



worlds
will
break

BRIDGE BURNED

BRIDGE OF THE GODS: BOOK 1
A Norse Myths & Legends Romantic Fantasy

ELLIANA THERED

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This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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Six years past and worlds away

AS I sprinted into the birch trees ringing Alfheim's bridge stone clearing, he reached for me. An unholy wind whipped his straw-gold hair into a flurry around his stone-strong features. His fingers curled, trying to catch hold of my robes.

I gathered the near-translucent silk of my skirts more tightly into my fist, drawing them clear of his reach while holding them away from my running feet. My breath rasped in my lungs. Summer grass skimmed beneath my soles, cool in comparison to the burning heat that filled the air.

Unnatural heat, raw with the stink of smoke.

"Iris! Wait!" He barked the command as if he were used to being obeyed.

MUSCLED shoulders strained the broadcloth which made his formal tunic. Silver threads wove in rune-like patterns through the tunic's black, which matched the plain black of his trousers. A silver-adorned horn lay curved against his hip, the natural ridges of the yak's horn from which it was made worn smooth beneath the silver bands. The bridge stone beside which he stood was a massive hunk of hewn stone, weather worn and embedded with a prism. He appeared no less powerful than the stone, no less bright than the diamond.

The shimmering colors of the way faded, delivering me from my home of Alfheim to the wintry world of Asgard. As I became visible in front of him, his eyes widened.

Mine probably did, too. I'd seen Asgardians before, but not this one. I was sure I'd have remembered. His hair was a pale gold, ruffled in the breeze, and his broad, strong features were ruddy from the same chill air. His eyes, though—those were clear as the sky, although a deeper blue.

Then he bowed, lowering his face from my view. When he looked up again, he wore a somber expression. I swore, though, that one corner of his mouth twitched like he wanted to smile.

Utterly charmed despite everything I knew about the stern and powerful self-styled gods of Asgard, I was the one who smiled. Although short, thick grass cushioned my feet and pale throats of purple and yellow crocus lay scattered across the turf, Asgard's much-colder climate stung my Alfheim-raised flesh into goosebumps. I found, however, that I didn't mind too much.

"You're new." He stated this fact in a perfectly level voice. "First day?"

That caught me off guard. Protocol stated that you asked the traveler's destination, took them where they wanted to go, and returned to Alfheim's central bridge stone to await the next call from a traveler. It said nothing about making conversation. In my admittedly-limited experience—I was twenty-two but had been a bridge less than a month—most Asgardians preferred a lack of it.

Except Thor, of course. My best friend Rose, who'd been a bridge for nearly a year already, had warned me about Thor. My little brother Willow had rolled his eyes, but Papa had stated, quite clearly, "If any of them give you any trouble, you will report it to me. Immediately."

But in Thor's case, it wasn't attempts at conversation you had to worry about. And this was not Thor—I noted the horn on this man's hip. No hammer there.

"Very nearly." And then, for reasons I couldn't fathom, I added, "My name is Iris."

A smile most definitely twitched the corner of his mouth, then. For reasons I absolutely could fathom, my pulse beat a little faster.

"And I am Heimdal." His voice was smooth. Warm. Rich. "Watcher of the Aesir."

Aesir, I reminded myself. The rest of us referred to them as gods for a reason.

But oh, those sapphire eyes and that beautiful hint of a smile.

I strained to add speed to my steps. Faced forward to see where I was going.

Leaves slapped my face. Branches tangled in my hair. My vision filled with spinning green coins of birch leaves and white of shedding bark, which were right. After all, I ran through the forest surrounding the bridge stone clearing, set high on a hillside just outside Alfheim's only city. Leaves were right. Tree bark was right.

Black smoke was not right. The hot stink that filled my nose was not right. The unsteady roar that drowned out all other sounds except the gasp of my breathing—that was not right.

Any second now. Any second, and I would burst free from the trees. Glass and marble pavers led from the hilltop and wound down through gardens filled with colors other worlds only dreamed of. Spires of spun glass floated above multi-hued rooftops. Pastel silk streamers flapped in the steady breeze of never-ending summer against the golden dome of sky that protected the Alfar from the radiation of our world.

Alfheim. My world. My city. That's what I would see. Any second now.

My hands, blindly shoving branches away from my face, abruptly met with no resistance. I ran out of the forest and onto the hillside, onto the first of the glass pavers.

And stumbled to a dead stop.

SUNSHINE, I decided. If sunshine made a sound, it would be the sound of Heimdal's voice.

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Heimdall had summoned me to Asgard, using the communication crystals embedded in each of the bridge stones my people had built on the various worlds. So Asgard's was the sunshine we stood in, stunningly bright, as if magnified through layers of ice.

Which was, for all I knew, exactly what happened. Asgard, like my home world of Alfheim, relied on protective domes to protect it from a harsh environment that would otherwise render our homes unlivable. On Asgard, that environment was a brutal, never-ending winter. To the natives of Asgard, that was inconvenient and made life more difficult.

Their winter would likely kill me within minutes. Alfheim, in contrast, was a world under constant bombardment by intense radiation. Our dome—only one, for our single city, for we were far less populous than the Asgardians—was of magic intended to filter our sun's heat. Where winter ruled Asgard, summer ruled Alfheim.

Not that I was cold. Even wearing the diaphanous robes of midnight and royal purple that bridges wore when on duty, I felt plenty warm. Flushed, even. And while Asgard's dome had certainly trapped enough heat to allow a dense forest of firs and ashes and elms to flourish, and even a low carpet of dense winter grass covered the bridge stone clearing where I'd met Heimdall, I was pretty sure the sun's heat wasn't the primary source of my warmth.

Heimdall's off-kilter hint of a smile quirked slightly higher. Gods. Did the man read minds?

"The Allfather has many tasks for me to accomplish today." Sunshine, his voice. Pure, melt-inducing sunshine. "I hope you won't mind if I keep you away from your world for a short time."

Mind? I urged my pulse to settle as I offered my arm, palm up, in the traditional pose of the bridge offering to carry a traveler. When Heimdall placed his hand palm down against mine, that was my cue to bend the light to my will and open a way between worlds.

"Svartalfheim." Heimdall stated his destination with that same delicious voice.

It was all I could do to center myself and focus. But that was my job, after all, and I had no intention of messing it up in front of this man.

This god.

I inhaled, reaching in my mind's eye for a spark of pure white light that I imagined over our heads. I drew the light down until I felt it surrounding us. Beside me, Heimdall stood very still, his hand pressed against mine. Maybe he felt it, too?

When the light had enveloped us, I envisioned the bridge stone on Svartalfheim that was used by visiting dignitaries from Asgard. Then I reached into the light and tweaked it, just so. Just as I'd been taught.

Around us, colors swirled out from the white. Before us, the void of a created bridge opened.

THE sky had vanished, and my city with it.

A wall of black pressed outward and upward in every direction, following the curves of the magical dome that held Alfheim's climate steady and rendered our environment livable. Where I had expected to see glass spires and silk streamers, alabaster walls and gemstone mosaics, instead flames the color of blood flared skyward in a great column.

My eyes burned. My vision blurred. I blinked and squinted, peering into the crimson and black.

Papa. Rose. Willow.

I had to move. They needed me.

My brain raged that no one could possibly be left to need me.

There's no screaming. No sound at all but the fire.

But my heart screamed rebelliously.

They need me!

Lifting one arm to shield my eyes from the worst of the smoke, I shoved one foot in front of the other and started forward again.

WE traveled first to Svartalfheim, a mountainous world with rocky spires and cities built into cliff sides. The bridge stone we used sat not in a forest clearing, but in a courtyard of polished quartz with a high ceiling where gems glittered like stars in an artificial sky. The bridge stone itself was cut granite, rune-carved and topped by the gleaming diamond prism of the communication crystal.

"Will you wait for me?" Heimdal's smile faded into an all-business expression. He squared his shoulders and fixed his gaze on the approaching Svartalf attendant, dark and sharp as a stone himself. "Delivering messages takes only a few minutes."

A furrow rippled across Heimdal's brow, there and then gone.

"You're delivering messages?" I pressed my lips together as soon as the question was out. My job was to take travelers where they asked, not to interrogate them about their business there. Particularly when they were high-ranking members of Asgard's ruling class, performing tasks for their leader.

Heimdal's eyebrows lifted, but he kept his gaze on the attendant who'd nearly reached us.

"It's more important work than it seems." He sounded more amused than angry. "But I'm less than thrilled about it, too."

"I'm sorry." I kept my voice hushed, not wanting to make a scene. "I—"

Heimdal still didn't look at me, but his hand brushed mine. I absolutely did not gasp. But I may have inhaled somewhat more sharply.

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Heimdall's smile quirked anew, this time in profile. "Wait for me. If you get into trouble, whisper my name. I'll hear you."

He sounded even more amused as he said that last.

The Svartalf attendant bowed before Heimdall, and Heimdall bowed in return. Then they were gone, boots clacking on the polished granite floor, and I was alone with a slowly-dawning realization.

In a fashion similar to the Alfar, the Asgardians shared similar traits. For my people, we could all to some extent or another manipulate light—the ability most valued was, of course, that of warping light to create bridges between worlds. For the Asgardians, they shared a hardiness and strength greater than on other worlds. But on Asgard, individual talents had developed as well.

Heimdall was Watcher, head of security for the Allfather Odin. But if rumors I'd heard were true, "watcher" was more than just a title. Along with a talent for casting protective rune-wards, Heimdall also enjoyed keener senses than most—sight, smell...

"I'll hear you," he'd said. And if he could truly hear my whisper from whatever great distance away he was currently walking to deliver his message...

Then he could no doubt hear my racing pulse when he was standing right beside me. So no, he was not reading my mind.

But he still knew exactly what I'd been thinking about him.

"IRIS!"

Heimdall's voice, from behind me. I could barely hear it over the conflagration. The fire rumbled, like an unceasing thunder.

I inhaled, intending to shout back to Heimdall to hurry, to come and help.

Help my people. Help us.

Heated air razed my throat. Black stink coated my mouth and choked me. I stumbled to a stop and doubled over, coughing.

Trying to stand straight, I was forced to look all over again at the orange-red inferno where Alfheim's only city had once stood. The truth lanced through my gut.

There is no one left to help.

I gasped, sucking in a breath I hadn't intended, and exhaled it all in a single scream.

AFTER Svartalfheim, I took Heimdall to the world of Jotunheim. Once there, Heimdall showed no trace of a smile and didn't ask me to wait. He narrowed his eyes at the Jotun attendants, with their

jet eyes and dark hair that ranged from black to deep auburn. They, in turn, looked me up and down before turning their attention to Heimdal.

“We have no friends here.” Heimdal spoke quietly, just for me, before the three attendants got close enough.

He wouldn't have needed to warn me. “Jotun” meant “devourer,” named so for their warlike ways. They'd conquered worlds before this one. They'd have taken Alfheim and Asgard and all others, if they'd thought they could get away with it. Peace with Jotunheim had long been a tentative, uncertain thing. Alfheim's council—my people—were widely known for free thinking and compassion. But even they treaded with caution where the Jotun were concerned.

I was not allowed to answer traveler requests directly from Jotunheim. I was happy enough about that rule. I'd been here during my training, just long enough to memorize the cold iron arches and poured-stone floors that surrounded the obsidian bridge stone. The rainbow colors that dribbled from this bridge stone's communication crystal seemed feeble in the grim surroundings. The very air tasted like iron and danger.

Heimdal's hand again touched mine. For reassurance, I thought at first, and my pulse picked up before I could rein it in.

Get yourself together. He has to think you're a giddy, stupid fool by now.

But Heimdal's touch turned to ice, and a cold light flared around me. Runes of deep blue crackled before my eyes. They faded almost immediately, but I felt their presence lingering in the air.

The Jotun attendants snapped their attention to Heimdal.

“She is under my protection.” Heimdal bowed to the Jotun, the picture of politeness. “Propriety dictates that I mark her as such.”

None of the three remarked on Heimdal's blatantly false excuse for casting a ward on me in the halls of a political ally, however tentative the alliance might be.

One attendant led Heimdal away, while the other two flanked the door. They watched me with hooded gazes until Heimdal returned. Even with the ward surrounding me, that was not quickly enough. The entire time, I stood very still, as much to avoid drawing undue attention from the watching Jotun as from fear of perhaps bumping up against the unseen shield around me.

Finally, booted footfalls sounded in the hall. The first attendant returned, Heimdal on his heels and looking like a flash of sunlight in Jotunheim's ominous gloom. Forgetting—yet again—that Heimdal would hear, I let out a tiny sigh of relief.

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His eyes caught mine, bluer than the flash of sapphire light that again lit the air. The ward around me fell, and with it gone a chill returned. But not for long, because Heimdal's hand again brushed mine.

"Let's not linger," he murmured.

I lifted my arm and turned up my palm. Heimdal laid his hand on mine, palm down.

"Alfheim." Heimdal hesitated. "The last stop. Then you can return me to Asgard."

Did he sound disappointed? Crazy as it was, I was disappointed. By the time I returned from acting as bridge for Heimdal, the sun would have barely shifted position in Alfheim's sky. I could hardly say I knew Heimdal at all.

"It's been my pleasure." I flushed as I spoke. Which meant, of course, that my pulse was beating faster than normal. Again. Which meant that Heimdal could hear it. Again.

I took a breath and gathered myself.

Center. Focus. Find the light and bend it.

As Jotunheim shimmered out of existence around us, I was vaguely aware of Heimdal's bluer-than-blue eyes turning in my direction. His lips parted.

What he'd been about to say, I didn't find out. First, the light took us, rainbow streaks that glowed in the warping light. The darkness of the bridge chased after. Then Alfheim's bridge stone appeared from the swirling colors on the far side, alabaster white and topped with a glittering prism.

A prism drenched in blood red light. An alabaster nearly obscured by drifting smoke.

A rising wind pressed against my back, whipping my hair around my head and into my face. The sky was midnight, but without stars. Without the magnetic aurora that typically filled the night sky.

Because it's not night.

A firestorm billowed out from the city, eating its way up the hillside. Devouring the glass and marble pavers with a sound like a million hungry teeth gnashing, it drove a wall of smoke before it.

Now that I'd stopped running down the hill, I instinctively scrambled backwards.

The fire kept coming. Heat sizzled against my skin. The stink of overheating fabric filled my nostrils.

My robes.

Light flared around me, silvery cool. Lines of brilliant blue slashed through the light, forming runes that flared and then faded.

Fingers closed around my arms and hauled me away from the advancing fire. I backpedaled, trying to keep my balance. I failed, but before I could hit the ground, arms surrounded me and held me up.

The flare of pale light faded to a dim glow.

Heimdall, I realized. *He certainly picked a good day to show up at the bridge stone.*

Wholly inappropriate laughter welled up inside me. Before it got out, it turned into a wordless wail.

The arms holding me tightened. Heimdall's voice rumbled beside my ear, raspy from the smoke.

"My ward won't hold forever. We have to go. Now."

Beyond Heimdall's protective magic, black smoke shoved against the silver light. The black glowed darkly, with crimson light.

"Papa." I mouthed the word. I couldn't tell if it came out, because the thunderous sound of fire filled my ears.

"There's no one left." Heimdall choked out the words. I twisted toward him.

His features contorted into an ugly mask. Soot streaked his face.

He would be able to hear them, I realized. Screaming, heartbeats... anything.

"Please," I whispered.

"I'm sorry." Heimdall's arms remained locked around me. He leaned toward me, filling my face with his, locking his gaze to mine. "I hear no one. They were dead before we got here."

I moaned and tried to turn my head aside.

Heimdall's embrace tightened. He didn't shake me, not exactly, but he held me firmly.

"You are the bridge. You will need to open the way for us." Heimdall's gaze never wavered from my face. "You're the only one who can."

His life was in danger as well, I abruptly realized. Strong as the Asgardians were, only the Alfar could bend light and create the bridges between worlds. If I refused to go, he would die here with me.

Fire shrieked and cackled, shoving against Heimdall's ward.

There's no one left.

Sobbing, I managed to focus long enough to open a way to Asgard. Light and colors swept in, claiming us just before Heimdall's icy ward could crack and fail.

Behind us, my world burned.

WINTER sunlight. Heimdall's arms. Then darkness.

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After that, a muzzy, blurred existence of half light and half consciousness and half heard conversations. Beneath me, a bed. Above me, a blanket. Around me, nothing that I couldn't block by keeping my eyes shut.

"...should burn itself out, with their dome to contain it." A man's voice. Strong but aged.

"Yes. But what *started* it to begin with?" Heimdal, but with no soft edges. With a fire as hot as the one we fled. "That was no simple fire. It was an explosion."

"Frigg has spent the last several hours attempting to answer that question. Her scrying shows that a failure in their dome mechanisms may have caused it. Even a small dose of their sun's radiation leaking through..." The other, older man paused. "Without returning to investigate, there's no way of knowing, I suppose. As it stands, there's little to be done about it now."

Now that we are all dead. Now that Alfheim is gone.

"Their dome mechanisms are outside the city, separately shielded. Frigg's scrying shows they remain undamaged, and the dome itself hasn't failed. In time, the land will heal itself."

The land, perhaps. The people were gone—all gone.

My world was dead.

I kept my eyes squeezed shut, as much because I lacked the ability to open them as because I wished to avoid the words the two Asgardians were exchanging. Despite the bone deep weariness that weighed me against the bed, I moaned and turned my head, wishing for the energy to cover my ears.

A hand fell on my shoulder. The backs of Heimdal's fingers brushed my cheek.

"We shouldn't be discussing this here." Heimdal's voice, with the fire gone from it, replaced by a tender pity. He said no more, but his touch lingered on my shoulder, as if there were more he would say if he had no audience.

Whisper my name. I'll hear you.

Maybe that wasn't what he'd have said, at all. But at the time, I felt better for believing it.

Present day

SIX years. Over six years, actually, since I'd first met Heimdal. I couldn't have told you the exact span of time—I never learned how to convert Alfheim's or Asgard's dates to those of Midgard, where I now lived. But on days like this one, in the season peculiar to Midgard that lay between Alfheim's summer and Asgard's winter, I thought about him.

Far more than I liked, I thought about him.

I was the only employee working Cox Lake Resort's rental office—which was not unusual. Like many of the resorts surrounding the plethora of lakes that filled central North Dakota, this one was a small mom-and-pop operation. Most of the fishermen and occasional families who stayed here registered over the weekend and settled in for a week-long stay. Today was a Wednesday, so at least the office wouldn't be busy.

Delicate sunlight streamed through the east-facing windows of the log-constructed building which housed the rental office. I stood with my back to the light, letting it stream through the strands of blonde hair hanging in my face. With my mug of morning coffee clutched in both hands, I propped my butt against the registration counter behind me.

There were no customers at the moment. In a few minutes, I'd wander through the open doorway between the office and the tiny general store that took up the other half of the building, to see if Claire needed help restocking anything. Coffee and chewing gum, most likely. The folks who frequented the Cox Lake Resort tended to be self-reliant sorts, for the most part. No touristy-types on the books this week.

In a minute, I'd do that. For now, homesickness powerful enough to be real pain twanged behind my eyes. Longing as thick as nausea gripped my throat.

Breathe, Iris. Just breathe.

Which I was more homesick for, Heimdal or my home world, was up for grabs. I had nightmares sometimes still, filled with pillars of blood red flame and choking black smoke. And I shouldn't, quite honestly, miss Heimdal at all. I should be furious, glad he was gone, cursing his very existence.

But some days, holding onto that anger was just too much effort. Some days, I just wanted everything to go back to the way it had been.

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I could at least be grateful for the comfy jeans and simple blue t-shirt I wore. Not every place I'd worked over the last six years had such a relaxed dress code. Moments like this, relaxed was a good thing.

Mid-September, the air outside was cool but not cold. I'd already cracked open a window, so fresh air wafted into the office. I focused on following my every inhalation, clear air flowing into my lungs and then back out again. *Breathe. Feel the rise and fall of my stomach.*

Curse the gods who did this to me.

What I really wanted was to be home. Home would make all the pain go away. Even just the *ability* to go home would cure everything.

The pain in my head twanged, and I backed away from that line of thinking. I'd wasted enough years on self-pity and futile wishing. Going home? That wasn't happening.

The next best thing for distracting myself from homesickness was painting, but I couldn't do that here and now. Third best thing, then.

An over-sized frame window filled the office's west wall—scenic views were a thing you couldn't get away from out here. Sunlight glittered on the furthest reaches of the lake, visible between the trees that flanked the lake—a motley crowd of elms and aspen, with a sprinkling of poplars and birches closer to the water's edge. I imagined a brush in my hands—I'd load it with burnt sienna.

I could smell the trees, an earthy sharp scent that filled my senses and distracted from other thoughts.

A glaze to create the deep shadows. A heavier-bodied mix with yellow ochre, then, and denser brush strokes. I leaned forward, as if into the scene I was painting in my head. Next would come crimson. Vermillion. A bittersweet autumn breeze tickled my nose, the scent of summer life bowing before winter's impending death.

A warmth blossomed behind my eyes and seeped through my forehead and along my scalp. As often happened, the comfort I took in painting felt nearly like a tangible thing.

A bell chimed. For a moment, forgetting myself, I ignored it.

“Hey?”

The bell repeated itself. A split second later, I recognized it.

I shoved away from the rental counter and spun around.

A fisherman stood on the other side of the counter, beside the “ring for service” sign. He held one big hand poised over the call bell sitting beneath the sign. He was an older guy, salt and pepper peeking from beneath a crumpled and stained cap.

“Either of you gals working today?” His equally crumpled and stained flannel shirt shifted as he lowered the bell-ringing hand. His mouth crooked into a lazy grin.

“Mr. Davis. I’m so sorry.” I took a step back from the counter and pasted a polite smile onto my face.

Rick Davis waved away the apology. With his other hand, he hefted a familiar red can. It wafted the warm-rich scent of coffee.

“It happens. Not a worry. You ring this up for me, sweetheart? Ain’t nobody next door.”

Nobody next door?

I frowned. Irresponsibility wasn’t a new thing for Claire, the girl who was supposed to watch the general store. Two days ago, Claire flat out hadn’t shown up for work at all. I had juggled both the rental office and the store, not so much to cover for Claire but because our boss, Maureen, had enough on her hands without worrying about her employees.

Before that day, Claire hadn’t ever done anything quite that extreme. She’d been getting progressively worse. But I was positive she’d come in this morning. I’d seen her battered green van.

Mr. Davis lifted the coffee can a little higher and raised his eyebrows.

I pasted on my practiced smile-for-customers again. “Of course I can. Step back into the store. I’ll be right over.”

My hiking boots beat a lighter patter between the man’s heavier footsteps as I followed him across the plank floor and through the open doorway.

The store’s lights were on. I glanced into the surveillance mirror in the back corner of the ceiling, but no one stood between the half dozen aisles of shelving that comprised the Cox Lake Resort General Store.

“Claire?” I called out as I rounded the short counter. I reached for Mr. Davis’s coffee with one hand and toward the register with my other.

No answer.

I didn’t call out again. I rang up Mr. Davis’s coffee, made change for him, and saw him off with the “have a nice day now” version of my practiced polite smile.

Polite was fine. Genuinely friendly, I rarely had the heart for. Genuine emotions led to genuine relationships, and those only ever led to pain.

Through the store’s front window, I could see the gravel parking lot. Claire’s van sat at the far end, beside my Jeep. Claire was definitely here, then. Somewhere.

The register drawer jingled as I shut it. I headed for the storeroom beyond the store’s main aisles, cutting between shelves of packaged snacks and the beer cooler.

The storeroom door was closed, but a sound came from the other side.

I hesitated. I didn’t know Claire well, but I knew enough about her lifestyle to extrapolate a lot of potential scenarios.

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If I catch her back there smoking or snorting something, I'll have to report her to Maureen.

If the Alfar had laid any claim to fame—beyond that of our ability to open bridges between worlds—it was for a compassion that went above and beyond that of most other races. My people had long been the negotiators, the peace-makers, the creators of truces between worlds. As I had been frequently reminded, my penchant for landing waist deep in the troubles of other people was likely a genetic thing.

On Asgard, that had led to nothing good. And Claire's insistence on walking at the fringe of legality was not something I wanted to get in the middle of.

But I was here now. I had to do *something*. If nothing, else, I needed to be sure Claire was on duty so I could scamper back to the relatively safe haven of the rental office.

With a resigned sigh, I knocked, one light rap on the scarred surface of the door. "Claire?"

"Iris? I'm OK." Claire's voice wavered. She didn't sound high.

She sounded like she was crying.

I wasn't sure which would be worse. I glanced longingly toward the doorway leading back to my little realm of rental counter and paperwork. And then toward the unmanned store register.

Here now. Do something.

Damn it anyhow.

I pushed open the storeroom door.

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