

I am not Stan Lee nor Rowling. I like to think I would make better decisions than either...

Summary of the last Chapter:

Having announced his Empire to the UN, Harry is forced to play politics and work on various business deals for a time, while plans for his and Jean's wedding proceeded apace. This included an agreement with Canada that, while not what they wanted, gave him oversight over the education of mutants with dangerous powers in their nation in return for technological aid and introduced him to a local goddess in the form of Snowbird.

Bruce Banner is declared fully in control of himself by Charles, having now transformed into a Bruce/Hulk hybrid form, although losing the ability to use anger to further empower his strength.

Elsewhere, an obstruction in the form of a new alien species has appeared in Thanos' path, halting his desire to use the Skrull against Earth for now, despite the Mad Titan setting his 'daughters' to the task of dealing with this new species.

But while that threat has yet to appear, another comes to a head as Thor leads his party to victory over Níðhöggr, discovering a secret and severing a thread holding the power of Those Who Watch Above in Shadow over his people. The Shadows are not amused and accelerate the timing of the next Ragnarök, wishing to wipe the slate clean. The confusion and momentary weakness caused by Níðhöggr allowed Odin to set the ball rolling on his own long-term plans before the Shadows place him under the Odinsleep, a completely made up weakness they have instilled in his being.

Back on Earth, Harry weds Jean, unaware the next crisis will soon begin.

This has been edited by me with Grammarly and [Morte24](#).

Edit 3/13/2022: This chapter has no been put through a major rewrite. First [The Observanc3](#) went through it and did a magnificent job spotting small mistakes and such. Second, I made a major mistake in this chapter in relation to the chapter previous: **I had forgotten that Odin was stuck in Odinsleep!!!!** This has been corrected. Third, Wander-Odin's attitude and the attitude toward him were just...weird. So I have edited that segment to make more sense and be less jarring and well, mean-sounding.

Tell me what you guys think!!

Chapter 47: A Call for Aid, Heeded

Two days after his second of four planned weddings to the gorgeous and amazing women who had inexplicably decided to share his life, Harry sat with his apprentice, Illyana, watching as she worked through her last rote lesson for the day. After that would come a practical, a small test covering what she had learned in the past week. That this would come in

the form of a duel might have surprised many, but Harry had long since learned that he taught better by emphasizing the the use of spells in a real, fluid environment rather than simple single-spell practice. To Harry, that was like practicing writing a single word rather than practicing using the word.

Even taking that out of the equation, Harry did not teach Illyana magic as he had learned it. This was obvious as Harry was teaching Illyana in one-on-one instruction, a vast difference to how Harry had been taught.

Of his other students, Ororo had learned all he could teach her, and all Gaea could in turn, and was now instructing Kitty. Indeed, young Kitty used magic more often these days than her mutant powers since the former was more useful in her day-to-day life. Not to mention the runes that Harry had already taught Kitty had made her a very rich young girl.

Further, Harry didn't organize his lessons along the same lines as the schools in his old universe had. Instead of Defense Against the Dark Arts, it was Protective and Offensive magic. Instead of Transfiguration, Harry called it Universal Manipulation, after a few tests he and Steven had run on revealed what really happened when conjuration occurred. Charms were the same, but Harry had broken the subject down into different disciplines and allocated the spells he had learned from the different grades Hogwarts had offered into each.

There was no potion class currently. Illyana had shown no interest in cooking or potion-making, so Harry saw no need to teach it to her. Besides, Dr. Druid had begun to experiment as it was, and one person on that job was enough for now.

Ironically, there were some lessons on divination magic. At its heart, Divination was the ability to try to see what was hidden; past, present and future. It was time-consuming, and Illyana wasn't all that good at it yet, but Harry was proud that she had been able to use some divination spells to help plan out her pranks occasionally in her ongoing prank war with Hela.

Nearby, Melody and dozens of kids Melody and Illyana's age were doing their own homework, most sneaking glances over to the much more interesting lesson near the front of the Great Hall. Beyond Harry and Illyana, the hall was empty beyond that group of kids, who Ororo was helping with their latest lesson.

Illyana also had normal studies, but Harry didn't control that aspect and refused to get involved. As he'd told her, "Just because you are my apprentice doesn't mean you're going to get special treatment, just like being my daughter doesn't give Melody any special treatment." Melody's special treatment was because of her mutant powers, not her relation to Harry.

As he thought about his apprentice's normal classes, Harry looked over at the other kids, watching as Ororo bent over slightly to lean over Anechka's shoulder, brushing back a bit of her currently loose silver hair as she did so. The smile on her face, far more so than the view the small amount of décolletage she was showing, caused him to breath in deeply, a smile of pure

contentment on his face. Moments like this, with the kids and one of his loved ones around, these moments made all the violence and death worth it.

“Okay, I got this,” Illyana muttered, and Harry turned back to her, watching intently as the young Russian girl rubbed her hands together before holding them out, flicking two fingers out while holding the others in a strange gesture that she had seemingly picked up from seeing Hela use it occasionally. Harry honestly couldn’t tell at times whether Hela was a good influence on Illyana or not, but she certainly left her stamp on the girl. “You ready, Trickster?”

The Megalenhydris barbaricina familiar that Illyana had bonded with during her misadventure in the Savage Land nodded its head, turning the nod into a forward roll, then twirled around itself in place before standing upright on its back paws, tail flat on the ground and head well above Illyana’s own. The aptly named Trickster was never still for very long, having the energy and boisterous nature of all of its otter brethren rolled into one.

Breathing in, Illyana began. “Enlarge,” she whispered.

Harry nodded in approval. Today’s lesson had been on the mental discipline needed to use silent casting but using a simple word like that rather than the actual spell was a good step forward.

At Illyana’s command, the large otter grew tremendously, swiftly growing in length to match that of one of the tables, his shoulders coming up to almost Harry’s. The nearby children all laughed, clapping in delight, and Ororo chuckled, her smile turning wry as she realized she wouldn’t get the youngsters back on task anytime soon.

The enlarged otter twitched, looking down at itself, then bounded forward and back, moving around the tables as adroitly as if the change to his size hadn’t bothered the beast at all. He sniffed at Anechka’s hair, which the young girl manipulated to smack Trickster on the nose with a giggle. The other kids all reached out and began to pat the otter’s legs, one of them reaching up high enough to rub his furry belly. This caused the otter to roll onto his side, displaying his belly for more attention.

“When I went to Hogwarts in my original dimension, the lake had a squid in it. It was a most playful creature, always willing to help the students if they fell in or play catch with them. Perhaps if we kept your familiar at his current size, he could be our own lake monster?” Harry quipped, placing a warm hand on Illyana’s shoulder. “Though, I’m afraid he wouldn’t be as much help with your pranks like this.”

Ororo chuckled, watching with amusement. *How Harry can instill discipline in Illyana while still encouraging her to continue pranking is beyond me. But I can appreciate the results.* Indeed, Ororo and the other teachers had even linked a few fantasy-type writing assignments to Illyana’s cold war with Hela, asking their students to write adventures based on Illyana’s actions or the spells she used as if they were parts of epic battles between good and evil.

Now she watched as the giant otter ran around the kids, being very careful despite its massive size to not knock any of them over. A moment later, Trickster was back in front of his mistress, and Illyana was smiling up at him, patting the otter on the nose with one hand.

This time, Illyana didn't need to use a word to help concentrate her mind on the effects she wanted. Instead, she simply touched Trickster's nose and the spell she wanted flowed out into her familiar. Slowly, he shrunk, the spell only ending when Trickster was the size of a mouse. A second after the spell ended, Illyana giggled as Trickster raced forward and up her leg, climbing her as the otter would one of the trees in the Savage Land before perching on her shoulder for a moment. Then, he climbed further until he was up onto the top of her head. There the tiny otter circled around a few times before standing up like an explorer who had just discovered new lands and was declaring his presence to the world.

"Well done!" Harry announced ruffling Illyana's hair. Trickster rolled forward onto his open hand, and Harry gently dropped him down onto the nearby table. There, Trickster gamboled around for a few moments before, at Harry's nod, Illyana returned him to his normal size. By the time that last spell was done, the otter was back on the floor, closely watching his mistress and her teacher for whatever came next.

Harry waved him off. "We're done with you for now, my little friend. And I meant it, Illyana, that was very well done. Always remember that mentally preparing the image in your mind of what you want your spell to do will help you not need the actual spell incantation. Whatever the discipline, that aspect doesn't change. It's hard, and for some spells, it's impossible thanks to how much concentration they take, such as high-end attack spells or the Patronus Charm. But eventually, you'll get so good that you can create the mental image in a split second and use the spell without any buildup."

Illyana nodded, and Harry ruffled her hair before going on more seriously. "And now, let's see what you can remember from last week."

The youngest Rasputin nodded eagerly, moving into the open space between two tables. Harry moved to stand across from her, smiling faintly. The two of them stood in silence for a moment as Ororo moved her pupils further away from the upcoming duel, her students joined by Trickster as they settled in to watch. All present eyed the twosome avidly. Despite some of them, like young Anechka or Melody, having lived in Camelot for months now, the sight of magic was just as wondrous to them now as it had been when they'd first arrived.

Harry made certain their audience would be safe by covering the area around himself and his apprentice, along with the tables to either side of them, under Protego shields. Right as he finished, Illyana attacked, hopping up and away from her starting position onto the nearby table as she launched a spell towards Harry.

"Points for remembering to move, and remembering that in a real fight, waiting for your opponent to be ready is quite foolish," Harry commented even as he waved a finger, catching

the spell, a stunning charm, and flicked it sideways, redirecting it rather than using a spell of his own. Then he too was moving, darting forward and around, pushing Illyana to turn with him on the table, although he kept to the speed the younger girl was capable of. The idea of these duels wasn't to overwhelm Illyana after all, but to see what she could do.

And see he did, as Illyana raced along the table, sending spells Harry's way, one after another.

A spell chain? I hadn't thought Illyana was up to that just yet, even if Ororo and I used them in our mock duel last week. The two adults had spent the entire evening with the kids, putting on the play duel after watching the Sword in the Stone before leaving the kids to their pizza and having a nice in-castle date for themselves. The memory of how that date ended brought a smile to Harry's face, so much so that he nearly missed that one of the spells that Illyana was using wasn't aimed at him. Rather, it was aimed at the floor below his feet.

"Glacius!" Illyana called between muttering Stupefy and Immobilis under her breath.

Harry felt the stone underneath him turning slick with ice and quickly leaped to the side onto the table opposite Illyana. He paused for a moment, then went on the attack, launching spells at Illyana. First, he bracketed her with low-level attack spells, then he aimed directly at the young girl. As Harry had hoped, this forced her to use a Protego, covering her entire front.

"Good, but remember, if you keep the image in your mind and continue to funnel energy into the spell, you can manipulate what the shield does. Just like you were doing last week with the Rubik's cubes and changing their colors several times in a row," Harry explained calmly, slowly launching another low-powered spell at Illyana's shield.

Illyana grimaced but continued to concentrate on the protective spell, and the magical shield slowly shifted. It had started as a simple half-circle in front of her, but now it expanded into a wall and then shrank until it covered her entire body like a poncho. "Urgh... this is tough, and I don't think I can do this and concentrate on another spell."

"The fact that you can do it at all at your age is enough," Harry said, hopping down from his perch on the table and flicking his fingers upward, canceling the Protego around them. "These duels of ours aren't for you to try your best to win, although if you can, that's great. The main point behind them is to show me what you've learned. And I have to say you are learning extremely well. The spell chain was impressive, as was the trick with Glacius."

Illyana smiled cheerfully at that but waited until Harry said the duel was over before canceling her own Protego. That was another lesson Harry had drilled into her, and he smiled at her caution and helped her down from the table by lifting her into a brief hug before setting her down the ground, ruffling her hair. "Now, was there anything else you wanted to do? Because we're done with my lesson for you for the day."

Illyana beamed at that, then paused, thinking about it, before nodding. "I wanted to try a few divination spells. I want to learn how to find something lost, and then wanted to... predict the future," she ended cautiously, watching her master's reaction.

Thankfully Harry didn't really have a problem with trying to see into the future, so long as those involved weren't going to base life and death decisions on all-too-vague prophecies anyway. "Well, looking into the future is quite wooly, as I've stated before. How far into the future are you talking about, and whose particular future?"

"Hela, and three days from now," Illyana chirped instantly.

"Ah, I should have known. And... well, that's something different," Harry said with a laugh, ruffling her hair again. "Come on, you know I'm not good enough at divination to teach you without books on hand. To the tower!"

Illyana nodded eagerly before she scampered over to the other kids, where she excitedly asked Ororo if she could take Melody with her. Harry didn't hear the explanation, but his mocha-colored lover eventually let them go, and Harry led the two children up to Ravenclaw Tower.

The library of the deceased wizards who had attempted to fort up in the castle against this universe's Dementors had remained unchanged despite all of the other changes Harry had made to everything else in the castle. Soon, the trio were sitting in chairs hovering around the third floor of the tower, an open book and Illyana's chosen method of Divination rattling in a cup. These were several dozen sticks of different sizes and shapes, each with a word painted on them.

Melody sat holding Illyana's hand as she shook a small tumbler and tossed them down onto the table, with several of them on top of one another. "Where is Melody's favorite hair squeegee?"

The two girls then flew over into Harry's lap, and the three of them looked at the words visible on the sticks, then checked with the text, and finally Illyana sighed. "Well, it looks like your lost hair tie is either gone or deep under frozen water, which I would assume means snow."

Melody sighed, unhappy it wasn't anything specific. "I liked that hair tie. It was soft, squishy, and had lots of colors in it. Ororo got it for me the first time she and you, Father, took me out shopping."

Harry chuckled, pulling his daughter into a hug, then gently pushed the two kids off his lap before standing up, leaving the two kids floating gently in the air. Moving to the nearby wall, the stone turned see-through thanks to one of the enchantments on the castle's towers he had seen no reason to change. Indeed, the opacity spell was probably the best non-protection-based enchantment on the castle thanks to how much it helped with Ororo's claustrophobia. "Then we can't have it be lost now, can we? Accio Melody's hair tie!"

“I have to learn how to do that. I can pull things to me if I see them, but for some reason, I just have trouble with the general kind of out of sight pull thing,” Illyana muttered as the three of them looked outside over the gray landscape of Camelot’s grounds in winter. It had snowed the day after the wedding, adding another foot onto the snow already on the ground, and it was now so cold out that only Garm and the few truly dedicated runners went out without warming charms.

“We can work on that next week if you want? But I want to get your existing spell work in transfiguration and protection magic up to the point where you don’t have to verbalize the last few spells we’ve covered first. Then we’ll go on to tougher stuff,” Harry told Illyana before something flew out from a small grotto near the edge of the woods and towards the library tower, smacking into the tower’s outer wall with a splatter.

A moment later, Hedwig appeared from out of nowhere, swooping down on the hair clip before it could slide down to the ground. Harry’s familiar appeared above them within a second, landing lightly on the table before holding out the soaked squeegee to a grateful Melody. The owl accepted the girl’s feather stroking as her just reward and bobbed her head in thanks to Melody’s promise to save some bacon for her the next time she had any.

“Well, I have to say, those sticks were a lot more accurate than I thought,” Harry mused, looking over as Illyana gleefully gathered the sticks into their cup and began to shake the container again.

Laying down a picture of Hela in the middle of the table, Illyana tapped it three times with her fingers as the book dictated, then asked her question. “Which meal will Hela eat in the main hall in four days, and which entrance will she enter by?”

With that, Illyana dumped the sticks over the picture before picking up the book from where Harry had left it. Harry watched as her brows furrowed in intense concentration, then in a real frown. Before he could offer to help, she looked up. “Er, Master Harry, I think that we might not have time to prank Hela like I planned to. It says here that there will be new challenges and a darkness that must be vanquished appearing {that day} for Hela. Nothing about her eating in the main hall.”

Harry frowned, looking over her shoulder for a few moments, and then slowly nodded, seeing that Illyana had interpreted the fallen sticks as correctly as possible. *Normally I wouldn’t put much truck in Divination, but the sticks just proved they were kind of accurate. And let’s face facts, with our lives, it isn’t exactly unusual to have a new challenge pop up just like that.*

More to the point, Harry now had two very worried-looking kids staring at him. “Well, that isn’t ominous at all,” he drawled, “But then again, it isn’t as if we are unused to such situations. It just means the next disaster is coming a little earlier than scheduled. Disasters often do.”

The tone of uncaring amusement carried over, and both girls smiled, their momentary trepidation quickly disappearing. It was soon helped along by Harry suddenly conjuring a snowball into one hand. "I'm not going to worry about it right now. I have a much better way to spend the rest of my day off in mind."

With that, he hurled the snowball towards Melody across the table,, causing her to squawk as she fell backward. She rolled end over end through the air as she slowly descended to the ground thanks to the various weightless and levitation enchantments on the tower.

"Vengeance!" Ilyana cackled as she also conjured a snowball. She tossed it at Harry before ducking down to try to find some cover, with Melody doing the same, and Harry laughed, letting the pair gather enough snow to launch back his way. Whatever would happen in the future, they would handle it when it came. Beyond the general warning to the various teams to be ready, there was nothing Harry could do about it now. So why bother worrying?

OOOOOOO

"Fall back! Fall back to the woodlands!" Balder bellowed. His men, a mix of Asgardians and human warrior spirits known as karls, or common warriors whose original deaths had been deemed worthy of joining Odin in Valhalla, fell back, barely keeping a shield in front of themselves as the fire jotun advanced. Towering over all but the tallest, with strength that no mortal men could match, they had made a shambles of any attempt to hold a line against them where they had first invaded Asgard, slaying the border forces almost to a man.

The keyword being 'almost', as since then, Balder had led his men in a few sharp ambushes, which had taught the invaders some caution. This was but the latest, built around two light cavalry charges that had pinned the enemy's vanguard while Balder led his footmen to attack one group which had ended up furthest away from the rest of the fire jotun's forces.

By the time the infantry closed, the cavalry had already been forced into a retreat. Even from the top of a horse, a jotun towered over Aesir and karl alike. This use of cavalry had been doomed from the start, only speed and surprise letting the cavalry make any impact, and the majority of the men who had ridden out would not be returning to their homes. But that assault, and indeed this entire battle, had been designed to buy time.

Time, time, ask me for anything but time! Balder nearly sang to himself mentally as he charged forward, getting his shield in front of a spear that would've stabbed its target through. The other man fell back, pulling an arrow from his quiver and letting it fly at a fire jotun barely a few feet away. Balder parried another blow before the arrow struck. Enspelled by Freya before they set out with powers of the wind, the arrow, like the rest of their arrows, the steel point of the arrow had been given greater penetrating power. In this case, it impacted the jotun's face right below one of its eyes, causing it to cry out in pain and fall back a step, despite the arrow not digging very deep.

That was all Balder needed, and his sword was up and striking across the jotun's stomach, spilling intestines onto the snow. Such as they were, anyway. The jotun might look human, but they were anything but. Their insides were an example of this, being composed mostly of magma somehow contained in thin, skin-like outer shells. That outer shell was tougher than old wood and worked almost as well as the fire jotun's black stone armor at stopping most unenchanted weapons.

Unfortunately for the jotun, most of the weapons Balder and his men were using weapons enchanted to penetrate or cut better than normal blades. They were cheap weapons, enchanted by Freya or the other seidr users rather than with the magic worked into their making by dvergar. But the magic could last at least a few battles.

A moment later, Balder ducked under yet another blow from another jotun, his riposte nearly chopping its arm off, as another attacked from nearby. That jotun's spear was blocked by his shield, and for a moment, Balder danced among the jotun, blocking and hewing, using his smaller size to good effect.

One of the invaders went shield to shield with him, and Balder gave way, nearly bowled off his feet. But in doing so the jotun overextended. As he pushed forward, Balder was able to twirl around, slamming his shield into the jotun's side and knocking him into one of its brethren before falling back with his men. Both died to hurled spears from his men, while another fell screaming in agony from a blow to the knee from a warhammer-wielding warrior who then danced away from a sword chop with a laugh. The blow hadn't broken skin, but the bone beneath had proven to be less resistant.

Wielding only his hammer, the man, a berserker, had given up any pretense of defense for greater speed. Now turning, he quickly caught up and began to run alongside Balder, snorting. "Balls, knees and ankles, they can't be protectin' all three!"

Balder chuckled at the man's good spirits. "Aye, Harnell. But there be too many of them to kill even if we took all day doing it and they were so kind as to let us. Pity that none seem so inclined."

Harnell and the other men nearby laughed at the Bright One's words, taking heart in his presence as they did in his courage in battle. The courage and determination he instilled in them was a near-physical thing, bolstering their flagging spirits. Above them, the sun shone all the fiercer, blinding their enemies with its radiance for a time, giving the last of Balder's men cover as they entered the nearby woods.

The battle, such as it was, had occurred on the road leading up into the mountains nearest to where the jotun had begun their invasion. Out in the wilds as it was, this road was the only real sign of any civilization, which was precisely the way Lord Odin had wanted it. To really hurt the Asgardians, a force would have to make their way weeks inland at the pace a fire jotun could march per day.

As the invaders came closer, arrows and even a few heartily flung spears lanced out from the woodlands, striking the chest and legs of the jotun. The enemy was taken completely by surprise and their advance crumbled into disarray until one of their number blew a horn, and soon they reformed into a makeshift shield line. These shields, massive slabs of sharp black metal like their armor, were soon festooned with arrows and spears as they advanced doggedly after Balder and his men. And in the distance, still more came on, hundreds strong and fresh for battle.

Thank all the gods the jotun do not breed like men! This invasion is dire, but this army looks to be the majority of their numbers if Lord Odin's estimates of yore were accurate as to the size of Muspellheim and how low their population size is. If the Fire Jotun could make up their numbers so quickly every generation, we would have long been overrun.

Balder nearly shivered as he watched the inexorable advance. He had personally snuck forward to view the main invasion force several days before and counted more than fourteen thousand jotun in the enemy army. That was barely a fifth of the numbers Asgard could muster, but each jotun was normally more than a match for any four or even five warrior spirits who made up the vast amount of the Lord Odin's army. Small attacks such as the ones Balder had been leading played to the strengths of the spirits, as the jotun lacked any ability to work together and were easily confused unless a chieftain was nearby. And while those chieftains were rarely seen with the vanguard, in a larger-scale battle out in the open, the odds would shift to that of the jotun.

After a few moments, Balder nodded to the nearby men, two of whom pulled out horns and blew interspersed notes. The different tones of the horns, one low, the other almost akin a flute, were a signal. Instead of continuing to fall back, moving in the same direction that he and his men had been retreating in the past few days along the road, everyone turned to the left, now racing through the woods lengthwise.

When the jotun inevitably reached the woods, they set several trees on fire in a fury at yet another ambush from Balder's reserves, which came out that night and hit the forward units before fading back into the darkness. When they continued to move forward the next day, they also began to run into traps. Large beams suspended in midair by ropes swung downward with force when jotun burned through their trip lines, while weights fell from above. Pits dug in the earth of the forest swallowed jotun whole. Metal stakes hidden in the underbrush stabbed through unprotected feet.

These last two were particularly effective. Thanks to their size, the average Fire Jotun had a lot of trouble seeing below their chests and stomachs. This meant that simple traps like could truly slow them down, especially in this terrain. *After all, they can't burn the whole forest, not at this time of year. Not unless they burn each tree in turn. Pine might be flammable, snow is not, and if they melt the snow, the tree becomes wet and hard to set alight, regardless of type,*

Baldur reflected as he marched through the woods beside his men, hearing the roars of rage behind him.

And even this far removed from Asgard City, Freya and the court could offer some aid. While Thor was still missing Njord, the Vanir lord of the oceans and Freya had worked together to send a cold, wet wind towards the border where Balder's campaign was taking place. Njord could control the weather to a certain degree, not enough to call up storms or utterly change the weather as Thor could, but with Freya helping with her magic, he had calmed the weather in other areas of Asgard in such a way that it created the wet wind at need here at the front. It was a subtle rather than brute force measure, but it worked quite well.

With the jotun slowed, Balder and his men moved through the woods to the left of where they had previously been retreating, joined by still other karls Balder had sent back earlier. One of them, a massive man named Arnolf, reported. "We shattered the Bridge, my Lord. Hard thing to do to such a beautiful thing, but this be a hard time, aye?"

"I know, lads, but it had to be done. Queen Freya herself ordered us to delay this invading army, and that bridge was the easiest way across the gorge."

The gorge's name was forgotten to all but the wisest, but Queen Freya was the one who had originally enchanted with her magic and craft the aforementioned bridge. Made by dvergar craftsman in ancient times, the Bridge of True Beauty, as it was called, a place for lovers to come and pledge their troth to one another. The trip out so far, weeks from the nearest hamlet, let alone the mighty city of Asgard for which the realm was named, served as proof of the fidelity of those who made the journey.

It would do so no longer. The bridge was sacrificed to give the realm more time for Asgard's host to muster.

"Aye, my Lord, but we're leading them straight to another bridge. It would be bad luck if our work on destroying such beauty were for naught."

Balder smirked, showing a hint of teeth in the expression. "Indeed we are, and I sent Barnabas to the town of Anvilcroft for more arrows and spears. After all, a bridge can be described as more than simply a means of getting from one side of an obstacle to another, my friend."

While no jarl in life, there was nothing wrong with Arnolf's brain, and he instantly understood what his war chief was talking about. "A narrow place to defend my Lord. Made worse by the sheer size of the damned jotun."

Laughing, Balder clapped him on the shoulder and urged him over to an Asgardian named Togrun, who carried some of the day's supplies. Every day six of the men were chosen to carry the war band's supplies in terms of food and what limited bandages and so forth they had available rather than take part in the battle. It was chosen by lot, so there could be no hard

feelings among karls or Asgardians. Even Balder had to take a turn early on, which neatly removed any kind of annoyance with the duty.

Not that there had been much of that. While the war band had been hastily pulled together from the outermost villages nearest the point of the invasion when the initial defenders had taken such horrendous losses, all of them were warriors. They knew this particular dance all too well. The Asgardians had recently seen action against the dark elves of Svartalfheim both in short sharp campaigns and in skirmishes since. The karls might've been slightly rustier in terms of real warfare, but they were far more numerous and burned with an urge to prove themselves to Lord Odin and Lady Freya, who had chosen them.

The battles in the forest continued for another two days while the jotun's vanguard chased after them, desperate to envelop Balder's men. While Balder led the majority in small, scattered ambushes at random ridges, outcrops of stone or ditches, the rest of his forces concentrated on putting down more and more traps. To avoid friendly fire incidents, the traps were marked out differently each day so that the jotun, sadly no fools, wouldn't understand where the traps were, but the retreating Asgardians did.

But always, the fires and strength of the jotun continued to drive them back. While traps and sneak attacks worked very well in the forest, the woodland underbrush also negated much of the advantages the karls had in terms of teamwork. And with most Asgardians being weaker than Fire Jotun's in terms of pure strength, the environment left them to fall back on their skill with their weapons, which were always of higher quality. Luckily the skill of the karls was such that even most Asgardians were not their equal in pure swordwork.

Both groups took losses in the woods. Here a man would go down, split through by a jotun. There, a karl would be torn asunder by a blade coming down too fast to dodge, or a karl would burn as a Fire Jotun's blood splashed him, an Asgardian run through nearby.

Blood painted the snow, and fire wound its way through the woodlands as the enemy army kept on pressing hard, bringing up more and more of their people.

Grimly Balder led the enemy a merry dance, slowing the enemy advance as best he could until a report from one of his scouts announced that they had finally reached the next bridge. That was the signal, and Balder led the fittest of his warriors into one final holding action as the rest of his men fell back, creating a wide area of traps through the woods.

The woodland campaign continued as long as Balder could hold it, using their last arrows and spears before breaking contact entirely, fleeing away in smaller groups. One of his scouts led each band in the proper direction towards the bridge. This split seemed to confuse the jotun and allowed the survivors of the action in the woods to get away far more cleanly than Balder had dared to hope.

Meeting up once more later, the warrior band wearily made their way towards the secondary bridge. Soon they came out of the woodland and saw it ahead of them. This bridge

hadn't been named anything special and was as such a much more prosaic thing, made of metal and wood rather than the stone and metal masterpiece of the dvergar that the Bridge of True Beauty.

But at the other end of its span stood groups of people who were nowhere near as prosaic as the bridge. A war-party of armored women, forty strong, sat on winged horses, gilded bows in hand, while nearby, large two-story-tall walls of wood and stone had been piled, with arrow slits scattered through the makeshift barriers. And alongside that was a veritable pile of arrows, spears, and shields.

At the sight of the horsewomen and the assembled gear, the men with Balder whooped in delight, racing forward. Several of them ran across the span, reaching up to pull this woman or another down into a kiss. They were laughingly told off, or, more infrequently, a woman allowed herself to be pulled down into a brief kiss before pushing the man away.

These were the Valkyrie of Freya and Odin, who meted out fate to those fallen in battle. Ages past when Midgard was connected entirely to Asgard and a warrior died in battle in a glorious (or memorable, which wasn't quite the same thing) manner, a Valkyrie would come to offer their spirits the chance to ascend to the realm of the gods. Here the jarls and karls of men could make new lives for themselves. Most were then joined by their loved ones later as they too died. Once here in Asgard, any children they had would grow up normally following in their parent's footsteps, providing new blood.

Despite ages having passed since their deaths back on Midgard, many a karl still recognized the particular Valkyrie who had chosen him. And regardless of how many warriors were chosen by this or that Valkyrie, there always remained a kind of connection. Not, as many would've thought, a bond of lust or love, save in a few special cases such as Gudrun and Helgi, but a link just the same.

Normally, the Valkyrie wouldn't not be seen as warriors, but they were all renowned archers. Further, their arrows were marked by Freya and crafted by the greatest dvergar craftsmen.

"Hail, fair Balder!" The leader of the company of Valkyries greeted Balder, dismounting and going to one knee in front of Balder. A few of those nearby could see a faint blush visible on the woman's visage, though none would've blamed her for it. Balder was reckoned one of the fairest of all the Asgardians, and many women, Valkyrie and Asgardian alike, had pined for the Bright One over the centuries.

Balder nodded in turn, gesturing with one hand towards his men as he asked what food had been prepared, going on in a jocular tone. "Though the action be hot enough, and the woods be burning to cinders behind us, we have rather ironically not had enough time for any hot meals of our own. We broke contact last night, but they will be coming on swiftly enough. Even if we have taught them caution. Isn't that right, boys!?"

Around him, his men gave a ragged cheer, but the surviving warriors cheered much more heartily when they saw that over a dozen womenfolk from the nearest town had come along with the rest of the supplies for the war group. Hot soup and roasted venison and boar awaited them. Even Balder, the strongest of the warriors here, could not help but feel some hunger at the sight.

The warriors had time to eat and rest for roughly half a day before the first of the invaders found the bridge. Those first few died to arrows from the Valkyrie, who could shoot further and aim truer than any Asgardian save the absent Skadi, their enchanted recurve bows deadly beyond measure. Fate Ending, those arrows were called, used to cull those spirits unworthy of joining Lord Odin or Lady Freya's side in Asgard.

And yet even they are not the shot Skadi is. I wonder where Skadi and Thor and the rest of that band are now, Balder idly mused. *We could use their strength here, one and all.*

watched the jotun on the other side of the gorge die to the accurate, powerful shots of the Valkyrie. No armor that any jotun could make could stop the enchanted arrows wielded by the horsewomen. And although the Fire Jotun were unbelievably hardy, none of the jotun to leave the protective cover of the woods survived to retreat.

The enemy attack began in earnest swiftly after that. The local commander of the Fire Jotun, Balder had no idea of his identity, was surely no fool. Faced with the skill of the Valkyrie, the jotun quickly melted nearby stone into large shields, bringing their creations forward and setting them up under cover of their own spear throwers and archers, mirror images of the walls the locals had prepared for Balder and his men.

They still took losses, though. The Valkyrie could simply ride their flying horses up into the air and fire down on the Fire Jotun from above. But the work continued despite this, and then several larger-than-average Fire Jotun joined the fight. These behemoths, who had shapeshifted themselves into these larger, less wieldy forms, soon began to cut their palms on small daggers and hurl their blood into the air, where the molten droplets instantly became large fireballs the magma of their blood acting like a spell component. Winged or not, the Valkyries' horses were still only horses. The fear of fire could not be trained out of even such legendary mounts, and they shied away, ruining many a Valkyrie's aim.

"Fall back across the bridge," Balder bellowed. "Give us fire from down here!" The Valkyries had all spread out in a vague dome around the area, spreading out on either side of the bridge to fire at the jotun from as many angles as possible including directly above them. But with this new trick, and importantly the speed of the fireballs in relation to the hurled spears the jotun had been previously using, that tactic was no longer viable.

The lead Valkyrie obeyed reluctantly, her horse soon stomping to the ground nearby, her mouth quickly opening to deliver an angry retort. But Balder held up a hand, shaking his

head. "We are fighting for time, not to the last man. Losing your Valkyrie would hurt our cause more than any number of karls or Asgardians."

It was the truth. There were far fewer Valkyrie than there were Asgardians, let alone karls. Indeed, there were fewer Valkyrie than even there were Álfar, the light elves who served in Odin's hall as servants and messengers. There were several armies worth of karls, a powerful host of Asgardians and some thousand dvergar with eight hundred or more Álfar. But across the lands of Asgard, there were only two hundred or so Valkyrie all told.

"And when it becomes time for Lady Freya to take the field with our main host, it is you and your sisters who will be our eyes and ears. You know this. Do not throw their lives away. Do not throw your life away," Balder ordered his tone intense.

The Valkyrie commander blushed under Balder's gaze, her earlier anger evaporating as she nodded at the Bright One. "Your pardon Lord Balder, you are right, of course."

Balder simply smiled at her, patting her on the shoulder, careful not to notice her trembling at the touch before gesturing her back to her women. They spread out to either side of the bridge, giggling among themselves like farmgirls for a moment. Yet even as they did, their arrows still flew, further and stronger than even a jotun's spear could be thrown.

And at the same time, a wind picked up from within the gorge. Every time a jotun attempted the fireball trick, the wind picked up and dispelled them. Yet still the jotun came on, now coming within range of the karls as they moved to cross the bridge at last. As they did, the jotun once more made use of their skills in self-transfiguration to change their bodies, becoming thinner and smaller to allow more of their number to press across the bridge at a time.

"Remember, lads. Smaller the seidr-users might have made themselves, but their strength is still the same," Balder warned, earning laughter from the warriors around him. After all, being male and using magic was a sign of weakness and femininity that no true warrior could stomach. Using magical weapons was fine, but using magic yourself, especially on your own body, was simply wrong.

As he finished speaking, Balder moved forward, rubbing elbows with Pazi, another Asgardian, Arnolf and Mactan, another karl. While Balder and Pazi were armed with swords and shields, the karls only held swords, which were both longer than the long swords that the two Asgardians used. No armor or shield a human could carry would stand up against a Fire Jotun's blow after all, so it was best not to wear them at all and make use of speed instead.

To either side of the bridge, the defenders hidden behind the prepared walls were now taking losses. The walls might've been a good defense, but any spear that managed to get through an arrow slit would kill a karl, and even an Asgardian could be slain by a lucky hit to the head.

Still, they were also killing the enemy two for every one of their own that fell. Already several of the advancing jotun had died, having been knocked off the bridge or lost their footing, falling to their doom. But it still took several wounds to slay a jotun, and the horde came on.

“Brace, brace,” Balder said, crouching low behind his shield, hiding his head from view, Pazi doing the same. “Brace... now!”

As the enemy entered sword range Balder and Pazi charged the few steps forward, counter-charging them, smashing swords and spear to either side in their mad rush. This opened up the jotun’s defenses and the karls to either side thrust out, their blades passing the two Asgardians and into the guts or privates of the jotun.

Two jotun fell, magma splashing down onto the bridge's stone. While the stone was proofed against the heat, the rapidly cooling bodies got in the way of their fellows until they were unceremoniously kicked out of the way by the jotun behind them.

Spears and swords thrust once more but were deflected, and for a moment, the warriors four stood there, hacking and hewing. The Asgardians provided defense, the karls offense. Then Pazi fell back, a blow to his shoulder having deadened his sword arm.

Instantly, Mactan twirled around the larger Asgardian, his great sword cleaving into the side of the jotun who had struck him. He quickly pulled out and retreated, with two other warriors taking his place as that jotun leaked still more magma onto the stone of the bridge, where it ran to one side, hissing as it fell.

Balder did not move even as Arnolf also fell back. Instead, he shouted, “For Queen Freya and Lord Odin!”

Above them, the rainy day sent by Njord faded swiftly, and a bright blast of sunlight fell onto the bridge, giving heart to those around Balder . Though it did not dismay the jotun, it did empower Balder with a defensive spell, an enchantment his mother had devised when he was young and Balder had been plagued by terrible nightmares of his eventual death. While it wasn’t perfect, the enchantment granted him an insane level of durability even among his own kind.

So arrayed, the Bright One held firm, slaying seven more jotun, taking the arms and hands of still others who were then kicked or knocked out of the way off the bridge by their fellows. He stayed until the firing of arrow and spear from his side of the bridge began to die down, the karls and even a few of the precious Valkyrie dying while returning fire upon the jotun.

Even as they fell, still more invaders joined the battle, spreading down either side of the gorge across from the defenders and hurling spears or fireballs. Where before there had been perhaps one hundred to two hundred when the Fire Jotun had first started across the bridge, now there were so many it looked as if the burning forest had sprouted thousands of new,

massive bodies. It was only a matter of time before their ever-increasing numbers finished off the brave warriors of Asgard.

“Now!” Pazi shouted, having retaken his place beside Balder once more. Now his sword flicked out, stabbing into one jotun’s forearm, ruining a blow meant for Balder . “Balder , we must do it now!”

Balder took another blow on his shield, a third to the head, while a fourth sliced into his leg, twisting so that his thigh guard absorbed the blow. Yet while his mother’s enchantment was upon him, none of these attacks could truly harm him, Balder knew arrogance was a dead man’s friend. His sword flicked out, killing the jotun who’d gone for his leg, while his shield battered aside a second blow from the one who had attacked from his other side, opening that opponent to his fellow Asgardian.

But even as he fought, Balder knew Pazi was right and shouted out, “Do it!” He didn’t want to give the jotun any hint on what was about to happen and kept his command simple.

At his cry, several spells from the Vanir Ganu, who’d been kept in reserve especially for this moment, lanced over the bridge. A student of Freya, the spells the handmaiden cast didn’t hold much power behind them. As the bolts of magic struck the stonework of the bridge, the structure began to come undone. Nails popped from their holds the wooden frame fell apart, and stones as big around as Volstagg’s chest shook loose from their fellows.

The best countermeasures the jotun’s own few magic users could do was for naught. There just weren’t enough of them nearby to defend against such an assault.

The bridge collapsed along its length, coming apart all at once and dumping more than fourteen jotun into the gorge to their doom, forever closing this route of invasion. The Fire Jotun would now have to skirt far to the north to find a way across the gorge now.

Suddenly, Balder gasped as a hurled spear crashed into him so fast that he’d barely even seen it coming in time to raise his shield. The spear punched straight through his shield, right below his arm, the point of the spear going on to impact his breastplate with enough force to send Balder sprawling backward.

Landing hard, he gasped for air, a suddenly heavily bruised chest making the effort incredibly painful. From where he’d been flung, Balder could only watch in shocked disbelief as both Arnolf and Pazi quickly fell to hurled spears as well, the weapons clearly thrown just as hard as the one that had caught him by surprise.

This left the madman Harnell standing alone, and to Balder’s awe, the karl didn’t retreat. Instead, he stayed there at the edge of the gorge, cackling madly as he faced down the army of Fire Jotun. “Ar, yas got the big tools but yas don’t know what ta do with ‘em! You fire humpers be so slow, a tree could grow on ya. Yer fire’s not hot, it’s ju...””

As Balder pushed himself to his knees, Harnell's cackling tirade was cut off by another flung spear. Larger than the karl was tall and thicker around than Harnell's thighs, it took Harnell's head clean off, his skull exploding from the pure force of the strike.

Across the span, Balder saw a particular Fire Jotun now standing, balefully staring him down. Half again the size of any other, broader in the shoulder than any two combined. Wearing a visage filled with both maliciousness and an expressive, glaring hatred towards Balder set over a long, magnificent black beard, this jotun was truly a nightmare born.

"You have but delayed the inevitable!" The king of Muspellheim, Surtur, bellowed. "Soon Balder, you and all of your fellows will roast in the fires of Ragnarök!"

In response, a volley of arrows from the Valkyrie slammed into the king.

It did nothing. Many burnt to ash before they even reached the enormous king. Others that survived only pinged off his shining black armor, which covered him from the neck down. Surtur's equipment was well-wrought, completely unlike the other jotun and even arrows spelled to cut the lines of Fate could do nothing against the king of the Fire Jotun's durability and magical presence.

When no further volleys came, Balder realized those had been the last of the Valkyries' arrows. Indeed, all of the supplies that had been gathered over the past few days for this battle had been exhausted. He could also see the bodies on his side of the gorge, and there were many of them. The death toll had certainly **not** been one-sided. Yet the Valkyrie had pulled back completely by that point, and with them, Balder saw more than two dozen of his men yet alive. It wasn't any kind of victory in his mind, but it would have to do for now.

As Balder began pulling his somewhat scattered wits together, Surtur pulled back his arm again, and his spear returned to his hand. Instantly, the king of the Fire Jotun hurled the weapon towards Balder, leaving the Asgardian hardly any time to raise his pierced shield to block. This time, the shield shattered above his arm under the brunt of the attack, Balder's shoulder and pectoral taking the hit almost full force. His armor dented badly under the blow and he could feel the bruising of the skin underneath something fierce despite his enchantment as once again, Balder was hurled off his feet.

When he again hit the ground, Balder rolled desperately and kept on rolling, putting more and more distance between himself and the fire king by using the slight slope of the ground to his advantage. Then a hand grabbed his leg, a voice shouting, "Over here, milord!"

Balder forcefully stopped rolling at the words and was immediately pulled behind the cover of a rock outcropping. The natural rock formation instantly shattered under the blow from Surtur's spear, but it held long enough for Balder and the Valkyrie who'd grabbed him to race away until they had put a slight hillock between them and their enemy.

“You cannot escape your destiny!” Came a shout from Surtur. “You can only delay it! Asgard will be mine, and the pyres of your death will be glorious!”

Looking around, Balder saw worried and even a few frightened expressions among the Asgardians and karls. The Valkyries were harder to read, although they too seemed unsettled given how they held their bridles or bows and seeing those faces in the growing twilight, Balder knew he had to say something to break the despondent spirit of his command before it could become addled by grief or give in to fear.

Standing straight and ignoring his wounds, Balder shouted back, his voice easily carrying over to the jotun. “You have but faced a pittance of our might! I held you up for days on end with barely two hundred warriors! You will soon face the full might of Asgard and Lord Odin, and it is your legions who will despair! Come meet us in the north if you are so eager to die!”

His only answer from Surtur was a roar of fury, but Balder’s men seemed to take heart in his words, and he nodded firmly at those about him. “This was but the last line of skirmishes, my lads.”

“And lasses,” the lead Valkyrie interjected.

“And lasses,” Balder allowed, sending her a wink that caused her to blush like a maiden and turn away rapidly. “You have all performed magnificently here and before this day in our grim work. By our blood and toil, we have given Asgard time to muster our full might. And it will be enough, as it has always been before, to rid our lands of the Fire Jotun and send them packing back to their own fiery realm.”

A ragged cheer went up from the survivors of his war band, and he nodded firmly at them all. “Now, come. Let us get on our way. After all, none of us would wish to miss a battle so grand as that, would we?”

Laughter abounded, but smiles could now be seen on many faces as they began to make their way west. Balder could even hear a few of the men beginning to sing. There were ribald drinking songs or boat shanties that won many an eye roll from the Valkyries. At least from those that weren’t already joining in at the choruses anyway.

Balder even joined in a few times, his clear tenor cutting through the evening as they made their way away from the battlefield, joking and laughing, slapping backs and smiling at everyone and sundry. Yet at the back of his mind, an exhausted Balder wondered. The full might of the Fire Jotun nation had never been released like this before, and he wondered what ill this augured for the realm.

OOOOOOO

The day after Balder had retreated from that nameless gorge in Asgard, the Enchantress Amora, formally of Asgard, smiled contentedly as she got into her personal gondola. *How I do love the modern world.* As she sat down, an image of a boatmen waited on her, a most

excellent illusion she had created for this exact purpose. The image began to pole them out into the water, when in reality it was Amora's magic which moved the small boat, the pole laying unused on the interior of the boat.

What care I for my previous plots or ambitions in cold, dreary Asgard? I may not be able to use magic openly, but that was never my way anyway. I may not have any direct power over people, but what do I care for that when I can live in comfort and leisure without such? Spas, masseuses, and pedicures, like the one I just had! In the name of all the Aesir and Vanir, where were such amenities back home?

Amora smiled as she heard calls of, "Hello, beautiful!" And, "My God, look at that woman. She's as beautiful as the stars above!" The adulation, in Italian came from several men around the canal who had stopped to stare at the breathtaking woman lounging in her boat like a movie star as it went along below or beside them.

And no end of handsome men to wile away time with if I wish to. Though most of them don't have anything going for them beyond their looks, unlike Doctor Doom. But Paris snagged him first, which is fine. I have no need for a husband, let alone children, ugh. Indeed. Why ever did I want a husband in the first place? Particularly Thor of all people? An intelligent conversationalist Thor is not, for all his physical prowess. Indeed, looking back on it, I have to wonder...

Not for the first time, the Enchantress shook her head, setting that thought aside before it could gain any purchase. Instead Amora looked around at the city of Venice, her personal gondola winding its way through the canals slowly. She'd fallen in love with this city when she came here for a photo shoot. Paris had hired the former Asgardian for many different jobs, and while acting as a news broadcaster had been interesting, it had been her work as a model which had allowed her to explore, and enjoy, the human realm. Of all the cities Amora had seen during her work, Venice was the one Amora had liked the most. *Perhaps that is the sign of the Aesir in me*, Amora reflected, *liking these little boats and the large amount of water nearby.*

That thought made her chuckle to herself, then Amora put on some music on her headphones, and at the next bend in the canal, as soon they disappeared from sight underneath a bridge, hopped to her feet. With a wave of her hand, Amora dispelled the illusion of the boatman and second later, she canceled the spells on the gondola and took over, punting the little boat along, now under an illusion herself. The music of Jennifer Lopez began and Amora, the dread Enchantress of Asgard, continued on her way, humming along and generally grateful beyond all words to have left that life behind her.

Later that day, Amora headed back to her very tasteful studio apartment, which boasted a magnificent view of Venice from one of its richer districts, with a bag of groceries under one arm. Entering her current home, she left the bag on the table after cancelling the minor weightless charm she'd cast on it, heading into her bathroom. She proceeded to take a long

shower, smiling as she inhaled the new shampoo that she'd bought that day, reveling in the feel of it pampering her silken locks.

Paris was right again, this new shampoo is magnificent, and I love the smell of pine and mint. She'd said the next time she needed me for a job wasn't until the fourteenth, I believe. Time enough to perhaps purchase a larger boat and go down the shore to one of the other nearby cities. Or perhaps I could take a few days and travel someplace else... hmm... decisions, decisions.

All thought on that score fled Amora's mind when she began to hear voices echoing from her apartment. One voice mumbled, "I don't know, this looks more like some kind of rich person's apartment, not..." The next few words were unintelligible, but the tone was unmistakably that of a young girl. The young intruder was then answered by another voice, male, old and crotchety. His voice was a low mumble, the words indiscernible, and wrath gave way to confusion for a moment.

They do not sound like a gang or any stalker I have heard of, but the fact that I am hearing anyone in my apartment is the issue! Not only do I have the only key and this whole complex has it's own security, but I warded my home against any unwanted intrusion, magical or not! So how did these unknowns even enter? Still, if whoever this is has assumed that I am a weak mark, they will find themselves gravely mistaken.

With an angry scowl on her face, Amora tersely wrapped a towel around herself and marched out, orange tongues of magic blooming around her hands. *I will worry about getting rid of the bodies later.* "I have no idea what you two were trying to accomplish here, but you will rue the day you..." Amora's voice stuttered to a halt as she took in the scene in front of her.

There were indeed only two intruders. One was indeed a young girl who was busy putting away Amora's food—in the right places a part of Amora's mind noticed—while looking around her with a sense of childlike awe and curiosity. The young girl in question had violet-colored skin, elven ears, and a few marks on her cheeks that looked somewhat like tattoos but could well have been natural marks of some kind. She was a toned, lithe young thing and quite striking despite her drab clothing—jeans and a thin shirt, the kind of clothing Amora had seen young people wear when they were backpacking across Europe.

The second person was an old man, who had laid himself out on Amora's sofa as if this was his apartment rather than Amora's. If the young girl looked like she at least tried to care for her appearance, the old man most certainly did not. His clothing, if it could be called that, was not threadbare by any means but patched and dusty from long travel and hard living. A robe of all things covered a tough pair of jeans and large boots, hiding whatever shirt he'd decided to wear. The man's gray locks were long and flowing, seemingly clean but unkempt.

But it wasn't their appearance that halted Amora, her anger snuffed out as easily as a small candle on a birthday cake in the middle of a gale. No, what stopped one of the most

powerful magic-wielders of Asgard was the old man's eye, his only eye, catching her own, staring into her soul in a way that she had felt only once before.

For all her power, Amora trembled, the magic around her hands disappearing as Amora fought the urge to prostrate herself. "My Lord..."

"Say not my name in front of young Blink. That would ruin some of my fun. Call me Wanderer." The old man warned sharply before smiling beatifically. "Although considering how far we are from home, that is an appellation that could be placed at your feet too, is it not, Enchantress? You are also very far from home."

"Please tell me you don't speak in riddles," the young girl apparently named Blink almost whined, as she looked over at the towel-clad woman. She blushed a bit, then quickly moved to cover the old man's one eye with one of her hands. "Sorry about just, you know, coming in like this, but he was adamant that this was the place we had to be."

That act of childish innocence allowed Amora to regain some of her equilibrium, her gaze momentarily blocked from the Lord's weighty mien, and she snorted at the girl. "And obviously he was not going to accept any attempt to put things off or argument. Don't worry, child, I know that fact well enough."

She couldn't quite hide the bite of bitter memories from her words, recalling how she'sd long been persecuted by the Aesir for how Amora used her magic back in Asgard. Most of that had been caused by the laws of the very man before her, who himself was a practitioner of magic, which no man should be. *By his own rules and beliefs, Odin is a damned soul*, she thought not for the first time, scowling a bit. *But worse, Odin has long thought only himself and those he trusts should use any magic.*

"Truly, we would not be here at all if it were not grave. Grave enough that all wanderers go home, grave enough to speak of endings and beginnings, of not just ourselves, but of all," the Wanderer aspect of Odin announced.

Amora scowled, but even so she could still feel the old man's unblinking stare. Although Blink (and what kind of a name was that for a young girl?) still held one hand over his eye, it did precious little in reality. "If this is going to be an in-depth conversation, I am going to get changed first."

A moment later, Amora emerged garbed in her typical around-the-house attire, a loose shirt and long, loose pants, the kind of comfortable clothing she preferred to wear around the apartment. *Normally I would dress up more for guests, but I will be damned to Niflheim if I show this old reprobate that much deference.*

"Now why are you here... Wanderer? And no prevarication! Just tell me what you want from me, and furthermore, how by the Bifrost's holy light did even **you** get past my wards without me feeling a thing?!"

“What are wards? Er... sorry, but um, whatever they are, I didn’t have any trouble getting us here,” Blink said, tilting her head slightly as she silently held up an apple, asking silent permission from Amora to have a bite.

“Well, at least you have some manners, child. But the fact you didn’t even notice my wards doesn’t make me feel any better about you being here. Still, your comment at least tells me that it was you who brought the two of you here and not this old,” Amora responded, waving her hand in answer in equally silent permission.

“I don’t know what that word means, but I’m certain that it describes this old goat, whatever it is,” Blink answered around a mouthful of apple, shaking her head reproachfully. “Sorry, he didn’t tell me that we were here to find a woman or else I would have tried to blink us outside on your balcony maybe.”

“Foolishness. The time to care about such niceties has passed. We need to get in contact with Harry Potter,” the aspect of Odin announced, fed up with the small talk.

Amora scoffed at the frowning older man. “Go through Magical Minds and get an appointment from one of his secretaries then. Why do you need me?”

“Did you not hear me? Pray are you deaf? We must speak to Potter! Not mere flunkies. And it is ‘we,’ not just me, make no mistake Enchantress,” the Wanderer retorted. “I said it was time that all of us come home, and I meant it.”

At that, Amora’s lips curled back into a snarl. “If this is your way of saying that you wish for me to return willingly I—”

“**No.**” The force behind that single word took Amora aback, and the old man continued on in the ensuing silence. “We go back to war, not to put you in a cage. We go back to **the** war, the war to end the cycle a bid for freedom, for all which will either lead to sweet victory or fiery ruin.”

“That tells me absolutely nothing. Freedom for who?” Amora questioned, while Blink just looked confused, wondering what the heck she’d gotten involved in here.

“Freedom for everyone left behind. Freedom for me, for you, for the Aesir and Vanir all,” the wandering aspect of Odin Borson answered.

Amora stared, but the Wanderer had obviously said as much as he was going to and, aspect or no, it was still Odin in front of her so all Amora could do was sigh. *The old raven-pecked fool always could do inscrutable better than a whole cadre of mummies. Best to just go along with things I suppose. For now.* “I believe I could get us into seeing Potter, yes. But even I would have to go through the one called Sage to do it. Or perhaps I could lean on Paris and have her pass on a personal request.”

The seriousness in the Wanderer faded, and he shook his head with a chuckle. “No, no, that shan’t do it all. Time to become serious it may be, but I would still loathe my last act in this grand play to be so boring. We will rely on Blink, and in doing so, will reveal yet another aspect of what we bring to the table.”

“This entire conversation is going way over my head,” Blink muttered. “And I don’t like how you’re just talking about me like I’m a commodity.”

“That happens often around this scoundrel, child. Still, if organizing a meeting the mundane way doesn’t have the proper flair that you seem to be going for, my Lord, I can understand why you came to me.”

The use of that title for a second time caused Blink to stare at the woman, who she still hadn’t been introduced to, then back at the old man. Amora ignored the girl, standing and moving towards the kitchen. “And I cannot deny that I too have a flair for the dramatic. But I don’t suppose that my willing aid would grant me largess to slink off while you and Potter meet?”

“Indeed not! When one goes through to the trouble of picking up a piece, one does not then set it down beside the board unused,” the Wanderer announced, flicking fingers at both women.

Amora sighed again, mentally whimpering at having her easy life so displaced but holding out hope that after this was all over, she would be able to return and pick it up again as if nothing had happened. “Blink, was it? Would you like something to eat? I’m rather hungry myself. You Wanderer can fend for yourself! This is my home, my kitchen, and as you are not guests invited to my table, and you are not facing duress nor foul weather, I may decide who to serve.”

The Wanderer scowled, but did not gainsay Amora’s word. The Enchantress went on. “Instead, you will tell us more about this war you mentioned and what you want from me personally. And not in ribald riddles or quips, old man, or else we will be having more than words whatever your power might be!”

Later, Amora would wonder if perhaps she should’ve allowed the wandering aspect of Odin to keep his plans to himself. They certainly hadn’t made for pleasant listening.

OOOOOO

Harry wasn’t the only one among his command cadre who hadn’t been to the Savage Land in a while. Indeed, the only one who had was Hela, so Harry had organized a day trip for himself and his ladies, or rather most of them, as when she was approached, Jean evinced no interest in exploring the city. She’d had a doctor’s appointment that morning, and that always put her in an odd mood. So it was only Harry, Ororo, and Emma who’d decided to make the trip.

They were joined by Sage and the pair of MJ and Wyatt. Even though this visit was mostly just to look around and have a date out on the lake, business never stopped and as they walked to the room holding the runic doorways, Sage was still relaying some points to Harry.

“Forge has reported that he’s happy enough with building the first human-made ships to your specifications, although Admiral Whitaker wants it on record that he doesn’t think it’s a good idea. In his opinion, the first human ship should stay here to flag the Home Fleet. As that’s a human-type debate, I thought you should have some input.”

“Does Forge know that he’s going to be working with Kitty and that any designs he makes have to be run by Carol, her think tank, and Reed? I don’t want him to go all absent-minded professor on us and start building ships without making certain that they match the criteria we need,” Harry joked, although he knew Forge was perfectly capable of doing just that.

Yet of all the geniuses Harry had access to at present, Forge was easily the most capable of playing nice with others, and Harry took Sage at her word when she replied in the affirmative, going on to address her other point. “Good. As for Admiral Whitaker, I realize that having our flagship be a human-designed vessel is a big deal in terms of morale and public relations, but the fact is, we have enough Kree-made ships we just don’t need more capital ships. The Warspite can serve as our flagship for now. And no, I’m not going to allow the first human-made carrier to be called Victory either,” Harry said, ending on a dry note. “He got away with calling the defense force ‘Home Fleet’. That’s all he gets.”

Ororo chuckled at that, as did Wyatt, although the others looked blank, and Harry rolled his eyes. “Nevermind. Let’s just say that he was being very quintessentially British-first with that choice of a name and the Home Fleet thing. Now, MJ, you had something you wanted to say before we started our tour?”

“We’re starting to get some pushback from the American public and the Chinese government who say that the Avalon Empire is just a new type of imperialism, but I had an idea about combating that before it becomes an issue, at least in the states. With your permission, I want to commission a documentary series about the number of alien races out there and what they’re like. The more information we share on that score, the better the Avalon Empire looks.”

MJ chuckled wryly, pushing a long thread of red hair out of her face as she went on while Wyatt held the door open for her. “We’re also starting to see some local groups protesting how many veterans are signing up to have dual citizenship. And those astronomers who were angry we’re destroying asteroids and using them as military bases have gotten organized. Their screaming is beginning to get more airtime in American news, and their rants are being taken more seriously online. That’s not something we want to see. There are also a few dozen pro-mutant supremacy sites we should be aware of, but I think between Sage and me, we can figure out who set them up and start to marginalize them without giving them the kind of attention they want.”

Harry frowned at that, then shrugged his shoulders. "I think that falls on the heading of releasing more information as well. If we can get the realists on our side, we can get the scientific purists to back off, and those astronomers aren't the kind to make real trouble. As for your idea about a documentary series, that sounds like a fantastic idea."

"I would ask Una and Mar'vel to help. Having actual aliens discussing their society will add credence to your documentary. And, if we are speaking on future troubles, my love?" Ororo interjected, turning to give Harry a look he knew too well.

"I'm always willing to hear whatever you want to tell me, Ororo, you know that. now's a good time as any. Just remember to leave problems and portents at the docks, hmm?" Harry teased in response.

Ororo smiled back slightly but still brought up the issue she had seen building for some weeks now. "Understood and agreed. But back to my concern. I think we need to honestly consider adding another artificial intelligence to our resources. Pinoptes is becoming far too stretched between helping on the educational side of things and running our ever-growing number of sensor arrays."

"Should we slow construction of the Raven Towers then, the Verdun platforms and so forth?" Emma inquired. "I don't want to know what an AI, no matter how seemingly sane, would do if it feels itself being 'stretched' and **then** is relieved of its duties. Especially one who is connected to so much of what we do."

"I don't think we should pare Pinoptes back," Ororo cautioned. "Further, I think working with the teachers and the students is good for it. But Mary Jane and Sage need dedicated supporter and someone really needs to focus on keeping track of the construction side of things. Let Pinoptes handle the sensors and the education side of things, but only that. It shouldn't also have to direct the thousands of repair droids work on the various asteroids, the ships' flight paths and so forth, let alone Hephaestus 2."

"Agreed. I'll sit down with Tony, see if he can find it in his heart to program another artificial intelligence. And just like before, I'll have Reed go through the programming before full activation," Harry answered. "That seemed to have worked for us so far, and I honestly don't think relying on either one of them alone to program an AI would work out as well."

"Truer words were never spoken. One big brain is never going to be as good as two," Emma quipped before glaring at all of the others bar Wyatt, her hands on her hips. "And with that out of the way, and while I realize this sounds extremely strange coming from me, no more talk of business for now. You and Hela are still going to sit in on that meeting later, and I want to make the most of the time we have."

With even Sage being agreeable to that, Harry led the way through the long hallway directed to the runic doorways in Camelot. From there they took one to a runic doorway set

high up in the tower in the Savage Land and then from there to another local one that would deposit them in the budding city on the lake.

As he did so, Harry examined the numerous doorways the group passed, reflected that Kitty had been very busy. *Or is she still getting help from Wanda and Clea?* Regardless of who created this particular doorway, it deposited the party of six within what Harry had heard was being colloquially called a runic waystation.

A few odd looks were sent their way from passerbys, as it wasn't the normal time of day that people transferred from the tower into the city or vice versa, but that was all. Harry and Ororo were under a minor glamour to hide their identity, and the others, even Emma, were not famous enough to attract attention here.

Upon exiting the waystation into the rest of the city, MJ, Wyatt, and Emma all froze, staring around them. "By the Spirits!" Wyatt breathed.

Harry also paused, looking around appreciatively, while Sage slowly removed her special glasses, replacing them with regular sunglasses as she too took in the view with a faint smile on her purple-painted lips. "It's nice to see that all your hard work has paid off."

The runic waystation had been set up on a small hill in the center of the growing city. Around the hill a road circled, other roads splitting from the circle leading off through the city. While this added height didn't mean they could see everything, as the edifice wasn't all that tall, even so, it did afford them a very nice view of the surrounding area.

The cityscape was eclectic to say the least, just as Harry had said to Emma during their date at her mansion. Indeed, in terms of the number of buildings versus the size of the area, perhaps it didn't really deserve the term city yet. But it was impressive all the same.

For one thing, the waystation was situated in a building that looked like a mound crossed with a large, modern loghouse-like structure. Harry detected the hands of Hela and perhaps some of the indigenous folk in that. *Don't the lizard-kin live in buildings like that? I know they are the most pleased with our takeover of the Savage Lands.* On top of the mound was a small lighthouse-like structure for some reason.

Looking in one direction, the group could see one of the roads leading directly into a large, interconnected area of differently designed buildings. According to what Harry had been told, this was the area devoted to the various scientific communities developing here. Agriculture, ecology, mineralogy, paleontology, all these fields and more had their own spaces here. Indeed, even Carol's original think tank had relocated to the Savage Land. Their headquarters was a large dome-like structure with wings out to either side arched to catch the sun's rays, lined with hundreds of solar panels.

In contrast, the botany division stood out as a series of smaller bio-domes, where indigenous flora had been replanted to be studied in manageable examples of the various and

extremely diverse ecologies the Savage Land boasted. The areas between the small bio-domes were open to the public, but each dome was also guarded by a small security fence and a retina pattern security system. People could look but only those directly involved could go inside.

A small stream also wound its way in a U-turn pattern through this area. Offshoots fed into several public botanical gardens, but the main river wound under another building, apparently devoted to scientists conducting experiments and research related to the lake. That building, Harry recalled, had been part of the initial base that Magneto and his Brotherhood had set up. *I think only that main building of Carol's think tank could say the same. Good grief, no wonder she said I'd recognize it by its wings. Hah!*

In another direction was a growing housing district. There were not, as was found in other cities around the world, large and blocky apartment buildings. Instead, most of the structures were actually small two or three-story houses. The few apartment buildings constructed so far were spread out in different directions. The original barracks building was one such complex, after it had been refurbished of course. But even there, Harry could see that the designers and the construction teams had gone out of their way to make the new buildings at least look impressive. One condo Ororo pointed out as they made their way down the hill looked like a giant triangle of marble and glass, while another MJ seemed to like arched over a distant street, straddling both sides of the road.

As they walked, Harry and his group saw that the fledgling city had various things that one would assume a city would have. A large, utilitarian ACME sat squat and almost annoyingly out of place, taking space between two intersections. Elsewhere, hardware stores and several bars had set up shop, looking almost generic compared to the rest of the city.

The theater Emma had spotted and urged them towards did not. It was built around a dip in the land with a wide dome for a roof that and a façade that looked like a Greek temple. Inside, the theater was separated into four segments, each segment able to open up to the sky.

There were also people. Lots of people. Buildings were still being put up in a few lots even near the city's center, including what looked like some kind of sports complex, and construction teams were everywhere, speaking English, French, or Mexican amongst themselves in the main. Other people were scientists, their conversations low and intense as they moved around. Harry saw more than a dozen nonhuman locals, members of Shanna's tribe, along with men dressed as if they were preparing to head into the jungle. Intermixed among them all were normal men and women going about their lives. There were only a few kids though, and they were teenagers or older. It was a school day, after all.

"How—I mean... I knew before coming here that this city was pretty large already. But Harry, this place has only been here for what, four months? Five?" Mary Jane asked, breaking her stunned silence while Wyatt looked around intently.

“A little longer. But you need to remember that some of these buildings have been repurposed from what Magneto and his followers created. And they also had their own ‘homegrown’ construction droids for the roads and more simple things,” Harry explained, winking at the redhead. “As for the rest, you should know. How many applications have you and Sage looked at for scientists to come here and research the Savage Land?”

“If you’re talking about applications we accepted; fourteen thousand, two hundred and ninety-five. At your direction, I chose ‘division leaders’ for every five hundred. Above them, I created an oversight committee from a group of emeritus professors to organize the various divisions in different sectors so that there is some overlap, but not too much. About forty percent of those scientists paid for the privilege to come here as individuals or to represent various colleges or laboratories elsewhere,” Sage answered instantly, although she was also shaking her head and looking back at the bio-domes as she spoke. “But over six thousand live here full-time at this point. And I agree with MJ; I personally signed off on most of the funding and expenditures here under your name, and even I’m astonished by all this.”

MJ shook her head slowly as well, taking in the view around the theater while Ororo looked quietly proud as she exchanged nods with a few of the people around them. These individuals didn’t recognize her thanks to her glamor, they were simply being friendly, and she happily returned the gesture, as pleased in that courtesy and the smiles on their faces as the rest of the city.

“When Harry and I decided that the original supply depot by the lake would be the natural place to build a community of colonists, we brought in several dozen construction companies we had made agreements with via the Hellfire Club and Emma.” Ororo nodded her head to Emma, who nodded back easily, also smiling widely—or as widely as she ever did in public—at the visible sign of their efforts. “Then, we simply told them that everything had to be structurally sound first and *then* beautiful if it could be done. With that, and the magic words ‘money is no object’, one can work wonders.”

“Exactly. That, and when we started to build up a surplus of the construction robots originally designed by Doctor Doom, we sent several hundred of them down here. Plus, most construction teams, electricians, metalworkers, and so forth live here now. Along with many Magical Minds personnel, a large majority of their families and the families of people working up in Fortress Mars. But beyond that, it really was the magic words Ororo mentioned, that has been the real reason behind this explosive progress.”

“I don’t see many cars. I’ve seen many people on bikes and a few people using those odd two-wheeled contraptions with handlebars. Is that by law?” Emma questioned.

Seeing that Sage, Wyatt and Mary Jane also looked a little confused about the lack of vehicular travel, Harry answered with a grin. “And how exactly would we transport cars here? They can’t fit through runic doorways. Not the normal-sized ones, anyway.”

That caused everyone to nod, but Wyatt frowned and gestured over to where a truck was rumbling along the road, carrying some kind of load in the back. “And what about those? Or the construction machines?”

“We use the submarine to bring in necessary materials. Cars are luxury goods at this point. Trucks, on the other hand, are useful. Eventually, we might have a homegrown car-building division of Magical Minds, especially given my acquisition of Saab. But for now, if it can’t be used for actual work, it’s classified as a luxury good and isn’t going to be coming in via the submarines or the runic doorways. The only exception is jeeps, as they can be used in the jungle.”

“There is a certain amount of forethought going into this topic as well, including our systems of public transportation. There are the tramways as you saw in the center of the city, hover buses leading out of the city, and so forth,” Ororo explained further, not noticing that only Emma was nodding in agreement. Sage, Wyatt, and Mary Jane had all missed the tram earlier.

“Indeed, the hover technology has been a boon for many of the indigenous clans, just as much as our medical technology. We’ve made a point of not doing anything to change their cultures beyond keeping the peace between the various local groups, which they’re thankful for, but the medical side of things has been the real key to practically every group signing onboard with Harry and the Avalon Empire acting as the overarching federal government here in the Savage Land. That, and the agreement not to create conventional roads beyond the area ceded to us as a ‘colonial zone’.”

“I can see your point, but that is a pity. Imagine the kinds of race courses you could build in a place like this,” Emma murmured, practically drooling at the thought. If Emma was going to admit to one vice over all her others, it was that she loved sports cars and races.

This was something that Harry fully understood and even shared with Emma. He could all too easily remember how meeting his eventual wife and racing her in Switzerland had changed both Emma’s life and his after all. *Just as much as meeting Ororo when she came with Charles to speak with Reed about me did.*

Sensing the nature of his thoughts, Emma moved over, sliding one arm around Harry’s waist before leaning up to kiss his chin as his arm wound around her in turn. Mentally she sent, *“Yes, love, that was a most serendipitous moment for me as well. Still, tell me you have some plans in that area at least. Please?”*

“Well...” Harry hedged out loud, then laughed. “Maybe in the future. One massive road all along the edge of the Savage Land wouldn’t be too difficult to secure a deal for. But I also don’t want to put in roads beyond the areas we’ve already worked out with the tribes without their approval, so actually constructing it could be annoying, at least at first.”

Wyatt nodded in firm agreement at that, reflecting that Harry's takeover of the Savage Land had been helped by the fact that he had essentially replaced the previous tyrant, Magneto, than anything else. The indigenous people had already been used to living under an overlord. He'd simply replaced tyranny and aloof despotism with a new, more democratic and kind type of leadership. It was better for them, sure, but it wasn't anything they weren't used to. "Just so long as the indigenous populations don't start to be pushed back and sequestered away in reservations," the Native American announced warningly.

"Not going to happen. As Harry said, the city's limits have already been decided. And with how many scientists are here to study the local wildlife in its various native habitats, there's always going to be strong representation against unplanned expansion in the city's government too," Ororo announced firmly.

"We might want to emphasize that in the documentary series about the Savage Land. If we can show we're working with the natives and that they are happy to help us, we can undercut a lot of people wondering if the Savage Land has been subjected to the same type of imperialistic colonization and takeover that India, Africa, and even the Middle East were subjected to," MJ murmured.

"Further, there's no real need for expansion here," Harry added. "The Savage Land produces food, sure, and exotic plants and animals. But I'm not interested in selling any of that, nor is there any kind of black market."

"See the issue about getting cars in. Anything going out is also highly secured," Emma interjected.

"Right. There's also no local market, so no black market even here. As for mineral resources, I've got several hundred asteroids, many which have precious minerals, to exploit. I've got no need to mine anything here in the Savage Land." Harry finished.

So saying, Harry sent a teasing look down to Emma, whose face assumed a cold, aloof expression. She made to pull away, but Harry's hold firmed and he didn't let her. Emma was still somewhat sore at Lorna Dane officially becoming the richest woman in the world thanks to her work on the various asteroids. Even worse for Emma's sensibilities, that fortune grew as Lorna continued to work with the Avalon Empire.

"She isn't even doing anything with it!" Emma mentally groused to Harry, though her attempts to get away quickly faded. Now she only maintained a pout on her face. *"It's just building up in her bank accounts! What is the use of being wealthy if you don't do anything with it? Lorna has more gold than most first-world countries and it's just sitting there!"* More than her pride, that fact offended Emma's sensibilities. *"She even turned down my advice on investing!"*

Harry commiserated with her, but mainly by giving her a mental ear to listen, as he'd already known Lorna didn't have any real plans for her money just yet. In fact, she was too busy enjoying her time with Steve and Betsy to even think about it.

Meanwhile, the group had made their way through the city, now heading out to one of its outer edges. This area reminded Wyatt of frontier towns, which he said aloud. "Almost like a mix between a Hollywood Wild West set and ranches back in Texas."

The buildings around them were indeed somewhat smaller and more rustic-looking. To one side of the road that they were walking along was a large paddock full of cows, and elsewhere other animals could be seen here and there, including some of the indigenous animals. Interspersed within this area were watchtowers, each containing a few people that Wyatt could barely see from where he was walking, though he could pick out that each was armed with a large rifle of some sort. In the distance, he could make out the sonic towers, the sound-based weapons system that kept the larger animals of the jungle at bay.

Wyatt also noticed that people around them were armed, far in contrast to the city's center. He pointed this out, wondering, "I had thought that the various animals inside the range of the towers weren't much trouble. Why the guns?"

"Because a lot of these people out here on the edges of the city head out with scientists and explorers daily. On top of that, sometimes more stubborn animals can bull through the sonic-based defenses. A few local species even seem to be developing an immunity to them." Harry answered before shrugging. "Or maybe they're going deaf. We're not certain which yet."

"There's also defending against other people to consider. But you'll notice the signs." Wyatt looked in the direction Ororo pointed and noticed the signs. Closer to the city center, the signs had been white text on blue, but they were now purple on black. "As you pass further in towards the city center, these signs change. That tells people that they are entering an area where they are not allowed to carry arms unless they are part of the police force. What people do in their own homes is up to them, but they can't carry in public in the more heavily developed areas."

Sage nodded. "We also offer incentives in terms of money and other such things for people to exchange the rifles they've brought in with them for gene-locked rifles and guns. And the gun owners must all submit to monthly safety tests to make sure that they understand what they're doing with their weapons. That caused a bit of a kerfuffle from a few Americans, but they agreed to it eventually."

"Aren't you an American too?" MJ asked, cocking her head to one side as she looked at the other woman. "Or have you gone native thanks to how much time you've spent in the UK?" The way Sage had said it made it seem like she was speaking of a group of exasperating foreigners.

Sage merely shrugged. "I've moved my permanent place of residence into the Avalon Empire. I'm no longer an American citizen."

That simple revelation caused MJ to silently nod, wondering if she would ever get to that point. She still identified herself as an American, but the only times she ever went to the States was when she stayed at Emma's mansion, meeting with Susan, doing various PR-related jobs, or shopping in New York. She even lived in an apartment near Magical Minds. *I suppose when the locals here in the Savage Land develop their own sense of fashion and build up a decent enough shopping district, I might think of doing the same thing.*

From there, the group wound their way around the city, seeing the different types of architecture on display, before stopping near the lake in the dock district. Here, the docks that had previously serviced Magneto's submarine had been expanded. There were now more than a dozen different wharves, including an area devoted to swimming and boating for the local students, one to the city's scientific community, and three for people who just wanted to go out onto the lake, either for exercise or pleasure.

It was to these that they eventually wound their way, although Ororo spent a few moments explaining about the education system here in the Savage Land, with Harry and Sage asking questions as she did. Emma was not interested, and the other two had already split off.

MJ and Wyatt were interested in exploring the Savage Land, and Wyatt had the forethought to bring along the magical pouch that contained his rifle for self-defense. Mary Jane in contrast just wanted to see what driving the cool, dune buggy-like exploratory vehicle things would be like.

Emma and Harry were also mildly interested in that, but when they'd arrived at the wharf, they'd found Hela waiting for them, a smile visible under her half-mask. "There you are! I've already booked us one of the larger private catamarans for the day, my Seidr Man. Come," she'd gestured imperiously. "It is a gorgeous day out, and I believe that we should make the most of it."

She'd looked at Sage apologetically but very firmly, not that she'd needed to. The other woman had already begun to back away, smiling cheerfully at them. "You all have fun. I think I'm going to head back to the science sector. I want to know what has been discovered about various plants here in the Savage Land."

Jean soon joined them, and the group of lovers spent the rest of the morning and into the afternoon out on the lake. Jean and Emma laid out on lounge chairs, soaking in the sun, with Jean dressed in a full one-piece suit after much cajoling from Harry and Ororo. In stark contrast, Emma wore a bikini that would probably have been illegal in most countries, the thing barely covering her nipples and privates, while she delighted in Harry and Ororo combining their efforts to cover her in sunscreen. Ororo and Hela enjoyed sailing around, as did Harry,

who engaged all of his lovers in conversation until Jean and Emma both fell asleep, lulled by the sun and the waves.

But unfortunately for the sleeping duo, their naps were interrupted about an hour later.

Harry looked up from where Hela was teaching him how to steer at a sudden shift in the air. An instant later, there was a loud pop, and three people appeared in the air above the boat. Two of them instantly fell with a yelp, one of them shouting, "I told you I couldn't tell where we'd land!" to the other.

The third, a woman Harry and Hela both recognized instantly, waved her hands and all three paused in midair.

It was that recognition and the haphazard method of their arrival that halted Harry, Hela, and Ororo's instant violent response to such an abrupt interruption. Harry lowered his raised hand, staring at the blonde woman as she alighted onto their boat, while nearby, Jean and Emma woke up, the former scowling and the latter instantly creating a barrier over the twosome.

With Ororo taking over for Hela at the wheel, Harry strode forward with the Asgardian goddess flanking him, scowling slightly as he addressed the blonde. "Amora. I could've sworn that you had turned your back on your whole evil sorceress ways that I'd heard about, so what is this intrusion about?"

"I have, I have! I am not here to pick a fight with you Potter, most decidedly not!" Amora hastened to reply, backing away almost to the point where her shapely rear hit the ship's guardrail over the prow. Harry Potter had been stronger, magically speaking, than Amora was when she had interviewed him on live TV. Now she could sense he was far stronger, which made her initial desire to not fight him even stronger. "I am merely here with these two because this elderly... gentleman... has something to say to you."

"You couldn't have made an appointment?" Harry asked warily as he glanced at the other two intruders, one who looked to be an old man and the other a young girl. The young girl was obviously a mutant from her appearance and seemed exhausted, shaking her head as she stared around them with somewhat glazed eyes. She also made no move to get to her feet from where she'd fallen.

The old man, on the other hand, had already stood up and was looking back at Harry with a certain amount of dignity, far more than one would expect from someone who had just been teleported into midair and then saved through no art of his own. Yet Harry's thoughts juddered to a halt as he stared at the old man, then over at Hela, then back at Amora. "I think I recognize that elderly... gentleman. Is he who—what—I think he is?"

Hela nodded slowly, staring hard at the old man. "For a given value, yes. Hail, Lord Odin."

The girl gasped, staring up at the old man, then shook her head. “That’s who you are?! Really? You would think the chief god of the Vikings could have dressed better.”

Harry barked a laugh while the old man looked a little annoyed, mock-glaring at the girl before turning his one-eyed gaze on Harry. But before he could answer, Hela did it for him. “In terms of the lore and history that is known of my folk, Lord Odin has always enjoyed going about in disguise to get a feel for his worshipers and see how they would act in unusual circumstances. In this fashion, he would judge them in both normal times and the battlefield, the better to see the true worth of the jarls and warriors who looked to him for his favor.”

“Lord Odin also likes to be talked **to** rather than **about** by those in his presence!” Odin announced irritably before stepping forward from his two companions. To the utter shock and surprise of Hela and Amora, the aspect of the All-Father bowed from the waist towards Harry. He didn’t hold it for very long, but doing such a thing at all was significant. “By the pricking of my thumbs, something wicked this way comes! In the name of myself, as representative of myself, the King of Asgard, I do come before you, Harry Potter, to ask for your assistance in freeing our people. We have struck back, but we have reaped the whirlwind in doing so. The Ragnarök comes, and I fear that should we fail to acquire external aid, it will sweep us all away.”

OOOOOOO

It was a very grim group of dragon slayers who started their way back up Yggdrasil from where the corpse of Níðhögggr had been left amongst the World Tree’s roots. It’s members did not carry Volstagg’s body with them, which under normal circumstances would have been returned for a warrior’s burial at sea. But this honor had been denied the robust Asgardian, for his body had decomposed to naught but bits of wood and bloody matter at an unnatural pace, leaving nothing behind. Even his clothing had turned to dust.

Nothing had remained, save a small cairn they put up to remember their friend. Whatever purpose he’d been created for, why he’d been hiding Thor’s gauntlets inside his own body, none of it mattered. Volstagg had been their friend. That was the most important thing.

Twice Beasts waylaid them twice on their return, but neither assault had been difficult to beat off. Better, Skadi now led them back the way they came correctly, even though something kept on trying to ensnare them in illusion. The Shadows had utilized illusions and mental assaults to mislead and trick the Asgardians before, but though Skadi had no idea where the attacks were coming from, her senses could no longer be so easily confused. The others were still tricked occasionally, but even then Skadi saw through the falsehoods fast enough that the party’s progress heading up was far better than climbing down.

One night as they sat around the fire, Skadi reflected on the continued attempts to charm them from afar. “I confess, it has me confused. It is not in Yggdrasil’s nature to do this. If one is faced with an illusion, that illusion must be created by another’s mind and for a reason.

Going down, I had thought that somehow Níðhöggr was releasing such spells but the creature is dead and still we are plagued by them.”

“Do you believe these illusions to be targeted against us specifically, or traps long since laid out for anyone passing by?” Sif inquired of the Huntress as she and Fandral replaced the dressings on Tyr’s shoulder and chest. “Perhaps even something set in place to keep the dread wyrm from escaping?”

But it wasn’t Skadi who answered. It was Thor, and all eyes turned toward where he stood, glaring out into the darkness around them. “They have been directed against us. And by the same people who... who...created our friend Volstagg to hide my Gauntlets of Power. But their artifice failed them in the end. They created life and forgot that in life, there is always free will. Now our friend is gone, but these pieces of seal offal yet remain. They will feel my fury!” The Thunder God growled.

Even from where she kneeled beside Tyr, Sif could hear Thor’s grip on Mjollnir clenching, causing the wooden handle to creak and groan. Once again, Sif suppressed a shiver, but not of fear. No, hearing Thor speak like that called to something equally as base but equally as unwelcome. *Stop that, girl! You haven’t fought all your life for recognition as a warrior despite being a Vanir, and a woman to go all girly over Thor of all people!*

The two remaining warriors of the Warriors Three had been the most subdued of the party since their friend’s death. But now, Hogun spoke up from where he had been cooking the last of their meager rations over a small fire. “Think you they are one and the same then? But who would have the power to lay such a trap so long in the making? Surely ensnaring all of us in illusions is no easy feat, to say nothing of... of creating life as they did in brave Volstagg. And for what reason would they create a, a person to hide your gauntlets within in the first place?”

Catching Thor’s darkening features, Hogun went on calmly. “I do not gainsay you, Thor. Truly having two sets of enemies so well versed in magic would be the stuff of nightmares. But we durst not have enough information to even guess at their goals, let alone their identities.”

“Could it be the Enchantress? Or perhaps the Dark Elves? Malekith certainly has the knowledge of magic and the power, to do it,” Tyr interjected, grimacing a bit as the work on dressing his wounds continued. Although Asgardians healed quickly, they had all taken a heavy thrashing from Níðhöggr.

“Nay. For all of her magical power, the Enchantress cannot truly create life like this,” Thor denied. “Nor can I think of any reason why Amora would do so. Well known it is that I am not the most forward-thinking of fellows myself...” he paused as his friends laughed or good-naturedly jeered at the comment, which was all too true. “And if anyone else here could tell me why she would do it, I would listen. But I still maintain that it would not be her. “

Sif’s eyes narrowed, but Skadi moved for her before she could ask. “Why?”

“Because Amora is still on Midgard, and Midgard is cut off from us,” Thor reminded them all, surprising everyone. It took a moment, but they all realized it was true. Amora had, in effect, been banished after-the-fact by Lord Odin. The realms were currently mystically separated, so even if she desired to, Amora could not return.

That made Sif breathe a sigh of relief, although why she felt such, she did not quite know. The others simply nodded and then turned their attention to the idea that it might have been the Dark Elves. Had the deception been some long thought-out plot to infiltrate Asgard, gone awry because they had created a personality too well?

“But then again, why would they hide Thor’s gauntlets within their creation?” Tyr reposted. “That is just as important as the act of creating true life. Why that manner of concealment? Further, how did they even come to possess the gauntlets in the first place? And why could they not destroy them?”

Everyone there nodded, but Thor had no answer, staring down at his gauntlets, clenching and unclenching them in thought. “Truly, I cannot even remember when I lost them, friends. Who knows how long they have been missing?”

Skadi cut through the debate with the same skill she wielded a hunting dagger. “Who and how long matters not unless we can track them down. None of us have the magic to do that, not even I. When I examined Níðhöggr on the belief that he could have been involved or touched by the magic of these other enemies, I could not find any trail that I could follow. So unless they reveal themselves now that their plot has been foiled, we have no means to strike at them here and now.”

“Agreed,” Thor answered reluctantly. “Whichever the case, conjecture at this point serves no one. We have a long day's trek ahead of us tomorrow. Bed down all of you, I will take first watch. We can take this matter before Lord Odin when we return. Surely Father will know what to do.”

To that, no one raised issue or alternate answer, and everyone bedded down quickly.

OOOOOO

The instant Harry and his companions and their new guests exited the runic doorway into Camelot Blink gasped, her eyes going wide as her body stiffened, her hands going to her stomach. “OOOH, wha... what the heck is... ugh!”

Blink, or Clare as she had given her birth name, tumbled to one side in a heap. Everything she’d eaten the past few days came up, followed by the young woman collapsing to one side, her eyes wide and unseeing. “Wh... what the hell, where is, where is **everything!?**” Blink wailed. To Blink, whose mutant power gave her an innate understanding of her surroundings it was as if everything around her had been replaced by a wide gray zone, floating in nothing. It was like nothing existed beyond herself and the other people she could see

nearby. This impacted her mind and stomach as if she had just gone from being sober to being drunk and also hungover in an instant.

“The Fidelius spell seems to be having an effect on you. That’s an extreme reaction, but Nightcrawler went through something similar. Sorry, I’d forgotten,” Harry waved a hand to banish Blink’s sick, waving the other to conjure up a pen and paper before writing out the secret quickly. “Here, read this.”

Usually, using the runic doorways bypassed the Fidelius. But to Teleporters, the impact on their preternatural spatial senses remained until they were read into the secret. Nightcrawler hadn’t been sick when he’d first come through to Camelot, but he was thrown off-balance and quite panicky before Harry had read him into the secret.

Gulping, Blink read the note and almost immediately began to look better, although still pale and sickly. “Ugh, that helps, but oh boy, that wasn’t fun at all!”

Wobbling to her feet, the young woman clung to Harry’s helping hand as the others quickly came through after them. When Hela, who’d been following behind Amora and the Wanderer, emerged the group left the room devoted to the runic doorways heading out into the hallway beyond. There they broke up, with Harry and Hela leading the two newcomers up into the adult levels of the castle.

There, the group was nearly run over by Trickster, who was carrying several of the castle’s younger residents as if he was a living bus. Illyana had obviously used the Engorgio charm on him again, just as she had during Harry’s lesson with her a few days ago.

Behind them, Rahne raced, shouting, “Get back here, ya boggetts! Ya’ll not try yer pranks on me and get awa’ withou’ a proper canning!” The fact the wolfish teen’s shirt had been turned white with sparkly dots scattered across it, and that she looked as if she’d been hit by a mix of water balloons and glitter gave reason for her anger.

With a somewhat embarrassed groan, Harry hit the charging giant otter with a Finite Incantatum, returning him to normal size and tossing the kids into the air. A Leviosa spell caught the few who looked like they would have a bruising landing, and Harry scowled at the kids. “Do we have to have another talk about playful pranks, hurtful pranks, and the difference between the two?”

The children looked rebellious, and Rahne glared at them in return. “Ach, aye that ya do Laird Potter. I didnae do anything to—”

“Don’t lie!” Illyana interrupted quickly, turning her attention from the girl clinging to her magic teacher with the cool violet skin to glare at Rahne. “You said I was evil! You said Mister Potter and the others were living in sin!”

Rahne winced as Harry looked back at her, a questioning brow raised. “I tried ta talk ta Anechka and a few of the others about faith. I... I mighta accidentally mentioned some opinions

about magic and er... living in debauchery that I shouldn't have, but I prefaced all o' that by sayin' it was wha' the Catholic faith believed, not me. I'll apologize for it, but Anechka and the other Russians were raised in..."

Harry held up a hand, forestalling any more discussion. "I don't have time to sit down and mete out punishments right now. Therefore, I am ordering you to go directly to Father Garnoff. You all are to take whatever punishment he assigns." He looked specifically at Illyana and Rahne while the other children present winced. "All of you. While I know your heart might be in the right place, Rahne, it is not your job to see to the souls or our young flock here. Understood?"

All of the kids assumed hangdog expressions, but Harry was unmoved. Illyana and her coterie were far too quick to prank and had definitely gone too far in this instance, even if Rahne had backslid for some reason. *And she was doing so well too. I hope Garnoff realizes he'll need to keep an eye on her from now on.*

Finally, Melody, the group's conscience, reached out and took Illyana's hands. Illyana looked at her bestest friend, sighed, and nodded. "Yes, Master." She patted her familiar on the head, gathering the others up with a wave of her hand. "Come on, guys. Trickster can sniff the priest out right away. We should get this over with."

For a moment after the herd of youths had moved off, the trio of newcomers held silent while Hela and Harry exchanged amused looks. It was never dull around Camelot, that was for certain.

After recovering from her surprise at the children's appearance, Amora opened her mouth, but before she could say anything Blink spoke up, giggling as she looked from the retreating herd to the Wanderer. "W-Wait a sec, was that otter named Trickster? Heheheheh...oooooh, it hurts to laugh..."

Shaking his head at the giggling and groaning young woman, Harry took Blink's arm once more and led her away. "Come on, young Miss. You have a date with our nurse."

After leaving Blink to be looked over by Una, Harry led Amora and the aspect of Odin to a waiting room. As they walked, Odin began to needle Harry, subtly insulting Harry for not marrying Hela, for the 'quaintness' of Camelot, and how he didn't seem able to instill order in the children. He even made fun of Harry using magic and his green eyes. But with Hela gently smacking the back of her hand against his, Harry didn't reply much, until they came to the waiting room where Carol and some of the others occasionally gathered for card games or darts.

Waving the aspect of Odin into the room, Harry kept a smile on his face with some difficulty, saying blandly, "Now, ask for a house-elf if you want anything. They should reply to you since you're magic-users but for the moment, please excuse me as I gather my people. We'll send for you when we're ready to address your request for help, Wanderer."

Huffing, the aspect of Odin marched over to one of the room's sofas and lay out out on it before Amora could even move to sit down, leaving his large, and extremely ratty boots towards the doorway.

Seeing Amora's clear look of revulsion at spending more time with the old man, Harry asked, "Would the lady prefer her own room?"

"Yes!" Amora answered immediately.

Tsk, it is as if you do not enjoy my company, Enchantress," Odin taunted.

"I don't. How is that even a question, meddler?" Amora shot back tartly. "You come into my life and upturn it with fell words and your mere presence and then ask me to continue to be polite to you? Well, I have no need of your blessings, your information and tales, so no, I will not torture myself further than I must."

So saying, Amora followed Harry out of the room as the Wanderer began to ask for mead and food.

"Is he trying to be annoying?" Harry questioned, confused by the aspect's attitude. "I don't remember him acting so abrasively when we crossed paths before." How that meeting had come about and under what circumstances would take too long to explain, and there was no need to at present.

To Harry's surprise, Amora and Hela nodded in the affirmative, with Hela going on. "Part of this personality is meant to be both helpful, wise, and yes, annoying. The better to test those he meets. A jarl who loses his temper to some old man's lack of manners or provocations is not worth Lord Odin's favor, and it is always in watching one treat those he thinks as lesser that you can take a leader's true merit."

"Huh, I don't seem to recall asking for his favor, as Amora said," Harry jested before leading Amora to another sitting area, this one an adult version of the sitting-room he had just stuck the aspect of Odin in. "Here. Drinks are in that cabinet over there. I would only ask that if you finish one of the bottles, have the courtesy to ask for a house-elf to come and replace it."

"As much as I would like to get drunk after the time I've had these past few days, I rather doubt now is the proper time for it. After, perhaps," Amora murmured. She paused, then looked over at Hela. "Lady Hela."

"Enchantress," Hela answered, nodding her head as something weird and feminine passed between them. *Acknowledgment maybe?*

"I think Amora's a bit jealous of Hela, love," Jean answered mentally, walking towards them slowly but surely. Beside her, Garm stalked, returning to his mistress's side now that she had returned from their aborted date. *"Remember she was interested in Doom, but he wanted a woman who was interested in being part of a dynasty, so to speak. Amora's not."*

"So like our own Emma then?" Harry replied in the same fashion, putting his arms around Jean lightly, caressing her stomach before looking over at Hela. The goddess was looking back the way they had come and had a pensive look on her face as she briefly touched Garm's nose. *"I'm not going to ask if you're alright, Hela. But what are you thinking?"*

"I... I do not know. I know that a part of me should be ecstatic right now. Another portion is terrified of facing Those Who Watch Above in Shadow. They have held all of the realms of Yggdrasil under their thrall for so long, including me and mine, that the idea of challenging them is hard to contemplate. The other aspect is that of the Ragnarök. The very name concerns me. It is supposed to be the end of everything, after all. Perhaps I'm feeling the shadow of past restarts, but it fills me with formless dread."

"Don't worry, love. We're going to beat them. We're going to send the Shadows running no matter what they throw at us." With that, Harry and Jean moved to hug Hela, giving her wordless reassurance before her sense of propriety, and Garm's smirk, drove her to gently push them away. Although, she was smiling as she did it and did not reject Jean's hand as it clasped hers immediately after.

Given their various duties and obligations, it took the rest of the day to for Harry's various officers and advisors to gather together, but eventually, they all convened in the Room of Requirement. Harry had a feeling that they might need the room's special properties at some point. There, Harry laid out what had happened and with the help of Hela and Ororo filled in those who weren't already in the know about the Shadows and their machinations before opening the floor to questions.

"Sort of a side issue I suppose, but it's bothering me a bit. How did they appear in the Savage Land? And what are the circumstances behind young Blink traveling with this... Odin?" Steve questioned.

And are we sure it is even really Odin? I would've thought that... well, I caught a glimpse of the elder when you arrived tovarisch To be honest, I had thought Odin would be much more impressive in person," Piotr admitted. *"And he does not match the wise, if quirky elder that Dani mentioned speaking to at the Asatru festival."*

"Agreed. While that old man's one-eyed stare was disconcerting, even to someone who's dealt with Nick Fury, I didn't get the sense of power from him I would've expected. Not like I get from you when you're not being careful, Hela," Steve stated, nodding his head towards her. He had arrived early and gone to meet the Wanderer for himself.

"Blink has no past as far as Dennis and I have been able to uncover," Sage answered, covering Steve's first questions. *"She's either fifteen or sixteen, judging by the physical Una conducted. We know she's Argentinian at least, but their birth records are appalling at the best of times."*

"I was able to dig up a few snippets of recorded video of someone matching her description. Most of them were video recordings taken from the sites of a few random break-ins, but that's about it, and she was never recorded as actually being involved. And, thanks to her age, the Big Book of Students is no help whatsoever. I checked," Dennis added, shaking his head. "On the other hand, that gang's gone belly up, and given the lack of paperwork, we can easily make her an Avalonian."

"I stopped in to speak with Clare when Emma told me this Wanderer had used a mutant to travel. Her mutant power is somewhat like Kurt's, only longer-range and more versatile. She's even been experimenting with some kind of weaponized version," Scott answered before his lips quirked. "Blink, she much prefers that name, also looked interested in Una's three-dimensional chess set and pestered me with questions about living in America and school. I think she's just a young girl caught up in things she didn't know much about. I also think that Professor Xavier and myself will be more than happy to put her up in the mansion after this. She'll fit in with Bobby and the rest of the second X-class very well."

"And before anyone asks about Amora, she's clearly involved in all of this quite against her better judgment. According to Amora, the other two just showed up in her apartment in Venice out of the blue, completely bypassing the wards and defenses she'd put up, and her emotions tell me she's not lying," Jean explained.

James Proudstar asked, "And how did they show up in the Savage Land of all places? You still have not said."

"When it comes to the Savage Land, we've always relied on being insanely hard to get to and it being hidden underground. Beyond a few wards designed predominantly to hide the place further from magical senses, I didn't think of adding specific wards to block teleportation. And even I would hesitate to try to use the Fidelius on the Savage Land, which is the spell which seems to have stopped Blink from popping into Camelot itself," Harry's lips quirked. "As for why the trio just showed up out of the blue so dramatically? Because it was dramatic."

There was a chorus of groans from around the table, and Steve, after facepalming, turned his attention towards Hela. "Is that normal? And you didn't answer Piotr's original question. Is that old man really Odin?"

When Hela spoke, her voice was dust dry. "Yes, it is very in keeping with the Wanderer aspect. When it is time to reveal his presence, Odin has about as much subtlety as a hammer to the nether regions. And I use the word **aspect** with aforethought. The Wanderer is **not** Odin, not really. He is rather an aspect of Odin, a part of his personality broken away to act on its own volition while given only vague goals. It is a sign of divinity that one can do so, and how often one is able to make these aspects depends upon how many you can contain."

"I have heard of this from Gaea, but I also noted that doing so comes with an extreme amount of risk," Ororo mused, while the others looked at one another in some shock at the

idea. "If the aspect of the divinity in question is destroyed, then the power devoted to that aspect is also lost, as well as that character of the aspect. I realize that Odin has both power and knowledge to spare, but that doesn't mean this is any less of a gamble."

"While I have no idea about the whole power or gamble or anything like that, let's call him Wander-Odin to differentiate from the original," Emma suggested.

Everyone nodded at that, then Harry decided to move things along. "I'm curious to know what happened on the Asgardian end of things that has made the Wanderer aspect, who has been on earth for more than a few months now, finally come and find us. Now, unless anyone has any question about the background of events here, I'll ask Wander-Odin to join us."

Questions flew at that point, mostly based on what had happened to Harry and Emma when they were attacked mentally by the Shadows. The two of them fielded those and when asked Hela admitted reluctantly that she would have been overcome by the telepathic assault if not for Emma's aid.

"But between us, Betsy, Jean, and I should be able to defend those around us from such mental assaults. Telepathic attacks lose some of their power when they're sent at a group rather than individuals," Emma opined, not taking the time to needle Hela about her weakness as she might have when they first met. Since then, while Emma and Hela were not lovers and did not find one another attractive, they had become close friends.

"Steven also suggested coming up with a ward scheme to defend against such. I've had time to put down a basic concept, but finishing it, testing it, and then mass production would take a bit, and honestly, I'm not really happy with even the basic design. But we're not going to run into this without a **lot** of prior planning," Harry ended firmly. "While I want to help the Asgardians, and Odin in particular for helping us free Hela, that doesn't mean we need to charge forward blindly."

Jean suggested asking Charles to come with them. "When it comes to telepaths, Charles could be a big help. There's also Father Garnoff, too and Xian at least, although I don't know if Garnoff would be willing to join us. He's a staunch pacifist these days, and after single-handedly running the Mutant Railroad in Russia, I can't blame him."

"We'd have to make certain they are protected at all times, but will come along if we ask, although it might take some convincing to get Charles to come along," Scott agreed.

Sage spoke up now, her voice tart as she interrupted the conversation. "I realize what I'm about to say won't be popular with you spandex-lovers, but why in the world are you all talking like it's a foregone conclusion we will stick our collective noses into this? From what you explained, there's only a small chance that even in the event of the Asgardians losing and this restart happening that it would affect Hela or even this Amora woman."

Sighing, Dennis nodded while Steve and Scott both looked angry at the very idea that the Custodes wouldn't become involved. "I agree with Sage. As much as I feel for the Asgardians and their plight, we cannot just go haring off on this latest quest, like Cervantes and his windmills. You, Lord Potter, are an Emperor now, with a quickly growing empire to run."

Reluctantly, John Proudstar raised his hand in agreement. "You all got away with it with Galactus and the Shi'ar since both represented threats that had to be investigated. This time, there's no such threat since the Shadows can't reach Earth. While a part of me wants to jump into this just as much as the rest of you, I feel the question must be asked, what's in it for us? For the Earth?"

Sage nodded his way, then looked at Harry and the people sitting around him. "You're not just a single citizen fighting the good fight anymore, Harry. You can't continue to think like one."

Harry stared back at her, while Steve began to argue that doing the right thing was its own reward and Ororo and Jean spoke up in favor of helping just because of the slim chance of a threat to Hela, who was glaring at the table in front of her, unwilling to speak up given her obvious bias. Emma reluctantly came in on the other side of the argument, citing their lack of information, the size of the challenge, and the fact that Harry and the other magicals would be the only ones to really be able to fight the Shadows rather than their pawns, which would leave them vulnerable.

Yet Harry heard none of it. No, as he stared back at Sage's cool, calculating expression, all he heard was his daughter's voice, Melody telling him about how his song was still that of a hero. Whatever else, that wouldn't change. Harry wouldn't let it change.

"No, I am not just a hero anymore, but that doesn't mean that I can't make this decision as one. Even if no one else wanted to go, I would want to. As Steve said, it's the right thing to do, and that part of my motivation will never change, no matter how inconvenient it might be for my empire building," Harry announced, his calm voice cutting through the tumult. "That doesn't mean I won't take advantage of the opportunity later to bring the Asgardians into an alliance with Earth, but even without that, I'd still get involved here. I won't demand any of you follow me into this though."

While Sage and the other nay-sayers subsided now that Harry had spoken, his words also won a round of supportive negatives and mutterings that highlighted that the majority of his officers were just as infected by the People Saving Thing disease as he was. And really, Harry wouldn't have had it any other way.

Eventually, the questions ended, and after a few last remarks about what a Fire Jotun's response to being frozen would be or the need to figure out what their various gun designs would do against them, Harry left, returning with the aspect in tow. Standing in front of the

room, Wander-Odin began without any preamble. Gone was his previous attitude, replaced by a more business-like mein that put Dani in mind of the old man she met at the Althing.

“As Lord Potter has told you all, I am here to ask for aid. Ages past, we Asgardians came under the control of the Shadows. How that happened is a tale in itself, but is not one that should take our time now. Since then, we have been used, manipulated, made to act out the various plays they wished to see us partake in. All the while our powers, emotions, even our very souls fed them. Only my original knew, and even then, so complete is that control that my original self could not consciously acknowledge their manipulations.”

“However, since Jarl Potter’s first interactions with Hela and Thor, my greater-self started to free himself. Not entirely, not even for any significant length of time, but my will is such that even a small shift of attention was enough to let me act,” Wander-Odin announced, his tone both grim and proud. “And at every moment, I plotted against them. When you fought to free Hela I was able to act at last. That was the moment Odin freed the Wanderer aspect of myself to move in his stead on Midgard in order to eventually get into contact with , Jarl Potter.”

“That was an extremely confusing summary and explained almost nothing,” John Proudstar murmured, causing both his brother and Cyclopes to nod in agreement.

“One of the strategies I set into motion sent Thor and several of his companions to seek out and kill one of the other tethers connecting the Shadows to our realms, the dread Níðhögr. They succeeded, further weakening the hold the Shadows have over my people. As slight as the extra freedom may be, my full self was able to reach out to me and update my orders so to speak. Since then, I have no doubt that the Shadows will have pressed even harder to keep my greater-self docile while also releasing the legions of Surtur. The time is ripe to free us; to destroy the remaining tethers and cut my people off from the Shadows. But, it is also a time of great danger for all of Asgard as they seek to wipe the board clear, to remove your influence among my folk.”

“That is easier said than done. We know that at least one of the other tethers will be Jörmungandr and if the Ragnarök is really their reset button, then it stands to reason Surtur will be their tool also. Neither are simple targets, to say the least. Which is to say nothing about my father, who might be another given how he has supposedly been so greatly twisted by them. Worse, he has seemingly disappeared to who knows where since falling off the Bifrost!” Hela answered tartly.

Stephen Strange shook his head. “Actually, from what I have studied of divinity, its agreements, and the impact to the divine in question concerning interfering influences, destroying the majority of the tethers should allow us to cut off the majority of the power the Shadows have been syphoning. That would, in turn, cause them to be susceptible to direct assault.”

“Or rather, indirect assault, considering we still wouldn’t be able to touch them with physical-type spellwork,” Clea demurred from where she sat next to the Sorcerer Supreme. The couple had been called in for advice on this score and thanks to her background, Clea had proven an invaluable addition to their magical corps. She had even already agreed to come along with the expedition, although like Amara and Dani, she hadn’t spoken up much prior to this point.

“Based on our past encounters, that could well be enough. But again, I’m not going in blind. I need to know everything you can tell me about the Shadows, their abilities, and most importantly, can they really be killed? Will they just reform from even a single tether? If that’s the case, this whole Ragnarök concept might be a trap.”

Storm nodded, agreeing with Harry’s points before adding, “And exactly what aid do you require of us beyond combating the Shadows? Odin is supposed to be powerful, wise, and clever. The Asgardians are a powerful people. What aid would you require of us to fight the Jotun and the other enemies you assume to be part of the Ragnarök? For I believe there are two different campaigns being planned out here, if not three.”

Hela and Harry glanced at Ororo, who shrugged and raised a finger for each point. “The Shadows themselves, their tethers, and the jotun, although I would prefer to deal with the jotun first.”

“Don’t forget a hunt, Lady Ororo,” Dani answered from where she sat on the ground, leaning against Garm where he lay next to Hela. There were more than enough chairs for her to have one, but Dani preferred to sit this way, even if it somewhat hid her from many of the other people in the room. “From what I remember, Tyr was supposed to lose his hand to Fenrir, and then Fenrir would eat Odin during Ragnarök, right? So we need to hunt him down and free him of whatever control the Shadows might have over him.”

Hela winced at that. While she had no love for Jörmangandr, she did hold some sisterly affection towards Fenrir. “That would be most helpful indeed. If the Shadows are perchance constrained to act within the limits of their own chosen scenario, then naught but my younger brother will be able, or perhaps the more apt term should be allowed, to harm Lord Odin.”

“Indeed, there are three campaigns to be fought. But even more importantly than severing the remaining tethers, we must stop the invasion from Muspellheim. If we do not, my people will continue to suffer and die, and even if we can then drive off the Shadows, it will not bring them back. Who knows how many hundreds of my people have already died, waiting for aid to arrive. That facet will be further exasperated by the night elves. They might not be willing pawns of the Shadows like Surtur, but they certainly hate my people and will no doubt join in the war.”

Wander-Odin spread his arms wide, a bright, eager grin appearing through his beard. “Next to that is the task of slaying the tethers on hand, Jörmangandr and the one assumed to

be set into Surtur. And we must take the fight to the Shadows themselves however we may. Truly, it is a feat worthy of the gods!”

Rolling his eyes at this dramatic display, Harry crossed his arms, staring at Wander-Odin. “That’s all well and good, but I’m not going to agree to help you or put any of my people in danger without fully understanding Those Who Watch Above in Shadow and their abilities. Not even if it makes you uncomfortable.”

Wincing as that shot hit home, Wander-Odin reluctantly agreed. Truly, the initial agreement with Those Who Watch Above in Shadow did not paint Odin in a good light. He had been practically duped in the end, despite his brother Loki speaking out against the agreement. Even his own attempt to protect himself against betrayal hadn’t worked at all until recently.

In contrast, Loki’s own attempts to free his wife had worked... for a given value. While the woman’s soul, and thus the key to freeing Loki, remained missing, Wander-Odin knew that her body had been recovered by Jarl Potter and his coterie. He could even sense Sigyn’s physical form somewhere in this very castle. In stasis but protected instead of hidden.

In actually, Sigyn’s soul had also been found, hiding within Danielle’s bloodline. However, freeing it and returning it to its body was an entirely different matter. And since Wander-Odin aspect was not a part of Odin’s personality that had much to do with magical theory, no one had considered talking to him about it.

“Furthermore, and not to put a damper on this heroic nonsense, but how are we even going to get into Asgard? The last time, Harry used his connection to Yggdrasil and that trinket that you dropped off for him to cross the dimensional divide. But since then, the Shadows have cut off all access to Asgard and its surrounding pocket dimensions,” Emma drawled.

Wander-Odin scowled, not appreciating the pocket dimension crack and unwilling to admit that Asgard, and indeed all aspects of Yggdrasil, were but a side dimension to the ‘real’ realm where Earth resided. Even so, he still had an answer for her question. “The girl I brought with me, Blink. Her ability can practically ignore most magical defenses, at least the magic of this dimension. She might not have been able to teleport herself to this place, or up to your asteroid fortress, despite the existence of both being public knowledge, but I know she will be able to help us cross the divide and get past the defenses the Shadows have raised.”

While Harry had informed the world about Camelot, Babylon, and High Note, he had only explained *what* they were, not *where* they were. Thus the Fidelius continued to keep information about their specific locations hidden to those he hadn’t personally told.

Harry frowned, thinking. “In conjunction with the teleportation array that we created to do the jobs before, that’s certainly possible. Then he sighed, shaking his head at Wander-Odin. “But noow for the tale of the Shadows, their abilities, and everything else you can tell me about them and the remaining anchors.”

The debrief took some time, and unfortunately when it came to the abilities of the Shadows, didn't tell Harry anything that he, Emma, and Hela hadn't already deduced from their initial run-in with them. The Shadows worked best through the mind, through illusion and trickery. They also had a few spells to attack the soul; to siphon energy off of them and to change a person's personality if the individual's soul was weakened. Oddly, if a person didn't have magic, they couldn't actually use that method, as it was the individual's own magic that was used to power the spell. They also had powers over teleportation that made Blink or Nightcrawler appear limited by comparison, but only within the realms under their purview.

And they had power over the cycle that they had stuck the Asgardians in, hence why Wander-Odin was concerned that his people's time might soon come to an end. If that happened, the power the Shadows took from the Asgardian's cyclical deaths would be enough to recreate their tethers and return all the Asgardians, mentally, to a time of their own choosing. "This would include Hela and Amora, even if they both remain here on Earth. How they would be recalled, so to speak I know not as even my greater-self does not have any idea, but it is certain"

Worse than even that horrible thought was the fact that thanks to Surtur having willingly become their tool, the Shadows could use aspects of the never-ending cycle of rebirth and Ragnarök to maintain the numbers of the Fire Jotun at a set total. That ability would make the war against them extremely difficult, even if it would take time for them to recreate the jotun's numbers. The fact the other jotun races would no doubt join in for the hell of it was also quite annoying.

"We might need to consider asking for volunteers among the orbital drop troopers. Battles as large as the ones that could be occurring even now in Asgard could be too spread out for just the Custodes and the X-Men alone to deal with," Ororo murmured mentally, to Harry's rueful agreement.

However, the knowledge that Wander-Odin aspect had been given in what amounted to the infodump that had set him into action was much more welcome. Harry was pleased to hear that Thor had found his gauntlets and Níðhöggr was dead...until the Shadows won and the current cycle ended anyway. Still, this both removed a target from the board and added to the Asgardian's potential strength. Wander-Odin also knew of Jörmungandr's strength and abilities, and had a very good idea of Surtur's

But the tale about the death of Níðhöggr raised another question that Clea voiced. "Why in the world did the Shadows allow that kind of conflict to even occur? Their strength is in illusions, in mind games. Surely Thor and his band would've been extremely susceptible to such?"

"They would have been yes, if not for the Faith from the Asatru reaching Thor and Skadi. Obviously, I do not know the full tale, but I know that when empowered by the Faith of those Asatru who ask for their aid, my people become far stronger mentally and physically. If

empowered thusly, one such as Skadi would not be fooled by any manner of illusions. Not forever, at any rate,” Wander-Odin answered, giving only a vague answer, although Harry and the other magic-savvy listeners knew that was not his fault. This aspect of the Sky Father did not have much to do with magic and so ultimately lacked Odin’s mastery of its mysteries and its impact on divinity in general.

While Dani blinked, wondering if her own prayers to Skadi had helped the goddess in some fashion, Hela unabashedly stared, her lower face showing incredulity below her half-mask. “How does that connection still exist!? Helheim and I are completely cut off from the other realms of Yggdrasil, but I know full well I have gained power from the Asatru of Earth and over the dead as well, even those who died in battle. But as Helheim and I are cut off, so too should the power of belief not be able to pass the interdiction between Midgard and Asgard.”

“I can answer that, I think,” Gaea said, suddenly appearing in the cleared zone at the head of the room.

Harry and the others all stood respectfully greeting the goddess, with Ororo, Dani and Hela both bowing while Harry and the rest simply nodded their heads, which she took with a smile. For his part, Wander-Odin smiled under his beard. “Lady Gaea, you still are as gorgeous as ever.”

“And you are both older and yet still a shameless flirt. I would have thought ages of wedded bliss would have cured you of that,” Gaea answered with a droll eyeroll, shaking her head before turning away from the aspect and back to the gathering. “The connection remaining between Earth and Asgard is due to Thor and myself. You see, Thor is my son. Long ago, Odin and I came to an agreement that we needed to create a stronger God who would hopefully be able to aid him and the other Sky Fathers from the various pantheons in protecting Earth against the Celestials.”

Hearing how clinical Gaea spoke in regards to basically breeding a child for the express purpose of becoming a weapon Ororo and several others winced, although given what they knew of Celestials none of them said anything. Meanwhile, Harry ground his teeth at the same mention. Even now, he could all too clearly remember his run-in with one in the Negative Zone. That run-in had culminated in Harry using one of his Bloody Insane spells, fleeing the scene, and then hoping he’d killed the creature that at the time he’d had no name for.

Harry also grimly remembered how the Celestials had been behind the creation of the Dementors in this universe, and subsequently the deaths of all wizard-kind. The Celestials had named wizard-kind a failed experiment and had moved to liquidate them without mercy or recourse. It had actually been discovering that horror which had told Harry there was a whole race of the bastards.

“This connection, for obvious reasons, creates a permanent link between Earth and Thor. Due to that, the power of belief was still able to flow into his direct vicinity,” Gaea went on,

acknowledging the looks shock in her audience before locking gazes with Hela. “That power became stronger when Hela initially tore Helheim away from the rest of the Asgardian pocket dimensions for some reason. Much of the power of belief is... for want of a better word, still splashing around the hole made in the barrier, but some of it still gets through.”

She smiled over at Dani. “In this case, I believe the Faith of Skadi’s worshippers was what made the difference.”

While that made some sense to the others, Hela’s shock stemmed from far more than just how Gaea was being so detached about the process of having a child or the discovery that Thor and those around him could still be so empowered. “Does Queen Freya know of the affair? If not... well, it honestly might not matter overmuch now, but in the future, it could matter a great deal in Asgard. Their marriage is what ended the war between the Vanir and the Aesir, and since then, their oaths were supposed to make certain they were faithful to one another.”

Wander-Odin looked a little shifty, but Gaea answered in the affirmative with no prevarication, causing him to stare at her in shock. “Yes, Freya does know, although she was called Frigga at the time, and their marriage was newly formed and without issue. She and I even met to discuss the possibility. I knew Freya would know the instant her husband betrayed her, much like Hera did when that philanderer was still active. But unlike Hera, Freya would react by ending their marriage entire, which would have indeed resulted in the resumption of war between the Aesir and Vanir.”

Gaea sighed, remembering that meeting from ages past as she shook her head. “Freya is an extremely sharp woman, do not make the mistake of underestimating her because she is known as a goddess of love as well as war. Once I made it clear I was not interested in usurping her position among the Aesir and Vanir, Freya was quite understanding of the need... so long as I agreed that she could rear the child without interference on my part, which at the time was a bitter decision. And that her own child would become the next King. But given what we were asking, to allow her husband to step outside of their vows, it seemed a fair trade.”

She looked over at the wide-eyed Wander-Odin, sneering a little. Normally she wouldn’t have shown her distaste like this, but of all the facets of Odin’s personality, Wander-Odin, was the one Gaea disliked the most. Not only was it the one used to foment challenges (wars) among Jarls, but it was also the aspect he used to sleep with goddesses and greater jotun both. “I see you’re shocked, but you should not be. You were a good king, an excellent leader, and a fine warrior. But as a man, as a husband, you did not think of your wife as often as you should have when making plans for the future.”

While many of the women in the room were somewhat amused by that minor dressing down, Harry tapped the table, grabbing everyone’s attention. “I think there are still some parts of this we need to discuss. For example, while a piece of me is more than willing to throw myself into this, and I’m certain that many of my Custodes feel the same, I’m **not** willing to lead

regular soldiers into something like this without a payoff in the future. Are you able to make agreements that will be binding to your greater self?"

"No." Wander-Odin groused, looking a little put-out at Gaea's words, but answering readily enough. "I can only request for help. You will have to make any agreements or treaties with my greater self."

That caused many of Harry's 'non-hero type' advisors to narrow their eyes, but Harry only looked around, seeing that a majority of those gathered were still in favor of intervening. Steve and Piotr, in particular, looked determined, and Harry exchanged nods with the two men before turning back to Wander-Odin.

"Very well. We will put a pin in that for later the future, but for now, more information about what we might find on the ground, so to speak. What can you tell us about the numbers of the Fire Jotun, the other jotun races, the night elves and their abilities? Have you had time to study modern weaponry? If so, can you tell us what can and won't work on them? I've fought the fire jotun, so I know their capabilities to a certain degree. But what about the others? What can you tell us about the terrain? And what do you think we will find when we transport in, in terms of your greater self's response to the Shadows assault?"

Wander-Odin nodded in respect at the breadth of the young Jarl's request for information. While he was not the Warlord, Wander-Odin still had enough knowledge of tactics and terrain to understand the importance of what Harry was asking. So he simply nodded and then began to speak, asking politely if someone would be able to enchant a map to match his words. Then the real planning session began.

Much like his refusal to go into the forthcoming campaign blind, Harry refused to go into it without prior preparation. Given the size of the disaster that Wander-Odin had hinted they might be facing, an all-out war that could be scattered across a realm of an unknown size, such precautions were only common sense.

While Steve and Scott were moving through the interactive map Wander-Odin and the Asgardian ladies had put together, asking all manner of strategic and combat-related questions, Harry began to prepare another side of the mission by asking Ororo, Kitty, and Clea to work on the transportation aspect with Blink. Since they would be working on a pre-existing array that had worked previously, that gave them a good foundation to work with, freeing Harry and Steven to work on other tasks.

"While I would dare not gainsay any aspect of Odin when it comes to guileful plans, young Blink's powers are a relative unknown, something we need to see to," Hela announced, standing from her seat. "Between myself, Amora, you, and Wander-Odin, we should be able to create the anchor we need, but we are placing the use of that anchor on Clare's thin shoulders. I would rather like to make certain we know what we are doing there."

“Agreed. Scott, could you call in Kurt?” Harry called, getting the X-men field commander’s attention, causing him to look up from where he had been pointing out something to Steve on the map. “We might need his expertise.”

Scott nodded, then stated, “I’m fully behind getting involved in this conflict Harry, but I still want to leave a small team under either John or someone else we can trust just in case of trouble with the anti-mutant terrorists in America.” His slightly chapped lips curled under his red-tinted glasses as he shook his head. “Or the opposite. We’re still seeing a lot of recruitment for pro-mutant groups, smaller and less organized than the opposition, but we don’t want either extreme able to cause trouble, so it’s best to have a team ready to act at all times.”

Harry thought about that for a moment, then nodded. “Good idea. You’ve trained up Bobby, Warren, Jubilee, and the one code-named Boom-Boom, right?” When Scott nodded, Harry went on. “In that case, ask Laynia to work with the team while we’re gone, she’ll add more firepower and another flyer. And we’ll have James step up to a full leadership position.”

Not only would Warpath add a strongman to the team, but just like his older brother, James had some decent leadership abilities. Although he hadn’t previously been given any dependent command like Thunderbird had in Genosha, this would be a good opportunity to see how well he did, and he would have Sage and Pinoptes to call on if need be.

“Good thinking,” Piotr agreed, not at all annoyed to be passed over for the leadership role while James and John blinked, both surprised and pleased the younger brother would have a chance to shine. For Piotr, this meant he would be involved in the real action this time, not left behind as he had for the mission to fight Galactus. Then he gestured to the map. “I also think, even with both teams aboard for this, we might be looking at being spread too thin. If we’re going to be fighting these Fire Jotun as Wander-Odin believes, it is far too much ground to cover.”

"Your young friend is right, I am afraid. If Jörmungandr, the night elves, the stone jotun or some combination thereof join in, and they will if the Shadows have launched Ragnarök, then you will be faced with multiple enemies spread out across a wide area," Wander Odin warned.

Gesturing down to the small laptop he had been using to take notes during the discussion with the being so named, Harry responded, “I already made an appointment to talk with the Falcon. I’m going to be asking for volunteers among his cadre of Orbital Drop Marines.”

For a moment, Wander-Odin looked askance at the term Orbital Drop, possibly not understanding the nomenclature, but he still nodded in approval. “Marines, those are troops trained for ship boarding action, yes? Very brave and strong?”

“Originally. Since then, the term marine has been used to generally indicate troops trained for point defense and assault. They don’t have the staying power of the army, but they

do have a bigger individual punch which is magnified by the ODMs' training and gear," Harry explained.

"I'll be sure to mention that you don't think marines have staying power to any of them that I meet," Scott said dryly, causing Steve to snort and Harry to roll his eyes. But then he stood up and moved to the map, frowning as he knelt next to it, gazing at the terrain and joining the discussion there.

That discussion took the better part of that night, and Harry had to schedule his discussion with Sam for the next afternoon, after a morning spent meeting with Dr. Richards and the Fantastic Four. More firepower was always a good thing, after all.

But Reed had no interest in joining this operation and said so, interrupting Harry's explanation by shaking his head firmly. "I need to spend time with my wife and son, Harry. In fact, with your permission, we'll probably be moving into your castle sometime rather soon. Franklin's powers are beginning to manifest more often, and Madame Harkness is starting to have trouble coping, even with that magnificent house-elf you asked to work with her helping."

Susan nodded, looking a little harried. "Without that little lass, we'd have all been run ragged by now. Franklin somehow seems to know he can do things beyond the norm but hasn't learned enough to realize when he shouldn't do so or what the term 'no' means in relation to him."

"I'm certain the house elves will love to have a toddler around the place. And I did agree to train Franklin in his powers at Camelot when it became time to do so," Harry agreed, belatedly remembering that he hadn't actually read any of the Fantastic Four into the secrets of Camelot. They could come and go through the runic doorways if someone else opened the far end, or have someone else teleport them, but they had no more idea where Camelot really was than what the environment outside the castle's battlements and windows could tell them.

"Bah, just because Stretcho wants to have some family time don't mean we won't join you, Harry," Benjamin said, speaking up from where he'd been leaning against a wall watching the discussion between leaders. Johnny and Thundra nodded in firm agreement.

The young woman sitting next to Johnny, however, had been a surprise when he'd first arrived. After a moment, Harry had vaguely recognized her as one of the Inhumans. Indeed, she was the one he, Scott, Jean and the FF had rescued from some kind of demon summoner going on a little under a year ago. She appeared young, with honey-colored hair tied up with wide ribbons, wearing a yellow and black striped outfit. "And you, Miss? I'm sorry, but I'm pants with names at the best of times, although I know we've met a few times before and that you're an Inhuman. Something that begins with C, yes?"

"Er, yes, Mr.—er, that is, Lord Potter, my name is Crystal," Crystal stammered, wondering how to address the young man barely a few years older than herself and Johnny but who had become such an important leader of both heroes and men. "U-um, I... I would have to

ask, but as my King, Lord Blackbolt, has finally agreed to open discussions with you at last, I think I might be allowed? At the moment, my lord and his advisors are still debating on what we will ask for and would be willing to trade in return. But we've all come to agree that eventually, the dimensional wall protecting us from the outside world will need to come down, and we will need to interact with the universe at large."

While internally doing backflips in delight at having yet another group to ally with, Harry outwardly kept calm, responding to this sudden bombshell with only a slight tilt of the head. "If you all wish to keep your nation's location a secret, that's fine. I won't pry into your internal matters. What I really want is to make an agreement with the Inhumans, a mutual defense treaty, as well as a trade and research agreement."

Crystal nodded but stated that she didn't have any authority to agree to any of that. However, Crystal did promise she would put Harry's words in her report after her current mission was over.

Harry's meeting with the Falcon went slightly better, except when they spoke about material needs. "I'm more than happy to let you ask for volunteers Harry, but if you want us to be our most effective, we're gonna need more suits, boots, and guns. I've got four companies of Orbital Drop Marines training pretty well at this point, with three more regiments of volunteers or transferees, whatever the term ya want to use, starting training soon. But not enough gear yet to kit them all out at once."

Watching Sam wave one hand almost manically in emphasis of that point, Harry looked around the man's office, smirking slightly at the amount of paperwork scattered around the place. *I'll have to remember to get him a secretary.* "The ones waiting are the Russian Naval Infantry, French Foreign Legion, and so forth. But on top of the gear shortage we don't have enough materials or a large enough training zone on Fortress Mars to get them up to snuff right now."

"I'll sit down with General Murphy and devote some of the construction droids to mining out a larger area. Sorry, I didn't realize that you were running into that issue. Did you pass on a report about it?" Sam's silence was telling, and Harry chuckled. "Yes, you definitely need a secretary. For now, I'll order Forge 2 to start building up your munitions and gear. But first, let me make my appeal for volunteers, yeah?"

Sam rolled his eyes but agreed. *As if any of this lot will ever say no if Potter asks them to do something. Harry really doesn't know how popular he is among the common troopers, does he?* Regardless of his personal feelings on the subject though, Sam still sent out an order for his ODM troopers to report to the atrium for an announcement.

About twenty minutes later, Harry stared out across the crowd that was now scattered around the atrium. This was the same atrium that Harry had shown the delegates from Earth several months ago, and while it wasn't at capacity by any means, it was still fuller than it had

been then when only one of the atrium's many platforms had been in use. *But we created it for a reason, and the acoustics plus a little magic should mean that everyone hears me well enough. Whether or not they like what I say, that's up to them.*

"Gentlemen and ladies," Harry said, drawing the attention of the crowd of would-be Orbital Drop Marines to him. Not all of them were male, a distinguishing fact for the nascent military force. At present there were a few dozen women among the crowd, and that number was only projected to grow.

"Good afternoon. For those of you who haven't met me personally, I'm Harry Potter." There was a chorus of laughter from the crowd, even the Russians, and Harry smiled wanly. He didn't let himself think about it often, but he knew that he was possibly the most famous person in the world right now and was only happy that it was because of Magical Minds and what the Custodes had done, rather than, as it had been in his home dimension, something his parents had done which he had gotten the undeserved accolades for.

"Yes, I know that's a sad way of starting this conversation, but for an icebreaker, it works," Harry drawled, causing another small chuckle to ripple around the atrium. "However, it's time to be a little serious. When I signed off on this unit, I mandated in its charter that the Oh Damns would not be used to settle terrestrial conflicts, only to fight extraterrestrial threats that made their way to Earth. That is still the case. However, a crisis has arisen on a... different battlefield, so to speak. Let me tell you about the Asgardians."

He waited for a tic, letting the murmurs settle before he went on. "You might have seen Hela around or remember Thor and Balder from months back. Or you might have heard of the Gods of the Vikings. Or perhaps, you might even know someone who follows the Asatru faith. But regardless of if you have heard of them before, the Asgardian gods are real. And they are under attack."

From there, Harry outlined once again what they knew about Those Who Watch Above in Shadow and what Wander-Odin had passed on about what might be occurring in his homeland: the start of Ragnarök, the invasion of the Fire Jotun, and the planned destruction of Asgard. Of the thousands of people reborn there in an endless cycle, facing death once more along with their leaders.

"That's why I'm going." Harry flashed a wry smile. "I'm a hero. I have a people-saving thing. It's sort of par for the course. However, given the size of this war, the Custodes will need help. So I'm asking for volunteers. Volunteers to help me take the fight to the jotun and the Shadows' other tools. That is why I am here today. But hark, I hear you ask, what's in it for Earth? Why should we get involved? Well, for that, I have to turn to my lovely assistant Polaris."

Lorna, in her Polaris uniform, waved at the crowd from nearby, holding up a gleaming sword in her other hand. "She'll be going from one platform to another. Anyone who wants to test out that sword is welcome to on the granite and metal blocks you'll find prepared for you.

But suffice it to say that the Asgardians have some interesting metallurgical abilities, and we had a trade agreement with them before the Shadows forced a shut down of our shared dimensional borders. That kind of thing could be very interesting to add to your battle rattle, wouldn't it?" Harry quipped. "To say nothing of what that kind of metal could mean for everything else."

He fell silent as dozens of men and a few women did take up the challenge. Harry heard the interest rise as the challengers tried out the sword against the prepared targets one after another. Watching it punch through concrete or granite and slice into Kree battle steel was impressive, to say the least.

When those gathered settled down once more, Harry continued. "Make no mistake, I am not ordering you into this battle. I am asking for volunteers. If you want no part in this, there will be no onus on you. There will be no recrimination. Not officially, and not unofficially. I will come down like the hammer of doom on anyone who tries to push someone else into this fight when they don't believe it's in their own best interest or the interest of Earth. Volunteers, I said, and willing ones. But we need to start tooling up for this, so I will need a list by the end of the day. Talk it over amongst yourselves. If you have them call your wives... ah, your wives *or* your husbands," he corrected, glancing towards a few of the women who rolled their eyes. "Think it through. Don't make a hasty decision, one way or the other. Thank you for listening. And as always, thank you for your service."

"And speaking of service," Harry said a moment later as he exited the atrium, already having heard the sounds of loud discussions within from the various platforms, "Are you sure you want to come along? It's been a while since you've seen actual combat, Lorna."

"I'll be training with Shiang Chi in Camelot for as long as I can until we leave, but yeah, I want to join this mission. I like Hela, and the idea that if the Asgardians lose, something could happen to her even if she's here on Earth just because she's one of them? It's a little horrifying. I don't understand the whole mystical magic mumbo-jumbo, but I understand that at least."

Lorna continued talking quietly to Harry for a few moments before several people came out of the atrium. Harry recognized them as unit commanders. He even recognized a few from before they'd become Orbital Drop Marines, including Sean. Each of them held out a data slate to Harry, and as he read off the names, Harry's eyes widened in surprise.

And that surprise was completely genuine, Lorna thought to herself with a bit of amused exasperation. Harry really hadn't thought that many people would sign up. He honestly didn't understand how popular he was personally among the troops or among military men in general.

After a moment, Harry shook his head wryly and thanked Sean and the others before doing something on the slates and handing them back. "I just authorized a wage hike to five times the normal amount for the duration of this operation. You all just volunteered to be heroes instead of soldiers, and I think you should be paid like them."

“Why didn’t you mention that before?!” Sean squawked in shock. While money wasn’t really important to him, he knew that his men had been very pleased with the wages they’d already received during their training. But this? The amount he was reading on the data slate this second? It would make them all very rich indeed.

“If I had to buy your service, you wouldn’t be worth the price. The pay is necessary, but it can’t be your motivation. Not in this,” Harry answered, slapping Sean on the shoulder before turning away.

From there, Harry moved to talk to General Murphy. He spoke about the need for more training zones for the ODMs and then spoke about the campaign to come, asking for advice. The General’s opinion came quickly and vociferously.

“You haven’t allowed for enough logistics!” Murphy barked, banging on his desk crossly. “We’re getting well ahead of the curve here on Fortress Mars, but the ODMs are still new and just don’t have enough material built up. You’ll need more rounds, more guns, more parts, more everything. You’re envisioning this as what, a single, sharp battle?”

“We have no idea,” Harry said with a shrug. “Wander-Odin thinks we’ll be arriving in the middle a long campaign, but how long it lasts after we arrive will be up to how many jotun they can field at any one time and how effective our forces are against them. Only myself, Helen, Garm, and Emma have even fought jotun before. They’re tough to kill, magically resistant, massively strong, and immensely durable. But they *can* be killed.”

In fact, Harry knew at that very minute Jean was running tests in the Room of Requirement on what weapons worked best against the Fire Jotun. Garm was helping her, and it was hoped the duo would have some results in the next few days.

“Did you tell the men what they’re getting into?” Murphy questioned, frowning. “I heard the trainees were called into the atrium for something.”

Harry nodded. “I have. The majority volunteered.”

“Good. You’ve got perhaps the best reputation among fighting men that any government leader has ever had Harry, even if we go back to ancient times. Don’t waste it. Now, let’s see what we can do to fix your fucked up logistics train. First, we need to turn over more of our construction droids to prepare these weapons. And could we use those weird time enhancement chambers? That could really help speed things up, pun intended.”

Setting up the logistics side of things, correctly, took up the rest of that day with Harry leaving Jean and Carol in charge of that aspect once Jean’s experiments were done. Thankfully, Sam and Carol had already put together a pair of armor styles for the Orbital Drop Marines. They just had to put them into production with the changes Jean would recommend as a result of her studies.

The next day, Harry went back to the Savage Land, not alas, to troll the local council of Prefects but to talk to Logan. Eventually, he and his daughter agreed to join the amassing might of the Custodes.

Laura was actually eager for an adventure. She'd spent most of the time since Harry had conquered the Savage Land there. It had been fun, and she was nowhere near done exploring, but there was a difference between exploring-adventure and going to war. This sounded like something she could really sink her claws into. Having been to war before, Logan was more reluctant and hoped this wouldn't turn into a real, drag-out conflict. Not to mention he still have to talk to Shanna and Fatale.

The next one Harry called in was Forge, followed by Tony. As much as he and Tony had clashing personalities, Harry knew the inventive genius could be a major aid on the logistical side of things.

To his surprise, Tony volunteered easily and even went further. "I want in on the actually going into Asgard part too."

"I thought you were only reluctantly Iron Man," Harry answered with a faint smile. "Or is this the adrenaline junkie in you?"

"Probably a bit of both frankly," Tony readily admitted. "But let's face facts. You're going to go into a primitive environment, and you're going to need an armory and a factory set up on the ground to deal with any repairs to the Oh Damns' equipment. You might be bringing in loads of parts and guns, but there's a big difference between that and having someone there in place to see to all of your needs. And my Iron Man suit is still leagues better than even your Ghigau and Coyote suits, let alone any mass-produced model I've seen."

Harry sighed but nodded. "All right. You'll be involved in the main war against the Fire Jotun. And you'll be answering to Falcon and Steve for the most part. No offense Tony, but I don't want you in a position of command outside of logistics."

"Fine, fine," Tony answered breezily. "I never wanted to be in charge of any of your teams anyway. Sounds far too much like work in my opinion. Tell me, old boy, are you losing any hair yet? With all the balls you've got in the air, you're going to go bald before your time."

Rolling his eyes, Harry didn't respond to Tony's taunt, not seeing the point, and hung up. Knowing that the logistics of the oncoming war were now in good hands, he headed down to help out on the magical side of things. After all, the array that would help them get to Asgard, or rather Yggdrasil, wasn't the only magical aid they would need. "Cory."

There was a pop, and Cory, Harry's house elf aide-de-camp, appeared beside him. The little creature ran beside Harry to keep up before Harry slowed down to let him walk instead. "Master calls for Cory?"

“Hmm. If you could find Dr. Druid for me? And have him join me up in High Note? He and I will be working on a little project in the time capsule. I was also hoping you would come with us to bring along supplies. Specifically, we need a sand table and food.”

“Yes, Master, Cory will be pleased to serve,” Cory responded instantly, and Harry smiled in reply. But his eyes had already taken to staring over Cory’s head, already thinking about the task in front of them. This mission was going to take a lot of prep time, and that might be the easiest part of it...

OOOOOOO

Despite Thor’s fury at Volstagg’s fate and the sadness of his death, the Thunderer and his companions were not people who could remain sad or angry for long. As the days' hard travel up Yggdrasil continued, Hogun was the only one to remain grim-faced. Soon Tyr, Thor, and even Fandral returned to joking and laughing, delighting in the fact they had succeeded in such a momentous quest. The death of their friend was a comparatively small price to pay for such a magnificent adventure as they’d recently had. Níðhöggr was such an opponent that it would not have been surprising if they had lost far more than just one of their companions.

Soon they reached the limb where they had originally landed within Yggdrasil’s boughs. Seeing as they had basically floated down from Asgard’s outermost mountainside however, the group spent the rest of what they considered a day climbing higher up the World Tree to perform the same trick going the other way. When they finally found a bough both long enough and high enough to allow them to make the leap between the dimensions, the Asgardians ate the last of their supplies, rested for a time, and then, with Thor leading them, marched out towards the edge of the branch.

Thor led the way, leaping across the dimensional gap from the bough that overlooked the mountains of Asgard closest to where the two dimensions met. For a moment, he was in freefall, nothing but an endless blackness around him, then he pierced the bubble of air encompassing Asgard.

A moment later, he landed lightly on his feet, grimacing slightly at the effort of the leap, then blinked as he saw several spears of black metal and stone being hurled his way. “What manner of ill luck!?” He bellowed, using his hammer to smash the spears aside, the swing creating a hurricane of force that shattered the spears. “Or perhaps foul design, as I do see Fire Jotun here along with Stone Jotun. Regardless, all of you will feel Mjollnir’s wrath!”

The jotun had created a perfect ambush point around the area where travel between Asgard and Yggdrasil was possible. A dozen stone jotun were hidden in small carved out holes in the mountain, having used their magic to mold such, and were now firing towards Thor. At least ten fire jotun were hidden behind primitive wooden walls while hurling spears. Still more just charged forward, eagerly bellowing their war cries.

“Have at you then!” Thor shouted back, charging to meet them. With the power of his gauntlets, no jotun beyond Surtur could close to matching him in pure strength, and he barreled into the first group of ambushers to try and close with him, knocking them aside like they weighed nothing.

One stone jotun died to a blow to the head from Mjollnir, which he then whirled around in an arc to crash into the chest of another, hurling him sideways and off into the air between the dimensions where he was not nearly so lucky as to land among the boughs of the World Tree. Not that it would have mattered, as his chest had been caved in like thin tinfoil.

A fireball hurled his way from a fire jotun caught Thor on the back, searing his clothing sending him stumbling, that was all. Thor’s Gauntlets of Power didn’t just heighten the strength of his arms but the rest of his body as well, adding to his already formidable durability. The blow might have scorched his shirt, but that was all.

More serious than those flames was the black metal spear thrust into his side, which tore through Thor’s already battered armor like butter. Luckily, he was already turning, and the spear skittered across his ribs rather than striking him dead on. The opportunistic attacker died an instant later to a kick which ruptured his insides and hurled him backward, magma blood gushing out of his mouth as he rolled among the snow and stone.

Then Sif and Tyr were there, having hurled themselves across the dimensional gap as one. They landed in the space that Thor’s charge had won them, swords flashing down and slaying any jotun he had already bulled over. After a second spent regaining their bearings, the duo moved forward, engaging the enemy, forging a path towards their friend. Behind them came the others, and when the Warriors Two hurled themselves into the fight, the name of their rotund friend was on their lips. “For brave Volstagg!”

With Thor at their head, the friends formed a tight wedge, charging towards the enemy’s archers. Unlike Thor, they were not immune to their enemies' weapons and needed to get in among those archers quickly before they became pincushions.

As they close, the jotun behind the wooden walls lit their barriers on fire. The simple structures seemed to have been coated with some alchemical product, perhaps even the jotun’s own magma-like blood, which after it cooled left a kind of rubbery, gelatinous muck behind. Very flammable muck.

Whatever the case, the jotun smashed the walls from behind, sending the burning logs towards the Asgardians. But Thor simply bellowed in laughter, smashing the two closest logs to flinders. “Burning logs!? Truly? You think that will stop us!?”

“Speak for yourself, thoughtless one!” Skadi shouted, from behind the others. of all the warriors there, Skadi was the least durable.

The fires truly must have had something added to them though, as they burned both a dark red and a toxic-looking green. Skadi and the others could actually feel the heat off of them. The other Asgardians flinched back while Sif and Hogun were burned as a few stray splinters landed on them, both of whom hissed in pain, retreating.

Seeing that, Thor took a step back, letting Hogun and Fandral guard him for a moment. Both took wounds from the archers but could keep the jotun in front of them at bay. This let Thor twirl Mjollnir above his head, bellowing to the sky as he called upon his powers over the weather.

Soon a heavy rain began to fall, dampening the fires, the unnatural flames sizzling in the downpour so loudly it almost drowned out the sound of the continuing battle. And as those flames were dampened, the Asgardians leapt over the still-hot coals, charging forward towards the jotun archers.

Yet the state of their equipment and the lack of shielding began to tell, injuries abounding. The Asgardians' armor had been ruined or lost during the battle against Níðhöggr. On top of that, more than one of them was wounded at this point with Tyr and Sif still nursing injuries from that dread battle.

And yet, for all that, Skadi could only stare in shock at the number of dead that littered the field, watching as Thor, undaunted, continued to swing his hammer, slaying with each blow, hurling bodies aside as if they were mere chattel. The others were not nearly as deadly, the loss of weapons hampering their progress, and Fandral was limping badly from a long gash in his thigh that went from hip to knee. Despite that, Tyr came close to Thor's lethality, and he and Hogun went about their business in the same grim, professional manner. Their blade and mace might lack the power of Mjollnir, but the two had skill enough to attempt to close the gap.

"And here is me, without any arrows to my name," Skadi grimaced. She hadn't been able to pull any of her arrowheads from Níðhöggr's corpse and had even dropped her hunting dagger, lost in the darkness when the wyrm had dislodged it in his death throes.

But Skadi wasn't one to dwell on things lost. Instead, she grabbed up a fallen stone jotun's spear. She charged forward, her spear tip taking a fire jotun in the back as he tried to get around Tyr's left flank. Then as magma gushed out of his wound and the jotun collapsed to his knees, Skadi ripped the sword from the jotun's grip. Welding it in a two-handed style, Skadi whirled like a top to cut into the thigh of another jotun, sending it squalling to the ground in agony where Tyr finished it off with a precise sword thrust to the neck. "How many of our foes have gathered to halt our return?"

"Do you think any of us have had time to be counting bodies?" Tyr answered tartly, ducking a close blow that would've opened his face, the near miss still catching his helmet with a ringing blow that sent him stumbling.

“That isn’t what I meant, oh serious one,” Skadi grumbled yet still stepped forward to guard her downed friend for a brief moment.

Tyr recovered, thrusting forward hard, knocking aside the next blow before his blade punctured into the chest of the fire jotun that had attacked him. Molten blood spurted out, and Tyr growled angrily as his sword began to melt, the enchantments on it finally overcome by the continued use. “Then what?”

“Truly I am wondering about the Fire Jotun’s involvement most of all,” Skadi admitted, even as she parried a blow that nearly put her on her rear.

“Ah, aye, it is something to note, but for later, yes Huntress? Keep your eyes on the current prize and do not hark after the goose in the distance,” Tyr warned, smashing an attacking jotun across the face so hard his weakened blade shattered.

A second later, he stole a weapon from one of their enemy and used it against them. Indeed, only Hogun and Thor hadn’t done the same by this point. And as Tyr glanced over his shoulder, he saw Fandral going down, with Hogun moving in to guard him as Sif dragged him behind the mace-wielder.

She had to leave him and rejoin the battle as the archers began to throw down their bows. Pulling out spears, the ambushers charged forward, switching to an all-out close-quarters attack. Those on the edges attempted to encircle the Asgardians, and Sif, Skadi, and Tyr soon found themselves hard-pressed from all sides, their wedge forming into a circle, with the injured Fandral guarded in the center, his life’s blood pumping out of his thigh wound.

The enemy attempted to close in, but Thor was too powerful. He burst out through the encirclement with great sweeps of Mjollnir. He turned to one side, whirling his hammer and created a blast of air so powerful that it knocked a dozen attackers there off their feet, although it also caused Skadi and Tyr to stumble. Then, he turned to the other side and with a few strokes of his hammer, downed enough enemies to give Hogun and Sif the advantage. Once stable, Skadi and Tyr moved to slay many of those knocked off their feet.

The last fire jotun turned to flee, but Skadi picked up a stray dagger and raced after him, shouting out, “Open combat might be the calling of you Aesir, but leave the hunt to me!”

A moment later, the final Stone Jotun fell, leaving the field to the battered Asgardians. By that point, both Skadi and her prey were out of sight, but none were overly concerned. If the Huntress ran into something she couldn’t handle, she was smart enough to retreat. And they had their own injuries to attend to besides.

“I just finished healing from the wounds caused by the dread wyrm, and now I am injured once again! What will the ladies think of me when I return to the city with my beautiful body covered in scars?” Fandral moaned as Sif and Hogun saw to the wound sliced deeply into his thigh.

“At least you took no injuries to the face. That should be some measure of saving grace, especially considering that few ladies would like to see you below the neck anyway,” Sif answered mock-sweetly as she examined the grim wound.

“Your words are as cruel as you are fair,” Fandral answered with a laugh. “Still, mayhap you have a point. I am lucky to not be injured in the face. I doubt you would like me to recount all my tales of lust and love at this moment in time to refute your other claim, however.”

“You are most correct, and indeed, your luck of not being wounded in the face will surely change very quickly if you try,” Sif answered with a snort.

“Enough,” Hogun grunted, pushing Fandral’s head back down. “You have lost enough blood for one day, my friend, do not do anything that will have you losing more now.”

Tyr was also hurting, having taken another strike across the ribs, breaking only recently healed fractures and reopening the wounds he had taken from Níðhögg. Hogun had been burned along one side, although not too badly. His thick gambeson had protected him somewhat although he was now limping slightly, something having broken in one of his legs. Sif had taken a few wounds to the shoulders and head, having lost her helmet in the recent battle, the headgear being stepped on near the end of the fight by one of the jotun.

Of all of them, Thor was the only one who remained uninjured. While his armor had been battered and torn so much that it was functionally useless, his body was entirely unmarred. Once he realized this he discarded the scrap to one side while the others saw to their own injuries.

Yet despite his power-up, this had been far too near a thing. The presence of the fire jotun also worried them all, and the party looked after their wounds and policed the area as best they could, talking quietly on that score while waiting for Skadi to return.

The Huntress did so quickly, moving to scour around the area to find what arrows she could. “The way is clear ahead of us for a bit down the trail, but I would recommend I scout ahead of us from now on. I do not think we are in any condition to fight another battle like this one. At least not any time soon.”

“Aye. And we must report to Lord Odin. If the Fire Jotun are about in our realm, that could mean trouble. Especially here as we are in the east, whereas Muspellheim is to the west from Asgard within the boughs of Yggdrasil,” Tyr announced, nodding towards Thor.

And it could also mean that the Fire Jotun are in league with whoever was attempting to stop us from reaching and fighting Níðhögg in the first place. None of the others seemed to have made that connection, and Tyr didn’t speak his concerns aloud for fear of summoning up still more trouble. But it was an obvious conclusion to his sharp mind.

Getting out of the mountains safely caused them some delay, taking six days, but back on actual earth rather than the boughs of Yggdrasil, Skadi was not only able to scout ahead of

the party with ease but also able to hunt. She found food, leaving rabbits and other small animals hung up on string for the others to find during the day, along with a few herbs that would hasten the healing process. One particular herb aided in removing the lingering burns that pained Hogun and the others.

Yet it was still a very bedraggled group that finally reached the plains below two days after leaving Yggdrasil behind.

From there, travel went far faster, and they stopped in at Hamlet to acquire horses for themselves. But the news that the karls shared with them there was grim. The fire jotun were indeed on the move, and a massive invasion had begun to the south.

“Word reached us here that Lord Balder was leading a staunch defense but had no means to wholly stop the invasion. If the Bright One has been pushed back too quickly, you may find your way back to Asgard a perilous one, my Lord.” A simply dressed farmer, a warrior spirit who’d taken up farming since arriving in Asgard, answered. He was sharing a tankard of ale with Thor and Tyr as the others bartered with his wife for the farm’s horses, all three sitting on his small wooden porch.

“Bah! Hard or easy, naught will stop the mighty Thor from returning home! Let those who wish to get in my way do so at their own peril!”

The man laughed at that, and he and Thor continued to joke and share tales as his neighbors came along to pay their respects to the Asgardians, particularly Thor. Not for nothing was he known as the defender of the common man, and Thor was one of the most beloved of the Asgardians to karls such as these. They respected and gave fealty to Odin, but they loved his sons, Thor and Balder, far more dearly.

The group decided to spend the rest of the day there, purchasing what supplies and clothing they could before hurrying on. But instead of making for Asgard, the group eventually learned where Odin had chosen to muster his host and diverted their journey towards that point. The area was called the Fields of Gronulf’s Wrath, named after a jotun Stone Lord that had been slain there in ages past. Unlike their debased cousins, the Stone Lords had power, mental capacity and skills to match those of the Aesir, and the battle between this particular one and Thor had been a thing of legend although few, including even Thor, could now remember either battle or Stone Lord.

But the rest of the news wasn’t as good. Balder’s forces had done their job well, but the fire jotun force was truly massive, and all warriors would be needed to turn back the tide. Many a human jarl had already taken his men to the muster, and the Asgardians had brought their dvergjar and alfar allies to the battle as well.

The few remaining thoughts of past glory left in the band’s heads fled at such dire news, and throwing caution and comfort to the winds, the party pushed their horses to the brisk pace they could manage. Thor could well have just flown ahead of the others, but he refrained,

instead racing alongside Sif tirelessly while she rode. This breakneck pace brought them within the Valkyries' scouting sphere within three days, a feat which nearly killed their horses.

A Valkyrie speedily rode off, returning just as quickly with more horses for the tired dragonslayers, something they were all pleased with. From that point forward, they moved at a slightly more sedate pace and within another day, cheers arose from the Asgardian host as Thor led the band through the huge encampment's outer perimeter.

But it was not Odin who greeted them at the camp's center. Instead, it was Queen Freya, resplendent in silver chain mail and hauberk, with a blade set in the ground nearby. She greeted Thor with a tight hug and a breathy whisper of, "Praise be that you have returned, my son!"

She nodded to the others, although sobered at the fact she could not see Volstagg among them, and at how bedraggled the rest of them looked. "I see that your victorious return comes at a cost."

"Aye, my queen, but there is also a mystery to be solved here," Tyr answered for them all. At Tyr's gesture, Thor held up his gauntlets as if he had just remembered their presence.

With the thought of further war ahead of them, Thor had put aside the mystery about them. Tyr's words reminded him though, and the memory of Volstagg's abnormal demise recalled it to him again now, his joyful expression at meeting his mother turning grim. He relayed what had occurred with a growl and how he had once more acquired his Gauntlets of Power.

Freya listened silently, looking between Tyr and Fandral who held up the claws and teeth they had taken from Níðhöggr's body and then back to the gauntlets before gesturing to a nearby alfar. That worthy came forward and took the bag from Fandral, as Freya ordered him to deliver it to the chief dvergar. In the manner of that clannish folk, the most senior leader was also the most skilled blacksmith.

"Such can be made into weapons of dread strength and ability, as you all know. When this war is over, I will commission daggers or swords for each of you, whatever you wish."

The others all nodded, even Hogun and Thor grateful for the queen's largess. The dvergar were notoriously difficult to work with, let alone make agreements with. But Tyr remained stoic, and kept his eyes on the queen as she gestured them all into her tent. This was a massive thing, easily as large and as long as some of the log houses being set up nearby.

Within, they found an odd dichotomy. Several goddesses rested on cushions, but instead of working on cloth or whatever other project they might have done in peace time, several were enchanting weapons. And while there were cushions, soft music and lighting within the tent, in the center of the tent was a magical map of Asgard, showing the invading

army and several dozen markers of small hamlets, villages and even a few military units on the move.

Sif however noticed it wasn't just showing Surtur's advance. Elsewhere on the map a few clan markers were situated around the deep south, where the Dark Elves realm could be reached. Across from them were symbols of deep blue marked by white runes indicating the dark elves were on the move, but not in any number. Another sign, a green serpent mark by the ocean's shore, worried her far more however.

But Tyr was still more concerned about the possible mystery they might have on their hands, as was Freya as she sat near the map, gesturing them all into chairs or cushions as was their preference. After they sat down, she addressed that mystery, a faint scowl on her face as she tugged at her honey-blond curls. "in terms of Volstagg and the mystery of his existence, neither the Enchantress nor Malekith have the power to kindle the flame of life imperishable. They could perhaps have created an illusion of an individual and indeed ensorcelled a few of our people to believe it. But they could not have fooled Heimdall, myself of my husband."

"If I may, mother, where is Father?" Thor asked, looking at the map.

Skadi nodded too, looking worried. "Surely he should have taken the field with you, unless he has decided to crush the dark elves first?"

"Alas, no. The Odin-sleep has come upon him at the most inopportune time," Freya admitted, shaking her head with a sigh.

Such was the power and subtlety of the Shadow's mental manipulation that none of the gathered Asgardians thought that odd, only, as Freya had said, a matter of bad timing. Every one of them **knew** with the same certainty that they knew their own abilities that Odin occasionally had to sleep for months on end in order to recover his strength from keeping the realm intact and whole. Why that was, or why Odin would even need to will Asgard to remain intact like that, none of them even considered.

"That is grim tidings, Queen Freya. I have trust in your skill and that of the Bright One to lead, but King Odin is not known as the Judge of Kings for no reason," Frandral murmured.

"Truly. But one should not waste time wishing for things beyond their control. For now, let us return to your mystery before speaking of the war against Surtur," Freya commanded, a hand chopping through the air. "Continuing to speak of Volstagg, even Odin and I could not create a simulacrum to so ape true life. Instead, we, and even such a one as Malekith, would have to take someone already alive and mold them into the desired personality and form."

Getting the implications faster than the others, Skadi hissed. "You're saying that whoever hid the Gauntlets of Power within Volstagg actually took someone else and molded the gauntlets into that individual somehow? I did not even think magic could do something so outrageous."

The snarl of hatred in her voice at the term magic was not unusual, and Freya didn't take it personally. While seidr was a woman's field, Skadi had never enjoyed such education, and even as a practitioner herself, Freya knew the disdain most had towards magic. She could even agree with it in a way, as one could achieve great things with magic, but you could do equally terrible ones, such as this issue with Volstagg. *But if your enemy comes at you with magic, it behooves you to have some magic to counter it.*

"This is merely speculation on my part, as if such a thing was done, it surpasses far my own knowledge of the magical arts. That alone says this mystery is perhaps larger and far more dangerous than we can conjecture at this moment." So saying Freya seemed to shiver from head to toe for a moment, an odd body movement that caught the eyes of those around her and she seemed to visibly set aside the mystery for now.

None noticed that Tyr too shivered. When he stopped, the idea of him speaking to Freya about the Fire Jotun possibly being allied with whomever had hidden Thor's gauntlets was gone from his mind as if it had never been, and he turned his full attention on the queen's words.

"However, such a mystery cannot control our attention at this moment. We have a war to win, an enemy more powerful than the dark elves or Stone Jotun to defeat. One whose numbers eclipse our own, and whose strength is beyond most of our warriors one on one."

The hunting band nodded grimly at that, and Freya stood, moving to a nearby table. There she took up a series of goblets made of gold and glass, filling each with mead from her own hand before going to each of the party, giving them the victory cup, exchanging words with each. She ended this ritual acknowledgement of the victorious end of their quest with another tight hug with her son, praising Odin for his return before sitting down once more.

In her cushion Freya waited for them all to drink before she began, officially disbanding the group and then assigning them new duties in the war host. "Hogun, Fandral, you will join the host. I believe you will serve best as part of our main muster. Rest for the rest of the day and then get outfitted properly."

The two so named nodded, raising the last of the honey and apple mead to their lips before sharing a series of handclasps and backslapping hugs with their friends. Then with a deep bow to the queen, they left the tent.

Turning to her fellow Vanir, Freya smiled. "Skadi, you will join the scouts. The Valkyries have been acting as my eyes and ears, but none can go unseen as you can. Guard the flanks of our gathering hosts, and then see if you can sneak into their army. If we know which route toward Asgard the City Surtur means to follow, it would help our plans immensely."

The younger goddess nodded in formal acknowledgment and also excused herself quickly. Skadi would leave the camp within an hour after gaining a bag of supplies and a new bow, quiver, spear, and dagger. She wasn't the strongest of the Aesir or Vanir, but she had endurance to spare and needed no rest now, as the others did, bar Thor.

“Tyr, come the morrow, you will be given a command of your own. I will place you in charge of a thousand human warriors and fifty Asgardians for now, and also charge you with continuing our muster. I think we’ve done the best job we could, but another eye on things would be good. When it comes time to offer open battle, you will follow my second born, Balder’s orders. He has command at the front now.”

“As you will, my Queen,” the god of Justice and law answered bowing from the waist. He asked a few questions about the war and the map, then he too left the tent, having received permission to return after resting to examine the map again.

This left Sif and Thor, and Freya turned to them, smiling faintly. “Sif, I wish for you to join another, smaller band for now. The dverggar will fit you with a new set of armor and weapons, then you will head out. While Balder and his warriors have done a magnificent job, the jotun are marching faster than we could wish and are nearly past the Long Gorge. I will place a spell on you and yours that will allow me to update the terrain of my map, so Tyr, Balder and I can find the right ground to force a battle on our terms. I trust you to know what manner of terrain we will seek.”

Sif bowed deeply, proud of the important task, and Thor stepped forward, speaking before Sif could take her leave in turn. “And what of me, Mother? What duty would you have me do?”

Freya smiled faintly standing up and taking Thor’s chin in her hand, chuckling quietly. “Why my son, your duty will be to do what you do best. Chaos havoc.”

As Thor burst out into laughter and Sif rolled her eyes, the queen strode past them back out the tent calling over her shoulder for the pair to follow her. If the goddess of love had more than simple whimsy in letting the pair remain together for now, she didn’t say.

Regardless, a few minutes’ walk brought them to the area where horses and other animals were kept in paddocks. Here Freya gestured to a chariot while nearby two large rams, their horns covered in steel, their hooves gleaming copper, nipped at the grass. “While you cannot fly on your own, your chariot can, and will do so now. I have seen to the training of these two rams, and they are enchanted to fly where you will, so long as they are tied into your chariot’s bridles.”

Thor whooped at that, smiling and moving over to the rams, running his hands from their horns down their flanks. Before this, Thor couldn’t really fly, instead using the force of Mjollnir hurled ahead of him to pull his body along. But to truly fly, even if not under his own power, would be a tremendous boon. “I will leave at once, by the halls of Valhalla I will give Surtur and his folk a drubbing they will not soon forget!”

“Not yet, Thor. Even you need rest. Not to put too fine a point on it, my son, but you stink, and your clothing is a disgrace,” Freya laughed, ruffling Thor’s hair as if he was a child, causing him to pout while the nearby Sif snorted in ill-hidden humor. “Take a bath, take the

day to get your clothing in order and rest, and then see the armorer. You have done well, and you can take a brief moment before we ask still more of you.”

Thor nodded and turned back to Sif as Freya left them heading back to her tent, pointing the way towards where she had ordered tents be made ready for them. Like the other goddesses within, Freya needed to return to the task of casting enchantments on weapons and arrows alike.

Sif walked beside Thor for a few moments as they made their way into the area where Freya had told them he had set up tents for them all. The silence between them was somewhat awkward, neither knowing what to say at the moment but also not willing to part just yet.

This awkward silence ended when they spotted a large sign with three flags. There a Valkyrie trotted up to Sif, gesturing back the way she had come to where the womenfolk had set up a bathing area behind a small wooden palisade.

Sif thanked the Valkyrie, then turned back to Thor, thumping him on the shoulder. “Well, it was fun and harrowing and an adventure we’ll be able to boast about for ages. My thanks for choosing me to come with you.”

“My thanks for choosing to come. You more than held up your part in the journey, more so than Fandral or even Tyr, although it is dishonest to speak so of friends. But it would have been a much poorer journey without your wit and sword beside me,” Thor answered with a wide grin.

That caused Sif to blush slightly, and she looked away. “Well, were it not for your own prowess, the entire trip would have ended in misery and ruin at the paws of Níðhöggr. Dare I say it, but there was a moment there when you actually looked formidable, as astonishing as that thought may be.”

“Hah! Well, unlike Fandral or yourself, no one has yet commented on my beauty, only my strength. So I suppose formidable is the best one such as I could hope for,” Thor guffawed.

Blushing anew at a second inadvertent compliment from Thor, Sif shook her head, thumped him on the shoulder once more, and waved him on his way. “Go. The journey is over for now, and we can but have the evening to ourselves to prepare for the next challenge. And despite all your power, you still stink.”

Thor laughed again, turning away and heading towards the men’s bathing area nearby, while Sif followed the chortling Valkyrie, growling at her as best she could with a full blush now upon her face.

Later, as he prepared to exit the bathing area, Thor stared at his silently at his reflection before shaking his head. The image of himself with a red hair, longer than his blonde locks were now, accompanied by a thick, full beard disappeared in the steam, replaced by his normal

visage. It was strange, to be sure, but Thor had no time for such distractions or amusements. There was a battle to fight, after all, a war to win.

OOOOOO

Those Who Watch Above in Shadow looked on, doing their equivalent of gnashing their teeth in a fury. The Ragnarök was on schedule, but more than once, they'd had to step in to keep Tyr and several others from realizing the implications of such and their own adventure. Thankfully, with Odin locked in the Odin-sleep, dealing with Freya's suspicions was far easier.

But even with all their attention concentrated on that moment, something had slipped by there. Thankfully, Thor, unlike his parents, was quite stupid. If Odin or Freya had seen such a vision, they would have had to erase Freya's mind of the moment and exert even more force on keeping Odin from becoming aware able to act against them.

Still, no questions would be asked, and Ragnarök **was** continuing. The dark elves of Svartalfheim had sent envoys to the Fire Jotun, and when they struck, in conjunction with Jörmungandr and Fenrir's rampage, their combined might would be able to slay all of the Asgardians and their followers. Those ritual sacrifices would restart the cycle once more. And when that happened, every Asgardian, even the sleeping Odin himself, would forget everything that had happened in this cycle.

The Shadows' hold was weakened though. At the moment, They knew that they could not reform their anchors, nor could they reach Midgard and reclaim Hela and Niflheim. But, if the Ragnarök continued, the rest of the Asgardians would be within their control forevermore. Nothing any of the Asgardians did could halt that inevitability. Indeed, his best efforts would merely fuel the Ragnarök further, making the destruction all the more total.

Despite several of their pieces moving in ways they had not anticipated, the board and the game itself were still that of the Shadows. All that could be done now was to make certain that the pieces kept moving as they should.

OOOOOO

While Tony and Forge worked on arming the four-company force of Oh Damns, Harry and Dr. Druid created runic arrays that could defend peoples' minds from illusions and physical assault. This was a extremely difficult process, with two major issues.

The first was simply that protecting the mind from exterior assault was difficult to put into runes, which had never been used like this before in this world or Harry's. Worse, Harry knew that his own technique, hiding his mind via a mental invisibility cloak, didn't work against the Shadows.

Unfortunately, that was the best concept they could come up with. Hopefully that kind of obfuscation and Emma, Jean, and the other telepaths, would be enough to protect their people from the direct, personalized assaults of the type Harry had faced when he and Emma

freed Hela of the Shadows' influence. Beyond stopping that kind of assault though, Harry put more hope in the telepaths than the runic arrays designed to hide an individual's mind. They were just too limited for this kind of mind-based work.

The runes to help people see through illusions went a lot better, however. So long as the illusions were based on sight or sound, anyway. Much to their frustration, neither Harry nor Dr. Druid could figure out any combination of runes or separate arrays that could block a scent-based illusion. They could figure out an array that could tell you if something smelled off, but not if the smell itself was an illusion.

The second problem was the cost of these arrays to the wearer was huge. Harry had developed a runic sequence that fed the array via the body's natural bio-energy instead of magic for those without internal cores, acting much like exercise would in burning off calories, when he was still living in Xavier's mansion. But the energy matrix wasn't efficient at all for these arrays. Harry estimated that even someone well-fed and in excellent shape would succumb to exhaustion after only ten minutes worth of using their current mental obfuscation array. It was about forty minutes for the anti-illusion array.

Thankfully, both of the runic arrays could be designed to only work on activation, i.e. when the arrays detected a mental assault or when a magic-user created an illusion to fool the individual equipped with the array. That was honestly their only saving grace.

Adding the runic arrays into the helmets for the Custodes (and even those without head gear like Colossus and the Thing, who each received a pendant that would create the mental protection array) and the ODMs took longer. That even with Kitty joining them, that work dragged on well behind the rest of the magic-type preparations. Thankfully, the military side of those preparations was also slow, and the work on the one-size fits all two types of ODM armor was also slower than expected.

Still, around three weeks after Wander-Odin, gave his presentation to Harry and the others, the Avalon Empire Expeditionary force, as Emma called it, was ready to go. However for such a sizeable force the teleportation circle couldn't be made in Camelot.

The sheer number of bags, gear, men, and other miscellaneous stuff meant even the Great Hall wouldn't have been able to house them all. So Ororo, Hela, and others had written out the array at an old WW2 military installation in Australia that Harry had purchased months back in preparation for creating an Arc reactor factory there. It had originally been government land, and the infusion of cash had made the locals very happy with Harry. That work took another day and a half.

Yet still, the day finally dawned, troops began to arrive in a slow, steady stream. First to arrive had been Harry, of course, followed by the team that had worked on the array. This consisted of Blink, Wander-Odin, Amora, Hela, Ororo, Clea, and Kitty. Harry moved over to Blink, smiling at the young somewhat elven girl as the others went over their work one more time.

Seriously, she almost looks like she could be related to Melody. Strange to think of. “Are you really fine with coming with us into what might be a warzone? Do you understand what will be required of you?”

Blink nodded slowly, her eyes glancing over to Ororo and Kitty where the two were going over a portion of the array several hundred meters away. Kitty felt her gaze and looked up, waving, which seemed to give the young mutant girl some courage. “I am, yeah. Ms. Munroe and Ms. Hela had me test my blinking ability a few times. They and Nightcrawler have been a big help.” She looked back at Harry, smiling. “And thanks for agreeing to pay my way through school for this, Mr. Potter. Going to school with Jubilee and the others sounds like a lot of fun.”

Chuckling, Harry waved away her thanks, saying that it was part of working for him. He had been adamant from the start that whatever their motivations, if someone worked for him, they would be getting paid what Harry felt their job was worth, regardless of what they were doing.

After a few minutes of small talk about what Blink wanted to do with her life in the future, Harry made his way over to Hela. Gently pulling her away from where Wander-Odin had been trying to draw her into a flyting, Harry pulled her into a sideways hug. “I know you’ve mentioned how you loathe the fact Jörmungandr hid your mother’s body, but I want to make certain you’re okay with our going after him. You realize if we’re right about him being an anchor for the Shadows that we will have to kill him.” He watched Hela’s eyes and mouth, the rest of her face, as always, covered by a half-mask. “Are you... alright with that?”

“I am not happy about the need to slay one who shares parentage with me, but really Harry, I am... ambivalent about it, I suppose.” Hela scowled, shaking her head. “That might be different if I could but know my oldest memories were my own. If they are, then Jörmungandr and I never got along when he was small enough to be part of our family in the first place, and it is a moot point. As it is... no. Most of my memories with him are full of spite, pranks, and threats of eating me. Not the best childhood memories, you could say.”

Harry watched as her violet eyes narrowed dangerously. “And yes, his hiding of our mother’s body like that, his willingness to serve those who would control us with a tyranny so complete it has no equal in human history, those are travesties. A wrongness that must be answered for. If it is to be paid for by his death, then so be it. I will not be the one to swing the sword, but neither shall I mourn.”

She turned to one side as the Custodes arrived, with Dani and Piotr in the lead. Steve having opted to help lead the ODMs, was not present. While the company commanders were all experienced men, none had commanded such a large force, and both Harry and Steve had felt a calming influence, who could take in the whole battle through tried and true experience, would be a force multiplier. Scott would serve as his second-in-command, but he would be more of a second pair of eyes than anything else.

“I am more concerned about Jean coming along at all, even if she will be well away from the front. And with Dani and Garm’s part in this operation,” Hela added.

Dani and Garm, along with Betsy, would be splitting off almost as soon as they arrived in Asgard. Their job would be to hunt down Fenrir and talk him out of fulfilling his role in Ragnarök. Once they found him, it was felt that

“I am concerned you will miss my fang and claw mistress. But you have given me a command, and I shall obey,” Garm answered, clearly hesitant. Not so much about helping Dani, but about being away from Hela if she ran into trouble.

“Finding the trail will be hard and talking Fenrir down from his anger toward Odin and the other Asgardians harder still. Even so, we’re going to try our best,” Dani answered briskly, still working on braiding her hair so that she could put on her suit’s helmet.

Beside them, Betsy nodded, moving to scratch Garm behind the ears. But the snarl he released made her think twice about it. “Er, right. Yeah, the three of us will find the little wolfy.”

Watching Dani and Garm’s eyes cross at Fenrir being called a ‘little wolfy’ caused Betsy to break out into laughter, but Harry had already moved on to greet Ben, Johnny and Thundra as they all arrived together. Crystal had been recalled by her people barely a few days ago.

Soon the X-men arrived, or those who would be joining the battle anyway. Scott, Sam Guthrie, Nightcrawler, Rogue, and Amelia Vought, who was pushing Charles in his chair, walked through followed by Xian, the Hulk, and perhaps most surprisingly, the Hulk.

A few days before, Harry decided they would need to add to their numbers a bit more, just in case. To that end, he had approached Charles and asked about all three of his past patients: Xian Coh Manh, the young Vietnamese telepath, Bruce Banner, and Emma Steed. Xian agreed instantly, despite being the next best thing to a wallflower, while Bruce took a bit of convincing before he decided he needed to pay Harry back for introducing him to Charles and for the aid he had offered Bruce after the Mad Titan incident.

Emma Steed, the former member of the Hellfire Club who was still wanted for questioning in relation to Selene Gallio’s London assault, was a tougher nut to crack. But the attack force needed as many telepaths as they could get, and Emma (British Version) eventually agreed to help out, much like Bruce, to pay Harry and Charles back.

Harry nodded to Cyclops and then gestured him to one side. He and the rest from America took their position on one of the many large flying carpets scattered around the airfield. Then a moment later, the runic doorway Harry had set up here at the installation’s airfield glowed blue as it connected to Fortress Mars and Iron Man stepped through.

Tony immediately flew into the air and began to circle around the area, while behind him, Polaris walked out, dozens of large metal crates surrounding her. Each of them had legs and could move on their own for short spurts of time, but for now, Lorna’s power was the best

way to transport them through the doorways. Behind her came several more rows of crates ushered through the runic doorway to be lifted out of the way by Lorna's power toward where other magic carpets waited, floating at rest above the ground nearby.

After their supplies came the regular troopers. Their outfits were outfitted with winter camo, but beyond that, they looked somewhat like the suits worn by Coyote and Uzume, though without the personal touches. The ODM suits were several inches taller and were equipped with visibly thicker armor. The suits were bulkier around their back legs and backs as well, where the thrusters for their jetpacks were located rather than being equipped with the teleportation arrays and the hover boots Coyote, Uzume and Ghigau were equipped with.

The backpack for each also contained folded wings, shorter than the Falcon's but still able to give the user some control in his or her flight for longer jumps. Their helmets fully covered their heads and faces, the front of which was a square, almost robotic-looking visor.

Most held a new weapon too, large-barreled rifles that looked like something straight out of science fiction with how large they were. Jean had called the guns Boom Sticks, and universal acclaim had taken up the name, although a few of the troopers preferred the name 'Bolter'.

Those rifles were not the guns the ODM would normally use. Jean's experiments had proven that plasma guns would barely itch a jotun, while a rail gun round tested against the jotun's armor would just bounce off. Perhaps there'd be enough force imparted to the target to knock him over, but that was all. What was needed to kill a jotun with anything but a headshot was a higher caliber bullet that flew slower so that could do more damage.

With Tony's help, Jean had designed a new gun that fired small, explosive gyro-rocket rounds. While the rifles couldn't fire nearly as fast as either Jean or Tony had wanted, they should still prove to be deadly.

They hoped, anyway. Tests on fire jotun armor the Room of Requirement created based on Harry's memory of the version he had faced said it would. But if they had significantly thicker armor now that they were assaulting Asgard, their effort would be for naught.

After the first platoons of regular troops moved to one side, lining up in ranks as Ororo dictated, the first Heavy Gunners came through. Their suits were very obviously mini-mechs rather than merely powered suits. Built off the Hulkbuster chassis that Tony had originally designed for SHIELD, they stood as tall as Colossus but looked almost squat given how bulky they were. Their arms were large and long, almost like that of a gorilla, with the wearer's arms ending well before the end of their arms.

Their legs were not short per say but they weren't nearly as powerfully built as the arms either. Their backs were stooped as well, a large hump visible there holding the large thrusters the Heavy Gunners would use to move through the air. However, unlike the regular troopers, it was obvious these troops were made to fall like meteors, not glide like birds.

Such a notion was helped along by the heavy Barret-like mortar guns many of the Gunners carried. Others held large Gatling Guns slung under their arms, fed by ammo belts that led to a second hump on their backs. Still others had large apertures sticking out of their shoulders. The only thing they had in common with the regular troopers was their helmets contained a T-shaped visor at the front of their helmets.

“Sir, Orbital Drop Marines reporting for orders, sir!” Falcon barked, saluting Harry before standing at ease, a wide grin on his face under his oversized goggles. These too were also treated to the same anti-illusion array Harry and Dr. Druid had created.

Harry nodded, then looked across the Oh Damns. “I’m not one for speeches, so I’ll just say thank you for coming. I know that you don’t feel as strongly about intervening here as I do, and it means a lot to me that all of you signed up to participate in this operation. Get to your places, and we will begin. And don’t touch the pink javelins.”

Soon the ODMs were separated into platoon and squad-sized teams around the circle's edge. The X-men and the Custodes were mostly intermingled with the troopers in various groups to combat trouble on arrival.

Inside of the circle of ODMs, X-Men, Custodes, and other assembled soldiers were two circles, each meeting at a single point in the exact center of the teleportation array. In one, Blink sat alone. Around her hands was a scintillating pink crystalline structure of some kind, her teleportation power rendered into a solid-state object. Other similar structures in the form of small javelins had been stuck into the ground throughout the array.

Across from her, Amora and Hela sat together with Wander-Odin. Both of the Asgardians and the aspect were touching a different part of the circle they were in. While Blink would be coloring the runic enchantment with her power so to speak, so that it could get around the barrier between Midgard and Asgard, the three of them and Harry would create the anchor to the other side.

Harry joined them now, walking carefully through the hundreds of runes covering the ground. He paused briefly to exchange a hug with Ororo and pat Kitty on the head. She, Una, Tony and Amelia would be the four most responsible for setting up a base camp and a medical facility when they arrived, important tasks that would no doubt be needed. In particular, creating a new anchor for the

“Remember, we don’t know if you’ll be teleported into the air or directly onto one of Yggdrasil’s branches. You won’t be teleported into anything, but you might be in danger the moment you arrive,” Harry shouted as he sat down next to Hela, forming a square with the trio’s previous triangle. Amplified by magic, his voice carried to everyone there. “Keep your fingers on your jump jet buttons or hold on tight to the magic carpets. This is your last chance to turn back.”

The replies he received were firm and unyielding. The Marines gave their famous cry of “OORAH!” over and over again. The sound came out tinny due to their helmets, but it was still loud. The Custodes shouted wordlessly, and the X-men just thrust their hands into the air, even Charles getting into it.

Seeing everyone was ready, Harry nodded over to Blink, who nodded shyly back, lips twitching into the ghost of a smile at the whispers of encouragement from the nearby Hela and a backhanded compliment from Amora. Wander-Odin simply growled, “Enough with this false modesty, girl! You know you can do this. Get on with it.”

Marveling at perhaps the most arrogant and annoying words of encouragement he had ever heard, Harry leaned forward and began to project his power into the array. At the same time Blink closed her eyes, calling her power into being around her. The gathered pink-hued energy was pulled out, away, and into the array.

A moment later, the entire runic array, longer than two passenger planes head to tail, thrummed to life with a pink glow, concentrated at the points where the crystalline javelins stood. There was a loud crash of sound as air rushed into a suddenly created vacuum as the land forces of the Avalon Empire disappeared from Earth between one moment and the next...

End Chapter