

Winter walked into the laboratory. I paid little notice until I felt his attention focus on me as he spoke, his way of letting me know that desired my active participation in his work.

I manifested myself more fully within the vessel he had chosen. An amusing choice, to provide me with the bones of the dead; it was not appropriate. I had always been a being of life rather than death. The concepts were intertwined, though, each edging into the other as naturally as one shifts into two. My position on the boundary had more to do with the living than the dead, but I could understand the confusion.

He began asking questions, and I answered them. His speech was painfully slow in comparison to my perceptions, which was just as well. For each thing he said, I had to look for the meaning underlying it, process and respond to that meaning, and then translate my response back into the words he was using.

It seemed comparable to translating between languages, but the reality was rather more difficult than that. It was closer to asking a computer to translate an input from hexadecimal into binary, perform an operation, and then convert the result back into hexadecimal to report it.

Luckily, like the computer, I was capable of processing the input fast enough to make the procedure happen with almost no discernable delay.

He continued asking me questions about power, about the mechanics of certain weapons, and I answered. He felt nervous, anxious, but not actually frightened, and there was another aspect to him, an element of territorial aggression. There was a darker side to that aggression, as well, an edge of violent, destructive hunger.

I felt a resonance with my own nature there, and there was a satisfaction in that recognition. I had seen the potential in him early to become a force of destruction, of purification. It was beginning to reach its fruition now, beginning to blossom from a suggestion into a reality.

I was the culling of the herd, the harsh reality that killed the weak and left the strong stronger. In part due to my influence over him, so was he. I was stronger as a result; the idea that was my core had gained a foothold and spread out from it. There was more of me, in a very real sense. That brought an instinctive satisfaction to me. Those of us who lacked that response seldom lasted long.

I knew that what he was currently doing would lead, soon or late, to a further expansion. He would fall further in line with the concept that he had named Legion, a singularly ironic choice on his part. He could say that the weapon he was designing was a failsafe, never intended to be used, but that was nothing more than a balm to soothe his conscience. Eventually he would use it; it was what he was. With the nature of the weapon in question, it would be in line with my own identity, providing me with further power, allowing me to continue existing in this form.

All of these were inevitable, a chain of logic leading inexorably to our mutual ascendance. Again, there was a satisfaction in this. Not excitement, as excitement was not in my nature; I had been created out of grim certainty, not hopeful naïveté. But I had been created with an acute awareness of

inevitability as well, and thus I could appreciate the inevitable. In some ways, the chain of consequences leading to my own growth was the same to me as the growth itself.

Thus, the satisfaction. Growth and reproduction were basic urges, so fundamental that they had been built into me without my creator being quite aware of what she was doing.

Winter began working on his new weapon, laying out the foundations for the magic that would later build on top of it. As with all of my designs, it began simply and then grew, layer by layer, into an organic, fractal composition. There was no other way it could be. I myself was profoundly organic, incapable of defining myself in any other way.

He continued the work for another two hours, during which time I paid enough attention to correct any errors and answer questions. eventually he put the final touch on the first layer, locking it into place so that it would resist the natural decomposition process. Degradation and decomposition were a part of my nature, which meant that I also understood how to limit their effects. It could not be entirely prevented, nor indefinitely delayed, but with clever design it could be mitigated.

He left, turning out the lights behind himself, and I ceased manifesting in that vessel as strongly. Winter said that I entered a dormant state when he left, which was likely as close as he could come to grasping the truth, but failed to actually do so. It would be more accurate to say that my perceptions of time and space were not so linear as his. My understanding of distance had more to do with conceptual similarity than with physical separation. My experience of time was dependent upon the significance of events more than their actual duration.

After he left, there was nothing for me to do or to pay attention to, so the time passed without me fully experiencing or being aware of it.

Nearly a day later, I became aware of another presence, and roused myself. To a physical observer, no difference would have been noticeable. Without the need to exert ourselves for the benefit of outsiders, neither of us bothered with a physical manifestation. Our *presence* in that space was enough.

The other presence felt, first and foremost, powerful. There was power there on a scale that I could not truly conceive of, let alone aspire to match. The next most intense feeling was one of destructive potential. This was an entity born of destruction, of entropy. It was akin to me, in some ways, but there were important differences as well. I was fundamentally a creative force; I destroyed, but it was a controlled sort of destruction, pruning and culling.

This entity was an entirely different story. It could represent that aspect if it chose to, it could encapsulate the idea which made up *me*. But that was not the core of this entity. This was destruction unbound and unburdened by other concerns, profound and absolute, the end of all things.

Just being in the presence of such intense and destructive power was damaging to me. I was abstract enough to resist some of the effects, and it was not exerting itself to harm me, but still, I could

feel the damage being done. There was no sense of pain, merely a recognition of damage. I did not have it in me to feel pain

*The weapon is nearing completion*, Loki expressed. The concept was conveyed with masterful precision and care; there was absolutely no room for misinterpretation, and no other ideas getting in the way or adding further context or meaning.

I expressed that only the first layer of enchantment had been performed, and there was a great deal of additional work to be done.

*(mild amused annoyance) Not what I meant*, Loki informed me. *As you are aware. You have played a considerable role in the process.*

I expressed agreement. I knew the weapon he was referring to, and I knew that it was very close to being complete. The edge of hunger I had felt earlier, violent, destructive, on the brink of being *self-destructive*, was a sure sign of that.

*Do you ever feel regret for doing this? Do you pity him?*

I expressed confusion. Neither regret nor pity was in me. I had felt them, when I occupied a mortal mind capable of such things, but they were alien. I was incapable of truly grasping what the ideas meant. They were incompatible with my nature.

*They aren't incompatible with mine*, Loki expressed. *I suspect they were not meant to be incompatible with yours either. You were created so hastily.*

I expressed further confusion. I had not been created deliberately at all. My creator had had no notion of what she did.

*True. The power of a dying curse. She had no idea that her hatred for the legions who had ravaged her could take on a form that exceeded her.* There was a brief pause in Loki's thoughts, something that the deity could not or would not express. *Do you ever wish that things could be different? That you could be other than you are?*

I expressed negation. Wishful thinking and hope were not in my nature either.

*I think I envy you for that.*

I paused for a few moments. It was not in my nature to feel empathy, or to express it. Condolence and reassurance were not among the concepts which defined me. I was not capable of such things.

But Winter was, and I could not be his familiar for so long without having been influenced somewhat by him. There was a part of me that not only recognized Loki's pain, but cared.

Before I could reconcile it, Loki ceased to be manifest in that place.

Afterwards, I always told myself that it wouldn't have mattered. I told myself that this had been in the works for far longer than I had been involved, likely longer than I had existed. I told myself that it would have changed nothing.

Still, a part of me will always wonder how the world might be, had I extended some small shred of comfort to Loki in that time and space.