to make Loki eat every smug word he had ever said.

Getting the console to work was much easier said than done, especially since nothing in the room could legitimately count as a tool. Jane had had to improvise with every bit of ingenuity at her disposal; flattening one of the bobby pins between the springs of the metal cot and using that to pry the smooth console open, stripping the wiring from behind the radiator to act as a circuit connector, and using the mirror from off the wall to reflect enough fading sunlight from outside to enable her to keep working as it started to dip below the horizon.

The whole process was maddening, and Jane had used her frozen vocal chords to scream her frustration more than once as it dragged on. It didn't help that everything she did was more or less a shot in the dark; the technology was much more sophisticated than anything she'd ever built, and though she'd worked with some advanced gear, she had always had SHIELD tech support on hand to help her with troubleshooting.

Pepper, thankfully, was not the sort of person to say "I told you so." In fact, she was the ideal assistant; fetching whatever Jane pointed at, holding whatever needed to be held, and acting as a tireless watchman, signaling every time the Skrull guard approached their end of the hall.

It was finally too dark to work, so Jane replaced the panel on the wall—as loosely as she could—and flopped down on her cot, massaging her tired eyes with the heels of her palms.

"They usually come around with dinner in another half hour," Pepper said, sitting down herself after making sure every sign of their work was erased. "And they bring a candle, if you want to
work some more. It never burns longer than an hour, but it's something."

Jane couldn't look up. She nodded, pressing her lips together to keep from crying. This whole scenario was so frustrating, so insane, that she still had a hard time processing that it was really happening at all. Any moment now, she thought wildly, she would wake up and find that the last six months had not happened; that she was still working in New Mexico on a theory that nearly everyone thought was insane.

That she had never met a tall, blond god who could summon thunder.

She took her hands away from her eyes and glared up at the ceiling. No. No, no.

Jane forced herself to relax and breathe deeply. When the candle came, she could keep trying; for right now, she had to take a break so she could return to the project with a fresh mind. She watched the fading light outside the window and battled the insistent thought that she was dreaming—she didn't think that New York had ever been this dark since its founding.

The only ambient light in the entire city was coming from Stark Tower. And even it—as proved by their little room—was not fully lit.

When the buildings outside faded to nothing more than deep blue shadows backlit by a starlit sky, the lock on their door shuddered and hissed. Pepper shuddered and retreated to the far side of the bed, huddling in the corner. It made Jane sick and furious to see such a strong woman reduced to a trembling wreck like this; she sat up and decided that she would never look at a Skrull in fear again.

It was almost impossible. Their long, reptilian faces and flickering tongues reminded her of a Gorn from Star Trek come to terrifying life, but she closed her hands into fists and refused to shy away. Strangely, it was more the knowledge that Loki wanted her alive that gave her the courage to stand her ground than the knowledge that Thor was waiting for her to find him again. The Skrull would hardly hurt either of them when their master wanted them alive.

They were in the room for barely a minute; just long enough to drop the tray and give the chamber a quick once-over. Clearly, they had given up expecting an escape attempt from Pepper, and did not bother to concern themselves with the addition of another weak human woman. Jane hid her smile; *pride goeth before a fall, assholes.*

The tiny candle did its job, throwing off just enough light to fill the room with trembling shadows. Jane gestured for Pepper to hold it up the moment the Skrulls were out of the room, and pretended not to notice how the light shook as Pepper's shaking hands held it to illuminate the panel.

She worked as quickly as she could, prying back visual feed cables and trying to recognize anything that could reestablish the interface. Her thin tool slipped and threw sparks; she jumped back and shook the burn off her hand, but a blister was already forming.

The male voice sounded as though it were drowning underwater. Pepper gasped, and whispered, "Jarvis?"

Jane dove back towards the panel and twisted the wire she had inadvertently touched. She wigged it this way and that, almost like trying to get a faulty connection to make a clean circuit. After another thirty seconds:

"Miss Potts?"

"Oh, Jarvis!" Pepper's voice wobbled, "It's so good to hear your voice!"
"I cannot access primary systems," the AI sounded exhausted, as though it had been actively trying to work despite Loki's intervention, "many of the controls for the Tower are out of my control."

Jane signaled frantically. Pepper said, "It doesn't matter. Can you access the staff elevators?"

There was a brief pause. "Yes. Those pathways are still unguarded."

"How about security feeds? Can you see where the guards are...can you see where Tony is?"

"I cannot. Security feeds have been disabled throughout the entire building."

Pepper groaned. "Is there anything useful you can give us?"

"I can access physical controls only: door locks, temperature controls, lighting levels...I can open the outer doors as well."

Jane punched the sky. Pepper shared her enthusiasm. "So, if we find where Tony and the others are, you can let us out?"

"Yes."

"Then let's go!"

Jane caught her arm and shook her head. She pointed to the nearly extinguished candle, and then the door lock. There was no way they were going anywhere at the moment, and even Pepper had to swallow her excitement and defer their going until the morning. Helped on by Jane's nods and few scribbled words, the two women made a plan with Jarvis.

Tomorrow, when the guards brought breakfast to them, they would figure out a way to incapacitate them long enough to reach the elevator, which Jarvis would have ready for them. Then, they would discretely search the building until they found the Avengers, figure a way to set them free, and get out.

Their candle guttered and went out, but Jane and Pepper worked long into the night to disassemble one of the cots; the long bars that held the mattresses up were sturdy enough to use as clubs, and if they were lucky again, neither the Skrull nor Loki would see it coming.

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Jane did not sleep that night. The adrenaline from her early success and the chance of escape that morning kept her brain awake and racing. She was alternately dreading and thrilled to face the challenge of the Skrull; at the very least it would feel great to bash her frustrations out on something. But she was afraid; though she thought her life was safe enough—Thor was not yet under Loki's control—Pepper did not have that same security.

If Tony were already a prisoner... She beat those thoughts back. Pepper was willing to take the chance; nothing else mattered.

Jane rolled over on her cot and tried to find a comfortable angle to watch the rising light through the window. Her foot jiggled restlessly, and she hugged the strong metal bar from the cot to her chest; dawn could not come fast enough.

But eventually it did come, and she and Pepper stood ready behind the door for their guards. Pepper murmured, "They come usually a half hour after dawn with breakfast." No other words
passed between the two women as they waited. Cold sweat beaded Jane's forehead and palms, but Pepper looked surprisingly calm.

The lock hissed. Jane raised her weapon.

They were lucky; a sole Skrull came through the door, and one blow from each of their bars was enough to lay him out flat. Jane was beyond taking chances though, and she whacked him three more times as he lay there. Finally, he was still.

"Did you kill him?" Pepper whispered, staring at the prone alien.

Jane shrugged—*who cares?*—and squeezed herself around the lock in the half open door. After looking at the state of Pepper's hand, she didn't want an injury for either one of them. She jerked her thumb in the direction of the elevator when Pepper came out into the hall, and started to walk.

"Well done, Miss Foster,"

Jane whirled around, brandishing her bar, but saw no one in the corridor besides Pepper.

Pepper, who had not moved a step.

Pepper, who was merely standing, one hand on her hip, and *smiling*, a wide, deranged smile that she had only ever seen…

Jane's hand went temporarily nerveless, and she almost dropped her weapon.

*Loki*, she mouthed, and swayed on her two feet.

Pepper/Loki nodded.

"I repeat," and now the voice was a sickening hybrid between familiar friend and barely concealed killer, "well done, Miss Foster."

A furious hissing filled the hallway and the fully conscious Skrull stalked into the hallway.

"Bring her."

Jane recoiled backwards and tried to bring her club to bear, but there was no time before the Skrull was on her and a swift blow to her head made everything go dark.
Chapter Three

Be warned: this chapter is pretty dark. Loki is turning out to be more vicious than I planned, but he seems to write his own dialogue, so I'll let him do his thing. He's definitely the darkest villain I've written, but there's a reason for it, I promise you.

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Jane was getting very tired of waking up like this, with a pounding headache from either being drugged or knocked out. She felt her forehead with the tips of two fingers, and yes, she was going to have a sizeable lump on her right temple. Her vision blurred as she straightened, no matter how carefully she tried to move, and she wondered if she might have a concussion.

Her groan of pain was soundless, still, and she gritted her teeth. Just adding insult to injury, he hadn't removed the silencing spell he'd put on her yesterday. Jane rested her elbows on her knees, and cradled her head in both hands. She breathed deeply and tried not to cry; no matter how overwhelming everything seemed, she had to stay strong.

No one was going to come and help her, so she would have do what she could on her own.

"You are remarkably resilient, Miss Foster," his smooth voice, at least, did not add to the pounding in her head, softly as he spoke. But her shoulders tightened automatically as she heard it, and all her muscles cramped in anticipation—a rabbit's anticipation of fight or flight.

"Especially considering one of your size," he went on, and she distinguished movement creeping up on her from the corner of her shadowed eyes. "The Skrull you…" and here he chuckled, "managed to incapacitate was none too happy with you. I thought the blow would put you under for the day, at least…yet here you are, up after a mere two hours."

Jane raised her head and looked at him. The expression on his face caught her by surprise. It was almost as if—

"I must say,"

As if—

"I am impressed."

Oh, hell no.

He actually did seem impressed with her. What on earth did that mean? Jane couldn't decide whether to be more or less nervous. The way he was smiling at her certainly did not make her comfortable. She dropped her head to her palms once again, rubbed her fingers lightly over the bruise, and straightened up.

If she could be brave in the face of the Skrull—whom she knew wanted to kill her—she could be brave in the face of Loki—who only might want to kill her. Jane wanted to laugh at the absurdity of that particular slice of encouragement.

Her smile must have showed, because Loki's face creased in confusion.

"And now you smile at me? You are full of surprises."

Jane just stared at him, head cocked to one side.
"Oh, that's right," he drawled, snapping his fingers as though the thought had only just occurred to him, "you still can't speak, can you?" He sauntered towards her, smiling wider as she had to crane her neck back to keep track of his eyes. His hand hovered just above her right temple, fingers twitching towards the bruise. She had to use all her willpower to keep from flinching back from his grasp, but he did not touch her.

The pain from her forehead melted away like the skim of ice that drips away in a March thaw.

"Let's remedy that, shall we?"

A quick pulse of green light, and Jane felt as though someone had just connected a circuit in her vocal chords. She drew a quick breath and actually heard the flow of air; she could speak again.

Loki backed away, watching her face as intently as she had studied his. Jane breathed again, and looked away, touching her throat with one hand and her forehead with the other. A deep shudder of relief ran through her, shaking her shoulders and making her heart surge—she could feel the pulse pounding in her ears—but she did not speak.

"Well, Miss Foster? No longer dumb," she could hear the sneer in the word, "so what means this silence? Stubborn, hmm? No…annoyed."

He laughed. "Do you think to impress me with this show of defiance? Or punish me by withholding your pearls of wisdom? You cannot be so foolish."

Jane looked at him again, and could not help the smirk that played around the corner of her mouth. One of her eyebrows quirked upwards as she looked away again. Bluster he might, but the fact that she wasn't bombarding him with abuse was an annoyance; she was not playing according to his rules.

She knew that this couldn't end well, but if she was going to die, she might as well truly amaze the smug bastard first.

Her suspicions were confirmed. An invisible hand grasped her jaw and swung her face back towards his. She gasped, more from shock than pain—the grip was surprisingly light—but the expression on his face made her shiver with stomach-churning fear.

His green eyes were wider than she had ever seen; the entire white was visible around the jade irises, and his dark brows furrowed together above them. His teeth were bared and completely feral; she would not have been surprised if he'd lunged forward to claw at her face with his clenched hands.

"I gave you your voice, Miss Foster," like a mad dog he snarled, "therefore…speak."

Jane spoke.

"What do you want me to say?" her voice was less defiant and more shaky than she would have liked, but there were extenuating circumstances, "What do you want from me?"

The question seemed to diffuse some of his anger. He dropped his hand and the hold on her jaw vanished. She did not dare look away again—much less smile—and she felt no relief when some of the anger smoothed from his brow.

The anger faded, but the capricious madness was not gone.

"How should I know?" he said, smiling. "I hardly know how you did it, after all."
"How I did what? What did I do?"

He dropped onto the sofa across from her and slung his arms over the backrest, looking for all the world like a frat boy about to crack open a can of beer. His smile was only slightly more natural as he went on:

"How you changed my arrogant, careless, condescending, oblivious Neanderthal of a brother. In a mere three days. When, for centuries uncounted—by your measure, at least—he has remained the same."

Jane could not stop the sudden tears that prickled the corners of her eyes when his words conjured the beautiful, smiling, comforting image of Thor. What she wouldn't give to see him here now! She swallowed, hard, and pushed the image away. He wasn't here. There was only her.

And him. And he was waiting on her answer.

"I…" she tried again, "I don't know."

"Your erudition is astounding," his voice was drier than the desert, "but I wonder if you might venture a guess?"

Oddly enough, this was a question that Jane had often considered, since her encounter with the god. She had thought of his arrogant attitude when he first arrived—they will suffice—and contrasted that with his willingness to die for them—you are safe—just before he left. She had wondered the same thing, wondered what had caused that shift.

Like the good scientist she was, she had considered all sorts of variables. The shock of being in a new environment, the disapproval of his father, the loss of his powers…hell, she had even considered the huge number of tiny things—like Poptarts, pancakes, and coffee—that might have gone so far in opening Thor's mind to the smaller lives around him that he had never taken into account.

But even in the safety of her own mind, she had rarely had the guts to think that it might have been her, something about her—her desire to learn, her restless questions—that might have altered him, might have gentled him. And though men before had told Jane that she was beautiful, she never thought that it was any special beauty of face or feature that made Thor kiss her the way he had.

The sheer number of variables had made any definitive conclusion impossible. Jane really had no idea.

She realized that she had still not answered the question. Loki had not spoken, however; merely looked at her from beneath lowered eyelids and waited for her to gather her thoughts. The silence and sheer consideration in his gaze sent a shockwave through her.

For whatever reason, Loki really wanted to know. And if he really wanted this information from her…that gave Jane some leverage.

Her brain whirled, throwing together strategies and analyzing possible outcomes. Despite still shivering when she thought of the unknown limits of his power and the madness that enabled him to wield it to its fullest, she had to try.

"I'll tell you," she said, slowly, weighing each word, "if you answer some of my questions in return."

He smiled, opening his eyes wide again. "The time for negotiations was before you acknowledged
your complete ignorance about my brother's surprising shift. I'm afraid you are—to use the human expression—shit out of luck."

Something snapped inside of Jane. She laughed. Her body released its tension and collapsed against the sofa back, and she put her hands over her face and laughed some more. After about thirty seconds, her laughter faded to chuckles; she pressed her fingertips over her eyes and took a deep breath.

When she looked up, Loki had not moved. A smile played around his mouth, but he did not seem any more upset than he usually did. He cocked his head at her and gestured with an open palm—please, continue.

"That's not bad," Jane said, still feeling her lips tremble with suppressed giggles, "do you have a tutor on Midgardian idioms, or something?"

"You surely do not think I would be careless enough to attempt the conquest of a world I did not thoroughly understand, do you?" He smiled wider. "I was in this realm long before my brother made his reappearance; I know more about the customs and countries of your Earth than you do yourself, my dear Jane."

The endearment turned her blood cold, and the smile dropped from her face.

"For the most part, I have found your race to be barbaric, ignorant, backwards, and ineffective in self-governance. You will not do what is necessary in most cases to ensure the survival of your best, and seem intent on preserving what is most pathetic among you. And yet…there is enough that is worthwhile here that I do not want to merely destroy you."

His eyes fixed on hers and the expression on his face approached something like lucidity.

"I am going to save you from yourselves."

Jane could barely breathe. She felt pinned by the weight of his gaze, spread open like a butterfly to be dissected.

"You may find some relief to know, Miss Foster," he continued, leaning forward and resting his elbows on his knees, "that despite wanting to kill you—wanting to kill you very badly, too—I have seen enough worth in you to spare your life."

Jane swallowed, and her hands shook, but with relief or dread she could not tell. His eyes were too intense, and for a wild, terrifying moment she thought he might bridge that small gap between them…

"And my friends?" Her voice was strained in her throat, but she spoke without tears. "Clint, Natasha, Tony, Pepper? Have you found it," she let her anger take over and spat out the word, "worthwhile to spare their lives too?"

"Ah," he said, sitting back, smiling gently. "I thought we might return to that topic at some point. Tell you what, Miss Foster," he smiled, "you tell me what I want to know, and I will tell you what you want to know. Tell me," he continued quietly, "why my brother changed. Why after a mere three days with you and your pathetic species," his voice was dark with malice, "he returned to Asgard, so much more worthy to assume the throne?"

"I'm a scientist," Jane began, slowly, "and one of the first rules of science is that correlation doesn't imply causation. I can give you my hypotheses, and I can tell you my suspicions, but Thor is the only one who can tell you the truth."
"Very good, Miss Foster," he replied, "much better than your first attempt. Please, do share your thoughts with me."

The word "share" sounded wrong coming from his lips, but Jane tamped down on her feelings of dread and tried to organize her thoughts. She folded her hands, stared down at her interlaced fingers, and began to speak.

"Thor was banished from his home and thrown into a situation that he had no understanding of. The last time he had been to Midgard, he was a god; now, we do not believe in thunder gods..." she paused, and without looking up, "or gods of mischief."

"He was without his powers, and for the first time, he knew what it was like to be at the mercy of others. Even I," she chuckled, "managed to get the better of him, once or twice. And when he tried to use only physical force—which had always worked for him before—to regain his birthright, it didn't work."

There was no motion or sound in the room. Loki did not shift in the slightest, or even seem to breathe.

"Every single one of his deeply-held beliefs about how the world should work was challenged. He was a prince, and became a vagrant; he was strong, and no longer had any power; was once beyond reproach, and now everyone doubted him."

Jane swallowed. She had left out any personal notes, but knew that Loki would not be satisfied until he knew how she played into the equation.

"But I... I was willing to believe him. Even though sometimes I thought he was crazy..." she shook her head, "there was something about him that I trusted. And the idea that he might know about the things I have worked all my life to understand," her voice swelled with longing, "I had to at least try to believe him."

"He fell in love with you," Loki's voice was heavy with a swirl of emotions—she could distinguish disgust, derision, and wonder in equal measure—and he continued, "because you took him in like a wounded baby bird."

Jane's head jerked up, and she met Loki's cruelly twisted lips with narrowed eyes. "It sounds like you think we humans aren't the only pathetic creatures in the universe," she snapped, "and if you think that's all there was to it, you don't understand your brother at all."

"He is not my brother," the last three words dropped like stones from his mouth, "and he never was."

"Whatever," Jane brushed that off, "you two were raised together and have known each other since you were babies; you've fought together and bled together...if that doesn't make you brothers, what the hell would?"

He stared at her as though she had started speaking a foreign language. Jane looked back down at her clenched hands and continued.

"Thor had to rethink his entire life," she said, shaking her head, "He went from knowing just where he fit in to not even understanding the fundamental aspects of the world he thought he would have to call home. Maybe at first he clung to me because I could take care of him—but that wasn't the reason he..." she could not even say the words.

Speaking the word "love" in Loki's presence, especially when the thought of having Thor's love meant so much to her, was sacrilege.
"I believed in him," she concluded, "without knowing for sure that he was a god and a prince and a hero... I only knew that he was a man... a man that I could trust, and fall asleep beside, and would have given my life for. He fell in love with me because I was in love with him. With him, alone... not the prince or the god or the hero. I was in love with Thor."

The simple clarity of her words was like a stream of pure water, cleansing all her dark thoughts and confusion. For all her months of analysis, she suddenly knew that this was as close to the truth as she was ever going to get.

The thought made her sigh softly. Would she even survive to ask Thor how close she had come to guessing his thoughts?

She heard Loki swallow and shift in his seat. He did not speak, and Jane decided not to say another word; she had said her piece, and it was up to him to accept it or not, as he chose.

She heard him chuckle, but the emotion behind the sound was not mirth.

"It makes sense that the mindless adoration of an ignorant child would be what finally conquered the heart of that oaf;"

Jane looked up, met his eyes without fear, and spoke with absolute surety.

"If you really believe that, then you don't know him. And you certainly don't know me."

The smile on his face faded, and his eyes went slowly cold. Still, she did not look away; she knew that she was right, and he was wrong, and she was going to sit there and stare at him until he looked away this time.

But of course, Loki cheated. Though she had only known him for less than forty-eight hours, she was starting to suspect that Loki always cheated.

He slapped her. She had no time to register the motion of his arm before pain exploded across her jaw and cheek and her chin smashed into her right shoulder. The sudden shock of it brought a rush of adrenaline; her cheeks flushed and her eyes clouded over with tears. She closed her eyes and clamped her lips down against the sobs that wanted to bubble up.

"What I do not know, Miss Foster," he hissed, "is immaterial. What you should concern yourself with is what I do know. The whereabouts of your friends, for one thing."

Jane took another moment to compose herself but it did no good; two tears slipped free of her control and ran down her cheeks as she opened her eyes. He stared at the tracks of them on her skin and the smile he gave was so truly pleased that she had to close her eyes again.

"Where are they?" she whispered. "Have you hurt them?"

"Here. And yes."

She bit down on the inside of her lip so hard that her jaw hurt. "May I see them?"

"Of course. I would not be near so discourteous as to think of keeping you apart."

Jane trembled. Torture was something that she could imagine—in her heroic fantasies, that is—withstanding, but in reality... she tasted blood in her mouth and the pain helped clear the veil of panic descending on her. She opened her eyes.
"Stand up, Miss Foster,"

She ignored his offered hand—she couldn't think of anything more impossible than putting her hands on him—and stood up on weak-kneed legs. She felt his gaze on the top of her head like a physical weight. Before she could blink, her left arm was folded under his, and though he was smaller than his brother, she felt the iron strength of his grip and knew that nothing she could do would make him let go.

It was terrible, but she was also shamefully glad of the support. Adrenaline, pain, exhaustion, and fear were combining in a nearly overwhelming cocktail wreaking havoc in her system, and though Jane had never done it before, she somehow knew that she was close to passing out. Didn't everyone say that you saw black spots before fainting? There they were, dancing before her eyes like giant, horrible flies crawling at the edges of her vision.

She wanted to be sick.

"Please do pull yourself together, my dear," the scorn in his voice made her want to slap him, this time, "after all," he walked and she trotted to keep up with his long legs, "we are going to see your beloved friends. Isn't that what you were so valiantly attempting to do just this morning, after all? To fly in like a valkyrie and save your brave warriors?"

"That was the general idea," Jane said, focusing on moving the tired muscles of her legs, "But I suppose that Jarvis, like Pepper, was just an illusion?" The idea of Loki, disguised as her friend, laughing at her feeble efforts to free herself was sickening, but Jane tried to be more angry at Loki than ashamed at herself.

"No indeed," he said smoothly, gesturing her politely into the elevator and pressing the button for the second subbasement, "you managed to resurrect the AI. It may gratify you to know that no one put in that room succeeded in doing the same thing, save your talented Mr. Stark."

"I'll bet that Tony almost escaped, didn't he?" Jane said, smiling as she thought of her reckless, genius friend, "I'll bet he made it past most of the Skrulls and nearly got Pepper out."

"Your intelligence continues to amaze and astound," Loki replied. He leaned close enough for his breath to stir the flyaway hairs at her temple, and continued in a whisper "but he paid dearly for it."

Jane did not speak for the rest of their descent, although Loki continued on for another few minutes, describing in nauseating detail the punishments he'd seen fit to deal to Tony for his near-escape success.

The elevator's chime rang gently as they reached their destination, and Loki's grip was just as inexorable as he pulled her from the elevator car.

"You would not think that being beaten on the soles of your feet would hurt quite so much, would you? But I guarantee it is one of the most painful punishments possible...in the realm of blunt-force trauma, that is."

The black flies swarming in front of Jane's eyes clustered into a single, buzzing mass, and she stumbled, her free hand slamming to the ground as she tried to catch herself. Loki did not let her other arm go, and her elbow and shoulder cracked painfully at the joints. She did not make a sound; she just pressed her forehead into the cold tile beneath her and focused on her breathing.

In...and out. In...and out.

She whispered to the floor. "Come on, Jane. Stand up. Get up."
For once, Loki seemed to be in no rush, though he did not let go of her hand. He could have easily jerked her to her feet or merely dragged her along—he had more than enough strength—but he merely stood, and held her, while she scraped herself up off the floor.

When Jane was standing, he continued down the hallway, at a pace slightly more manageable for her shorter legs. She had just enough strength to keep her spinning head from resting on his arm; he might force her into contact with him, but she would not touch him voluntarily.

"You need not worry, Jane," his voice was soft, and almost comforting, "I have no intention of harming you. Even your Mr. Stark…once he had given me what I wanted, I healed him. He has nothing but the memory of his pains, now. And he was the most resilient; all the others gave me what I needed long before. They did not suffer nearly as much, I promise you."

Jane really did think he was trying to soothe her.

"And I likewise promise, that if you do as I wish, I will not harm you in the least."

She could barely find her voice. "What do you want me to do?"

He did not answer. He stopped in front of a large pair of very solid doors and waved his hand. The locks snapped open, and the two doors—which looked so heavy as to only be opened with some sort of power source—eased apart.

The laboratory inside was absolutely state-of-the-art. Jane recognized where they were at once, having made it like her home for the weeks she was in New York, working on the final plans for the Einstein-Rosen Bridge and collaborating with Tony Stark.

"I will let your friend explain," Loki let Jane go and she grasped at the edge of a table to take her weight, "and bid you farewell."

His smile, she was sure, would haunt her in her dreams tonight.

"As always, Miss Foster," he said, backing out through the closing doors, "it was a true pleasure."

Jane put both hands against the surface of the table and let out a shaky sob. She pressed a hand against her mouth to muffle the noise; if he came back in the room, she was sure that she would scream. The tears flowed freely now, hot over her fingers, and she sobbed again, pressing both hands against her mouth until she could barely breathe.

"Oh, sweetheart," Tony's weary voice came from the back of the lab, "are you all right?"
Chapter Four

He answered his own question immediately.

"Of course you're not," he scoffed at himself, pulling the shocked and shaking Jane in for a hug, "that's a ridiculous question, forget it. I mean; you're not hurt, right? Because if you were," he pulled back and took Jane by the shoulders, staring intently at her face, "I would really have to do something reckless and masculine."

Jane laughed, the sound heavy and wet with tears. "No," she said, swiping at the stray traitor that dripped down her cheek, "I'm not hurt. Not really. I'm just…so glad to see you! And that sounds awful," she shook her head, "because I wish that you were still off in California or Nevada or Tibet, kicking ass, but…" she sighed, and put her flushed face against his shoulder, "I'm so glad to see you."

"I hear you, sweetheart; don't feel bad. I sure as hell wish we were both outta this hell hole, but… I'm glad to see you too."

Jane nodded and felt a weak smile tease the corners of her mouth. Somehow, Tony always made her feel better, even when he made her want to scream. He was so thoughtlessly self-confident, in every situation, that his emotions buoyed hers. Working with Tony was like driving shotgun with a professional racecar driver; he might go way too fast and break all the rules, but at the end of the day, he would get you home safe because he was just that good.

Aside from Thor, she couldn't think of anyone she would rather be held prisoner with.

Her smile grew stronger.

"So what are we in here for? Doesn't this seem a little fancy for two prisoners?"

"Ah," he said, folding his arms and leaning against the edge of the workbench, "we're slave labor, I'm afraid. The great and powerful Loki, apparently, is not so great or so powerful. We've got you to thank for that, by the way."

"Me?" Jane dragged out a lab stool and sat cross-legged, leaning her elbows against her knees, "What did I do?"

"You remember your magical early-warning-system—the one that you developed right before your lab in Uppsala was raided? We still use it. We even miniaturized the original tech so that each operative can wear it as part of standard field gear. Thing kicks up a ruckus when it starts to detect the atmospheric distortions that precede attack, teleportation, what have you, and we can get ready for it."

"He hasn't figured a way around it yet?" Jane asked, feeling her smile widen at the thought of what she had contributed to their fight. She hadn't the smallest idea that SHIELD had been able to make use of her ideas before the war really accelerated, but it seemed as though she might have helped save a few lives, at least.

"He can't really change the nature of his magic, now can he? At least, he says he's not going to, which seems to me to mean that he can't. The bastard would never admit he's weak, but I figure that's the story."

"And I take it that's where we come in?"
"You bet," Tony grumbled, running his hands through his wild brown hair, "he wants us to figure a way around your detection system, and he's not particular about the method. But so far," and here he grinned, and winked, "despite my absolute best efforts…there's no way to do it."

Jane felt her scientific interest peaked against her will. "No shielding, or way to disable the technology on our side?"

"Whose side are you on?" Tony said, looking at her sideways. "But no. Your system was pretty clever; by honing in on the inevitable disturbances that magical forces cause in the universe, you found a way of detecting an incoming spell in a way that can't be countered."

"Newton's laws apply to everything, I guess. That's…kind of comforting."

"Isn't it? But we're still stuck here, trying to figure out a solution to a situation that has none, at least in my opinion, which is a pretty thorough one."

"So why doesn't he just give up? Why are you still in the lab?"

"Well, he's got other problems," Tony's expression was outright gleeful, "you might not have heard this, since it's kind of a recent thing, but the mutants? Most of them have decided not to put up with his world-conquering crap and have started to resist."

"The mutants?" Jane gasped, "I never would have thought they'd come out united in support of anything!"

"Well, I never mentioned united," Tony said, shaking his head. "Most of them are just fighting back in their home countries to keep people from being killed or imprisoned. And some bands of them—three guesses who, of course—have decided to join Loki. Seems he promised them dominion over their home countries, provided they swore loyalty to him first. But a lot of mutants are fighting, all over the world…and since he can't know in advance what their powers are or how many are in each country, he and his Skrull are getting their asses kicked more often than not."

"That's great!" Jane cried, "But what does that have to do with us?"

"Well, he wants us to work on a way to neutralize the mutant threat. He raided the government supply centers for the anti-mutant vaccination, but the production methods were either hidden too well or destroyed before he could get to them. He's used pretty near his entire supply of the vaccine, and he needs more."

"But," Jane shook her head, "neither of us are doctors. The materials and genetic research behind the vaccine were never made public knowledge, nor do we have any mutants to perform any testing on. How does he expect us to come up with anything useful?"

"Not a clue. I told him the same things—in more…colorful language—while he was giving me frostbite. He doesn't much like hearing excuses," he said, rubbing at a puckered patch of skin on his upper arm, "so I've been tossing around some ideas. It's the last thing he wants that I think we can actually do."

Jane felt a shudder of dread creep down her spine. "What else does he want?"

Tony sighed. "He wants portals. Pathways to Asgard and the other realms that can accommodate an army."

"But…" Jane shook her head, "from what I understand, he can already travel between the realms without using the Asbru Bridge. Why should he need us to create portals for him?"
"Oh, he can travel. But he can't drag his army after him, one soldier at a time. Apparently, his power isn't enough to open and sustain a stable pathway; but he knows that we can do it. I've been holding off on it for as long as I can, insisting that you're the only person that had complete knowledge about the bridge…but now that you're here, that'll be a moot point."

"Still, we both have the knowledge to open a portal, but without the energy from the Cube, we can't really create a bridge; we never could. He doesn't expect us to overcome that minor problem, does he?"

"He knows that we used the Cube. And he tells me that he is going to get the Cube back. When he does…” Tony sighed and rubbed the back of his neck, "it's not going to be good for anyone."

"Who has the Cube now?"

"SHIELD's still got it. I don't think old Fury's gonna let that get anywhere out of his cycloptic sight. But it may only be a matter of time. Once Loki finishes conquering Earth," he finished grimly, "he's going to go after Asgard."

Jane stood up. "It's not going to happen, Tony," she said, putting one hand on his forearm, "we're not going to let him do it."

"You're right," he agreed, "but I'm drawing a blank about how we're going to stop him. You haven't been in the fighting, Jane," he went on, putting his hand over hers, "and I'm really glad for that. But it's been brutal. Wherever he's bringing them from, the Skrull seem endless. And even though we know when he's going to launch a magical assault, he can do things that we can't predict and have no time to counter. The best we can do is get under cover. He brought the entire Berkeley complex down in about an hour, and that was with everyone except Natasha and Clint working against him. And you've seen what he's done to the city."

"His power isn't endless," Jane said, "There's no way he can use all this power without draining himself, and the Skrull? They're trying to conquer an entire world. A world where a lot of people are rising up to stop him. If the mutants are fighting, it's only a matter of time before they start turning the tide, and ordinary people see that there are things they can do to fight as well. And we," she finished, "we are going to get out of here. We're going to get out of here, and we'll figure a way to use the Cube's power to stop him cold."

Tony stared at her. "Where did the nervous little chipmunk scientist I used to know disappear to?"

She punched him, "I am not a chipmunk."

"You're right; you're too cute to be a chipmunk. How about a ferret?"

Jane smiled. "That's not bad. Did you know that ferrets are notorious cage-breakers?"

For the first time since she'd seen him again, Tony laughed. "As a matter of fact, I do. I used to have a ferret, when I was a kid. My dad always complained that it was always underfoot. Like me."

"Do you have copies of our original portal research?" Jane asked, turning towards the lab bench, "because I've got an idea."

"Yeah," he went to a filing cabinet and fished out a couple of heavy manila envelopes, "SHIELD managed to destroy most of the vital paperwork, but they didn't get everything. I've put most of what we had together again; take a look."

Jane was half-disappointed and half-relieved to see that he was right; except for a few conclusions
and some of the computer models that showed the portal in operation, Loki had managed to recover all their original research. "Who made these notes?" she asked, pointing to the script that annotated some of the final pages of the file.

"He did. At first, he worked in the lab with me, to make sure I was doing my job. Or as he put it," Tony grimaced, "doing what he spared my miserable life for."

"Bastard."

"Putting it mildly."

Jane took a pencil from the cup on the table and flipped one of the pages over, scrawling, Do you think the lab is bugged? in her messy cursive.

Tony took another pencil, said, "Here, I'll show you," and wrote back, I'm sure it is, but magically; I can't find anything mechanical doing it.

"It looks like most everything is here," she said: I think we can create a localized portal to transport us outside of the Tower.

"Yeah, we're just missing a few pages here and there," he replied, shaking his head: There's nothing to use as a power source.

What about your heart? Jane hmm'ed under her breath and pretended to examine the other pages of the file.

Considered that; but I'm pretty sure that even a short jump would burn it out.

Jane sighed, and shook her head. Any spares?

Yeah, but I don't think Loki's going to go for the old "help, my cellmate's having a heart attack" schtick.

Where are they kept?

My room, accessible only by fingerprint and retina scans.

"Okay, I think that's everything I need to see," Jane said, finishing: we'll figure this out. For right now, let's just work on getting the portal ready and choosing a destination. We'll work on the power source later.

"You got it, boss," Tony winked at her and said, "let's get to work."

It was a relief to be with Tony Stark. After weeks of living with a semi-comatose and possessed Erik, Jane relished having someone to bounce ideas off of. Though Tony was less sparkling than usual, he seemed to revive a bit with her, and together the two of them worked on recreating the computer models of the portal.

For the purposes of their cover, Jane modeled the destination on a star cluster close to the vicinity of Asgard; but without the exact coordinates of the actual planet, any attempt to use the portal as their equations showed it would just drop the traveler into a cold void of space.

To anyone spying on them, however, it was close enough to fool them.

Meanwhile, Tony calculated the power of his heart, trying to figure out how far he could get them
Meanwhile, Tony calculated the power of his heart, trying to figure out how far he could get them without completely draining its energy and leaving him on the verge of death. His findings weren't all that encouraging; his miniature arc-reactor could get them outside of the Tower and to a distance of five blocks. Five blocks, which would be easily traceable by Loki and would probably result in their immediate recapture.

Jane sighed, and wrote: \textit{we could try it when he's not in the Tower?}

\textit{Yeah, but how are we supposed to figure that out?}

She turned the problem over in her mind, and shook her head. "Well, I think that's as far as we can go right now," she said, folding up their handwritten conversation and putting it and their research file back in the cabinet.

"It's almost feeding time at the zoo, anyway," Tony agreed. She'd never heard him sound so bitter before.

"Are you…" there was no way to ask this question, and she already knew the answer. Her voice faded off, and she wrapped her arms around her shoulders.

He got her meaning, of course. "I'm pissed off, that's all," he answered her unspoken question. "I mean, I'm Tony-goddamn-Stark, and I've been kept prisoner—in my own Tower—for months! And with all the tools in my lab, I haven't been able to get out."

Jane shook her head. "It's not that you haven't been able to," she said, "it's that you won't. Pepper's still here, isn't she?"

He was silent. Then, with a shaky breath, he said, "I know where she is, but I haven't been able to see her. I've got no idea if she's okay. He told me…" and his own voice faded away. Then, fiercely, "If she went through anything like what he put me through, I'm going to take him apart one body part at a time."

"She didn't," Jane said, "I mean, he had no reason to tell me the truth, but he said that none of the others resisted for as long as you did. And Pepper…she didn't know anything about the work we were doing. He had no reason to…" she couldn't finish the sentence. What a horrible way to try to comfort someone!

Tony chuckled. "I know you're trying, sweetheart, but nothing's gonna make me feel better. Nothing except getting to destroy that asshole."

"I know." she said. "Believe me, I know."

The door to the lab shuddered as the locks slid back, and two Skrull marched into the lab; one carrying a stack of clothes, the other holding a single dinner tray. Jane stood tall, feeling her muscles clench again as she prepared herself for anything; Tony moved in front of her and squared his shoulders.

"What's on the menu tonight, boys?" he quipped, "I hope you got my request from last night. MREs are fantastic, but a little hard on the digestive system."

Jane smothered her laugh. The Skrull could not speak in a way that humans could understand, but it was clear that they knew he was making fun of them. Their snarls got louder, but they had clearly been told not to react to the constant annoyance that was Tony Stark.

The first Skrull dropped the tray on the table and stood by the door, tail lashing impatiently. The other approached them and thrust its bundle out towards Jane; Tony did not step aside to let it any closer to her, so she reached around him and snagged the clothes.
"So the pretty girl gets new threads, but I'm still in the same old yoga clothes? Most people consider me pretty darn cute myself." Tony didn't flinch as the Skrull hissed and clicked at him. They stared at each other for a few seconds as Jane bit her lip in the anticipation of their fight, but then the Skrull snorted, turned, and stalked away.

The door slammed behind them.

Tony muttered under his breath and went to get the dinner tray. Jane put the stack of clothes on the lab table and noticed the letter folded on top. She broke the seal and drew out a single sheet of paper, upon which—in the same script as the notes on their portal diagrams—a short note was written.

My dear Jane,

Should you have no prior engagements, my I request the pleasure of your company for dinner this evening? Your guards will arrive in a half hour to escort you. Please make use of the garments they have brought—of course, your outfit is charming, if a tad casual.

She snorted, crumpled the letter in one fist, and tossed it to the floor.

"What was that?" Tony said, munching on a slice of bread from the tray.

"A summons," Jane said, running her hands through her hair. They were shaking, and cold dread pooled in her stomach. She wasn't sure she could bear any more time alone in his company.

"What?" Tony snagged the letter from the floor and read it. "This is new."

"I take it he never invited you for dinner?" Jane was breathing quickly and felt herself getting a bit lightheaded. The whole notion of a polite, shared meal was ludicrous; what did he want from her now? Hadn't she already been through enough at his hands?

"No, not really," Tony said slowly, crunching the paper in his own hand. She saw the muscles in his forearm bulge with the force, "there wasn't much time between the yelling for any polite small talk."

"Oh." She couldn't say much more. Her heart was beating too quickly and she felt her face going pale.

"Jane," Tony's voice was quiet, "if you don't want to go, we can figure a way out of it."

"No, we can't," she said, shaking her head, "you know we can't. Besides," she lowered her voice, "this is an opportunity. He'll be distracted, and you can get out, and find Pepper and the others—make sure they're okay. When the guard comes to get me," she whispered, "you can wedge the door, keep it open."

"I don't want to use you like this," he began, but she cut him off with a quick motion of her hand.

"It doesn't matter," she said, "whether I want it or not, it's going to happen. We might as well make use of the opportunity. I want you to."

She turned away so that Tony couldn't see her hands shaking, and busied herself unfolding the clothes that the guards had brought. Though she certainly questioned Loki's taste—whatever it happened to be—she could not, thankfully, object to the outfit. It was a sapphire-colored satin blouse and a black pencil skirt with some strappy black sandals; hardly anything scandalous.
She heard Tony's quick breath behind her. "What is it?"

"Those," he spoke slowly, voice rough, "are Pepper's clothes."

Jane couldn't speak; there was nothing to say. Tony turned away and in a single violent motion of his whole body, launched the tray into the wall of the door, hard enough to leave a gash in the metal. Jane flinched at the sound, and tightened her grip on the shirt. She would go through with this—she would go through with it, and Tony would see Pepper, and somehow, somehow…they would all manage to escape.

She retreated to the corner of the lab, and with her back to Tony, stripped out of her tee-shirt and pants.

The bundle that Loki had put together for her also included a hairbrush and some basic necessities. Jane carefully brushed out her knotted hair—it had not so much as seen a comb since her capture in Stockholm—and used the chemical sink in the lab to wash her face and brush her teeth. The idea that she was doing any of this for Loki turned her stomach, so she focused instead on how nice it felt to be clean again.

There wasn't a mirror in the lab, so she had to part her hair by feel alone. She tried three times to get a straight line, but had to give it up. It hardly mattered, after all. It's not like she really wanted Loki to admire her looks after all. That idea alone was enough to send her back towards hyperventilation, so she pushed it aside and abandoned any other attempts to look "nice".

Tony had not looked at her or spoken a word since his outburst. She had gone about her preparations with as much silence as she could, waiting to put on her shoes until the very last moment.

But the last moment did finally come. As the locks on the door slid back, Jane toed on the black sandals and felt her side; she had tucked one sharp pencil into the band of her skirt, and now held another in the palm of her right hand to wedge into the door, just in case Tony would not do it. Her stomach gave one final lurch, but she squared her shoulders and gathered her courage as best she could.

Only one Skrull came to get her, but one was more than enough; it reacted the moment Tony lunged for it. With a swish of its tail, Tony went crashing over a stool and smashing into the ground. He gave a yell through clenched teeth and shoved himself to his feet, but Jane caught him by the shoulder as he moved to attack again.

"Tony," she whispered, "no. You've got to find Pepper."

Her name seemed to calm him down, but she still felt all this muscles vibrating under her hand as he fought for control. The Skrull looked ready for another round, and Jane was certain he could not win. She tightened her grip on Tony's arm, and whispered, "It's more important to find Pepper."

He relaxed, sighed, and nodded. "Just be careful, okay? Don't let him hurt you."

Jane gave a weak laugh. "I'll try."

She walked forward and allowed the Skrull to grasp her by the left arm, leaving her right hand—and its pencil—free to do its work. As they passed through the door, Jane dropped it, using the sound from her scuffling heels to cover the noise of its fall. The Skrull walked her quickly down the hallway to the elevator, but she had enough time to turn her head and see the door stop a quarter-inch from closing.
She smiled. If nothing else, Tony would have his chance. Now, she had to focus on getting herself ready.

Riding up in the elevator, Jane tried to stop her heart from racing. She tried everything from deep breathing to holding her breath entirely. Nothing helped. She had never really been in a situation where she had felt this threatened, and there was nothing she had ever learned or studied to prepare her for it.

She wished Tony were standing next to her, instead of the softly-hissing Skrull. She wished Thor would crash through the top of the elevator and fly off with her.

Jane bit her lip. She shouldn't have thought of Thor. The image of him—smiling and golden—was more of a torment than a comfort at the moment. He was not there—he was not coming, either. Once again, she had only herself. It was just too bad that she didn't seem to be enough at the moment.

You recreated the Einstein-Rosen Bridge, Jane reminded herself firmly, and you helped the Avengers stay one step ahead by discovering the anomalies that precede a magical attack. You brought Thor back from Asgard. If you can do that, you can manage this.

Her words of encouragement weren't much, but they were all she had. Jane felt her heartbeat slow, and her breathing evened out.

The elevator gave a quiet chime as they reached the penthouse level, and the Skrull grasped Jane by the arm and pushed her forward once again. She didn't fake stumbling in her heels this time—it had been many months since she'd needed to use them—and she made less than the impressive entrance she had planned.

"I hardly think there's a need for this violence," God, she was getting so tired of hearing his voice, "She doesn't need to be on her knees just yet."

Jane looked up and glared. The Skrull dropped her arm and retreated back into the elevator. After another subtle chime, she was alone with Loki. Again.

This time, he was all politeness.

"Miss Foster," he gestured her farther into the room, "I hope that you have had a productive day. May I offer you a drink?"

Jane stepped forward, feeling her knees stabilize in the heels, "Water please, and yes, in more ways than one."

"Ah," he gestured and summoned her another glass, "I take it Mr. Stark has brought you up to speed with the current situation? I hope he has impressed upon you," he drew closer and offered her the glass, "just how hopeless your situation really is?"

She stood firm, and took it from his fingers. "In a manner of speaking," she said, masking her trembling lips with a sip. Her sip turned into a gulp; she really had to watch her hydration.

He waited for her to finish. "So he remains defiant, then, in spite of the progress I have made in conquering your world? I thought that he might have learnt something of the lessons I tried to teach him."

"Tony's hard-headed," Jane replied, taking another drink, "and so am I."

"What a pity," he said, conjuring himself a glass of red wine. "Although, in your case, I do admit
that such stubbornness is more compelling than annoying. I have no idea why you would be so hopeful about your prospects, especially since you have no strength or powers to fight me. Mr. Stark, at least, has the hope of regaining his suit, which would give him some measure of power, but you?” Loki looked her over slowly, from head to toe, "You have nothing."

Jane felt her irritation rise, and welcomed it. It pushed away her fear. "I would have thought," she snapped, "that someone who gained his power by studying arcane magic would understand the power that knowledge brings."

Loki laughed; the hairs on the back of her neck rose in response. "Well spoken, Miss Foster," he raised his glass in a small salute to her, "well spoken, indeed. Now I know what kind of pet I'm keeping; scratch her, and she shows her claws."

"You aren't keeping a pet," Jane said, "you're keeping a human being—several of them, in fact—as prisoners. We are not animals."

"Human beings are merely a higher order of mammal," Loki replied, a smile settling on his face as he challenged her, "you keep dogs and cats as pets—both capable of thought, emotion, and communication—so why should I not keep humans?"

"Because we have the will and desire to be free," Jane said, shaking her head. "It's not the same thing at all!"

"And what benefit does your freedom bring you?" he asked, and Jane was curious to hear that he sounded desirous of an honest answer, "It sets you free to do endless damage to yourself and others. You harm yourself with a series of endless addictions, and harm each other by a series of brutal and pointless wars. Now, you set boundaries for your pets so that they do not bring themselves to harm, and I ask again…where is the difference?"

Jane smirked, and gestured with her glass towards his, "I'm not the one indulging in an addiction."

"Don't display your ignorance so quickly," he smirked right back, "alcohol does not harm the immortal."

"But being run through with a sword does," Jane countered, to cover her mistake, "and I know that the Aesir fight wars and enjoy battle just as much as some mortals do."

"That conclusion stems from knowledge of my brother, and his ilk. There are many of the Aesir who would do much to avoid the devastation of war."

"So, that makes you just the same as humans," Jane concluded, "we have warmongers and pacifists both. And you are still the one who is fighting, and killing…although you say it's to bring an end to fighting and killing. What is the sense of that?"

Loki leaned against the bar and paused, his gaze once more settling in contemplation on Jane's face. "I am again reminded of the reasons I spared your life. If humans are more like animals, in comparison with the Aesir, at least you are one of the more intelligent, Jane Foster. You are my trained chimpanzee."

Jane felt her face flush with anger, but she controlled it. "If I have to be an animal, you should know that dolphins are much more intelligent than any of the primates. And I'd much rather be a dolphin than a monkey."

"Indeed?" he smiled at her, indulgently, clearly amused that she was playing along with his game, "I'll have to keep that in mind. But for the moment," here he gestured to the table behind her, "will you sit down?"
It took more courage that Jane thought it would to turn her back on him and take her seat at the table, especially since he stood close behind her and courteously held her chair. His kind—if condescending—behavior was at such odds when compared to his earlier violence that she felt herself unable to relax in his presence. Her shoulders were already aching with tension and her fingers kept flexing restlessly against the stem of her glass.

When he had seated himself across from her, Jane couldn't keep the question in any longer:

"Why am I here?"

His eyes told her that he understood her question in its entirety, but he still played his games. "I assumed that you might be hungry. It has been quite a while since your dinner with Pepper, after all."

Jane eased up on her grip of the glass, for fear she'd shatter it. "You settled for bringing food to Tony. Why the…special treatment for me?"

"Oh, Mr. Stark," Loki dismissed him with a wave of the hand, "I already know him. You'll find, Miss Foster, that if you torture someone you gain an intimate understanding of that person's character." Jane shivered as he went on, "Mr. Stark is a wonderful set of contradictions, but he offers nothing new. You, on the other hand, I do not understand as well."

"Why do you want to?"

He smiled at her again, "Surely you can't expect me to reveal my motivations, Miss Foster? Now," he lifted the lids off the dishes on the table, and Jane's stomach growled uncontrollably, "what may I offer you?"
Chapter Five

Jane had to swallow some of her saliva before answering. How many months had it been since she’d had the chance to eat something that smelled this good? Even before hiding out in Stockholm, with the food shortages and canned goods, SHIELD’s headquarters in Uppsala had not really catered to her specific tastes. Come to think of it…

“How did you know?” she asked, double-checking each dish to be sure. “How did you know I’m a vegetarian?”

He smirked. “Though your SHIELD handlers did a very good job preventing me from seeing your scientific work, they were less careful about your personnel file. I know your entire history—that is, as well as SHIELD knew it. Maybe you can tell me just how thorough they were?”

Jane reached across the table and spooned some lentil curry—one of her favorites, and did he know that, or was it just a lucky guess?—onto her plate, feeling her hands shaking not with fear but with eager anticipation of the food.

“I don’t know,” she said, avoiding his eyes as much as she could, “I never saw my personnel file. Knowing SHIELD, I’m guessing it’s pretty accurate.” She finished off the plate with a serving of crisp salad and a thick slice of whole-grained bread; it was the kind of meal that she would have made for herself…if she had the money for the ingredients and could actually cook, that is.

“So when it says that you have graduated from two of your country’s top scientific institutions with the highest academic honors?”

Jane smiled vaguely as she remembered her days at Stanford and then Columbia. “That’s true,” she nodded, shaking her head, “it seems like so long ago, but it’s true. Actually, I just finished my second Master’s three years ago.”

“But I understand that a Master’s degree is not the most advanced degree that your universities offer? There is…a Doctorate, am I correct?”

Despite Loki’s having told her earlier that he had made an extensive study of Earth before revealing himself, Jane still found her eyes widening as she looked at him. He seemed earnest, however, in his pursuit of knowledge, and she swallowed thickly, wondering what this could all mean.
“Yes. A Doctorate is our most advanced degree, but it’s often for those who want to become university instructors. I decided not to get a Doctorate because of the time involved; also, my research was already looked upon as too extreme by most doctoral institutions.”

“And yet, by everything I understand of your research, your theories are hardly astounding. I find it hard to believe that you had as much difficulty as your records indicate in finding funding for your work.”

Jane took another bite of curry and forced herself to chew slowly. She was so hungry that she was glad of Loki’s questions; they made her slow down. “Well, you consider interplanetary travel as a matter-of-course,” she reasoned, “here, the idea of a stable wormhole is still very much considered a domain of science fiction.”

“Many of your science fiction writers had ideas that would hardly be outside the realm of possibility,” Loki replied, “It seems narrow minded of your people to ignore ideas that are theoretically possible, if not yet technologically possible.”

“I would agree,” Jane said, “but that’s not how a lot of grant agencies view it. To them, the idea of an Einstein-Rosen Bridge was not only theoretically and technologically impossible, but even if it were, no one was imagining that there would be people or planets on the other side. Until I met…” she broke off her sentence, and tried to mask her uncertainty with a sip of water. Considering how Loki had reacted to her last mention of his brother, she was not certain that speaking of Thor would be safe.

Loki smiled, the expression unusually gentle. “Until you met Thor, you didn’t think that you would find anyone on the other side of your Bridge.”

Jane swallowed hard, and nodded. “That’s right.”

Silence fell at the little table, and Jane was able to take a few more bites in peace. Watching Loki eat from underneath her eyelashes, she mustered her courage and indulged her curiosity. “I didn’t think the Aesir were vegetarians.”

“They are not, as a general rule. Neither,” and here the dangerous expression in his eyes was back, “are the Jotun; you would do well to remember that this has more relevance in my case. But my personal preferences are no excuse to be rude to my guest.”
She couldn’t help it; she snorted. “Your guest? I thought I was your trained chimpanzee?”

“I thought we had agreed that you were a dolphin?”

Jane laughed. “Still…I’m not quite sure where this suddenly polite treatment is coming from.”

“You would rather I throw you back in the lab and relegate you to Mr. Stark’s thoughtfully-stockpiled emergency rations?” His tone was dry curiosity, no more.

“No,” Jane took another bite of her dinner just in case he meant to throw her out, “but I would like to know what sort of treatment to expect from you. I mean, just a few hours ago you were slapping me and dragging me around.”

“Perhaps it’s all in the name of scientific experiment? Subject the creature under study to a variety of different stimuli and judge its reactions?”

Jane felt her dinner threaten to make its way back up again. “So I’m your lab rat, now?”

“You always were,” he said, matter-of-fact as he helped himself to more curry, “and I won’t insult your intelligence by thinking that you did not always comprehend that fact. I think you know that nothing I do is for your benefit.”

She nodded, slowly, and pressed both hands against the table so he couldn’t see her shaking fingers. “I think I did,” her voice was unsteady, and she cleared her throat, “but that doesn’t mean that knowing that doesn’t frighten me.”

“So why think about it?” he asked, shrugging with an elegant motion of shoulders, “Why concentrate on something so unpalatable to both of us? Why not simply take this dinner as a gift, enjoy some pleasant conversation, and not worry about what tomorrow will bring?”

“I’m a scientist,” Jane gave a shrug of her own, “I can’t just ignore the facts, comforting as ignorance might be. I can’t help but be curious about what you have planned; and I know better than to imagine that this is just an excuse for…pleasant conversation for you. I know that you want something from this; I’d just like to know what it is.”
“Perhaps I simply want to understand the thoughts and emotions of those I will eventually rule,” he leaned back in his chair and spread one long hand on the table, fingers splayed. “Is that an impossibility, Jane Foster?”

“No,” she conceded, leaning forward and shoving away her irritation at his presumed victory, “but after treating me in the way that you have, you can’t expect me to believe that my opinions mean anything to you?”

“Your belief is irrelevant,” her questions were clearly starting to irritate him; she could see the tension around his mouth, “if I ask you questions I expect them to be answered. You have no right to demand an explanation behind each and every one.”

“If I have no right to know, then you have no right to expect me to answer a single one,” Jane lost her own temper, and she snapped, “I think you’d better just take me back to my prison.”

Her anger appeared—thankfully, her brain supplied—to diffuse his. He shook his head and with a smile playing around the corners of his mouth said, “You are truly unique. Powerless, defenseless, completely under my control…and yet you continue to annoy me, even though you must know it to be pointless. Why insist on having inviolable rights when you know that all the rules have changed?”

“The rules may have changed,” Jane said, emboldened by his calm response, “but I refuse to surrender to a rule by force. If you mean to rule this world, you will have to realize that you are attempting to rule a collection of people who will force you, every single day, to justify your right to rule. And since you have established your rule as one of dominance by physical force, we will make you prove it…no matter how much you may not want to.”

He was silent, and his gaze dropped away from hers. “I had no idea you were a political philosopher as well as a scientist.”

“I lived with a political science major for four months,” she said, remembering Darcy with a sudden heart-rush of affection and worry, “something must have rubbed off. And my father…” she took a quick breath, and went on, “my father was a philosopher, in addition to being an economics professor. He and my mother,” she had to pause again; the pain in remembering them here, now, was worse than expected, “used to discuss things like this over the dinner table.”

She took a long drink of water, but it couldn’t soothe the tight soreness of tears bundling up in her throat. She was glad that neither of her parents was around to see the state of the world now.
Would her father have continued to resist, risking the lives of his wife and daughter, and died a martyr to his better nature? Or would he have gotten on his knees and bowed his head, as thousands of New Yorkers had done when they turned their backs on the Avengers?

No. No, he wouldn’t have. So he would probably be dead now anyway. Jane’s throat burned and she swallowed only with difficulty. Why was she suddenly hurting, thinking about her parents? They had been gone for so long…

“I am sorry,” his voice was quiet, and she almost missed it over the rush of blood in her ears.

She looked up. “What?”

“I am sorry,” he repeated, looking at her, “to have raised memories of your parents which are clearly painful to you. You were young when they died, I believe?”

Her SHIELD personnel file must have been more detailed than she thought. She spoke, her voice quiet and her lips numb, “They died in a car accident when I was nine.”

“You were injured as well in this accident?”

Why was she talking about this? It was surreal. “Compound fracture of my right leg, and three broken ribs.”

“Your mother was the scientist in your family, was she not? A pioneer in the arena of stellar cartography.”

Jane breathed quick and shallow. She couldn’t meet his gaze any longer. Her voice was a hoarse cry as she said, “Why do you want to know? Why do you care about any of this? Please,” she said, turning to him and not waiting for his answer, “if this is just an experiment, please don’t. Ask me about anything else, torture me if you want, but please…don’t talk about my parents.”

The expression on his face was almost repentant; he nodded slowly. “Very well, Miss Foster. We will not discuss this any longer.”

Jane’s sigh of relief was just barely inaudible. She felt the adrenaline rush leave her in a giant
There was silence in the room; a silence which normally would have been broken by endless little noises from the street outside. As it was, Jane felt a sudden and sickening disorientation as she remembered once again that New York, vibrant economic capital of her country, was very nearly a ghost town. It felt as though every single pillar she relied on in her life had been kicked out from under her: her parents, Erik, her whole world…she closed her eyes and sat back in her chair, waiting for her head to stop spinning.

“You asked me why I was doing this; why I was asking you these questions.”

Jane looked up, but Loki was not looking at her. His eyes had drifted out the window, so she was watching his face in profile. She saw the dark brows overshadowing the rich jade of his inward-looking eyes, the strong nose and the pale skin—skin of the immortal, unblemished in rest and smooth, flawless—but she also saw the downturned lips and the bitter, bitter remorse of countless years weighing down on his shoulders.

He continued to speak without looking at her.

“I ask because you and I are very similar. Your parents are gone; my true parents abandoned me and my adopted ones betrayed me. Your ideas made you an outcast; my skills in magic made me one as well. Your discoveries will cause the end of your world,”

Jane felt her blood run cold, but he went on,

“And I will cause the end of mine.”

She had to catch her breath. The matter-of-fact way in which he spoke had not a single note of despair; he was simply stating the truth…that both of them were destroyers of worlds.

“What…” she tried again, “what do you mean?”

He met her eyes with a tired smile, as though he had already heard her questions and had answered them at length.
“You opened doors, Jane Foster,” he said, shaking his head, “doors that lead to things you cannot possibly imagine. And once these doors have been opened, it is extremely hard to close them again. I brought the Skrull into your world, it is true, but they would have found their way to Midgard by following the trails your portals left behind. And without a guiding mind leading them, the Skrull would have simply slaughtered your people, without mercy and without purpose.”

Jane shivered.

“And after the Skrull, the Jotun would have come. Their people boast some talented sorcerers, and would have been able to widen and stabilize the interstellar paths. Would any humans have been left after these two invasions? It is doubtful.”

She licked her shaking lips and tried to raise a rebuttal. “So we should be grateful to you and your…controlled killings?”

“You should,” his gaze speared her to her seat and she could not get away. “I bring power to Midgard; power and authority. If I control this world, the Jotun and the Skrull will know that there is someone here who can control the world-paths and will not allow incursions into his territory. That is something that no band of Avengers would have ever been capable of doing. If I fail in controlling Midgard,” he finished, smiling at her, “I fear it will be an end for your kind.”

Jane had never really believed that fear could make one’s teeth chatter; now she had to clench her jaw against the terrifying images his words conjured. Her world, devastated first by indiscriminate killings, then laid to frozen waste by giants who planted their ice-blue feet on all that was verdant and thriving. And all of it, all the devastation…her fault?

It was impossible. He had to be lying. “I don’t believe you,” she said, her voice tight and high-pitched.

“I did not wish to believe that I would destroy my world either,” he said, not rising to her anger. His voice was still flat, toneless. “But I know that it is true.”

“How do you know?” she was battling hysteria and wanted almost to leap across the table and shake him, force him to tell her what he knew.

“I fell between the worlds,” he began, “and saw all possible futures…saw all conceivable pasts. I saw myself dying as an infant without Odin’s intervention, saw myself ascending to the Jotun
throne, saw myself living out my entire life in my brother’s shadow. I saw you, Jane Foster,” he continued, and Jane felt her heart stop, “and saw you die alongside your parents, saw you choose another career besides science, saw you and your parents living without ever having suffered your defining tragedy.”

He paused, and closed his eyes. “I saw everything. Every possible permutation of our lives throughout the entire history of the universe. But always, in every single possibility I saw…I cause Ragnarok, and end the world.”

Jane could not speak. There seemed no possible response to him, to his absolute certainty. The enormity of what he must have seen, the sheer number of possible futures and uncounted pasts, the blending and warping of the lines between truth and fiction…no wonder he was mad!

She had to say something. “If you think…” she saw his shoulders spasm, but went on, “if you think you are going to cause the end of the world,” she took a deep breath, and heard it shiver in her throat, “then why are you doing this? Why wage a war against a defenseless people?”

He smiled, and for the first time since they had sat down together, Jane saw again the cold gleam of madness in his eyes. His smile widened, stretched, spread across his face until it looked almost elastic and Jane felt sick.

“Why not?”

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Dinner ended soon after that, mostly because Jane could not bring herself to take another bite. Loki summoned a Skrull to bring her back down to the lab, and Jane let herself be led with no resistance; she was still numb from Loki’s revelations.

Tony was waiting for her and helped steady her after the Skrull threw her none-too-gently into the lab. For the first time, Jane heard the slam and lock of the door behind her with inexpressible relief, and she sagged against the lab table, pressing shaking hands against her eyes and forehead. Her fingertips were frozen; she felt as though she would never be warm again.

Wisely, Tony didn’t say a word; he merely watched for a moment, then came over and held her in his arms while she breathed, and shook, and willed away tears. When she was somewhat more in control of herself and stepped back from him, he asked,
“What happened?”

She gave him the outline of their conversation, pausing frequently to both gather her thoughts and consider the best way to frame things. In retrospect, she was surprised at the turns their conversation had taken—as Tony evidently was—and it was strange, the idea that Loki had chosen to be honest with her about so many different topics. Tony reacted indignantly to Loki’s accusation of Jane’s destroying her world—Jane could not leap to her own defense as readily—and let out a low whistle over the idea of Ragnarok.

“And that’s it?”

“That’s pretty much it,” Jane nodded, “I don’t know if I could have handled much more,” she said, chafing her arms in a vain attempt to get some warmth flowing. She felt like a stranger in her own skin, uncomfortable, unfamiliar. Again, she considered: was it possible, what Loki had said? He had seen her…seen her open the portals which, with his intervention or not, would have led to her world’s being conquered and enslaved. The idea was horrifying.

Tony saw the expression on her face. “You shouldn’t pay so much attention to him,” he insisted, “just because he’s a psychopath doesn’t mean that you are. And whatever he might say, I don’t think it’s possible to predict the future. Who knows if the ether-between-worlds or whatever even tells the truth? Who knows if whatever he saw was anything at all except a great big interstellar LSD trip?”

Despite his cavalier attitude, Jane could see that Tony was as shaken up as she was. “Whatever he saw, Tony,” she said, shaking her head, “I think he believes, without a doubt, that he’s going to end the world.”

Tony nodded, mouth tight and face grim. “I think you’re right. But I don’t know if that makes this whole situation better or worse.”

“I think it can only make it worse,” Jane replied. She looked down at her clasped hands and saw that her fingers were still shaking. She had to change the subject.

“Did you find Pepper?” she whispered, motioning Tony over to her side so they could talk quietly.
“Yeah, I did,” he said just as softly, “she’s okay. He didn’t touch her; basically just put her in with Natasha and Clint. They got a little roughed up, but they got caught so early that they didn’t have much information that he wanted.”

“That’s good; that they’re all okay.”

“Yeah, although I wouldn’t categorize either Clint or Natasha as “okay”. They’re both pissed off and doing everything they can to let their guards know about it. Seems like they’ve taken more damage from the Skrull than from Loki. They’d probably be in better shape if they didn’t annoy them quite so much.”

“That sounds a bit like the pot calling the kettle black,” Jane said slyly, smiling at him.

“Lies, slander and calumny,” he sniffed, “I am a model prisoner.”

She laughed, and it felt good to do it; somehow the shadows receded for a few minutes and she remembered normal life. Life before aliens, and mystical portals, and superior beings/gods. Whatever else might happen, she would have this…friendship with people she trusted, people whom she could rely on to help her get through.

But they did have to get through. So, back to work.

“Did you see any way to get up to your room to get a spare arc reactor?” she asked, voice almost silent, “I think creating another portal is still our best way out of here.”

“Well, that’s where things get interesting,” Tony said, “I can’t get to the arc reactors, but Natasha can. Apparently, she found a way to slip my security systems, back when she worked for me; she says it was just in case I needed an emergency replacement and couldn’t get to one on my own, but I have my doubts.” Tony sounded like a pouting child after someone pointed out the flaw in his supposedly foolproof scheme. Jane smothered a smile.

“Anyway,” he continued, much put-upon but smiling himself, “she and Clint have worked out a way to get out of their cells; apparently Loki didn’t see the need to seal them in magically as he’s done with us. So here’s what’ll happen; I’ll get Jarvis working so he can send a message to Clint, Natasha, and Pepper; they’ll get out, Natasha will go for the reactors while Clint and Pepper come here; we’ll set up the portal reaction and when Natasha gets here with the power source, we can all escape together.”
“Escape, unfortunately, within a radius of only five blocks,” Jane murmured, shaking her head. “We can’t do this if Loki is anywhere around; he’ll catch us in a minute.”

“Yup. Timing is gonna be everything. Biggest problem is that none of us can think of a way to find out what his travel plans are going to be.”

Jane bit her lip. “I might be able to,” she said, running her fingers through her hair and turning away.

Tony followed her. “How’s that?”

“He seems to think…that we have something in common,” saying the words were difficult; Jane felt unclean, somehow, thinking of any possible connection between herself—harmless, if klutzy astrophysicist—and him—insane, mass-murdering god—but any advantage could save all their lives. “And if that’s true…if I can get closer to him…I might be able to get him to say something about his plans. It could give us some idea of when to act.”

Tony shook his head. “Sweetheart, I don’t think you want to get any closer to this guy than you have to. Who knows what he could get in his head?”

“But that’s just the thing, Tony,” Jane said, “I might just have to. If we’re going to get out of here, you know as well as I do that someone is going to have to get the information we need. I know I’m not a super spy,” she continued, smiling softly, “but I do have an advantage here.”

“I don’t like it.”

“Me either,” she assured him, “but it’s the best chance we have.”

Tony’s face was pinched and dark; it seemed as though he liked the idea less than even she did. To keep him from fixating on the idea—which was depressing to her as well—she shook her head and turned back towards their plans.

“We should try and find a way to boost the portal’s radius. Even if Loki isn’t here when we break out, the Skrull might be able to track our trail as well. The farther away we can get, the better.”
“I’ve got some ideas about that,” Tony said, pulling out a sheaf of papers that had his messy penciled scribbles all over them, “take a look.”

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It seemed that the lights in the lab never dimmed. Jane and Tony poured over their plans until the wee hours—with Tony remarking that only a bottle of vodka could make their discussions more fun—but finally had to call it quits. Jane was exhausted; she felt slow and dragging, and even her eyelids felt like lead weights, hanging half-closed over her eyes.

But the lights made it impossible to sleep. The lights, and her racing thoughts, that is. For though Jane was physically tired, the amount of information absorbed that day—in both facts and feelings—still needed to be processed before her brain could shut down and she could allow herself some rest.

She rolled over on her cot and threw one arm over her eyes, pressing down until she saw spots and tried to breathe slowly and deeply, although every fiber of her being wanted to scream until she coughed blood.

She couldn’t get his face out of her head. She pressed down hard with both hands, but she still saw his deep eyes, his pale skin, his narrow lips. She saw him smiling, laughing, seething with fury…and as she saw these things, she felt herself responding. Smiling when he was happy, and wanting to shrink back from his anger when he frowned.

What was happening to her? She wanted to purge these images from her brain, cut them out with a scalpel…not fixate on them like a starstruck teenager. The fact that she could not absolutely terrified her.

If they escaped tomorrow, would she still think about him? Would her life ever assume the same untroubled (comparatively, that is) flow that it had before?

He was insane. He was a killer. Whatever his reasons, however he might be justifying his actions, these would always remain the facts. Whatever horrors he’d seen in traversing the uncharted flows between the realms notwithstanding, he had no right to barge into their world and make a mess of things. Whatever end he was trying to affect, good or bad, he was using methods that had no justification or excuse.
That being said, however…Jane believed him. She really believed him when he said he was trying to save them from themselves. It was condescending, and infuriating, and she didn’t think by any means that his intervention would help—she snorted and rolled over again—but she did believe that he meant to help them. It wasn’t a justification, but it did mean something.

He had had no reason to take her into his confidence. Clearly he hadn’t done the same with Tony, the other mortal with whom he had spent some time. And once in his confidence, he had had no reason to confess his fears (and he had been afraid) about causing the end of the world. She was sure that he believed his confession to be a weakness—and why would he allow himself to seem weak to a powerless human woman?

Jane sat up and put both feet flat on the cold tile floor, resting her feverish forehead in the palms of her hands. Why would he do any of this?

If he were telling the truth, then he also meant what he had said about the similarities between the two of them. Which meant that, in his mind, Jane was a destructive force just as surely as he was. She shivered. Was it true? Could she, even inadvertently, have caused the downfall of her world?

And if it was true, did she now have a responsibility to help Loki, knowing that he was a force of power that would cause potential invaders to think twice about conquering Earth?

The thought was chilling, and Jane tried to shove it aside, but once raised, she had to consider it. The Skrull were here. That was a fact. And it seemed that he was the only thing that kept them from slaughtering indiscriminately. After seeing them…she didn’t doubt that he had kept their destructive potential to a minimum. If the Skrull had gotten here on their own, or if Loki were defeated before he could send them away…

The consequences were unimaginable.

“So the question remains,” Jane whispered, voice small and uncertain, “what do I have to do?”

There was no answer in the silence of the lab. She lay down again and tried to get to sleep.

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I made up absolutely everything about Jane’s history. I’m not sure what her past is like in the comics, so all of this is my invention only! Please let me know what you think…drop a line, even if only to say you hated it :D
Chapter Six

Jane woke up with grit under her eyelids, feeling as though she had barely rested at all. Tony was already awake, leaning against a lab table and going over their calculations again, his shoulders slumped and tired, hair mussed up. She sighed, and rolled over, clutching the thin blanket in front of her chest and feeling unaccountably like the kid she was in high school who just wanted to hide under the blankets and let the world pass her by.

What was the point of getting out of bed? What was the point of doing anything to either help Loki or themselves? If they escaped, he'd just catch them. If they fought, he'd probably win…

Jane bit her lip and swung herself upright before she had the chance to think another thought like that. That was ridiculous. How could she? There were still people on the outside who were continuing the fight: Director Fury, the mutants, Thor…thinking this way was a betrayal of them all.

She got to her feet and wiped the sleep from her eyes, pulling her tangled hair away from her face in a messy ponytail. Tony turned to look at her, his eyes heavily lidded and bloodshot; he seemed about as sanguine about their upcoming day as she felt.

"Hey, hon," he said, gesturing towards the coffeepot at the corner of the workbench, "help yourself."

"I wonder if the others get such special treatment?" she said, taking a mug and pouring a steaming cup of the dark liquid. The thought was as bitter as the coffee, but she was glad of its burning sting as it scalded down her throat. She blinked again and saw the world come in to sharper focus around her.

"They've got some pretty cozy digs," Tony said softly, "they're in a suite of rooms on the eighteenth floor. We're the ones roughing it down here."

She groaned. "That makes me feel so much better," she grumbled, pulling over Tony's paperwork and giving it a quick once over. She could see that he'd been trying to figure out a way to increase the range of their projected portal, but so far, the three methods that he'd tried were unsuccessful. She grabbed a pencil and started going over his math, knowing that he would not have made a mistake.

"Jane, hey," he said, laying one hand over hers and stilling their restless motion, "stop a minute."

"Tony," she said, shaking her head, "just let me work. I just want to get out of here, okay?"

"We both do. But slamming your head against this isn't going to help. Let me figure out a way to boost the power, all right? I know the arc reactor's capabilities better than you do."

"And what should I do in the meantime?" Jane shot back, jerking her hand from under his and leaving a long pencil mark on the paper, "Do Loki's dirty work? Try and figure out a way to destroy the mutants? Or maybe I should just try to get a working portal to Asgard, so he can destroy that too."

"Hey," he said sharply, "you know that's not what I mean. Take it easy, kiddo."

"I can't!" she said, flinging down the pencil and turning away from him. "I can't stay here, okay, Tony? He looked at me and he said that what I'd done would cause the end of Earth. How am I supposed to handle that? All my life, all I've wanted to do is contribute to humanity, to help us
understand the universe a little bit better. And by doing that…" she broke off and put both hands over her face.

"I told you that you shouldn't pay any attention to him; he's a nutcase," Tony said, "but what I meant was that you could try and figure out some other way for us to get out of here. The portal isn't the only way, you know."

"I think it is," Jane said, "and it ought to work, but we'll have to make sure…"

"What?"

"We'll have to make sure…" Jane repeated, slowly, running one hand through her hair. She stopped, processed her thoughts, and turned to her friend. "I think I know a way."

"Uh, Jane," he said, cocking one eyebrow at her, "you're kinda not making sense anymore. I think I'm the only one here who's allowed not to make sense on a regular basis."

Jane was too distracted with penciling her thoughts and equations on a yellow notepad. She flashed an unusually bright smile at Tony, and said, "You concentrate on boosting the power. I'm going to build us a barometer."

"O-kay," he drew the word out, studying her earnestly bent head, "I'm gonna let you do that…and try and boost the power. You just…sit over there and not be crazy."

She laughed. "I'm not crazy," she didn't look up as she flipped the page, "I'm just seeing things from a different angle. Maybe I slept better than I feel like I did."

"Well, that'll make one of us," Tony grumbled, turning back to his own calculations, "Remind me next time I'm stocking emergency gear that I should really have better quality cots. Although, I never imagined that I'd be hostage in my own tower, so maybe I should just do a better job planning for emergencies in general."

Jane didn't reply. Tony sighed, "I'm a voice crying in the wilderness," and let her work in peace.

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Despite a brief, hostility-filled encounter with the Skrull guards who brought in their breakfast trays—thankfully without any notes or other communication from Loki—Jane was able to work for three hours in uninterrupted calm. Not that she was calm, by any means. She had a tendency to talk to herself, swear, kick equipment, and throw her calculator when in the depths of a research puzzle, and Tony had had more than one good laugh at her expense.

She barely noticed. The idea that sparked in her brain was so promising that if she could pull it off, it might go a long way towards solving their problems.

She took a quick break from wielding the acetylene torch and pushed her safety goggles off her forehead, wiping the sweat from her forehead with a filthy work glove.

"I love a woman who can weld," Tony called from across the lab, his vision shielded from the brilliance by a stack of books.

"It's a much-underappreciated skill," Jane said, shaking out her tired arm and testing the temperature of her new barometer's metal. "Give it a few more minutes," she murmured, wiping her forehead once more, "and I think…I think we can do a test."

"You've had me on tenterhooks for the last four hours," Tony said, having crept up behind her to
sneak a peek at her invention, "so it had better be just another few minutes. Wanna walk me through the theory while we wait?"

"Sure," Jane said, peeling off her gloves and stowing the tank and welder. "So...it's pretty much a magical barometer. Since it's atmospheric pressure differentials that allow us to predict an incoming magical attack, I figure that Loki must constantly be generating some sort of magical field. Maybe it's not enough to detect with the technology I've already created, but this..." Jane prodded the circular disk with one grimy finger, "is much more sensitive."

"And if we can calibrate it properly..." Tony began, giving his trademark smarmy grin...

"We'll be able to tell just how close he is to us." Jane finished, giving a smirk of her own. "And we'll be able to leave whenever he does."

"Jane Foster, brilliant and beautiful," Tony said, pressing one hand to his glowing chest, "the world needs more people like us."

"Like 'us'?" Jane huffed, planting her fists on her hips, "I seem to recall that I was the one doing all the welding over here."

"Yes, but I provided the encouragement and motivation. Props are due for the fantastic pep talk I gave. And you cannot deny that I am both brilliant and beautiful."

She laughed, and picked up her creation, feeling it gingerly for structural weaknesses. It was an ugly little thing; about six inches in diameter, three inches wide, it was a basic design which was more like a cross between a magnet and a barometer, although this one had an on/off switch on the base.

Thankfully, Loki had kept most of the original supplies in the lab; Jane had been able to get some very thin adamantium rods that, when set in the right alignment to the iridium filings that lay between two panes of glass, picked up the magical vibrations running through the air and caused the whole device to vibrate. Theoretically. Now it was time to see if it would actually work.

"Here goes nothing," she breathed.

She flipped the switch and it started shaking immediately; Jane took it over to the entrance to the lab and held it up towards the magical seal on the doorway and the thing nearly jumped out of her hand. On the far side of the lab, the tremors were much fainter.

Tony took the device and did his own comparison, walking it back and forth across the lab to get an idea of the thing's baseline vibration.

Jane watched him, and saw his face getting progressively darker. She understood his worries; they were the same as her own, and unfortunately, had only one solution.

"One of us is going to have to get right up next to him to properly gauge how this thing will react when he's gone," Tony said, grimly.

"It's gotta be calibrated," Jane nodded, looking at the device where it buzzed gently on the table.

"Shit," he grumbled, folding his arms and giving her a hard stare, "I don't want you to have to get that close to him again."

"Well, maybe you can piss him off and have him fling you around the lab a bit," Jane remarked, snidely, "and you can satisfy your macho protective urges. You know it'll be safer for both of us if I'm the one to do it...and face it, I'm probably going to have the opportunity sooner than you
"It's gonna be tricky to smuggle that anywhere around him," Tony said, shaking his head. "The thing's like a hyperactive iPhone, the way it vibrates."

"I thought you eschewed all things Apple," Jane said, taking up her barometer and practicing wrapping it in a fold of her cardigan. Nope, too bulky…it stuck out from her hip.

"Of course I do," he said, "because of these very reasons."

"Exactly these reasons!" Jane laughed over her shoulder. She tucked the barometer in at the waistband of her jeans so that it rested flat against her back. That wasn't too bad…if she put on a chunkier sweater, it wouldn't be noticeable at all. Then again, she might start laughing uncontrollably when it started to vibrate.

She put the thing down and crossed her arms. "This is vaguely ridiculous."

"Isn't it just?" Tony was grinning like a madman. "I think you had the right idea, though," he took up the barometer and swathed it in a hand towel from the lab sink, "and this will keep it from irritating you too much."

"If it went crazy at the door lock, can you imagine what it'll do around Loki?" Jane said, "I'm not sure if I'll be able to keep a straight face."

"Well, you've got time to practice," Tony took her by the shoulders and pushed her towards the door in question, "see what you think."

The vibrations tickled, it was true, but through the muffling of the towel they weren't so overpowering as to put her in danger of exposing their secret. She was still nervous of how different it would be when she came face-to-face with Loki again, but she would bite her tongue in two before doing something to betray them.

"I think I'm good," Jane said, checking her profile in the mirror one last time. With a thicker sweater and careful attention to her posture, the barometer didn't show up as anything other than a fold in her shirt. The constant vibration against her skin was a strange sensation, but already she could see the advantages; she was familiar with the "baseline" level to be found in the room in general and could almost sense how far she was from the door just by the varying levels of intensity she felt humming against the base of her spine.

She looked at Tony. "I think this will work."

"It'll have to work," he said, "since I can't think of anything smarter. And there's no time to make it any smaller. The sooner we get this done, the better."

Jane nodded. The sudden silence in the lab, after the restless activity of the morning, was disconcerting. "So..." she said, looking around, "what do you want to do between now and then?"

"That's a dangerous question," Tony said, smiling, "normally, I'd suggest something irresponsible and fun, like playing with acetylene torches or having an invent-off. But I think you've beaten me in today's round...although don't expect any mercy from me tomorrow."

"I won't," Jane said, resting her elbows against the lab bench, "but don't think I'm going to rest on my laurels. I've already got big plans for boosting our portal's range...some ways of looking at physical space that you might not have considered."
"You know, we should probably do some work on the projects that our lord and master's assigned," Tony sighed, "just in case he decides to give us a pop quiz, or something."

Jane frowned. "You don't really want to, do you?"

"Hell, no. It was a particularly bad joke, even for me."

Her brow was still furrowed. "You've got a point, though. He could come down and see that we haven't actually made any progress on what he wants."

"So? We're not his lapdogs, jumping at every offered treat. He hasn't even offered a treat for us, except not throwing us around. And I gotta say," Tony rolled his shoulders and clenched his fists, "after a few days stuck down here, staring at the walls, I could use a little throwing around."

"You know you can't match him," Jane said, softly. Offending his masculine pride be damned, she had to speak the truth. The grimace on Tony's face confirmed that he knew the truth as well as she did.

He nodded. "I know," he said, crossing his arms and leaning against the lab table, "but it's just so annoying, being stuck down here…knowing Pepper's just upstairs, but I can't go see her. And he took Jarvis offline, so I didn't have anyone to talk to, before he shoved you in here with me."

Jane lowered her voice. "We'll get out, Tony," she said, "we'll get out and then we can fight back. But not before; it'd be suicide."

"Nah," Tony dismissed that idea, "not suicide; he needs us too much. Remember? There's a shortage of beautiful and brilliant people in the world…he needs us both."

She smiled at the absurdity of his logic. They sank into silence again, and Jane jumped on top of the table, folding her feet underneath her to sit cross legged. If only she had a cup of hot chocolate to cradle between her cold hands…it seemed like she could never get warm…

The door lock clattered, and rasped aside. Both of them suddenly sat and stood ramrod straight; Tony's body was locked into a preparatory fighting stance, and Jane dropped one leg in front of her in order to hop down quickly, if need be. She couldn't fight, but she could at least get out of Tony's way…

"Ah, it's Mr. L'Oreal himself," Tony drawled, his attitude so casual that Jane couldn't believe they were looking at the same Loki. She felt her heart beating so fast that she was surprised it was still in her chest, and not breaking through her solar plexus like an alien parasite.

Judging from the sour twist of Loki's lips, if he didn't understand the full meaning behind Tony's jibe, he at least understood that the man was being insolent, as usual. The sorcerer clenched one fist, and the barometer at Jane's back started to shake with such force that she almost screamed in surprise.

True to her inner pledge, though, she clamped her teeth down on her lower lip and nothing else betrayed the presence of the device. The feeling was like a razor flaying the skin above her bones, and she remembered, in a flash of insight, the carnival machines which pretended to give you electric shocks just through very powerful vibrations…

She gritted her teeth against the pain and the panic as Loki spoke.

"Mr. Stark," he said, "insolent as always. One might have thought that after a few weeks in solitary ineptitude in your own laboratory that you might have learnt humility. But as I remarked to Miss Foster, here," and he smiled at her direction, despite Tony's scornful snort, "you seem
incapable of learning the simplest of lessons."

"Maybe you're just a bad teacher," Tony shot back, his eyes darting between Loki and Jane, who could not look away from their captor's gaze. "And maybe I didn't think your lessons were worth learning."

Loki's attention could not be swayed. He continued to stare at Jane as he took slow steps across the lab.

"Tell me Miss Foster," he said, gently.

She couldn't tell if it was the increasing pain at her spine or the lure of his magnetic voice that made her sit straighter. She pressed her lips together and focused on her breathing. It gave her a slight measure of control.

"Tell me," he repeated, "is it common in your world to find creatures that are so blind to their own welfare that they will challenge insurmountable forces out of sheer stubbornness? Can you not persuade your…friend," his voice lingered on the word, "to act in a way less likely to get him killed?"

She wondered if she could trust herself to speak. It was a moot point; she had to.

"That's the problem with trying to control creatures of free will," she said, quietly, thanking whatever unseen powers that her voice didn't shake along with the rest of her, "we don't respond well to threats and force."

"Now, that's just not true, is it? You saw some of the news broadcasts, I'm sure, even before Sweden surrendered," Loki studied her face as though he had completely forgotten about Tony, who was still throwing worried glances in Jane's direction, "you saw how most people—your great "creatures of free will", as you say—practically fell over each other to kneel at my feet?"

"I saw what you did to those who didn't," Jane said, and this time her voice shook, but she knew it was not because of the barometer. "I saw what you did to that man in Germany. And those students in Brazil."

"And the woman in Italy, the Prime Minister of Britain, and those poor unfortunate children in Istanbul," Loki continued her recitation with not a shadow of remorse coloring his words. Indeed, he just smiled at her still as he finished, "I can play this game as well as you can."

"You asshole, it's not a game!" Tony snarled, finally getting the god's attention. Jane's whole body slumped momentarily as he turned away from her, but she tensed up again as Loki moved, covering the space of the lab in the blink of an eye and slamming her friend up against the wall.

She prayed that the crack she heard as his body hit wasn't the sound of a rib breaking. Jane jumped down from the table and took the barometer out from the waistband of her jeans, stowing it quickly in one of the filing cabinets under the workbench. As far as she was concerned, it was damn well calibrated.

Tony was wheezing under the pressure of Loki's forearm pressed horizontally against his windpipe and his arms scrabbled for purchase against his bracers, but there was no shifting the god. He was just physically so much stronger than the Tony that there was nothing he could do.

"No, Mr. Stark," Loki said, voice low and gravelly, "it is not a game. In a game, I would advance, and you would retreat, and vice versa. But I have been winning this war, and I have shown that I do not care enough for your miserable lives to spare them just because one of you decides to show the vestiges of a spine."
"Stop it!" Jane cried, wrapping both her hands around Loki's forearm and bracing all her weight against him. It was a pathetic display, and the curl of Loki's lip showed that he knew it too, but she had to do something.

He freed Tony's throat long enough to place his hand against her shoulder and push. The push was enough to send her crashing into the doorway, and her head bounced painfully off the frame. She crumpled, and Tony was still caught.

Jane clutched her head with both hands. He moved so fast. His words came to her through a hazy veil, and she struggled to get back on her feet. The wall helped her, and she was upright again. But the few feet between them seemed so far…

"You are nothing," Loki snarled, digging his forearm deeper into Tony's throat as the other man's defenses became weaker and weaker. "Why is it so difficult for your idiotic race to realize that you should be grateful for the protection of a superior being? That your place in the universe is merely a single step up from that of the ants?

"I should just destroy all of you," power bloomed at his fingertips, green and horrible. Tony's face looked sunken and corpselike in the glow, and he could barely muster the strength to keep his arms up. "I should just destroy all you mortals and begin with my own inventions."

"Stop," Jane gasped, and put her hands on his forearm again. She was so dizzy from the blow to her head—she could feel the blood trickling down the collar of her sweater—that she slid forward on his arm and ended up clutching his hand.

They both jumped from the shock.

At first, Jane thought that it was the power of his magic that was making her feel this way—as though she could sense every nerve in her body, from her hair follicles to her kneecaps. But from the way his eyes widened as his fingers contracted automatically around hers…she didn't think she was the only one feeling it.

The skin of his hand was calloused in odd places—the ridges of the knuckles, the fingertips, and the heel of the palm—but the rest of it was soft and smooth. Still, she knew that a knife probably wouldn't be enough to pierce it, and that the deceptively gentle hand could crush the life from her without much effort (or remorse) at all. But Jane did not let go.

Beside them, Tony slid quietly to the ground, gasping and clutching at his bruised throat. Loki didn't spare him a moment's glance; he was taken up entirely by Jane. She took a quick breath and it shivered past her lips; his eyes fastened on them and his upper body curved towards her in a subtle arc.

She panicked, and jerked backwards, out of his grip. Even without the direct contact, her whole body still felt electrified, and her heart beat fitfully, stuttering in her chest as though trying to get started after a stall.

He was staring at her still, and she was struck suddenly with the thought that he looked tired…exhausted, even. The skin around his eyes was dark and shadowed, and his skin seemed tight and sallow. She wondered if he were sleeping at all.

Beside them, Tony wheezed.

"Please," she said, the word hardly louder than a breath. "Please, stop."

He stared at her, and licked his lips. "Please, what?"
She tried again. "Please, Loki—"

He lashed out at her, and gripped her forearms, jerking her forward and twisting them until she hand to stand on her toes. She cried out with the pain and shock.

"You do not," he spat, "have the right to use my name. You will address me properly."

Her brain raced, and she saw her father in her mind's eye. Would he have bowed?—she wondered briefly, hysterically. It didn't matter. It wasn't the pain in her arms that made her say what she did, nor was it her frantically beating heart. It was the shallow, pained breaths of a friend suffering beside her that made her look up at him, and beg.

"Please," she blinked back tears and smothered her pride, "please…my god, please."

He smiled then, wide, slow, and self-satisfied. He breathed out and she felt his breath on her face, and heard the low sound of the chuckle building in his throat. He laughed low, but long, and did not let her move an inch as he reveled in his victory.

She could not even flinch as he leaned close to her, his cheek brushing against hers as he whispered in her ear.

"Good girl."

She thrashed against his grip, but it was useless. If Tony had no chance of moving him, neither did she. He continued.

"I knew you would realize your place," he whispered, the low, intimate sound enough to prickle the fine hairs on her neck. Even as she fought, she shuddered with the sensation. He laughed again, "And as your god," he drew back, "I will spare him."

He turned away from her, but did not relax his grip. "Tony Stark," he said, addressing the man still slumped on the floor, "consider yourself fortunate that you have someone willing to sacrifice her pride on your behalf. Not that your pride is such a great sacrifice, my dear," his smile was cutting and cruel, and Jane couldn't help herself; she gave a strangled scream and lunged at him again, baring her teeth as he laughed harder and stilled her thrashing by catching her wrists and squeezing the bones together.

Her scream of anger became one of pain, and Tony recovered so far as to snarl, "Let her go, you bastard," and lash out with one well-aimed foot.

Loki returned the kick, and this time Jane knew she heard a bone break. Tony's face went pale, and he curled up into himself.

Loki watched him, and shook his head. "Fragile as a fly," he shook his head, "why do you fight so hard?"

"Because we have to!" Jane cried, "Why don't you understand that?"

He did not reply. His gaze had left them both, and turned inward. For a moment, they remained that way, in a silent tableau of uncomprehending and unreasoning pain. Jane focused on her breath and his face; nothing else in the world mattered.

"Well," Loki said, at last, "your pride may be an unworthy sacrifice, but I think I will accept it all the same. So, if you will excuse us, Mr. Stark," he let go of one of Jane's wrists but dragged her along with him by the other. She had to trot to keep up with his long strides, since when she fell
behind he crushed her bones again in his grasp.

Tony tried to push himself up against the wall but the pain in his leg sent him to the ground again. "Where are you taking her?" he bellowed, but by then, the door of the lab was already shut, muffling his voice.

Jane was suddenly beyond fear, beyond panic. She breathed, and she walked, and she felt only her heart beating and the iron grip of his hand on her wrist. She did not meet his eyes, did not notice what hallway they were walking through, did not even watch her feet as they moved at his guiding. Academically, she realized she was probably going into shock, but she couldn't expend the energy on that thought. She had to focus on her breathing…it was the only way she could stop from screaming.

They stopped moving, and he let go of her wrist. She still did not look up. Her lungs expanded…breathe in. They contracted…exhale out.

Her fingers were shaking, and they were still cold. God, she just wanted to be warm! Just once, before—if—she died…if she could just feel truly warm again, she would close her eyes thanking whatever god had decided to take pity on her.

He was standing so close to her, she could feel his heat on her skin. It didn't help.

Nothing he did would ever help.

His fingers—his cold fingers—took her chin and gently lifted her head. She did not meet his eyes; her breath hitched in her throat.

It was a nightmare, but not a surprise, when his lips descended on hers and his arms—his impossibly strong arms—tightened around her and pulled her against his body.

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And…there we go. Leave me a note.
Chapter Seven

Jane's mouth had been slightly open, her lips parted, and that was the reason Loki's tongue was in her mouth. She felt it there, and yet didn't feel it at the same time. Her body and mind were cold. Every place he touched her (one hand was on her neck, and trailing lower; the other was at her waist) felt lifeless and numb, as though all the blood in her body were retreating from his touch.

Her eyes were open. They had never shut. Academically, she found it very strange that his were closed—tightly closed—and that he seemed so desperate to get closer to her when she could not have been further away.

He leaned away from her for a moment—his eyes still closed—and took a deep, shuddering breath. She had no time to react before he pressed his lips to hers again, his hand on her neck almost painfully cold and his other arm around her middle like a steel band.

It wasn't until his hand trailed down her neck and slid down the collar of her V-neck tee-shirt that Jane woke up.

She had never punched anyone before. She had barely punched anything before—except at that one kickboxing lesson Darcy had dragged her to—but somehow she remembered what the instructor had told her about how to make a fist and how to hit the bag.

The pacifist in her died a quiet death as Jane did two things in quick succession:

She bit down hard on his tongue, tasting blood in her mouth.

When he jerked back from her, she punched him hard in the face.

It hurt her far more than it hurt him, she could tell. Her knuckles only glanced off his cheekbone before impacting on his nose, but every place her fingers connected felt sore and bruised. He did not move.

Jane welcomed the pain without a whimper. It made her warm, and drove away the lingering cold and numbness from his fingers. She could still feel them—like burning ice on her flesh.

"Don't you dare," she hissed, keeping her fist clenched and taking a few steps back from him, "touch me again."

It was insulting that he did not even acknowledge her anger. He merely stood there and looked at her, and Jane suddenly realized that he was not seeing her. His vision had gone inward—whether to analyze his next course of action or to wage some personal struggle, she could not tell—but he was silent, and still.

Meanwhile, Jane's body was still shaking with delayed adrenaline. Had her fists not been balled up as tight as she could make them, her fingers would have been shaking uncontrollably.

She could not be silent and wait for him to be done. She had been silent too long…never, ever again.

"Do you hear me?" she asked, voice strong with righteous anger, "Put a hand on me again and I will break your fingers."

The same academic voice in her brain that catalogued dry facts supplied her with the idea that his bones were probably stronger than steel, and there would be no way in Hell she could ever
damage him. She ignored that voice, and stood by her—very—empty threat.

He could hit her, lock her up, torture her. Anything was preferable to…

She took a deep breath and shoved that thought out of her mind too.

Loki took a step forward. It was a tribute to the differences between their heights that in one single step he closed all the distance that she had put between them. Jane shifted backwards again and felt her back hit the cold glass of the floor-to-ceiling windows. She tried to move to one side, but his hand shot out and blocked her escape.

The impact of his fist shuddered against the window—her ears rang with the sound, and the bruise on her head twinged—but he still did not speak. She stood still, her fists still clenched and her arms bent at the elbow, prepared—she hoped—for anything.

Prepared for everything except what he did, of course.

He laughed.

The sound was low in his throat, at first. Grating…like driving over a gravel road. But soon it grew in intensity and pitch, until he was out of control, laughing and laughing, almost spitting in her face. Jane winced and turned away, though she couldn't escape from the cage that his arms made; she wished she could melt through the glass and fall through the air. Even if no one came to catch her.

The laughter couldn't have lasted for longer than a minute or two, but Jane was close to collapse—her head aching from the shrill pitch of his voice—by the time he finally started to quiet himself. He took two breaths, chuckling each time he exhaled, and caught her chin between his fingers, dragging her face back to look at him.

"Well, Ms. Foster," he said, all his teeth showing as he smiled, "and here I thought one god might be as good as another. But you really are in love with my brother, aren't you?"

"This has nothing to do with love," Jane hissed, though her voice shook as much as her tiny fists, "this has to do with hating you." She punctuated her sentence by shoving her hands away from her face. "I meant it," she repeated, "don't touch me."

The laughter disappeared from his face. His body shifted ever closer; looming, smothering. Jane could barely breathe.

"Don't," he said softly, leaning in so close that he was almost speaking the words into her mouth, "ever," his lips brushed against hers, and she bared her teeth, "threaten me."

He drew back to his full height and stepped back, looking down on her with cold eyes and a curl of disgust to his lip. "It would not be a wise course of action."

Her heart was pounding so loudly, blood racing through her ears, that Jane almost didn't hear herself as she said, "I don't think you're one to talk about wise courses of action. How is r-rape," she stumbled on the word, "ever wise?"

He shrugged. "How does the expression go? You can't rape the willing."

Her mouth fell open in disgust and disbelief. "You didn't honestly think," she said, stepping sideways and getting another few paces of space between them, "that I would ever—could ever __"
"Oh, spare me your disgust and indignation," he said, dismissing her anger with a languorous wave of his hand, "you forget, I have known human women before. In all senses of the word," he went on, smiling, "you are far less unique than you might believe."

"If that's what you think," Jane was so angry she could barely see straight, "I wonder why you'd even be interested in..." she couldn't say the words, and let them die in her throat. He fully understood her meaning.

"Why not?" He looked at her, eyes running slowly along the length of her body. "Can you imagine a better way to torture my brother?"

Jane shook her head, "You unimaginable bastard."

He laughed, throwing his head back. "Yes, no one ever imagined a bastard quite like me," he said, chuckling, "But, in all honesty—I put this question to you because, being such a clever woman, you must know the answer—can you think of a more perfect revenge? For Thor's first love, his steadfast little mortal scientist, to succumb to the superior charms of his rival not-brother? It would eat him alive," and Loki licked his lips, his eyes bright, reveling in Thor's imaginary pain.

Those same bright eyes met Jane's; "Don't you agree, Miss Foster?"

She stared back, swallowing the sudden rush of bile that threatened to make an unsightly appearance all over his boots. *Keep it together, Jane.* "You're absolutely out of your mind."

"True," he conceded, "true, but irrelevant to the current topic of discussion. You know, I have had all manner of plans in mind for you. At first, I thought I would simply kill you,

The word had barely left his lips when he was *there*, in front of her, his long fingers spanning the circumference of her neck and his forefinger dancing over the artery that drummed her frantic heartbeat. His fingers tightened, gently, and Jane reached up in panic to try and tear his fingers away...

But he was already gone. His voice echoed from the walls, the ceiling, preternaturally loud; Jane clamped her hands over her ears as he went on:

"Then I thought, why waste a decent mind? I thought, let her continue her work on the off-chance that she helps me. And you did, Miss Foster," the voice was a tangible thing, swirling around her body like smoke, getting underneath the millimeters of space left by her hands and reverberating in her ears, "oh, you have no concept of how you have helped me."

"Stop it!" she cried, not able to bear another moment of that disembodied voice in her mind, speaking all her worst fears.

Still, he went on:

"Oh, your drive to help and to save and to make things better... so adorable, and so misguided."

There were physical hands on her body again; he took her by the shoulders and turned her around to face the window. Jane could barely raise any resistance. She was a rag doll in his hands, but he still put one palm to the back of her head, almost pressing her face into the glass.

"Look at what your science has wrought! You punched holes in your universe, and look what decided to come through!"

She started to panic. Though every muscle in her body was limp and exhausted from a mixture of pain, fear, and adrenaline-crash, she still fought back. It was like trying to topple a brick wall. She
batted against him like a moth crashes against a screen door, trying to reach the safety and comfort of a warm light.

"Let me go, let go!" she yelled, "You're hurting me!"

This fact meant nothing to him. She felt a laugh vibrate through his chest, and then his voice was in her ear again, dark and sibilant.

"After I saw what you were capable of," he whispered, holding Jane's head firmly against the glass so that she could not escape, "I was pleased, but still resolved. I thought I would have your mentor be the one to kill you. What would you have felt, I wonder," he murmured, pressing against her hair, "as he turned on you with a knife, nothing but emptiness in his eyes, deaf to your pleas for mercy?"

Jane whimpered, closing her eyes futilely against the images his words conjured. She found herself flung back to those dark, endless days in Stockholm, each dawning exactly like the other—without hope, without goal. She saw Erik's cold eyes tracking her movements across the room, an alien presence lurking behind his gaze; callous, when he had always loved her.

Cold, when he had always been so warm.

His hands were ice-cold, again. Her brain felt sluggish and stupefied from the frigid pressure on the back of her head. Her hands were frozen, the nail beds blue at the base. She wanted to cry, but the tears were slush, clogged in her lachrymal ducts.

Jane shivered, down to her bones. "Stop it," she said, teeth chattering. She was going to freeze to death from the inside out; freeze, and stand here for eternity, looking over the crumbled wasteland her ideas had created. New York…the whole city, abandoned and brought low.

Because of her.

The tear running down her cheek was so hot she thought it would raise a line of blisters on her skin. She stopped struggling, and let her body sag against the window, supported by his hands. Her breath fogged the glass, and she idly noticed the staggered, haphazard rhythm of her breathing. Would it matter if she just stopped?

Jane closed both eyes, squeezing them shut until she saw stars. But she wanted to live. She so passionately wanted to live. The smooth glass on her forehead helped steady her; she took a deep, even breath, and stood firm on her feet.

Loki seemed to sense her resolve. His grip loosened, and he stepped back. With her eyes closed, his distance was not a comfort; in fact, she felt like a rabbit, hopping along the forest floor, ignorant of when the hawk was going to swoop in for the kill. She only knew that the hawk was still there, and she could not see him.

She opened her eyes, and turned around, still leaning on the window behind her for support. The tear tracks on her face were irritating—reminders of her weakness—and she wiped them away.

"You think you can make the world better," she lifted her eyes to his face, but his gaze had gone above and beyond hers, looking out the window at the ruined city below, "you think you can make yourself better. But no one ever changes. Nothing can change."

"That's not true," Jane said, pressing her hands together to get some warmth into her fingertips, "you know yourself it's not true. You said that Thor had changed."

He shrugged, still not looking at her. "A temporary situation. I have known him for years without
end, and will eventually cause his end. Trust me, Miss Foster," and he smiled down at her, the expression soft, and hopeless, "no one ever changes."

"It's not true," her voice was stronger now, certain of her convictions, "we are all capable of change."

His smile grew broader, and more resigned. "I hope," he sounded more tired than anything, "that you have no plans of redemption in your head for me, my dear. Did you not just hear me admit that I planned to kill you myself, or have your old teacher do it instead? Your life means nothing to me...take care you do not annoy me needlessly."

"I know that," Jane whispered, "but you could have given the order to kill me dozens of times already. The first time we met, you could have broken my neck. When I was drugged, you could have told the doctors never to let me wake up. You could have had Erik kill me, back in Stockholm."

She shivered, again. She hoped that he didn't take this as her rationalizing away his desire not to kill her, but the truth-loving academic in her had to win this argument. She continued:

"But you didn't. You know that I'm not going to help you, and you still keep me alive. There must be a reason."

"I find it amusing that you insist you will not help me when I have not even begun to persuade you to do it," the smile left his face, "After all, you almost fainted when I described how I had tortured your Mr. Stark. And just now, you abandoned what little dignity you had in order to spare his life. Out of curiosity," he took another step back from her, and gestured towards the door, "if I summoned Erik Selvig in here, gave him a knife, and told him to shred his skin from his bones...would you still persist in this fantasy of resistance?"

"You might get me to cooperate," the words tumbled out, as though her willingness to acquiesce would keep him from carrying out his threat, "but the problems you asked us to solve...we can't do it! Not without a greater source of power, not without—"

"The tesseract," he finished, "I know."

"So why are you putting us through all this?" Jane cried, almost stamping her feet, she was so frustrated, "You're never going to get the tesseract!"

"Such confidence," he breathed, "such astounding arrogance, from someone so helpless. Do you honestly think I would let the key to ruling this realm—indeed, all the realms—remain beyond my possession?"

"But," she said, trying to order her racing thoughts, "you don't know where it is."

"Of course I know where it is!" he hissed at her, "Stupid girl! It is the single greatest source of magical power known in the entire universe...wherever it is, it calls to all who have knowledge of the lines of power, the secret forces that bind this world together and keep it from flying outside known space! I know where the tesseract is," he finished, seeming calmer, "and when I am ready, I will take it."

She was going to regret this, but the opportunity was too fair. "Such confidence," she parroted back at him, her shoulders tightening and preparing for the blow, "but what makes you think Thor will ever let you take it?"

"Please," he scoffed, "Thor would not be able to stop me even if I showed him how."
"You're underestimating him," she said, still shrunk back against the window, "just like you've underestimated all of us."

"Ah, yes. It is not as though five members of your elite team—warriors and scientists both—are at my mercy."

She bristled at his sarcasm. "We will escape from here. And we will make you sorry."

His palms slammed her shoulders into the glass, and her head bounced off, the pain from her prior injury making her wince and grit her teeth. His face was inches from hers. Despite the fury in his eyes, his voice was measured, quiet, and calm.

"I should torture you," he said, "I should hang you in chains and have the Skrull flay the skin from your back. I should break all the bones in your hands so you cannot solve another mathematical equation with the twisted remains. I should gouge out your eyes so that you can never look upon the stars again."

She tried to close her eyes; he dug his nails into the flesh of her shoulders until she opened them again.

"I should show you that rape entails far more than a kiss, my dear," he went on, ignoring her increasingly pale face and shallow breathing, "and after I wring from you every tear, every scream you have to give…I should take a trip into my erstwhile brother's dreams, and show him what has happened to his beloved. That way," he finished, "that way he will never dream without seeing your tormented face, and never sleep without waking with screams."

He let her go, and Jane fell to the floor. Her head was heavy and feverish; she tried to steady her breath, but her it hitched in her throat, and then she was crying anyway, in spite of her promises to be strong…crying the way children do, with no restraint or control.

It was fear, and exhaustion, and a half-crazy wish for this all to be done that fueled her sobs. She was so humiliated, so debased in front of him that her logical mind (the one that was soothing her now in a voice reminiscent of her mother's) told her not to worry, and just get it all out.

So Jane cried. Giving up any ideas of equality or control in their constant back-and-forth was shamefully liberating; the feminist in her died and joined ranks with the slaughtered pacifist. She remembered a line from *Fight Club*—another Darcy-induced experience:

"Losing all hope…was freedom."

Her sobs gentled, mostly because her throat was raw and burning. The tears continued to flow, tear ducts still hyperactive, but they merely surged forward and overran the banks of her lower lids. She was no longer actively crying, and she had control of her breathing again.

Jane closed her eyes, and ran her palms over her face, swiping away the tears and sweat as best she could. She pressed her hands against her pant legs, and then wiped her face again.

She didn't want to open her eyes, but had no excuse not to. With her hands on her thighs for some semblance of balance and grounding, she opened her eyes.

Everything was blurry and dim, the large pieces of furniture seeming like nothing but hazy shadows illuminated by the pale light from the windows; Jane blinked a few times to clear her eyes of residual tears, and her vision sharpened.

Sharpened, and landed right on Loki, who was kneeling not two feet in front of her.
Jane swallowed, and sat back on her heels. The reaction was instinctive and she almost knocked her head against the window. She blinked, and watched his eyes.

He smiled at her, and reached over to hold her face between his two hands.

"I should do all these things," he said, pleasantly, as though he were merely resuming their conversation after a short interruption, "But I will not. You have changed my best and most treasured intentions regarding you, Jane Foster, so maybe there is hope for your changing my mind about other things in the long run."

She jerked her face away from his grasp, but almost started crying again at the knowledge that she was not going to die just yet. She hated him so that she was almost blind with it; the rage filled her throat and kept her from thinking of any response to his mockery. She just looked at him, water and anger in her eyes.

He saw it. "I think that is probably enough for one day. Stand up."

His brusque commands were easy to obey, but her knees shook underneath her and she had to put one wet palm against the window to ensure that she wouldn't fall right back down again. He waited until she could stand unassisted, and led the way from the room.

It was the first time that Jane had actually taken in their surroundings, and her brain shot off one crazy thought—thank God it's not Tony's bedroom—before they passed through the doorway.

Loki set off in the opposite direction to the elevator.

"Aren't you taking me back down to the lab?" Jane asked, biting the inside of her lip in case the answer was…

"So that you and Mr. Stark can keep devising clever ways to avoid your work?" he said, not pausing for an instant, "I think not. You will remain where I can keep an eye on you."

She swallowed, willing herself not to vomit. She had lost a lot of her dignity today, but falling to her knees and retching would probably be the last nail in the coffin. Just because he meant to keep her close did not mean—she emphasized that last thought—what she thought it might mean.

But Tony…she already missed him fiercely. It would have been nice to feel his arms around her and listen to his stupid jokes and toss around another few harebrained theories after an ordeal like this one.

Loki stopped and unlocked a door with a flourish. "Your chambers, my Lady Jane," he bowed to her as she went in, mocking, "I hope you will find your rooms comfortable and convenient."

She swallowed her pride and her bile. "Thank you," she said softly, blinking at the bright late-afternoon light that filtered through the windows. She knew this room; it was one of those rooms Tony called "guest rooms for people I actually like".

Being so high up, Jane could see a stunning view of the entire city clear out to the Hudson River. Well, it would have been a stunning view. At least one out of every four skyscrapers was either missing its upper floors or great chunks from its side. The pavement of most major roads was furrowed or buckled up, impassible. There were neither cars nor pedestrians; no noise filtering up from the sidewalks. She could even see smoldering fires from trees burnt to charcoal in the public parks, the smoke making random symbols in the sky.

She turned away.
The furnishings were luxurious in a way that only Tony Stark could afford. Right now, they stood in the entryway to the suite; Jane could see the bedroom with its mahogany canopy bed to her right. The living room in front of them gave Jane the chilling view, and to her left there was a door that she assumed led to the bathroom.

The moment her gaze landed on the bed, her eyes began to slide closed in anticipation of a comfortable night's sleep. Her head ached fiercely and her eyes burned, but she had one more question to ask.

"How long am I supposed to stay here? I don't see any tools; there's no computer…how am I supposed to work?"

"Since you assumed that your tasks were impossible, I only believed that you no longer wished to attempt them," she wished she could beat the smugness out of his voice, but she barely had the energy to turn and face him, "You will remain here until I consider of what use you are to me."

Her head dropped to her chest. She understood his meaning; she would not be seeing Tony again. They would coexist in this tower—like Tony and Pepper—knowing that the other person was there, but never seeing the other, never speaking or laughing together again.

The loneliness was so sudden and shocking that she almost considered asking Loki to take her back downstairs, with a promise to be on her best behavior. How could she go through this without Tony?

Then, she lifted her head, nodding at her captor with a tiny smile. "As you wish," she said, as graciously mocking as he had been just moments ago.

Keep it together, Jane, her logical brain coaxed, you can do this. You have to do this.

He looked at her, a shadow of admiration back in his gaze. As before, he seemed to approve her shows of spirit; that is, when they didn't infuriate him. "Very well then," he bowed, a wicked edge to his smile, "I hope you have a pleasant evening, Miss Foster. Rest well."

She couldn't return his good wishes—even sarcastically—so she settled for nodding as he turned and left the room.

The moment the lock slid shut behind him, Jane dropped to her knees, splaying her fingers through the rich weave of the Oriental rug as though attempting to root herself in the earth. Her shoulders shook from the effort of holding her up, so she lay down, nose taking in the rich, oily scent of the wool. She sighed, and the sound trembled, but her tears were gone.

For now.

She rolled onto her back, relishing the hard wood and soft cloth beneath her back; it soothed some of the aches and pains that tormented her muscles. She pressed her cold hands to her face and felt the feverish, puffy skin around her eyes.

A bath would be so nice. She wondered if the bathroom had a view; it would be painful, but somewhat cathartic to look out at the city and imagine what its glory had been just a few months ago. From this high up, she could just look at the clouds and dream…

Something plucked at her memory. She was quite high up, though not at the top of the tower.

The sudden surge of energy propelled her body upright and to the living room window before she had time to think. How high was she?
Jane focused on a building across from them that looked to be on the same level. She counted floors: one…five…ten…fifteen…twenty—she gritted her teeth—twenty-one, two, and three…

She was on the 23rd floor. Damn. Five stories above where Tony had said the others were being kept. And she was certain the elevators were locked…

Jane used the armrests of the fluffy blue sofas in the room to haul herself upright.

"You're too tired, Jane," she said, softly, "take a bath, go to sleep, and figure this out in a few hours."

She stumbled into the bathroom and started the tub filling—the luxury of endless hot water!—but had to pause. The last thing she wanted to do, after everything, was take off her clothes in a place where Loki could come in uninvited and with no notice. She bit her lip. The water was so inviting!

"Bathing suit," she murmured, and turned towards the bedroom. She opened the wardrobes and found that a good deal of Pepper's clothes (she recognized a powder-blue suit and a black dress, among other things) had been put there for her use. She rummaged through the hangars, then the dresser drawers, and found a pink one-piece suit that would do.

Jane shut and locked the door before changing, but still felt her skin crawl for every moment she was unclothed. After living for so long in the middle of the desert, she hated to feel that her privacy was being invaded, and this was even worse. He could be watching her right now, and she would have no idea.

Pushing that thought aside, she crossed the entryway again and shut and locked the bathroom door behind her. The hot water was a balm to her exhausted muscles; she kept draining and freshening the tub until her skin was pickled and pale red with the heat. It took forever before her fingers and toes lost the stubborn numbness he had pressed into them, but she felt indescribably better when she was warm.

When her eyes became too heavy to keep open, Jane toweled off, went into the bedroom, and crawled into bed; wet bathing suit, towel, and all.

She was unconscious the moment her head hit the pillow.
Chapter Eight

There was a bitter taste in her mouth when she woke, and her neck and shoulders were sore from
the awkward way her head was positioned on the pillow, but Jane had to admit that she felt better
than she had in weeks. The comforter was fluffy, soft, and warm, the tinted glass in the windows
kept the sunlight off her face, and her hair and skin were clean for the first time in a long time.

The moment she admitted just how comfortable she was, Jane sat upright. It wasn't fair that she
was so content when others were in a state of misery.

She shivered when she stepped out of bed, and realized that neither her bathing suit nor her hair
was dry from the previous evening. She yawned and shuffled slowly in the direction of the
bathroom.

Now upright, Jane had the opportunity to feel each one of her aches and pains. Her elbow and
hand still hurt from the IV being torn out; the back of her skull was tender from when it had
smashed against the door in the lab; she could feel prickles of bruises on her throat from Loki's
fingers; her knees were sore from when she had dropped down and cried…

Jane swallowed hard and tried not to think about any of it, but once in the bathroom, it was
impossible to escape the vision of her face, wan and tired, staring back at her with the wary, dark-
circled eyes of a victim.

The sight made her start to tear up again.

"Enough, Jane," she said firmly, speaking to the sad image in the mirror, "this isn't going to get
you anywhere."

Her strong voice echoing off the clean tile walls of the bathroom, managed to perk her up a little
bit.

"First things first," she said, trying to order her thoughts, "is to get cleaned up."

She rummaged in the medicine cabinet and pulled out everything that might be of use; rubbing
alcohol for the cuts in her arm and on her head, a hairbrush and comb, toothbrush, toothpaste, and
mouthwash. Once her tools were assembled, she set about making herself presentable.

With a straight part in her hair, Jane tugged the wet strands forward over her shoulder so they
obscured some of the worse bruises on her neck. She dabbed the alcohol over her cuts—wincing
at the sting—and wrapped some medical gauze around her arm and hand. The cut on her head
was not too deep, so she settled for giving it a good cleanse and leaving it alone.

With a washed face, brushed hair, and clean teeth, Jane actually felt human again. Shoving aside
her guilt about having access to all this luxury when she knew that Tony was probably sick with
worry about her, down in the lab, she tackled next the problem of changing clothes.

A wet swimsuit was not the preferred outfit in which to face a hostile world, but Jane felt dread
pooling in her stomach at the thought of undressing. She selected her outfit—a pair of jeans and a
royal-blue scoop-neck tee-shirt—and brought them into the bathroom, locking the door behind
her.

She took a deep breath, and stepped out of the suit, toweled herself off, and hopped into the jeans
and tee in record time. At the end of the process, her hands were shaky and her breath was coming
a little fast, but nothing had happened, and Jane breathed a sigh of relief.
Now, with all the little mundane tasks out of the way, she had time to consider her situation. Jane stepped out of the bathroom into the entryway and jiggled the door handle. Nothing doing, as it was definitely locked, and she wandered into the living room, looking around for something, anything, of use.

"The priority is going to be figuring a way out," talking aloud was comforting, so Jane continued the narration as she paced the room, slowly, "if I can get out, I can try to get downstairs to Pepper and the others, or Tony, and let them know where I am and we can figure out how to modify the escape plan." She turned over all the cushions on the sofa, "Maybe I'm close enough to Tony's room that I can get the spare arc reactors and help us get out of here."

The living room searched—with nothing immediately helpful in evidence—Jane returned to the bedroom. This time upon opening the wardrobes, she didn't just browse through aimlessly. She looked in every pocket of every pair of pants, swept her fingers into the corner of every dresser drawer, and shook every shirt in the hopes that something useful would present itself.

Of course, not having the vaguest idea how she was going to get out of the room made her definition of "useful" rather broad. And these rooms seemed to have been swept with the same care that her first cell—with the counterfeit Pepper—had been. There was very little she could categorize as either "tool" or "weapon".

Finally, Jane sat on the bed and tried to consider her actual plan of escape. She wasn't strong enough to break the door down, nor was there a balcony to climb to reach another, unlocked, room. So the door was her only option; she returned to the entryway and considered it.

"Why," she muttered under her breath, "does Tony have to make everything so nice?"

These were not the hollow doors of her childhood home, though which a hammer could smash with very little effort. Thankfully, they weren't the metal doors of the lab or her old trailer, but being made of heavy, solid wood (oak would be her guess) made them just about has hard to get through.

Jane examined the doorknob. Without tools, there would be no way for her to break it apart. The screws were concealed under a brass cover, one that she couldn't pry back without a crowbar, and in her search of the rooms, she had seen nothing that could be used as such.

Next, she examined the hinges. These gave her some hope. The screws were visible; at three to a hinge, and three hinges to the door, she would have to undo nine screws before she could wedge the door open on one side. It would be tight, but she might—might—be able to slip out. And her escape attempt would be fairly quiet; if she could find something to use as a screwdriver, she would be able to hear any Skrull patrols coming down the hallway to deliver her meals.

She would not—and this thought gave her the shivers—be able to hear Loki, of course. But he had not sealed the door magically—the why of which was still unclear to her—and he must have known that she would try to escape as quickly as she could. If he caught her, who knows what he would do?

Jane decided not to think about it.

She sat cross-legged on the rug in the entryway, and considered her opponent. If she had Tony around, he would have already come up with at least eight possible options for a screwdriver, and would have had one hinge off already. As it was…

Jane hung her head. Her brain was working slowly today, and she pondered all the items she had
seen in her inventory of the suite, wondering what the heck she could do to get the screws loose.

The silence in the rooms was oppressive, and Jane's thoughts seemed thundering loud in consequence. She pressed her palms to her forehead, leaning elbows on her knees, and tried to focus.

It didn't help that the only noise in the room aside from her thoughts was the growling of her stomach. Thinking back, Jane remembered the last time she had had anything to eat had been breakfast with Tony in the lab the previous day. And that meal, being only cereal and powdered milk, with extra-strong coffee, had been far from nourishing.

And before that…there had been lentil curry, salad, and bread. Jane's stomach growled louder as she remembered her meal with Loki, even as her mind never wanted to dwell on those memories ever again.

She got to her feet and returned to the living room, looking out over the city. The sun was already high; she must have slept from the previous afternoon until mid-morning; she guessed it was about 10 AM or even later. So why had no one brought her anything to eat? Usually breakfast was just after dawn, and dinner just before sunset. Had they not brought her anything to avoid interfering with her sleep?

Jane shook her head at this bizarre train of thought. How could she tell what sort of logic her captors had? What was the use in speculating when—or even if—they intended to feed her? Her responsibility was to get the door open.

Resolution in mind, Jane ignored her stomach and went back to the bedroom, determined to find something—anything—that would serve her purpose.

Slowly, carefully, she went over each piece of clothing, searching in all the corners of all the pockets. On this search, she found an assortment of coins and a crumbled ten-dollar bill in one of Pepper's suit pockets, a balled-up receipt, and a hair tie. Jane wished that Pepper had kept a bobby-pin somewhere, but even in the bathroom, it seemed that Loki had learned from her last escape attempt, and removed them all from the suite.

Jane jingled the change in her hand and thought. Maybe one of the coins was thin enough…

One by one, the quarter, nickel, and dime were fitted into the thin groove of the screw. The dime was the best fit, but even it was just a touch too thick; especially considering the fact that she could barely twist the coin with any sort of power only added to her frustration.

It was, however, the best she could do.

She gave a frustrated sigh, and blew loose strands of hair out of her eyes.

"Come on, Jane," she said, settling down on her knees and pulling her hair back in a messy bun, "people have dug tunnels with spoons and…and…" her knowledge of escape artistry was limited to the movies, so she finished with, "done all sorts of incredible things to get out of prison. Ooh, rafts with raincoats! That's how they got off of Alcatraz," she fitted the dime into the screw and slowly, painfully, started to turn it millimeter by millimeter. "Thank you, Mythbusters."

"And at least," she said, trying to ignore the pain in her fingers and knuckles, "your guards are more or less leaving you alone. It's not like you're trying to do this with Nazi guards running sweeps of the hallways every two minutes." Thinking of the Holocaust in this situation made her a little queasy, so she went on, "Anyway, it could be worse."

The dime slid out of the groove and her knuckles smacked against the door frame. Jane winced
and sucked at the little droplet of blood that dripped from the skinned flesh.

"Ow," she grumbled, making sure the flow of blood had stopped, and fitted the coin back in.

The dime gave her so little torque, and the screw was so tightly pressed into the hinge, that Jane could barely tell if all her effort was moving the metal at all. Her sweaty fingers repeatedly slipped on the dime, and her forearms and knuckles soon ached with the effort of twisting the coin. She took a few breaks—no longer than thirty seconds apiece—to shake out her fingers before working harder than ever.

Finally, her efforts paid off. The screw moved with noticeably more ease, letting out tiny squeaks as it twisted off its base.

Jane sighed, and smiled. "See? This is a piece of cake. A few hours, max, and you'll be out the door, down the stairs, and gone."

In her giddy relief, that ideal situation seemed almost possible. She redoubled her efforts, and finally, the first screw fell from the hinge, bouncing away on the lacquered wood floor. She caught the runaway screw and tucked it in her pocket—she didn't want the guards finding it—and celebrated by standing up and giving her sore legs and arms a good long stretch.

She sat back down, and tackled the next screw. Then the next. She was setting her dime to the fourth screw (onto the second hinge) when she distinguished the tell-tale sounds of heavy footsteps in the hallway.

Though her legs spasmed as she launched herself quickly to her feet, she was still able to make it to the living room sofa—curled up in the corner and looking wistfully over the city—before the deadbolt on the door slid back and two Skrull guards entered the room.

Jane folded her arms around her raised knees and shrank back against the sofa's armrest, only half-acting her fear as the snarling Skrull entered the room with her. She prayed to whatever god might be listening—except for the one who happened to be closest, of course—that the Skrull could not detect her plan in her eyes.

As usual, though, they were nothing but scornful of their human captive. It took them no more than two minutes to inspect all the rooms (and Jane had been careful to make everything look undisturbed) and drop her lunch tray on the coffee table in the room before stalking out and locking the door again. Thankfully, the unscrewed hinge had not made the smallest sound.

Jane breathed a deep sigh of relief. In celebration for her undiscovered plan, she decided to give herself a break and eat her lunch before it got cold. The smell from underneath the cover was familiar, and Jane grimaced when she realized Loki was feeding her leftovers. That said, however, the lentil curry tasted just as warm and welcoming as it had the night before last, and the bread had been toasted and spread with—was it possible?—fresh butter.

She devoured everything except the banana—which she saved for a snack later on—and returned to her post in the entryway. The meal had improved her mood immensely, and she hummed under her breath as she wrestled with the next three screws.

The second hinge took her until the early afternoon to unscrew. Jane stood and stretched, shaking out her tired hands, and considered.

"If they bring dinner at 6," she murmured, "do I have time to unscrew the last hinge, get down to the eighteenth floor, and get back up before they notice I'm missing?"

Her immediate thought was no. To begin with, she had no idea how she would get between the
floors; she had very little idea how to get around Stark Tower except by means of the elevator. Second, she had no idea where on the eighteenth floor the others were being held. Third, if she failed to make it back in time…

Jane swallowed, and said, "Don't think about that," she sighed, "This will have to wait until tomorrow."

The thought sat uneasily with her. She didn't want to wait until tomorrow! If Tony and the others were still planning their escape, she needed to let them know where she was and make sure they didn't leave her behind.

Jane bit her lip. It might be easier to move around the Tower in the dark. The moon was almost full, and without the streetlights, there would probably be enough natural light for her to navigate by. Also, the Skrull seemed to patrol less frequently at night, as though after they fed their prisoners and "tucked them in", there was nothing more to be done.

Jane went back to work on the door, unfastening all except the very last screw. It would be enough to hold the door to the wall when they came in with dinner, but easy enough for her to unscrew with the last minutes of daylight left. Then, she could sneak out and try to find the others.

When this was done, Jane returned to the living room and watched the shadows lengthen on the street. As with her other escape plans before, the waiting was the most difficult part. She kept imagining horrible scenarios: getting caught when the Skrull came in the room, getting caught outside her cell after-hours, or running into Loki.

Jane rubbed her sweaty palms on her jeans. Probably, she tried to reassure herself, nothing would happen. Probably, she would find her friends, find out that they had an imminent escape planned, and be just fine getting back to her rooms. Jane scoffed. Yes, and they would just stroll out the front door to a waiting helicopter.

"Don't be an idiot, Jane," she scoffed.

She stretched out on the sofa and tried to relax. But she just lay there, tapping her fingers in random rhythms until she heard the lock clank. This time, her heart started beating so quickly that she didn't have to fake her sudden jerk upright to a fetal position at the end of the sofa.

The first of the Skrull caught her frantic motion, and she heard him chuckle—the dry, hissing sound like coarse-grain sandpaper—as he spoke to his companion, who also laughed. Jane gritted her teeth; let them laugh, Jane; you'll have the last one.

She gave the Skrull a dead-eye stare as they examined the rooms and then deposited the tray and lone candle. As they passed through the door, she held her breath; but they didn't seem to notice the sounds of the hinges scraping against the doorframe as it closed.

She exhaled in a giant whoosh. "Hurdle one," she whispered, and turned to the tray.

Despite all her work that afternoon, her stomach was not settled enough to take in any more food. In fact, the more she considered the work ahead of her, she found herself growing too queasy to eat.

"I'll just," she replaced the lid, "save this for after I get back. If I get back," she finished, darkly.

She lay down on the sofa and waited for it to get dark.
The wood of the door creaked as she wedged the door open on the hinged side. The stiff oak did not want to bend in the least; Jane wedged her hands in, braced all her weight against the wall, and pulled, sweating as inch by inch, the door bent inward. She wedged her foot in the gap, took a few panting breaths, and pushed again, edging her shoulder into the gap.

Finally, she had wiggled her way through the protesting door, and stepped out into the hallway. The release of tension on the wood was too much for her to hold back, and the door slammed shut, the bang echoing in the silence of the hall.

Jane gasped, and leaped into the shadows cast by another door. There was no sound in the corridor, but she stood there shaking as her ears ached with the effort of listening for her guards returning.

There was nothing. After five minutes—which felt like an hour—Jane eased away from the wall and started her trip down the hallway. Her sneakers were silent on the carpet in the hallway, and she was able to make good time around the floor.

The elevator at the end of the hallway was locked, accessible only with a key card. Jane tried calling out for Jarvis—it was a long shot—but the AI was silent.

She gave a frustrated stomp (a quiet frustrated stomp), and looked around.

A building of this size, she reasoned silently, had to have an interior staircase, according to building codes. Knowing Tony, he wouldn't want something that building codes required to be visible, if it didn't appeal to his aesthetic sense. So, he would have it concealed. But code required that the stairs and the elevators be located close together…

Jane put her fingers to the wall next to the elevator and started walking, feeling every inch of the wall she passed for some kind of groove that would indicate the hidden staircase. One wall revealed nothing; she doubled back and tried the other side. This time…jackpot!

She traced the groove with both hands and found a palm-sized depression on the left side. Pressing forward on this made the entire panel swing inwards, to reveal the emergency lit staircase.

She couldn't believe it. This harebrained long-shot might actually work!

Before heading down the stairs, Jane propped open the door with a balled-up sock, just in case the seal was less obvious from the other side, and quickly started her descent. The floors were labeled from the inside, and it took her less than a minute to skip down the five stories until she reached the eighteenth.

Even though her heart was pounding and her instincts were screaming at her to hurry, Jane forced herself to slow down. It wouldn't make any sense for her to rush headlong onto this floor; for all she knew, the Skrull patrolled it all night long. She put her ear to the crack and waited for another five minutes. Though her ragged breathing made quiet listening difficult, Jane didn't hear a sound.

She eased the door inward, and edged into the hallway. The light from the staircase made her blind in the darkness; she tamped down on the panic that her blindness inevitably caused, and waited again, until the shadows had enough texture and contrast for her to find her way.

Jane started down the hallway, feeling a weird sense of deja-vu. This floor looked exactly like hers…exactly except in one, tiny detail.

A small, flickering light came from underneath one of the doors.
Her breath caught in her throat; that must be it! She flew down the hall and stretched out on her stomach, trying to look underneath the door. The gap was too small, so she put her lips against it and whispered, loud as she dared, "Pepper! Natasha, Clint! It's me, Jane!"

The low murmur of voices she had heard stilled instantly. Cautious footsteps approached from the other side, and Jane heard a body lie down parallel to her.

"Jane?"

It was Natasha's voice, low and wary.

"Yes, it's me!"

"Prove it."

A wise precaution. Jane bit her lip and thought over their few prior interactions. She and the assassin had almost nothing in common; they had barely spoken while she had been working in Stark Tower for those few weeks before Thor reappeared.

There had been one memorable occurrence, though…

"The first time we met, I asked you how on earth you got into your bodysuit every day. And you said—"

"I said, "what makes you assume I take it off"", " Natasha finished, sounding reluctantly amused. There was muffled laughter from the other side of the door, and Jane smothered her own chuckles in the carpet. "Okay, hang on."

Jane got to her feet, and a few minutes later, two sets of hands pulled the door open in exactly the same way she had opened her own. They had managed to get the hinges off, too.

"Hurry up," Natasha commanded, the strain of holding the stubborn wood evident in her voice. Jane squeezed through the gap, and Natasha and Clint eased the door silently closed.

Jane barely had a moment to look around at the suite—exactly like her own—before she was blindsided by Pepper. The taller woman threw her arms around Jane and held tight.

"I'm so glad you're okay!" she whispered, pulling back to look Jane in the face, "Tony told me that Loki had been paying extra attention to you and…we were all worried."

"Jane," Natasha said, her voice flat and still wary, "let us see your face."

Jane turned, confusion evident in her eyes; suddenly Clint was holding both her arms behind her back in an almost-painful grip and Natasha was staring intently at her, their faces mere inches apart. Jane managed not to cry out from the shock and didn't struggle. Clint was much stronger than she was.

"She's fine," the redhead said after a few minutes, "let her go."

"Sorry about that, Jane," the archer said, patting her on the shoulder. "after the whole Erik Selvig surprise, we can't be too careful. And you've been spending so much time with Loki," his voice was sour, "that none of us could be sure."

"I don't blame you," Jane said, "Loki's done plenty of things to me, but possession isn't one of them. Although," and she couldn't believe she hadn't thought of this, but they were right, "I don't know why he hasn't."
"Neither you nor Stark," Romanov commented, "even though he wants you to do his dirty work?"

"Maybe it doesn't work like that," Jane speculated, "Erik seemed pretty out of it when he was possessed. Definitely a puppet, not an independent agent. We probably couldn't think creatively and be possessed at the same time."

Clint and Natasha exchanged a glance, and Natasha shrugged. Clearly, neither of them knew.

"Forget about that," Pepper interjected, "you are okay, right Jane? You've got some bruises," she pointed to Jane's throat, where her hair had fallen aside to reveal the marks from Loki's fingers.

Jane pulled her hair forward again, feeling uncomfortably exposed. Both Clint and Natasha were watching her like hawks. "Um, yeah, I'm fine," she sighed, "he's…he's knocked me around, hit me a bit, but nothing too bad."

"Tony told us," Pepper's voice sounded tearful, "what happened to him. We were worried he was going to do the same to you."

Jane swallowed. "It's all threats, so far," she said, patting the other woman on the shoulder. "Don't worry about me. Have you heard anything from Tony?"

"He managed to connect Jarvis for a few minutes yesterday to let us know that you'd been taken," Clint said, gesturing towards the AI panel in the wall next to the door, "told us to keep our ears open just in case we heard anything. But we never get visits from Loki, so there wasn't much we could do."

"Arrogant asshole thinks we can't figure a way out of here," Natasha said, her tone a mix of anger and smug pride, "so he forgets about us. We know where he sleeps, though…we'll see who has the last laugh."

"Where did he put you, Jane?" Pepper asked. "Tony needs to know so he can tell Jarvis what room to contact. Jarvis can't do internal scans anymore, so he needs to be directed."

"I'm on the twenty-third floor, but I don't know what suite I'm in. It's six doors away from the elevator, on the right side of the hall…"

"That's suite 23C," Natasha didn't even bat an eye, "I'll relay the information right away."

And indeed, without another word, she wedged the door open with one hand, slid herself through the gap, and disappeared without a sound.

"Things are moving quickly, now," Clint said, explaining her sudden disappearance. "Tony overheard that Loki was needed on the Italian front; apparently a mutant called Nightcrawler showed up in the Vatican and started rallying the troops for some guerilla resistance. They're making a good fight for some of the territory in and around Rome that's been lost, and the Skrull have taken losses they're not happy about. Loki's going to be leaving tomorrow; and your barometer," he smiled at Jane, "is going to let us know the minute he's out of the building."

"And then," Jane said, almost vibrating with excitement, "Natasha gets the arc reactor, we all meet down in the lab when Tony gives Jarvis the go-ahead, and Tony creates the portal!"

"And we get out of here," Pepper finished, grinning herself.

"How did Tony find out?" Jane asked, brow furrowed. It seemed unlikely that Loki would reveal something so sensitive to one of his enemies, and Jane had not heard a murmur of this before.
"After Loki took you away," Pepper said, taking up the narrative, "Tony was so worried that he reactivated Jarvis and had him eavesdrop on the penthouse level, which is where Loki does all his planning. He heard the story straight from the man himself."

"Good job on getting out of your room," Clint said, "because none of us knew how we were going to exploit this opportunity without you. Tony was insistent that he wasn't going to leave without you. How did you get out?"

"Same way you did," Jane had to smother her proud smile, "I unhinged the door, and used the staircase next to the elevator."

"Smart. What'd you have for a screwdriver?"

"A dime that Pepper," and here Jane smiled wider, "left in one of her pockets."

"I knew that shirt looked familiar!" Pepper laughed. "Well, for your sake, I'm glad I did. We only had a bobby pin," she shook her head, "it took almost two days to get all the screws out."

The door bent open again, letting out a long creak. Natasha slipped back into the room.

"The code is: "Loki has left the building"," the spy seemed less than amused by what was clearly Tony's choice of words. "The minute that comes over the speakers, we all get out of our rooms and head down to the lab. After we rendezvous, we wait for the Skrull to open the lab door at the next meal, knock them out, and activate the portal."

"Piece of cake," Jane said, her voice not as certain. Pepper looked as nervous as she felt, but neither of the professionals seemed phased at all. Jane knew that they had escaped from far worse scenarios.

"Do you want one of us to come up to your room and get you, Jane?" Clint asked, catching the nervous way Jane nibbled on her lower lip.

"No," she said, crossing her arms. "I'll be fine. Besides, you two need to get out, too. And if you go first," she tried for a joke, "you can get all the bad guys out of the way."

Natasha nodded. Clearly the idea of taking down eight-foot-tall reptile men was no joke to her.

"You'd better go back," Natasha said, "and try to get some sleep. We have no idea when we'll have to move, and getting out of the city without being detected is going to be hard. The Skrull will notice the moment we're gone, of course. Wear layers and comfortable shoes, and bring anything that you can use as a weapon."

Jane swallowed, and nodded. "I'll be ready," she promised.

"Are you sure you don't want anyone coming back with you tonight?" Clint repeated his offer, mouth turned down at the corners as he looked at her.

"I can get back on my own," Jane said. "I don't know if I'll be able to find a weapon, though. They swept my room pretty thoroughly."

"You can use your screwdriver to loosen one of the supporting bars from the sofa frame," Pepper offered, "that's what we've done. It doesn't take very long; no more than a few hours."

Jane nodded. "Okay. I'm on my way, then."

Clint and Natasha put their ears to the door, then held it open for her. Jane wished she didn't have
to go, but it would in no way be safe for her to spend a night outside of her room. For all she
knew, Loki had detected her absence already. She stepped out into the hallway and jogged back
to the stairwell, retrieving her sock along the way.

Getting back into her room was easier than getting out of it; she put her shoulder to the door and
pushed until she wedged her way inside, and caught the door with her foot to keep it from
crashing back.

Looking around the darkened room (her own candle had burnt out) she sighed. After being within
sight and sound of friends, it was very hard to be alone again. Still, to escape—and perhaps, to see
Thor!—as early as tomorrow was a powerful motivator, and Jane dug in her pocket to find her
dime, in order to get her weapon.

Hours later, after replacing some of the screws in the hinges and breaking the sofa apart, Jane lay
on the bed, wearing a turtleneck and tee-shirt, belted jeans, and socks (she left her sneakers off to
avoid seeming suspicious). The bar from the sofa was a hard line under her pillow, but it made her
feel safe to have it there.

Her heart pounded, and her breath came short. She did not close her eyes all night.
Chapter Nine

The sky outside the windows turned blue by inches, running the spectrum from navy, to royal, to pale, to robin's egg blue over a span of at least two hours. Jane's eyes were gritty and puffed from lack of sleep, but she refused to close them. Her whole body was tense and alert, adrenaline flowing at a low level, readying her for any necessary, sudden movements.

She sat up. Dawn. In another half-hour, it would be breakfast time.

For what was probably the two-hundred and sixty-seventh time that night, she wondered how the others were preparing for the upcoming day. Knowing Clint and Natasha—not that she really knew them, but still...—they were probably doing one-armed pushups and endless sit ups. She envied them their fitness and energy, but knew that she could never do the many things they had done to get to that level.

Pepper was probably sitting and watching the sky grow slowly brighter, like Jane. It had been nice, seeing Pepper again. She and Jane had always gotten along well together; their pragmatism and desire to get things done—plus their fond/frustrated opinion of Tony—had made them quick friends when Jane had first arrived at Stark Tower. Pepper had been one of the strongest advocates on Jane's behalf when SHIELD insisted that she leave the city ahead of Thor's arrival, and Jane would always be thankful for that.

And Tony? Jane chuckled and stretched. He had probably built himself another suit and was ready and raring to test it. It wouldn't be the first short-notice engineering miracle he'd pulled off.

That left her. "How are you feeling, Jane?" she murmured, trying to take objective stock of her state of mind. But what was there to say? She was nervous—and scared—but couldn't wait for things to get started.

She wandered into the living room and stood in front of the window, shifting from one leg to the other. Unbidden, the thought arose: what was Loki doing this morning? How was he preparing for the ordeal of defending the territory his opponents were so desperate to take back?

Jane snorted, angry at herself for even wondering. Why should she care about his state of mind? He certainly had no thought for his opponents; scared, bullied humans and mutants standing up against the unbearable thought of losing their homes and heritage, and facing forces that were superior to them in both numbers and weaponry. Theirs was the truly honorable stand. Loki should be ashamed of himself for fighting them.

Somehow, Jane doubted that he was. Call it intuition; she smiled wearily. This was all so pointless. He would have to fight them, for to admit defeat would be to call his entire invasion into question. They would have to fight; she had said it herself. They would fight because they had to. Because human beings had a compulsion to be free.

Whatever Loki might say or think...humans wanted to be free.

She shook her head and turned away from the window. As excited as she was for their escape today, she felt sick at the thought that many people would very likely lose their lives before the day was done.

Would the Avengers go to Italy to help in the fight? Did they even know it was going on? Could they do anything to help, or were their talents needed in other places around the US?
"Stop asking questions you can't answer," she said, tapping the side of her head, "you're making me crazy."

The lock rattled in the door, and Jane turned, cursing under her breath as her heartbeat skyrocketed. No matter how she tried, she just couldn't be nonchalant in the face of the Skrull. They were terrifying.

But her heart stuttered, then stalled entirely, when it wasn't the reptiles that walked into the room.

It was Loki.

She stumbled backwards a few steps, retreating further into the living room but stopping short of putting her back against the window. She didn't want to be trapped the same way she had been last time. Jane bit her lip and wished that she'd taken her weapon with her from the bedroom; there was no way to get it now.

Her brain whirred furiously, thinking about what she should do. Should she be polite? Cold? Silent, as he was?

Her mouth, meanwhile, had made its decision. "Good morning," she said, softly.

She saw his shoulders jerk and had to smother her smile at managing to surprise him yet again. Rather than flying into a rage, he merely returned her greeting in a similarly neutral tone of voice.

Jane knew it couldn't last, and after another moment, she saw the familiar wide, unhinged grin bloom across his face.

"'Once more unto the breach, dear friend',' he said, making Jane jump this time with his surprising knowledge of Shakespearean quotes. "I really do wish," he went on, shaking his head, "that being ruler of so much of the world would entitle me to a few mornings of sleeping in."

"I'm sorry that world domination is such a taxing ordeal," Jane replied, crossing her arms, "maybe you should choose a goal that's less strenuous?"

He scoffed, "I place the blame with you and people of your ilk, who refuse to know when they have been beaten. If humans were sensible creatures, I would not have to work nearly as hard as I do."

Oh, poor baby, Jane thought, her mental voice dripping with acid. Outwardly, she was silent; but Loki caught her eyes and she knew that her sarcastic thoughts were visible on her face.

"Oh, Miss Foster," he said, "you have never been skilled in the art of hiding your emotions. You should be grateful that I have battles to fight today and do not wish to expend any energy on you."

"Even if I hid my emotions," she said, shaking her head, "you would know what I was feeling. No one who knows that hundreds, maybe thousands, of her fellow creatures are going to be killed could help feeling what I'm feeling."

"Well, I'm flattered," he smirked, "the deaths of so many…that presupposes I will win. Thank you for your confidence."

"You have more men and more power than your opponents," she shot back, digging her nails into her upper arms, "Sometimes it's impossible to be both optimistic and realistic. That doesn't mean I'm not hoping you won't come back from this," she finished, bracing herself for his retaliation, "I'm not that generous."
"After all I have done for you," he tsked, shaking his head and stepping closer, while Jane retreated, "Took you out of that miserable situation in Stockholm, sheltered you, fed you, and clothed you," no matter how fast she stepped backwards, he was always there, "not to mention," he finished, "relinquishing my long-cherished plans of your lingering torture and painful death."

She had run out of room; with her back to the wall, he had her cornered again. Her skin crawled as he reached out and ran his hand down her cheek.

"And now," he murmured, "to be the one to whom I unburden my thoughts, before setting off for battle. You have been truly honored, Jane," even she could hear the mockery in his voice, despite his so-called compliments, "why this hostility?"

"You are going to kill people," she said, "do you think I'll thank you for any mercy you show me? What guarantee do I have that you won't do the same to me tomorrow?"

"I already told you I would not. That is the word of a King, Miss Foster…why should you doubt it?"

She shook her head in staggered disbelief. "The first two days I was here, you hit me, took away my voice and dragged me around. Three days ago we sat down together and had what I'm sure you'd call a civil dinner. But the next day, you..." damn, it was still hard to say, "kissed me against my will and told me how you should torture me. You've kidnapped me, taken me halfway across the world, separated me from my friends, killed people I care about;" she was starting to hyperventilate, "why should I trust anything you say?"

She saw his eyelids flutter, and his mouth turned down at the corners. Her brow furrowed; had she actually hurt him with this recital of grievances? She thought quickly; he had told her he wanted to save humans from themselves, implying that he wanted to make their world a better place. Could she make him see just how much damage his twisted desire to help was doing?

At that thought, she felt a sickening moment of vertigo as she recalled his words from the day before last:

Oh, your drive to help and to save and to make things better...so adorable, and so misguided.

Oh, my God. That's what he meant...when he'd said they were the same.

Jane slumped back against the wall and shut her eyes, feeling like she was going to faint. She breathed deeply and locked her knees, hoping that she wouldn't just collapse like a marionette with its strings cut.

This time, his fingers on her neck and jaw were not there in violence. He lifted her head until she opened her eyes and met his. They were expressionless...almost expressionless. When he spoke again, she could hear his sadness for both of them in his voice:

"Do you see, now? Do you understand?"

With more strength than she had ever thought it possible to muster, she whispered, "That still means what you're doing is wrong. You know that."

"Even if I did," he did not let her go, "even if you did...would you stop?"

Jane stopped the retort that sprang immediately to her mind, and forced herself to think honestly. To abandon the possible good that could come with an interchange of trade and ideas with other worlds...could she do that, knowing what she did? To have never met Thor, never dreamed of other worlds...or to abandon those dreams, after having spent so many months with them...
Even knowing there was a possibility that bad could come with the good, would she still continue to try to reach those distant stars?

And because she loved the truth, and had to speak it, Jane looked up into the eyes of the mad, world-conquering demigod and said, "No. I wouldn't."

His hands dropped to her shoulders, and he squeezed gently, his hands almost warm. "So you understand why I cannot stop."

She took a quick breath that was more of a sob, "You have to," she replied, "You know that you will have to kill hundreds of thousands of people—maybe millions—before we stop fighting. I dreamed about helping people...finding advances in medicine and technology that could make our lives better," she had to make him see the difference, "But you...you must have known from the beginning that your plan would lead to nothing but death."

He shook his head, and stepped back, hands falling loosely to his sides. "At first, yes, there will be death; it is inevitable," he seemed to be speaking to himself; he was no longer looking at her, "But then, between the technology of the Skrull and my magic, we can rejuvenate this world! Midgard could be a power among the realms; even your paltry advances," he turned on her, but still wasn't seeing her, "have created things that surprise us."

Suddenly, he was staring at her and his hands bore down on her shoulders; Jane controlled her panic and waited for him to be done.

"If you would only submit," he snarled the word, "I could make this world into a paradise! I could prove..." but he checked himself, and ground his teeth, looking down and away from her.

"We won't," Jane said, wishing she could get away from the cage of his hands, but knowing it was futile. "We can't."

"So you say," he replied, looking up, resolution set in his eyes. "But throughout your history, there have been examples for me to follow—successful dictators who imposed their visions on the populace—and those who are naïve enough to think I will not employ the same methods will find themselves sorely mistaken. I have come too far to fail now."

Jane had nothing to say. How do you stop a madman? The successful dictators he spoke of...if someone had been able to talk to Stalin, Hitler, or Pol Pot without fear of reprisals, could they have changed the course of history?

She sincerely doubted it. She only hoped—similarities between the two of them be damned—that some lucky revolutionary would manage to lodge a bullet in his brain.

Loki was chuckling again. "How is it that I always manage to entangle myself in pointless philosophical discussions with you? You are such a distraction."

"So I suppose," she snapped, frustrated by his cavalier attitude and her helplessness, "that being such a worthless distraction, you've decided to kill me anyway?"

"No," he corrected gently, "no, I came here for one purpose."

He was too close. Jane felt smothered by the solid bulk of him, trapped as she was between his arms and the wall. She started to panic, and her hands balled into fists, pressed between their bodies.

"Stop, Jane," one of his hands managed to envelop both of hers, "you know there is no point."
She knew he was right, "It might be pointless, but we never stop fighting," she said, tears pooling in her eyes.

"You will always lose," he said, and though she had sworn it would never happen again, his lips were on hers.

This time, Jane was fully present, with no numbness of mind or body to shield her from the reality of what was happening. She whimpered into his mouth and put her hands on his chest, pushing as hard as she could, but there was no moving him. His hands were around her neck, cupping the back of her head; Jane went for those next, sinking her nails into the skin. She could not pierce it.

Loki leaned back, nowhere near far enough for comfort. His eyes opened, heavy, half-lidded.

"Relax, Jane."

"Stop this, please," she asked, a tear falling from the corner of her eye, "Why are you doing this?"

He smiled, but it was not his usual crazed grin. He only seemed amused at her inability to understand. "Why do you keep asking questions that require logical answers? Because I can. No," he corrected himself, and whispered the words against her mouth, "Because I want to."

It was a secret he sealed up inside her as he pressed against hers once more.

His hands were still cold, but his mouth was warm. He had learned something from last time; she must have hurt him when she bit his tongue, for it was only his lips that touched her, and the touch was soft and considerate.

Jane was lost. Her mind was present, but she could make no sense of the situation. She could not think, she could only feel; and the sensations her brain registered were enough to overwhelm her completely.

She felt his tongue trace the seam of her lips. Her hands flattened against the leather and metal armor, the soft and sharp edges a fascinating contrast to her fingertips. When she made no move to open her mouth, he moved away, kissing the line of her jaw until he reached the juncture where her pulse beat.

Jane's eyes opened wide and she gasped. He suckled harder, and she felt the cool nick of teeth against her flesh.

"Stop," she begged, "stop, stop, stop." She should have been screaming the words, but shame kept her voice to a whisper—no one who cared could possibly hear her, but the idea of Tony or Pepper seeing her like this made her want to sink through the floor.

He actually did. He pulled back and pressed his forehead against hers. She was shocked to hear how ragged his breathing sounded...how sincere he seemed in the emotions behind his kiss. Against her will—and against her mind's screaming rational voice—she found herself wondering if he could possibly care about her.

The thought was...she didn't know what it was. Her own emotions were a tangled mess, like strings of Christmas tree lights. It would take hours of patience and care to make sense of what she was feeling.

"Have you ever been to Rome?"

Her voice trembled. "No."
His eyes were still closed as he said, "Shame. It is a lovely city...a rarity in this realm. When the present situation is settled," he opened his eyes and smiled at her, hand once again cupping her cheek, "I will take you there."

When he turned away from her, it was though a weight had been lifted off her body. Jane breathed a silent sigh of relief and thanked whoever was looking out for her that he was not planning on taking his pet human—and what else could she be to him?—along with him this time around.

"So, Jane?" He said, looking back at her over his shoulder, "Will you not wish me well?"

She looked at him. Her shame, embarrassment, anger, and helplessness hit her in the chest like a freight train. She didn't think; she said the most violent, hateful words she could imagine:

"I hope someone puts a bullet in your brain."

The last thing she saw of his face was his damnable smirk; his voice echoed back to her as he left the room:

"Trust me, my dear...it will not happen."

The door shut, locked, and Jane slid down the wall, putting her head down against her upturned knees. Her whole body was shaking uncontrollably, and her skin felt tight, dry, and hot. She was so angry, so angry...she wanted to scream at him and hit him again and again for what he had done, for what he was doing to her...

She still felt his teeth on her neck. She could still smell him around her—leather, iron, smoke, and ice. Even from behind her closed eyes, she could see his face, and the wondering tenderness in his eyes as he had put his hands on her. He was invading her, colonizing her...Jane wasn't certain that if she remained in this place that anything of her own, individual self would be left.

This was possession, all right. It was just possession of a different nature. Isolated and alone, she had been completely dependent on him for both the basic necessities of life and the higher pleasures—intellectual stimulation, for instance—and Jane was only now realizing just how quickly she could become dependent on one person's influence on her life.

And she had only been in captivity for a week!

Was he doing this to her on purpose? And if so, why? Jane shivered as she remembered his words: Why do you keep asking questions that require logical answers? Because I can. Because I want to.

It didn't matter. Whether sincere or not, Jane wanted nothing to do with him. If he wanted to mess with her mind...she just wouldn't let him. So it was with a visceral rush of relief that she heard the intercom crackle to life as Tony's voice—in his best Elvis style—said:

"Ladies and gentleman...Loki has left the building."

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Jane was the last one to make it down to the lab, smiling at Hawkeye as she slid through the door that he was guarding. Her face still felt flushed; she had to fight the urge to check in the mirror to see if the words "Loki just kissed me and bit my neck" were tattooed on her forehead.

It felt as though they were. She had a hard time looking the archer in the eye, and she just knew that he had noticed the strange skittishness in her behavior. He noticed details that many people
would just brush off or ignore. It was what made him a great fighter, but Jane wished that he could just let it pass.

Her smile faltered as she entered the lab. She knew he wouldn't. Sometime in the future, this would all come out…and it would look bad for her when it did. How many people would give her the benefit of the doubt when it came out that Loki had kept her separate from the others? That he had told her things no one else had known? That he had, on two separate occasions, been physically close to her?

Would people understand that she had not been in any sort of position to fight back? Would—and her mind shied away from considering this—Thor understand?

"Hey, you made it," Tony greeted her, standing in front of the two large whiteboards where he had all the equations for the portal scrawled out in different colors of ink.

"Wouldn't miss it," Jane said, her smile a little more genuine. She thought that, at the very least, Tony would understand the sort of pressure that Loki was able to exert. He would probably be on her side.

She looked at the whiteboards, her experienced eyes taking in the process of mathematics from beginning to end. The certainty of the numbers and the difficulty of the equations settled her mind and gave her a focus.

"This looks good," she said, looking next at the crumpled map of the city that showed their landing point; in the middle of a broad avenue close to a subway entrance.

"Yeah, it should do," Tony said, "the more we can stay underground, the better. We can follow the subway tunnels until we get out of the city."

"Where do we go from there?"

"SHIELD has a field office in White Plains," Natasha answered, walking over to join them, "so once we get out of the city, we can find a vehicle and siphon gas until we get there."

"What if the office is abandoned?" Jane asked. White Plains was not too far from the city, but on foot, or even in a series of short hops in a stolen car, it seemed an almost impossible distance. "And why White Plains? It seems like such a…tame place for a super-secret government office."

"That's exactly why it was chosen," Natasha replied, "nothing ever happens in White Plains, but a lot of things happen around it. Makes deployment for assignments easier and extraction safer. And even if the office is abandoned, there will always be supplies we can use: vehicles, food, clean water…"

Jane nodded, feeling a shiver up her spine. That was very true. Once they left Stark Tower, they could not be guaranteed any of those things. None of them knew what the state of the rest of the country was, but if it was anything like New York…they could be in serious trouble.

Pepper looked troubled. "Do you think we'll be able to contact anyone once we get there?"

"Should be," Natasha said, shrugging, "all SHIELD offices have access to a secure intranet. As long as we can get a generator up and running, we'll be able to contact anyone who's still out there." From the flat tone in her voice, it almost seemed as though she didn't care one way or the other if they did find anyone still alive.

"Okay, well," Tony said, clapping his hands, "first step is to get out of here. Jane, can you align the particle array while I set the arc reactor into the power converter?"
"You got it," she said, thankful for the distraction, "have you already done the calculations on the particle frequencies?"

He produced a legal pad covered in columns of numbers. "Of course, madame," he drawled in a horrendous French accent, "we are 'appy to pleeze."

Jane swatted him on the shoulder with the pad and got to work.

The portal was a rough circle of swirling blue energy; it swept papers off the tables, threw Jane's and Pepper's hair into messy disarray, and sucked everything not nailed to the floor slowly towards its center.

"All right!" Tony yelled, "Natasha, you're up!"

The assassin, nonchalant as though she were going for a walk in the park, took a firm grasp on the steel bar stolen from the sofa and vanished through the portal.

"Hawkeye, go!"

Similarly armed, Clint stepped forward and disappeared.

"Jane!"

It took more courage than she'd thought, stepping up to a turbulent storm of agitated quantum particles powered by a tiny little arc reactor. She knew the science was sound, she knew this had been done before, and over much greater distances…and she still had to grit her teeth, dig her nails into her hands, and shut her eyes before she walked through.

She shouldn't have shut her eyes. Whipping through the non-space the portal generated, her feet slammed hard against the asphalt and Jane was knocked off-balance, falling hard on her knees and hands, ripping her jeans and skimming the flesh off her palms. Thank goodness Loki had not brought her breakfast; the meager contents of her stomach sloshed around and Jane gagged, stopping just short of retching.

"Stand up and walk around, if you can," she heard Clint's voice somewhere above her to the right. She blinked up at him, ears a little slow at processing speech. He spared a quick glance down at her, and clarified, "It helps with the nausea, trust me."

She felt like a newborn fawn; her legs wobbled underneath her and she only managed after a fashion to stand on her own two legs.

The portal flashed behind her, and Pepper stumbled out, breaking her fall on an abandoned car. She coughed violently and put her back to the car, sinking to her knees, steadying her head with both hands.

Natasha looked at the two of them, unfazed. Jane felt a stab of irritation; how was it possible that the woman could always be so capable and clear-headed?

Tony emerged last in a flash of light. He managed to stay on his feet, but even he looked slightly green. He stood still for a moment or two and took several deep breaths.

"Uh, guys? Tactical error; we can't exactly…turn the portal off, now that we've got it on."

"Oh, crap," Jane groaned, "of course. We didn't rig a timed shut off. That means that when the Skrull come down…"
"They'll just come right through and find us," Natasha finished. She went over to Pepper and hauled the woman to her feet. "Everyone, move!"

"We still have some time," Hawkeye said, scanning each alleyway and intersection as they ran past, "They won't notice we're missing until lunch, right?"

"Not unless they've got some kind of scanner that detects energy fields," Tony said, "Which, knowing them, they probably do. I'm betting we've got time to make it to the subway entrance before they notice we're—"

A scream filled the air, shattering the silence into ear-piercing fragments. Jane stopped and pressed her hands to her ears, trying to blot out some of the sound; her eardrums felt ruptured and there was a trickle of blood between her fingers.

Pepper had her face pressed against Tony's chest, but he didn't look capable of comforting her; his face was gray and there was a trickle of blood running down from his ears as well. Even Natasha and Clint looked shaken, but they were still professionals; Clint looped one arm around Jane's arm and pulled her along, and Natasha gestured to Tony, who scooped Pepper up and kept walking.

The scream lasted for perhaps another minute, but it seemed to Jane as though she would never clear the sound from her head. It cut off just as they neared the entrance to the subway tunnel, but nothing changed. She could see Natasha's mouth moving, telling them something; her ears were clogged with a shrill sound—like a dial tone—and she couldn't hear a thing.

She turned once and looked back before descending the stairs into the subway tunnel. From the top of Stark Tower, she saw a stream of Skrull jumping off the rooftops on their individual hovercraft. Some, already close to street level, were strafing the roads with their weapons, blasting cars out of the way and blowing potholes straight down to the electric and water lines.

Clint pulled her down the stairs and she lost sight of the devastation. Natasha was still yelling, but she couldn't hear; she only followed them beyond the station platform and down onto the tracks.

Jane couldn't hear it, but she still felt the explosion behind them that destroyed the entrance to the subway tunnels and knocked them all flat on their faces along the tracks.

Jane lay flat, feeling her heart beat and knowing she was still alive. The pain and the blood in her ears now mirrored the blood on her hands, her knees, and what felt like her face. Her ribs, nose, and chest felt tight and bruised; she had not been able to break her fall. She blinked, but the darkness did not clear. The tunnel was pitch dark…there was no light from the surface.

No sight, no sound; Jane fought her natural instinct to panic, and forced her bruised body up on its knees. A hand brushed against her knee, and she grasped it with her own. The human contact brought tears to her eyes, but she did not cry.

When her eyes adjusted slightly to the darkness, she saw the gentle blue light of Tony's arc reactor on her left. It was on the floor, unmoving; she crawled over to it and touched her friend on his chest, then his shoulder. He did not move. Jane breathed once, twice, and reached for his neck. Thank God, his pulse was strong and steady; he was just knocked out.

There was a scuffle of gravel on her right, and Jane jumped at the noise—and smiled—because she had heard the noise. The damage done by the alarm they'd tripped was not permanent.

Natasha's voice came at her through what sounded like four layers of cotton padding.

"Everyone okay?"

"Yeah," Jane replied, speaking loudly, since she could barely hear her own voice, "Tony's out,
but he's alive."

"I'm okay," Pepper's voice was in front of them to the left.

"Me too," Clint was somewhere behind Jane on the right.

Slowly, moving so as not to damage their already hurt bodies, they assembled around the light of Tony's heart.

"All right," Natasha said, her voice getting clearer every minute, "Plan hasn't changed. As soon as Stark's capable of walking, we follow the tracks until we get out of the city. If we stay underground, the Skrull can't find us. Barton, are you still armed?"

"Yes."

"Foster, what about you?"

Jane couldn't remember the last time anyone had called her "Foster", but she thought it had been her high school soccer coach. "I dropped mine," she said, feeling around her, "but some of these track ties are loose. I should be able to pry one free."

"Good. Get yourself and Potts armed. I want to be ready to move as soon as Stark comes to. Potts, you stay with him and monitor his condition." There was a crunch of gravel as Pepper crawled over to take up Jane's post.

Natasha continued, "Now, I've got one flashlight from the lab, but we're not gonna use it unless we absolutely have to; there are no spare batteries. Just keep your ears and eyes open, and we'll get through this. We will."
Chapter Ten

Even from across the George Washington Bridge, staring back at the city on a small bluff overlooking the river, Jane could still hear the explosions from the Skrull warriors tearing the streets apart looking for them. Though she knew the city was mostly abandoned, she still had to press her hand to her mouth as she saw a ten story building crumble to dust.

Tony, Natasha, and Clint were stony-faced at the sight, but Pepper looked just as shaken as she was. It was a comfort to have one other simple mortal on the team, and Jane sidled over to her friend and held her hand. Pepper gripped hers back, smiling tremulously.

Natasha turned away, returning to the job that the team was neglecting. A short length of rubber pipe hung from a car's open gas tank; she worked the pipe quickly and kept the small reserve of gas flowing into the bucket they'd scavenged.

The Palisades Parkway was littered with abandoned cars; some left because of flat tires, others because they had run out of fuel. In many cases, the keys were still in the ignition, but the doors were hanging open and the trunks were too, showing that the people inside had grabbed their supplies and kept going on foot.

Jane wondered how many of these people had survived to reach whatever safe haven they had set out looking for. Then she pushed the thought away.

It hadn't taken the group long to find a suitable vehicle, although Tony had had a long, intricate conversation with no one in particular about the virtues of choosing a hybrid car over the recent-model SUV that Natasha landed on. After ten minutes of his gabble, Natasha had flatly said, "That tin can won't hold five of us, Stark. And no one wants to sit in your lap all the way to White Plains. So shut up and find me a bucket."

Surprisingly, Tony had listened—Jane had expected a temper tantrum—and five minutes later, they were searching the surrounding vehicles for any spare gas they could find.

Now, half an hour later, they were ready to go, with a full tank of gas and five gallons to spare. Natasha took the wheel, again over Tony's protestations, but Pepper intervened this time and told him to sit in the back; the head wound he'd sustained in the subway tunnels was still bleeding slowly, and Clint—who obviously had more than basic medical training—was concerned about the lack of dilation in Tony's pupils. All the signs pointed to a concussion, so Jane and Pepper were tasked with the job of keeping him awake during the drive.

Not that any of them were capable of getting any sleep, no matter how they wanted to. Every muscle in Jane's body ached; even sitting down in the back seat of the SUV hurt. For hours, they had walked through the subway tunnels—with only the light from the arc reactor and Natasha's flashlight to guide them—crawling over wreckage where the pathways had caved in and running frantically aboveground when they had to change lines in several places.

They were all exhausted and filthy, covered in dirt and blood. It had taken them all day and through the night to walk from Manhattan, through Harlem, and then Washington Heights and over the bridge; so now, with a full day of light ahead of them they had to keep going. It wouldn't be smart to drive at night; the headlights would attract more attention than they wanted.

In the close, airless confines of the backseat of the car, Jane felt her eyes drifting closed. It was a tribute to Pepper's iron will that she was keeping up a stream of endless trivialities precisely calculated to get Tony as mad—and therefore as awake—as possible.
"And you know that the DoD is still on your schedule for the week after next—"

"No, no, no…hell no. You'd think that the DoD is all huddled away in their little panic room in Utah or something. No matter how bad they want a piece of the Iron Man tech, when will they realize that they just can't have it?"

"Well, you realize they can make things hard for our new factory in South Carolina—"

"Oh, what are they gonna do? Sic the EPA on me again? We all know how that story goes…"

Jane let the stream of gentle reminders and petulant whining (from Pepper and Tony, respectively) wash her awareness away. Though she felt guilt, even at the moment of letting her eyes closed, she knew there was nothing she could do to contribute to their present situation. She let herself fall asleep.

They had to stop several times along the drive, and what should have taken them no more than an hour had already stretched into three. Sometimes, pileups blocked their path, and everyone had to get out to shove the cars out of the way. Once, a fragment of broken windshield punctured the front right tire, and they had to scavenge a replacement—unfortunately from a car two miles back on the road—and replace it.

Each time, Jane woke up and took her turn at guard duty, wielding a heavy tire-iron just in case of attack. It was shocking to realize that they were not afraid of attack by the Skrull, but one by fellow humans.

It was a valid concern. The road was deserted; every gas station they passed was abandoned, with clear signs of having been looted as well. They had grabbed a few candy bars from a convenience store along the way, but the sugar gave them headaches. The poor diet in the Tower had taken its toll on everyone; they had had very little fresh vegetation and almost no protein.

Jane, having had a heavier meal than the others—at least twice—and having been in captivity for less time, was in slightly better shape. But they would have to get some vitamins and protein before their health broke down completely.

Clint was driving now. Jane was taking her turn in the front seat, a machete (from somebody's trunk) lying across her lap. She would never have thought it possible for Natasha to relax enough to fall asleep, but both she and Pepper were drowsing in the back. Tony was keeping himself—and Jane and Clint—awake by mumbling "I'm Henry the Eighth I Am" under his breath.

Over and over again.

And normally even-tempered Jane found her nerves fraying. She bit her lip and turned around.

"Hey, Tony? Do you think you could give it a rest?"

He sighed, and nodded. "Sorry. It's just…trying to distract myself. Head wound and all. So…if I stop singing, you've gotta keep me awake."

She softened. "I know. I'm sorry. It's just that this whole day has been unreal. Do you think the whole country is like this? I feel like we're walking through Land of the Dead, or something."

"Bet not. Just the places around some major cities. We know that there are places in the States that haven't even been touched. Phoenix, Minneapolis, Atlanta…they're just fine. Loki hit the coastal metropolitan areas—New York, LA, Miami—and he hit them hard. But so far, he's left everything
"How does he think he can do it?" Jane asked the question that had been bothering her since the invasion had begun. "How does he think he can enslave 7 billion people?"

"All he needs to do," Clint spoke, his eyes never wavering from the road, "is destroy the military installations. Once he's gotten rid of our weapons, we won't have the means to make an organized resistance. Small pockets of people here and there will keep trying to fight…but it'll be over."

"But he doesn't want to damage the agricultural sections of the country," Tony filled in, shifting in his seat, "because then he'll starve the people he wants to control. That's why the center of the country is pretty much untouched. But he destroys our economic centers, our military centers, and we don't have the means to fight back."

Jane swallowed. "How..." she tried again, "how close do you think he's gotten?"

There was silence in the car. Then Clint spoke:

"He's getting close."

Tony said, "I think we are too."

Jane looked ahead, and saw the exit sign for White Plains, shining brilliantly in the midday sunlight. No later than 12 noon, but Jane was only thinking of whether she might be able to grab a few hours of uninterrupted rest.

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As expected, the SHIELD office was abandoned. Natasha and Clint hacked the internal security net and examined all the video feeds, scouring the rooms for any sign of friend or foe. There was nothing. The last log entry of the sentry guard showed there had been no attack on the office; merely an order that required all SHIELD personnel to assemble at the nearest headquarters in Newark, New Jersey.

At least that meant they could roam through the halls without searching every corner for possible attack. Once the door was sealed behind them—rigged with an alarm to alert them to an intruder—Natasha sent Jane, Pepper and Tony around the compound to look for supplies.

Despite knowing they were safe, Jane did not let go of her machete. She felt safer with it in her hand, the wooden handle already marked with her filthy handprints. She didn't even let it go when she came into one of the storage rooms and found a wealth of canned goods: fruits, vegetables, and meats. She found a bag and loaded everything up, including some water purification tablets that some thoughtful agent had stockpiled for a rainy day like this one.

She went back out into the hall and looked around. The corridor was deathly silent; merely a stretch of industrial drywall painted flat white. She peered into a few rooms as she passed—a kitchen, computer labs (hard drives all fried, she checked), and a rec room—but everything that might have given an indication of who exactly had lived there was gone.

She prayed that the agents who had lived here were still alive and fighting. Not...not somewhere else.

The silence was broken by muffled voices ahead of her. Jane heard Tony, Clint, Natasha…and then a voice that was deeper, richer…

She stopped walking, and dropped her machete and bag of food. She didn't hear them fall.
Then Jane was running. Running so fast that she slammed her shoulder against the doorframe as she cornered into the communications room. She didn't feel the pain; it didn't matter.

"Thor?"

There was no power behind her voice, but everyone heard her. Surprisingly, it was Natasha who spoke first.

"We've got audio only," she said, picking up the receiver and handing it over, "we'll give you a few minutes; then I have to get back on the line with Fury. But he's been asking for you. Come on," she handed the phone to Jane, and shooed the others out of the room.

The phone in Jane's hand was suddenly a foreign object. She stared at it for a moment, as though trying to figure out what its purpose was. Slowly, she lifted it to her ear, thinking that this was all a dream, that she was going to wake up in the lab in Uppsala or her bedroom in Stark Tower to another day of alternating boredom and terror.

After so many months—it was more than half a year, for sure—of not hearing his voice…or hearing him, but being separated from him by oceans…

"Thor?"

She pressed a hand against her mouth so that she wouldn't cry when she heard his voice.

"Jane?"

She gasped. It was the release of pressure, of a tension she had known she was carrying; she just hadn't known until right now just how great that pressure had been. Every minute of every one of her days had been spent in the effort to hear his voice again…and to hear that voice say her name…

Jane put her hand over her eyes, pressing the tears back. She had cried too much over the last week. Now it was time for something else.

She started to laugh. "You have no idea," she said, laughing as she stood in self-imposed darkness, in an underground government compound at the end of the world, "how glad I am to hear your voice. I'm so sorry I wasn't there…" she swallowed her resentment, "when you came back. I wanted to be…so much. But—"

He interrupted her, voice heavy with the anger that she had suppressed in her own speech. "They would not let you remain in the path of such danger," he finished for her. "This man—Director Fury—has said as much. I knew that you had not left of your own volition, Jane," she felt a shiver up her spine every time he said that word, "I have missed you greatly."

There was a sincerity in his voice that thrilled her to her very core. Though the words were simple, she knew that he meant every one. He had been thinking of her for all those days apart, just as she had been thinking of him.

Jane gripped the phone in both hands. "When will I be able to see you?" To just hear him was torture; her brain was playing tricks on her, making her think that if she just reached out she would feel his hand grasping hers. She tangled her fingers in the cord of the phone to keep herself from trying.

"Soon," he assured her. There was a clash of voices in the background, and Jane could clearly hear the snapping command of Nick Fury asking for the phone. "I believe that is the subject of
"discussion," he said, his annoyance at being ordered about clear in his tone, "So we must say farewell, for now. I will come for you, Jane," he said, softly. She could almost see him, turning away from the others, speaking words that were meant only for her.

The smile on her face was so wide it was almost painful. "Deal?"

He chuckled. "One that I swear I shall not break."

She sniffled, and nodded. "Okay," she turned towards the door, jumping a little when she saw Natasha leaning against the frame, watching her with an uncharacteristically gentle expression on her face, "I'm going to give the phone back to Natasha, now. I..." what could she say? "I'll see you soon."

*I've thought about you every day since you left. I worked harder for you than I ever thought it possible to work. I cried sometimes, I missed you so much. I love you. I love you. I love you.*

When they saw each other, she could say those words. Right now, Jane handed over the phone and pressed her lips together so they wouldn't accidentally spill out. Natasha brushed past her and started speaking, her precise, business-as-usual voice an embarrassing contrast to the emotional vortex swirling in Jane's heart.

Out in the hallway, Jane pressed her forehead against the wall, relishing the sensation of cool drywall against her flushed face. She sighed, smiling to herself. After so long...her mind did the math—after six months, three weeks, and two days—she had finally spoken to him. She had heard affection in his voice, and longing, and for the first time since he had left she knew that he had been trying to find his way back to her.

Jane was not naïve. She rarely threw herself headlong into emotional situations. In fact, Donald—who was so great with patients—had broken up with her by calling her "emotionally frigid". At the time, the insult had been painful, and Jane had countered with a few choice words of her own. After a time, though, she had come to realize that the assessment was just.

She loved her work. She was passionate about the stars, about her theories, about being free to travel through the limitless galaxy and learn everything there was to know. Anyone who had debated her on the subjects of faster-than-light travel, wormholes, or astronomical phenomena could not call her frigid. But people...

People were messy. They were equations that she could not solve, and in most cases, were equations she had no desire to solve. People, unlike numbers, acted irrationally, unpredictably, and sometimes wouldn't be there when you needed them most. She could never predict how people would behave.

Thinking the way she did about love and people, Jane would not have been surprised—only painfully disappointed—if Thor's feelings for her had faded during their long separation.

As with most scientists, her best relationships had been with colleagues, people who did not question missing an anniversary dinner because of lab time, and could understand the value of a scholarship or grant. Even so, Jane's longest relationship had only lasted for five months, in her senior year of college.

And then there was Thor. Jane smiled wider, and shook her head, wondering how one man—even such a man—could change her so radically. But Thor had changed everything. She might not be ready to say "I love you" to him without knowing whether he felt the same way, but everything else she had wanted to say was true.
"Hey you," Pepper's voice was quiet, but still loud enough to reverberate down the silent hallway, "Are you all right?"

Jane turned around and slumped back against the wall, pushing long strands of hair back from her flushed face. Pepper—who had changed into some SHIELD-issue shirt and sweatpants and washed her face—looked down at her through a fringe of amber bangs, her thin lips pressed together.

The pain and exhilaration swirling in her heart made Jane giddy. She laughed, as she had laughed over the phone with Thor. She laughed because she was sick of crying.

"I'm fantastic," she said, swatting Pepper lightly on the arm, "don't be so serious. Now where can I get a shower and a change?"

Pepper smiled and shook her head. "Not quite a shower," she said, putting her arm around Jane's shoulders, "but Tony has got some water set aside for washing. There's soap, and then there are lockers with clean clothes."

"Good," Jane said, wiping her grimy hands on her pants, "because I think we're going to be getting out of here soon."

"I hope so," Pepper said, "It'll be nice to get a decent meal again. And a real shower. Or a bath."

"Mmm," Jane said, closing her eyes and sighing, "with endless hot water and lemon-lavender bubbles. But I could use a full night's sleep without being afraid of waking up in the morning."

"Yes," Pepper agreed. "You know, I've been Tony Stark's assistant for nine years now…and I've never been more tired in my life. And most people would say that living with Tony is a little like living at the end of the world."

"He's not that bad, is he?"

"Actually…" Pepper considered, "around Tony, there are usually explosions, strange men breaking into the house, incurable diseases, and men in black suits. Not unlike the end of the world, in any case."

Jane snorted. "What would he do without you?"

There was a brief pause. Then:

"He'd probably be dead."

The two women laughed all the way down the hallway.

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"Here's the situation," Natasha began, looking at the circle of faces around the table. Though they were all moderately cleaner and dressed in clothes that were neither falling apart nor bloodstained, everyone showed the strain of exhaustion.

Tony was slumped forward, leaning on his forearms, one of which Pepper rested her hand on, moving her fingers in soothing circles. The assistant herself sat ramrod straight in her chair, legs crossed, looking for all the world as though her casual attire was the fanciest business suit she
owned. Still, there were dark circles under her eyes, like bruises against her pale skin.

Clint leaned back in his chair, pushed slightly away from the table, surveying them all—and the doors, the ventilation ducts above, and any other entrance or exit to the room—with his usual sharp eyes. Every so often however, he would blink slowly and leave his eyes closed for a beat too long.

Jane didn't want to speculate about her appearance. She leaned on the table like Tony, resting her head in her cupped hands, the balance of her elbows and wrists the only thing from keeping her head from drooping to her chest.

Natasha was as rigidly upright as Pepper, but her movements had lost their fluid grace. She moved in sharp angles, efficiently; every motion was calculated to spare her energy reserves.

"All SHIELD offices have been vacated," she said, "and all agents have been recalled to the mobile unit that left New York when defending the city was no longer viable. At the time, SHIELD wanted to consolidate all its assets—personnel and equipment—to plan the next move. But the helicarrier is currently en route up the coastline, because the decision has been made."

She paused, and shifted her weight to her left foot. "The plan right now is to retake New York City."

Tony snorted, "I thought they'd decided that wasn't..."viable", was it? In case you've forgotten, we abandoned the six million people who weren't able to evacuate to their fates. But now we get the go-ahead to do what we should have done in the first place?"

"We are not having this argument again," Natasha said, fixing him with her cold eyes, "the call was made; and now we're being told to go in."

Tony shoved back from the table. "This was why I never wanted in on this initiative anyway. I am not your good little soldier, I do not march to your fife; the call was a stupid one...who knows how many people died that we could have saved!"

Jane caught a shadow of movement in the corner of her eye. Clint nodded—only once, and quickly—but it was clear that not everyone in SHIELD toed the party line. Natasha did not look pleased.

"Well, now's your chance."

"Chance to do what?"

"To save them."

Tony laughed, bitterly. "I don't know what city you just came from," he scoffed, "but the one I saw looked pretty far gone. There's no point, anymore."

"There is a point, if you'd just listen," Jane knew that Natasha was exhausted, because she had never heard her lose her temper that way. "This assault on New York," the assassin rubbed her eyes with a brusque swipe of one palm, "is the last portion of a three-pronged effort to dislodge all substantial Skrull armies from the United States."

"Excuse me," Pepper said, shaking her head, "for those of us without SWAT training...what does that mean?"

"There are three Skrull armies in the country right now, all sitting in major port cities," Natasha was clearly relaying intelligence she had just gotten from SHIELD, but they all leaned forward; it
was the first information about the outside world they'd gotten in weeks, "New York, Los Angeles, and Honolulu. SHIELD and the US, Canadian, and Mexican militaries—and some influential mutants in all three countries—have been coming up with an attack that will hit all these sites simultaneously."

"I had no idea we had enough resources left to manage something like that," Clint said, shaking his head.

"None of us did," Jane chimed in. All the news she had gotten while living in Sweden had been overwhelmingly negative.

"A lot of the bad news was propaganda," Natasha said, "but it seems as though we've got enough—barely—to pull this off. So, Mr. Stark," she must have been upset, to put the "Mr." back in front of Tony's name, "if you'll march to our fife one more time," her lip curled, "we can kick Loki's ass right out of this country."

"That's why he got pulled away to Italy so abruptly!" Jane cried, "The mutants in the Vatican…are they in on this plan?"

"Nightcrawler is one of the mutants that Charles Xavier helped train," the redhead nodded, "and he can move fast. He was planted in Italy to start an uprising disruptive enough to require Loki's presence."

"That still leaves a hell of a lot of Skrull for us to deal with," Tony shook his head, "not to mention the fact that Loki can move pretty fast too."

"So far, our movements in preparation for the attack have been undetected. SHIELD has loaned their cloaking technology to the US military, and various mutants in all three countries have helped destroying or misleading Skrull patrols from the remaining forces. The helicarrier is waiting twenty miles off the coast. Unless the plans are discovered, forty-eight hours from now," she concluded, "the attack begins."

There was silence around the table. Jane let out a shaky breath.

"We have to go back," she said, "we have to go back to New York."

Natasha nodded. "Clint and I are leaving tomorrow morning," she confirmed this with a glance at the archer, who gave a quick nod, "and Mr. Stark…if he deigns to join us."

"Watch it, matchstick," the man in question shot back, "I may hate the way SHIELD plays, but New York is my town…or it is, ever since Loki used my Tower as his playground. If there's action going on, I'm in. Just don't expect me to toe the party line."

"Fine," she said, "But civilians don't have any place there. Ms. Potts, Ms. Foster," she looked at the two women in turn, "you'll be much safer here. After the fighting is over, we'll send a helicopter to bring you back to the city."

"No." Jane didn't even have to think about it. "I'm not being left behind again. There are plenty of places that I can stay in the city where I'll be safe."

"Name one," Natasha challenged, "There's not a building that we can guarantee as being secure, and we can't get anyone to the helicarrier before the attack begins without compromising the entire plan. The three of us will have to get back into the city by the subway tunnels as it is, and will not have access to any supplies until after the assault begins. It's no place for either of you."

"You know I hate to say it, Pep," Tony chimed in, "but she's probably right. You'll be safer if you
"Screw safer!" Jane interrupted, talking right over Pepper's more gentle objection, "I've had it with being left out, or left behind. I'll crawl through the tunnels with you and stay there until the fight is over…but I'm coming, one way or the other. If you leave me behind," she clenched her fists, "I'll follow you. So if you're worried about me getting killed, you should just let me come with you in the first place. I'll be safer that way."

Tony laughed outright, and even Clint cracked a smile. "She's got you there," the archer said, giving Natasha a helpless shrug. The assassin herself sighed, rubbing her forehead.

"All right then, Foster. But you're going to stay out of sight during the battle. I don't even want to think about what Thor would do to the rest of us if you got hurt. And Barton?" she smiled, the sweetness of the expression slightly acidic on her face, "You're gonna teach her how to shoot. I'm not letting her go unless she can defend herself."

"Why me?" he asked, "I'm an archer…you're the marksman."

"I'm pulling rank. We have," she checked her watch, "nineteen hours until we need to get on the road. I plan to use most of those to sleep. So the sooner she learns how to hit the broadside of a barn, the sooner you can sleep."

Clint shot Jane a much less friendly look than he'd just given her. Jane gave a weak smile in return.

"Stark, you'd better turn in too," Natasha headed towards the door, "and what about you, Potts? If you're thinking about going, you'll have to train with Foster."

Pepper exchanged a quick look with Tony, who took her hand in his and squeezed, shaking his head. "I think I'll sit this one out," she said, turning to Jane. "I'm sorry. I won't be a help to anyone if I go…I'm no fighter."

"Nothing to be sorry about," Jane said, "This is probably one of those very bad ideas that everyone tells me not to act on. But I just can't sit here and wait."

"Let's get going then, Jane," Clint stood up and stretched, shaking out his arms and fingers, "The shooting range is in the subbasement."

It took Jane a full three hours before she felt comfortable enough to load, fire, and reload the Glock 18 that Clint got her started with. The gun was comfortable in her hand, kicked less than the Magnum, and had both automatic and semi-automatic settings.

She was surprised at how much she enjoyed shooting at the paper targets on the range. Normally, she considered herself more or less a pacifist; she would never have considered keeping a handgun in her home. But in times like these…she felt confidence returning as she learned how to defend herself.

After learning the 18, it was a simple matter to pick up the Glock subcompact, a counterpart that had fewer firing options but was small enough to fit in an ankle holster. Clint wanted her to have a spare weapon, and Jane could hardly disagree. It was only the time factor—and the fact that they were both ready to collapse—that kept him from teaching her how to fire a rifle as well.

From the one stocked gun cabinet in the SHIELD office (all the others had been cleared during the evacuation), Clint outfitted her with two Glock 18s and one subcompact, plus all the attendant
holsters and ammunition. There was also a Kevlar vest small enough for her to use, with pockets to hold the extra clips, and a pair of transition sunglasses that served her for safety goggles.

Jane fastened the vest comfortably across her chest and put her hands on her hips, just above her holstered pistols. "I feel a little badass, I gotta say," she said, grinning. "Thanks."

"You look badass," Clint said, smiling himself, "just make sure you pull your hair back, tight back. It's no good if you can't see where you're shooting. And Kevlar won't make you invulnerable; you make sure you stay out of the way. This is self-defense stuff only…you're not going to be in the fight."

"I know," she nodded. Anxiety, adrenaline, and excitement churned in her stomach, and she bit her lip. Was she doing the right thing? She really didn't have to be there; and what if something ended up happening…what if she messed up the plan?

"I know that look," Clint said, crossing his arms, "don't doubt yourself."

"You think this is a good idea?" she asked, hopeful for someone's approval; she couldn't quite give it to herself.

"Uh, in all honesty?" he hedged, "It's not the best idea you've ever had."

"Thanks. That makes me feel so much better."

"Wasn't meant to," he shook off her sarcasm, "It's an awful idea, and you know it as well as I do." He paused just long enough to see Jane nod, and continued, "But you know what? It's the right thing to do, and I get where you're coming from. Fury pushed you out, after you did all that work to bring Thor here. I know it wasn't your biggest motivation—saving lives, that is—but we would have been in deep trouble more than once if Thor hadn't been here. You did good, and you deserved to see him. You still do."

Her throat felt tight; she didn't speak, she just nodded, looking up at Clint through her lashes. This was more sympathy than she'd ever expected from him…but she should have known that he'd notice her tireless work and have guessed the thing that motivated her.

"But I'm serious," he turned to the gun cabinet and snapped the lock on the doors, "you stay out of the way. This is going to be a bad fight; none of us will be able to help you if you get into trouble, okay? You stay in the tunnels, and stay out of sight."

"I will," she promised. After a moment, as they left the range together, she worked up her courage and asked, "Do you think we can win?"

He looked down at her. Then, pushing the button for the elevator, he said, "I don't know."

They rode back up to the main compound in silence, each thinking of the battle ahead. Jane rested one hand on her Glock; it was solid and comforting, if a little frightening at the same time. Who could have thought seven months ago, that Jane Foster, astrophysicist, would ever need to carry a gun? In what world did that make sense?

"Get some rest, Jane," Clint said, resting a hand on her shoulder as they left the elevator. "There's still fifteen hours before we have to leave, but 'Tasha will probably have us doing push-ups in ten."

"She better not," Jane grumbled, "I know how to shoot now."

He laughed, and turned into one of the bedrooms. Jane continued down the hall into the bedroom
she had staked out earlier. It was a simple thing, with nothing more than a cot, a desk, and a chest of drawers, but it also had a door that locked from the inside, and a distinct lack of evil demigods. That was enough to put it on the level with the Ritz-Carlton.

Jane shed her vest, holsters, and guns, double-checking each one to make sure that the safeties were on. To save time in the morning, she laid out her outfit for the next day: black jeans, turtleneck, socks, and boots. She pulled on a soft tee-shirt, climbed into bed, and went to sleep.

One of the benefits of living in the apocalypse, she had found, was the ability to sleep nearly anywhere, anytime.
Chapter Eleven

A thundering crunch above Jane's head was yet another body hitting the pavement; the force was enough to burst an electrical circuit to her left, showering sparks along the rails and scattering the screeching rats below. Jane moved fast, jumping off the track and onto the platform itself, where through the debris-clogged staircase she could see some of the battle raging above.

The sunlight on her wristwatch showed that the fighting had dragged on for another half hour. Granted, she didn't have the best view, but she had no idea which side was winning. If winning was even possible in all the chaos.

There were screams in the air, intermingled with the shattering of glass and concrete and the hysterical squeals of buckling steel. Gunfire—from police and Skrull alike—was a staccato drumbeat, a deadly percussion underlying all other noises. Jane shivered as she saw someone stumble and fall just above her; it was a woman in ragged jeans and a filthy tee-shirt. She could not call out—could not risk her hiding place—and her heart broke for the thousandth time that day as she saw the bloodied woman pull herself up and keep running. In the high noon sun, Jane could even see the tears streaking down her dirty face.

Her arms ached with the strain of clutching her gun, but she had not let it drop from ready position since the fighting had begun, now a distant three hours ago. So far, she had had no occasion to use it—no one seemed to be looking down, since the battle was being decided in the air—but it was a security blanket that she could not let go. She had seen enough to know what happened to those humans who faced the Skrull with no defense.

Their brutality—cruel and efficient though it was—was still shocking. She had seen one of the reptiles grasp a man's head with one hand and crack his neck with a sharp jerk, throwing the body aside without a glance.

Thunder shuddered overhead, and the sound that usually made Jane run for cover now made her want to race into the street. Thor! A bolt of lightning streaked the sky and charred bodies and hovercraft crashed onto the street. The God of Thunder was using his formidable weapons—she only hoped they were enough to win the fight.

The Avengers team chattered in her ear; Natasha had left her with a headset and tuned it to the secure com channel they were sharing so that she would know when it was safe to come out.

"Tony, they're getting too far out!" a voice that she had come to recognize as Captain Rogers cried, "You've got to turn them back!"

"Workin' on it, Cap," Tony growled back, his bite significantly more gentle after the hours of exertion. A boom from his repulsors broke the sound barrier, and Jane head more shattering of glass. "Got 'em! Call it out, Legolas," he asked Clint, who was standing on top of the one of the skyscrapers next to Stark Tower, "Where's the next group?"

"I've got a cluster of six moving up Park, and I've got no clear shot," the archer replied.

"Heading back your way."

Natasha broke in, "There's a group of civilians under fire in the library; Captain, can you—"

"On my way; you keep them bottled here while I get those people out through the basements and subway tunnels. The police are setting up the evacuation line...dammit! I didn't think there'd be so
many left!"

"Civilians or Skrull?"

"Civvies. I thought most of these people had gone."

"They didn't want to leave their homes," Tony's voice was dark, "even when we did."

"Keep it under wraps, Mr. Stark," the Captain was running; she could hear the exhaustion as he breathed heavily, "We do this job right and everyone has a home again."

Jane bit her lip. She was hiding in the subway station just to one side of the library at the base of Stark Tower. If she picked the right moment, she could make it up the stairs and into the main lobby without anyone noticing. She had seen the Skrull go into the building, but like the others had never dreamed that a cluster of people had been living there ever since the New York invasion. If the Captain was going alone—no one else had chimed in—he might need some backup.

Her breath was shaky, and so were her hands. But she knew that she had to do it.

She crept up the stairs and quickly—like a gopher—stuck her head out. One side was clear. She turned around and looked again. She had the street to herself. She heard her soccer coach's voice in her head—she had been thinking of that tough woman ever since Natasha had started calling her "Foster"—and she remembered: Foster, you run. You run and it doesn't matter who's behind you. All that matters is that you get to the goal; you get where you need to go.

So Jane ran. Her boots crunched and slipped on the fragments of asphalt, glass, and concrete and she flung her arms out for stability—finger always off the trigger until ready to fire, as Clint had coached her—but she got across the street and up the stairs in record time. On her knees, she inched her way under the glass doors and took a peek inside.

A group of about twenty people was huddled in the main foyer, menaced from above by five Skrull with their laser rifles. The aliens were laughing—deep, guttural hiccupping sounds—as they peppered the ground with random fire, making the humans below scream and cry, panicked and helpless.

Fear left Jane as anger flooded her system, and her hands grew steady. There was enough noise from the street that her opening the door seemed silent, and she was able to take up a sheltered firing spot behind a pillar, concealed enough that she could bring her gun up to shoulder height and sight her target.

Now she was hearing Clint's voice: use your dominant eye, put your finger on the trigger, breathe—and take your time with it—and then squeeze. If you breathe, you give yourself the time to make sure you're hitting the right thing.

So Jane breathed. Her bullet penetrated the gap in the Skrull's armor just above the solar plexus, making a wet crunch as it entered bone and sprayed blood. The Skrull yelped, and keeled over.

She whirled around and pressed her back to the pillar, closing her eyes as the rest of the Skrull roared in confusion and frustration. It took them only a few seconds to figure where the bullet had come from, and the circulation desk to Jane's right exploded in a burst of smoking wood shards.

Good job, Jane. Now what?
She flipped her Glock to its automatic setting and turned the opposite direction, letting off a brief burst of bullets into the walkway above. The noise distracted the Skrull long enough for her to scramble two pillars down and take up a new hiding place. But they were still going to find her—one Skrull had already jumped down onto her level—if she didn't do something soon.

"Hey!" Jane heard the yell in her room and in her ear. Taking a peek from behind the pillar, she saw the red, white and blue-suited figure (and what a figure!) of Captain America, standing in the open window frame with all the light of day behind him. The humans in the room erupted in cheers, and the Skrull snarled.

The Captain threw his shield; it shattered the skull of one alien and ricocheted into another, throwing it from the railing and down into the lobby below. As the Skrull fired on his position, he jumped and missed the return arc of the shield—it clattered to the ground—but even without it, the man was an impressive fighter. He dodged the fists of the Skrull, grabbed the base of one of the rifles and yanked it away, turning it like a club on his attackers.

While he was occupied, Jane spotted the Skrull on the lobby level taking aim with his rifle. The Captain had no idea it was coming.

"Oh no, you don't." Jane whispered, raising her gun. Sight, finger, breathe…she fired. The bullet glanced off the Skrull's shoulder armor and the reptile turned, hissing furiously.

It saw her.

"Crap," she breathed, flipping her gun into automatic fire again and letting go with a barrage of bullets as it stalked across the foyer, scattering humans right and left. None of them even tried to help her as the alien approached her, raising its rifle.

Jane's bullets kept glancing off the armor; none of them could find a weak spot. She started to panic as it got closer, and ran to the left, continuing around the lobby to find another hiding spot. The laser rifle shattered one of the pillars she passed, and the walkway above gave a deep groan as the stones shifted and held together.

Running was a pointless exercise. Jane turned and fired again and again, closing her weaker left eye and aiming for the alien's gaping mouth. This time, she hit. A spray of purple blood and fragments of the alien's skull erupted from the back of its head, and it collapsed…a bare twenty feet from where Jane was standing.

She gasped and sank back against a pillar, breathing hard. Her hands were shaking again. But when she heard a thump to her right, instinct brought up the gun immediately, pointing it directly at Captain America.

Jane lowered her gun. "Are you all right?"

"Me?" He stared at her, shield hanging from one hand still in throwing position, "What about you? You're Jane Foster, aren't you?" he went on, "I didn't think you were supposed to be in this fight."

"I was hiding in the subway station just outside," she said, "and since no one else could come help you…I thought…this was stupid," her adrenaline levels were crashing and she was just realizing how idiotic she had been, running headlong into trouble like this, "I'm sorry."

"Listen," he said, stepping closer and putting one hand on her shoulder, "what you did was very brave. You took out two of those guys and watched my back. Do you think you can do something else for me?"
His hand steadied her, and the kind words he spoke were a far cry from the chewing out she knew she deserved. Jane straightened up, and nodded.

"I have to get back to the fight, but these people need to get to safety. Do you think you can get them to your subway tunnel and keep them safe? They'll be able to walk along the tracks and get to the police barricade three blocks down."

"Yes," she nodded, tightening her grip on her gun. "You fight. I'll get them out of here."

"All right," he strapped his shield around his arm and turned towards the doors, "It looks clear. Everybody listen up!" he called to the people in the lobby, "This woman right here is going to take you down to the subways; stay underground and follow the lines three blocks in either direction, and you'll find help. The National Guard and NYPD have set up a blockade and have medical help available."

He looked back at Jane, smiled, and asked, "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," she said firmly. "Do—" she tried again, quietly, "are we winning?"

"It's always hard to tell when you're right in the middle of a dogfight, Miss Foster," he said, shaking his head, "I can tell you that we're giving them a hell of a fight. And so far, there's no sign of Loki. If we can get the fight out over the ocean, the helicarrier's guns could do a lot for us—and that's what we're trying to do."

"Okay," she felt better—slightly—and knew she couldn't keep him any longer, "Come on everybody," she raised her voice, turning to the crowd behind them, "the way is clear and the tunnels are just a few hundred yards away. Stick together and move!"

Her thin and reedy voice was nowhere near as inspiring as the Captain's, but she did have a gun and that was apparently all the inspiration the group needed. While she held the door and scouted the street, the ragtag bunch made a break for the tunnels; after the last one left, she took up rear guard position and made sure that everyone was safely underground.

Once back in the darkness, nobody wanted to stay put. Mothers hurried their children down onto the tracks to reach the safety of the military encampments. Only one man turned to Jane and asked, "Are you going to stay here?"

She nodded, "My friends are fighting. I want to be here when it's over."

"It's dangerous, you know," he said, shaking his head, "if we stick together, we can make it."

"I can't leave," she repeated, "but do you know how to use a gun?"

"I was in the Chicago PD for twenty years," he said, "But I used all my bullets weeks ago, keeping the group safe."

"Here," she took her other Glock from its holster, sliding out two clips from her vest pocket as well, "take this. Make sure everyone's okay."

He nodded. "Will do. Just make sure you're okay too." He jumped down onto the tracks. Just before he moved out of sight, he called back, "What's your name?"

"Jane Foster."

"Many thanks, Jane Foster," he smiled, giving her a quick salute. Before she had a chance to ask for his name, he had turned and was gone down the track. The crunching of feet over gravel soon
faded from earshot, and Jane was left alone in the dark with only the sounds of battle to keep her company.

She checked her watch. The whole excursion to the library had only taken fifteen minutes. But Jane was as bone-weary as if she had been fighting the whole day. She could only imagine how the Avengers felt.

Jane tightened her grasp on her gun and watched the only bit of sky she could see as it darkened with smoke from the burning city.

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"Thor, light the bastards up!" Tony yelled, the connection fizzling in Jane's ear now that they were fighting one mile out over the Atlantic, "This is the last of 'em!"

"With pleasure," Jane had to smile; it seemed as though Thor could go another few rounds with the Skrull, as he sounded almost as fresh now as he had five hours ago. Even from this distance, Jane heard the roll of thunder and the crack of lightning shatter the air above the sea.

Within the last hour, the Avengers had successfully driven the straggling Skrull out over the ocean, and now the big guns of the helicarrier were significantly augmenting their firepower. The aliens were also taking a pounding from the short-range fighter jets launched both from the SHIELD carrier and from US Navy aircraft carriers. The jets had not been launched over the city for fear of civilian casualties, but now, over the water, they had full maneuverability and the Skrull were on the run.

Jane listened to the last tense minutes of battle from the safety of the National Guard outpost. Once the Skrull were off the streets, Jane had made her way to the barricade and was now helping monitor some of her magic-detecting technology that had been installed into every mobile defense unit, calling her readings into the SHIELD control center on the helicarrier. So far, so good; though Loki must have become aware of the three-pronged attack, she saw no portals opening anywhere in the country, nor did she register any elevated levels of magical activity.

This should have been comforting, but it wasn't. Jane knew that he was knew of their fight, that he was probably watching it—but Jane would find things less frightening if she could just see him, the wasp in the room. Not knowing when—or how—Loki would strike back was making her very nervous. Their streak of luck was surely too good to last.

For things were going well with the attack. So far, the battle in New York had lasted the longest. Since SHIELD had its biggest presence on the East coast, most of the mutants involved in the battles had been sent to LA and Honolulu. Apparently they had made shorter work of the Skrull armies there, driving them away from the harbors and out over the ocean.

Pearl Harbor—according to the guardsman Jane spoke to—was already flying the American flag again.

The radio in the back of the APC squawked, and the weary voice of Nick Fury said, "All right, boys and girls…the generals are calling it and so am I: New York is officially secured."

Jane shut her eyes and dropped her head into her hands, whispering a silent prayer of thanks to whatever gods might have helped them, Norse or otherwise. Cheers burst out all around as police and military celebrated together; but the Avengers were curiously silent in Jane's ear.

All except for one…naturally.

"All right, yay us!" Tony said, pale and breathless and not like himself, "I think…I think we
should take a day tomorrow. Let's just take a day and let someone else handle the cleanup, all right guys? I don't know about you, Slugger,” Jane knew he was talking to Thor—he had nicknames for everyone, and Thor's mean swing was an easy target—and she smiled as he finished, "But I've got a girl I want to see."

"You are right, my friend," Thor said, and Jane felt a tingle sweep from her face all the way down to her toes, "There is a lady I should be glad to see once more."

She knew that she was blushing and was glad that none of the men around her had access to the Avengers' channel. No one outside the Avengers knew about her previous interactions with Thor, but her red face felt like a beacon—no one who saw her could doubt that there was something going on between them.

"No one's talking to Miss Foster until she's been debriefed," Nick Fury cut in, "Stark, will you go get her, please?"

"Aw, at least let Thor help with the debriefing," Tony drawled, "I'm sure he'd like that."

Jane snorted and clapped her hand over her mouth. Only Tony could make a dirty joke at a time like this. Thor chuckled, but she could tell he had not really understood the joke; Director Fury's frustrated sigh showed that he understood all too well.

"All right then," he growled, "Thor. Would you please go and get Miss Foster? There are some questions she needs to answer about her time in Stark Tower. Stark, I want you, Barton, and Romanov all here on the carrier when she comes in…might as well get you all done at once."

"Fine," Stark replied, petulant as ever, "But could I get a limo sent to that podunk little office in White Plains? I gotta have Pepper come in so she can start coordinating repairs to the Tower. She doesn't get a day off tomorrow."

"Agents have already secured Miss Potts," Fury responded, "and she'll be debriefed with the rest of you."

"Oh, this is gonna be a party! Fury, I didn't think you had it in you."

Clouds gathered over Jane's head and she could feel static electricity charging the air; she shivered and the fine hairs on her arms prickled and stood on end. She smiled up at the threatening sky—never again would she be afraid of bad weather, because it meant that Thor was on the way.

And a few minutes later, descending from the sky in a rush of wind and ozone, was the God of Thunder himself. Jane felt her heart pound—stop for a beat or two—and then pound again. Her smile was soft and shy, for no matter how many times she had rehearsed this meeting in her head, she could never quite muster the confidence she knew she should.

But she knew what she wanted to say.

"Hi," she said, so quietly that she wasn't sure he could hear her over the noise of the military men shifting and muttering amongst themselves over the god's presence. "I missed you." She stepped forward and had to tilt her head back to meet his eyes. Then she hugged him, wrapping her arms around his middle like a child hugging a parent. He was broad, and warm, and solid, and she pressed her cheek to his chest, feeling his heartbeat through the leather and steel.

When his arms came up and around her, cradling her to him with delicate care, she felt safe for the first time in months.

Her breath came in silent gasps—she was happy, so happy that the feeling verged on pain—and
"I missed you," she blinked back tears, not wanting anything to cloud her vision of him. His golden hair was longer than she remembered, and his eyes were less childlike than before—it seemed as though years of age, experience, and sorrow had given them a depth of maturity she did not recognize—but he was still the same man she remembered.

And when he smiled, the age, experience, and sorrow disappeared. As before, his smile drew out her own—she defied anyone to frown in the face of Thor's happiness.

"Hello, Jane Foster," his words had the same simple, rehearsed quality of her own, "I knew you would find me. I only regret I could not do more to fulfill my promise to return."

She shook her head and swallowed hard. "I'm just glad you're here, now," she stood on her tiptoes and pressed her lips to his, feeling the tickling scratch of his beard against her skin and tasting ozone on his breath.

For a moment, he let the kiss remain sweet and gentle. Then his arms tightened and he gathered her closer, deepening the kiss as his fingers tangled in her long hair. Jane smiled and tightened her arms around his shoulders, feeling her heart swell and her coherent thoughts shatter into a joyous, laughing chorus of he likes me, he likes me!

She did not think again until the laughter and clapping of the soldiers around them made her aware of the fact that she was making out with an alien on the very public streets of downtown Manhattan. Instead of being embarrassed, she found herself grinning openly—discovering then that it was impossible to laugh and kiss simultaneously.

Thor put her down but did not let her go; his arm was still wrapped around her shoulders, draping her in warmth and making her feel uncharacteristically soft and girly. She had never understood the popular girls in high school who seemed attached at the hip to their football team boyfriends—but now she did.

Thor made her feel safe; just being next to him made her happy.

"So," she said, still getting her breath back after that kiss, "I guess Director Fury wants to see all of us, right?"

"I would that we could spend more time together, Jane," he replied, "but Stark is right: the sooner this is done, the sooner we can speak."

Jane's clever mind immediately supplied her with a list of about eight things that she'd rather do with Thor than speaking—and from the look in his eyes she could tell that he could imagine better ways to spend their time too—but she settled biting her lip and nodding.

"I guess," she smiled, wrapping her arms around him once again, "this means I get to fly with you again. It's the most amazing feeling, you know," she confided, "flying."

He smiled down at her. "I will take you flying as often and as far as you like. It will be my atonement for being absent from you so long."

She faked a pout—something she could never remember doing before—and teased him, "I hope you don't think that flying with me is a punishment?"

"If it were," he answered, wrapping his left arm securely around her shoulders and spinning his hammer with his right, "I should commit sins at every opportunity."
Jane laughed, and her heart soared as her feet left the ground.

The debriefing room was windowless, airless, and accessible only by a steel door two feet thick that sealed automatically when shut. The air being piped in for the eight people sitting around the table smelled stale, full of dust and diesel fuel. Jane sat between Clint Barton and Maria Hill—Director Fury's right hand woman. Also in the room were Natasha, Tony, Pepper, and Agent Phil Coulson.

Everyone else—and there were hundreds of very important people on board ranging from US military representatives to mutants, to domestic and foreign ambassadors—had been excluded.

At the end of the day, Nick Fury clearly assumed that all information about Loki was a matter of importance primarily for SHIELD and the Avengers Initiative. It was likely to be this small group of individuals who would be responsible for defeating Loki in the end, but Jane could have done with a little less cloak-and-dagger…and a little more time with Thor.

They had already been in the room for—she took a discreet peek at her watch—three hours. Things would have gone faster if Tony hadn't kept antagonizing Director Fury at every opportunity, but Tony couldn't resist tweaking the lion's tail.

Jane had to admit that some of his jokes were pretty funny, but after the seventy-second spat erupted between the two of them, she knew her patience was wearing very thin. So was everybody else's.

"For God's sake, Stark," Clint snarled, "would you please shut up?"

The whole room went silent. No one could ever remember Clint Barton getting so emotional about anything. Jane saw Natasha smother a smile with one hand—Pepper bit her lip to keep herself from laughing—because the expression on Tony's face was priceless.

And for the first time since he'd sat down, he was speechless.

"Thank you, Agent Barton," Fury said, "I think we've heard from everyone except—"

Jane swallowed as every eye in the room turned towards her.

"Miss Foster," he finished. "Would you please describe your interactions with the alien?"

She found it very curious that no one of SHIELD seemed to call Loki by his name. It was always "the subject" or "the alien" or "the antagonist", depending on the situation. Sometimes she forgot just who they were talking about…as if those dry words banished the fear and menace about the man himself.

Jane bit her lip and tried to focus on just the facts. "Well, I was with Erik—who was being possessed, only I didn't know it—in Stockholm when I decided to try getting out of Sweden. I thought I would cross the border to Norway…"

She gave a quick five minute summary of her capture and journey to New York. Describing her actual interactions with "the alien" was a good deal more complicated. Being a scientist, though, she did her best to divorce herself from all the emotions the idea of Loki conjured—fear, curiosity, shame—and just stated the facts in as plain a voice as she could manage.

It took her another ten minutes to get to the first really sticky part.
"As Tony said," she had to pause to arrange her words, "Loki had him against the wall of the lab and was hurting him. I begged him to stop, and he did. But then," she swallowed, and dropped her gaze into her lap, staring at her hands, "then he took me upstairs and…and while I was in shock, he—"

It had to be faced. She looked up and said, "He kissed me."

Nearly everyone in the room was a professional assassin or spy, trained in the art of concealing emotion. But even Jane, untrained as she was, could clearly see the miniscule glances that darted between Fury, Coulson, Hill, Natasha, and Clint. They said nothing, but the downward tilt to Fury's lips spoke volumes of distrust, anger, and calculation. Pepper put one hand to her mouth and Tony swore under his breath.

She didn't let the silence stretch on. In the same monotone that she'd tried to maintain for her recital thus far, she continued, "I fought back, biting him and punching him in the face. After that, he told me that he had always meant to torture me and use the knowledge of my pain to punish Thor for casting him out of Asgard. He told me that he should have the Skrull beat me, break my fingers, and cut out my eyes."

How twisted was this whole situation that she found it more comfortable to recite Loki's laundry list of contemplated atrocities than describe his few moments of twisted tenderness? She saw everyone relax again as she told of how he'd wanted to kill her—but she knew that the taint of having been close to him in a different way was going to take a long time to rub off.

Especially when she got to the next kiss.

"On the day we escaped, I was awake at dawn." This time, she looked at the dull reflective surface of the steel table, letting her eyes trace the SHIELD logo as she spoke. "Loki came in and told me that he was going to battle to quell a rebellion. I challenged him and told him that we would never give in; we argued. He said that he was trying to bring order to our world, and implied that he was trying to prove his worth…but to whom, I don't know.

"And then he said all this was just useless philosophical discussion, because he had come too far to fail. He said he would use whatever methods he had to in order to conquer the Earth. He also said and that he had come to me for one purpose."

She paused. Nothing would ever make confessing this easier. "He kissed me again, even though this time I fought back from the start. I fought, but couldn't do anything. It was only when I begged him to stop that he did."

Tony let off a stream of profanity that made Jane blush; an achievement, considering how flushed she already was from telling her story. She did not look up.

"He asked if I'd ever been to Rome. When I said no, he told me that he would take me there one day when everything was settled. Then he asked if I would wish him luck; I said that I hoped someone would put a bullet in his brain. He left, and I got out of the room, met Tony and the others in the lab, and we escaped."

She met Nick Fury's eyes, and finished, "And you know everything that happened after that."

Whether it was the fact that he was a master spy or the fact that he was missing one eye, Jane could not read his expression. He stared her down from behind his folded hands, eye flitting over her face, reading her emotions and body language. He shifted in his chair, and looked around.

"Clear the room."
Coulson, Hill, Clint and Natasha moved immediately. Tony remained stubbornly in his seat until Pepper finally pulled him up by the arm. He got off one parting shot:

"I hope you're not planning to blame her for any of this, Cyclops," he said, "All this proves is that Loki—excuse me, "the alien"—” he made exaggerated quotes with his fingers, "is even more of a low-down little shit than we thought. We wouldn't have made it out without her. You wouldn't know where Loki or his henchmen were without her. So sending her away because of some suspected "contamination", here he sneered, "would be a mistake even stupider than the ones you usually make."

He squeezed Jane's shoulder as he left. "Chin up, sweetheart. Don't let him mess with you."

Jane managed a wan smile. She wasn't certain if Tony had saved her, or just driven another nail into her coffin.

Director Fury didn't say a word for another few minutes after the room was empty. He only looked at her. Jane found his gaze unsettling, to say the least, but she wouldn't let him intimidate her into looking ashamed. She knew—intellectually, even if her emotions shamed her into feeling otherwise—that she was not to blame for Loki's actions. So she held Fury's gaze with her head held high; chin up, as Tony had said.

Fury sighed and dropped his hands flat on the table. "You know what this sounds like, Miss Foster."

"I don't know what it "sounds like"," great, she was sounding like Tony now, "All I know is the truth. And the truth is that I didn't ask for any of this. He targeted me because of how Thor feels—feels—about me. He wanted to punish him, and he thought using me would be the best way to do that."

"Whatever he meant to do," Fury replied, shaking his head, "his taking so much notice of you makes keeping you in the loop a very dangerous gamble. If he keeps focusing on you, and you know things about SHIELD's plans or tactics, what happens if he captures you again? He seems to have gone out of his way to keep an eye on you. So tell me," he turned his palms upright, appealing to her, "what would you do in my place?"

"Why would he come after me again? Especially if he could just go right for Thor?"

"You keep talking about him like he's in his right mind," Fury reminded her, "but he's not. He's as crazy as a box of cats, and we both know it. A sane person wouldn't go after you—you don't serve much purpose to him, at least from a tactical standpoint—but he's crazy. He could go for you right away, and the more you know, the more dangerous it is for us. You see what I mean?"

She knew he was right, but the idea of admitting it stuck in her throat. "Don't send me away again," she shook her head, "Please. You have no idea how bad those months in Sweden were. I…” she closed her eyes, squeezed them until the tears were suppressed, "I couldn't stand it."

"Well, then we have a problem," he said, sighing, "because I'm not about to risk the safety of this operation just because you don't want to be alone."

"What about Thor?" Jane was grasping at straws, but she wouldn't let SHIELD marginalize her again, "If you send me away, he won't be too happy."

"Thor wouldn't want you to be in any unnecessary danger," he was a good tactician, she'd admit; he was backing her into a corner and she knew that sooner or later he'd trick her into admitting the truth, "I'm sure he could be made to see how it would be safer for you to be in a SHIELD
stronghold on the other side of the country."

Jane felt her shoulders tightening as she prepared to sink her teeth into this new argument.

Before she could speak, the hissing sound of the door's air seal disturbed the silence. Maria Hill stuck her head around the corner, her slightly wider-than-usual eyes the only thing that betrayed her shock and concern.

"Director Fury," she said, "sorry to interrupt, but he's contacting us."

Fury stood immediately, Jane just a moment behind.

"It's Loki."

Both Fury and Hill ignored Jane on the way back up to the bridge; since she hadn't been told either way, she followed along behind. The labyrinthine passages of the helicarrier were such that Jane immediately forgot how to go back the way she had come, anyway; and where was it more important to be...on the bridge, where the war's future would be decided, or in her windowless interior cell, with a cot barely big enough to fit her?

Even from one deck down, Jane could already hear raised voices coming from the bridge. She heard Thor quite clearly, his pleading voice pure heartbreak to her. There were other voices—mostly male, all crisp and military (she assumed from the US government)—but her heart stopped and her feet faltered as she heard Loki's smooth, honeyed voice answering them all.

"Brother,"

She slipped onto the bridge, remaining half-concealed behind a bank of computers as Fury and Hill stepped forward. Thor was speaking.

"Brother, please. Give up this futile dream. All of Asgard mourned for you. Give up and come home...you are still my brother!"

Loki's smile was just as she remembered it: heartless, crazy, and cold. His chuckle filled the entire deck, making some of the agents—and Jane, too—shiver as though touched by spiders.

"When will you give up this useless sentiment, Aesir?" He shook his head, brow furrowing with mock concern. "We are not now and have never been blood," he lingered on the last word, tasting it after the echoes had faded. "And blood is all that matters to the house of Odin, is it not?"

Before Thor could voice any rejoinder, Loki looked beyond him and caught sight of Nick Fury. "But here is the man to whom I wished to speak," he dipped his head, sneering as he did so, "the great Director Fury, who so boldly faced my army and triumphed in battle." He laughed, though no one knew why. "Well done."

"Thank you," Fury said, taking his spot at the head of the bridge. "And what is the purpose of this little call?"

"Why, to negotiate terms of my withdrawal, of course," he sounded as nonchalant as a man ordering what he wanted for dinner. "You have achieved superiority over this stretch of dirt," he went on, his smile turning even colder, "but I have a portal ready to open that will unleash millions of Skrull on your world. Can you imagine the devastation?"

The room was silent. Tony met Jane's eyes across the room; she shrugged, not knowing if he was
bluffing or not. No one could.

Loki’s eyes seemed to meet them all in turn. He went on, genially, "Now, all is not lost; I am willing to let you retain hold of your country, as America, as you call it, has no special meaning for me. But I still control one-third of this realm," he finished, "and if you challenge my control of it, I will return with my army and slaughter every man, woman, and child who calls this land home."

A white haired man in a distinguished Army uniform cleared his throat and said, "You're talking about killing over 270 million people."

He laughed. "No, no, my friend," he shook his head, "I am talking about killing over 270 million animals. You are nothing more than cattle to me; remember that when you make your calculations. To me, you are mindless beasts who have learned to walk on your hind legs and ape the speech of intelligent creatures."

Thor cried, "Loki, stop this!"

"You," he snarled, "have no place in this conversation—this is between Director Fury," he met that man's eyes, "and myself."

Fury crossed his arms. "What are your terms?"

"I will retain control of all the nations I possess that are not in the lands of North or Central America. The countries that have not been conquered will remain in dispute," Jane's stomach turned as she realized that this conversation would be no end to the war—just a continuation. "I will also pledge," he went on, "to leave the countries in the lands of North and Central America in peace for a period of three months. During that time, you may make whatever preparations for war you wish…but I would suggest your time better spent in preparing your people for their new King."

The room exploded, each man yelling out his opinion of Loki's "terms". Fury made a sharp movement at both Agent Hill and Coulson; they started to efficiently clear the room of the deadweight. After a few minutes, no one remained on the bridge except for SHIELD staff and members of the Avengers.

Fury turned back to Loki, who had viewed the entire scene with a look of unabashed joy. It must seem like perfect proof to him, Jane thought…proof that humans were incapable of thinking clearly for themselves or acting in unison for the good of the species. She felt shame for herself and her race, but shame was soon overridden by anger—anger that he had so easily found their weakness, and known just how to exploit it.

"This seems like we don't get a lot for what we give," Fury said, matter-of-fact as ever. "I'm not accepting this; you've gotta do better."

"I do not have to do anything, foolish mortal," Loki replied, chuckling. "Look at what you have left to fight me! Your armies are in shambles; you have spent all your resources to drive me from your shores. This is a triumph, I grant you that…but be honest; we both know it is short-lived. Are you prepared to lose everything," he shook his head, "because you cannot admit that you are beaten?"

Fury didn't say a word. Everyone in the room held their breath.

"We'll need six months," he said, finally, "Six months of non-aggression. This is a big country, with a lot of people," his lip curled, "and if we're going to get everyone ready for their new King,"
he sneered, "we'll need more time."

"Six months is a possibility," Loki conceded, "but if I am to be so generous, I will need some guarantee that you will not try to launch a sneak attack. I require a hostage."

"Sir," Maria Hill said immediately, looking at Fury, "I volunteer."

"And when did I ask for you, quim?" The raw violence in Loki's voice—and the insult itself—made Jane flinch, shrinking further back into the shadows. Her heart rate accelerated as she remembered that dark voice hissing in her own ear. *Calm down, Jane. You're okay.*

"What worth do you have? You are cannon fodder, throwing yourself forward like the chaff you are," he looked back at Fury, who glared at him—glared, but said nothing. "I require a hostage of far greater value."

"Who do you want?" Though it was a question, Fury's voice was flat—almost bored with the whole exchange.

Jane knew that it was stupid of her to have come into the room at all. Loki's eyes met hers with no hesitation; he had known she was there all along. She pressed back against the wall, feeling his gaze skewer her in place as his hands had done, once. He saw her fear and smiled, the tip of his tongue showing momentarily between his teeth.

"I want Jane Foster."
Chapter Twelve

There was so much noise in the room—shouting, swearing, banging—as every member of the Avengers vigorously defended Jane's right to freedom that her ears took on a curious ringing sound, like the numbness that develops in the aftermath of an explosion. She saw people's faces—twisted in anger—and saw their mouths move, but she could not make sense of what she heard.

She saw Nick Fury turn and gesture towards his red-headed right hand—Natasha knifed through the discord in the room and grasped Jane by one arm, turning her around—but for a moment, Jane met the master spy's eye and could clearly read the sentiment there.

_I told you so._

Jane flushed red and stood firm, resisting Natasha's not-so-gentle guiding hand. Director Fury wanted to sweep her under the rug, keep her out of sight, but it was too late for that. Jane was in it now, deep in it, and wherever her path went from here, she swore that she would be the one to decide it.

Not the US government, not the military…and not SHIELD or the Avengers.

She planted her feet firmly and shook her head at Natasha. The other woman stared at her for a long moment—green eyes searching and prodding, as they always did—and whatever resolution she saw there made her let Jane go.

The world came rushing back.

"Loki, stop this madness!" Thor looked angry enough to smash his hammer through the view screen, "She has nothing to do with any of this."

"You sick son of a bitch, if you think we're going to turn her over to you—" Tony's voice was drowned out as the Captain chimed in:

"She's a civilian; if you need a hostage, take one of us!"

"Everyone, shut up!" Nick Fury had neither a super suit nor genetic engineering, was not a god or a monster, but when he commanded, people obeyed. There was silence in the room. Momentarily.

"Fury, if you think you're going to hand her over—"

"Sir, this goes against all the rules of war—"

Tony and the Captain looked at each other; Jane wondered if this was the first time the two of them had agreed about anything. Fury ignored them both—he was focused on the one real enemy in the room: the mad god who grinned at them all, drinking in the chaos like wine.

"Your first choice isn't polling well with the crowd," Fury began, crossing his arms over his chest, "I don't suppose there's any chance you'll take a substitution?"

"And who would I want from this...illustrious assembly?" he replied, eyes moving over each of the Avengers in turn, "The assassins, with their hands drenched in blood? The monster, wearing the skin of a man? The relic?"

"No. Miss Foster will come with me now or this war will end sooner than it has to, and I think you know just how the war would end if the confrontation came now. Six months gives you a
chance, Director Fury—not much of a chance, I grant you—and all it takes is one little sacrifice.” He drawled the last three words, looking past Fury to where Jane and Natasha stood. Jane managed not to flinch under his thin-lipped smile and wandering eyes.

His smile grew wider as he saw her stand firm and stare him down. For a long moment, Jane's awareness narrowed to the two of them; two beings poised at the opposite ends of a spectrum, locked together even though they could not have been further apart.

Then he looked back at Director Fury. Jane blinked and, embarrassed at her strange fascination, looked at the ground, taking in the room only with brief glances through her lashes. She saw Thor looking at her and had to look away immediately.

Her analogy had been wrong.

This situation was not about her and Loki. Not just about her and Loki, anyway. It was about Loki and Thor—and Thor and her—and Loki, Thor, and her. The permutations were enough to make even her brain hurt, and she was a mathematician. She was certain, however—as she was sure of her deepest convictions—that there would be no simple solution to their equation.

Thor might not think of it in the same way, but she had seen his face. The heartbreak, the hopelessness, the frustration—the frustration of a man whose strength was in his muscles when faced with a problem that could not be solved by violence—all of it showed Jane that Thor had arrived at the same conclusion she had.

This would not end well.

"Hypothetically," Fury was speaking again, "if we were to agree…a hostage keeps us from breaking the truce. What keeps you from doing the same?"

"I would give you my word, of course."

"Of course. But you'll forgive me if I think that your word is about as good as my left eye."

Loki laughed heartily at that. "Fair enough," he paused for a moment, thinking, "What can I offer you in return?"

"I want to be able to communicate with the hostage," he replied, promptly.

Jane thought it was decent that he said "the hostage" rather than "Miss Foster". It seemed to imply that he didn't already assume that she would agree to the exchange. It was a pleasantry, of sorts, for she was certain that Nick Fury had already decided how he was going to respond to Loki's offer.

She still had to square it with herself, however.

"I will allow communication," Loki conceded, "Miss Foster will be allowed to communicate with one individual—I leave the choice of individual up to you," he was looking at her again, and she gritted her teeth. Enough.

"What makes you think I'll agree to any of this?" she asked, shrugging. Though she was doing her best to seem nonchalant, her heart was pounding and she felt her lips trembling as she pressed them together; she only hoped he couldn't see it from the other side of the screen. "I thought that neither of us wanted anything to do with the other."

"You wound me, my dear Jane," he said, dramatically pressing one hand to his heart. "I wonder how you can think that after all the…tender moments we shared."
She broke in, mouth dry. Thor would not find out like this. "And you have to know that SHIELD won't really consider me much of a hostage; if they see a chance, they'll take it." She let that sink into the atmosphere, and then continued, "And I wouldn't blame them."

Thor moved suddenly, stepping forward as if to guard against the threat of her own words, Mjolnir humming in his hand, feeding off its master's agitation. The Captain stopped him with one hand on his arm, shaking his head—but Loki had already seen.

"A good bluff, Miss Foster," he smirked at her, "but we both know there is one person who will not allow any harm to come to you. Tell me," and he showed his teeth; more in a snarl than a smile, "have you fucked him yet?"

Even Natasha reacted this time—she grasped Jane by her upper arm as the physicist lunged towards the screen—and Jane bared her own teeth at Loki and snapped, "That's none of your damn business!"

"Is it not?" The set of his mouth had no humor at all, now. He was hunched—a panther waiting to spring—mouth turned down at the corners and jade eyes focused, unwavering. "He insists that he is my brother…and you," he ground out the words; Jane felt each of them as physical weights bearing down on her shoulders, "you are my hostage. My prisoner."

"Not yet she's not," Fury squared his shoulders, taking Loki's attention away from Jane. She took the opportunity to close her eyes—she was so tired, so sick of all this—and Natasha's hand on her upper arm was now a welcome support.

"We will need time to discuss your offer," Fury said, "how can we contact you when we're ready to make the exchange?"

"I don't believe I offered you the luxury of time, Director," Loki's objection was pro forma, only. Jane could tell he was pleased by Fury's seeming concession—his voice had lost its rough edge—and he continued immediately, "But, I am a generous man."

"We need twenty-four hours," it amazed Jane that he managed to sound so calm as he engaged in this lightning round of chess with a clever and skilled opponent. Her heart was pounding, her mouth was dry, and her palms were sweating…these next moments, after all, were to determine her last, small measure of freedom.

It struck her then that her mind was already made up. She knew what she would have to do.

He laughed, shaking his head. "I am not so generous. A full day to rally your men and prepare for a counterstrike? No. I offer twelve hours. At eight o'clock tomorrow morning, you will have Miss Foster waiting for me on the deck of your vessel. If she is not there," his image faded from the screen, "I will crush you where you stand."

The bridge was silent after Loki left. The helicarrier heaved underneath them as the gathering wind coaxed swelling waves from the sea. The various computer screens continued to beep on, displaying tactical and navigational information in bright, multicolored displays.

The only human sound was Fury's fingers, tapping a sharp staccato beat against the communication console. Slowly, they stopped. Then the glass of the console shattered underneath his fist. The sound of breaking glass threw Jane momentarily back into the battle for New York—she felt nauseous—but nobody moved.

Then, "Sir," the Captain cleared his throat and stepped forward, addressing the rigid back of Director Fury, "I believe that twelve hours still gives us enough time to prepare for an attack. I
have been speaking to Colonel McQueen, and he says—"

"Save it, Captain," Fury's voice was not angry; it was weary and dispirited...broken in a way very few people had ever heard. "There's no way we could be ready in time. Hell," he turned, folding his arms across his chest, "even if we had a week we still wouldn't be ready. The 58th squadron took heavy casualties, we lost two aircraft carriers, and the submarines we have won't provide nearly enough firepower.

"Let's face it," he said, sighing, "we are hopelessly outgunned. And twelve hours gives Loki enough time to get his reinforcements from Africa and Western Europe on those flying troop carriers...or whatever they are. We'd be overwhelmed."

"So we're just going to give up, sir?" Steve pressed, his jaw tightening with frustration, "We're not going to put up a fight?"

"Do you have any idea about how we might win that fight, Captain?" Fury was starting to sound frustrated himself, "Because if you do, I'd love to hear it. The world's in a delicate state right now, and SHIELD high command is getting twitchy. I don't want to give them an excuse to drop a nuke on us if things get out of hand."

"I hope you're kidding about that?" Jane gasped.

Fury shook his head. "I wish I were, Miss Foster. It was only the six million people still trying to evacuate that kept them from dropping one on New York."

"So, let me get this straight," it was the first time Dr. Banner had spoken, and everyone turned to look at the man who leaned against the wall at the back of the room, "to keep your bosses from getting "twitchy"," his voice was gentle and even, but his words sneered, "we're going to give this psychopath a civilian who also, may I remind you, can give him all the answers he needs about opening portals back to Asgard. Is that about right?"

"He already knows everything he needs to know about making and directing portals," Jane said, shrugging, "all he needs is the power source. To get back to Asgard, he needs the tesseract; none of this will work without it."

"Mr. Stark?" Fury looked for confirmation. Tony nodded.

"She's right. There's nothing we know that would be news to him, but none of it means a damn without the tesseract. As long as we keep that safe, he's not going anywhere."

"Yeah, but he keeps tearing up the world," Clint said. "Would it be such a bad thing if he had the power to go elsewhere?"

"You would have him destroy Asgard instead of Midgard?" Thor said, hand tightening around Mjolnir as he stared the archer down. Clint did not back down; he held the god's gaze as Thor continued, "I did not believe that humans could be so petty."

"This gets us nowhere," Fury said, "what we have to decide now is—"

"You know what?" Tony interrupted, speaking to Thor, "Green Arrow's got a point. I would rather have him destroying Asgard. It's your fault he's here in the first place, and they only sent you to clean up the mess. And what have you done?"

"Mr. Stark—" Fury tried to interrupt, but Thor's deep voice rolled right over him.

"What have I done? I have called down the power of the storms to stall my brother's advances; I
have kept this team and countless mortals out of danger; I have traveled with you as brother-in-
arms from one side of this realm to the other—"

"And people are still dying!" Tony slammed his fist on the table and stood. It was almost funny—
and would have been if Jane hadn't been on the point of tears—to see all five-foot-eight of Tony
Stark squaring off against the six-foot-three thunder god. "So what the hell does all that matter,
huh?"

He stepped closer, ignoring the static charge that filled the atmosphere as Thor battled his
irritation. Lighting flashed outside, a single bolt splitting the sea. "You know what you should
have done? You should have grabbed your brother, dragged him here, and used the tesseract to
take him back to Asgard. But you haven't. Every time we fight him, you beg and you plead and
you whine——"

Thor hit him; a swift backhand blow across his face. Jane couldn't believe it—Thor using his
strength against an unguarded human—and the force was enough to throw Tony backwards. He
landed solidly on his back on the table, cracking the glass surface.

Blood dripped from his mouth and nose and he spat it out. Discretion had never been the better
part of Tony's valor, though, and in another moment—after getting his lungs working again—he
went on:

"And now, he wheezed, cracking his jaw back into place, "and now...he's gonna take Jane. And
what are you gonna do then, huh?"

Thor looked down at his fist—bewildered, as though it had moved without his consent—and then
looked at Jane. She had both hands over her mouth to stop the scream that had wanted to come
out, and she shook her head at him, dropping her hands to her sides.

The only sound in the room was Tony's labored breathing, and the glass tinkling to the ground as
he rolled off the table.

Jane had had enough. She turned on her heel and left the room. No one said a word to stop her.

Outside, she leaned her head against the cool steel walls of the corridor, relishing the silence. Her
ears were still ringing with angry voices and she pressed her hands against them, knowing it was a
futile gesture.

This was the haven she had longed for? These were the people she had hoped would keep her
safe?

Jane tried to be generous. They had just been through a hard battle. Tony, Clint, and Natasha had
come from captivity, like herself. Dr. Banner fought every day with his alter ego, and this situation
was probably extremely uncomfortable for him. The fact that he hadn't already lost control was
impressive.

But even with every allowance she could give...she was still disappointed in Thor. He had hurt
Tony; he might have killed him. How violently would he have reacted if Loki had been able to
confess what had happened between the two of them during Jane's imprisonment?

The thought was disquieting, to say the least. But she would have to tell him, before she left...

The fully articulated thought gave Jane a momentary pause. There it was—the source of all this
bickering, all this friction. The Avengers were trying to find a reason and a way to keep her away
from Loki.
All of this was to try to protect her.

Jane put her back to the wall and slid down, resting her forehead against her knees. The thought was humbling, and she felt ashamed for her ungenerous thoughts. It only helped steel her resolution; she would have to go. No one would die because of her.

"Jane?"

Even speaking gently, Thor's rich, deep voice was enough to fill the entire hallway. She looked up, straining to meet his eyes; he dropped down to one knee before her, resting his hands lightly on the ground.

"Are you all right? I am sorry," he dropped his gaze and murmured like a guilty child, "for striking Tony. He is a friend of yours, I know."

"He can be kind of a jerk," Jane conceded, trying to laugh and not succeeding, "but he is a good friend to me. I don't understand…you could have killed him."

"I would not have—" he paused, and shook his head, "No, you are right. I have never struck a fellow warrior out of anger before. It was wrong of me." He shifted forward and leaned against the wall, warm against her side. She dropped her head down to rest on his shoulder, folding her arm under his.

She felt him breathe deeply before he spoke again:

"I was angriest because…because he was right. My failure to act has caused great harm. And now you are affected by it as well," Jane squeezed his arm gently, encouraging him to go on, "None of this would have happened if I had done as I ought."

"You still love him," Jane said, pressing a light kiss to his bicep, "I don't blame you for not wanting to hurt him."

He kissed the top of her head, "I could have captured him without hurting him overmuch. But I had hoped…"

She picked up the tail end of his thought, "You hoped that you could talk him out of all this."

It was a long moment before he spoke again. "I fear that he is beyond my reach."

What sort of things could make Thor say the words "I fear"? An immortal being with the power to manipulate the storm—someone who could fly and travel the boundless reaches between the stars—had he ever said those words before?

Jane untangled herself from him and raised herself to her knees, turning to face him. His eyes were bright, even in the dim hallway—twin blue stars, shining like Rigel in the darkness of space. He blinked twice, quickly, and Jane's heart contracted painfully in her chest as she realized he was trying to hold back tears.

She wrapped her arms around his shoulders, gathering him to her like a mother gathers a child, running her hand in long strokes down his back. He leaned into her, his head resting against her breastbone, arms tight around her middle—she could feel them shaking. Like a mother, she wished with everything inside her that she could stand between him and his pain, a shield of flesh and willpower to keep him safe from pain.

Somewhere—the thought made her throat spasm with unshed tears—Thor's actual mother must be shedding tears of blood, to see her sons hurting like this.
"I do not want you to go, Jane," he said, his breath drifting against her collarbone.

She steeled herself, and said, "You know I have to."

His arms grew tighter and his voice deepened, growling the threat: "I could take you away from here. I could keep you safe."

"You could," she said, gently, resting her hands on his shoulder and leaning away from his embrace, "you could keep me safe. But everyone else would suffer for it. I can't let that happen. You can't either. I have to go."

"I do not like this."

"I don't either, believe me. But Director Fury is right. We don't really have any other option."

"I will not allow them to threaten your life, Jane," Thor said, interlacing his fingers with hers, "If any of the Avengers act in a way that will endanger your safety, I will stop them."

"But that's what Loki wants, you know," Jane said, shaking her head. "He wants the team to fall apart. He wants you to fight Tony, for Natasha to fight the Captain...for Dr. Banner to lose control. That can't happen. Until we have a chance to recover, and the army builds itself back up again, the Avengers are the only people who can stop Loki. You need to stay together."

He gave her a weak smile, "I knew you were a brilliant scientist, but I had no idea that you also have a keen tactical mind." He lifted one of her hands and kissed the palm, sending a shiver up her spine. Her lips parted in a silent gasp. "You are truly unique, Jane Foster."

Warmth unspooled in her stomach and she shivered again as he lowered his head to lay open-mouth kisses on the soft skin of her wrist and forearm. The soft hairs of his beard tickled and she wanted to laugh—she settled for breathing a quiet sigh as she leaned forward to kiss his forehead.

He was warm, and strong, and wild, and everything she wanted...but there was no time for what she wanted. She still had something very important to confess before they went any further.

"Um," her voice wobbled as she spoke, but he looked up anyway, "we need to talk about something. Do you have a room?"

Any other man might have made a joke about her intention to do any talking, but Thor only nodded, taking her hands in his as he pulled the two of them to their feet. Jane settled into his side —head barely able to rest against his shoulder—as they walked the confusing hallways of the carrier.

At least SHIELD had known to give Thor a larger room than her tiny broom cupboard. And he had a view. There was a large bed, a table with four chairs, a desk, and even a little kitchenette. Jane saw a coffeepot and made a beeline for it. Caffeine was possibly the only thing with enough power to take her from Thor's side, but they could probably both use the pick-me-up.

"So this is the machine that makes the delicious drink you offered me!" Thor stood behind her and watched her pour the grounds into the filter. "I must learn its operation."

"Well, you're in luck," Jane teased, bumping her hip against his, "because I happen to be a fantastic teacher."

He learned how to use the coffeepot in about two minutes—Jane let him brew the first pot—and she thought that she had never seen anyone smile wider at mastering such a simple task. He made
her sit at the table as he brought powdered creamer and sugar from the tiny cabinet above the sink and poured two mugs of coffee.

It had been so long since someone waited on her—not since pre-possession Erik, when Darcy was still living with them—and she had to swallow hard so she wouldn't sniffle like a baby when he asked if the drink was to her liking.

"It's very good," she laid her hand over his and he turned his over so they could hold hands. She kept her coffee black; the bitterness in her mouth echoing the sorrow in her heart. He smiled at her and she had to look away. It was no good to get attached to that face or those hands…it would be a long time before she saw them again.

"I have to tell you about what happened when Loki held me prisoner," she said, her words coming in an undisciplined rush, "I want to tell you, because I know if I don't, you'll find out some other way and it will be terrible. And it doesn't seem like anyone on this boat can keep a secret. So…" she swallowed, trying to slow herself down, "this is gonna be a little awkward, so, um…just bear with me."

"I will hear whatever you have to say, Jane, in however much time you need to say it."

She smiled at him quickly and looked away again. Even his understanding and considerate reply was a knife in her heart. She pulled her hand out of his and wrapped her palms around the hot mug. She took a moment to stare at the shining brown liquid, watching it shift against the clean white ceramic, trying to get her thoughts in order.

Unfortunately, while her brain was taking its sweet time buffering, her mouth had decided it was already loaded.

"Loki kissed me,"

Thor choked on his coffee and coughed. "What?"

"Twice," she said, looking up with a wild-eyed stare. "I didn't—I mean—I didn't ask for it. He just kind of…did it."

There was no way Hallmark made cards that said "sorry your brother's kind of a perverted creep". She could have used one of them.

She didn't know if it was a good sign or a bad sign that Thor seemed to be as much at a loss for words as she was. He opened his mouth—changed his mind—and tried again.

"He has always been envious of me…" he trailed off, "This…would not be the first time jealousies had arisen between us because of a woman. But never something like this," he ground his teeth and hissed, "Den lilla skiten, när jag får mina händer på honom—"

Jane didn't want to know. She let him rant—his shoulders tightening and his grip so strong that he broke the handle off his mug, spilling coffee on the table—until he breathed deeply and stopped. He also returned to English.

"My apologies, Jane. For my brother, I apologize. There are no excuses I can make for him in this regard. His offenses against me and Jotunheim I could understand and forgive, but this—this is vile."

"Well," damn, that Hallmark card would be really useful right about now, "It sounds worse than…" was she really going to say this? "than it was. I mean, I didn't want him to do it and I hated it…but I don't think he was really trying to—" she couldn't finish the sentence, not when
Thor was looking at her like he wanted to be sick for being associated with the cause of her pain.

Jane swallowed. "He did stop, when I—when I asked him to."

"Jane," the word was strained, uneven, "are you certain you want to do this? If Loki—" he stopped himself, "I could not reach you in time."

"I know," she nodded, "but I don't think he will. He had plenty of chances before, and he didn't. He even told me that he'd considered hurting me," she was paraphrasing, but Thor didn't need to know the whole nasty truth, "and had decided against it."

"I do not want you to go."

"Believe me, I don't want to go," Jane said, covering one of his big hands with both of hers, feeling his fingers grasp at her with urgency, "but you and I both know what's at stake. I have to."

He nodded, slowly, his acknowledgement dragged out of him against his will.

Jane checked her watch. It was already after eleven o'clock. That left her only…nine hours of freedom. If this was the last night she would spend as a free woman…she knew what she wanted to do.

She tightened her grip on Thor's hand and stood, keeping contact with him as she walked around the table. He slid his chair back as she drew closer and she settled herself on one of his knees. His blue eyes grew a little darker—the scientist in her noted the dilation of his pupils as he took her in.

"Do we have to talk any more?" she murmured, leaning closer, "I'm tired of words."

"And I," he said, so close that his lips brushed hers when he spoke, "have never been blessed with the gift of speech. My talents," he kissed her softly between words, "have always lain in action."

There were no more words.

Four hours later, Jane eased open the door to Thor's room and stepped out into the hallway, tightening the belt of the SHIELD-issued cotton bathrobe over her pajamas. Thor had been asleep for the last half-hour, but Jane's mind was too restless to shut down. And even though it had been a half-hour since Thor had pressed his last kiss to the pulse point at the base of her throat, her heart was still hammering.

Three hours of making out with a thunder god, apparently, was not all that conducive to sleep.

A walk would probably help settle her restless nerves. And if she could get a drink of water along the way, even better. Her throat was parched and her lips were dry and swollen. Even so, she was smiling.

The helicarrier was silent at this hour, and Jane only heard the voices of two or three crewmembers staffing the bridge. The Avengers were all asleep; she wondered how many of them were planning on being present for the exchange in a few hours.

She heard the distinctive sounds of booted feet pacing, back and forth, restlessly. Her own socked feet made no noise in the hallway, and she doubted that any active duty crew would be pacing. She followed the noise to the carrier's central kitchen.

The last person Jane expected to see awake and tormented by his decisions was Nick Fury, but
there he was—wearing only a black tee-shirt, jeans, and his boots, pacing the long length of stainless-steel cabinets set into the wall. It was a strangely stripped-down look for the man; she couldn’t remember ever seeing him without his long leather coat.

Though she approached nearly silently, he spoke without turning around:

"Can't sleep either, Miss Foster?"

"I needed a drink," she went to the cabinet and took out a plastic cup, stamped with the ubiquitous SHIELD seal. She filled it from the tap. "You know, for a super-secret organization, you guys are really fond of your logo."

Fury smiled. "I've talked to the marketing department about that, but they don't really understand the message."

She chuckled. A super-secret…marketing team. "Why can't you sleep? After a day like today, you must be exhausted. And..." did she dare? "you must have done a prisoner exchange before. That can't be what's keeping you up."

He didn't reply, but he stopped moving. Slowly, he turned to face her. Jane could not read the expression on his face—she didn't think she would ever be able to—but it was not the blank canvas she had expected to see.

"I do something very ugly and very necessary, Miss Foster," he said at last, "so that other people are free to do things that are beautiful and useless. Sometimes, I have to do things that even I regret. This exchange tomorrow will be one of them."

"I did want to thank you," Jane said, setting the tumbler down on the table, "for before. You let me make up my own mind...even though there was only one decision to make. But I still appreciate it."

"You're welcome," he said, "and you're wrong. You could have made a different call."

"Could I have?" she hoped he would forgive her skepticism, but she found it hard to believe he would put the entire world's freedom at risk just for her.

"Well, we won't ever know, will we?"

She shrugged. He was right—it really didn't matter now. The choice had been made.

"But I want you to know...there's no safety net here. If he threatens you, if he hurts you...we will not break the truce. We can't afford to. But you were right. If we see a chance to break it to our advantage, we will."

Jane took another sip of water to moisten her dry throat. If Loki decided to revisit his former plans—or make some new ones—she would have to deal with it. For six months. Alone. Suddenly, the self-sacrificing resolution she had made seemed like the adolescent fantasy it was. What was she thinking?

No. No panic. It was the only thing to do. She had to do it.

"I understand."

He was looking at her again, and this time Jane could detect a shadow of admiration. "Yeah, I guess you do." He sighed and ran his hands over his head, cupping the back of his neck. "We could both use some sleep. Go back to your man, Miss Foster," Jane flinched as she realized that
everyone must have made some embarrassing assumptions about her and Thor's sudden disappearance, "He'll need encouragement too…for the months ahead."

Months, she thought, heart sinking…*Jane, don't panic.*

"Yeah," she put her empty tumbler into the sink, wondering whose job it was to wash the dishes. Were there SHIELD janitors? With SHIELD-brand cleaning supplies?

Oh my. She was tired…she only made terrible jokes when she was exhausted. The clock on the wall read 0347.

Less than five hours to go.
Chapter Thirteen

The morning was bright and clear, the offshore breezes brisk and chilly; it would have been a nice
day to curl up in a sun-warmed window seat with a cup of hot chocolate and a new book, while
watching the wind play games with the bright green buds on the trees. Her childhood home had
had just such a window seat, and outside there had been birch trees. She could remember them—
bright white bark with lime green buds—dancing with the wind on an early spring day just like
this one.

Such peaceful, lazy days were far behind. Such days might never come again.

It was just that she was tired….that was why she was so depressed. After going back to Thor’s
room, she had brewed another pot of coffee (double strength) and sat at the table, writing a long,
detailed note to Tony and Dr. Banner about all the research she had done into the detection of
magical fields and the barometer she had crafted. Not knowing where the R&D department was
on the ship, pen and paper was the best she could do.

At breakfast that morning—a silent affair with only Tony, Thor, Clint, and Director Fury in
attendance—she had pressed the notepad into his hand, trying her best to ignore Tony's suggestion
that she give a big middle finger to Loki's demands.

After giving her third gentle but firm negative—and after a brief spat with Fury about not being
allowed to accompany them to the exchange—Tony had taken her research and retreated to the
lab to crunch the numbers with Bruce. The two of them would need to be able to reproduce her
work while she was gone, after all.

Over the breakfast table, Director Fury had given her a duffel bag with a supply of clothes and
other useful items, as well as walked her through the use of the sleek Blackberry that would be her
only link back to the Avengers. It seemed overkill to have such an elaborate phone—4G, internet
capable and so on—since wherever she was going was likely underneath the same magical
communications blackout as all other alien controlled territories, but Fury told her she was better
off having it and not needing it than the other way around.

Taking the long set of stairs up to the flight deck reminded Jane eerily of walking up to the
gallows. All morning, she had tried to keep herself from noticing the funereal atmosphere in the
air, but now it was unavoidable.

Hawkeye dropped back from the rest of them—after reminding the Director that he always saw
best from a distance—and took up position near one of the F-22 fighter jets. Across the deck, Jane
could see a flash of red, and noticed that Natasha was already in a similar position, holding a very
impressive automatic rifle. She was flanked by two Marine corps marksmen, stretched out on their
stomachs with sniper rifles.

A detachment of ten more soldiers stood in the center of the flight deck waiting for them.

Jane swallowed. She would much rather have made the exchange in private; the looks that some
of the soldiers were giving her were embarrassing. Clearly, some rumors had gone around about
just why she was the chosen hostage. From their expressions, she decided that she never wanted
to know what those rumors were.

One soldier saluted, "Corporal Wolf of Charlie Company, sir, reporting as ordered."

Fury returned the salute. "Welcome to the party. The exchange will happen in," he checked his
"Watch, "ten minutes. Keep your eyes and ears open, but fingers off the trigger—we want this to go smooth."

"Yes, sir," the soldier replied, motioning to the members of his squad, who distributed themselves in a rough semi-circle behind Fury, Jane, and Thor, hands resting lightly on their weapons.

Ten minutes. Jane shivered and stuck her hands in the pockets of her black windbreaker. The breezes swept unobstructed across the deck and chilled her to the bone, and though the idea of cuddling up under Thor's arm seemed wonderfully warming, she had already decided that she would stand away from him. She was certain that Loki was going to make some nasty remarks about the two of them, but she didn't want to give him any encouragement.

Fury's walkie-talkie chirped, and he answered, "Yes, Hill?"

"Sir," the voice replied, "our scout ships have reported three alien craft approaching. ETA is five minutes. Pilots say they're primed; should I order phase two weapons deployed?"

"Not yet," Fury responded, "let's save those for a rainy day. He's got no reason to attack; he's just blowing smoke."

Even through the radio, Agent Hill's voice sounded sceptical. "Are you sure about that, sir?"

"We'll deal with that if and when we need to," Fury shook his head, "Anything else?"

"No sir. We'll continue monitoring for any developments. Hill out."

The radio went silent. Jane folded her arms so that she wouldn't shiver—either from fear or from the cold—and tried to stop the countdown that had started in her head. Five minutes. It seemed an unimaginably long stretch of time to wait for the end of her life…at this point, she just wanted it over and done with.

After a few minutes, the scout quinjets shrieked overhead, hovering to either side of the carrier, poised for any action from Loki's ships. Those vessels were coming into view now—rough, jointed exoskeletons reminding Jane of nothing so much as deep sea isopods—and the distinctive hum from their engines filled the air. Since Loki had not needed (apparently) to mine fuels during his invasion, she wondered if the ships ran on some sort of bioelectric energy.

It would certainly explain why each ship was dripping with Skrull; they leaned out the open sides and lined the upper deck, brandishing their rifles and yelling. Their high, keening cries made the fine hairs on Jane's arms stand on end, and thankfully she wasn't the only one unnerved; even the marines behind them shifted and muttered uneasily before their CO shut them up.

The Skrull pounded on the deck with the butts of their rifles in a slow, steady rhythm. Between the few thousands on the three carriers, the pounding of metal and the screaming reached such a pitch that Jane felt each blow in her heart—the sound almost strong enough to beat it for her. She pressed her hands over her ears, but it didn't help; nothing could dim that terrible noise.

Thor reached out to her and pulled her against him, hammer loose and ready in his hand as he regarded the skies with distrust. Fury met the god's eyes and shook his head—he also gestured a "calm down" sign to the marines, who were all getting twitchy—and he turned, right hand unclipping his holster but making no move to draw his gun.

He was so calm. If he could stand at ease in that maelstrom of sound—of squealing metal and guttural cries—then so could Jane. She put one hand on Thor's arm and moved two steps away from him again.
The noise stopped abruptly. The silence echoed painfully around them, replaced only slowly by the sound of the wind and the ocean surging underneath them.

Then the mouth of the lead ship opened, teeth parting in a gruesome smile to reveal a tall, narrow figure in shimmering gold and green armor, a long spear with a glowing stone strapped to its back. Loki stepped forward into empty air, cape flying up behind him, one leg stretched towards the ground.

Was it wrong that she felt a surge of panic as she watched him fall? Shouldn't she want him to splatter his brains all over the cold metal of the deck?

Of course, he did not. He landed lightly, gracefully—almost as if bowing at the start of a dance—and straightened, walking towards them. His strides were long and loose, hands swinging at his sides. Was it fair that he looked as though he hadn't a care in the world? He took in their preparations for defense—the marine snipers, the hovering quinjets—with a parent's smile at a child's game of make-believe.

That condescending smile turned hard at the edges when he caught sight of Thor. His eyes darted between his brother and Jane—and suddenly he was grinning.

"I hope you had a pleasant evening, Miss Foster," he drawled, looking her up and down, "Was it everything you hoped it would be? I do hope he didn't disappoint you…it has been known to happen."

Jane managed to beat Thor to the reply, as he was almost too angry to speak. "My evening was very pleasant, thank you," let him think what he would think from that, "In fact, the only disappointment was knowing that this morning would follow."

Thor laughed. "I would not recommend trying to match wits with Jane, brother," he said, "I do not think even your talented tongue could challenge hers."

"That is a matter of opinion," the confidence that Jane had managed to wound came rushing back, "She might not have told you, but the truth is I am well acquainted with the talents of Jane's tongue."

She had been expecting it, but the blood rushed to her face anyway and she looked down at her feet. She was naked, exposed like a worm on a hook; trapped between two men who had kissed her and unable to get away. How could women possibly enjoy being fought over? It was humiliating; what must the soldiers listening behind them think of her?

"You listen well, brother, for I will say this only once," Thor stepped forward, going toe-to-toe with the smaller man. In armor and cape, Thor was a smothering physical presence, but Loki merely looked at him with his sarcastic smile as his older brother wrapped one hand around his neck. "If any harm comes to her…" he paused, and lowered his voice, "If you hurt her…I do not know if I will be able to forgive you."

Jane's heart ached. She and Loki were the only people on this ship who understood the full meaning of that threat. Thor had been the one person who still wanted Loki alive, who still desired his safe return to Asgard…he was possibly the only person who still thought of Loki as family.

She blinked away tears; Loki gritted his teeth and shoved Thor's hand away.

"Is that meant to be a threat?" Loki hissed, blinking quickly and stepping back, "That you will not forgive me? How…misguided are you," he laughed, the sound more a gasp than a chuckle, "to think that I need or desire your forgiveness? Your sentiment, brother," he sneered the word, "will
Loki looked at Director Fury, "I said that Miss Foster should meet me here. I thank you for delivering her and proving yourself a man of your word. But if you do not send him away," he jerked his head towards Thor, "this entire exercise will have been for nothing."

Fury had no time to reply.

"I will not go!" Thor declared, "If you want me to leave, you will have to send me away yourself. And I do not believe," he stepped wider, squaring his shoulders and lowering his head, preparing for attack, "that you have the strength."

"What you never understood, Thor," Loki replied, sliding his spear in one fluid movement from the holster at his back, "is that it has never been about strength."

He moved.

Fury threw himself across the deck towards Jane, knocking her flat on her back on the hard metal of the deck. She saw stars as the back of her skull connected and tried to wiggle into a more comfortable position, but Fury hissed in her ear, "Stay down!" and she obeyed.

Gunfire burst out above as the marines opened fire, their bullets glancing harmlessly off the flesh and armor of the two gods. Jane wanted to yell at them to be careful, that they were hitting Thor; but it didn't matter. Bullets hurt them no worse than mosquito bites.

Thor grappled with his brother and stumbled forward—the Loki figure melted away like fog at dawn. He turned; there was another figure behind him, standing and smirking. It brandished the spear and a bolt of blue energy knocked Thor twenty feet across the deck.

"Strength is one-dimensional," there were two more figures now. The trio of Lokis flanked the blond god, each one identical to the other, "Strength," they whispered, together, "can be fooled."

Thor swung Mjolnir in a wide arc—passing straight through one figure before the other two jumped back out of range—roaring his frustration.

"Strength," there were six of them now, and Jane was dizzy, keeping track of them all, "can be redirected."

"Enough of this!" Thor cried, "Everyone, stand clear!"

"Scatter!" Fury yelled, pulling Jane to her feet and hustling them both towards where Hawkeye stood, his bow trained first on one Loki, then another. The marines broke formation and ran as well. Not a moment too soon.

"Sir, if he releases lightning here he'll fry us all!" Clint cried as static electricity built in the air, "Should I take him down?"

"Take down an ally, Barton?" Fury replied, "He'll control it; keep your bow where it belongs."

Thunder crashed a millisecond after the lightning hit the deck, tendrils of blinding light shooting away from Mjolnir and cutting through each of Loki's simulacra. Instead of going further, though, the lightning consolidated into a ring of solid white, crackling with power and connecting all six images of the trickster god.

"See?" Fury said, his voice nearly drowned out by the deafening storm, "He's got it under control."
"No, look!" Jane yelled, pointing. Thor now stood at the center of the ring, hammer no longer channeling energy. From the look on his face, it was clear that he was not the one putting on the show.

Soft as the hiss was that issued from the trickster god, it still carried across the entire ship.

"I told you, fool," the crackling lightning and the sibilant sound of his voice made Jane feel as there were needles prickling her spine, "strength can be redirected."

The ring of light contracted with a blinding flash; Jane cleared her eyes from the afterimage and gasped in relief when she saw that Thor had leapt clear just in time. The ragged edges of his cape smoldered, blackened and charred from the heat.

"Stop it!"

Jane hadn't realized she had shouted until she caught the echo of her own voice. Everyone turned and looked at her, Thor coming to land with a solid thunk on the deck.

She flinched under the collective stare, but once she had started, there was nothing to do but continue.

"Look," she walked forward from under the shelter of the F-22's wings, "you came for a prisoner exchange. Let's just…do that and get it over with. Thor," she turned and met Thor's furious eyes, holding her hands up, "it's okay. Just calm down."

He ground his teeth and shifted, clearly considering ignoring her. But in the end, his good sense won out, and he nodded, lowering Mjolnir to his side.

The duplicate images of Loki faded away until only one remained.

"Well, well, well," he said, folding his arms and smirking at Thor, "I never thought I would see the day when a mere woman would conquer the God of Thunder. She must have been good…I'll have to watch myself."

"Damn," Jane muttered as Thor's hammer connected solidly with Loki's jaw. The smaller man reeled and dropped to one knee, laughing all the while as blood dripped from a gash on his cheekbone. There was something that turned Jane's stomach in the way he accepted pain as long as it was the result of another's agony. She felt sick.

"Thor!" she cried again, "Please…this isn't making it any easier."

Thor stopped himself, but just barely. He crouched down next to Loki, who was still giggling, and said, "Mark me, brother, for I do not jest. Hurt her, and I will chain you under the serpent and let its venom sear your flesh to the bones."

There was a beat of silence as each regarded the other. Loki took a breath. "Now that," he said, all laughter gone from his voice, "is the first decent threat I have ever heard from you. Very well," he stood, passing one hand over his face to seal the wound with a quick pulse of magic, "I will heed your warnings."

They both stood, warily regarding each other like two prize fighters. Loki was the first to look away.

"Miss Foster," he raised one hand and summoned her with a quirk of two fingers. She bristled but obeyed the call, Fury walking close to her side. As they drew nearer, Loki spoke again, "I believe we have a few final details to work out before this exchange is complete?"
"There's the matter of the frequency of Miss Foster's communication back to SHIELD," Fury nodded.

"As well as the identity of the person who will receive her calls," Loki finished. "Your terms?"

"Standard SHIELD procedure is for operatives to check in every 48 hours," Fury began, his words sending a warm thrill through Jane's heart; she had not expected him to go to bat for her, "and she will need to be able to talk with more than one person."

"Both terms are inacceptable," Loki replied quickly, "We had already agreed that she would have one contact—of your choice—but every two days is far too often. Do you think I would do anything untoward that would require you to keep such a close eye on her?"

He spoke these words with a smile that conveyed his understanding perfectly, but Jane still rose to his bait:

"None of us trust you any farther than we can throw you," she said, "would you really respect us if we did?"

"It would be very hard for me to respect you to begin with," he said, which made Jane roll her eyes and want to kick both herself and him, "but I suppose you are correct. Would it make you feel more comfortable if you checked in so frequently?"

She had to be honest. "Yes, it would."

"Then every two days it shall be," he decided. Jane let out a quick breath—she couldn't believe he had acquiesced so readily—and from the expression on Fury's face, he was sharing her sense of relief and astonishment.

"However," her shoulders tightened again at what was clearly the catch, "if I am to be so generous, you must give me one concession. I will name your contact, and you will speak with no other."

"My contact is non-negotiable," she said. She and Thor had spoken of this—in between more pleasant subjects—the previous evening. They had decided that with a unified front, no one could prevent them from speaking during her captivity. "I will speak with Thor, and only with Thor. The one original condition in this bargain, you remember," she continued, trying to get a read on Loki's suddenly expressionless face, "is that I would be the one to make this decision."

"So it was," he admitted, green eyes flashing from her to Thor and back again, as he cupped his chin in his long fingers. "Very well. But I will monitor your conversations."

"Why on earth would you want to do that?" Fury interrupted, "You can probably guess what they're gonna be talking about. Shouldn't you give them some privacy?"

Jane blushed and looked down—she needed to get that reaction under control—so she only heard Loki's voice as he replied:

"I think you have misunderstood the concept of hostage, Director Fury. A hostage is merely one step removed from a prisoner; I will not mistreat Miss Foster, but nor will I make it possible for her to share tactical secrets with my enemies."

She felt a hand grasp hers, and despite her resolutions to stand alone, she gripped Thor's fingers with a desperate gratitude. So she would not be able to speak to him in private…right now, it seemed like a small sacrifice to make, as long as she got to speak to him at all.
"So, are we agreed?" she lifted her head—as high and proud as she could manage—as Loki ended the conversation. "Miss Foster will communicate with Thor," he couldn't conceal his distaste as he spoke the name, "every two days while I—or a designated underling—monitor the conversation. Director Fury, Miss Foster," he smiled as he asked the question directly to her, "is this acceptable to you?"

It was so far from "acceptable" that Jane couldn't even imagine the concept from where she stood. But it was as good as she was going to get, and honestly, she had expected much worse.

So she sighed, and said, "Yes."

Director Fury nodded and said the same.

"Then I think," he held one hand out to Jane, "we should be on our way."

There was a distance of no more than ten feet between them. Her knees felt unsteady; she knew she would have to cross that space unaided—and take his hand at the end of it—but she had no idea how she was supposed to do it. Her feet refused to take orders from her brain...perhaps her brain wasn't even sending the orders to begin with.

She turned towards Thor.

"I..." she swallowed, "I guess I'll talk to you in a few days."

"I will be waiting," he said, hand still firmly holding hers.

There was a beat of silence. Then Jane launched herself forward, arms latching onto his shoulders and lips meeting his in an almost painful clash; it was as hasty and desperate as the time before their first long separation. Her heart whispered—traitorous coward that it was—that this would be the last time she'd see him, why hadn't she taken what she could when she could?

Her head was much more positive. It told her that she and Thor had already defied the odds—in meeting, in loving, in parting, and in meeting again—and reminded her that she shouldn't doubt the very good reasons that had held her back last night. Her head was also what made her relax her hold on him, and back away...smiling.

"Talk soon, yeah?"

Thor looked a little dazed—the woman in her gave a quick preen at being able to have such an effect on him—but he nodded and smiled back; a bright, unclouded smile that promised Jane the world.

"Yes."

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Loki's hold on Jane's wrist was gentle...for as long as Director Fury and Thor could see. As soon as they were out of eyeshot, his hand tightened just past the point of pain, grinding the bones in her wrist together. She winced, but did not cry out. The pain intensified and she gasped. Loki did not look down.

"I will make you pay for that little performance," he hissed from the corner of his mouth, "If you think such an infantile tactic can make me jealous—"

"What makes you think," she interrupted, suppressing her panic reaction, "that it was for your benefit? This is the last time I'm going to see him for six months. And you're the only one talking
about jealousy."

She squealed when he dug his nails into her flesh and swung her around. "Do try not to be smart, Miss Foster," he snarled, "You'll live longer. Now," he said, jerking his head back towards the waiting Avengers, "smile for your worried friends."

She had no time to look or to think. The moment she looked back, they were already twenty feet off the ground.

It was nothing like flying with Thor had been. Thor had moved quickly, yes, but he had also held her against his side, one of her feet resting on his boot. This time, her only point of contact with the means of her flight was Loki's hand, which still held her none-too-gently by the wrist. Below her feet was nothing but cold metal and an increasing amount of empty air.

Jane did not scream—mostly because panic prevented her from taking a deep breath—and after a moment she was no longer tempted; they had landed safely inside the carrier and Loki had dropped her hand.

He walked away from her without a second glance, and at the risk of being left near the gaping entrance of the vessel, she followed him.

The interior of the ship was as frightening as the outside; viscous fluid dripped from the ceiling and from the joints in the walls, connecting the panels of the ship and holding everything together. The lighting was a strange shade between neon blue and deep purple and made all the Skrull inside look like animated corpses—all sharp angles and exposed bone.

Shuddering, she looked at the floor, following as closely as possible could the hem of Loki's cape. They saw her fear and started to laugh. Loki stopped. So did she.

She didn't realize he had turned to look at her until his hand lifted her face to look at him.

"I trust you will understand, Miss Foster," he said, voice low to be heard underneath the sound of the laughter, "that if you try to escape, I will simply watch while they," his eyes flicked up to the assembled soldiers, "take you apart, piece by piece. It will not be the most pleasant way to die," he finished, looking at her and running his thumb lightly over her chin, "but I will let it happen. Do you understand?"

Jane did not need to look around. More importantly, she did not want to look around.

She nodded.

"Good," he said, and turned again. She followed.

It took them only a few minutes to reach her cell—she was surprised that he was keeping her so close to the bridge—but "cell" wasn't really the word to describe it. It was actually fairly comfortable for a military vessel. For one thing, the bed was bigger than the one in the room SHIELD had given her.

And it had one other advantage.

"Erik!" Jane cried, roused from her stupor at the sight of her teacher. She darted forward, catching the other man by the shoulders and trying to look in his eyes. Her joy faded like a candle-flame. Erik didn't respond to her voice or her touch—he was the same stupefied puppet he had been in Stockholm.

He was also much the worse for wear. There were wrinkles and shadows around his eyes that
Jane did not remember. His clothes were rumpled, even torn in places, and he smelled strongly of sweat, oil, and dirt. To see her neat, professional teacher and friend degraded in this way made Jane see red.

She turned to Loki, who waited near the doorway.

"Won't you let him go?" she asked, "You don't need him anymore…he's no good to anyone like this."

"He has his uses," he replied, "and you surely do not think I would relinquish such a valuable bargaining chip?"

"But you haven't ever used him to make a bargain," she said, feeling her fear recede as her anger rose, "You've got me now; I'm more important to SHIELD and the Avengers…besides which, I know more than Erik does on the subject of interstellar portals. You don't need him; let him go."

"You say I have no need for him," he moved forward, all serpentine grace, "but I wonder…"

He paused.

"Kiss me."

"What?" Jane stumbled back a few steps and her voice squeaked. "Wha…why?"

"You should know by now," he sounded bored but his eyes were alight and focused, "that asking me "why" has very little purpose. Let us say…I am conducting an experiment. Kiss me."

She swallowed; her mouth and throat were bone-dry. "I don't want to," she murmured.

He looked at her, and smiled. One hand flashed; suddenly, he was holding a knife. She flinched, but he didn't make any move towards her. He stared at the blade and turned it in his hand—the light caught on the curved metal and it flashed like the Cheshire cat's smile—then, he flipped it easily and held it out to Erik.

"Dr. Selvig," he said, as the man's head came up and a pathetically eager smile spread over his face, "I wonder if you would be so kind as to take this?"

Jane reached out towards him, to stop him, but Erik was faster—surprisingly so, given his condition.

"Kiss me," he lingered on the first word, eyes dropping to Jane's lips.

Her breath was coming short. She glanced at Erik, whose attention was focused on the knife; he held it in his clenched fist, like a butcher knife. She swallowed again.

"What if I say no?"

"Erik," was the only response, "cut yourself."

The command was barely out of his mouth before there was a spray of blood on the floor. Jane screamed; Erik didn't make a sound as he sliced the skin of his forearm again and again. She lunged forward, but Loki stopped her. Fear gave her strength—she flailed and wiggled and almost got free—but still not enough to combat a demigod.

"Stop it!"

"You stop it," his voice was in her ear, "Kiss me."
"God damn it!" she swore, almost sobbing. "Erik, stop!"

He didn't hear her voice. He was oblivious to everything but what Loki put into his mind. He felt no pain, no fear, no uncertainty. And he was getting dangerously close to the vein in the crook of his elbow.

Jane turned. "Stop him," she said, her eyes unable to meet his. She focused instead on the white column of his throat. "I'll do it; stop him."

"Erik, enough."

The knife clanged to the floor. Now the only sound in the room was the trickling drip of his blood on the floor. That, and Jane's pounding heart.

She had to stand on her toes to reach his mouth. For balance, she put her hands on his shoulders. Her eyes now landed on the bridge of his nose; she still did not really look at him.

She stood like that for one second. Then two. Her eyes fell closed; but once deprived of one sense, she could suddenly smell Erik's blood, warm and pooling on the floor. She leaned forward.

The scent of it overwhelmed the rest of her senses as well. When she pressed her lips to Loki's mouth there was nothing but the salty iron of blood. When his tongue met with hers, the taste was so strong she nearly gagged.

She breathed deeply through her mouth—it helped settle her stomach—and pressed against him once more, her teeth clicking hard against his.

Jane dropped down to her heels and stepped back. She turned and took the pillowcase off the pillow from her bed, putting the seam between her teeth and tearing the cloth. Doing the same on the other side, she folded the case into a long strip of cloth and went up to Erik, who still stood without moving, his blood trickling between his fingers down to the floor. The only things that showed he felt the injuries at all were his shaking shoulders and his pale face.

She gently lifted Erik's sleeve, folding it back towards the elbow. He stood like a statue—not even looking at her—while she wound her pillowcase firmly around his arm and tied it neatly.

"I hope you have some antiseptic on board?" she asked, still not looking back.

There was a long pause before he replied. "We do."

"Then would you please tell Erik to put some on when he changes his bandages tonight?"

"I will."

"Good," she looked him straight in the eyes. "Now," she said, not blinking as she stared him down, "will you get the hell out of here?"

He looked at her—eyes drifting from her eyes to her mouth to her shaking, bloodstained hands—and jerked his thumb towards the door. Erik left the room. Then he flicked his fingers towards the floor. The bloodstains vanished. He stepped forward. Jane stepped back.

"Stop that," she hissed, "I know this game. You're trying to change it, but I know this game. And I don't want to play. So if you want to hurt me," she said, taking a step towards him this time, "you do it yourself. Don't bring Erik into it. Ever again."
"What did I tell you about threatening me?"

"As far as I'm concerned," Jane said, hoping her tough words could distract from her pale voice, "I was dead the minute I got on this ship. So do your worst."

"I believe I just did," he reached out and cupped her cheek. She jerked away—this time he made no move to stop her. He just looked at her. "You continue to surprise me. You are quite unique, Jane."

Thor had said nearly the same thing last night. Jane closed her eyes and felt her stomach heave. "Great. Now will you get out?"

"Very well," she heard his footsteps head to the door. They paused, "We are thirty thousand feet in the air, so I trust you will stay where you are."

She nodded.

"I will have someone bring a meal to you shortly," she heard boots scrape metal as he shuffled his feet, "and a fresh pillowcase."

This time, she did not thank him. She was done with all that. What had her good manners, her acquiescence, her sacrifice done for her so far? A big fat nothing, that's what. People had always told her she was a pushover…they were right, and this was the result.

"Miss Foster, look at me."

After a steadying breath, she opened her eyes and looked at him.

"I promise you," he said, lips thin and paler than usual, "that I will not use Dr. Selvig to threaten you again."

Tears rose in her eyes and her lips trembled. She looked away and nodded, swallowing hard.

Please go. Please go please go please go please go please go…

He turned and left. The door shut and locked behind him.
Chapter Fourteen

Once, during the relatively halcyon days of her sophomore year, Jane had gone out with friends and gotten stupid, staggering drunk. The next morning, she had thought she was going to die. Her head was splitting open from the inside, her mouth was chalky and dry, and every time she opened her eyes the light was like an arrow to the back of her skull. For hours, she had been motionless; lying on her side with her knees in a half-fetal position, her toes curled tight, eyes firmly closed, and arms around her shoulders, nails digging into the skin.

That strict control of her body had been what stopped her hangover from getting any worse. At the time, though, she was convinced that her control had kept her from dying.

Now, lying on the bed in her room onboard the alien ship, Jane lay still, her muscles clenched and controlled. Her arms encircled the (now clean) pillow, one end of which was between her knees and the other end clamped tightly between her teeth.

If she bit down as hard as she could, she would not be tempted to scream. If she kept her knees pressed tightly together, she would not be tempted to run. And if she kept her eyes closed, she could imagine she was somewhere—anywhere—else.

She still smelled blood. The room had been magically cleaned and her pillow had been replaced, but it didn’t matter. She still smelled it, like a greasy penny warmed in the sun. It made her feel unclean; it made her want to vomit. Erik's blood had been spilled in this room, and it was all her fault.

Jane bit down harder. It was not her fault; she needed to keep reminding herself of that. She was not to blame for the fact that her mentor had been used as a pawn to ensure her obedience. After all, Erik was under Loki’s control…and had been for months. Loki would have used Erik against her eventually. There would have been a breaking point, even if she hadn't kissed Thor right in front of Loki's nose.

At the time, it hadn't occurred to Jane that such a thing—such a little thing—could push him to such depths of depravity. But she should have remembered. She should have remembered a day spent in silence, should have remembered being a rat in a maze, should have remembered the slaps and the fingers digging into her shoulders and scalp, should have remembered his cold, cold lips on hers…

Her jaw ached from clenching so hard. Even behind her closed eyes, Jane could feel the tears that wanted to spill forth.

She didn't cry. She just groaned quietly, whimpering to herself like a wounded animal. Didn't autistic children do this, when the world got to be too much for them? Didn't they press their hands to their ears and rock back and forth and moan and wait for things to slow down and make sense again?

Make sense. She had to make sense of things. She had to think about how she would behave from now on. She couldn't afford to make another mistake like the one she'd just made. There was no way that he would really adhere to his promise to keep Erik out of the endless struggle between them; Erik was the ultimate chess piece, and Jane would do anything—she admitted it freely—to keep him away from harm.

Okay. She had to think. And if she was going to think, she was going to have to relax.
The idea of moving sent shudders of dread up her spine. Lying motionless and sightless felt safe; as when she was a child, staring at a shadow on the wall and imagining it to be a monster. If she didn't move, the monster would not see her and it would leave her alone.

But Loki was not a shadow on the wall. And she was not a child…she knew that this monster would never go away.

Why? She was a scientist, and she believed in the laws of nature. Even if she could not see a force that caused an action, she had to believe that the force existed. Neptune did not stray from its orbit because it felt like it; it was dragged out by something that exerted a tremendous gravitational pull.

Loki was not a planet. But she could not—just could not—believe that he was acting out of impulse in regards to her. Jane just had to think; somewhere, there was a strategy. Somewhere, she had missed something.

She started with her toes. They cracked a little as she unbent them, and she slowly flexed her feet, feeling the muscles give as she rocked them back and forth. Then she stretched her legs out until they were straight from the hip, until her toes touched the cold metal of the bed frame.

Nothing came to eat her. Nothing reached up from under the bed—no slimy tentacle or furry claw—to grab her by the ankles and drag her under. There are no monsters here, Jane. You're all right.

She opened her eyes, slowly. The cloudy gray light of thirty thousand feet washed in through the windows and stung; she blinked until her vision was strong enough to handle it. She looked around.

The moment she could see the room, she felt safer. The door was still shut and locked; the sound of the bolt sliding open would give her the few seconds necessary to steel herself in the event of Loki's return. Jane felt disgusted for acting like such a child; the sense of shame was heavy and sour in her gut. She tossed the pillow aside and sat up, resting her head in her hands as the sudden motion gave her vertigo.

Deep breaths. In…and out. In…and again. Her heartbeat slowed as the extra oxygen flushed her system of excess adrenaline.

What she wouldn't give for a cup of coffee! Or something warm and solid to hold between her hands to steady her as she sorted through her disorganized thoughts. It had always been nice, especially at night on the rooftop of the New Mexican lab, to hold a white ceramic coffee mug as insulation against the cold and try to puzzle out the mixed results her storm analyses had presented—

You're getting distracted. You'll never figure this out if you don't put in the work. Focus. Think. What are you missing?

"Bossy pants," Jane muttered at herself, rising slowly to her feet and feeling her muscles burn with the strain.

All right, what did she know? She knew that Loki had taken her, even when it didn't necessarily make tactical sense. Why didn't it make sense?

"Scientifically, he knows everything I know," she murmured, starting to pace. "He could have thought that I'd been told where the tesseract is…no. He said he knew where it was. That can't be it."

Why else didn't it make sense? There was something—something that had struck her at the time as
stupid—something just after Loki had demanded she be his hostage…

The Captain. Noble, self-sacrificing, and a little too gallant to be a real tactician. What had he said? She pressed her hands over her ears, and focused.

*She's a civilian; if you need a hostage, take one of us!*

There: "take one of us". When offered the chance to take one of the Avengers, he had declined. Why? Loki had had a chance to cripple the team…with Tony, or Dr. Banner, or the Captain in his custody, it would have been a major blow to the rest of the Avengers. After all, with Natasha, Clint, and Tony under his control, he had managed to overthrow quite a bit of the United States. And when the team was united, they'd driven him back.

Why not take an Avenger?

Then again: she was much easier to hold on to. And Thor had said it himself; he would not let harm come to her. *Her*. If the opportunity presented itself, would he have been all right with attacking Loki if the Captain were his hostage? The Captain, after all, had accepted all the risks that came with being a soldier. So had all the others. Thor would understand that.

So, tactically, she might be a better choice of hostage than an Avenger. Okay. Logic won out.

But then, *why* would Loki—practically the minute he had her under his power—decide to force her into kissing him? Injuring Erik in the process, a man that Thor had also fought to protect from the Destroyer in New Mexico? *Especially* after allowing Thor to speak to her every two days?

And also—her brain was working well now, presenting her with fact after fact with a childlike eagerness—immediately after promising Nick Fury that he would not mistreat her?

Loki's decisions in that regard had made logical, tactical sense. Keeping her in good health and letting Thor be the one to see her—and see her often—was a clever move. Thor, after all, was going to be the force behind stopping the Avengers from risking Jane's life in any risky maneuver to break the truce.

Nick Fury would not be so scrupulous. The man had told her himself that he would break the truce if the opportunity arose, whether she was being treated well or ill. But Thor…Thor would not. As long as he could see that Loki wasn't hurting her, he would not let anyone attempt an attack that would lead to her death.

So then…*why* had Loki hurt her? She would be speaking to Thor in less than—she checked her watch—thirty-eight hours. She could show him the bruises on her wrist, could tell him that Erik had stripped the skin from his arm, could tell him that Loki had made her kiss him…and Thor would be shooting across the Atlantic with enough lightning to destroy a fleet of Skrull.

It made no sense.

Jane stopped pacing, her thoughts stuttering to a halt along with her feet. No sense. Except that she didn't believe that. Something had made him do it. She just wasn't seeing it.

She turned to the window, but the gray clouds through which they soared gave her no inspiration. Her head hurt—the stress and the constant low hum of the ship wearing away at her nerves like water on a stone—and she wanted nothing more than to curl up and go to sleep. But she couldn't. There was a solution to be found; the data was there, right in front of her…Jane was *sure* of it.

She just had to put it together.
Loki had made a good tactical decision by choosing her as his hostage. He had made further good decisions by allowing Thor to speak with her, so that he could see that Loki was keeping his promise to refrain from hurting her. After making those good decisions, something caused him to potentially undo all his careful scheming. He had hurt her, and Erik…two things that he must know would upset Thor.

Thor, who would be calling her in another day and a half. Thor, who would believe her if she answered the phone, sobbing, telling him that she was hurt and would he please come and save her…

It was a huge misstep for such a careful tactician. And for all Loki said that logic and "why" did not apply to him, he was clearly a brilliant tactician. One does not conquer the world without knowing exactly when and where to strike.

What had done it?

Her brain was as blank and gray as the view. Then, like a leaf landing on the surface of a still pond:

*If you think such an infantile tactic can make me jealous—*

*What makes you think it was for your benefit? You're the only one talking about jealousy.*

Oh, my God. Oh, no. She had known. She had known but hadn't realized that she'd known…

Jane's knees gave out and she plopped down on the edge of the bed. Her heart didn't know how to react; it lurched in her chest, pattering ahead for a few beats, then stalled out like a rusty car. She swallowed and tried to breathe deep to fight the incipient panic, but couldn't get a steady rhythm going. The breath kept catching in her throat; she was a beached fish taking deep panicked gasps, desperate just to stay alive.

What would make a brilliant tactician act as though he'd abandoned all his logic?

"Please, God…whoever's out there, I don't care," she whispered, "please…no."

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When was the last time she had known anything like safety? The last time she had rested in peace, untroubled as to what the next day would bring?

Hell…not since she'd been sent out of the country. Months.

The bed was hard underneath her, the rails of the cot like a ladder against her back. The bars dug into her shoulders, her ribs, lower back, and hips. Her eyes drifted open and shut; each time it was a greater effort to pry them open again.

Jane's body craved sleep. But as before—sleepless nights on the rooftop in New Mexico, or the lab in New York, or her bedroom in Uppsala—her brain whirred and clicked, sorting through data and trying to find a path to the future, and it would not let her rest until it had arrived at some sort of conclusion.

She had all the information to hand; she could lay the facts out as neatly as shells on a beach.

She felt strongly for Thor, Thor felt strongly for her. Loki felt…something for her, and was
jealous because of her feelings for Thor. She could speak to Thor, but she was under Loki's control. And any affectionate feelings she expressed for Thor might result in reprisals against herself or the people she loved.

So...how should she act? How should she behave?

Jane tossed and turned, considering many options, each one playing out in her mind as though she had already lived it:

Playing the fool—Loki would react as he already had, swinging between kindness and violence, with her never certain which would come next.

Making him confront it—a violent outburst, followed by mistreatment for having forced his hand and making him admit what he probably wasn't aware of himself.

Playing along—too horrible for words.

And over all these options hung a sword of Damocles; the shadow of rape swinging ever nearer if she spoke or acted wrongly. Jane did not doubt for a minute that he was capable of it...she just prayed that however she ended up acting—once she made up her mind about how to act—she would not end up bringing that end upon herself.

Despite her pounding head and racing thoughts, Jane fell asleep. It was the natural consequence of her panic, stress, and exhaustion. Her last rest—troubled and brief, curled up on the stairs in a filthy subway station—had been just before the assault on New York. She was so tired that she could not even count the number of hours it had been since then. Over a day, certainly. It seemed like years ago.

And it wasn't just time, either. She felt older—drawn around the eyes, pinched and withered—and jaded, as though nothing would make her happy, ever again.

So even though the last thing Jane consciously wanted to do was close her eyes under the threat of Loki's uncontrolled emotions, her body overwhelmed her mind and dragged her into the dark oblivion of sleep.

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An explosion rocked the ship, jarring Jane not just out of her fitful sleep but out of her bed entirely. She landed hard on her right arm, bruising her shoulder and banging the side of her head. The first hard impact was followed by two more, each as severe as the first. They threw her end over end across the floor, helpless as a rag doll.

The ship wailed, a long, agonized moan that made Jane's skin burst into goose bumps. It sounded like an animal with a mortal wound, curled up into itself, dying slowly in pain.

She scrambled to her feet, clutching her right shoulder and trying to get her bearings. She saw two gray flashes outside the window as fighter jets streaked past, breaking the sound barrier as they accelerated. Just as quickly, Skrull fighters on open hovercraft followed in pursuit. Both groups were gone almost as quickly as she could register them.

The ship dropped suddenly, losing at least fifty feet in less than a second, and Jane screamed as gravity disappeared for that sickening second. She managed to land on her feet—barely—but she had to hang onto the bed frame while her little breakfast settled back in her stomach.

A plane burst into flame just outside, the ruined, burning metal falling like a spent firework from the sky. The flames illuminated the room with orange shadows, dancing like imps on the walls.
This was serious. The ship gave another sickening lurch towards the sea; and Jane was decided. She needed to know what was going on. They could be going down. She ran to her duffel and yanked out her cell phone—there was no way she was going to lose her connection to Thor—and shoved it in the pocket of her cargo pants, buttoning the pocket securely.

The explosions had shaken the strong door out of its frame; it banged back and forth as the pilot fought for balance against the fighters and the turbulence. It took Jane a moment to find her sea-legs and make it across the room. But finding anything was almost impossible—there were constant dips and dives as the ship maneuvered around to avoid the constant barrage of missiles.

She made it to the corridor and promptly slammed her other shoulder into the wall, almost sliding head over heels as they banked. Her nails scrabbled uselessly for purchase on the metal walls and her fingertips bled, shredded from the rough surface. They righted, and she landed on her knees. Nausea made her gag, but thankfully there was nothing left to come up.

Jane was so dizzy that she could barely remember which way the bridge was, but she staggered to her feet and kept moving.

At the end of the corridor, she heard hissing, radio chatter (voices with British accents coordinating the attack in military code), and her heart leapt with gratitude as she also heard a familiar voice—the only familiar voice on board:

"Alien craft, you are violating sovereign European airspace. Turn back now or our attack will continue."

Loki—and everyone else—ignored them. "Get that shielding back up, now! Are you completely incompetent?"

Something big hit the side of the ship and threw Jane flat on her stomach; it wasn't a missile, she was sure. She heard crumpling metal and she gasped. A pilot—perhaps out of control or perhaps with a fatally damaged plane—had run his jet into them. She pushed herself to her feet and started to run.

They were going to go down.

The bridge was open to the air and the swirling winds whipped Jane's hair in front of her face until she couldn't see. It was breathtakingly cold as well, but she was the only one who seemed to notice. A few Skrull stood by the open hatch, firing their rifles at the passing planes while others jumped from the same hatch, catching rides on hovercraft with their fellow fighters.

Loki—and her heart leaped again because she was perversely glad to see him—was seething. He worked some controls on the main console and touched the tip of his staff to it. The entire circular panel glowed blue, veins of light radiating from the center. Even over the whipping wind, Jane still heard his voice, syllables low and sibilant. He hissed three or four phrases in a language Jane couldn't even begin to pronounce—she might not understand it, but even she could feel the power building in the air, as the atmosphere thickens in the advance of a lightning strike.

A burst of power spread from the crystal on his staff and passed through the walls of the ship—stopping the breath in Jane's lungs as it passed through her—and she turned to the closest window to see what it had done.

The Skrull hovercraft were unaffected; they continued to harass the jets, peppering them with fire. But those same jets…the ones that had been flying circles around the Skrull just a moment ago…
They were motionless in the air. Jane could see the pilots frantically working their controls, trying to get the engines started before the inevitable happened…

But it was useless. They were all falling towards the ground.

She turned back towards Loki, horror turning her blood to solid ice in her veins. The smile on his face was unrepentant; he looked towards her—not even surprised to see her on the bridge—and then stared out the window.

He saw the falling planes, and gestured at the Skrull.

"Destroy them."

"No!" Jane yelled, her voice drowned out by the pulses of the firing rifles. One after the other, the planes exploded. She was too far away to hear anything, but she could have sworn that she heard every scream of every terrified man, burning alive. She raced forward.

"Loki!" She hadn't spoken his name since the last time she'd pleaded for a man's life, but at least it got his attention. He turned towards her, the flames outside throwing his face into harsh contrast; he was all high cheekbones and shadowed eyes. Fear would have stopped the words in her throat, but she had no time to be afraid.

"Please," she said, holding her hands out, pleading, "they're no harm to you now. Let the pilots live; the planes will go down anyway. You've won."

He did not answer for a long moment, and Jane couldn't help it—she ran to the open hatch, standing shoulder to shoulder with the Skrull warriors, fighting her fear and her vertigo as she watched the planes tumble ever downward, pursued by hovercraft.

She turned back, the violent wind flinging her hair forward and lifting the hem of her tee-shirt up over her ribcage. Jane shoved the brown strands back from her face and decided that she had nothing left to lose. Her knees hit the deck, and she bowed her head. She did not look up, but she heard the shifting of the Skrull behind her as they turned to look down at her.

"Please," she begged, yelling to be heard over the wind, "Please. Let them live."

There were two more explosions, punctuated by the slow rhythm of Loki's booted feet as he crossed the bridge to stand in front of her. She felt his eyes weighing heavily on the back of her neck, but she still didn't look up. Fear and anger made her shoulders shake, and even though she didn't speak again, her thoughts were loud enough that she felt Loki could hear her all the same: *Please. Please, please, please, you goddamned bastard, please.*

She saw his boots—black, gold, and green, probably worth more than she made in a month—move past her. He crossed the bridge to stand in front of her. She felt his eyes weighing heavily on the back of her neck, but she still didn't look up. Fear and anger made her shoulders shake, and even though she didn't speak again, her thoughts were loud enough that she felt Loki could hear her all the same:

*Please. Please, please, please, you goddamned bastard, please.*

She saw his boots—black, gold, and green, probably worth more than she made in a month—move past her. He was looking past her, out the hatch. His staff dropped into view, the light in the crystal swirling lazily with dark blue menace.

Jane raised her head, and he was looking at her. She mouthed the word once more—"please"—but had no breath to give it voice. The wind stung her eyes and shivered one tear lose. It felt as though it would freeze on her cheek, blistering as it was.

He knelt down, level with her eyes, staff still angled down and out of the ship. His hand reached towards her—Jane fought all her instincts—and she did not flinch when he touched her cheek and wiped away her tear.

"My brave, sweet martyr," how could she always manage to hear him, however softly he spoke?
"how hard you try. But you must realize—"

There was a flash of blue. Jane screamed. Far below them, the last plane vanished—vaporized by the force of his magic.

He continued without a pause, without even seeming to realize what he'd done, "you cannot save everyone."

She lunged for him, throwing her hands out and wrestling with all her strength. If she could just unbalance him, if she could just throw him out the window…even if she fell with him…

But Loki didn't even need to try and repel her. He caught her left arm in his hand and jerked her away from the hatch, the bone in her forearm straining almost to the breaking point. All her screams were gone; she only gritted her teeth and scrabbled at his hand with her nails, trying to break his hold.

It was no good.

He spoke to the assembled soldiers. "This vessel is damaged beyond repair. Take the weapons and the hovercraft and move to either of the accompanying ships."

Without any further orders, Loki stepped directly out into the open air, dragging Jane along behind him. Her stomach flipped and she closed her eyes tightly—if she didn't look down, it was like being on a roller-coaster ride…safe, controlled, with laughter and smiles at the end.

It seemed like they fell together, hand in hand, for hours. But it wasn't longer than five seconds. His hand tightened on her wrist, she saw an emerald glow—even behind her lids—and their descent slowed. Jane opened her eyes.

Above them hovered the three Skrull ships; one of them, their own, lurching in the sky like a drunkard, momentum and gravity bringing it slowly downward, hemorrhaging bursts of purple sparks. Below them, the wreckage of over twenty jets littered the landscape, wings and fuselages carving flaming furrows into the lush farmland.

Thank God they weren't over a city, was her first thought. Jane wasn't certain why she was thanking God, since he seemed to be managing just about fifty-fifty right now, but she was glad that there had been no more unnecessary loss of life. That gratitude was drowned out by an immediate and overwhelming malaise:

So what if no one else had died this time? There would be other battles, bigger battles, and more people would die. So what if lives were spared here? They would most certainly be lost elsewhere.

But she would be safe. That was the most galling thought of all. She would be safe. Because she was hiding behind the murderer.

"It was a ridiculous assault," he spoke mildly, as though commenting on the weather, "They had not nearly enough planes to be a threat to three of my carriers. It was stupid of them to try."

Of course he would think that. Floating above the scene, looking down on those ruined lives and fields like a god—a God, in truth…immortal and untouchable—why should he think any differently? He didn't know what it was like, to be in pain. If she could make him bleed, if she could tear him to pieces—as he'd torn her up, time and time again—he would die happily.

Loki had answered the question that had tormented her since discovering his jealousy. How should she behave towards him? Had there ever been any option for her? How could she even
have *thought* about acting politely towards him?

She spoke, looking down towards the burning earth. "I hate you."

"I know."
Chapter Fifteen

Jane woke slowly, her consciousness struggling to the surface from underneath crushing waves of gray exhaustion. Every muscle in her body felt stretched and pounded, as though she were nothing more than a lump of bread dough, beaten into submission by an impatient baker. Her eyelids were heavy, and when she did open her eyes, the light from outside was so pure and golden that she couldn't stand it.

She pulled the heavy brocade covers over her head and let her eyes adjust to the sunlight through layers of wine-red fabric. The blanket smelled of cedar wood, the kind of scent that came from a specially made cabinet for storing fabrics over a long period of time. Her mother had owned a cedar-lined trunk; every winter all the blankets in their home had smelled this way for a few weeks, until the rich, earthy scent wore away with use.

Jane felt homesick.

The diffused light through the layers of blankets felt cocoon-like and comforting. For the first time in a long time, Jane was almost peaceful. She was warm, she was rested, and the nightmare journey of the previous day was over.

Thinking of that trip—and the battle, with the deaths of those pilots—touched on a sore spot in her mind. She shied away from the memories, her eyes closing tightly as she tried to shut out the image of the burning wreckage. She sighed, putting both hands over her face. There was nothing to be done. It was over.

Still, dredging up those memories disturbed her calm, and Jane swung her legs over the side of the bed and slowly sat upright, letting the blankets pool around her hips. The air was chilly, but the sun was strong and had already warmed the marble underneath her feet. There was a robe—red brocade, like the blankets—draped across the foot of the bed, and she put it on.

Last night, she had barely had enough energy to unlace her boots and take off her cargo pants before falling asleep. She wondered who had taken them, since they weren't in the same crumpled heap next to her bed. The idea of someone being in her room while she was asleep was unsettling…

"Oh, wow," Jane breathed, the city outside finally catching her attention.

Rome in the light of early morning was a city of sun-warmed stone, the towers of the different basilicas and villas glowing like the spires of a burnished gold crown, the rich terra-cottas of the crowded tenement houses as rubies and citrines inlaid within. The old leaded windows warped the image slightly; she had to blink two or three times before she realized that this was not an illusion.

The windows were not locked, and she opened the gilt-edged doors—almost afraid to touch the handles—to reveal the gardens (with barely budding trees and evergreen hedge borders) underneath her terrace and the slow-rolling Tiber river just beyond.

"Oh, my God," she whispered, eyes stretched to the limit as she tried to see everything at once.

With the doors open, Jane could hear the sounds of the city around her. The sharp honks of moped and car horns, the off-beat wailing of a siren, the rumbling of trucks on uneven roads, and the low murmur of thousands of voices of the pedestrians lining the banks of the river. Birds chirped a welcome to the dawn, and insects hummed from bud to bud.
Together, these little sounds wove a symphony of life. People were still living, breathing, carrying on with business...even when the world was still tilting crazily towards chaos. This city—by surrendering—had survived and was (so far as she could see) thriving under Loki's control.

The thought was so jarring and antithetical to everything Jane believed that she shook her head, turning away from the glorious view. It couldn't be true. She would see that people were miserable, that the rules under which they lived were stifling, and that people longed for their freedom.

The door behind her opened quietly, and Jane heard the staccato tap of high-heeled shoes crossing the checkered marble floor. She turned, and saw a youngish woman (probably a few years older than she), dressed in a crisp gray wool skirt and a long-sleeved cream silk blouse. Her hair was tarnished gold, smoothed back in a trim chignon.

Jane was suddenly very much aware that her own mousy-brown hair was lumped up on one side of her head, that her breath smelled atrocious, and that she was dressed in odds and ends that hadn't been washed in forty-eight hours. She squared her shoulders as the woman approached. After all, she had fought battles, crossed interstellar boundaries, and defied a god...she was not going to be intimidated by anyone.

Even a beautiful and elegant Italian.

"Good morning, Signorina Foster," her accent was Italian, but there was a strange edge to it that was familiar to Jane, "Welcome to the Villa Farnesina. Did you sleep well?"

Jane looked at her warily, trying to decide if she should be polite to her—the woman who was clearly working with Loki, after all. But in the end, her parents' rules of good behavior were too strong for her to fight.

"I did, thank you," she replied, crossing her arms nervously over the gaping robe. She opened her mouth again, but then realized she had nothing to say, so she closed it again.

The other woman glided right over the momentary, awkward silence with a self-assurance that made Jane hate her just a little.

"My name is Lucia Pazzi," she said, extending her hand, "and I am your assistant and attendant while you are under the protection of Lord Loki. He sends his welcome, and will attend you this evening for dinner."

"Where are you from?" Jane said, the question escaping before she had a chance to snatch it back. "Your accent...it's..." she trailed off.

Lucia smiled. "I was au pair and then executive assistant to Gilbert James D'Arcy, of D'Arcy Consolidated, in London. You might be hearing the British accent. I lived in London for ten years after I finished university."

Woah. Jane might live apart from the commercial world, but even she knew the name D'Arcy Consolidated. That corporation controlled manufacturing, energy, and shipping interests all over the European Union, and Gilbert D'Arcy frequently made appearances on all manner of Forbes' lists.

What on earth was a woman with so many qualifications doing here, playing nursemaid to a hostage?

"Oh," was all she said. "That must be it."
"You must be still very tired, Signorina Foster," Lucia said, moving towards a wardrobe at the side of the room, "If you would like, I will show you to your bathroom and you can refresh yourself and change clothes."

"That would be nice," she murmured, watching Lucia's efficient movements as she gathered a pair of jeans and a peach-colored blouse, "Where are my clothes from last night?"

"Your pants are being washed," she replied, "but Lord Loki requested that you make your selections from the wardrobe prepared for you."

Her lips narrowed in irritation at her instinctive reaction of doing anything that Loki requested of her. "I'd really rather wear my own clothes."

"Your bag was lost in the destruction of the Skrull ship, signorina," Lucia shook her head, folding the clothes and tucking them under her arm, "So unless you would like to wear the same outfit over and over again..."

"If you're my attendant," Jane said, bristling at being treated like a child, "I'd like you to have my shirt and underwear washed and dried while I shower, and bring them and my pants to me so I can wear my own clothes. Surely "Lord" Loki," she put her hands on her hips, "told you to do as I say?"

Lucia stared at her with the same sort of blank, appraising eyes that Nick Fury and Natasha Romanov had. Was being an executive assistant for a corporate big-wig akin to being a spy?

She blinked, and the moment passed. "Very well, Signorina Foster," she said, nodding, "I will do as you ask."

"Thank you," being able to make her own wardrobe choices—even if nothing else was under her control—made her feel a little better. But after this small victory, she could again think of nothing to say.

"This way, then signorina," Lucia gestured towards the door.

Jane padded silently barefoot behind Lucia's clicking heels. If her bedroom—with its green, white and brown marble tiles and columns—was stunning, the rest of the Villa was breathtaking.

The ceilings were coffered, each little box depicting a new scene from Roman mythology. The frescos were carefully preserved, with each color—from sea green to mustard yellow—as bright and vivid as the day it was first painted. They crossed a long gallery, tall windows facing towards the river, and chaise lounges—fashioned from mahogany wood and royal blue velvet—were placed at regular intervals in case the walker was tired and looking for a quiet spot to contemplate all this elegance.

Lucia opened a paneled door to reveal a sparkling white bathroom with a clawfoot tub already filled with steaming water. Rose petals floated on the surface and a side table carried a selection of sweet-smelling hair and skin products, as well as a hairbrush and comb.

Jane had to take a breath. "This is...this is beautiful."

"It is," Lucia agreed, glancing around momentarily. Her business-like manner told Jane that she was either accustomed or immune to the power of all this wealth around her, and was nowhere near as awed as Jane. She felt very young, awkward, and somewhat embarrassed. It wasn't her fault that she'd never slept in a palace before!

"Is there everything you need?" Lucia asked, "Enough towels? Is there a particular brand of
product that you prefer?"

_The cheapest kind they sell at Walmart?_

"No. This is," _amazing, incredible, terrifying, oh God, oh God, what have I gotten myself into, _"this is fine. Thank you."

"Just leave your clothes outside the door and I will do my best to have them in your room within the hour. So please, take your time."

Jane nodded, and Lucia left, shutting the door silently behind her. Jane shucked her clothes and tied the robe around her before opening the door a crack and dropping her shirt and underthings into the hall outside. Her skin was streaked with dirt, soot, and dried sweat—she wrinkled her nose and groaned.

"Figures," she muttered, untying the robe and climbing into the tub, "my first time in Italy and I'm the worst-smelling person in the city."

But a bath of rosewater was just the thing to improve her mood. She groaned as she sank into the marble, the hot stone a soothing massage to her strained muscles and the fragrance a balm to her frayed nerves. So much luxury…it was over-the-top and embarrassing, but if she were being honest with herself…

It was really cool. She could almost hear what Darcy would have to say about all this craziness. Actually, there might not be any words: she would probably just babble, take pictures of everything, and steal the expensive soap. And maybe some towels.

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She managed to make it back to her room without getting lost, even after a brain-melting hour and a half of soaking and scrubbing. When she came in, she startled the housemaid—a pleasantly plump older woman with hair dyed a shade of red never known to nature—in the middle of making up her bed.

They both jumped. The housemaid let loose a stream of Italian, her accent broad and slightly course, of which Jane only understood two words: _buon giorno, signorina_. The rest swept past her in a dizzying torrent as she stood, smiling and embarrassed, still wet underneath her robe.

The woman paused for breath, and smiled nervously, her hands clasped together in front of her chest.

Jane summoned all her memories from the movie _A Room with a View_, and stammered, "_Grazie._"

"This is Maria Valli," Jane jumped as Lucia's voice rang through the room, "and she will also be assisting you during your stay. _Grazie, Maria, si può andare._" The plump Maria gathered her things, nodded gratefully in Jane's direction, and left, her thick, low-heeled shoes booming like cannon fire.

"Maria has lived near the Villa all her life," Lucia said, looking after the older lady with a soft smile, "so when Lord Loki asked for caretakers for the property, she volunteered immediately rather than let it be neglected like other sites around the city."

"So life is not quite back to normal here, is it?"

"The transition is still not complete, but we were fortunate that Rome was chosen as the center of the new Europe. Things have been better here than elsewhere."
The woman was really a master of diplomacy. SHIELD ought to consider recruiting her; Jane could spend an hour trying to untangle the levels of meaning in those two brief sentences. Those subtle hints only made her hungry to know the state of the world at large.

"You are free to travel the city, if you would like," Lucia said, placing Jane's freshly-cleaned clothes on a plush chair next to the wardrobe, "but for your own safety, any time you leave the Villa you should wear this."

She drew a pendant from her pocket; it was a silver rune strung on a black leather cord. Jane took it and let it hang from her fingertips. The charm swirled and caught the light, and she grimaced. Though she knew very little of runes, after all the reading on Norse mythology she'd done, even she could recognize the first rune of Loki's name.

"Do I have to?" Jane set the pendant on her nightstand and was momentarily grateful that Loki hadn't thought to brand it on her skin.

"We all do," her assistant said simply, adjusting her collar so that Jane could see the necklace around her own throat, "Lord Loki has made it known that he will not tolerate threats or violence against those who work for him."

"I don't work for him," Jane said immediately.

Lucia didn't shrug, but Jane heard the shrug in her words as she said, "As you say, signorina. Still, for your own safety, please wear that if you leave the Villa. Your dinner this evening will be at six; is there anything you need me for in the meantime?"

The bath had slowed Jane's mind and made her aware of just how much her body needed rest. She shook her head:

"I think I'll just go back to sleep. But…" asking for anything was galling, but she wasn't going to cut off her nose, "I could use some breakfast, first."

"Of course," Lucia nodded, "your tray is being sent up now. And I will bring you lunch as well, and wake you by four o'clock? So you can dress and be ready?"

"I'm not going to dress," Jane repeated, "but yes, if you could wake me at four, that would be great. Thank you."

"Of course, signorina," Lucia nodded and turned on her heels. Once the door had shut behind her, Jane untied her robe, pulled on her SHIELD-issue tee-shirt (stamped with the ubiquitous logo) and plunged under the covers.

She was asleep before breakfast came in.

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The next thing she felt was a pair of hands on her shoulders and a cold voice repeating her name.

Jane groaned, "It can't be time yet, Natasha."

"Signorina Foster," since when did Natasha speak Italian? "It is four o'clock. You asked that I wake you."

Oh, right. The Italian supermodel.

Jane rolled over and sat up, untangling herself from the layers of blankets. She must have had a
restless sleep; the covers were almost knotted around her legs and half the pillows were on the floor. The dream that had engrossed her just a few minutes ago evaporated like morning mist—Jane wished she could remember details, but she just recalled a soft mane of golden hair…she knew she had been dreaming of Thor.

She sighed. Just a few more hours, and she’d be able to talk to him. For right now, that would have to do. There were other things to focus on in the meantime. The most important of which—she swallowed, and put her feet firmly on the floor—was dinner with Loki.

"I have put out an outfit for you—"

"Okay," Jane cut her off, temper completely worn away, "what is this obsession with my clothes? I want to make this very clear to you," she stood up, not caring that she was half naked, "I am not on Loki's side, I don't want to take anything he gives me, and I am certainly not a doll he can play dress-up with. So, until they fall apart, I am going to wear my own clothes. Got it?"

Lucia blinked, face still and closed. Jane felt ridiculous, like a teenager digging her heels in over something completely pointless. Still, this was her line in the sand, and she had to stand by it.

"As you say, signorina," Jane gritted her teeth, but Lucia went on, "I have brought a tray for you, if you would like something to eat before dinner. You must be hungry."

"Thank you," Jane said, nodding, "I am."

Lucia escorted her down to the Villa's main floor, where the ceilings towered over both of them and the frescos took up entire walls. Jane lost herself in staring at one of them, where a beautiful woman—pale green foam streaming from her golden hair—emerged from the sea on a chariot drawn by a pair of dolphins, while an older man looked on with a pleading expression of hopeless longing.

Her mythology was shaky when it didn't relate to the stars, but the painting was beautiful and Jane fell behind Lucia as she paused to take it in.

The other woman waited for her for a moment, then cleared her throat and said, "I will go ahead to the dining room and make sure everything is prepared. I will return shortly, if you would like to remain."

"Yes," Jane didn't even look over her shoulder as she stared at the fresco. One of the dolphins was eating a squid, and the sight made her smile. Had the artist planned that little detail in his original sketch, or had it just seemed like the perfect touch to add at the last minute?

Strange to be pondering the thoughts of a man from hundreds of years ago! But no stranger than any of the other things she found herself doing recently.

Jane heard footsteps—not heels—and flinched. She realized for the first time that she was not alone.

Turning, she saw a cluster of three men grouped around a large table on the far side of the room. They conversed softly in Italian, circling the table and taking notes on what they saw. The surface of the table glowed in the softening evening light, different colors—green, red, blue, gold—making a map of random splashes on the ceiling.

She drifted over to them, feeling ever more the gangly teenager as she compared her casual pants and tee with their trim suits. Did everyone in Loki's employ dress to the nines all the time? It seemed exhausting.
Getting closer to the table, Jane realized that the color pattern was not random. Actually, the surface of the table was a magically-generated map of the world. The political lines were all wiped away, however, and Jane bit her lip as she realized she was seeing the world as it stood now, not as she had once known it.

Africa was gone. The entire continent glowed green, with spots of gold here and there to designate command centers. Much of southern and eastern Europe was green as well; her geography was as shaky as her mythology, but she counted only Great Britain, Spain, Portugal, France, Norway, Switzerland and Turkey as holdouts. Russia was in dispute; the Eastern half of the country was green but the West was still solidly red.

She looked at the map—the three note-taking men parting around her as they moved—and felt all her muscles tightening. So much of what she knew—had known—was completely useless. How was she going to survive? How was anyone going to survive in this strange new world?

"Signori, grazie. si può andare,"

Loki could have been speaking Chinese and it wouldn't have mattered. Jane would always know his voice. The three men set down their notebooks and gave quick, respectful nods—both to Loki and to her—and filed out of the room.

Jane sighed, letting her eyes close for a brief moment of weakness, and turned around. She was glad she had one hand on the table's edge, because the sight that greeted her was almost enough to make her fall over.

"Miss Foster," he greeted her with a nod. She swallowed, and returned the nod.

It was just not fair, she decided immediately, that Armani looked so very good on him. Jane couldn't decide if she were more shocked by his wearing mortal clothes or for wearing them so well, but either way…it still wasn't fair.

The suit and the crisp green shirt, casually unbuttoned at the collar, moved him closer to humanity. Even his skin seemed less unearthly pale in the light of the setting sun, and the warm light sparkled on the flecks of blue in his eyes and took some of the intensity out of his gaze.

It wasn't just the clothes, either. Here in this opulent environment, with the gold and the marble and the porcelain, with private gardens and the river just beyond…Loki looked comfortable. His face was relaxed, not pinched or dark-circled as it had always been in New York. His proud stance was fitted to this enormous room.

He looked at home.

Suddenly—and how could she have forgotten?—Jane remembered that he, as much as Thor, was a prince. A prince of a race of immortal beings who lived in an everlasting realm and who travelled between worlds on a bridge of rainbows. Asgard must be beautiful beyond words…

Her throat was dry, and she swallowed again.

"I trust you had a pleasant day?"

She stiffened. Don't let him suck you in, Jane…nice clothes or not, nice house or not, you remember what you swore.

"I slept."

He waited for a long moment before realizing that she didn't plan to say any more than that. His
lips thinned and some of the ease bled from his frame; he held himself taller, tighter.

"You did not feel it necessary to dress?"

"I am dressed."

His voice pitched slightly higher as he called, "Signorina Pazzi!"

Jane would have thought it impossible for Lucia to creep anywhere, or sound hesitant in any situation, but there was a good ten seconds between Loki's call and Lucia's entrance. She stood with head bowed, her hands clasped in front of her so tightly that her knuckles trembled with the strain.

She did not look up as she said, "Yes, my Lord?"

"I trust you informed Miss Foster of my wishes?"

"I did, my Lord."

"Did you also inform her of the consequences of not honoring those wishes?"

"I…" Lucia hesitated, and took a quick breath. Much as Jane did not really care for the woman, she knew better than anyone what it felt like to fear the man holding them both prisoner. Her heart ached; she wished she'd been more moderate in her actions, if only to spare Lucia this pain!

"I did not, my Lord."

Loki let a long breath out, clearly reaching for patience. Still, his voice was gentler than Jane could believe as he said, "Why not?"

"I wanted Signorina Foster to feel free to act in the way she thought best, my Lord," Lucia paused, and swallowed before continuing, "without fearing the consequences to those around her."

"No!" Jane cried, balling her fists, "You swore that you wouldn't! Leave Erik out of this!"

"No, Signorina," Lucia said, softly, "The Doctor is in no danger; I meant me."

"You humans," Loki said, his voice dropping to the danger zone Jane so easily recognized, soft and low, "how willing you are to suffer for your precious freedom. Miss Pazzi," he said, raising one hand, "I thought that you were less foolish than most of your kind. I am…disappointed."

His hand dropped, and Lucia's head snapped to one side, her cheek reddening. Loki gestured again with the other hand, and Lucia whimpered, her other cheek blooming crimson as well.

Jane felt sick. "She didn't tell me what would happen," she said, taking a step towards Loki, "so stop hurting her!"

"It's done," he said, shaking his head. "Miss Pazzi," he said, meeting Lucia's tear-bright eyes, "do we understand one another?"

She gave a shaky nod. "Yes, my Lord. I will not disobey you again."

"Good," he jerked his head towards the door and she left, the click of her heels uncertain and stuttering. Loki turned towards Jane, whose cheeks were as bright with anger as Lucia's were with pain. "She is my servant, Jane," the conciliation in his voice made her want to hurl all over his polished shoes, "and my servants must obey my commands. I must be able to trust those around
Jane shook her head. "She didn't say a word. How can you punish her for another's actions? It was my fault... I was being stubborn."

"Of course you were," he nodded, stepping closer, "but had she told you what was at stake, I do not believe you to be cold-hearted enough as to allow her to be punished for your sins. She had a choice with a simple outcome, and she chose to disobey me. Such an action cannot go unpunished."

"You're sick," Jane replied, "you're evil."

"On the contrary," the insult that should have launched him into uncontrollable anger he now shrugged off, "Lucia Pazzi—and everyone else here—came to me voluntarily and agreed to a system of rewards and punishments for their behavior. Is it evil to adhere to a mutually beneficial contract?"

"Mutually..." she stopped, "Nothing gives you the right to physically punish someone for acting in a way they deem right."

"And if Lucia herself gave me the right? I could show you the contract, if it would help make it any clearer to you."

"Nothing you say will convince me your actions are right," Jane said firmly, "Nothing."

"I realize that," he admitted, drawing even with her at the table. His height was still intimidating, and Jane shifted to one side, eyes darting towards the two doors in the room as she calculated her best escape route.

He made no move for her, though. He seemed hardly to look at her as he went on, voice quiet and bare of mockery. "I do not wish to fight you, Jane. Not here. This war already has enough fronts," his eyes dropped to the glowing map and traced the edges of each fluctuating border, "I do not wish to have one in my home."

"Then you shouldn't have taken me," Jane did not dare believe him, "You can't imagine that after everything you've done—to me and the people I love—that I would just lie down and be your tame little pet?"

"Hmm," he breathed, "I am going to give you a gift."

"There's nothing you have that I want. And what you've given you can take back. I don't want any of it."

"Not that kind of gift," he snapped his fingers, and Lucia came in again, guiding Erik by his shoulders. Jane's heart lurched and she steeled herself to perform some other debasing act to save her teacher from whatever Loki had planned. But again, she was surprised.

Erik looked much better. The pale, paper-like quality had left his skin, he had shaved (or been shaved), his clothes were clean and hair was neat and combed. Save for the empty lifelessness in his eyes, he looked exactly like Jane remembered him from the time before the New Mexico entanglement.

She closed her eyes. "You see? After you promised... how can I ever trust you?"

A pulse of Loki's power shot through the room, like a breath of wind through the open windows. Jane did not look up; she didn't want to see it.
Then: "Jane?"

Erik's voice. Not Erik's controlled, cruel voice or Erik's dull, defeated moan from the days of his possession…but his soft, kind voice...the one she knew from nights in the lab, from early-morning phone calls, from hours spent talking theory in his office on campus…

She gasped. "Erik?"

He looked at her, feet taking uncertain, small steps—like an old man's careful shuffle—in her direction, hands twitching as though longing to reach out. "Is it really…?"

His breath gave out as Jane rushed to him, catching his hands in her own and supporting his weight on her narrow shoulders. She felt his heart pounding and he dropped his head to hers, letting her support him until his hands found the edge of the table. Even then, he refused to let her go.

"Oh, Jane," he murmured, "I'm sorry…I'm so sorry."

She breathed through the lump in her throat and told herself not to cry—she couldn't make him worry. "Sorry for what, Erik?"

"I saw…I saw everything. Everything I did and said…everything he made me…" Erik cut off abruptly and Jane saw him giving nervous little glances in Loki's direction. He shook his head wearily, and repeated, "Sorry, so sorry," over and over again until Jane stopped him with a full-body hug.

"Forget it, Erik, forget it," she whispered, rubbing his back in soothing circles, "it's not your fault. I forgive you…I forgive you."

"Miss Pazzi," Loki interrupted—Erik tensed to the point of pain at the sound of his voice, "take him to his room, please. He needs to rest."

"I'll take him," Jane shot back, glaring at Loki and ready to fight if he tried to separate them.

"You have a prior engagement," he corrected her.

Jane held his eyes for a long moment, weighing her options. Did she really want to lose all she had just gained by the stubbornness that had already cost her so much?

*You can still be a bitch over dinner. Just get Erik out of the crossfire.*

"I'll see you later, Erik," she said, separating herself inch by inch and finally holding her teacher by his shaking shoulders, "you go with Lucia and get some rest, all right?"

He shook his head, clutching at her shoulders with weak fingers. "No, Jane, no…let's go, let's get out of here…"

"The disorientation will persist until he rests," Loki said, motioning to Lucia, "Make sure he gets adequate sleep."

Jane ignored them both, all her attention belonging to Erik. She did her best to smile and felt her lips tremble with the effort, but she persisted, "I'll be fine, I'll be just fine," speaking slowly and clearly, as to a child, seemed to soothe him, "you go and get some sleep, and I'll be up to see you in a little bit."

"Jane," he repeated, a harsher edge to his voice, "don't trust him. Don't ever."
She swallowed. "I won't. I promise." She took one of his hands and pressed it between her palms, turning him until Lucia could grasp his other arm in hers. "Now go with Lucia," she said, patting his back, "and get some sleep. I'll see you soon, okay?"

He nodded and smiled at her—she let go of his hand—and touched the back of his fingers to her cheek.

"I missed you,"

"I missed you too," she said, tears welling at the corners of her eyes. She blinked, hard. "Now, go on."

Lucia escorted him out of the room, Erik still talking quietly to himself and her. Jane leaned against the table, arms locked and muscles tight, pressure in her chest so tight she thought she might explode.

_Don't cry. Get yourself under control, Jane. Turn around; remember what you promised. Remember what you swore._

She turned. She cleared her throat and blinked; her eyes were dry. Loki looked at her, and for once he was not smiling or jeering or calculating. The only thing she could discern in him was the hope that she might accept his olive branch. She bit her lip and wrestled with herself.

_Oh, what the hell. You can still be a bitch over dinner._

She drew in a deep breath, and looked him right in the eye.

"Thank you."

He nodded. "You're welcome."

There was a beat of silence…and then Jane's stomach growled. She looked down, shaking her head.

"Okay, that sort of timing only happens in the movies," she grumbled, "this is ridiculous."

"If Lucia is to be believed, you have hardly eaten all day, so it is hardly surprising" Loki said, trying to suppress his smile, "Shall we sit down?"
Chapter Sixteen

They ate outside on the veranda, the cobblestones underfoot cooling quickly as the sun’s warmth faded from the sky and dwindled to an amber wash near the horizon. It was still a bit chilly, but Jane was glad to be in the open air after several days of enclosed spaces. And the view was lovely; the sky was indigo, pierced intermittently by diamond-points of stars, and the freshening breeze played games with the ends of her hair and the branches of the trees in the garden.

Torchines lined the edge of the stone railing and threw off enough heat to keep her from freezing; they also made things less threatening. Even Loki’s face seemed softer in the light of the flames, the flickering light avoiding the sharp angles of his chin and cheekbones.

Jane was very hungry and the food was delicious—mozzarella and tomato salad, pasta with fresh herbs and spring vegetables—but she ate slowly, trying to avoid seeming either desperate or thankful for her captor’s consideration.

Perhaps in deference to her (and what a strange thought that was) Loki did not speak as she took her first few quick bites. The silence was awkward and every moment it went on made Jane dread its ending, but the sky above was dark enough that she could trace the constellations and name each star according to name, magnitude, and type.

The test calmed her nerves and reminded her of happier times—times in New Mexico, and Norway (visiting Erik at his university), watching the skies through clear air and with a light heart. Her gaze fell from the sky and down to her plate, appetite sated and spirit heavy. Times that were so different from where she found herself now.

One of the three attendants topped off her wineglass, despite the fact that she’d had nothing to drink, and Jane stole a quick glance at him—tall and trim in a black suit with white gloves—through her lashes. His expression was blank and neutral; nothing about him told Jane that he felt any shame, remorse, or pleasure in serving either of them. Perhaps, like Lucia, he had seen which way the wind was blowing and decided that his freedom and self-respect weren’t worth his life or prosperity.

She gritted her teeth. They were collaborators; traitors who profited from the chaos and shifting tides of war. Jane could not lash out at Loki—to do so would endanger her life and Erik's, and anyone else who happened to get in the way. But she did not have to extend the same consideration to the humans who helped him.

Then again, who was she to talk? For the next six months, she was just as guilty as they.

Jane rested her fork and knife on the edge of her plate and took a long drink of water. Though her stomach was no longer growling, she knew she would pay for this stubbornness later. She would have to see if Lucia could sneak her something tomorrow morning.

He noticed her sudden resistance, but did not comment on it, continuing to help himself while she sat in stony silence. The dread in her stomach soured and started to burn like acid.

"How long will it take for Erik to get back to normal?"

The question came out, and Jane could have bitten her traitorous tongue in half. She had not meant to speak first, but her fear was out of control and she had had to say something. Loki looked almost as surprised as she did over her outburst. He took a moment before responding.
"It varies depending on the individual and the length of time under possession. Dr. Selvig may need several days of rest before his disorientation fades."

"Days?" Jane scoffed, shaking her head, "So he's going to be living in a nightmare for days? Just how long did you have him living like that?" Her anger was spiraling out of control and she clenched her fists under the table, trying to cut off the flow of her bitter words.

"I fell to Midgard three weeks after your encounter with Thor. Drawn by the power of the tesseract, I encountered Dr. Selvig soon thereafter."

She did the math.

"You played him like a puppet for almost seven months," she breathed, "did you ever consider the damage you might do? He's a brilliant man," her voice trembled with passionate anger, "and you've turned his brain to mush. Why?"

"I needed to be near the tesseract," he said simply, "it rejuvenated my magic after the…difficulties of my arrival and the weeks spent in transit between the different dimensions. I was injured, and needed time and energy to heal. Taking control of Dr. Selvig was the easiest way to achieve that goal."

His calm manner—his innocent expression, as though he could not understand why she was so upset—enraged her.

"And you say you want to help us," she snarled, "how is this helping? How do you expect anyone to trust you when you have the power—and the will—to do something so awful?"

Loki set down his wineglass and smiled at her across the table, the expression blunting the sharp edge of her anger and dulling it to fear. "I did miss you, Jane. No one here," he gestured to the assembled footmen, "is brave enough to challenge me in the way that you do."

"That's because they know you'll beat them for it," she shot back, remembering Lucia's slapped cheeks and the bright tears blooming in her eyes, "And," she continued, with a tight laugh, "knowing that the beating will have been their own fault. For breaking your…"mutually beneficial" contract."

"You have also suffered pain at my hands," he reminded her, eyes running from her face to the juncture of her neck. His half-closed eyes reminded Jane suddenly of his teeth nicking the skin, and she shuddered, "But you still continue to resist."

"I have nothing to lose."

"That is also a lie," he said, leaning forward, "because we both know that you care about Erik, and Thor…and every other helpless pawn that comes into your life. You had no reason to care about Miss Pazzi," he chuckled, "she is not an easy person to like. But you were infuriated when I hurt her."

His expression hardened, the shadows from the flickering torches turning his eyes to coal. "So when I tell you that she will suffer at my hands if you do not do me the simple courtesy of obeying my commands…I believe you will obey me. You are too generous to allow another person—even a stranger—to suffer on your behalf."

"Maybe I was that generous," Jane said, gaze fixed on the lowest star in the Big Dipper's handle where it hovered just above the railing. Alkaid, her mind murmured, B-type, main sequence star, magnitude 1.84, distance from Earth 101 light years. "And maybe you've changed that about me. Maybe I won't let your actions influence mine anymore."
"That is exactly how I know I will always control you," he smiled, the way a hungry spider might grin at a trapped fly, "you are constant."

She shrugged, the motion a knee-jerk reaction to his idle and somewhat insulting flattery. He understood it, and went on:

"I saw you, Jane Foster, as I fell between the worlds. I saw you," he continued, smile fading, "in hundreds of different worlds, thousands of different scenarios. I saw the best and the worst of you…and your worst was still pure gold compared to the general slag of human life this realm has to offer."

Jane felt herself leaning slowly forward, almost a millimeter at a time. The lure of his words—the idea of how he might have seen her, who she might have been in a thousand different parallel dimensions—was too strong to resist. Then she remembered what else he had seen during his journey, and sat back in her chair.

"Was all this before or after I ended up causing the end of the world?" The muscles running from neck to shoulder tensed, drawing Jane into herself like a turtle. She was still afraid but not of him, for once; she was afraid of his knowledge, of the answer he might have to her reckless question. Did she really want to know?

Loki was silent for a long moment, still sitting forward and staring at her intently. Finally he leaned back and answered, turning his wineglass on the table, "Your people do have a very good proverb to answer that," he said, quietly, and quoted: ""The road to hell is paved with good intentions". You never meant to hurt the people that you did," he looked up at her, "and that makes a great deal of difference."

Jane shut her eyes, pressing her lips together so she could not sob. "It makes no difference whatsoever, not to the people I hurt. Pain is pain, and death is death." She sighed, and the sound was wet with unshed tears. "Maybe I should just let you kill me."

"It would not matter," his voice was uncommonly gentle, as though the firelight has softened that too, "you lived, and you dreamed…and what you have discovered has already changed the world. The Skrull are here; I am here. We will not go away."

She breathed again, deeply, and pressed her cold palm against her eyes, pushing her head and shoulders upright. Her hand dropped away.

"Why are you doing this?" she asked, summoning all her courage to face him directly, "You fell to Midgard, but after recovering, you could have stolen the tesseract and returned to Asgard…or any of the other realms. Why choose to stay here, when you had the power to go anywhere else?"

He breathed a soft laugh, shaking his head. "I already told you, but you refuse to believe me," he smiled, but not at her; he seemed as though he were mocking himself, "I intend to improve the lot of you mortals; I intend to rescue you from the mediocrity and purposelessness of life in this realm. Think about it," he leaned forward again, palms flat on the table, "when united under one rule, with a common goal to strive for, mankind will be at its greatest potential."

"Humanity's problem is its insistence on self-determination," he concluded, making Jane's—very American—stomach turn sick at his words, "Each little individual running about, trying to accumulate a share of possessions and happiness before withering away and fading to the next generation. Great minds are wasted, information and progress is lost."

"So you would have us connected like gears in a machine," Jane interrupted, shoulders so tense
they ached, "locked into one state because you decide that's the way we should be? And how will you decide?" she was too angry to breathe; her words tumbled over each other like a rockslide, "Do you know that in high school I was terrible at math? I spent hours every night on my calculus, and physics was a nightmare.

"If you had been the one to decide my career, would you have let me go into astronomy? Or would you have decided that my talents were of better use elsewhere?"

Loki had gone very quiet, and he could not meet her eyes. He swallowed.

"For the sake of your world, perhaps it might have been better if you had gone into a different field."

It was her turn to swallow; his dig touched a sore spot, but only served to fuel her anger.

"That's beside the point and you know it," she said, "The point is, humans work better—we work harder—when we are in control of our own lives. You may have a person who has natural talent in one field, but loves and strives so hard after another goal that he becomes better than anyone expected. It's what happened to me…and so many other people I could name.

"And you can't predict that," she spread her hands on the table, palms up, pleading, "You can't measure it or legislate it. The only way to harness that power, that potential, is to allow us our freedom."

He did not make any reply. A sudden gust of wind swept across the table, and Jane shivered at last in the cold night air. Her tee-shirt was only thin cotton and the teasing wind fluttered around its neckline and sleeves, little breezes shimmering around her collarbone and shoulders. Goosebumps pebbled her skin.

"I want you to answer a question," he said, Jane flinching at the sudden shift in conversation, "And I want you to answer it with total honesty."

"Or you'll call in my whipping boy?" she said drily, folding her arms and trying to gather some heat to her shaking body.

"No. This time I offer a fair trade…if you answer this question for me, I will answer any question you pose; also with complete and total honesty."

She stared at him. He must really want to know something, for she could not imagine anything that would get the trickster god to pledge himself to the truth. Of course, it could all be a deception—she would be naïve indeed to think that he really would be honest with her, even after promising—but then again…

It was a very tempting offer.

"All right," she said, arms tightening around her shoulders as she steeled herself for his question, "go for it."

"Are you in love with Thor?"

Her mind tore that question apart, thoughts flashing through her brain with all the considerable speed of firing neurons.

Jealousy—he could have asked anything, why does he care?—jealousy—he calls him "Thor", not "brother"—
When the initial chatter and noise faded away, only two questions remained, possible answers ricocheting between heart and head:

*Am I in love with Thor?*

*Am I really in love with Thor?*

Jane took a quick glance upward; but he seemed content to wait in silence for her babbling thoughts to condense into words again. He was always patient when he hoped to get something out of his wait, Jane remembered. And though it pained her to admit it, even in the privacy of her own head, she really did need some time.

She shut her eyes—closing off external distractions and stimuli—and considered. Her scientific mind reached for precedent, tried to look for similarities between times that she had felt in love and what she now felt for Thor. The problem was (and this was another thing painful to admit) but Jane did not think she had ever really *been* in love. Not love of the type that all the songs talked about, with fluttering hearts and sweaty palms and the willingness to sacrifice and suffer and share…maybe with Steven, in college, but never since then.

But Thor…

Her heart did flutter, and she smiled even at the thought of him. If what she felt wasn't love, it was certainly something; something powerful, even in its infancy. She had spent months trying to find him, after all, and had thought of him every day…

Jane opened her eyes.

His eyes had never left her face. Despite the softening effect of the fire and moonlight, his features were once again focused, intent. His lips had narrowed—impatience for her answer barely concealed—and, through some trick of the light, Jane could see his pulse pounding in the hollow of his throat.

She even heard him breathing, shallow breaths in through his nose and out his mouth. Jane wondered when she had ever been so hyper-aware of another person's physical presence. Her stomach soured as she realized that it was with Thor…everything he did, every move he made…every smile he had given her…she had noticed and treasured all of it.

It was awful to have the same sort of awareness with someone she loathed. She *hated* it, but Loki was in her brain, and her gut, and she couldn't get him out.

But she had promised honesty. And she would not break her word.

"I think I'm getting there," she said, lifting her chin and staring him down. "But I know…that I *could* love him."

The tension in his face flowed away like water; the muscles slackened and his lips parted just a fraction of an inch. He was silent, seeming literally at a loss for words. As Jane stared at him—fatalistically looking at him dead on—his eyelids fluttered, uncertain, and he looked away.

It was one of the few times he'd lost a staring contest to her. The thought was heartening, like a warm coal still burning at the center of her being. But the idea that her love for Thor—or potential of love—could *hurt* Loki…

It was terrifying.

*Keep it together, Jane. You can't trust him—Erik said, "don't ever trust him"—who knows what he*
really thinks or feels…or if he feels anything at all…?

He cleared his throat. "That leaves you with an unanswered question."

The sheer number of questions she wanted to ask collided like freight cars on a track; and just as with a train wreck, it was impossible to pick out one useful piece from the oceans of detritus. Jane was too tired—brain wrung out and exhausted—to try.

"I'll save it for later," she said.

His eyes darkened, "That might be considered cheating."

"Says the God of Lies," she replied, a smile twitching the corner of her mouth, "This isn't cheating, it's exploiting a loophole. You never stipulated that the question had to be asked now. I'm tired; I can't think." As the words came out, she knew they were true. The hours of sleep that day had only dented the edge of her exhaustion; it was still welling up inside her like a spring with no bottom.

"Hmm," he huffed, crossing his arms. He pouted like a scolded child, and the sight brought another tiny smile to her face. Finally, she was 1-0 with the trickster, even with his home-field advantage.

"Very well; you may keep your question for a later time. And perhaps it is best that you return to your room for now. You will need to wake early, after all," he drew Jane's cell phone from his pocket, and placed in on the table between them.

"Was wondering where that was," Jane murmured, sliding it across the table and rolling it in her palm. How predictable of Loki to steal her one remaining link to Thor. "I need to check in by eight o'clock," she rubbed her eyes and could not believe it had been less than two days ago that she'd been standing on the deck of the helicarrier on the other side of the world. It seemed like years. She was so tired.

"I will have Miss Pazzi wake you in time," he assured her, rising from his chair. Jane got to her feet before he had the chance to offer his arm. She shied away from him.

"I don't suppose there's any chance I can talk to him alone?"

"You have never struck me as one to ask pointless questions, Jane," he shook his head, smiling, "and surely you know that I will not allow it. Speaking of which," he reached out to her, "I'll have that back, now."

Her hand tightened instinctively on the lump of plastic, and she backed away. "No. Why do you have to keep it? There's no way I can make a call anyway; why does it matter?"

"Pointless questions, Jane," his jaw tightened as he drew nearer, "Hand it over, or I will take it. You have acted rightly thus far; don't spoil this."

His manner—parental and condescending—turned her blood to lava. "No," she ground the word between her teeth, wrapping both hands around the phone and squaring her shoulders. None of that mattered; he raised one hand, whispered a few short words and her arms went limp, the phone clattering on the stones between them.

Jane struggled with every muscle—her vocal chords were frozen again, or she would have screamed her frustration—but it was no use. She watched, silent and helpless, as he bent and retrieved it. After tucking it in his pocket, he said, softly:
"It does not have to be this way, Jane."

Her eyes were free to move; she glared at him. He sighed, and snapped his fingers, releasing her body from his control.

"You bastard," she hissed, tears rising up from some as-yet untapped well, "even when you say you want what's best...you still use force."

"Because you made me use it," he threw back at her. "I had warned you of the consequences of defying me; do not plead ignorance and abuse. I will not have defiance from you, Jane."

Rather than acknowledge him, she turned away, crossing her arms over her shoulders and chafing her cold arms. She still felt his eyes on her; the back of her neck tingled and she had to fight the urge to look back.

Then: "I want to go see Erik. I want to make sure he's all right."

"If he were not, Miss Pazzi would have informed me of it. There is no need for you to trouble yourself."

"Yes, there is," she said, hands dropping to her sides—fists clenched—as she turned to face him, "he's my friend. You put him through hell, so before I go to sleep I am going to make sure he's okay. That's what friends do. Not that you'd know."

"And here I thought that Mr. Stark was the arrogant one," his voice had dropped low and his mouth sneered as he spoke, "I have been alive for countless lifetimes; longer than you can even conceive. Do you imagine in all that time that I have been friendless? I have bled for Thor, for Odin...placed myself willingly between Asgard and its enemies—"

"And now you want to destroy them," she interrupted, shaking her head, "so what does any of that matter? You've betrayed them."

"Only once they had betrayed me!"

Not mocking, not snide...there was raw pain in his voice; pain she understood from months of watching the world fall apart. His shoulders were tight, arms rigid and fists clenched; he stood, braced against the agony of his words, adrift in a tidal surge of emotion. Jane hated it, but her heart ached on his behalf.

It hurt even more knowing that his suffering was almost entirely self-inflicted. He had cut himself off from those that he loved and those who loved him—but he could not see it.

She swallowed and spoke, smoothing the rough edges from her voice. "Odin might have, by not telling you who you were," her words made him close his eyes and his neck moved in a sinuous motion, as though fighting the urge to back away, "but Thor didn't even know. And when he did find out, it didn't make any difference to him. He never betrayed you."

"They both betrayed me," he snarled, eyes white and wide like a rabid dog's, "by persisting in weaving the lie that I could become worthy of the throne. My...parentage..." he bared his teeth, "has nothing to do with it. I could never have ruled—because of who I am. Not what I am."

Jane could make no answer. The enormity of his self-loathing slammed into her and left her breathless; she could not even imagine hating anything with the same passion with which he despised himself.

He nodded at her silence and gave a savage grin. "Dumb at last, Miss Foster? You should be. I
told you at the very beginning," his fingers twitched, and she jerked backwards, "if you know nothing, you should say nothing."

Jane's breath hitched in her throat, heart banging painfully against her sternum. Would he take her voice away again, steal her breath, bind her into silence?

No. There was one sickening, stretched moment where she really thought he would lash out at her, and then it passed. He walked away, gone from sight in two long strides.

"Come, Miss Foster. Let me take you to your dear friend."

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Erik was sleeping badly. His fingers grasped at empty air, legs trembled, and eyelids fluttered, so restless that he seemed to be constantly on the verge of waking up. Jane sat in the darkness in a chair drawn up to the side of his bed and watched, ears straining for his voice as he muttered snatches of English and Swedish. The room was lit only by moonlight and starlight, the illumination sliding off each surface, pale and watery as skim milk.

Jane pressed one palm to the bed, longing to reach out and grasp Erik's hand but unwilling to wake him. She would give so much—so very much—for a friendly voice and a gentle touch just then. But there was nobody, and no one, and Erik would need her far more than she needed him in the days ahead. She was on her own.

Pulling her feet up off the floor, Jane braced them against the edge of the chair and rested her head on her knees. If she closed her eyes, the darkness was so intense it was almost like falling through the endless reaches of space.

She couldn't help feeling like she'd messed things up again. As necessary as it was to resist Loki—and keep resisting him, whatever he might do—just thinking about six months of this kind of endless confrontation was wearying. There was always the chance he might begin to ignore her, but Jane knew it was a long shot.

Something about her had gotten under his skin, and she would have to deal with it. Deal with his anger, his pain, and his unwillingness to leave her be. Was all this just because of Thor? Or was it her? Had she done something to attract him, even unwittingly?

"Stay away!" Erik cried, curling in on himself like a wounded animal, "stay out!" He muttered a few more times, and subsided again into silence. What was he imagining? What was possession like?

Jane never wanted to know. Oddly enough, she didn't think she would ever know. Loki had had chances to possess her, to control her mind and actions by force of his magic, but he never had. He might call her arrogant, ignorant, frustrating, or childish…but he had not used his ultimate power to rob her of freewill and compel her to do his bidding.

So…was that a good thing?

She put her head back between her knees and sank into the darkness.

00000

"Miss Foster? Jane?"

There was a hand on her shoulder, warm and smooth and soft. Jane leaned towards it, still shrouded in the gray fog of sleep; the perfume smelled familiar, lavender and fleece, like
something her mother used to wear. But it couldn't be her mother. Her mother was dead and gone…long ago.

"What?" she murmured, shifting in the chair, groaning as she registered the aches and pains in her shoulders and back from sleeping upright.

"It is seven o'clock. I thought you might want time to freshen up before your appointment this morning."

Only one person she knew spoke with such professional precision. Jane opened her eyes, glancing through puffy lids at the wide-open gaze of Lucia. It wasn't fair that she could look so fresh at such an ungodly hour. Granted, Jane had been more or less a nocturnal creature for the past year—and as an astronomer, was nocturnal in general—but she didn't need to feel any more inferior than she already did.

Lucia stood, hands at her sides, in a tailored navy sheath edged with white piping. Her heels tapped softly as she backed away, letting Jane unfold herself and stretch her legs. A soft chenille blanket slithered to the floor and Jane stared at it, mind blank. She could not remember pulling it over her shoulders; she could not remember seeing it in the room at all.

She hoped to God that Lucia had put it there and not…not anyone else.

Her knees creaked as she stood and Jane threw a glance over her shoulder. Erik slept on, breathing deep and even, some of the restlessness of the prior evening gone. He still shifted and mumbled occasionally, but with none of the violence of before.

"I will look in on him throughout the day," Lucia spoke very quietly, her voice pitched barely loud enough to reach Jane's ears, "so if you would like to rest later today, please do."

"Thank you," Jane replied, grateful to see the sincerity in her assistant's eyes, "but he's my responsibility. I'll take care of him."

"Very well," she nodded, "I have your things prepared in your bedroom."

Jane followed Lucia's confident steps three doors down the hallway, returning to the somewhat familiar sight of her new room. Maria stood waiting near a basin of steaming water, a towel draped over her arm, and Jane made a beeline for the woman, murmuring a "grazie" before splashing her face and making use of the assorted soaps.

Lucia answered the tap on the door a few minutes later and admitted one of the footmen from last night, carrying a silver-covered breakfast tray.

"So," Jane said, brow furrowing as Lucia laid out a napkin and silverware set, "I guess Loki and I won't be having breakfast together?"

She breathed a deep sigh of relief when Lucia shook her head and replied, "No. He informed me that he would oversee your call and then be gone for the day. A special session has been called of the new coalition government. Then he is meeting with the city council and having dinner with the mayor of Rome."

"Thank goodness," Jane murmured, plopping into her chair and sliding the napkin into her lap. Her breakfast—eggs Benedict with a side of fresh honeyed fruit—made her stomach growl savagely in payment for last night's hunger strike.

Lucia stood at attention to one side of the table, noticing everything—from Jane's dirty fork to her half-empty coffee cup—while her eyes remained at a polite middle-distance.
"Please sit down," Jane begged her, at last, "I'm not used to having someone wait on me. It's a little weird—awkward," she corrected herself quickly, "and besides, I have a question to ask you."

Her aide sat, only a brief beat of hesitation belying her unsteady internal state. Jane folded her napkin and sat back in her chair, studying the composed profile of the other woman.

"Why did you do it?"

"Do what, Miss Foster?"

"You let Loki hurt you," and her cheeks flushed as she remembered the horrible scene yet again, "for me. So that I could choose whether to follow his commands or not. You know you didn't have to…I would have protected you if you'd told me."

Lucia did not look at her, but her eyelashes fluttered and she glanced down at her manicured fingernails. "I know I did not have to," she said, softly, "but that is just the reason I did. Miss Foster," she looked Jane in the eyes, her mouth pinched at the corners, "I know what you must think of me…of all of us. You must think we're cowards."

Her cheeks went slightly redder at being so easily discovered, but she didn't say a word as Lucia went on:

"Some of us are. Some aren't. I will be honest and count myself among the cowards. But Maria, for example," she gestured at the elderly housekeeper, dusting bookshelves in the corner, "her son, Marcello, was a captain in the army defending the city. He was captured, tortured for information, and killed."

"His body was put on display with the rest of the so-called "traitors". But the next day, Maria joined Lord Loki's household staff to avoid any suspicion that her family was not loyal to the new order. She is the bravest, most selfless woman I have ever known."

Jane stared at her lap, shame battering at her heart in waves. How could she have been so cruel? So judgmental, so ungenerous? There were people in this house who went about their business with calm and pleasant facades, all the while bleeding internally from the loss of family, friends, or both.

What right had she to judge anyone?

"I…" her voice wobbled, and she looked up, Lucia's blonde hair shimmering like a halo through the veil of her tears, "I'm sorry."

"No, Miss Foster," a breath of warmth animated Lucia's words, and she leaned forward, "I do not tell you this to insult you. I tell you this so that you will understand. We all made our choice when we entered this house. We agreed to be treated the way we are treated. You did not; you are a prisoner. And because you are at his mercy," she concluded, firmly, "I will never violate the rights you deserve as a human being. Not even to spare myself pain."

Jane could not speak. She leaned forward and covered Lucia's hand with her own, squeezing hard while tears spilled over her cheeks. She took a breath and it shuddered in her throat.

"Thank you," was all she could manage.

"You're welcome. But you should dry those tears; after all, you will be talking to your lover soon."
Her laughter was almost indistinguishable from her sobs. "Does everyone know about that?"

"They always tell stories about gossip in a great house," she smirked, "but in certain cases, stories fall far from the truth. I suppose," she sighed, still smiling, "that it will be pointless to ask if you want to change your clothes?"

She scrubbed her wet eyes with the napkin, and threw it down. "I'll stick with these for now," she said, meeting Lucia's calm eyes, "if you don't mind?"

Lucia nodded. "Of course not. I understand."

Loki looked as ill-rested as she did, dark circles around his eyes and skin pale in the morning light. His hair was tousled, ends resting just below the collar of his purple shirt. A suit jacket and tie were slung over the back of his chair.

Jane stared at the striped purple and gray tie; it was so normal, so mundane, so human that she couldn't actually believe he was going to wear it. Wouldn't it make more sense (and be more intimidating) to show up at meetings in full armor, helmet sharp and shining, brandishing his staff?

_That presupposes he wants to intimidate, Jane,_ she reminded herself. _Maybe...maybe he means what he says._

She sat, hands folded in her lap, biting her lips, nervous as a schoolgirl who had forgotten her homework. Her eyes—when they weren't considering Loki—fixed on the cell phone in the middle of his desk.

Any minute now—

It rang.

She sprang forward, but he was faster; her fingertips skidded along the leather top of the desk after he had snatched the phone from under her. Jane glared at him and bit the inside of her cheek to keep from flinging herself across the desk to yank it back.

He smirked at her, leaned back in his chair, and drawled, "Well?"

Hearing only one side of a phone conversation, Jane decided, was the most annoying thing in the world. Especially when she was on the wrong side of the conversation.

"Of course she's safe."

"Be polite...or I may not let you speak to her at all."

He laughed, eyes alive and animated, as Thor growled his challenges from the other end. "But you cannot make good on your threats, God of Thunder...not while you remain tethered by that absurd league of so-called heroes. Does it not burn you as it does me to hear them called so? We who know the heroes of Valhalla! Why not free yourself from them?"

Jane opened her mouth but was silenced by Loki's upraised forefinger. She bit her lips and thought, so loudly she thought Thor might hear her: _no, no, the Avengers have to stay together... don't listen to him!_

"No? I'm sorry to see your judgment is as poor as it has always been, Thor."
Another burst of sound—Thor was angry enough to forget his English—made Loki lift the receiver from his ear and give Jane a mocking look of long-suffering. She stared back, boiling.

Thor stopped, and Loki leaned back in.

"Very well. I must say, Thor, you do not deserve her. Human though she is, common though she is, Jane Foster is your superior in many ways. A bit of friendly advice: take care not to betray your true quality, lest she lose interest in you."

Enough was enough. Jane slammed both hands flat on the desk and stood, leaning forward.

"Nothing could make me lose interest in Thor. And certainly not you or anything you say. Give me the phone."

Loki turned it to speakerphone and handed it over, while Thor's deep voice—still thundering abuse—washed into the room. She waited until he was done, then murmured, "Hi."

A beat. "Jane?"

"Yep," she turned sideways in her chair, trying to give herself a sense of privacy under Loki's stare, "it's me. I miss you."

He sighed in her ear. "And I you. Tell me the truth: are you well? Safe?"

Neither, she wanted to say.

Come save me, her heart begged.

"I'm all right," she said, "How is the team? And Pepper...is everyone all right?"

"They are all well. We have been resting while the army recovers. But we hear interesting news from the mutated humans in your country, Jane—"

She cut him off. "Don't tell me anything," Loki's eyes had hardened dangerously, "It's not safe."

He took her meaning—she heard a muttered curse, "Are we to have no privacy, brother?"

Loki grinned. "Hostage, brother. I make all the rules, and this one was quite explicitly stated. She has no privacy."

Jane tried to keep the peace by changing the subject. "How is the city? Are people starting to move back?"

Thor gave a grumbling sigh, but gave her a quick outline of the steps SHIELD was taking to repair and repopulate New York. At the very least, the government had enough money in its coffers (with a bit of help from abroad) to employ the necessary construction crews to begin repairs on all the damaged cities and harbors.

The news was simple and simply told—Thor was not a natural storyteller—but it lifted Jane's spirits sky-high. She found herself smiling for the first time in days. "That's great news, Thor."

"Indeed," he replied with a short laugh, "and Tony has been the most industrious of all. He has already put Miss Potts to work with the repairs on his tower, and the feats of strength he performs with his suit are quite impressive. Just yesterday, he—"

"While this conversation has been charming," Loki said, jolting Jane back to reality, "I am afraid that it has reached its end."
"No," Jane begged, holding the phone closer to her, reminded of the previous evening in the way her hands refused to let go. "Please; just a few minutes longer."

"Loki, we have barely spoken—"

"Jane," he ignored his brother and stared at her, hand extended, "do not make me force the issue."

She knew that his choice of words and posture was very deliberate; a shiver ran through her as she recalled the feeling of being held in place, muscles frozen, at the mercy of his will. Slowly, her fingers relaxed.

"I'll…" her throat was scratchy; she cleared it and tried again, "I'll talk to you in a few days, Thor. Give everyone my love, okay?"

"I will. I love you, Jane."

She nodded, closing her eyes. "I love you, too. Two days, all right?"

"Two days," his voice was as thick as hers. "Goodbye, Jane."

She couldn't say it; it sounded too final. She breathed, and murmured, "Talk soon."

The line went dead. She sat in dark silence until certain that no tears would fall when she opened her eyes.

Loki was still staring at her. Jane held his gaze, resigned: she knew what he was going to say. But it was still a slap in the face—stinging and more painful than any he'd given her before—when he said it.

"Liar."
Chapter Seventeen

The thought would have been inconceivable just a few weeks before, but one day, while lying on her back in the garden, browsing through a guidebook of Rome that Lucia had brought her, Jane realized she had settled into a routine. Generally, she woke late, took a long time to get ready, spent most of the day lounging in the gardens or exploring the villa (and all its amazing artwork), ate whenever she felt like it, and nursed Erik back to health and sanity.

Her routine was sometimes tense—as when Erik had thought her a figment of his imagination, and tried to strangle her—occasionally frightening—as when her conversations with Thor drove Loki into a rage—but most often…the rhythm of her days was simply boring.

Jane tossed aside her guidebook and sighed, staring up and watching the clouds drift aimlessly across the blue bowl of the sky. Had anyone asked her one word to describe her time as a hostage, "boring" would have been the last thing to come to mind. But she had so much time on her own, when both Loki and Lucia were busy with the business of running the new government, and she had nothing to do besides read the novels and other books that Lucia brought her, that "boring" was the only way to describe the days.

Still, Erik was getting better. It had taken the better part of a week for him to be able to sleep soundly, without waking or screaming during the night. Another few days had served to get him walking around and talking in complete sentences, and now…

Jane looked to her left and smiled as she watched her teacher sleeping on the grass beside her. Now he would not leave her alone. He followed her like a duckling follows its mother, always having to be in sight of her, or earshot at the very least. She had to stay with him until he fell asleep, sneaking back to her own room thereafter or sleeping on the comfy chair next to his bed. If she did return to her room, she had to wake before he did in the morning so he wouldn't panic if he didn't see her there.

It was exhausting, but Jane was not about to do any less for him. God knows, in the months after her parents' deaths, he'd done the same for her. And if his nightmares were anywhere near as bad as hers had been…it probably meant everything to see a friendly face in the morning.

She had spoken with Thor six times. In her mind, the conversations were like glass beads on a string; each one beautiful and unique. Mostly, they had talked of harmless things: her health, Erik's recovery, Tony's latest prank on Fury…but despite this simplicity, they had helped Jane feel grounded and connected to all she had left behind. Usually—for a few hours after each talk—Jane was quiet and pensive, homesickness eating away at her heart.

That was when Loki was most dangerous, and when she was least prepared to clash with him.

Her continuing refusal to accept what he offered—she still had not left the villa and stubbornly kept washing and wearing her own clothes—infuriated him. So far, he had neither hit nor spelled her, but he had unleashed all the considerable power of his sharp mind and even sharper tongue.

Jane had managed not to cry in front of him (yet), but his words—insults and insinuations, lies mixed with half-truths into black sludge that filled her heart with muck—had reduced her to tears on more than one occasion. She saved her tears for the ink-dark hours past midnight, when she couldn't sleep and her brain raced like a mouse on a wheel.

Last night had been one of those nights. Depression, heavy as a yoke, descended on her shoulders and pressed her into the ground. Jane pressed her hands against her face, feeling the hot, dry skin
around her eyes, and sighed.

"Are you all right?"

She turned again and smiled; the expression was unconvincing, even to her. "Isn't that my line?" she teased, "Be careful; you might end up having to take care of me."

Erik's face was serious, the frown lines around his mouth and eyes deepening as he spoke, "Someone should. You shouldn't have to carry this on your own. I still can't believe SHIELD let you come here in the first place."

She had explained the situation and the events leading to her imprisonment as simply as she could, but Erik had not been there for those mad hours—full of yells, and snarled accusations, and tired conversations with a spymaster—when Loki had threatened to bring them all to a premature end.

He couldn't understand. "Well, they did."

He waited for her to continue the thought, but she had nothing else to say. Erik sat up, shaking his head. "What happened to you, Jane? I've known you your entire life, and I've never known you to be so…passive about anything. And I never would have thought you'd be so passive about something like this."

Jane closed her eyes and swallowed, clamping down on the resentment that bubbled up in her throat. He couldn't understand. "What would you like me to do? Throw tantrums, rant and rave? I've done all that, believe me. But…” she ran out of energy, and shook her head, little pebbles under the grass digging into her scalp.

"But what?"

Her stomach and shoulders clenched against the acidic pain of shame and resentment in her belly. She didn't need this, not from him, not when she'd said it so often to herself. But what could she do? Night after night, she had tossed and turned and knotted herself into a sweaty, crying mess around her pillow…and she still had no answer to that question.

Well, not true. The answer she had found—time and time again—was merely unfulfilling. She could do nothing.

She shrugged, eyes still closed.

"Jane, come on," she pressed her eyes closed so hard that she saw stars and bit her lip; he couldn't understand, "answer me. What's going on?"

"Why didn't you fight back?" she snapped, a single tear running from the corner of her eye as she stared at him, "When he made you spy on me, drug me, cut yourself…why didn't you fight back?"

She could have sobbed at the expression on Erik's face as she threw her ugly words at him. He dropped her gaze, but not before she saw the tears in his eyes and the draining color in his face. Jane was hyperventilating and she could not stop.

"I'll tell you why," she went on, gasping, "you did it because you had no choice. And that's why I've done what I've done. That's why I begged him on my knees, that's why I kissed him…that's why I'm his hostage. Because I had no other choice."

She stood up, head spinning a crazy dance with the sky and the ground. "I don't want to talk about this."
His hand fastened around hers as she started to stumble away. "Jane," she did not look down, "Jane, I'm sorry…I should have known. I'm so sorry."

His hand around her wrist was a warm anchor, drawing her back down to the earth. She sighed and wiped her face. Then, slowly, she turned and sat down again.

"It's just…" she swiped tears away from her face again, "you really didn't have a choice. He'd possessed you. But he didn't possess me. So everything I've done…was my choice. I'm responsible."

"You're not," he pressed her limp hand between both of his, "you're not."

"I am. And I have to figure out a way to live with the guilt. But for the first time in my life," she said, squeezing his fingers with hers like a baby does to its mother, "I have no idea what I'm supposed to do."

He laughed. It was the first time in seven months, and Jane smiled through her tears. "You know, Thor said the same thing to me. The night I…" he laughed harder, "made my ancestors proud. He was just realizing that he'd been wrong about a lot of things, and that his life was taking a much different path than he'd expected. Of course, at the time I thought he was crazy…but I'll tell you the same thing I told him. Jane…"

He took her by the shoulders and smiled, "It's not a bad thing finding out that you don't have all the answers. You start asking the right questions."

Ask the right questions, Jane thought. But without knowing what to do, how could she know which questions were the right ones?

*Sometimes, Erik, your simple truths are less than helpful. I don't need a Yoda. I need a roadmap with some clear directions: turn left, 3.2 miles, turn right.*

Jane wandered the great halls of the villa, eyes absently roaming the details of the *trompe l'oeil* paintings. Every so often, she would catch something—a chubby-cheeked cupid hiding behind a pillar or a fluffy cloud, edged in gold—that made her stop and smile. If she couldn't look at the stars, looking at art helped steady her mind and gave her racing thoughts something else to focus on.

Right now, Jane was focusing on asking the right questions. In the tradition of Marcus Aurelius—and how fitting that was here!—she had to consider first principles. What was a question? Well, a question is dependent on the answer one wants to receive. What did she want to know? What did she want to know?

Obviously, she wanted to know what she should do. But knowing what to do wasn't the endgame; the endgame would be getting the knowledge to kick Loki out of her world. Getting rid of Loki would mean that she would have to get some kind of power back. On her own—even with Erik and Lucia on her side—she had nothing.

She needed allies. And there were no allies in this place. Lucia had said it—everyone here had made a choice. She had nothing to offer that would compete with what Loki could give. Jane stopped, and sighed.

Put in those terms, her course of action was simple: to find allies, she would have to go outside. To go outside, she would have to put on the hated collar.
Despite the inevitability of her conclusion, the decision weighed heavily on Jane for the rest of the day. She went back to her bedroom—dodging Erik as he went down the hall to his own room—and leafed through a Larry Niven novel. Though he was normally one of her favorites (her father had owned a whole set of dog-eared, much-loved paperbacks) she did not read one word in ten.

The necklace lay where she had left it, glinting black and silver on the warm wood of the side table. Jane slid the cord between her fingers and let the charm dangle above her; it caught sparks from the late afternoon sun and made her blink.

The rune was straightforward; it was simple, with straight lines and sharp angles. So different from the man himself…twisted, bent, broken.

The idea of voluntarily placing that charm on her throat was nauseating. Jane slapped it down on the table and rolled over, like a child stubbornly refusing to get out of bed even though the school bus is rumbling down the street.

She sighed. "Grow up, Jane," she whispered, shaking her head, "what does it matter? It's a piece of metal…it doesn't mean anything. It's just a stupid symbol. Doesn't mean a thing."

But it did. Symbols had power, they had strength, and influence…what would it do to her if she allowed it to touch her skin? How would it change her?

The door whispered open, wind whistling from the open windows in a sudden gust. Jane sat upright; it wasn't like Lucia to come into her room without knocking. But the wide-eyed look of suppressed panic in her assistant's eyes made her shut her mouth and wait for Lucia to speak.

"Trouble."

Jane stood immediately, body ready for a fight. "Is Erik all right?"

Lucia took a quick breath and some of the tension left her frame. "Yes, Miss, he's fine. But Lord Loki has just told me that he wants you to accompany him to dinner with Mayor Alemanno and his wife at the Palazzo Chigi tonight."

She felt as though she'd been punched in the stomach. The confrontation she had been dreading for weeks was finally here. Despite her dread, she had a sudden and uncontrollable desire to laugh. So she did.

Lucia stared at her like she had sprouted another head. "Jane?" she must have been afraid, for she almost never called her anything other than "Miss Foster", "Are you all right?"

"It's just so ridiculous," Jane kept chuckling, leaning against her side table with one hand and clutching her ribs with the other, "I don't know anything about diplomacy! My idea of small talk is particle physics or star classifications and I babble when I get nervous…I'm babbling now! Why on Earth would he want to take me with him?"

She hadn't thought it possible for Lucia's eyes to get any wider, but there was a solid ring of white around her assistant's ice-blue irises. Then, miracle of miracles, she started laughing too.

"I have no idea," she was bent double, words gasped out as she giggled, "but he is very serious, Jane. He told me," she wheezed, and got control again, "he told me to make sure that you chose something suitable to wear. I don't think you can get away with your cargo pants anymore."

Jane shook her head and took two cleansing breaths. "I don't think I can either," she said, wrapping her arms around her shoulders. She was that nervous child, facing the first day at a new school. She didn't want to get out of bed, but she had to. "I guess you'd better pick something
The dress Lucia chose was very nice. In fact, had Jane the five thousand dollars to spare, she might have bought it for herself. It was a knee-length sheath dress with a scoop neck, made of soft navy wool. It gathered to a knot on one side just at her natural waist, and the knot was embellished with a spray of crystals ranging in color from white to navy blue, spreading over the dark fabric like a shooting star cutting through the twilight sky.

Jane checked herself in the mirror, turning and bending. It felt comfortable, like something she had worn dozens of times. That certainly gave credence to all that fashion show advice of quality over quantity. Not that she'd ever had the money for either quantity or quality…but she did like fashion shows.

She noticed Lucia giving her the once-over as well, and was pleased when her aide nodded to herself and went off to select shoes. Jane wondered, but refrained from asking just who had chosen her clothes, knowing that the answer would most likely be unpleasant.

Lucia returned with a pair of black leather pumps with a heel low enough for Jane to manage. Still, she borrowed Lucia's shoulder to steady herself while climbing in. Jane hated it, but had to admit that the heels forced her out of the habitual slump-shouldered posture that most scientists were plagued by.

She looked at the woman in the mirror, all dolled up, and felt a wave of disgust sweep up her throat. "I like this," she hissed, turning to face her friend, "I hate that I like this. What the hell kind of person am I?"

"You'd have to be a very strong-willed woman indeed to resist the lure of Salvatore Ferragamo," Lucia's joke fell flat, and the weak smile dropped from her face. "I know, Jane," she put one cool hand on Jane's bare shoulder, "It's not easy, for any of us. But none of us have a choice."


"How much time do I have?"

"How much time…?"

She clarified, "Before he comes to get me. How much time do I have?"

"A-another forty-five minutes," Lucia said, checking her watch and clearly confused, "but I still have to do your hair and makeup—"

"There'll be time," Jane was speaking fast now, crossing the room in her sharp heels—click, click, click—and took a notepad and pen out from the drawer of the dressing table. "I need ten minutes," she turned, meeting Lucia's confused look with her own determined stare, "and then you can curl me and tweeze me or—or whatever it is you do," she pointed to the door, "but I need ten minutes, first."

It was clear that Lucia had no idea what she was up to. It was also clear that she had no intention of asking.

"I will go and look in on Dr. Selvig," she said, turning to the door, "Shall I tell him where you are going tonight?"
"No," Jane was already sitting and uncapping the pen, "I don't want to worry him. Just…" she shrugged, "just make something up. Tell him I'll be there when he wakes up in the morning."

The door shut. Jane stared at the blank sheet of paper, and started to write.

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Jane felt polished and refined…and therefore totally unlike herself. The person in the mirror was hardly someone she recognized. The features were her own; no trick of makeup could camouflage her upturned nose or sharp cheekbones. But the sweep of shadow on her upper lids and the deep berry shade of her lips gave her a maturity and gravitas that Jane rarely felt.

She certainly did not feel it now. Her entire body was a live wire, vibrating on a frequency that did not allow for a second of rest or relaxation. She could not sit, but she paced slowly from window to wall, gaze studiously avoiding the charm that still rested on the table, winking at her every time she turned.

It was a not-so-subtle reminder: this was her fate. Somehow, her life and ambition, her education and her courage, had come down to this moment of voluntary slavery. Submission could be power…wasn't that what some women said? Submission could lead to control.

The thought just made Jane sick.

Lucia had offered to fasten it around her throat, knowing Jane's aversion to the idea. She had refused, and Lucia had made herself scarce in that diplomatic way of hers. Jane let her go with no argument; it would be better if the confrontation was just between her and Loki.

Who was due to arrive at any minute now.

And right on cue…

Had he dressed to match her, or was it a figment of her racing imagination? His black suit was as immaculately tailored as ever, but his shirt was shimmering gray silk and the tie was blue…both shades reminiscent of the crystals on her dress. The colors suited him well, complimenting the smooth pallor of his skin and the midnight dark of his hair.

And it was clear from the way his eyes swept her figure that the dress was doing good things for her as well. Jane swallowed her disgust and fear to meet his gaze with as much confidence as she could muster.

"Good evening, Jane," he said, softly, "you look well."

She could not return the compliment, but she managed a whispered, "Thank you."

He crossed the room, footsteps deliberate, each one like a gunshot in the near-silence of the room. Jane could feel her heart pounding as his eyes moved from her eyes down to her throat…then slid beyond her to the necklace on the table. The silence welled up between them, pressing on Jane's ears and making her head ache.

"You know what I'm going to say, Jane," he turned towards her infinitesimally, the top of her head level with his chin. She felt his breath on her face, warm and soft as the spring wind. She nodded, swallowing.

"Well?"  

Submission can be power. Submission can be strength. You have to. It means nothing.
All those mantras failed her.

"I can't," her voice broke, "I just can't."

"Shh," he placed a palm on her back, the skin warm and dry and the fingers spanning her vertebrae the way a pianist touches the keys before beginning a sonata. "Would it make you feel better if I did it?"

His unspoken question echoed in her mind: *would it make you feel better if you had no choice?*

His mercy—twisted and horrible as it was—flooded her with such a rush of relief that it nearly knocked her to her knees. Jane looked inside her for the strength to shrug off his hand and fasten the thing around her own neck…but found nothing. It was shameful…but she *needed* his mercy.

She nodded.

The metal was cold—unexpectedly so, given that the charm had been lying all day in a pool of sunlight. But the minute the clasp closed—her ears registered the tiny snap of metal—a sudden shock, like electricity, flowed through her and warmed it up. A completed circuit. Jane knew that it was not going to come off.

His fingers dropped from the necklace, but came to rest lightly on the long muscles along her neck and shoulders. The sensation made her shiver, the skin of her arms pebbling. Between her upswept hair and the plunging back of her dress, she felt naked.

"I know how you feel, Jane," he murmured, stepping closer. She felt the long line of his body pressed against her back, warm, smothering. "But there is nothing shameful in this. Bowing to the demands of reality is the mark of a rational mind."

He pressed a kiss into the skin just below her pulse and above the leather cord. Jane shuddered. Somehow, the kiss felt like a mark more obvious than the silver rune between her collarbones.

He stepped in front of her again, taking in her complete look. Jane expected to see a look of triumph on his face—Thor's little scientist, finally branded with his hated brother's seal—but she saw nothing. He looked a little…disappointed. As though his own intractability had gotten him the result he wanted—only to find out that he no longer wanted it.

"Shall we?"

Like a gentleman (like this whole situation wasn't completely *insane* and they were just a normal man and woman heading out for a night on the town) he offered her his arm. Jane stared at it.

*It's just a symbol, Jane. It doesn't mean anything. You can do this. You have to do this.*

Arm in arm, they walked out into the Roman sunset.

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"How do you find living in the Villa Farnesina, Miss Foster?"

Somehow, Jane had managed to get through cocktail hour, all four courses at dinner, and post-dinner drinks without making too much of an idiot of herself. Mostly, she had listened as intently as possible as Mayor Alemanno—Gianni, he preferred to be called—and Loki had discussed city operations and smiled and nodded whenever anyone asked her a question.

Now, she sat on the veranda with the Madame Mayor—who had insisted that Jane call her
Allegra—and a few other women of high standing in the new government. This was the time she was most concerned about. This was the fulcrum of her plan.

She took a sip of her coffee. "It is very beautiful," she said, "the artwork is unlike anything I've ever seen, outside of a museum."

"Well, the Villa used to be a museum," Allegra said, nodding, "but I am sure that Lord Loki will be certain to maintain the quality of the works therein." Everyone nodded, but Jane could not tell if they were being sincere or diplomatic. Considering that everyone here was a diplomat's wife, the two expressions were nearly identical.

The conversation drifted on to other topics—Jane's knowledge of Rome, her career—and she started to breathe easier. Allegra seemed genuinely nice, and her plan—far-fetched at first—now started to seem more feasible.

After a brief pause while the staff came around to refresh coffee cups, the wife of the French liaison to the coalition government—Jane could not remember her name—smiled thinly and asked, "How long have you been with Lord Loki, Miss Foster?"

She choked, nearly spewing coffee all over her nice dress. Even some of the other women looked startled at the question; nonetheless, no one spoke up in her defense either by changing the subject or absolving her from answering the question. She was clearly the subject of some tabloid gossip—she remembered the soldiers on the helicarrier, and the way they'd looked at her—and everyone was politely desperate to hear her answer.

She could almost hear their thoughts:

*Is she a captive? Why would he take her...what can she give him...whose was she? Is she willing? What did he promise her...who did she betray?*

Jane licked her lips—belatedly remembered not to smudge her lipstick—and stared down at her cold hands, wrapped around the tiny silver coffee cup. Allegra came to her rescue:

"Come, ladies," she gave a breathless laugh, "the gentlemen will be coming out soon, and we should not be so serious when they do. Madame Arnaut, may I offer you—"

"I am not with Loki," Jane's head came up and she fixed the French diplomat's wife with a hard stare, "I know it looks that way; but I'm not. If anyone's spreading rumors to that effect," she finished, drawing up her shoulders and for once feeling as though this was a fight she could win, "I'd prefer you'd set them straight."

A momentary pause. Then: "We will, Miss Foster," Allegra nodded, smiling. Jane took a deep breath, and extended her hand.

"Thank you."

She saw Allegra's face change momentarily as she felt the paper Jane palmed into her hand. Only momentarily, however. Deft as a magician, the folded square disappeared against her wineglass and she was calling for a toast as the doors opened and the men came out to join them.

Jane took a deep swig of her wine as all the women stood to greet their husbands and Loki cut smoothly through the throng to take a seat beside her.

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*My name is Jane Foster. I am the American astrophysicist who created the portals that brought*
Thor to Earth. I am a prisoner at the Villa, a hostage of the alien called Loki. However I may act or appear, I do not want to be in this situation. I know that there is a resistance movement in the city—both human and mutant—and I want to be part of that movement.

I am completely in your power. You can betray me to Loki, or tear up this letter and never think of it again. I would not blame you for either action. All I am asking is that you give my name to the resistance and tell them where to find me. Starting tomorrow, I will go running along the Tiber between 8 and 9 every day. Let them know.

We can save this city. We can save the world. All we have to do is work together…and not be afraid. But we are all afraid, we are all at his mercy. I am begging you to fight that fear, and help me. Then you can forget that I—and this letter—ever existed.
Chapter Eighteen

Jane was not used to wearing jewelry in the first place, much less leaving it on when she slept, so the necklace around her throat felt tight as a noose as she tossed and turned in the darkness of her room. But even if she’d been able to take it off, she wouldn’t have been able to sleep anyway. Her mind was active and her heart was pounding, rehashing the events of the evening until they were mashed flat in her head.

Certainly by now, Allegra had told her husband about the letter that Jane had given her. They were probably talking over options, deciding how best to act…and wondering if she was sincere or if the whole thing was just a plot by Loki to test their loyalties. Jane knew her chances were slim. There was no reason for them to trust her. At dinner, she’d held her tongue—smiled and nodded, screaming inside—probably appearing as nothing more than Loki’s pretty, brainless companion.

"Companion" was a mild word. There were others…to describe what they must think she was.

Jane gave up on the idea of sleep and stood up, snatching her robe from the foot of the bed and wrapping it around her. The hallway was moonlit and silent, and the door of Erik’s bedroom groaned just slightly as she nudged it open. He was sleeping soundly, curled up on one side, hands clasped together as in prayer. She folded her legs underneath her, sitting against the arched back of the comfy chair, and watched him.

If Allegra and Mayor Alemanno—she couldn’t think of him as "Gianni"—did believe her, and if they did put her in contact with the mutants…well, what then? Spying on Loki would be difficult, dangerous, and would make it necessary for her to be in even closer contact with him than she already was. She would have to earn his trust…to convince him that she was starting to believe in his plan for mankind, that she might be accepting him…

She sighed. An indescribable emotion welled up in her chest, tightening her throat. It felt composed of the usual anger and frustration that dogged her most days, but at its core, there was also a rotten heart of guilt. Guilt that, no matter how necessary or justified it was, she was still in the position of having to play with someone else’s emotions in order to achieve her ends.

Now Jane was angry. How could she have become so...attached or in tune with Loki that she felt any guilt whatsoever about having to manipulate him? He was the world’s enemy. He was her enemy. And all was fair in love and war. Thinking the word "love" in the same paragraph as Loki felt wrong, and Jane shifted in her chair as if to wiggle away from her thoughts.

But there was no way out of her brain. She had to talk about this with someone, anyone.

"Erik," she whispered, leaning forward and resting her hand gently on Erik’s interlaced fingers, "Erik,"

He stirred, head jerking as though dodging a blow. "Jane? What's wrong?" he blinked, eyes narrowed like a turtle’s. He rolled over, out of her reach.

"Can we talk?"

Many conversations had started between them in this way, quite a few of them happening in the darkest hours of night, when Jane—young or old—could not sleep from sadness, confusion, or fear. She had lived with Erik—her legal guardian, all other close relatives being dead—for years, after all, and the first six months after her parents’ deaths were difficult to bear.
He must have been thinking of that past just as much as she; he sat up immediately, not even irritated for being disturbed so abruptly. He leaned against the headboard and made a move to turn on the light.

"No," she stopped him, voice no louder than a whisper, "just in case."

Erik blinked, eyes dark in the pooling shadows of the room. "What's wrong?"

"I…” she gathered her knees to her chest and wrapped her arms around them, "I just need someone to talk to. I started something tonight, and don't know what's going to happen. I'm scared."

"What did you do?" His voice was gentle still, not accusatory, but his body stiffened and one hand clenched to a fist in the blankets.

"Loki took me with him to dinner with the mayor and some delegates from the new coalition government," she began, knowing that Lucia had not told him this, "an organization of representatives from the countries that have surrendered. Anyway, I'd been thinking that there had to be a way for me to fight, even if we're stuck in here. So I wrote a letter to the mayor and gave it to his wife, asking them to help me get in contact with the mutants."

"The mutants?" Erik was still speaking quietly, but she could hear the hysteria dancing behind his words, "What do they have to do with any of this?"

She reminded herself that he had had no way of catching up on the last seven months' history, "The mutants have started uprisings all over the world," she began, "and it was the one here in Rome that SHIELD used as a diversion to conquer New York. I figured, if anyone was still going to be fighting Loki in the conquered territories, it would be them."

"So," he was not so gentle now, "you wrote a letter confessing that you still wanted to fight," he ticked each mistake off on his shaking fingers, "and gave it to strangers," she winced, "knowing that they could decide to do anything with it, including turn you in. In which case, you would have put yourself and the Avengers at risk."

She nodded, but he wasn't finished.

"And if they did decide to help," he went on, leaning forward so she could see the deep furrows in his brow, "you would succeed in throwing yourself into the middle of the worst war this world has ever known. Does that about cover everything?"

"Well…it sounds really stupid when you say it like that," she muttered, resting her chin on her knees.

"I wonder how that could be," he sighed, "oh, Jane, didn't you think about what could happen?"

"Of course I did," she said, "all afternoon, after you'd insulted me for implying I was being passive. Well, you can't say I'm passive now! Look," she said, "they wouldn't achieve anything by turning me in. I figure the worst that can happen is that they decide it's a trick and don't do anything. But if they do put me in contact with the rebels," she had to stifle her inner Star Wars nerd, "I can pass information from the inside. And since I'm already inside," she finished, triumphant, "I'll be totally safe!"

"Totally safe," he repeated, deadpan, "spying on an all-powerful psychopath."

"He's not all-powerful."
"He's close enough that the differences don't matter to us," Erik shook his head, "Jane, I was with him when he tortured people for information, or disciplined the Skrull. You can't even imagine some of the things he's capable of...I hope you never have to imagine it. I don't want you doing something stupid to put yourself in danger."

"I can't sit on the sidelines, Erik," she said, "I've tried, but you're right; as long as we're alive, we have to do something. It's not fair to let everyone else fight this battle. Anyway," she cut him off as he tried to break in, "it's done now. But...I just feel weird about it."

He scrubbed his face with both hands, clearly wrestling with the impulse to take her by the shoulders and physically shake some sense into her. Finally, he could looked up again.

"Define "weird"," he said.

That used to be a catchphrase of her mother's, borrowed from Mr. Spock. Jane, she'd say, whenever her daughter used some platitude or vague word to explain herself, Define "cool"; specify "crappy".

It made Jane smile; even if the smile faded quickly. "It's...I feel...I feel guilty."

Pause. "Why?" He sounded as incredulous as she felt.

"I don't know," she growled, nails digging into her knees, "it's so stupid. We don't owe him anything; I should just do what I have to do. But I still feel bad." At Erik's look of complete befuddlement, she clarified, "For manipulating his emotions."

"You think he has emotions to manipulate?"

"Yeah," the idea was strange, but it was starting to fit into Jane's concept of Loki, "he does. I mean, at first I thought it was all anger at his family and lust for power. But he wants other things too. It may be stupid," she bit her lip, "but I think that he wants to help us. Or at least he thinks he does. He wants to prove that he can rule...prove it to himself, not just his family."

Erik did not look convinced, so she went on. "It was the way he talked last night; he was working with those people. Not threatening them. They were talking about imports, supply lines, agricultural development; he was making sure that no one would starve. If he just wanted to conquer us," she pressed her hands together, "he wouldn't care about any of that. He feels responsible for us...maybe even fond of us, in a smug, condescending kind of way."

"Like we're his pets," Erik spat.

"Maybe something like that," Jane said, nodding. She sighed and dropped her legs to the floor, slumping forward.

Erik leaned forward as well. "But that doesn't explain why you're feeling guilt. You can't be getting a soft spot because someone looks at you like you're a dog. This is something else," he stopped, suddenly getting very still as a thought washed over him, "Jane...he's not in love with you, is he?"

There it was again: "love" and "Loki". It still felt wrong.

"No, nothing like that," she assured him, watching the way he heaved a silent sigh of relief, "but he...tells me things. He trusts me, sometimes. And he's done things for me, to get me on his side: letting you go, trying to make peace. Maybe I'm nothing more than a favorite pet, but...I don't know! To get anything useful I'm going to have to encourage him to trust me more, to talk to me...and I feel bad about it. Why?"
"Because you're a better person than you should be, in times like these."

She shrugged. "Maybe. I just wish I weren't. It's not like he deserves it, or anything. Every action he has is selfishly motivated. And the way he treats Thor is awful. I just wish I could predict him. Sometimes he's almost nice and other times he's so awful that I never want to be in the same room with him. But you can't ever tell what's coming next. If he'd just be a bastard all the time, I could hate him all the time."

"You don't hate him?"

Silence, pain, flames. Tony in agony, Thor's stricken face, the pilots screaming as they died. Jane had used the word "hate"; she'd wished that someone would kill him. But then, there were comfortable rooms instead of prison cells, clean clothes, a friend—friends, if she could count Lucia…and Loki had talked of distribution centers, of setting up headmen in the city to make sure everyone received their rations…

"I'm not sure. Not anymore."

Erik sank back into silence, swallowing whatever indignant retort that made him shake his head and sigh. He just stared at her, regret and fear clouding his face. Eventually he fell asleep, and Jane was left alone with her scarcely settled thoughts. She hardly minded; the bombshell that she had just dropped could not have made him feel any better, and he was still exhausted. She just felt awful for hurting him. There was nothing he could do; she would have to deal with this moral crisis on her own.

Jane drowsed fitfully in her nemesis—the comfy chair—waking for the last time an hour after dawn. Maria was laying out breakfast in her room when she stumbled back in, much the worse for wear after another restless night. She helped herself to a cup of coffee and sipped it, stomach too unsettled to handle food.

The last thing she wanted to do was go running—she was tired and irritated, a poor combination—but on the off-chance that Allegra had decided to help her, she was not going to skip out. And at least her wardrobe was well-stocked; she put on a tank top and a pair of leggings, shoving on her own sneakers before heading downstairs.

She stepped out on the veranda and stretched, rising to her toes and feeling her muscles warm and pull with the movement. The sun was warm and shone brightly through the branches of the trees below, dappling the ground with cool shadows.

And there, lying on a blanket on the grass, was Loki.

It was the first time she had ever seen him there. It was also the first time Jane had ever seen him looking so…peaceful. His long body, usually tense and controlled, was languid, one leg stretched out before him and the other bent at the knee. His head lay pillowed on his hands, hair gleaming obsidian in the morning light against his pale skin.

No time like the present.

Her sneakers were soundless on the stairs into the garden, and he did not open her eyes, even when the seedpods from the budding trees crunched beneath her feet. For a moment she stood above him, staring down at his relaxed face—with its hint of a smile—and felt her heart soften just the tiniest bit at the sight.

"Good morning, Jane."
His eyes were open now, a hint of color as green as the grass around him. He blinked lazily, like a cat when disturbed from a nap, and patted the ground beside him.

"Have a seat. It's a lovely day."

Jane obeyed, sitting cross-legged and sharing his blanket, eyes not moving from his face. "Yes, it is," she agreed. "Recovering from last night?"

He closed his eyes again and gave a slow shrug, "That was nothing. Things in the city are running fairly smoothly now; you should have seen our first negotiations. Gianni is a shrewd man—I'm tempted to make him my lieutenant—and he keeps the others in line. He knows what is best for his city."

"He seems like a good man," she said, "if somewhat…flamboyant. Actually, he reminds me a little bit of Tony."

Loki chuckled, shaking his head, "He is far more practical than Mr. Stark. Technological discoveries aside, of course. How did you find his wife?"

Jane hesitated. "As…shrewdly diplomatic as her husband," he laughed outright at that, while Jane quickly followed with, "but she was very nice. Some of the other ladies could take a lesson in manners from her."

"Why?" he looked at her, brow furrowed, "What happened? What did they say?"

"Oh, nothing too bad," she shook her head, "they just drew some very reasonable conclusions that happened to be entirely wrong. But they're politicians' wives…I imagine that usually the conclusions they draw are usually entirely right. It was just a little embarrassing. Anyway, Allegra took care of them."

From the solemn expression on his face, Jane knew he understood her perfectly. She looked down at her folded hands, expecting him to mock her for her modesty and shame for being mistaken as his consort. But he surprised her again by his silence.

"Why did you take me along, anyway?" Jane tried to shake off the unpleasant memory, "I'm no diplomat. And you ought to know I'm no good at making small talk."

"Those who are good at small talk rarely have anything of greater importance to say, which could hardly be said of you," he said, "and rest assured, it was not for your political skills that I brought you along."

She smiled. "I'm not sure whether that was a compliment, but thanks…I guess."

He smirked. "You may take it in any way that you wish. No," he went on, "I brought you along because I wanted you to see that—no matter how you distrust my words—that I am sincere when I tell you that I mean to care for Midgard. You were correct; one cannot rule by means of fear and intimidation. One can only conquer by those means. You have known me as a conqueror only."

Jane swallowed. "And it matters what I think of you?"

"Of course it does," he replied, simply, "it matters a great deal. I want you to know me, Jane."

She dropped his gaze, tearing at blades of grass and shredding them with her nails. Tension roiled in her stomach.

"I think…I'm starting to believe you," she said.
He was quiet for a long moment, mouth drawn. "But that grieves you, does it not? You would rather I be the villain, even at the expense of people's lives? The lives that you so fiercely defend?"

Horrified at the gleam of truth in his words, she flinched, nails digging into her palm. He went on, body curving like a snake as he rose to his elbows:

"There is the flaw in your logic, the crack in your reasoning," he said, "you want a pure villain, against whom all resistance is necessary and proper. But no one is a pure villain, Jane. Not even I."

"No, you're not," she whispered, "you're not," stronger now, "but you said it; you're both a conqueror and a ruler. I can't abide what one does, even if the other tries to amend it...even if he amends it well. You're not one thing or the other, Loki," his eyes widened as she voluntarily spoke his name, "so how do you expect me to feel?"

He sat upright, eyes level with hers, unblinking as he drew closer. Jane fought her panic and sat perfectly still, even when he put one hand on her shoulder, thumb dipping into the hollow of her throat. His grip did not tighten, and though Jane's heart did beat faster, she felt almost no fear.

"We had a poor introduction, you and I," he said, "had you known me before all this began—and more importantly," he scoffed, "had you known Thor as he used to be—you opinion of our relative worth might be quite the opposite. I will not deny that some of my actions were motivated by jealousy and arrogance, but you could find few of Thor's actions not motivated by the same. But he was the golden child, and more were likely to forgive him his..."youthful transgressions", as it were."

""There is just enough merit between them to make one good sort of man"," Jane quipped, shaking her head and closing her hand over his, pulling it away from her throat. At his look of confusion, she clarified, "Jane Austen described two of her characters—one the seeming cad and the other the seeming hero—that way. When the heroine was changing her mind about each man's nature."

"Jane Austen, the nineteenth-century novelist?"

"You know her?" Jane said, incredulous, "So, what...when you studied Shakespeare you made a diversion through Regency novels too?"

"I was incapacitated for some time," he said, "and contemplating the control of a realm I did not understand. Familiarizing myself with your literary canon was a way to pass the time and come to understand the nature of your species. Jane Austen was not my favorite," he admitted, "but you mortals are not devoid of talented storytellers."

Jane laughed, running her fingers through her hair and pressing her hands against her temples. "So...which of us "mere mortal storytellers" did you prefer?"

"Ernest Hemingway, for his particularly unembellished understanding of war," he listed them quickly, "Shakespeare, for his wonderful characterizations—and dialogue—John Steinbeck, Marcus Aurelius, Natsume Soseki...who else?"

Jane shivered; it seemed wrong for someone so alien to have such knowledge (and seeming appreciation) of human literature. Then again...

"You're such a man," she said, shaking her head, "No Toni Morrison, Charlotte Bronte, or Jane Austen? You'd have fit right into my AP Literature class in high school. Twelve boys and all of them bellyached all semester long about having to read chick lit."
"It is hardly my fault," he gave a mock pout at her displeasure, "if your female authors bore me with their descriptions of finery and their endless prattle about emotions."

She snorted and opened her mouth to defend Jane Austen's clear-eyed and satiric portrayal of Regency culture when a sudden wave of dizziness nearly overwhelmed her. Her laughter faded as quickly as it had come. This was wrong. "Are we having a conversation?"

"That would generally be the term for two people speaking, yes." Despite his flippant tone, he clearly understood her unspoken meaning. They sat in silence for a long moment.

"I was going to go for a run," Jane said, fumbling for an out, "I should go before it gets too warm."

He nodded slowly, eyes searching her flushed face. "You should. But I would be very interested in continuing this conversation later," he watched her unflinching as she stumbled upright and brushed blades of grass from her legs, hands uncertain, "if you would care to join me for dinner this evening?"

This was a man asking for a date, not someone issuing a command. Jane's hands shook and her stomach was icy cold. "All right," she said, taking a few steps backwards, "okay."

Loki gave a thin-lipped smile and lay back again, eyes closing. "Enjoy your run," he said, smirking as Jane bolted back up the stairs and into the Villa.

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No one, from the footmen to the maids, challenged her as she went outside. They only glanced at the necklace around her throat—the same one that hung from their own necks—and opened the outer gate to let her out to the river. The Tiber gleamed like dull gold in the sun, muddy with yellow silt.

For a while, Jane just strolled the banks, leaning on the high stone walls and standing on her toes to watch it flow slowly along. To her right she could see San Bartolomeo, its terra-cotta bell tower stretching towards the high sun. To her left, she could see the river parting around several other bridges down the length of the river, each one lined with pedestrians as they crossed to and fro to work.

The sun, even at eight in the morning, was high and hot; it reminded her of the pitiless sunlight of New Mexico. Usually, she preferred doing her runs either before dawn or after sunset to avoid the heat, but this would have to do.

After weeks of spending her days inside, or behind the walls of the enclosed garden, the sensation of freedom was intoxicating. Jane started her jog with no stretch, her muscles stiff and unwilling at first, but soon relaxing as her sneakers slapped the cobblestones faster and faster as she forgot to pace herself and thought only of moving.

Jane ran, racing against the river as her pace became more frantic and desperate. Sweat prickled and dripped from her forehead and dampened the hair at her temples; her breath came hard in her throat and burned her lungs but she didn't stop. The heat was welcoming; it burned away the cool shadows of the garden and the expression in Loki's face as he'd looked at her, hoping for her understanding and sympathy.

She slammed her eyes shut, trying to block out the memories, but they were inside her now. The uneven cobbles caught at her feet and she stumbled, skinning her palm as she flung one arm wide to break her fall.
Jane slumped against the wall, panting. Her knees shook and she took pity on them, sitting with her back against the wall. Pedestrians gave her strange looks as they parted around her—a sweaty, mousy heap of a girl clutching her legs to her chest as though she might fall to pieces at any moment—but some of the kinder ones smiled and asked "Va bene, signorina?"

No, she thought at them, all the while smiling and nodding, not bene. Not anymore.

Eventually, the kindness of strangers overwhelmed her and she clambered upright to get away from the crowds. Leaving the river behind, Jane plunged into the Trastavere neighborhood, wandering the narrow alleyways and lingering outside pleasant restaurants, where laborers and businesspeople—on their way to work—stopped for a cup of coffee or a quick breakfast.

Being among people—even people with whom she shared no common language or culture—was comforting. But she was irreconcilably separate from them, and not merely because of her mother tongue. Every time she went into a shop or passed a crowd of people, someone would inevitably catch sight of her pendant. A hush would descend and everyone would inch away from her until Jane stood in the middle of a bubble of silence.

However subtle they tried to be about it, Jane still noticed. It was hard to ignore when a mother would snatch her child up in a bear hug, or a laughing couple would fall into awkward quiet as she drew near, their smiles strained and plastic.

Jane checked her watch; 8:47 AM. She sighed.

"Might as well go back," she mumbled under her breath. The main streets were too awkward to bear, so she threaded her way down the alleys between the buildings, the walls sometimes narrowing to a point where she had to turn sideways. She was tired, hot, and dispirited; she trudged, each step a heavy plod.

She wasn't watching where she was going. That made it easy for them to catch her.

Navy blue smoke—musty and choking—swirled around her as a pair of impossibly strong hands grasped her by the shoulders. Jane screamed as for a moment she flashed entirely out of existence. Then, with a pop, she emerged back into reality, staggering forward and crashing to the floor. She whirled around on her knees, eyes blurry and dark, searching for her abductor.

"Listen, whoever you are," she cried, both hands in front of her to ward off another attack, "I don't know who you think I am, but I'm under Loki's protection, and if you hurt me I don't want him to hurt you!"

"Be at ease, Miss Foster; we are not going to hurt you."

Was that a German accent she heard? Jane blinked and rubbed her eyes, vision coming clearer after another moment. She was underground in a circular chamber, light shining through a small hole in the domed roof. People—old, young, male and female—lined the walls, all of them looking at her, most of them with a slightly suspicious expression.

But it was the person standing in front of her that made Jane gasp. Short but broad, he was covered in blue fur and wearing a black and red uniform. His yellow eyes were like searchlights in the gloomy atmosphere of the room, pupils slitted like a cat's. His hands (which had left bruises where they'd gripped her) only had three fingers, each one broad and flat. And a tail—arrow-pointed at the end—whipped behind him.

"She told you," Jane sighed, standing up, "Allegra gave you my letter?"
"She informed us that you wished to help," the man nodded, "I apologize for the method of bringing you here. We had to be certain that you weren't being followed or leading us into a trap. But Director Fury assured us that your offer to help would be genuine."

"You're in contact with SHIELD?"

"Yes," he said, stepping forward and giving a small bow. "Perhaps I should introduce myself. My name is Kurt Wagner," he smiled, sharp fangs at odds with his gentle words, "although you may know me better as Nightcrawler."
Chapter Nineteen

Jane got to her feet slowly, feeling her knees shake in the aftermath of transportation. Her stomach felt as though it had been left behind in that jolting transportation from the alley in Trastevere and was only just now making its way back into the gaping hole left behind.

But it wasn't just her stomach that made her uncertain. Shadows lurked against the curving stone walls of the underground amphitheater; shadows that glared at her with eyes of different, unnatural colors. She was a normal human in a room full of mutants...not a safe place to be even at the best of times. There was still a lot of resentment in the world.

She dusted off her knees, taking another moment to steel her nerves and face the assembled crowd. She cleared her throat.

"Thank you for trusting me," she said, "I know that it can't have been an easy decision."

"It wasn't," a new voice said, gruff and low, echoing off the walls behind her. Jane turned. The man who spoke leaned against the wall, one foot propped behind him, muscular arms folded across a broad, barrel-like chest. As she looked, he flexed one fist and she saw three long talons, thin and sharp as rapier blades, extend from the webbing between his fingers.

She swallowed. Had she jumped from the proverbial frying pan into the fire?

"For goodness' sake, Wolverine," a much gentler (though similarly deep) voice admonished, "is this how we treat a courageous lady who offers us help at great personal risk?"

Jane was going to get whiplash from turning so fast. This speaker could have been Nightcrawler's brother; blue fur flared like a halo from his cheeks and head and he was as broad as a bodybuilder. Unlike Nightcrawler, however, he looked at her with a human's eyes.

_They're all human, Jane. "Dr. McCoy?"_ she said, recognizing the face from TV, _"Dr. Hank McCoy?"

"Indeed," he seemed pleasantly surprised that she knew him, and advanced—feet landing heavily on the beaten dirt floor—to shake her hand. Her palm disappeared behind his blue talons, and Jane felt the unquestioning strength in his grip. He could fold her up and throw her across the room like a rag doll. "However, most simply call me "Beast". It's somewhat more manageable. And you are Miss Jane Foster, the brilliant astrophysicist who opened the pathways between worlds."

_And a fat lot of good that's done_, she grumbled to herself. Still, it was terribly flattering that someone outside of SHIELD knew of her work. _"I'll answer to the second part of that, but I don't know about my "brilliance","_ she said, _"but I know all about you. You wrote that fantastic paper..._Genetic protein markers in mutant RNA and their attendant physical manifestations_, right? It was fascinating."

"I thought you were an astrophysicist, not a geneticist, Miss Foster," he said, "but yes, I had the honor to write that paper with the assistance of other talented scientists. I'm surprised it was understandable to a layperson like yourself."

"One of my interests in high school was genetics," she replied, "and even though I didn't understand most of it, I knew enough to see that it was amazing research and absolutely groundbreaking."

"Can we skip the mutual-admiration party?" the one Dr. McCoy had called "Wolverine"
grumbled, "I don't think all of us were invited."

"Perhaps it would be best if we returned to the matter at hand," Nightcrawler put in, "Miss Foster, we were very pleased to hear that you wished to help us, even though Director Fury was not quite so happy."

"That's an understatement," Wolverine chuckled, "I've never seen Fury's panties in such a twist. Well done, kid."

"Oh," Jane winced, "I thought he'd be happy if I could do something to help."

"He takes a dim view of anything that might jeopardize the fragile truce between the opposing forces," Beast said, "and he worries that if you are caught it will exacerbate an already tense situation."

"Fury has always been more cautious than he lets on; a weakness of all those who struggle for a self-righteous cause."

Jane recognized the voice that spoke, and her mouth went suddenly dry. Of all the people she had expected to see partnered with SHIELD, he was definitely not one of them.

He emerged from the shadows in an archway; tall, cloaked in red the shade of clotted blood, and helmed…just as theatrical and imposing as Loki. And like Loki, over the years, he too had appeared on commandeered radio and television stations, assuring humans that their way of life was irrelevant and soon to be superseded by something better…something other.

Everyone tensed up; Wolverine dropped his resting foot to the floor and squared his broad shoulders and even levelheaded Beast looked ready for a scrap. The other assembled mutants—whose loyalties and motivations she didn't know—seemed connected by a spider's web of anxiety that could snap at any second. Jane shifted a few inches into Beast's shadow.

"From all I've heard," her voice wavered but she stood tall and showed no fear, "I thought you believed your cause was the righteous one. I thought that you and Loki would be working together, since you both believe that humans are weak and need to be controlled."

He looked at her with a stillness and control that was preternatural; but a curving sneer betrayed his innate human nature…the one he so vocally despised. After living so long with Loki, Jane recognized a bigot when she saw one.

"There is a difference between righteous and self-righteous," he said, folding his arms, leather gloves creaking in the stillness, "And that is obviously a nuance that you cannot appreciate. This is the woman we hope will provide the necessary information to destroy our enemy?"

She bristled as he spoke to the airy middle distance above her head, avoiding her eyes. But Jane also knew how to pick her fights, and this was one that she could not win; even if she did, the victory would do more harm than good.

Wolverine shot forward off the wall, the motion so explosively fast that Jane flinched backwards in shock. "You wanna show some respect, pal?" he said, claws extending from both hands now and glinting in the pale light.

Magneto didn't move, save to drop one hand, fingers loose and ready. "Please, do try. It will be amusing."

"Wolverine," Beast said, "please. We must remain together or we have no chance."
The taller man’s jaw clenched—there was a moment where both men hovered at the very edge of their self-control—but then he stood down, scoffing as his claws returned to their fleshy sheath with a gentle rasp.

Even Beast breathed a quiet sigh of relief.

"Returning to our earlier topic of conversation, however," he went on, resting forward on his muscular forearms as though they’d not just endured a miniature Cuban Missile Crisis "we do need an "inside man", so to speak. There are certain areas of the city that are magically shielded, and we believe that these are the areas where the prisoners are being kept."

"Prisoners?" Jane was honestly confused, "But…once Loki had taken over the city there was no more need for martial law. Mayor Alemanno would never have agreed to a treaty where ordinary citizens were subject to arrest without cause."

"He is not aware of the situation," Beast said, "but political dissidents, journalists, and others opposed to the new order have been quietly disappearing—"

"And the majority of them are mutants," Magneto interjected, "which is the real reason the government chooses not to act."

"We have no proof that this is an instance of collusion," the other man hurried to reassure her, "but the reports we have from safe houses in other cities reveal the same pattern. A country surrenders, its major cities have standing Skrull garrisons, and then the disappearances begin. No one overly important," Beast finished, "but enough to make everyone else wary of spreading their true opinions of the new government."

Jane didn’t know what was worse: to know that these things were happening, or to have been duped by Loki into (even slightly) believing his promises of sincerity and benevolent rule. "How do we know these people are still alive?"

"I know," a teenaged boy said, gesturing emphatically to his chest with his big hands, "my sister, she is missing. But she is not dead; I still feel her, here," he slapped hard where his heart beat against his breastbone.

"Alessio is an empath," Beast explained, "his sister is also; they are twins. And since he can feel her living presence, we believe that the prisoners are safe, somewhere. But we cannot find them."

"You can’t sense her location?" Jane asked. The boy shook his head, floppy dark curls falling over his brow. His mouth pinched hard at the corners and his lips shook; as he held back his tears he looked painfully young and lost.

"She is gone, but she is still here," he slapped his chest again. "Sometimes she is afraid; sometimes she hurts. But I cannot find her. I could always find her before."

"Why would he do this?" Jane asked, question directed at no one in particular, "Rome has surrendered; its people are peaceful. And—correct me if I’m wrong," she didn't like the look in Magneto’s eyes, "but I would think that most mutants would be just as likely to live in peace with him as most humans. Why would he risk antagonizing you?"

"It is a puzzle—" Beast began, only to be interrupted again by Magneto.

"He wants no challengers to his throne," he said, "and as all creatures do, he fears what he does not understand. Mutant power is of a type and range he cannot comprehend; so he will hunt us until we are all exterminated. He is as pathetic as the homo sapiens who try to rule this world."
Well...that explains that, Jane thought, not brave enough to speak the words aloud. But at least now Magneto's reasons for partnering with the X-Men and SHIELD were abundantly clear. His life's work was the perpetuation of the mutant race; any threat to them he would repulse with all possible violence.

Although she didn't want to imagine the kind of bloodbath that would result from Magneto calling Loki "pathetic" to his face.

So SHIELD had clearly decided to use a psychopath to fight a psychopath. Jane didn't know if that made her feel safe or not. Even Loki had never—or only rarely—looked at her with that particular blend of apathetic malice that Magneto did. He looked at her the way one looks at a cockroach just before squishing it.

Not safe. Not safe at all.

"Perhaps that is the explanation," Beast was still the peacemaker, "but the fact remains that we must find these missing people before they are used as leverage against us...or killed outright."

"And that's where I come in?"

"Indeed. We have compiled a map of all the portions of the city that have been magically shielded or defended. We cannot enter these areas without being detected, and doing so would draw Loki's attention to our location. So we need you to determine what or who is stationed in these zones so we can plan any necessary rescue attempts."

"Easy enough," now her voice did tremble, "but how am I supposed to communicate with you once I've found the information?"

"You can continue to rely on Allegra to pass it along," Beast said, "although next time you needn't bother with a note. Allegra is a minor telepath; when you are close together, she will be able read your thoughts. She was one of those who assured us your offer to help was genuine."

Whoops. She must have heard some other (less flattering) things too. I hope she doesn't pass along anything to Madame Arnaut...

"Oh," was all that came out, faintly. "What areas should I look into?"

"Wolverine, I believe you have the map."

Close up, Wolverine was as physically imposing as the animal whose name he'd taken. Jane had to remind herself that he was a friend—of sorts—as he approached. His body threw off so much heat she was worried that he might have a fever; but Jane remembered a part of Dr. McCoy's paper in which he'd addressed the case of those mutants with advanced healing capability, like Wolverine. Apparently, their metabolisms ran so high that their temperature, blood pressure, and other physical markers were often elevated beyond what a normal human would consider usual, or even safe.

He fished out a crumpled piece of glossy paper from his jeans' pocket—Jane nearly laughed when she saw that it was from the same guidebook that she had—and unrolled it so she could see the entire city.

She saw dots here and there; neighborhoods and streets quarantined by Loki's power. Mostly they were no more than six or seven blocks in circumference.

"Some of these other places I can explain," Jane said, after a quick glance, "for example, here, in Trastevere, that's where Loki lives...in the Villa Farnesina. And over here, near the Pantheon,
that's the Palazzo Chigi, the mayoral residence and where the new coalition government does most of its work. Anyone who works there has to wear one of these," she motioned at her necklace, "so he knows who comes in and out. But…"

Could it be possible?

"Are you sure about this?" She asked, curiosity overwhelming her innate caution of the man beside her, "He's blocked off the entire Vatican?"

"Yep," Wolverine confirmed, nodding sharply, "we figure that's where he has the main encampment of Skrull, and it would also be the most secure place for any prisoners. We can't even get a look inside the place; there's some sort of illusion distorting the sky above, and he's got forcefields in place above and below the ground."

"I cannot manifest inside, either," Nightcrawler said, "something blocks my abilities."

"But we see them when they come out," Alessio said, sullenly. "And no one human ever comes out."

"Which is why we should not wait for an "intelligence" she can bring us," Magneto was talking over her head again, and from the way he'd said the word made it clear that he didn't think Jane was capable of contributing any of it, "we should just attack and be done with this waiting."

"That would be a foolhardy move," Beast's patient tone suggested that he'd had much practice delaying this exact action, "we could easily find ourselves outmatched and overwhelmed with no prior reconnaissance. Whatever Miss Foster can discover will be extremely valuable to us."

"This is pointless," he replied, "and every moment we wait is the opportunity for another mutant to die. We know the capabilities of the Skrull and of their master. We have nothing to fear from them."

Jane remembered what Erik had said about Loki and his…capabilities. She also remembered the stark, haunted fear in his sunken eyes.

"That isn't true," she said, softly, refusing to quail even under Magneto's cold-eyed stare, "you don't know him. He's seen things and done things you literally cannot imagine. He's at least a thousand years old, he's travelled between dozens of planets across the universe, and he has fallen through untold parallel dimensions.

"From what he's told me," and now everyone's eyes were on her, "he's seen the future. Or at least," she said quickly, her voice cutting through the susurrus of whispers that immediately broke out, "he's seen the futures in those parallel dimensions. So underestimating him would be a huge mistake," she concluded, making a last push at the area she knew was his weakest, "and if you act without thinking, you could end up destroying the very people you want to protect.

"He's seen so much that it drove him to the brink of insanity, if not right over the edge. And that's something you shouldn't disregard."

He glared, but did not contradict her. Jane swallowed, throat still dry, and turned to Beast.

"I'll do it," she said, "I'll find out what's in there, as quickly as possible."

He nodded, "Thank you, Miss Foster."
Nightcrawler poofed (technical term) them back to the alley he'd taken her from, staying with her until the dry heaves stopped and she was able to stand upright again. Something about being teleported did not jive with her internal workings—Nightcrawler assured her that it was not unusual to react that way—but she was thankful that she'd had no breakfast. After he left, disappearing in a fast-dissipating cloud of blue-black smoke, she slowly made her way back to the Tiber, blinking in the sunlight like a newborn fawn.

This time, she barely noticed the crowds parting around her and the silences that dogged her steps. She meandered through the streets, the details of the world reaching her through a fog of swirling thoughts and cloudy emotions.

The meeting with the mutants had only taken about a half-hour, but Jane's worldview had changed so radically in that brief span of time she might as well have been gone for a year. There was no way she could return to the Villa right now; so she rested her arms against the stone walls of the river's embankment and pillowed her head against them, taking deep, measured breaths. In that dark, hot space that smelled of her own sweat and the wall's stone, she had some time to think.

She didn't often swear; she didn't like it and intellectually it felt lazy. Sometimes, however, the situation called for it.

"Jane," she said to herself, almost moaning the words into her cupped hands, "you are such a fucking idiot."

How... how could she have let it happen? She'd intended to play Loki by using his emotions against him, but it turned out that he'd been playing her, dandling her from the strings of her own gullibility. How, even for a moment, could she have trusted his claims of sincerity? How could she have felt an instant of guilt for working against him? She had been trusting the God of Mischief, and was honestly surprised that he'd been doing just what he advertised? She actually slammed her head against the wall, as a painful punctuation to each word. "Such a goddamned idiot."

Well, no more. She stood upright, blood flowing in a dizzy rush back to her brain. If he thought he was going to dupe her, or manipulate her trust, he had another thing coming. She knew his true self, now... and there could be no more doubting. No more guilt... no more better nature.

Jane walked quickly along the riverbank, hands swinging in closed fists tight to her sides.

He was a lying, cheating, cold-blooded bastard, and she would not trust even one more word that came out of his mouth. Rage and shame flooded her body; warm, welcoming, and powerful. Jane was on the warpath, and she would not stop until he was out of her life and her world.

Like a petulant child, Jane slammed the garden gate behind her, startling the poor gardeners who were trimming the olive trees. They stared at her from atop their rickety ladders as she continued her march across the garden and stomped up the stairs into the house.

As the cool air hit her, Jane felt it cool some of the rage. Yes, she was mad, and she had every right to be, but she had to keep up her act. Her spy job would be much easier to pull off if she could keep Loki in the dark about what she intended. Acting or not, she was earning his confidence; his invitation (nor order) to dinner that night was a sure proof of it. If she could keep that up... he might even let slip some details before she infiltrated the Vatican.

Oh...
Jane took a breath and felt some of her earlier fear return.

She had to infiltrate the Vatican. A certain Skrull stronghold where even the mutants did not dare go.

That thought chilled her rage until the lava flowing through her veins turned to obsidian. This would need careful planning, and Jane knew that she could not act in anger. Sweat trickled from the edge of her hairline to the bridge of her nose, making her shiver.

Jane trotted upstairs, stopping by her bedroom to pick up some new clothes, and poking her head into Erik's room to make sure he was all right. Then she went down the hall and filled the bathtub to the brim with steaming water and lavender bubbles. Peeling off her sweaty clothes and lowering herself into the water was heavenly—her body was in no way used to the exertion of a jog like that—and her brain relaxed with the rest of her muscles and she was able to think.

Normally she would have been making notes in her journal, but having any record of what she was about to do would be suicidal. She couldn't even talk to herself—as she was in the habit of doing, being often a solo researcher—for fear that the room was magically bugged. Instead, she wiggled her toes and traced patterns on her palm as particularly good thoughts occurred, and scrunched up her nose as another potential plan went awry in the simulator of her mind.

To any observer, she would have looked certifiably crazy. By the end of her brainstorming session, Jane was fairly certain that she was.

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"Did you enjoy your run this morning, Jane?"

Lucia had offered—as she usually did—to help Jane dress and do her hair and makeup for dinner. By this point, the offer was almost perfunctory—since Jane always said "no"—and Lucia had barely been able to hide her expression of astonishment when Jane finally said "yes". Jane did not really care for all the time-consuming moisturizing and priming that her assistant insisted on, but she did enjoy the opportunities for gossip that came with it.

"It was nice to get out again," she said, "I was starting to feel claustrophobic. Although next time I probably won't run so far. My legs weren't quite up to it."

Lucia hummed agreement under her breath and experimented with a few different ways to twist Jane's lank hair out of her face. She decided on a side-swept braid and started to brush.

"Do you know when the next dinner at the Mayor's house will be?" Jane couldn't manage to make her question sound casual, and Lucia's eyes met hers in the mirror, brow furrowing in confusion.

"Lord Loki dines there every week," she said, slowly, "so the next one would be Tuesday."

The stopwatch started in her mind: she had six days (give or take) to make it in and out of the Vatican with adequate information to pass along to Allegra. It was daunting, but Jane had—modestly speaking—pulled off some minor miracles, and she was determined that she would not fail.

Jane's tiny determined nod made Lucia's eyes narrow even further. "Do I want to know?" she asked, a wry smile twisting her mouth.

"Probably not," Jane replied, shaking her head. "The less you know, the safer you are."

"Ah," ever the soul of discretion, Lucia returned her focus to Jane's hair as though nothing had
happened. It truly seemed as though she had wiped the incident from her mind. Until…

"You will be careful?"

"I try to be," Jane said, her smile just as reluctant as Lucia's, "it just seems like danger wants to find me."

"But you will let me know if I can help?"

Jane jerked, twitching her hair out of Lucia's hands. "I did say "danger", right?" she said, turning around so she could face her assistant, "The thing you're trying to avoid? I'm not joking," she put one hand on top of Lucia's, "this is life or death. If I'm caught," her voice dropped to a solemn whisper, "it won't be pretty."

At seeing the other woman's unmoved face, Jane went on: "And I don't need your help. You don't need to do this."

"Yes, I do," despite her brave words, Lucia's eyes faltered and she looked down at her manicured nails, obscured by Jane's rougher palm. "You've never given up," she said, voice a shade thick, "never. Even when you had friends to hide behind. Even when he hurt you. And whatever you're planning," she looked up, turning her hand upright so she could squeeze Jane's, "I know you're not giving up now. Someone has to help you fight the battle; it's not fair that you've been doing all this alone."

Her heart swelled in her chest and made it difficult to breathe. Her relief was so great it actually made her head spin.

"Thank you," she whispered, croaking just like a frog. She tried again. "Seriously, thank you."

"You're welcome," burst of emotion shoved aside, Lucia resumed her usual businesslike mode, "now, let me finish this or you'll never get to eat tonight."

Jane turned back to the mirror and watched as Lucia twisted and pulled her hair into a side crown of shining braids, pinning an emerald pin here and there to hold back some flyaway strands at her temples. Jane's skin crawled as she put on the similarly green dress that Lucia pulled out for her—the mimicry of his colors was too over-the-top, in her opinion—but had to admit that the gown fit her perfectly; gathered in a ruched band at her ribcage, the skirt twirled down to her knees while the top gathered in a gold circlet at her throat and left her arms bare.

Borrowing Lucia's long-suffering shoulder once more, Jane climbed into three-inch gold strappy sandals and sighed, twisting and turning as she took in the final effect in the mirror.

"Well," she said, "at least I've got good weapons to fight with."

"Jane Foster," Lucia replied, one eyebrow raised, "I don't think I've ever heard you say anything so self-gratifying. Well done."

"Well, when your regular wardrobe is jeans and flannel button-down shirts," Lucia shuddered at the very thought, "it's hard to flaunt what you've got. But even I'll admit that this makes me look good."

I just hope he thinks so too.

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For the first time since she could remember, Jane was nervous not because of the possibility of
impending death or bodily harm, nor because her friends' lives were hanging in the balance of her actions. Standing out on the veranda, sipping her second glass of wine (indulging for the first time since her captivity), and shivering in the chilly air, Jane was nervous because, for the life of her, she could not remember the details of a single one of Ernest Hemingway's books.

She disliked Hemingway's books for the same reason Loki liked them. His descriptions of the Spanish Civil War she found to be alternately painful and tedious. Probably this was very much the way real war actually unfolded (and she was certain Loki would know, having fought many of them over the span of his immortal life) but she found it dull, more than anything else.

Ever the perfectionist, Jane had forced herself to suffer through *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and *A Farewell to Arms* (with a brief diversion through *The Old Man and the Sea*) before finally admitting that Hemingway was not her style and moving on to Faulkner…who was also not her style.

That summer between sophomore and junior year of high school had been a bad one, reading-wise.

Still, it would have been much easier to start a conversation if they'd had some common ground. Unbidden, Jane remembered the scene between Elizabeth and Darcy at the Netherfield ball:

"What think you of books?"

"Oh, no! I can never think of books in a ballroom. My head is always full of something else."

The "something else" that occupied the greater part of Jane's mind was overwhelming. Imagining subtle ways to work the Vatican into dinner conversation—and avoiding her reasons for wanting to go there—took up the best part of her gray matter. The rest of it was concerned with her upcoming "charm offensive", and reminding her that she had never been particularly good at flirting.

That little gem forced Jane into confronting the fact that she was going to flirt with Loki—after deciding yet again that she hated him—and reminding her that if she failed, the stakes were higher than they’d ever been. An unknown number of mutants' and humans' lives depended on her…she could not let them down.

Jane took a long swallow of wine, the alcohol landing heavily in her empty stomach. Nerves and hunger made the drink unusually potent; soon Jane wasn't feeling anxious so much as plain dizzy. At least it also warmed her up.

"Good evening, Jane,"

She turned quickly—a little too quickly, given the glass of wine—and leaned against the railing as he approached. Tension racheted her shoulders together and drew her upright, and the improvement in her posture drew a noticeable glance from Loki. Her whole outfit made him give a slow smile, teeth glinting and wolfish in the fading light.

"Hello," she said, pushing her hair behind her ear and feeling surprisingly confident. The way he was looking at her…Thor had looked at her that way. Maybe it was just the wine, but Jane found herself giving a smile of her own. Was it possible that the adage were true? That men—even supernatural men—were really all the same?

*Let's test that hypothesis, shall we?*

"So, I'll make you a deal," she leaned both elbows against the railing, the wind flipping the ends of her long hair over her shoulders, "if I can convince you that Jane Austen is the best female
author of all time, I promise that I will read your favorite Ernest Hemingway and do my honest best," she pressed one hand to her heart in a mock pledge, biting back a smile as his eyes tracked the motion closely, "to acknowledge its merit."

"What did they put in your glass?" he said, plucking the glass from her hand, "More importantly," he smiled conspiratorially, "do they have any left?"

She laughed. "It's been," she stopped, considering; but her mind was moving too slowly, "a good long while since I've had anything to drink. Not since Darcy left, anyway," she shook her head, remembering. "She used to buy these…boxes of cheap-ass white wine and we'd sit on the roof of the lab and "decompress"—that's what she used to say."

Remembering made Jane a little solemn, even through the fog of wine. She had never had much tolerance for alcohol, and Darcy had always made it a game, forcing Jane to match her swig for swig. At the end of the night, they'd usually ended up flopped on the same blanket, confiding childhood truths and disappointments to the starry sky. It was how Jane had discovered that Darcy's mother was schizophrenic, and how Darcy had learned that Jane had never…

She flushed. She was not drunk now—not really—and even thinking of what she'd said was painfully embarrassing.

Loki did not miss it. "And I imagine that many interesting things were said during those late-night conversations," he looked over his shoulder and snapped his fingers, summoning an attendant, "May I interest you in some more wine, Miss Foster?"

She looked at him through her lashes, blinking lazily. "I do believe," she drawled, watching more wine slosh into her glass, "that you may be trying to get me drunk. But I will foil your nefarious scheme," she declared.

"And how will you do that?"

_Indulgent, condescending, and amused…_

"By declaring that I am absolutely starving and craving pasta. So," she held out her hand, "help me up."

When he did not move, Jane waggled her fingers. "C'mon, help me up. You've got a starving hostage here."

Slowly, as though she might snatch back her hand if he reached for it, he touched his palm to hers. For the second time, Jane felt the calluses there—just as she remembered, on the heel of his palm and the fingertips, roughened skin from years of magic and fighting. The smile faded from her face as those tough fingertips rested briefly on the inside of her wrist.

In one smooth pull, she was upright. The sudden change overbalanced her, and she rocked forward, only barely managing to keep her glass from dropping as she caught herself against his shoulder. Only a few drops spilled on the cobblestones.

"Whoops,"

"I'm not sure if you should drink more often, or never touch another drop," Loki said, one hand resting on the small of her back, "but either way," he escorted her to her seat, "I'm certain that _Pride and Prejudice_ will be much more interesting when you explain it."

"Oh, it will be," she said, crossing her legs, "whether or not you can make _The Sun Also Rises_ similarly interesting will be the real challenge. Are you up to it?"
Chapter Twenty

It was surprisingly easy to make conversation with Loki…although Jane had the sneaky suspicion it got progressively easier with each glass of wine she drank. At least she wasn't alone. For each bottle they cracked open, Loki drank a good two-thirds of the it, and although it took him much longer to show the effects of that much alcohol, he did have his tells.

For one thing, he laughed longer and louder, throwing his head back, one hand coming up to cover his mouth. It was quite cute, actually. He also let go some of the unyielding rigidity that supported him at all times; he slumped backwards in his chair, legs splayed open, letting his head rest against his shoulder, and when he blinked, he let his eyes stay closed for just a moment too long.

Jane knew she wasn't doing much better. Her head felt stuffy and hot—she was probably bright red—and she leaned forward, cupping her chin in her palms. Small things—the flexing of his fingers on the stem of the glass, or the way his lips moved when he smiled—fascinated her, swelling in importance until they occupied her whole world.

Her deal had fallen through. Jane had not been able—despite her best efforts and loving description of Jennifer Ehle and Colin Firth—to convince him of Jane Austen's merits. Perhaps she'd tried the wrong book…maybe *Persuasion*, with its highly-intelligent but neglected-by-her-feckless-relatives heroine would have been more to his taste.

At least—according to the terms of their agreement—this meant she didn't have to read Hemingway.

Their conversation had roamed through many other authors, however. A fan of science-fiction (of course) and fantasy, Jane walked him through Clarke, Heinlein, Tolkein, LeGuin, and one of her favorites, *The Princess Bride*. In return, he told her of his favorites in the Japanese canon, managing the complicated names with only a few slurs…impressive, especially since the remains of six bottles of very old wine littered the table by that point.

He was convinced that some of the old-school Zen practitioners—especially the swordfighter Miyamoto Musashi—had known and practiced the rudiments of magic. Jane jumped at the chance to learn why…and that was the reason she was currently standing (after a fashion) against Loki while he showed her one of the first Forms of sorcery.

"You see," he took her right hand and arranged her fingers into what seemed like a modified Vulcan salute, "spellcasting is as much a physical discipline as it is a mental one. Here," he nudged her left foot forward and pushed at the back of her knee—it tickled—until she lunged forward, "Miyamoto was very concerned that each action," now his hands were on her shoulders, "should be proper. That nothing should be done in haste. That is the essence of sorcery."

"Self-control," Jane finished, settling into the stance after a few ungainly wobbles, "complete mental and physical control."

"Mmm," he stood away from her and studied her form, making a correction in the alignment of her hands, "It is an exacting discipline. Which is why many—even those who are naturally gifted with magic—never reach the heights of which they are capable."

Jane stood straight, shaking out her sore fingers and legs. "Is that why your hands are so freakishly strong?"
He laughed, studying his hands as though he had never seen them before, flexing the long fingers. "Perhaps," he flipped them over, running a nail over the calluses on his fingertips, "but I am also a god, remember."

She planted her hands on her hips and pouted, "Braggart."

"How can it be bragging if it happens to be the truth? You wound me, my dear," he hammed it up, pressing a hand to his heart and then to his forehead until Jane slumped over the railing, laughing until her ribs hurt. He joined her there, and together they stood for a moment in silence, looking out over the purple-black skyline of Rome.

The sun had long ago hidden his face; the moon was high above the horizon, hanging like a pearl pendant surrounded by the diamonds of the stars. Despite the late hour, the sky seemed more purple than black, like the color of a crow's wing in the sun, hiding shades of color within its dark depths. The city skyline was a dark silhouette against the violet sky, hills and spires competing in their reach towards the stars.

Even at this hour, parts of the city still blazed with light, faint echoes of laughter and song floating over the rushing river to Jane's ears. It was yet another reminder—at the same time poignant and invigorating—that life did and could go on...even in the strangest of times. People were out there, laughing, loving, celebrating the fact that they had survived the storm and were still able to care for their loved ones.

The thought washed over Jane, drowning her in melancholy until she hung her head, the ends of her hair tickling her wrists as tears welled in her eyes. She always turned into a bit of a soggy drunk, and right now, standing lonely and sad on the edge of this great city teeming with life, she felt her isolation more keenly than ever.

And yet...

"Beautiful," she said, lifting her head and smiling, "It's so beautiful. The world is so big," she looked over at Loki, not flirting or smiling, just soft and serious; a child speaking a simple truth.

"Your world is infinitesimal; it can be comprehended in a glance," he replied, shaking his head, "So many people limited to the same little world...it's amazing you haven't torn each other apart by now."

"Thank you Mr. Cynical," she scoffed, blowing him a raspberry, "but you're wrong. Maybe if you'd stop and look at things rather than trying to destroy them you'd get a better impression of our "little world";" she couldn't make air quotes with a glass in her hand, so she drained the last of her wine and set it down on the railing.

"You are very defensive about your realm," he said, "I find that curious for a woman who seems to have such a logical grasp of reality. Surely you know how flawed your species is, and how close you live to chaos?"

"I know," she said, nodding—although the motion made her sway and grasp the railing for reassurance, "but it's mine. It's all I have—all we have—and it may be messy and dangerous and frustrating and ridiculous," she emphasized each adjective with a slap of her palm, "but if we don't stand up for it—and keep standing up—what do we have left?

"And that's your problem," she said, poking him in the shoulder, "you keep thinking that we'll just accept a better way—on your say-so—but to accept that is to admit that everything we've done, all the progress we've made over millennia, all our Parliaments and Constitutions and laws and courts have been for nothing. That all our best has been worthless. You can't be surprised if we don't
want to believe that you can solve all our problems when everything we've done hasn't done the job yet."

He seemed unmoved by her passion; his gaze had once again gone inward and his lips had thinned...a sure sign of either deep thought or severe irritation. Jane blinked at him, and squinted, "Am I making any sense? 'Cause I don't know if my sentences are coming out the way I want them to."

"Actually," he said, "that may be the most sensible explanation anyone has yet given me on your inability to yield. I had not counted on such stubborn pride. Humans were very different the last time I paid Midgard any mind."

Jane smiled, the expression much too broad for his tiny—and slightly insulting—concession, but she was beyond caring. "I'd've thought that you, of all people, would understand something about stubborn pride."

"How so?"

"Well," she teetered once again in her heels, then just toed the damn things off, "you hold grudges."

"Oh? And you know this from your lengthy acquaintance with me, no doubt."

Now three inches shorter, Jane felt her courage flicker slightly at the intimidating difference in their heights. In heels, she barely reached his shoulder, so without them...but they didn't call it "liquid courage" for nothing. Jane felt invincible, unassailable. She knew the truth and she was going to speak.

"Yes," she frowned, "well, no. I mean, we haven't known each other for very long, but I do feel like I know you, a bit. And there's no way to explain how you feel and what you do without knowing that you hold grudges. For starters," she paused and muffled a tiny burp in her palm, "you resent Thor. And I get that, since he's the older brother and the golden child and he never gets punished or looked down on for what he does wrong, but you are a Prince—just like him—powerful—maybe in a different way, but still—and similarly hot," she ticked off the points on her fingers, "so what is your big problem with him?"

"Hot?"

"Uh, good looking, or attractive," she said, clarifying her slang, "Anyway, you've got all that going for you and you're immortal...what on earth can you possibly have to resent? I mean, do you have any idea what life is for people without all that going for them? Have you ever really known what day-to-day life is for a person like me, or Erik? I mean, I understand resentment but do you realize how much time and energy you've wasted (even if you can't technically waste time since you're immortal) in feeling that way? You've spent all this time trying to be him when you could have just been you."

Jane ran out of words and breath, so she finished off with what she hoped was an eloquent shrug. He could take it from there. But for a while, he didn't. He avoided her eyes, looking out over the city like a bird of prey, profile sharp and clear against the darkness of the city before him. She rocked on her feet, tracing the seams of the cobblestones with cold toes. The texture of the worn stone was soothing; it reminded her of the mudroom in her childhood home.

She had fallen into such a meditative trance that his voice came as something of a shock:

"You have no idea what you're talking about," he hissed, body curving just like a snake as he
turned towards her. Even though the haze of wine, Jane felt her stomach and shoulders tighten and the air turned to ice in her lungs as she gasped for breath.

"You disappoint me, Miss Foster," there was a ragged edge to his voice, but Jane couldn't hear the fine distinctions. She could only feel fear—suffocating panic—as he planted one hand on either side of her and pinned her to the railing. She remembered New York and the sound of his voice then, and cringed. The wine amplified her emotional responses; by the time he spoke again, she was ready to cry.

"You have no idea what my life is or has been," he went on, hands so tight on the stone that she could see little crumbling cracks start to form, "and yet you say you comprehend me. My life has spanned hundreds—if not thousands—of yours. I have seen and done things that would not fit into your infinitesimal simian brain, and you dare to make assumptions about what I am.

"Let me put this in simple terms, so that you may understand: I am your superior. I am your God. And you will never air your unimportant opinions in my presence again. Have I made myself clear?"

And because Jane was drunk, and because she had the vague thought that turnabout was fair play, she managed (at long last) to render Loki truly speechless with her next action.

She laughed.

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Jane laughed. It came bubbling up from her throat like champagne, light and golden and fizzling, and she couldn't stop it, even though she clapped both hands over her mouth to bottle it up. The thing that made it even harder for her poor, drunk self to suppress the sound was the fact that Loki, for the very first time, was retreating from her. He had taken a few small steps backwards, and the expression on his face was absolutely priceless; a mixture of confusion, bewilderment, and even a dash of fear. That tiny sliver of fear that suggested she knew more than he.

Which, of course, she did. Her hands dropped from her mouth, and she took a shaky couple of breaths.

"Bullshit," she declared, shaking her head, smile still playing at the corner of her mouth, "bullshit," she repeated, finger poking at the lapel of his suit jacket.

"Oh?"

It was a less eloquent comeback than she was used to, but then again, they were both a bit drunk and she had probably taken some of the wind out of his sails. She couldn't ever remember swearing at him before.

"Yeah," she said, "you're full of it. You say it doesn't matter, but what did you say to me just this morning? You said you wanted me to know you. That means that what I say and what I think sure as hell matters to you. So I'm calling bullshit on everything you just said…because I know why you said it."

He was regaining some of his poise now, and with his composure, the danger returned. One step was enough to close the distance between them again, and the foot of difference between their heights meant that when he wanted to loom, he could do it quite well. But this time, Jane did not flinch.

"Well, Miss Foster?" Loki's voice had dropped into that danger zone again; it was dark, controlled, and smooth. Like the cold wind it tickled at Jane's skin and gave her goose bumps.
"Dazzle me with your intellect as you so love to do. But I warn you against saying anything you might regret."

"I regret a lot of the things I've said to you," Jane shot back, glaring at him from where she stood trapped between his body and the railing, "but this won't be one of them. I'll tell you why you said it. You," and she smiled again, crossing her arms, "are afraid."

This time he was the one who laughed. But Jane—considering herself a bit of a connoisseur when it came to Loki's laughter—could detect a shade of breathless hysteria lurking behind the sound. He backed off a few steps, again; also a definite sign of fear. But still, he defended himself.

"Oh, Miss Foster," he drawled, shaking his head, "I believe I will keep you from the bottle in future. Truly, if you were not so amusing I would be tempted to punish you in a manner befitting my most insolent subjects. So I repeat my warning—"

"You'd beat me to stop me saying it because you know it's true," Jane interrupted…which in itself was another first. "You're getting close to me…you're showing your humanity—or whatever you want to call it—and it's scary. Because the more you tell me, the more you let me in…the more vulnerable you are. And so you lash out."

He made as if to break in and cut off the flow of her words, but Jane—who babbled when she was nervous or drunk, and therefore babbled twice as fast when she was both—steamrolled right over him.

"But I want you to know, Loki," she stepped forward and watched as he struggled not to retreat again, "that I won't do it."

"Won't do what?" he could not look at her. His throat moved with a harsh spasm as he swallowed.

Jane's hands moved almost without her direction. One went to his lapel and rested against his chest where she could feel his heart beat. The other took one of his cold hands in hers. The texture of his palm was starting to feel almost as familiar to Jane as her own. She knew the stories behind those calluses, worn by knives and magic, over centuries of skirmishes and war.

She shivered. The movement echoed through him as well, and he looked at her. When their eyes connected, she said, "I won't hurt you."

Each word was as solemn as a promise. For a long moment, they were silent, connected by Jane's hands and their eyes. He was still, preternaturally still, and his face was empty. Jane's heart had slowed and she heard it pounding, beat by beat, through the blood surging in her ears.

"You have already told me," he spoke slowly, almost grinding out the words, "that you—and your race—will resist me with everything you have. And I am supposed to believe that you will not hurt me?" He laughed, but the sound was bitter, "Whence comes this newfound charity?"

"Oh, don't get me wrong," Jane patted his chest, "I still want you off my planet. But I can want you gone without wanting to hurt you, right?" Even in her booze-addled head, she knew she wasn't really making sense. But it was as close to sense as she could come.

She wanted him gone…but she didn't want him dead. Not anymore.

"When did that happen?" she muttered to herself.

"When did what happen?"

She looked up. "I don't want you dead," she said, brow furrowed, "A few weeks ago," she
dropped his hand and backed off, wrapping her arms around herself and shivering, "I would have given anything to have someone kill you. You were—are—were heartless and cold," she trailed off, shaking her head.

"And now?"

"And now I don't want you dead," she whispered, still half speaking to herself. She wasn't playing anymore…wasn't pandering to his vanity with these words. They were Jane's honest truth. But just when had they become the truth? That was the question. Panic knifed at her heart, and she breathed faster, harder. Was she softening? When the crucial moment came, would this newfound sympathy get in the way of her doing what had to be done?

This time, when Loki put his hands on her, she did flinch. But with one hand on her shoulder and the other at her waist, he left nowhere for her to run.

"Jane," he said, softly, wonderingly, "Jane."

She wanted to put her hands against her ears to stop the sound of her name from his lips, but when she raised her hands he caught her wrists and held them down. He was closer than ever, and Jane had to fight her instinct to lean into his warmth.

His breath ghosted over her forehead as he bent to kiss her there, cheek pressed into her hair. He was warm, soft, and smelled delicious…through the haze of comfortable sensations his nearness brought, alarm bells started ringing violently in Jane's head. For the first time she was actually glad that he was touching her, and nothing good—her still functioning brain cells reminded her—could come from that.

But where could she go? Nowhere.

Well, not strictly true.

Jane lunged forward and wrapped both hands around his middle, trapping him in a solid hug. His entire body stiffened in the circle of her arms and she heard his sharp intake of breath, but he did not jerk back or try to escape. And after a very long moment, his hands settled on her back and pressed her even closer. He kissed the top of her head and then rested there.

She hardly knew she was saying the words aloud, but they came regardless.

"You're such a little boy," she murmured, feeling tension gather in his frame, "a little boy…lost."

When he tore himself away from her, she staggered forward, arms outstretched as though to stop him. But the look of stark terror on his face—suppressed so quickly under a grimace of anger—stopped her. Jane could only stare as he turned, hands clenched and shoulders tight, and stormed into the house, the doors slamming behind him with almost enough force to shatter the delicate glass squares.

Alone on the veranda, Jane sank to her knees and wondered what the hell she had just done.

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When dawn started to creep over the horizon, she finally stood, shaking out her cramped legs and dusting off her dress. Despite the hours gone by, Jane was still trembling, both physically and mentally. Whatever she had done had once again shifted the balance between the two of them, and once again, she had no idea what would come next. How would Loki react when they had to see each other again?
"When he has to see me three hours from now," Jane murmured, slowly making her way up the stairs, grasping the railing tight for the sake of her spinning head. Today was a contact day, and Loki never missed a chance to infuriate his older brother by having taken his favorite toy.

Usually the thought of speaking with Thor filled Jane with happiness, even considering the downside of having to endure Loki's taunts. But today, all she wanted to do was wrap herself up in blankets and drown the memory of last night with hours of sleep. Jane crept down the hallway to her bedroom and started painstakingly getting ready for the new day.

Her hands shook as she took the emerald pins from her hair and had difficulty finding the hidden zipper on her dress. Already her head was tightening with the premonition of a monster hangover, and she grabbed the ever-present bottle of water from her nightstand and slowly drank half of it down. There was a bottle of painkiller in the nightstand drawer, and she took three.

"Oh, that was not smart, Jane," she sighed, getting wearily to her feet, "Nothing about what you did was smart. What were you thinking?"

Still muttering to and scolding herself, she slowly got dressed in jeans and a tunic blouse. Thankfully, Loki had seen fit to provide her with clothes that weren't all befitting a state dinner, so even though the labels and materials were far more expensive than what Jane was used to, she still felt comfortable in the clothes. Last, she brushed out her hair and teeth and still had an hour to collapse into bed before Lucia shook her awake at 7:45.

"Miss Foster?"

Jane grumbled and turned over. "Is it time already?" she swung her legs over the side of the bed and felt her stomach slosh uncertainly. "I hope he doesn't expect me to have breakfast with him this morning, because I think that eating anything would be a little dangerous right now…"

"Lord Loki has sent me to supervise your conversation this morning."

She blinked. "What?"

"Lord Loki will not be joining you this morning. He requested that I be present for your conversation instead."

The words were still not making a shred of sense. "You mean…" she swallowed, and tried again, "he's not coming?"

"No, Miss Foster," Lucia spoke quietly, but beneath her calm veneer, Jane could sense her assistant's puzzlement. But Jane could no more explain her feelings to Lucia than she could to herself. She was curiously numb, as though some part of her she depended on had been cut off.

Then she shook her head. "Ridiculous," she scoffed, "he really is a scared little boy."

Now Lucia showed her surprise. "There are rumors about what exactly happened last night, but I can tell that they all pale in comparison with the truth. But it's true that you didn't return to your rooms until after dawn?"

Jane groaned. "I will tell you everything," she promised, "but first, be honest with me. Will it be safe for me to talk in front of you?"

The bemused humor faded from Lucia's face. She shook her head. "I have been bound to tell my Lord the exact details of your conversation. The phone must stay on speaker the entire time. I am sorry."
"Don't worry about it," Jane smiled, "that's why I asked. Do you think Erik could come in, though? He hasn't been able to hear any news of the outside world, and it may do him some good. He and Thor were pretty close, too."

Lucia considered. "Well," she hesitated, "my Lord did not specify that Dr. Selvig couldn't be present," she smiled, "shall I bring him?"

"Find out if he's interested," Jane stood, stretching and reaching for her water again. Lucia nodded and left the room. Jane shuffled across to her table and took a seat, her head pounding sluggishly with every movement. She probably wouldn't get a full-blown hangover, but today was not going to be very fun, regardless.

After a few minutes, Lucia and Erik entered the room, Erik looking a little confused and very much just out of bed. He sat across from Jane at the table.

"I thought I wasn't allowed to attend these little chats," he said, looking between Jane and Lucia as though one of them might have an explanation for him. But Jane could only sigh.

"I guess when the cat's away…"

"And where's he gone to? That's what worries me."

"He did not leave an explanation for any of us," Lucia replied, "There was just a note left for me this morning, along with the mobile phone, telling me what needed to be done. None of the house staff knows where he is."

Jane shivered. This couldn't possibly be a result of what she'd said. This had to be a new scheme, or plot, or something…but then, why wouldn't he tell anyone about it? Lucia—and every other staff member—usually received detailed instructions from him every day. And now he'd just disappeared, with only a few notes in his wake?

The phone rang.

"Yes?" Lucia answered. To what was clearly Thor's confusion as much as anyone else's, she explained, "I am a delegate of Lord Loki, sent to oversee Miss Foster's conversation. I would warn you not to share any information with her that could damage your cause, as I am bound to report in exact detail what has been said. Is this understood?"

She nodded. "Very well then. Here is Miss Foster," and she switched the phone to speaker and put it on the table.

"Good morning, Jane."

"Good morning," she replied, "Erik is here too."

"Dr. Selvig!" Thor exclaimed, honest joy flooding his voice, "Jane has told me of your release and recovery. Are you well?"

"I'm getting there," Erik replied, "still shaking out some of the cobwebs. But by the time this is over, I think I'll be able to have you buy me a drink."

"And this I will do with great satisfaction, Erik Selvig," Thor laughed heartily, "for this gives me yet another reason to work for a swift resolution to this situation. And Jane," some of the hilarity bled from his tone and he spoke with more depth and sincerity. Jane thought of that tone as hers…it was different from the way he spoke to anyone else. "You are also well?"
"I'm a little bit hungover this morning," she confessed, laughing, "but yes, I'm all right. I got to go out into the city a little bit yesterday. Rome is beautiful."

"He lets you leave the grounds and yet does not allow us to speak privately?" Thor grumbled, "I would that my brother's generosity stretched further than it does. But I am glad that your days have not been spent in prison. What have you seen?"

Though Jane longed to tell him of the mutants, she knew that Lucia would not stick her neck out that far. So instead, she gave him a light description of the Tiber and the Trastevere neighborhood around the Villa, telling him about the different shops and types of food, and the sheer variety of people she had come across. Careful against enraging him, she skipped all mention of her necklace or the way people responded to meeting one of Loki's protected ones. Erik helped the conversation along with a few helpful questions, and altogether the allotted five minutes—though Lucia allowed it to stretch to ten—went by too quickly...as usual.

When Lucia hung up silence descended over the table, heavy and stifling as a shroud. The remnants of alcohol in Jane's system unbalanced her and there were tears licking at the corners of her eyes. She sniffled.

"Would you mind?" she said, "I need to get some sleep."

Erik pressed her hand with his, then stood and left the room. Lucia hesitated for a moment as she turned to go.

"Do you want to talk about it, Jane?"

Jane looked at her. And how much would end up getting back to him, if I talked to you? I can't trust you...I can't trust myself, right now. She managed a smile and shook her head.

"I just need to get some sleep, first," she said, "maybe later this afternoon."

"Is there a particular time you'd like me to wake you?"

"No. And if you could just make sure that I'm not disturbed today. When I need anything, I'll let you know. Promise." The tiniest germ of a plan had taken root in Jane's mind, and she needed privacy to develop it. It would also be safer if no one saw her leave the Villa that afternoon.

"Very well," Lucia said, and shut the door.

Jane rested her head against the table, the cool glass surface sucking some of the feverish heat from her forehead. Before anything—before schemes and plans and plots—she had to get some sleep. She set the alarm for early afternoon, and dove beneath the blankets, asleep the moment she hit the pillow.

When she woke, it was before the alarm went off, so she spent the few minutes slowly wiggling her fingers and toes, letting the seedling plan grow and mature. It could work. And...since she'd probably frightened Loki enough to make him steer clear of her for the next few days, it was probably the best chance she'd have of getting any answers in time for Tuesday.

When she thought of the previous night, and of Loki, she felt shame spreading hot across her cheeks. She had softened. Somehow, all her resolutions had gotten twisted around in her head. Last night had been the perfect chance to get some information out of him. He had been relaxed...happy. She had gotten him off guard, and then...
Totally wasted the chance. Somehow, it had become more about him—helping him, or redeeming him, or some other sentimental crap—than achieving her goal. Jane ground her teeth. It had been a mistake, and she would have to avoid making those in the future. Especially the immediate future. Her plan could work, but she would have to scrub her emotions and show no hesitation, or fear, or sympathy.

She sat up and turned off the alarm. Okay. Step by step.

It took less than an hour to get ready. She showered—no luxurious bath today—found a black duffel in the back of her closet, and quickly packed it with a few choice items. She double-checked her guidebook and memorized all necessary sections of the Vatican, and stuffed the map the mutants had given her into her pocket.

The way through the garden was clear—Erik was taking his afternoon nap and Lucia was busy downstairs in the map room—so Jane was able to make her way out of the Villa almost unobserved. She nodded to the footman at the gate, swinging the bag casually in one hand, trying to act as though she were only walking out for a picnic at one of the many parks in the area. It wasn't until she was out of sight that she broke into a light jog, heading north towards Vatican City.

Her stomach gave out faster than her feet. The light meal that she'd had the night before was long gone, and she had to stop at a café for a roll filled with sweet cream. The shopkeeper would not let her pay—bowing and smiling nervously—and stuffed three rolls in her bag, waving off her protests. Jane felt her face burning as she accepted his fearful generosity, and she fled back to the river to eat in peace.

As she left the shop, she nearly jumped out of her skin as a rough voice growled behind her, "Didn't think you had it in you, kid."

Jane whirled around, finding the source of the voice at last, leaning up against an alley wall, half hidden in shadow. She recognized the unruly hair, long sideburns, and leather jacket, but had no idea whether to feel fear or relief.

"Wolverine?"

He grunted. "If you're gonna accept stuff for free, you might as well share."

Jane looked down at the bag in her hands and felt surreal. She had talked with gods and looked into other galaxies, but it was still a strange feeling to share her breakfast with a mutant. But she handed him two of the sweet rolls and saved one for herself. They ate in silence, Wolverine clearly not in the mood to explain himself, and Jane not knowing what words to say.

Finally, she cleared her throat and said, "What are you doing here?"

"Figured you could use some backup. Doesn't seem fair that we just tossed you out here to get captured or worse. And especially since Magneto's rooting for you to fail, I wanna make sure you shove it in his face."

She smiled. He might be rough around the edges, but he had the same devil-may-care self-assuredness that Tony Stark did, and that made her feel much safer. It would be nice to have someone in her corner, especially since the most dangerous part of her plan would happen right at the gates. If things went wrong there, it would be nice to have someone come running to the rescue.

"Well, thanks," she said, "and I'll do my best to do that."
"So what's the plan?"

Jane led the way back to the river and they strolled side by side, an odd couple taking a mid afternoon walk along the deserted path. The rest of the population was either working or napping.

"The plan is prisoner inspection," she said, "because I figure, if I show up at the door and ask to see the prisoners—on order from Lord Loki, of course—one of two things is going to happen. One, they'll attack me because they know that no prisoners are being held there, or two, they'll take me to see them, and I'll be able to find out if Alessio's sister is one of them."

"That's unless they demand to see your orders and attack you anyway for not having any."

"I've got better than orders," Jane tugged down her collar so that Wolverine could see the rune pendant around her neck. "Members of his inner circle wear this, and the Skrull know it. But," she went on, "they won't know who I am. There are no Skrull guards around the Villa or the Palazzo Chigi, so I'm hoping that none of them know what I look like. I'll borrow Lucia's name—his assistant—and pretend to be on his orders to find an empathic mutant."

Her companion whistled long and low. "That plan takes some serious guts, kid. You think you can pull it off? If you get inside, you won't have anyone to help you if you can't handle it."

"I have to," she said quietly, "there's no one else to do it. And if I get inside, most of the danger will be over. They'll have bought my story, right?"

"With humans, I could say yeah, probably," he replied, "but these are aliens. I've got no idea how they think. What happens if they do catch on?"

"If they recognize me, they'll know that Loki doesn't want me harmed," Jane spoke to reassure both of them, feeling her heart pound with panic, "they'd probably just take me back to the Villa and let him deal with me."

"And how would he do that?"

She swallowed. "No idea. I—I don't really want to think about it."

It would hurt him, and I promised I wouldn't hurt him. She bit her tongue, hard. All's fair in war, Jane, you know that. Toughen up.

"Well, it's probably the stupidest plan I could imagine an astrophysicist coming up with," Wolverine said, laughing roughly, "but if you pull it off... it's gonna make one hell of a story."

Jane was too nervous to return the laughter, but she managed, "I promise to give you all the details so you can make Magneto squirm."

He thumped her on the back, and together they turned west, heading towards the great dome of Saint Peter's rising into the sky.

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Still out of sight of the gate, Jane opened her duffel and quickly changed clothes. The black sheath dress had a scoop neck, allowing Loki's silver pendant to show, glittering between her collarbones. She stepped into the heels and tightened the ankle straps, hoping that they would hold if she needed to run. Her shoulder bag was big enough to accommodate a clipboard, onto which she had scribbled Alessio's name and his sister's—thankfully provided by Wolverine.

She had also managed a decent forgery of Loki's signature—not a difficult feat, considering he
used the runes for it and not English lettering—and hoped that these would suffice as a pass of sorts, if anyone asked.

A few quick swipes of makeup later, and she looked—hopefully—like a well-paid professional on her way to do an errand for her boss.

Now, if only she could stop her hands from shaking…

Wolverine returned. "The gate's guarded by seven of 'em," he said, unsheathing his claws, "but there's a spot on the left that's pretty blind. That's where I'll be. If you need me."

"Thanks," she said, smoothing her dress and hair one last time, "but I hope I won't. How do I look?"

"Like you could sell your story," he said, "if they're buying."

"It all comes down to that, doesn't it?" she smiled nervously and wiped the sweat off her palms. She breathed deeply once, then again. "Okay," the word left her in a rush, "let's do this."

Jane walked down the long road towards the gate, not wavering or hesitating at all. Her shoulders were tight and high, her eyes fixed on the Skrull ahead, and her face composed. Inside, her heart felt as though it would burst from her chest and she was biting her inner lip so hard that it was about to bleed. Everything—her life, the lives of the prisoners, and the truce itself—depended on her maintaining composure.

So she would.

The Skrull chattered and straightened as she approached, warning her off with harsh grunts and gestures from their rifles. She held up one hand as she got within speaking distance.

"I have come on the orders of Lord Loki to examine the prisoners," she called, thanking whatever god watching over her that her voice was strong and sure, "He has sent me to find an empathic girl—Angela Capello—whom he believes will be of use to him."

The cluster of aliens grumbled among themselves until one, larger than the others and wearing a heavy collar with a blue stone, shoved his way to the front. This Skrull gestured her forward while the rest of them spread in defensive formation, taking aim at her with their rifles.

Jane clamped down on her lip and walked forward, praying that Wolverine wouldn't jump the gun and attack. She got within ten feet when he held up one hand. Jane stopped.

The Skrull—ten feet tall and muscled like a linebacker—stepped forward, each heavy footfall sending echoes up into the buildings beside them. Jane felt every single muscle in her body tighten and her instincts screamed for flight, but she bit her lip and clenched her fists and stood her ground.

One clawed, four-fingered hand reached towards her neck, and Jane flinched but to no avail; the creature was too fast. The Skrull caught the leather cord of her pendant in a surprisingly delicate grip, and examined the rune closely. After a few moments—during which her heart didn't dare beat—it grunted.

Looking back over its shoulder, the Skrull captain (she assumed) barked some harsh orders to its subordinates. The gates started to open, and two smaller aliens came to Jane's side, flanking her as they moved forward into Vatican City. Jane felt a frisson of magical power touch her skin as they passed underneath the archway, and her pendant burned hot against her neck, but the sensation lasted for a moment only as they passed through the barrier.
It took all the strength she had left not to look back over her shoulder as the doors squealed shut behind them. She was on her own.
Jane focused on her steps and breaths, trying to keep the rhythm of the two unhurried and even. Originally, she had thought that fear of the Skrull would make maintaining her cover difficult. However, as she and her alien escorts cleared the archways and walked into the grand piazza, she knew that fear would not be her biggest problem.

It would be awe.

The grandeur of Saint Peter's was something she had always heard about—and seen pictures of, naturally—but being there in person was something else entirely. Giant marble columns, gleaming like pillars of white fire in the afternoon sun spread away from them on either side, in curves that encompassed an area so large it seemed to take up Jane's entire world. Her eyes widened and she could feel her pupils dilate, trying to take it all in.

An obelisk rose to the sky before them, almost bisecting the beautiful classic dome of the basilica and its row of white columns before the huge bronze doors. As a trophy from one of the many incursions into Egypt, the obelisk was an odd contrast in all this Greco-Roman architecture, but as with the other trophies she had seen around Rome, it managed to fit in with the feel of the city. Somehow, what was alien had become familiar through centuries of intermingling cultures.

The idea that humans—over centuries and despite countless hardships—had made this suddenly lit a fire of pride so strong in Jane's heart that she almost cracked a smile. This was the reason she couldn't give up...this was something she could hold up to the rest of the universe to show them that humanity had worth, had value, and was not to be messed with by any laser-toting reptiles.

As long as things like this had and did exist...Jane could never give up or lose hope.

As they drew nearer, however, Jane's heart dropped like a stone in her chest. Charred gouges littered the sides of the obelisk, obscuring some of the ancient writing and leaving scorched pebbles around the pillar's base. One of the Skrull chuckled and grunted something to his companion as they walked past, and she realized that it was actually proud of the damage it had inflicted. They had been using the monument for target practice...all the best of Earth was completely worthless to them.

The sweat beading on Jane's forehead from the hot sun turned suddenly icy cold. For the first time, the thought occurred to her that the Skrull and Loki had very different reasons for being on her planet. She was certain that Loki would not commit such vandalism on a landmark like this, unless—for reasons of strategy or combat—it was absolutely necessary.

An explosion detonated on their right, and Jane jumped, a strangled scream making its way out of her throat, though she clamped her hand over her mouth to stifle it. One of the mighty columns groaned, its stones squealing as the aged mortar between them gave way. The vibration of the falling stones shuddered through Jane's feet, and she couldn't help it; she had to stop and watch as the entire pillar came tumbling down, bringing a section of the roof with it.

The awe in her stomach also froze into rage and terror as she heard the guttural laughs of the Skrull who had just destroyed part of human history. She gritted her teeth and clenched her hands into fists, trying to mask her emotions. This was not the time to fight; even if she did, what hope did she have? The only way to get revenge was to find out how to let the mutants inside. That was what she had to do.

So, Jane only paused for a moment as the column came down, then shrugged—the expression as
nonchalant as she could manage—and walked on. Her escorts—after finishing their own hoarse chuckles—trailed after her.

Together, they ascended the short staircase up into the basilica itself. Jane allowed herself one glance upwards as they entered and one silent sigh of admiration at the gorgeous mosaics on the ceiling and the bas relief sculptures bringing biblical scenes to life before focusing on the next hurdle.

Ahead of them, beneath the bronze canopy above the altar, was another checkpoint. Six Skrull—one as large as the guard who had let her through the main gates—waited; all staring at her so intently that Jane knew the distance between them was nothing to their keen eyes. She lifted her head and kept walking, even though her skin was now shining with clammy sweat. She told herself it was only the heat, and resisted the urge to run her hand over her forehead.

Soft hisses filled the entire room from the rest of the alien horde. The Skrull were seemingly everywhere; they stood in clusters all over the nave, constantly adjusting their weapons or dueling between themselves with wickedly sharp bone daggers. The sounds of laughter, combat, and chatter echoed up to the very top of the cupola and made Jane's skin erupt in goose bumps. The smell of burning fires and rotten meat, as well as the moldy reptilian stench of the Skrull themselves, turned Jane's stomach and she had to swallow hard to hold down the bile that wanted to come up.

Keep it together, she reminded herself, taking her torn bottom lip between her teeth once more, you can do this.

It seemed to take forever to cross the nave, but sooner than Jane would have liked, the four of them stood in front of the checkpoint and she was once again explaining her story.

"I have been sent to find an empathic mutant that Lord Loki believes to be in custody. I need to inspect the prisoners and report back by the end of the day."

The aliens shifted and growled to each other. Finally, the large one—collared with the same blue stone as the other ten foot tall Skrull she had seen—shuffled forward and pressed one hand to its throat.

The most awful voice Jane had ever heard—like crunching metal and gnashing teeth—came from its throat.

"And why has the would-be King not come himself? He has never sent a human to interfere with us before. Explain."

Jane swallowed the blood in her mouth and said, "He has more important things to attend to than the inspection of prisoners today," she tried to make her voice crisp, but it had all the resilience of wilted lettuce, "so he has sent me. I don't believe that he needs to explain himself to you."

The Skrull bared his teeth at her and snarled; a wave of hot, fetid breath washed over Jane's face and she thought she might faint. Black spots swirled at the edges of her vision and it was only the fear of certain death that kept her on her feet. A bead of sweat dripped into the corner of her eye and stung painfully. She blinked, tears of pain and fear building behind her lids.

The Skrull saw past her façade of arrogance, saw straight into the heart of her terror, and laughed. Jane's knees trembled underneath her and she locked them back, hoping that she would not fall.

"Little mortal, already dead and buried," it growled, raising one hand, claws spreading. It might have been her imagination, but Jane saw, with a heart-stopping clarity, a stain of red on those
claws that looked just like dried blood.

She jumped backwards—into the arms of her Skrull escort—and lifted her pendant in one shaking hand. "I am one of Lord Loki's trusted advisors," she cried, "and if you kill me," a sob escaped, "if you kill me, he will not be pleased."

She squeezed her eyes shut—in case her gambit didn't work—and scorching tears rushed down her cheeks.

Another burst of grating laughter. "Be silent. You will go to the prisoners, little dirt-creature," Jane didn't dare look up, relief swelling in her like a helium balloon, "and should you ever return, keep in mind the proper respect for your betters. It is a lesson your whole planet will soon learn."

Jane nodded, eyes still closed, and let herself be guided forward by the none-too-gentle hands of the guards. It was only when she heard the room return to its normal cacophony that she dared open her eyes and wipe away the sweat and tears. The entire room was laughing at her, but she didn't care; she was still alive.

They proceeded to the right of the nave, connecting through several corridors to the huge complex of museums and galleries next door. This time, however, Jane was too far gone to even spare a glance towards the magnificent paintings, frescoes and mosaics on the walls. It was a good thing that her attention was so distracted, as all the decorations in the rooms had been defaced by some way or another by the Skrull. She saw paintings shredded by talons, mosaics ripped to their component stones, and walls and sculpture seared by the heat of the alien weapons.

It was a massacre…but all Jane could think of was how grateful she was to still be breathing.

How could Loki allow this? He who seemed so determined to gain the goodwill of Rome, he who assured her that he meant to be a benevolent leader…could he really allow this desecration, this prison camp?

Of course he could, one sensible thought broke through the confused chaos in her mind, He has to conquer before he can rule. And this...this is the only way he can ever truly conquer. Through terror, and intimidation, and wanton destruction.

Just a few hours ago, Jane had worried that she would be unable to do what had to be done.

At least she wasn't worried about that anymore.

The tumult of Jane's thoughts slowly cleared, and she started to take in some of the details around her. One of the things that struck her most forcibly was the sheer silence in the hallway; aside from the guards' footsteps and her own, there was almost no other sound in the stillness.

For all that, though, they were not alone.

Crude barriers standing waist or chest high—sometimes constructed of nothing more than broken marble or charred wood—covered the entrance to every side gallery. A single Skrull stood by each of these barriers, weapons held rigid and ready. And behind the barriers...

Oh, my God. Those sunken and hopeless faces, those thin fingers and dead eyes belonged to human beings.

The entire place—this beautiful museum dedicated to the highest of human artistic pursuits—had been turned into a concentration camp.

Now that Jane had seen them, it was impossible not to stare at each set of eyes as she walked past.
It staggered her mind that so many people (sometimes hundreds packed into the same gallery) all sat or stood in total silence as she passed by. They were still as wax figures, only their eyes tracing her movements as a testament to their life. She could see several clearly mutant figures in the crowd, and she tried to memorize details as quickly as possible—translucent butterfly wings on one, tufted red-orange fur on another—but the overwhelming majority, as far as she could tell, were simple humans.

Humans stolen from the normal flow of their lives by the man who claimed to be their compassionate ruler.

If Jane thought about it any more she might just break down, just stand in the middle of that grand corridor and scream until she coughed blood. So she clenched every muscle in her body past the point of pain and kept walking.

One of the Skrull caught her by the elbow, talons cutting razor-thin lines on her arm. She gasped from the unexpected pain, but did not cry out. The alien gestured towards one of the rooms, and Jane approached the barrier.

She swallowed. "I have been sent to find an Angela Capello," please, please, please be alive, "If you are here, Angela, please come forward."

For a long moment, no one moved. They simply stared at her with the dull, furious gazes of wounded animals; animals who wished they could fight against their abusers, but knew they had no strength to. Jane bit her lip and waited. The Skrull approached the barrier and raised their weapons.

"Please, Angela," she was begging now and took no care to disguise it, "please come forward. I swear you won't be hurt."

A teenage girl—so skinny that it made Jane hurt just to look at her—shuffled out from behind a cluster of older women. The dark curls and lanky figure, however, made her an unmistakable twin to Alessio. Jane longed to tell her that her brother was all right, and that (hopefully) this hideous nightmare would be over soon, but she could not. The Skrull might not all speak English, but she knew they understood it well enough.

She settled for smiling—feeling it tremble on her face—and nodding as the girl slowly made her way forward. "Angela?"

The girl lifted her head, but her eyes avoided Jane's. "Yes," she said, softly, "I am Angela Capello."

The wounded dignity of this poor girl! Starved, imprisoned…and still possessed of more courage than Jane, well-fed and protected, would ever have. Shame made Jane's eyes glaze over with tears and she saw the sudden, startled looks of some of the prisoners as they took in her expression. She shook her head, trying to banish them, but the lump in her throat was impossible to swallow.

She croaked, "Twin to Alessio Capello?"

"Yes," the girl replied, hope and fear warring for dominance in her voice, "do you know of him?"

Jane could not look at her any longer. She turned to her guards. "This is all I need to know. Lord Loki will come and collect the girl later on."

To hell with covering her tracks, to hell with her cover. If anyone bothered to follow up on her story, they would find her out in a minute. None of that mattered. She had to get out, now.
They started back down the hallway. The girl shrieked after them, demented with fear and grief:

"Do you know my brother? What have you done to him? What have you done? Answer me!"

Jane heard the sound of flesh hitting flesh, and Angela squealed. But the blow could not stop her. The girl screamed her questions until the solid metal of the basilica's doors finally cut off the sound.

But Jane still heard them. Jane would hear them in her nightmares for years to come.

Her feet—blistering and raw in her shoes from the interminable walking—were on autopilot. It was the only way that Jane could keep moving forward, stop herself from falling to her knees and bursting into tears. She kept walking, a curious silence ringing in her ears, blunting her to the noises of the aliens in the nave, dulling her sensitivity to their sneering laughter, their endless brutality. Jane hardly blinked as they left the screaming shadows of the church into the harsh sunlight and the bright blue sky.

Everything came to her through a thick veil; one that Jane felt no need to tear apart. The veil kept her safe, kept her cushioned and numb, swaddled like a baby…or a corpse in a shroud.

Her escorts left her at the gate, bowing low and mocking before her, still chuckling at her ashen face and dried tear-tracks. She blinked, and turned away, limping on her sore feet back towards the river. It was the only anchor she had, the only safe place she knew, and she had to get to it before falling apart.

In fact, she walked straight into the barrier wall before her feet realized they did not have to move anymore. Still insulated from reality by her thick shroud, Jane knelt down and fumbled with the buckles on her shoes, clumsy fingers tearing at the ankle straps until they finally gave way.

She kicked off the heels, and blinked. The yellow river—uncaring and unchanging—rolled along in front of her. Rome itself—full of ignorant people, uncaring and unchanging—heaved around her. Jane leaned forward and vomited into the river, sour alcohol and last night's dinner and that morning's breakfast escaping in one foul, cleansing rush.

She gagged and vomited again, hanging her body halfway over the wall and feeling her head spin crazily with dehydration and vertigo. Then, there was a warm, rough hand patting her back and pulling her away from the edge that, for a moment, had been so tempting.

The world rushed back to Jane, having found its way under the heavy veil, and the sounds and colors and smells were suddenly too bright, too overwhelming…and she sagged against the wall and the warm, leather-and-rust smelling body of Wolverine, and cried.

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She would never have gotten through that next half-hour without him. The gruff mutant held her against his solid chest until her sobs had faded to hiccups, not saying a word but lending his warmth and silence to bolster her spirits. God knows what the people stepping around them were thinking. Several times, Jane had heard Wolverine snarling something in response to a concerned inquiry, but her brain was not processing words just yet. It was still working in simple strokes:

Silence, good. Warmth, good. Moving, bad. Thinking, talking, words in any sense…bad.

Warm sogginess against her cheek finally made her sit up. As she did, her face flushed painfully as she realized she had cried through a good portion of her friend's white tee-shirt. Jane wiped her face free of the remainder of her tears and snot, smearing her palms against the black dress. She would be throwing the thing out the moment she got back to the Villa…if she could just throw the
memories of that awful day out with it!

No. She had to keep the memories. The memories were all that made this horrible day worth anything. Jane found herself speaking, words slithering over each other like cockroaches, describing the Skrull in their placement and numbers, and the human prisoners, penned animals in the museum wing. She could hardly make sense of the words herself, but Wolverine was taking it all in, nodding and asking the occasional question to prod her reckless thoughts into some kind of order.

Finally, she stopped. With the confession at an end, she started to feel a little better. But when Wolverine stood and gestured for her to do the same, her knees shook and she felt as helpless as an old woman, needing both his hand and support from the wall to get to her feet.

"I can't go back there," she said, shaking her head desperately. "I can't go back. It just…after…" her brain and her tongue slid out of alignment and she stood there, just shaking her head and clutching desperately at Wolverine's arm.

He nodded and tucked her hand firmly under his, letting her walk as slowly as she would on her bare, sore feet. "There's a safe house a little bit ahead," he said, "you can wash up and get some rest."

Jane nodded. Washing and rest sounded good. Her whole body was gritty with sweat and dirt, her breath smelt atrocious, and her head was pounding from heat and exhaustion. They hobbled slowly through back alleys until he finally tapped a prearranged code on a tiny wooden door, half hidden by yellowed vines. The door squeaked open and two mutants—red-orange furred with bulbous yellow eyes—let them inside, clucking at Jane's wrecked appearance.

One of them disappeared immediately to draw her a bath, while the other chattered to Wolverine in rapid-fire Italian. He responded in kind, slowly and with many curses (in English) as well as a variety of gestures to get his meaning across, but eventually they reached an agreement. Wolverine led Jane to a small bathroom upstairs and set her duffel down on a stool next to the bathtub.

"They've agreed to let us stay here for three hours," he said, "and the bedroom's right next door; so once you finish here, go and get some sleep. Then I've got to get you back, before you're missed."

Jane shook her head. "I can't go back," she said, quietly, "Didn't you hear what I told you? He has hundreds of people penned up there; unfed, unwashed. He's going to find out what I did, sooner or later. And when he does…" her eyes filled with tears, "when he does, I'm going to end up there too. Please," she begged, "please don't make me go back."

Wolverine sighed. "I've got to, kid," he said, holding her shoulders as she started to shake uncontrollably, 'you know I do. The only chance we have of helping anyone in there is to do take 'em by surprise. If you disappear, we lose that chance. You want to help those people, don't you?"

It was a low blow, but it put the situation in clear perspective. Jane would die before allowing the situation in the Vatican to continue. She nodded, but could not stop shaking.

"Okay," Wolverine said, patting her gently on the back, "you take a bath and get some sleep, and I'm going to get you something to eat. Then we're going to go back. Sound good?"

"I hope that's a rhetorical question," Jane said wearily, fumbling slowly at the zipper on her dress. He cracked a smile and left the room.

They were still a mile from the Villa when Wolverine left her side. Having moved along in a kind
of stupor since leaving the safe house, Jane felt all her fear rush back at the idea of taking a single solitary step in Loki’s direction.

"How will you get through the gates?" Jane asked, desperate to keep him near, "How will I know if you need me again? What if…" she swallowed, "what if I need you again?"

"Send word through the mayor's wife, whatever you need, and we'll get word to you the same way. We'll figure it out."

She couldn't let go. "Do I have to?"

He nodded, slowly, face softening out of its harsh lines with regret and sorrow for her. "Yeah, kid. But you can do it."

"Can I?" her voice was a faint whisper, like a ghost in the night.

"You can," he said, and he said it with such certainty that Jane couldn't help but believe him, even just a little bit, "listen," he put one rough hand over hers, "I've known a lot of tough people in my time. Been one of them myself, too. So I know the kind of guts it takes to do what you just did. And believe me," he finished, simply, "if you can do that, you can do anything."

What was it about plain-speaking, rough-seeming men that gave Jane so much strength? Tony Stark, Wolverine…and of course, Thor…she had known so many of them and they had all given her so much. He was right. She couldn't let this revulsion, this weakness, get the better of her. Helping the resistance was never going to be an easy job; and what would it say about her if she chickened out at the first sign of difficulty?

Jane smiled, having forgotten how good the expression could feel. It seemed to lift the burden of darkness and pain off her shoulders, at least a little bit. It hurt, but she smiled wider, squaring her shoulders and holding it firmly in place.

He looked at her, one eyebrow quirked. "Tone that down a bit; you look like you're about to murder someone."

She laughed. "Maybe I am," she said, grinning like a true maniac, arching her own eyebrow, "you never know."

Then she turned on her heel and set off for the Villa. She heard Wolverine laughing behind her, and the sound of it washed her along in relatively good spirits until she got back to the house.

Despite that, she still had to pause and take a few deep breaths before pushing open the gates to the garden. They squealed sharply and Jane jumped, but it didn't matter; she would have been seen no matter how quietly she'd come in.

Loki and Erik both turned to look at her. Jane couldn't help it; she had to take a long moment to gather herself, and knew that her guilt, fear, exhaustion, and anguish showed that whole time in her face. Slowly, she gathered the shattered pieces of her armor and assembled them piece by piece, until she felt her feet moving forward and a tremulous smile rising before her like a shield.

Erik looked pathetically happy to see her. She could see the strain of the unexpected tête-à-tête with his former captor in his stiff posture, pale face, and trembling hands. Loki, surprisingly, did not look fully at ease either. Jane would have expected him to be enjoying his domination—even without the power of possession—and reveling in his innate ability to make his betters cower before him.

But the way both men reacted made Jane realize they had both been waiting for her. That
realization was enough to completely tie Jane's tongue. She crossed the lawn and flopped on the
ground, putting her back to a stone bench and looking up at both men.

*I've done enough pretending for one day,* she thought sourly; *let them come up with a topic if*
*they're so desperate to speak to me.*

Her eyes wandered up to Loki's. Erik would never speak to her before knowing that it was safe
for him to do so. He would wait for his erstwhile master to go first.

Loki rested both hands against the edge of his bench and leaned towards her. There was a
coldness about his eyes that Jane had not seen for several weeks...actually (and this chilled her)
several months. She had lived with this man for two full months. She knew things about him. And
right now, she knew he was doing his best to look at her as he once had...as though she were
nothing but the tool he had wanted to use her as. As a hostage against SHIELD, a threat against
Thor, and a triumph...for himself.

But something wasn't quite right. The illusion wasn't complete, even for this master magician.
There were still telltale signs that showed Jane everything. The tilt of his head, the tiny curl at one
corner of his mouth, the straight furrow of his brow; they told her that he was pleased to see her,
but was very suspicious about where she had been all day.

A story surfaced in her mind and spilled out.

"I walked to the Spanish Steps," she fished the guidebook out of her bag and flipped the pages,
"They looked so beautiful in here," she went on, handing the book to Erik so he could see as well.
*Look, just another tourist, nothing to see here.* "I ate lunch on the steps and then had a real Italian
espresso!"

The enthusiasm was threadbare; even she could tell, and Erik was not someone who could back
her up, even when in control of his faculties. He smiled weakly and muttered something under his
breath as Jane stumbled into silence and dropped her gaze to her nervously twisting fingers.

"And why is your hair wet?"

Damn, damn, damn.

"It's sweat," she said, "I jogged most of the way back. It's pretty warm, for April. Although I
guess Rome is a little more..." she fumbled for the word, "humid than I'm used to."

"Hmm," he leaned back, still giving her that look that said I-don't-believe-you-in-the-slightest.
"Well, now that you have returned from your long, unsupervised afternoon," he said those words
as though she'd committed a crime, "I will repeat the news I have given to your mentor."

Dread rose in Jane's chest, choking off her airway. She sat up straighter, muscles tensing to absorb
the shock of whatever might come. He saw it, of course; just as she could read him, Loki had
learned the expressions of Jane's face and body a long while ago. He read her fear and resignation,
and smiled.

"I have just received word from my captains in the field that Russia is ready to sign a surrender," if
he were a cat, he would have purred in sheer content, "and that is an event which requires my
personal attendance. So I have waited to wish you a personal and fond farewell, my Jane," he
extended his hand, "as well as an apology for having to leave you alone. Moscow is still terribly
cold at this time of year, and I do not think you would enjoy it."

She wanted—now as never before—to slap the smug superiority and condescension out of his
voice. Instead, she settled for placing one limp hand in his, trying her best to conceal the shudder
that shook her body as his fingers closed around her thin wrist. Jane closed her eyes and let her body go completely limp; it was the only way to resist the urge to flinch away from his warm, familiar hands.

Those hands were dripping with blood. The blood of all the prisoners she had just seen and many—how many, she didn't even want to know—that she had not.

He pulled her upright; Jane would never have been able to get to her feet without his arms around her. She still could not get any power at all to her muscles, so she was entirely under his control. Jane heaved a silent sigh.

She always had been…and she always would be.

But…no. That wasn't right. She had and could take control.

Jane looked up, meeting his eyes with less difficulty than she would have ever thought possible. She even managed a smile.

"Good luck."

He recognized it for the taunt it was. So his smile in answer was full of teeth.

"Thank you," he leaned forward, the words breathed into her mouth, and sealed them in with a kiss. Jane didn't even flinch; perhaps she was growing more thick-skinned, or he was developing a pattern, but either way…she had known it was coming.

So this time, she fought back.

Loki was already pulling away from her when Jane's arms came up to his neck and pulled him back in. His lips moved to say things that were never heard, as Jane took the opportunity to slip her tongue into his mouth, hands softening into his hair as she felt his fingers on her back.

She knew how this must look to Erik, the attendants on the veranda above…to anyone who might be watching. Jane could even see Erik's look of shock and disgust from her half-open eyes. But Loki's eyes were closed, and his breath was hard against her cheek as his fingers clutched at her spine. He was just as urgent as the first time all those months ago in Stark Tower, and Jane felt a surge of power running from her toes to her fingertips as he succumbed to this manipulation.

Then Jane took his lower lip between her teeth and bit down.

Her blunt mortal teeth could never hurt him, of course. Still, she wanted to laugh at the look of shock on his face as he jerked away, hands still tangled in her hair. Jane took a step back, freeing herself from him, and repeated, smiling:

"Good luck."

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