

I don't own marvel (Thor's movies would have all have been better) nor am I British.

This has now been edited by **Morde24** but not **Observanc3**. That is why I haven't yet posted it over on fanfic.

A little note: I change Thor to Þór in this chapter. I feel that's a good way to show his return to his true self.

## Chapter 50: Shadows Twilight

Thunderbird, Thundra, Thing, and Hulk had been selected for Team Fishermen for their strength and durability. Harry, Freya, and his other officers had all acknowledged that dealing with Jörmungandr would be a test of endurance and durability more than anything else, and that fighting the Great Serpent (a label that Ororo felt did not quite match the reality. It did, after all, have **legs** which ended in paws with very nasty claws) would be a more physical challenge than the one against Surtur. Surtur, after all, was known not just as a fighter, but a magic user.

That knowledge did not help the frustration all of Team Fishermen was feeling currently. How long they had been fighting was a question without a discernable answer, but all of them knew the battle had begun with the sun high in the sky, and it was deep into night by this point. The fight was now lit by Storm's lightning blasts, the Scarlet Witch's hex bolts, and a few large-scale Lumos spells left hanging scattered across the battlefield, their light reflecting off the still-frozen waters of the ocean, which continued to encase much of the dread serpent in a vice-like grip.

Oh, and Jörmungandr's own coal-red eyes. Those were, in Rogue's unbiased opinion, "Freakin' scary," but hey, at least they always know where to aim! It was a thought she had given air to when Hulk had pointed out that the sun had been going down earlier.

Yet, for however long they had been fighting, Team Fishermen simply couldn't do enough damage to Jörmungandr to matter. Every time they hit him, he would growl in pain, but the team's attacks were amounting to less than

pinpricks for the most part. The giant serpent was simply too damn big and too damn durable. Not even the Thing had ever faced a foe this big or this hardy before. Even the segment they had initially been fighting had been the size of Galactus, and since then, Jörmungandr had pulled more coils out of the water, adding to his overall size until what parts of him were above water were as long as Everest was tall.

As for durability, much of Jörmungandr's girth actually seemed to be multiple layers of scales. To really hurt the beast, one had to dig through several layers of scale mail that, while not as tough as the Juggernaut-based armor Thunderbird, Rogue, or Thundra were wearing, was still extremely tough.

Not that this meant they couldn't get lucky.

Rogue blinked as the dread serpent turned aside, snapping at where the Scarlet Witch had just flown down, her hex bolts aiming for his eyes. In the light of the bolts and the serpent's eyes, Rogue's attention was also drawn to a flash of orange behind the serpent's head, but she didn't have any time to wonder about it as the Wanda yelped and rose up through the air with abrupt haste, Jörmungandr's open maw chasing her. In doing so, Rogue's blow, which had been aimed at the side of Jörmungandr's head, instead crashed into the side of the serpent's semi-open mouth, crashing into a fang as long as she was tall. The blow from her club smashed into the tooth and shattered it, sending bits of stone-like cartilage everywhere.

The serpent reacted instantly, his head snapping back towards Rogue with all the speed of a normal striking snake despite his vast size. "You bitch! I've had that fang longer than you've been alive. Do you know how long it takes for me to grow a new one!?"

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph!" The southern belle grunted as she barely dodged around Jörmungandr's open mouth, only to crash into the outer cheek of the monster instead. "Gah!"

Rogue tumbled through the air to smash back first down onto the ice where she laid still for a few seconds, rattled something fierce despite her impervious armor. "Owww..."

A second later, Thunderbird swooped down on his carpet. "Rogue! Hand!"

Groggily obeying, Rogue found herself plucked off the frigid ice and hoisted onto the magic carpet behind the Apache warrior. A second later, they were gone as one of Jörmungandr's many paws smashed into the spot where Rogue had been only a moment ago.

"Don't get hit," she said blearily, "That thing hits like a mountain."

"Considering he is the size of a whole mountain range, I feel like that should have been assumed. You seem to have forgotten that you aren't the first one he's treated like a bouncy ball," Thunderbird drawled before activating his communicator. "Pull back, team. Let's get some distance here and let Storm hit Jörmungandr again with some lightning."

"Screw you," Ben shouted, "I'm right here between the eyes, and I ain't moving!"

"Oh, tha' was the orange bit I saw," Rogue grunted, her accent coming out starkly in her somewhat befuddled state. "Now, where's mah broom gone?"

"Here," the Scarlet Witch said, floating over while holding the item out to the other girl. "When I broke off my attack I spotted it flying off. You're lucky it wasn't shattered."

"Yeah, lucky," Rogue grunted, taking the broom. She watched along with the others as, with a roar, Ben Grimm began to pound his fists into the area right between Jörmungandr's eyes with wild abandon.

The Thing howled with each punch, the pounding of stone fists on metal-like scales producing a clamor even the biggest heavy metal drummer fan would have found grating. "You are going to freaking feel this, you big bastard!"

Watching this, the Scarlet Witch had the extremely inappropriate urge to giggle, reminded of a book that she had gotten into at one point when visiting Camelot. "Crevins!" she shouted, unable to stop herself before lightning shattered the night.

Storm could tell she was doing just about as much damage to the local ecosphere as Jörmungandr's miasma had to the environment of the pocket dimension in keeping the ocean frozen like this, and gathering enough storms above them to help her produce consistent attacks wasn't helping either. But she

couldn't bring herself to care at present as she released a bolt of lightning she had been building up to for more than thirty minutes. "Do not say you were not warned, Ben Grimm!"

To the others, what came out of the sky wasn't so much a lightning bolt as a strike from a very angry deity, and not the small-scale Asgardian sort either. The strike was about as wide as several stadiums, and blazed into the night with a purplish light so bright it burned the eyes. It resembled a regular lightning bolt about as much as a tree did a blade of grass and had to contain enough energy to turn an entire city to glass and fractured ruin.

Moments like these made Thunderbird really understand what being an Omega class mutant meant. For all the label was rather foolish, those who earned it were just on a whole other level than the rest of mutant-kind.

For the first time since Team Fishermen had been able to get the creature to shore, Jörmungandr howled in real pain as Storm's god-tier lightning strike slammed down into its face while Ben Grimm, who was not a fool, leaped clear just in the nick of time to not get caught in the full blast. Some of the sparks still struck him, and he grimaced in pain despite his own extreme durability before he landed on the magic carpet he had originally been riding.

These carpets had been magically tethered to their first riders by a spell from Clea back at base camp for moments such as this and would always return to their primary user if said user left them behind. *Every time I'm on this I get Aladdin vibes, man. What I wouldn't give for a genie to wish this bastard shrunk at this point!*

Even as Ororo's attack continued, the Scarlet Witch was forced to shift her attention away from the still groggy Rogue as several dozen illusions rose into existence all around them. Most in this new assault appeared to be simple constructs made to blind or befuddle the senses. Examples such as illusions to have the nearby Thundra attack the Hulk's position thinking it was a part of Jörmungandr, or make Xian see Emma Steed, who she was sharing a carpet with, as a dark elf who had just teleported there were layered in multiple times, one on top of another. But Xian was smart enough to not instantly react, even as the suddenness of the attack startled her, and it took the Scarlet Witch only a few seconds to dispel the first round of illusions.

As both Ororo's and the Shadows' attacks faded, the monster serpent reared up, his head nearly disappearing into the clouds above and forcing Team Fishermen to follow it even higher into the air. Steam billowed off of Jörmungandr's mouth and face, yet his eyes still gleamed, looking only a little damaged. It was certainly not all that harmed from a strike that would have put down the current iteration of the Hulk and even the Thing if he had been hit dead on.

"When will you little creatures learn you cannot harm me?! I am Jörmungandr, the Ouroboros! My sides are mountains clad in steel, my fangs the size of great trees! I am he who will slay Þór. I am he whose poison ends the realm of Asgard! You, all of you, are naught but lice to one such as me!"

With every word, another segment of mountain-sized snake appeared, pushing up out of the frozen sea like icebergs erupting out of the ocean. Really, the frozen water was the only portion of the plan that had actually worked so far. It was clear to anyone watching that even now the ice alone was what was truly hampering Jörmungandr in many ways.

It was also somewhat clear in the light of the multiple Lumos spells that the serpent was showing signs of a few tiny injuries still unhealed. While he had some kind of healing factor that was even now going to work on the wounds dealt by Storm's latest strike, that same ability didn't seem able to replace scales that had been knocked off or shattered.

The sight of even a small amount of lasting damage gave heart to the team, which Thundra gave voice to, hefting her club onto her shoulder. "Your pock-marked hide says different, you overgrown garden snake!"

"Yeah, not ta mention that tooth of yers," Rogue added while the rest of the team spread out further. Xian and Emma Steed shifted well away from Jörmungandr until they could barely see the actions of the others, such was the size and speed of the enemy. The rest moved to encircle him.

Not that Jörmungandr noticed. Indeed, his tone was almost placid as he shrugged as best his serpentine body could, a gesture that shivered down his gargantuan frame. "Such irritations will grow back. Nor will a single missing tooth bother me overmuch after I swallow you whole."

At the back of his mind, the voices of his masters, his gods the Shadows, came to him. Oddly, they showed more emotion than he had ever felt from them before, a sense of frustration and concern. But that was impossible, wasn't it? Nothing could concern the Shadows. *"Do not bandy words with the humans. Kill them or disappear. We are keeping the Thunderer occupied, but we do not know for how long we can do so. And we cannot afford for you to die."*

Grumbling in annoyance but showing no concern about how the Shadows were speaking of his possible demise, Jörmungandr acquiesced and turned his attention to smashing his way further out of the ice entrapping him. In doing so he practically ignored the team of humans even as they all went on the attack once more.

Thundra, Hulk, Thing, and Rogue all zoomed in and out like dive-bombers on their assorted carpets and broomsticks. They pummeled the serpent's scaly hide, hammering blows wherever they could. Thundra and Rogue targeted his head, looking to blind him and keep the monster's attention on the two of them. The pair were the more agile flyers thanks to their broomsticks, so they could more easily dodge Jörmungandr's retaliation, be it come in the form of fang, poison cloud, or waterspout.

Meanwhile, Thunderbird and Rogue put effort into determining if the monstrous serpent had some kind of stomach area where his scales were less thick. Unfortunately, it turned out that while there was such an area, its existence didn't matter overmuch. The scales there were smaller and less thick, to be certain, and it certainly got Jörmungandr's attention, but it didn't seem to do him lasting harm any more than previous attacks had.

For his part, the Hulk took a more logical approach, going after areas where they had already landed telling blows on Jörmungandr's scales, knocking them loose or denting them further. Although lost scales merely revealed another layer underneath, this proved a decent enough idea. In practice, however, targeting the same space continually was impossibly difficult. "Blast and botheration, just stay still, creature!"

"No," Jörmungandr drawled back, twisting his serpentine length so the Hulk's strike missed its mark. Lazily, a claw came up to rake at him, smashing the

green fighter aside. “How about you make this fight easier and let eat me eat you instead?”

Growling in frustrated anger and slowly losing his self-control, Hulk raced forwards, dodging under another strike from another one of the wyrm/dragon/serpent monster’s claws and leaping upward. Landing on his side, the Hulk began to climb, grabbing at any scale he could and either using it as a handhold or tearing it out.

All the while, Storm practically removed herself from the battle entirely bar a few hurricane-force wind strikes. Instead, she turned her attention to keeping the ocean frozen, so Jörmungandr could not retreat. But with the Shadows continually upping the pressure on Scarlet Witch and the telepathic assault continuing, Storm knew it was only a matter of time before she could no longer devote enough of her attention to keep the deep freeze going. Once that happened, the regular weather patterns would reassert themselves, the ice would break, and whatever magic of Asgard cycled the sea waters would then sweep away the icebergs, allowing Jörmungandr to disappear into the depths once more.

But that time was not now, and Ororo grit her teeth while snarling into the communicator. “We must hold. Hold his attention. Keep Jörmungandr from retreating! We cannot allow him to escape! Keep him out of play until Þór and other aid can arrive and we win this, whatever happens!”

**OOOOOOO**

While Harry and Hela were dealing with the ambush outside Asgard, and Team Fishermen fought Jörmungandr, elsewhere, Þór roved alone. Alone, but not overlooked.

Having taken to the skies in his chariot the instant he had finished his oath, Þór had ignored anyone who tried to stop him, instead flying on, heading to the farthest west, staring ahead of him, or so he thought as he flew on, his tears filling his eyes, the names of children on his lips. “My beautiful daughter Þrúðr, Modi, Magni, my boys, my young warriors! Ullr, proud archer, why, why?!”

He could remember all four so clearly now. Ullr, Sif’s son from a previous assignation before he’d wed her as part of the peace pacts between the Vanir and

Aesir. Yet despite that, Þór had been proud to call the boy son in all his pursuits... save Ullr's ill-fated pursuit of Skadi.

“Bah, my son! Your tongue durst seem to become all knotted in her presence! Your eyes may be among the best in all the realms, but that is one target you cannot hit with an arrow!” Þór had often laughed, the whole thing a tremendous joke to him, as all knew Skadi would never consider a man unless that man could out-hunt or ski better than she. And as good an archer and skier as he'd been, Ullr had never been a match for Skadi in the woods.

He had died beside his mother in that first and most terrible Ragnarök, his quiver empty, his head crushed by a jotun's mace. And unlike Sif, for some reason he had not been resurrected with the rest of them. “Ullr, never to shoot again, never to tell a joke, never to blush like a maiden as Skadi passes him by. Why, why?!!!” Þór wailed as lightning and wind wracked the heavens, distorted by his grief.

Ullr's image faded in his mind's eye, the vision of him laughing and helping to put up a house replaced by his dead corpse only for that to fade and be replaced by memories of Þrúðr. Þór's daughter, the oldest of his trueborn children. When she was young, Þór always ended the night by carrying his little girl to bed as if she was still a small child. Þrúðr would never want to go to bed of course, always wanting to listen to a tale or tell one last joke. Þrúðr had deep belly laugh that she'd gotten from him, despite her face and hair coming from Sif. Many a heart had she broken as she grew, challenging any man or woman to a flyting at the drop of a stein, then laughing that joyful laugh win or lose. Many a time Þór and Þrúðr would have fun together while Sif tried in vain to teach the girl how to act more womanly at need.

Þór thought of his daughter, imagined her before him now in his chariot with him, caroling the names of his goats in a childish tone. “Faster Tanngrim, Tanngi!” And the pair would obey, delighting in her touch and pure voice above that of their master. Almost could Þór hear that laugh once more, his tears now falling in unending rivulets down his face.

Þór did not know what had befallen his daughter, his little jewel, during that first Ragnarök, and perhaps that not knowing hurt worst of all. “WHYYYY!?”

he bellowed, his free hand clenching so hard on the lip of his chariot that he turned the area he gripped into so much sawdust.

The fate of his twins, Modi and Magni, his heirs, Þór knew all too well. Once more memories rose within the Thunderer, of him teaching them how to farm, swing a sword, and carve figurines from any piece of wood they could find. But all too soon those happy memories faded, replaced by horror. The memory of seeing Magni dying to a fire jotun's spear to the gut right in front of him. Þór had remembered this scene once before when falling into a near-berserker fugue in his battle with the Hulk. But now, he could all too clearly remember the connection with the dead child, one of his own. One of his own that Þór, the Protector of Man and Gods alike, had failed so utterly.

Modi had died when he'd been smashed out of the sky as he'd tried to bring Þór his chariot. By the time Þór had managed to get to his resting place, the jotun had gathered like so much carrion, stabbing his corpse so many times poor Modi's body had been nigh-unrecognizable.

And like Uller and Þrúðr, neither of the twins had been resurrected afterward. "WHYYYYYYYY!!?" Þór wailed once more, practically blind now thanks to his tears. "Why did they not come back with Sif and me? Why!? What purpose could the deaths of such innocents serve?!"

No answer came from the thunderclouds around him, and though worried for their master, Tanngrisnir and Tanngnjóstr had no way of replying. Instead, they continued on while behind them, the Thunderer wept like a babe for the family that he had lost. The family he only now could remember.

As he flew on, Those Who Watched Above in Shadow watched, preparing to assault the Thunderer the only way they now could. With all three of Þór's items of power once more in his possession and creating a connection to Gaia that they could not assail empowering him further, the Thunderer was far too dangerous to field any of their land-based forces against, no matter how susceptible he was to illusion or mind-based magic.

Even armed with Gungnir, Surtur might well lose such a confrontation. And with one of the human telepaths protecting his mind even now, it would take a stroke of luck to turn any such battle in the Shadows' favor. With someone like

Þór, combat instincts could overcome much, and there was only so far illusions could go in fooling such honed instincts like that without access to the target's mind.

Truly though, the decision to not pit Surtur against Þór now came from fear. After all, Those Who Watch Above in Shadow had used Surtur on a headhunting mission once already to good effect. But the Jotun king was still one of their tethers, and fear of dissolution, of Death, stayed the Shadows' hand, despite a few discordant voices raised in objection against the majority, something that would never have occurred before this crisis.

So instead, the Shadows turned their attention to a subtler plan. The Shadows allowed Þór to travel west for a time before the illusions around him began to shift and move in order to get a very deliberate reaction.

"Have at thee!" Þór roared, flinging his hammer to the side, twisting around in his chariot, loosing the reins for a moment as he wiped at his tear-streaked face with his free hand. The creature he struck at, a giant, hissing bat-snake thing, managed to somehow avoid his hammer and backed away. In response, he ducked aside as a gob of acid flashed past his head.

*"ÞÓR! It's aren't real!"* A woman's voice cried in his mind. It had been trying to get his attention ever since he had left his brother and their army behind, but Þór ignored it now as he had then. After all, the Shadows had manipulated his memories and mind before this. Who was to say they were not doing the same now?

As he swung once more, moving with a burst of speed helped along by his righteous and all-consuming fury and grief, Þór actually connected this time! Only... only he felt no sensation of a successful hit traveling up his arm. He should have felt something even if the bat-snake creature was as weak as an arrow, but instead, Mjolnir burst through the beast's body, connecting to nothing. As it did so, Þór found himself overbalancing, his grip on the chariot's lip failing.

A moment later Þór crashed to the ground with a loud thump, cratering the ground upon impact. At the bottom of the new hole in the ground he'd made, Þór laid for a moment, staring up at the nighttime sky. Standing up and wiping once more at his tear-streaked face, Þór spied jotun, stone and fire alike, moving

through the woods around him. Their weapons were already raised, but Þór leaped to his feet and swung his hammer in raging defiance.

And as he fought, the Shadows added more illusions to befuddle Þór's senses. As the Asgardian prince charged forward, all around him were the bodies of his friends and allies. Of Balder, his brother, on the ground with a mistletoe dagger stabbed through his mouth. Sif, the wife he had forged a family with, only to lose those memories for who knew how long, now saw lying broken, her side having been turned into a charred paste by a fire jotun.

"NNNYYRRAAAAA!!!!!" Þór screamed and struck, and struck, and struck again. Mjolnir cleaved the very air in twain, but hit nothing else of note as the god tried to avenge the death of his once-upon-a-time wife. Even in his mindless rage, Þór could just barely feel that something was wrong with that, and every few swings that lack of impact caused him to have a brief second of reason. However, in his maddened grief, that single moment couldn't register for long enough for Þór to grasp it.

Yet when the Shadows tried to reach for their lost puppet's mind to either enthrall him once more or to further befuddle him utterly, they found diamond spikes awaiting them in the Astral Plane. The impenetrable defense destroyed their assaults, the wall of purple and black dissipating like a wave of bubbles popping under the impact of hundreds of hurled pins. A bristling bulwark of similar material went up around Þór's mind specifically a second later. The Shadows attempted to rally, tried hard to push forward and get past this mental defense emplaced by one of the telepaths from Earth. But, despite their efforts, they found they were unable to do so.

*"Þór, this is Emma Frost!"* The voice in Þór's head tried once more to get through to him. *"We have never met, but I am here with Captain America and others to help you. I am currently trying to protect your mind from the assault of the Shadows, the enemy that has been manipulating you all for so long. But I need you to trust me. Whatever they are showing you, none of it is real! And you can do more for your people working with the rest of us rather than just haring off on your own! Return to the battlefield, please!"*

"I know you not!" Þór bellowed, finally answering, something the distant Emma was thankful for even if she only understood the words through her

telepathy. Thankfully the roiling fury in the Asgardian prince's mind subsided a moment later, and now she could sense fully coherent thoughts too, enough to put together the full sentence anyway, even as he continued to roar the words aloud. "I shall not listen to thee! For all I know, you are more of the Shadows' ilk. I will not listen, and I will make my own way! I am Þór! No amount of illusion magic or other trickeries can stop me!"

*"Damn it, they're trying to make you fall into that big honking gorge thing!"* Emma exclaimed, having taken a brief moment to ride the senses of the goats pulling Þór's chariot above the battle. As animals, it was easy to do so, and when she had, Emma had seen a massive crevice a few hundred yards from where Þór was thrashing about.

*"Think Þór. You can tell when your swing that hammer of yours, can't you? Your hitting nothing, you're doing **nothing!** I am fighting off their attempts to invade your mind, Þór, but if you don't believe what I'm saying, the Shadows' magic-based illusions will lead you to fall into that crevice. I don't know if it would kill you or not, but I'm not willing to take that chance"* Emma retorted, shouting the words into his mind. *"What do I have to do to get you to trust me?"*

"Nothing! You are but a voice in my head, how can I trust such?! How could I trust anything that I cannot see or feel against my skin! And now, even that is suspect?!" Þór's voice was now a shriek, tears of frustration coming to his eyes as Mjolnir once more went through a stone jotun without any feeling of impact. But even still, he couldn't tell truth from illusion without at least attempting to strike what was before him.

So he continued to swing, continued to dance around, never thinking to question the illusions of his dead family and friends around him, all while moving closer to the gorge. The same gorge that the Bridge of True Beauty had previously spanned, a truly bottomless crevice that would drop Þór out into the nothingness between the dimensions.

Emma growled under her breath back at the base camp and poured more of her attention into the fight around Þór, keeping his mind, if not his senses, free of influence from the Shadows. The last thing they could afford would be to have the Shadows break into Þór's mind and implant within him the same sort of full memory replacement and mental control that they had done to Heimdall. *Worse,*

*their illusion magic is deadly enough, just like we saw when we arrived at the Asgardian's main camp.*

While she was able to keep her defenses between Þór and the Shadows' assaults on the Astral plane intact, their magical strikes continued unabated as Þór moved through a small copse of trees. Seeming to have learned as they went, the Shadows had directed their illusions to place Þór somewhere his strikes would find purchase. Now, whenever he swung his hammer, he could feel it connecting with the trees around him, smashing them into splinters. Meanwhile, lightning and wind whirled all around him as the weather responded to his orders to strike the enemies he could see around him. These vanished like the mirages they were, only succeeding in sapping away his time and energy, while his feet carried him onward toward his doom.

How long this went on, neither Emma, who was still shouting into Þór's mind for him to trust her, nor Þór, who stalwartly ignored her, could tell. But eventually, thanks to Harry's orders and Clea taking up the defense of the main base camp, Stephen Strange was released to head towards Þór. With an exasperated and rapidly exhausting Emma directing him where to go, he soon found the Asgardian prince.

"Hold Þór!" the Sorcerer Supreme—a title Stephen had long since stopped using after making Harry's acquaintance—shouted. With several waves of his hands, and a cry of "By the eye of the Ancient One, let us see true!" the illusions around Þór began to dissipate like dust in the wind.

Þór stared as the fragments of the world around him faded, bringing the nightmare he had been seeing of friends and family dead all around him with them, then looked up at the human now hovering in the air above him. Glaring at the man, he cocked back Mjolnir, ready to throw once more. "And why should I believe you, stranger?! The angry woman's voice in my head has yet to give me any reason to trust her, and now you appear above me as the other illusions fade? How do I know that you are not the same as they who cast such in the first place? How do I know if you do not serve my enemies?"

*Both philosophical and paranoid I see,* Stephen reflected drolly, wincing at how close Þór had come to falling into the canyon and thus beyond the eyes of

men and gods alike. *Barely ten more yards, and I would have been too late. Still, Balder told me how to get him to agree to trust me, so there's still hope.*

“When you and Balder were younger, the two of you got in trouble for trying to steal Freya’s jewelry on a dare. You hid them in the kennel of a young human jarl, and you attempted to convince Balder to try and put the blame on Loki, only he refused. Freya found her jewels and then thrashed the both of you with a switch of holly. Later, when you lost Mjolnir, Loki helped you reclaim it by dressing you up as a woman. You were the ugliest woman to ever exist, but the stone Lord Prym seemed to find you comely enough. He actually tried to kiss you before you could find your hammer, something that you only confessed to Balder when deep in your cups when trying to drown the memory.”

Þór hesitated, and when he spoke, his tone was equal parts fear, hope, and embarrassment, a faint flush on his bare cheeks even as his red-rimmed eyes remained grimly locked on the strange man before him. “You... you could have stolen both tales from my brother’s mind. Or even my own mind!”

“Perhaps, but would you agree that whoever has been controlling you and your folk could not do so while you were on Earth?”

“...” Þór lowered his hammer slightly, sifting through his memories before slowly nodding in agreement. “Tis true. Looking back on it, I did feel as if I were freer to be myself while on Midgard.”

“And you had a few adventures while last there, did you not? Alongside other heroes, such as Benjamin Grimm or Captain America, or the Hulk, who you even fought several times. Indeed, you put the maddened Hulk down when he was attacking the human country called Canada as well, correct?”

“You are simply telling me things I already know stranger, but they are not secrets that can prove that you and I are fighting against the same enemy,” Þór growled, his knuckles around Mjolnir going white. “You claim to know me and come from Midgard. But even if t’were true, it would not mean that you are fighting alongside my folk or me.”

Now it was Stephen’s turn to sigh in annoyance. “What would allow me to prove that I am on your side, Þór? I have another somewhat more embarrassing story about you attempting to sleep with a human woman that Amora, the

Enchantress, told me about. If you don't already believe me, then as I remember, the story goes—”

“No need to bring that up!” Þór shouted, blushing with even more discomfiture than he had earlier when Stephen had spoken about his most embarrassing adventure as a young man. Instead, the Thunderer held up Mjolnir, pointing at Stephen with it. “Come down here and swear on my hammer you are here to aide my people and me. Only then will I believe you.”

Shrugging his shoulders, Stephen floated down towards Þór, landing lightly using his magic. As he did so, he also had to constantly flick his hands this way and that, again and again, to dissipate illusions as they rose up around them. The Sorcerer Supreme held still otherwise as he did so while Þór watched on, saying nothing but staring straight at Stephen resolutely.

As they too watched on, the Shadows were not pleased, rather, they howled in fury. With Odin and Malekith teleported out of Asgard, they'd concentrated much of their attention on Þór. More and more illusions—visual, audial, olfactory—abounded as the Shadows used the same trick they had against the combined might of Clea and Harry. Instead of a few large illusions, they focused on a multitude of smaller ones, forcing Strange to expend an equally large number of small spells to deal with each of them separately.

At the same time, back at the base camp, Emma nearly cried out in pain, blood dripping from her nose as the attack on Þór's mind redoubled in an instant. Instead of a roiling mass of fog, the attack now became like a tsunami, crushing inwards, unstoppable. In response, Emma raised her diamond-like wall around Þór's mind once more, now concentrating her full attention on protecting the Asgardian prince's mind from the Shadows.

She barely noticed as Eir, one of Freya's Vanir handmaidens and goddess of healing, placed her hands on either side of Emma's head. Meanwhile, another handmaiden held up a flask to Emma's lips, while nearby Charles and Jean grimaced under a renewed attack on the camp.

Still, they had one another to fall back on, even if Charles was now also assisting Xian in protecting Team Fishermen at the same time. Emma was facing more than half of the total might of the current mental assault alone, and that,

combined with the toll of having been fighting on the Astral Plane since arriving in Asgard, was having a major impact.

“As soon as it is possible, this young human woman, the redhead, and even the odd purple-haired woman must be given time to rest so I can properly heal them,” Eir murmured to her Lady, who was nearby. “Whatever they are doing is straining their minds fiercely and I can feel their psyches slowly unraveling. I know not if my powers will be enough to keep their brains whole if they continue at this pace for much longer.”

‘As soon as possible might not be for quite some time, dear Eir,’ Freya said, patting the younger goddess on the shoulder before striding out at a call from beyond her tent. Outside, she found the next batch of wounded delivered by magic carpet. The draugr assault had cost the Einherjar and their new allies sorely. “Do the best you can. That is all even a queen can ask of anyone,” she murmured, before metaphorically rolling up her sleeves and getting to work triaging the wounded alongside her other healers. As she toiled saving lives, she saw that the two healers from Midgard, the woman Amelia and the woman who-was-not-human called Una were also helping.

Balder and Steve, meanwhile, had assumed joint command of the Einherjar-expeditionary force. The wounded had been loaded up onto the magic carpets, and each magic carpet had since made several trips while the rest of the able-bodied Einherjar and their allies had made their way back to the camp over land. Already, forces of ODMs could be seen in the distance, moving forward to take up patrols around the area.

Back with Þór and Stephen, the Sorcerer Supreme clapped one hand down on Mjolnir while the other still cast anti-illusion spells. “I, Stephen Strange, am here in Asgard to help free the Asgardians from the beings who have dictated their destinies and lives for hundreds of years. I am on your side, Þór Odinson.”

Þór stared, then laughed, and reached out, grabbing Stephen and pulling him into a bear hug that nearly broke his ribs and spine. So complete was his relief to have found an ally he could trust, he completely ignored the number of illusions that rose up to try and grab his attention while the strange human couldn’t move to dispel them. He even shook off the smell of roasting boar coming from nearby. “Excellent! I thank you truly! You and yours, you brought me

my belt and Mjolnir, didn't you? And with them, I am invincible!" The redheaded Þór paused, looking somewhat sheepish. "So long as I can truly see my foes at any rate."

"That is all well and good, but you will be down one ally if you keep squeezing me!" Stephen wheezed, turning blue around the edges. Þór, snorting humorously, dropped him to his feet.

Staring up at the Thunder God, Stephen touched his ribs gingerly, thinking that perhaps he should look into that Magia Erebea bodysuit that Harry used in the future. "I take it that you believe me then? I wasn't aware that your hammer had the mystical property of being able to tell the truth from lies. I would've thought that would be more Odin or Tyr's sphere of influence."

Þór snorted again, shaking his head and holding up Mjolnir, tapping it lightly against Stephen's shoulder as the other man stood up straight. "Nay, tis that you are real. None of the other illusions I've been facing had any substance. And it would be a very daring foe who would willingly place his hand upon my hammer."

"Really? Because given that story I was telling earlier, it seems to have been stolen off of you at least once," Stephen replied tartly, realizing now that Þór had bluffed him. The Asgardian prince had wanted to believe him due to the secrets he had mentioned. All he'd really needed was a bit more proof of Stephen's character, and his physicality, and he'd been willing to take the plunge.

Running one hand through his red locks, Þór paused as he felt his baby-smooth face. *Needs must I grow a beard posthaste! Why ever did these Shadow creatures have to take away my beard, of all things?* "T'was not stolen from my person at that point. And there is a vast difference between lifting it and wielding Mjolnir with the full might of the weapon. Indeed, without access to my gloves and my belt, even I would not be able to wield the full power of Mjolnir. But come!" he laughed wildly, a fey, burning light appearing in his eyes. "Lead me to our foes!"

Stephen turned away, dealing with several more illusion attacks, while Emma, her mind healed somewhat from the sudden push earlier by Eir, reported

to him and Þór both what was going on elsewhere. *“I’ll be directing the two of you toward the ocean to join Team Fishermen against Jörmungandr there.”*

Þór’s eyes narrowed, and a noticeable lightning aura appeared around him as he snarled. “Lead me to him!”

Once the Thunderer was back aboard his goat-powered transport, Stephen kept pace with his chariot while dealing with the continued attacks from the Shadows with ease. Dissipating illusions took but a scant moment of concentration and power from him, and so he was able to concentrate on the topic Þór most wanted to know about, explaining in detail what they had been doing since arriving in Asgard and why the expeditionary force was there at all.

The idea that his cousin—with the return of the real Mjolnir and the last Item of Power, the false memories within Þór had been broken, so he knew that Loki was not his brother but rather his uncle—had taken up with a human seidr-man was startling. Hearing that, he vowed to speak to this Harry Power the next time they saw one another. *If Loki is not here to look after the girl, someone must step in to do so. It is only right!*

In turn, Þór asked the one question that had been uppermost in his mind, the reason behind much of his fury with the Shadows. “You know this enemy better than I, their motivations, their thoughts. Tell me, Strange, why were my children slain? Why were they slain instead of enslaved like the rest of us, like my wife and I?”

The now-redheaded thunder God shook his head, gripping the reins of his chariot tight. Only the enchantments upon them made the leather reins resist his strength, although the grinding of leather on leather was so loud it might have hurt Stephen’s ears if he had been on the chariot with Þór. “Never would I have thought to be in a position to wish that my children were enslaved. But if enslaved, they could be freed. But dead is dead. With my true memories returned, I know that at least three were slain in that last, terrible battle. Yet so too were many others, who I know were then revived to serve these Shadows eternal. And as to the fate of my daughter, of Þrúðr, I know nothing at all.”

“...” Stephen was silent for a few moments, a wordless gesture of commiseration for Þór’s grief before assaying a response. “Perhaps they did not

fit the mold? I cannot speak as to their plans, nor why they decided to implant memories to make it appear as if Loki was your brother instead of Odin's, but perhaps it is tied into the fact that you were not married to Sif in their false, constructed life, correct? Perhaps they wanted you unfettered by familial love."

To Stephen's astonishment, Þór actually blushed, looking down at the chariot below him. "Indeed, it is true that we were not married in this new life the Shadows foisted upon us. And in the main, tis perhaps a good thing, else our wedding vows would be for naught. Still, perhaps some good can come from this. The two of us will have a chance to rebuild, together again, once this is all over."

Þór's flush disappeared, and he shook his head sadly. "In truth, we will need to lean on one another for strength when Sif is similarly freed of her false memories as I became when I touched my belt and Mjolnir both."

Stephen winced at that and moved through the air to pat the larger man on the shoulder before pulling slightly ahead, dealing with a massive cloud of illusion magic ahead of them before it could form into whatever trick or trap the Shadows were attempting to use. "Then come. The sooner we deal with the giant serpent, the sooner we are one step closer to ending this and the Shadows once and for all."

**OOOOOOO**

Leaping between the dimensions was not something Fenrir would ever wish to do again. The feeling of weightlessness and the lack of anything beyond himself to see, smell, or hear had hammered his mind hard. Indeed, he had grasped at the scent of blood, sweat, and unknown spice that came from Dani as she rode upon his back to keep his mind intact. There were some things even the consciousness of the smartest animal, and for all his deific blood, Fenrir was an animal, could not endure.

But eventually, the horror ended as his momentum carried him from the dimensional bubble of Utgard/Asgard and into the much smaller dimension of Svartalfheim. Just feeling air whip through his fur was enough to cause him to let out a loud yip of joy. "AT last!"

Even as he fell through the sky of the realm of the dark elves, he was sniffing wildly, breathing in deeply and feeling the wind in his face with a

delighted expression pulling on his canine features. So overcome with just feeling again after the utter nothing of the leap was he that that the young wolf—and though fully grown now, Fenrir was still quite young— forgot that he would have to land.

Instead of landing on his feet, the young wolf bellyflopped more than anything else, smashing trees and the ground with such force that he created a small crater around him. Well, small in relation to his own body anyway, which was of course quite large to most anyone else. Shaking his head somewhat woozily, Fenrir pushed himself to his feet, wincing a hair at the small wounds on his stomach that Garm had left him, the only real injuries he'd taken in the small battle against the humans who had come looking for him.

Turning his head, Fenrir sniffed at Dani's unconscious form, still on his back. He was grateful that she still smelled alive at least. The armor she wore was undoubtedly keeping her in one piece, but she was alive. That was good enough for now. *I will do as I said and fight her enemies, but I will not reveal my underbelly to the Asgardians! Mayhaps I could bear to see my sister, or even our half-brother Sleipnir, but none of the others. And... if the humans come to retrieve her, that would be all well and good. Until then, I will continue to guar—that is, carry her like the burden she is. It isn't like I enjoyed her song or the feeling of having a packmate for once. No, no! It is just a debt, for she did overcome the challenge we agreed upon.*

With that firmly in mind, Fenrir stood up, taking in the surrounding terrain. He quickly discovered that he'd found himself in a very... strange place. The grass and ground underneath him seemed normal enough, it matched what could be found in Utgard before Jörmungandr's poison had begun to spread. But beyond that, everything was so different. Trees of what appeared to be metal and glass rose in seemingly random places. Some of them were obviously made things, others... not so much. Mixed in between these trees were other trees whose bark was as black as night. This second type was far thinner than the metal or glass trees, which were as wide as Fenrir was across.

At the foot of some of those pitch black trees were various entrances into what Fenrir's nose was telling him was a vast underground cave system. As he moved through the strange forest, the giant wolf came upon a few houses on the

actual surface. From many of these structures came the sharp smell of metal, much like the trees, only slightly different. Less... alive? *How bizarre, the metal trees are alive? I could've sworn iron and steel were an ore and alloy rather than a plant...*

Fenrir's mind was in a very odd place at that moment. The hunger-madness had been a part of his being for so long that its removal under Dani's mutant power had resulted in a constant near-euphoric feeling within the young wolf. His nominally serious mien had given way to an almost pup-like delight. He was able to simply enjoy his life at present to a degree he couldn't ever remember doing so before.

But as Fenrir came upon the first few surface houses, out of both the entrances to the cave system and houses alike came the dark elves, as he'd half expected. First dozens appeared, then hundreds, all instantly casting their magic at the giant wolf. As they closed, they added using their weapons to the attack.

Neither worked. While magic could distract Fenrir's senses, and indeed a number did occasionally cause him to turn away to chase a ball of light or delicious smell, the attack spells simply collapsed against his fur, doing nothing. No dark elf, bar Malekith, had the strength to match a spellcaster such as Clea, and even her spells had not made much of an impression. If anything, she'd simply knocked him about, overcoming his weight and footing without doing much real harm.

The dark elves were also too one-dimensional in regards to their magic and how they used it during battle. Despite using their magic for mining, spells aimed at the ground or the area around them were few and far between and easy to break through. As for their physical weapons, those bounced off Fenrir's fur just as Garm's claws and the rest of the humans' weapons had.

*On the other hand, they are persistent if nothing else,* Fenrir growled to himself as he tore another group of dark elves to pieces. Smashing through a glass and steel tree a second later, he chomped down on two more and was still chewing as he raced toward several others, all of whom were shooting arrows and spellfire his way.

Halfway there, the ground underneath him collapsed, and Fenrir roared in rage as he fell through the air. This time though, he kept his wits about him and landed solidly on his feet. Looking around, he saw he'd ended up in a pit carved out of the underground tunnel system. With walls many stories high, Fenrir could barely see the top of the trap he'd fallen into. But halfway up its length, caves led off this magically created pit. In those cave entrances were more dark elves, all quick to toss down faggots of wood and spells of flames and spark.

They also poured down something else. From the smell of it, the concoction was some kind of oil that looked almost purple in the few sun's light high above. On top of this development, Fenrir also noticed that half of the fire spells raining down on him were some sort that created a blue flame. The fire from these odd spells clung to the seeping oil like a living thing.

Seeing this seemingly alive fire coming at him, Fenrir's animal mind began to lose its grip on its self-control. As powerful as he was, as strong and intelligent as Fenrir had grown, he was still an animal, as his reaction to the dimensional gap had made very clear to him. And all animals, bar anyway, held a natural fear of fire. Fenrir knew intellectually that no fire was hot enough to truly burn him. He'd proven that when he dealt with the flaming man the day before.

But the site of that blue flame particularly unmanned him, which unbeknownst to Fenrir, part of the blue flame's magic. "Use the Ógn-Bál, the Ógn-Bál!" shouted one of the magic-users. "More fear, more fire!"

Grimacing as the fear of the fire and the acrid odors of the growing conflagration filled his senses, Fenrir desperately clung to the memory of dealing with the flaming man, baring his teeth even as the fire at the bottom of the pit licked up his legs. Pushing his power into his massive limbs, he crouched then leaped, smashing into the side of the pit. Fangs gleaming in the firelight, he roared, "I will devour you all!"

Scrabbling for purchase, Fenrir snapped up two of the dark elves closest to his jaws, gulping them down. More importantly, he was able to push off the side of the pit and launch himself ever higher. Despite the dark elves attempting several times to make the sides of the pit slick or close up their cave entrances so as to not give Fenrir enough purchase to climb, Fenrir was soon out of the pit.

Howling in triumph, the giant wolf crashed into a war band of dark elves who'd been trying to close around the lip of the pit.

Even as he slew them, though, Fenrir noticed something strange. Thanks to Danielle's intervention, much of his innate curiosity had returned to him once his hunger-madness had been dealt with. When he'd been stalking farmers' herds in Utgard, he'd heard rumors that the Asgardians had fought a recent campaign against the dark elves. It was a very minor thing compared to the invasion of the fire jotun, but it still surprised him that there were still so many dark elves around in Svartalfheim after the casualties he'd heard they'd taken against Balder's forces.

Pausing for a moment, Fenrir looked around himself, standing amidst the destroyed remains of the warband. He easily ignored the light impact of arrows from elsewhere as he lowered his nose to a corpse at his feet. Sniffing at it, he snarled in irritation. There was far more wood and sap in this 'body' than bone or blood. "Some magical construct or other? How annoying. No wonder I am still so hungry. I thought perhaps it was just the nature of the dark elves that I could eat so many of their number and yet still crave more, but if only one out of every three has been flesh and blood, that would explain it."

Fenrir shrugged in a truly wolfish expression of philosophical amusement, seeing he had smashed what local defenses were there. Even so, his nose could detect in which direction the majority of the dark elves still resided. "Oh well, that just makes this more amusing."

And so, with his unconscious companion still strapped to him, Fenrir, the Wolf, destined to swallow the sun and Odin himself during Ragnarök, continued to rage through the lands of Svartalfheim, no longer affecting the war one in Asgard way or the other. For now, anyway. As Sigyn and Dani had discussed, it remained to be seen how long such a weapon could be left to sit unused...

**OOOOOOO**

All in all, Those Who Watch Above in Shadow were... not **pleased**, no, but perhaps quietly confident that they had at least stopped the cascade of losses that they had begun to suffer since the Midgard-borne humans had arrived. Although, this confidence wasn't entirely without cracks, of course. Since the

humans had entered Asgard, the Shadows had seen one setback after another. But the strategy of sacrificing pawns for time, and not directly challenging Harry Potter seemed to have worked to their benefit. So too did Malekith's suggestion and Odin had been whisked away before he could be saved.

They had done even better elsewhere, such as keeping the grief-stricken and headstrong Þór trapped in a series of illusions for much of the night even after he'd managed to break a majority of their bindings upon him. With the arrival of one of the other extremely powerful magic users from Earth, they might've failed to remove him from the board, but the Shadows were becoming somewhat philosophical about such things.

Yet, the Shadow's automatic response to that situation showed their long-term strategy was working. At that very moment, they could feel the tide on the Astral Plane slowly turning against their foes, the human telepaths. If the Shadows could continue to use their pawns effectively, it was only a matter of time before the telepaths protecting the Migardian humans and, more importantly, the Asgardians and their Einherjar would collapse. At that point, adroit utilization of mental domination and illusion magic would turn the humans and the Asgardian host against one another, leaving perhaps only Potter and the other more powerful magic users on their own.

Of course, there were still issues.

While they had nearly wiped out the group sent after Fenrir, apparently, most of those humans had already returned to and been healed at the war camp, from what they could sense. Worse, the one individual they had thought to be completely overmatched by the Wolf had somehow managed to break their mental control of him. He, in turn, had managed to leap across the dimensional gap and was now going on a rampage against the dark elves, slaughtering them like chaff.

However, beyond removing Fenrir from the equation, such a thing really didn't matter at the moment. The more annoying aspect of the situation was that they couldn't teleport him back. Mental commands, certainly, they send those innumerable at their leisure. Much like their continued assault on the Astral Plane, doing so would simply be a matter of time and concentration. Concentration, they had decided, they did not want to waste at that moment due

to their desire to keep up the pressure on the human telepaths. Furthermore, Fenrir had so much natural magical resistance that it would take an inordinate amount of power to move him from one dimension to another.

And at the moment, the main problem the Shadows were realizing they faced was that they were taking a huge hit to their magical reserves.

While the Shadows had started this war with a truly monstrous well of power, well beyond what even most Elder Gods could draw upon, the loss of two of their tethers—one dead, the other useless due to distance—severely limited their energy intake. The Shadows themselves could create magic, it was true, but the amount they generated, and the limited flow they were absorbing from the Asgardians, minus Hela and now Þór, as well as the splashes of power from the deaths of any Asgardians who'd been slain so far was not enough to keep up with the demand. Illusions were easier to create than teleporting people or a worthwhile fear spell, but even sticking strictly with their phantasms, the Shadows knew they were losing strength they could not afford.

Frankly, it seemed as if this Ragnarök had become a race. Which would run out first, the Shadows' ability to use any means beyond telepathy to attack their foes or those foes' telepathic defenses?

But then, one amongst the Shadows pointed out that they did still have Odin. The implications took a moment to sink into the rest of the Shadows, but soon they all saw the opportunity their planning had presented them. It was not one they would normally take, no, but it might well be necessary in these troubled, unusual times. Odin was, after all, a major wellspring of power, nearly thirty percent of what they could passively draw from the Asgardians still living. And just because they personally could not create the means to which that passivity could be shifted to aggressive did not mean that their pawns were so limited.

Quickly, Malekith, who had been teleported to Muspellheim along with his prize, felt the Shadows reaching into his mind. Instead of only words this time, there were also images. *“These are runes of power. You will use them and your own knowledge of the craft to create a magical array that will siphon off Odin’s power.”*

*“Oh, how delightfully delicious!”* Malekith exclaimed, going over the images in his mind’s eye, already beginning to put together the runic array that he would need. *“So long as Surtur has a sufficiently large and enclosed room in his hovel of a palace, I see no issues with this. It might take me an hour or more, but it is certainly doable. But... why not expand on this idea? Set up traps using these runes elsewhere? And why haven’t you tried to use something like this before now?”*

*“That is a possibility once you have completed this primary task,”* the Shadows answered brusquely, although they did not hold onto any great hope that this idea of theirs would work on someone like Potter or any Asgardian they were not already keeping unconscious. These interloping humans seemed too wily, too intelligent when it came to magic to fall for something like that. And as for the Asgardians, to make that kind of runic array a tactical weapon, Malekith would have to set it up on the battlefield, where not only the humans would spot it, but even the dullest Asgardian would be able to tell a trap was present.

The Shadows completely ignored Malekith’s second question. The reason for their not using something like this before this moment was because the idea simply wouldn’t have occurred to them. And frankly, even the power they would get from draining Odin to the point of death would be but drops compared to the ocean of power they would take from the Asgardians as a whole when they succeeded in finishing this Ragnarök as it should be.

Of course, they had been forced to sup on some of that power already. Many Asgardians had already died in the war so far, and their deaths, and indeed the second deaths of their Asatru followers, had fed the Shadows. But they had not yet managed to kill any of the more powerful gods or goddesses of the pantheon, and that had made using so much of their stockpile to create the draugr a mistake they were now paying for.

On the bright side, draining Odin so proactively had no impact on the compact that the Skyfather and the other Asgardians had signed with the Shadows all those centuries ago to help them flee from Midgard. So long as the old fool didn’t die, and as long as someone else was doing the work, the Shadows could benefit while still keeping to their agreement. Still, it was obvious even now that using any such runic array that Malekith could come up with would not give

them nearly as much power as if Odin were to die. Like any other sacrifice-based magic, the moment of death, what could be called the Last Gasp of Life perhaps, where the willpower, life, vitality, and magic of an individual were all released, that moment right before the soul was fully severed, that was when the most power could be harvested.

Souls too, could be... recycled. Their power could be drawn away along with their memories. But the souls of the Asgardians who'd survived the first Ragnarök were inviolate. This was partially because of the agreement that the Shadows had made with them. All Asgardians, and indeed every other creature or individual within the dimensions connected to Yggdrasil's branches who had signed that fateful compact with the Shadows would be kept from the wheel, allowed to be reborn so that they could continue their lives again once Ragnarök had passed.

But beyond that, dealing with souls would inevitably draw the direct interest of the most horrid of the Endless. And like many of those who had given up their mortality and the equivalent of what would pass as humanity to cheat their ends, the last thing the Shadows wanted was to draw the personal attention of Death. That was a line the Shadows would move towards but would never willingly cross unless there were no other options.

Realizing that there was no reply forthcoming, Malekith shrugged his shoulders and looked around at the group of four jotun who had come out to meet him once he'd arrived at Surtur's castle. He gestured for them to pick up Odin, snickering to himself. "And don't bother being gentle with that one. We merely need him alive. If you bounce his head a dozen times or more off the floors and walls, well, that will hardly matter in the end."

**OOOOOOO**

"You are all so annoying!" Jörmungandr bellowed, snapping his jaws this way and that as he tried to catch one of the gnats buzzing around him in his jaws, one paw lashing out at another, and another paw scratched at his side where at one of the insects had just alighted. All of his attacks missed, and the serpent bellowed in fury, dispersing a cloud of noxious fumes. Even that was dodged and he was paid back in kind by a strike that barely missed his eye, the massive orb only saved by a last-minute twitch to the side before a tiny hatchet crashed down

upon his scales. The weapon did no lasting injury, but the momentum alone jarred Jörmungandr's eye socket a bit too much for his liking.

The giant serpent flicked his head upwards, sending Thunderbird flying, but his waiting magic carpet flew under him, directed there by the spell that placed on the carpets to make them follow whoever sat on them last. Jörmungandr attempted to follow up and eat the gnat, but he found himself blinded by an arcing blast of sub-zero wind and a flensing blade of wind crashing into the side of his head, twisting his body aside. Even that didn't do much more than sting horribly, but it still irritated him.

"Even annoyances can eventually bring down a beast like you," Storm growled from on high. Jörmungandr reared up in response, trying to bite at her, but she simply flew higher, blasting him in return with hurricane-force gales until the serpent crashed down headfirst onto the frozen ocean below.

His breath coming in great billowing clouds, the Hulk raced forward and was able to land a number of solid blows against Jörmungandr's snout, causing the serpent to growl in anger before he could lift himself back up. It was then the Hulk's turn to face a breath attack, a torrent of water crashing into him and sending him staggering backward two steps before he could thrust his hands before him, dispersing the water.

Thundra and the Thing crashed down from on high, landing on a section of the beast's long sinuous back, each of them armed with a harpoon. These they started to work underneath a pair of giant scales before hammering them furiously. The sudden piercing of his flesh caused the World Serpent to hiss in pain.

Mind you, this would be akin to the result of amateur acupuncture for a normal human, painful certainly, but not life-threatening. Jörmungandr turned aside from where he had been trying to breathe the Hulk to death, twisting down on his own body and bringing his jaws to bear on the two harpoon users. At the last second, both leaped away, Thundra using the broom she'd strapped to her back and the Thing being grabbed out of the air by his magic carpet.

"Again with the Aladdin vibes," Ben laughed as he raced away from the serpent, who raged and roared. Several of Jörmungandr's legs came up to try and

slash at them again, but Rogue quickly made a go for his eye again, regaining his full attention . “Not that I’m complaining, mind you!”

Above and to the side of the main battle, the Scarlet Witch laughed somewhat brokenly as she dealt with another wave of illusions before they could disrupt another round of attacks. “If you were, I’d probably send a hex at your ass! This is hard enough as it is, and I don’t know about you, but it doesn’t seem like we’re winning here!”

“You all have it easy!” Xian growled, her normally placid nature in stark abeyance at the moment. She and Emma Steed were being hard-pressed on the Astral Plane, and it was all they could do to keep the Shadows from getting to the members of Team Fishermen. Neither were powerhouses like Charles or Jean, and each mental assault battered away at their fortitude a piece at a time.

“Remember everyone, you have Pepper-up potions, don’t be afraid to use them!” Storm ordered, joining in with the Scarlet Witch to dispatch another magical assault, this one much larger in scope than the last. Hundreds, then thousands of small illusions. These phantasms were mostly of Jörmungandr twitching the opposite way he was actually doing so, crafted to fool the attackers into making mistakes. Thankfully, Storm and the Scarlet Witch both had ways to dispatch large numbers of spells at once.

*“Have no fear,”* Charles’ voice suddenly boomed through the two wavering telepaths’ minds as his astral presence appeared beside their own. Holding up his hand, the elder mutant’s power flared out, blocking the incoming assault from the Shadows wholesale. Indeed, he not only pushed it back, but also created an almost dome-like structure around Team Fishermen one and all. *“I am here. You are not alone. The assaults on the main camp have slowly subsided. I believe this is because Harry and Hela failed in their part of the operation. However, that allows for me to come and aid you more directly.”*

While Xian nearly collapsed backward onto her magic carpet, fingers fumbling for her pouch and the Pepper-up potion inside, Emma Steed tried to act a little more refined as she reached for her own. Unfortunately for her, the utter relief she felt at the elder telepath’s presence was far too easy to discern on the Astral Plane. Storm, however, was more than a little concerned about what the professor had just revealed. “Harry and Hela failed?”

*“Unfortunately, it is so. The Shadows were able to hold the two off long enough for one of their agents to spirit Odin away. We don’t know for what purpose besides the obvious of keeping us deprived of him, but all the same we could not free him from their chains. Where we go from here will depend on how long it takes the Thunderer and Stephen to get to you and what Harry and Queen Freya decides our next move should be.”*

**OOOOOOO**

The Shadows were not the only ones able to innovate. Harry had already shown that with his creation of an anti-illusion spell that created a zone which continually rejected all types of illusions within its sphere of influence that followed him around. A few moments after Malekith and Odin had disappeared, Harry innovated again, reaching out to Jean. *“Let me use your eyes, love. If I can see where you are, I can memorize it and then teleport to you, like I’ve done with Hedwig in the past.”*

Much like everyone else who used teleportation, Harry had to memorize the location he was going to teleport to. If they had been on Earth, he could have used Ororo’s methodology to go both ways and saved himself a lot of time, maybe. It was an open question if a Gaia-taught spell would work through Asgard’s defensive wards. Regardless, as they were not on Earth, that had been a mute point.

Jean wearily answered in the affirmative but also asked, *“What about Freya and her wards? I thought they had put up anti-teleportation protections around the camp?”*

*“Blocking teleportation completely is easier said than done since every magical school has their own various ways of going about it. I doubt Freya or the others have dealt with Apparition before,”* Harry soothed, *“Tell her and the rest we’re coming in, though. That’s just polite.”*

*“Okay, we’ll try it. But if Hela hurls when she arrives, I’m blaming you,”* Jean quipped back, some actual humor coming across the connection. It went without saying that her weary voice carried the utter relief she felt at her husband’s imminent arrival.

Jean took a break from the telepathic side of the war to send a runner to Freya. She rolled her head slightly to one side, feeling her body ache from being set in one position for far too long. Turning onto her side—or more accurately, rolling—she rubbed her large belly for a second, taking a measure of peace from the action as she looked at the far corner of the command tent, which was currently empty. *“Ready, love.”*

With that, Jean opened herself the link with her husband and shared her sight with Harry, feeling his presence beyond her own eyes, feeling his avatar appearing within her mental realm. A moment later, the empty spot in the tent was no longer empty as Harry, Hela, and an unknown and very trussed up large man suddenly appeared in front of her with a loud *\*crack!\**

True to Jean’s prediction, Hela stumbled, falling to one knee and began heaving. At the same time, Harry fell flat on his face. But while Hela stayed where she was, her eyes clenched tightly behind her mask, Harry pushed to his feet, moving over to give Jean a hug as if the tumble hadn’t happened at all. *“That worked quite well, I think,”* he murmured into her hair, looking over at Emma, Charles, and Betsy worriedly, especially when he saw the Asgardian goddess still attending his White Queen. *“Thank you, love.”*

Betsy, Tony and Johnny had been recalled hours ago. Emma and Jean had felt Dani’s unconscious mind hitting the edge of the dimensional gap, which stopped telepathic powers. Wherever Fenrir had taken her after Dani had somehow broken through his hunger-madness, she was out of reach for now.

Jean didn’t answer verbally, instead leaning up and kissing him lightly, not ardently. Jean desperately needed some reassurance right now, and she hugged her greatest source of comfort as if she never wanted to let him go.

Harry returned the kiss just as gently, then pulled away as Hela smacked him across the back in clear annoyance. *“What have I told you about teleporting me in that nature, my Seidr Man?”*

However, the moment of levity passed quickly as the goddess looked over to Jean, Emma, and Eir. Even Charles was sweating at this point; his face was locked in a grimace, his hands like claws digging into the armrests of his wheelchair. Even Betsy, who was basically working as backup for the more

powerful trio and only fighting off attacks on the camp rather than on the distant Team Fishermen or Pór, was looking much the worse for wear. It had been approximately half a day since the expeditionary force had arrived, and all of the telepaths had been in near-constant combat since then.

“Come, sister,” Hela said, moving forward as Harry stepped over towards Emma, her hand going around Jean’s expanded waist. “Sit back down. Let the handmaidens take care of you as best they may. Much rides on you and the others, but at least we can continue to make you comfortable and aid you as much as we can.”

“Do you have six or seven other telepaths we could rotate in?” Jean quipped, sarcasm as heavy as her weariness in her tone as she sat once more, leaning against Hela with a grateful smile for her support, both emotional and physical. Freya and the handmaidens and everyone in the camp had been solicitous of the needs of all three of the main telepaths, but that was a far cry from feeling a loved one’s arms around them.

“Would you like me to have Amelia come by and give you a massage, Charles?” Harry half-teased, looking over at the older telepath before turning back to Emma.

“If you would, I would be most grateful,” Charles answered, his voice unwontedly serious. “I have faced a foe like these Shadows before. Ironically enough, he went by the moniker The Shadow King. The knowledge I gained from surviving that conflict is giving me an edge the others lack, but the raw anger and power of these Shadows dwarfs that of my old foe by orders of magnitude.”

“Oooh, Steve and a shoulder rub for me if you’re taking orders, Harry!” Betsy joked, raising a chuckle from the tent’s occupants.

“I’ll see about that in a moment.” Freya announced upon entering the tent. The Queen nodded once to them all and thanked Jean for warning her ahead of time that Harry and Hela would be returning magically.

“While I did not get enough of a feel for that magic well enough to construct a new working against such, I did still sensed the spell as your arrived. I understand you have some talent as a healer as well, Harry? If so, might I request

your aid for a moment? While Amelia, Una, and my own ladies are doing well enough, more hands are always helpful.”

“I’ll be there in a moment.” Nodding, Harry leaned down to squeeze Emma’s hand, looking at Eir. “How is she?”

“Well enough for now. But I think that if this battle goes on o’er long, then all of these, what is those with mental powers called, telepaths? If their battle goes on longer than a quarter day more, some of the damage to their brains will become permanent,” Eir warned. “My magic is keeping the worst at bay for now, but there is only so much healing one can do on a mind while it is still locked in combat.”

Wincing, Harry leaned down before pressing his lips to Emma’s forehead. “I’ll be back, love.”

With that, Harry left the tent with Freya, who showed him where the wounded were being treated. As he worked, Harry filled her in on what they had run into.

Freya listened gravely, shaking her head sadly as she looked over at where Heimdall was being dragged away by four dverggar. Harry had bound him with magical force, and under Freya’s order, the Asgardian watchman would be further tied up by the dwarves, although it was distressing to see so doughty a warrior being treated so.

“I do not like the fact these Shadows have shown us several times now that controlling so many of my people is but child’s play for them,” Freya scowled, biting at one long fingernail. “If I had any doubt about their existence after the draugr attack, this would have put it to rest. And that annoys me all the more. What else have they done? What else will we discover is false of our own memories? And worse, who else will be revealed to be but constructs of magic and torn souls?”

Nearby, Amora, the Enchantress, shivered and looked away. She had been busy with several of the elves putting down wards of warning and other traps in the forest beyond the camp's outer edge, just in case the Shadows decided to teleport more forces in to attack them from long range. But she had returned a moment ago, just in time to hear that comment.

*Blast it all. What will happen to me once the Shadows have been defeated? Unless all I have learned of souls, life, and the magics thereof has been utterly wrong, it is unlikely that I will just disappear completely. Yet even so, will I be allowed to go back to my life on Earth?* Amora was still of the firm opinion she had been conscripted into this war against her own will and would like nothing better than to return to her life on Earth as soon as possible.

While there were no servants or worshippers waiting for her there, so much more was possible! Clothing, sights, sounds, beaches, perfume, food. No, whatever else happened, Amora was determined to return to Earth and be happy. *No matter if I might have begun as a... a split off soul shard I am my own person now, damn it!*

Somewhat away from this narrowly avoided existential crisis, Harry finished helping the healers attend to the most seriously wounded in about forty minutes. Luckily, Team Fisherman's efforts had already had an effect. With the Vanir Njord's efforts combined with their continued harassment of the World Serpent, all of the miasma in the atmosphere around the area of the camp had been pushed away. With clean air returned, the remaining wounded could be left to Una, Amelia, and the local healers without concern.

*At least, until Garm arrives,* Harry thought ruefully. *I rather doubt that he will be in a very good mood.*

Meanwhile, the able-bodied Einherjar had returned to camp, joining the ODMs, teleporters, and flyers who had all reached the camp hours back. Leaving the logistics of food and bedding to the Alfar, Freya led the way back to the command tent, thinking on what Harry had said earlier.

"You are certain that the noncombatants in Asgard will remain relatively unharmed?"

"We made certain they were at least in no danger of breaking anything or otherwise hurting themselves once the spells binding them in place faded. We might not have the time to deal with them at present but keeping them out of harm's way was easy enough," Harry answered in the affirmative. "Hell, they might all have to be put through the same kind of treatment that Emma did originally with Hela to be truly free for all we know. Not only would that be a

major drain on our telepath's energy, but the Shadows have proven far more tricky than we'd expected. The last thing we want to do is give them more time to work with."

"Then my next question is, what could they be using my husband for?" Freya mused, biting at her fingernail once more, an obvious sign of the queen's nerves. "Was it just to keep you from freeing him? If so, that would by itself make some sense. Yet, I cannot help but feel that his abduction is simply a part of a larger scheme."

"Agreed," Harry nodded, reflecting that if Odin had been a human leader, then the idea of keeping him as a hostage would make sense. As it was, the very idea was

"This is so demeaning," Emma whimpered, although she didn't put up any real objections and opened her mouth when Harry used a fork to pick up a bit of savory meat on a fork.

Moments later, her eyes rolled back into her skull as she returned the majority of her concentration to the extremely distant Þór, leaving her body entirely in Harry's hands. He nodded over at Eir, who wordlessly placed her hands on either side of Emma's head once more. Harry continued to feed her from the full plate of food he'd brought, capping it off with a large chalice of water and the Pepper-up potion.

Nearby, Amelia did the same for Charles, while Betsy had to look after herself for the moment. Jean giggled at Emma's expression, watching with amusement as their man took care of the normally proud and self-sufficient woman. Hela, meanwhile, had already left to meet with Balder and some of the other commanders as they came into the tent, interested to know how the main conflict was going.

The good-humored atmosphere of easy camaraderie in the tent ended abruptly, however, moments later as Hela let out a bone-chilling shriek. It was a wordless cry of pure fury, like the world's largest raptor on a very bad day coupled with the rage of a woman who had just returned home and found someone had filled her entire house full of trash. "What?! What do you mean the dead rose en-masse?!"

“Balder means precisely what he says,” Freya interjected coolly, turning away from the map to address Hela’s outrage. As she did, the Asgardian queen reflected she hadn’t seen Hela in the flesh for many centuries before this crisis, and the goddess of love and war had to admit that she quite liked how the woman had changed in that intervening time. “After you all had left the Einherjar and our allied forces began to reorganize and bury the dead. Those dead suddenly arose as they were doing so, attacking all in turn both upon the battlefield and here. Between the formidable magic of that human Strange and my own efforts, we were able to create a spell to protect the area around the base camp eventually, and I was able to spread its influence beyond, but it was hard going.”

“We had to fend for ourselves for a long time before the... the denial field I guess you could call it, arrived,” Cyclops added, shaking his head. “We lost more ODM troopers to the draugr than we had since arriving, thirty-three dead, and they nearly caught Nightcrawler and Uzume several times too.”

“It was like something out of a horror film. On top of our dead we had seventy more were teleported away thanks to their arrays. They are now back on their feet, thanks to Lady Eir and you, Harry. Tony says he should have the broken suits repaired quickly, too,” Steve reported, shaking his head in admiration and gesturing to one of the tent’s walls in the direction of a distant segment of the central camp. Even from here, the sounds of furious blacksmithing could be heard. “I have a list of the final dead, and we were able to get the bodies back this time, thankfully, although...”

“Many of the dead killed by the draugr also then rose to assault their former friends as well,” Balder intoned sorrowfully. “Twas a harsh test for our warriors, to face friends and family risen from the dead, a test that nearly overcame the Einherjar.”

While Hela set to pacing back and forth, her voice a low murmur of sheer affronted fury, Harry could only nod sadly. “We will make certain that all of our dead are buried with full military honors when we get back to Earth.” He then looked over at Amelia, who, besides being there to pamper Charles a bit, was also there to speak on behalf of the expeditionary force's logistical side of things. “How are we on logistics?”

“You would have to ask Tony for most of that. I only know the medical side of things. On that, however, we’re good.” Amelia looked up from her work on Charles’ insanely tight shoulders and smiled at Harry, admiration gleaming in the ex-pro-mutant terrorist’s eyes. “We have thirty-eight of the wounded ODMs still in our care due to utter exhaustion, along with Uzume and Johnny Storm. But they should be good as new with a few hours of rest.”

“We all need a few hours rest, tovarisch,” Piotr said, shaking his head as he entered the tent with Amara, Sif, and Tyr. This made the tent decidedly crowded until Freya gestured them all onto cushions laid out around the map. “I would also like a time for mourning Nikolai and our other dead, and I think it would be good to combine the two, yes?”

“I think it would be more appropriate to wait until after this war is over for that kind of thing, Piotr. And when we do lay Nikolai to rest, I will want the full Custodes present,” Harry said gently.

After a moment of contemplation, Piotr nodded silently. In the quiet, Balder spoke up once more.

“I agree that it would be best to wait to mourn the dead until after the final tally has been taken and victory assured. Yet young Piotr is right in that most of our forces do need rest. The Einherjar were fighting on and off for half a day before you all arrived, and even Asgardians have a limit to their endurance.”

Balder was ready to go even now, although he felt slightly weakened from what his full strength would normally be. As the Aesir most closely associated with sunlight, by the same token he was weakened when the sun was not in the sky. But that wasn’t exactly going to stop him if the strategists among them decided that they needed to press on hard now was it?

“I agree that our forces need rest and refit, Harry. Most of the ODMs have gone through two full magazine reloads, and I’ve gotten a lot of reports of armor that needs some good ol’ TLC,” Falcon threw in from his spot, awkwardly half swallowed by a cushion. He had spent a large portion of his time since returning to camp dealing with the logistical side of things.

Thankfully, as Steve had noted earlier, Polaris, Tony and Kitty had stepped up and were even now helping the dwarves repair ODM armor at breakneck pace.

Even better, the expeditionary force had already brought along enough material, repair tools, and replacement parts, something that Sam was determined to send general Murphy a gift basket for. But even so their workforce would have been found lacking some serious manpower without Lorna's abilities or the dvergar's understanding of metal.

Scott added a warning note. "We don't have enough Pepper-up potions to go around. With the telepaths taking one practically every hour now the supply is dwindling fast. We didn't have many to go around as it was, and their priority use limits the stock the rest of us can access."

Everyone from Earth nodded at that. While making Pepper-up potions was a relatively easy task, Harry hadn't really devoted much of Babylon's farmlands to the ingredients needed, instead working on building up a vast cache of Veritaserum that was only recently getting to the point where he could sell it in quantity, burn cream, and the other potions he sold via Magical Minds. Pepper-ups had simply been a low priority before this. But now, facing a warzone and several thousand people who might need them due to exhaustion, both magical and not, that lack was coming back to bite them.

Freya turned to her son, interested in hearing about their own forces as she had been buried in the camp's magical defenses and triage efforts before Harry returned. "And what were the losses among the Einherjar?"

"I cannot deny it, my queen. We were mauled," Balder stated simply. "Even with our wounded fully healed, we will have lost a little under half of our army. And that is only because of Jarl Potter and his forces arriving when they did. If not for that, we would have been utterly destroyed by the fire jotun and the dark elves. Even narrowly avoiding that, the raising of the undead would've done us in if the humans had not been there. We lost five hundred to the draugr alone, many of those rising almost instantly despite my best efforts. I have the scrolls marking those jarls and their men lost entirely to us and the names of individuals who have fallen from clans and warbands still viable." He shook his head sadly. "I take full responsibility for what happened in the battle with the draugr. I should have taken the concerns of our new allies about the Shadows more seriously and anticipated they would move in any way that would allow them to hurt us most. And as for the main battle, I—"

“None of that, my son!” Freya cut Balder off tartly, “You had no reason to take their concerns on that score to heart. Certainly, and although it might speak ill of us, the idea of anyone so controlling of our people is not one that any godling can contemplate with any measure of ease. Further, you had no knowledge of their powers or abilities even if you had taken their words seriously. You are the field commander of the Army of Asgard. In that capacity, the battle's outcome is on your shoulders, but only to the extent that you could logically have anticipated things. Wallowing in self-flagellation and what-ifs serves no one.”

Sif and Tyr, Balder’s senior commanders, and the four jarls chosen to represent the Asatru among the Einherjar all rumbled their agreement to this. After a moment, Balder nodded gravely before turning back to the others. “All that said, after a night’s rest, the Army will be fit to move again.”

“No,” Harry stated simply, shaking his head as all eyes fell to him. He had been examining the map and mentally going over what he knew of the Yggdrasil pocket dimensions, and now he glanced at Freya, his eyes almost challenging. “We have broken the back of the invasion force, and we have a strong team already dealing with Jörmungandr. From Jean’s reports, Fenrir is also no longer a threat at present. Now is the time to bring our forces together and go for the throat.”

Harry tapped the far eastern edge of the map, an area that had not been updated since Balder and his force had been pushed away from the dimension’s mountainous borders. “Instead, we go straight for Muspellheim. Assault Surtur in his realm, remove him, and destroy another tether of the Shadows. This is no longer a war for armies but of magic and might.”

All of the Jarls, Baldur, and most of the remaining Asgardians argued back vociferously, with Sam joining in on the Earth side of things. He knew he didn’t have much to offer in terms of fighting jotun, just like the Oh Damns were in much the same position. But he also knew that he and every other man and woman who’d bled that day on the battlefield wanted some payback for the draugr assault. Many of the men had been badly shaken by that and wanted to express their **displeasure** against the willing pawns of those who had cast the spell.

However, Harry would have none of it and, as a counter-argument, simply gestured over to the telepaths. The trio was sitting in their own separate little triangle to one side of the large map at the tent's center. "Do you honestly think that the three of them, Xian, Betsy, or the poor man's British version of Emma, will be able to keep up their defenses till morning, let alone until whatever point after that we'd need them to if we move with the entire army at once?"

Everyone fell silent at that, looking over at the telepaths. After a moment, Harry continued, his emerald eyes flashing with magical power. "No, the Shadows have clearly identified our weakness. Now, we need to strike at theirs. Surtur and his realm." He leaned forward, the magical power visible in his eyes growing from flashes to a steady glow. "I was wrong to take on the job of trying to recover Odin personally. I had thought for certain that the Shadows would confront us with everything they had, maybe look to break me on the Astral Plane when I tried to release Odin from their machinations. They did not. But they still retain the same weakness they did before: they have to work through their servants in the main, their powers lie in illusions and mental magics. Of them, Jörmungandr is already being dealt with. If we focus all of our strength there, while we would undoubtedly bring that battle to an end much more quickly, the Shadows will be free to work their influence elsewhere, including here and against our telepaths. So no. We take the fight to them."

"You're not suggesting, you will leave behind **all** of our own forces, are you, Lord Potter? Simply the bulk of the Einherjar and your own, what did you call them, ODMs?" Freya asked, still gazing at the telepaths even as she stumbled over the strange term. She knew next to nothing about conflict on the Astral Plane but well understood it was the coterie of Midgard telepaths she and her people had to thank for being free to act as they were.

"That's the abbreviation, or initialism of their official name, my lady, for ease of use. Officially, they are the Orbital Drop Marines. Unofficially, we just call them Oh Damns because that's what the enemy will say when our men drop on them," Falcon said cheekily.

Freya snickered at that, nodding towards the black-skinned warrior. "I quite like that! But now, answer my question, Jarl Potter."

“You have it exactly. Unless the Shadows can revive Stephen’s Surtur’s entire army, there's no need to bring the bulk of our regular forces against him. We would also move far faster in a smaller unit. Instead, we leave the majority here to watch over the telepaths and be watched over by them in turn. We hide the rest of us under as many cloaking spells and blessings as we can and then push straight for the dimensional gap.”

It took a bit more arguing, but Freya eventually came around to Harry’s side. Quick to put away whatever frustrations she had about being out-strategized by a child a millennia her junior, Freya could see the sense in what he had planned. She also knew that pride like the type fueling Balder and the other Asgardian’s had no place in war, particularly in a war against an enemy like Those Who Watch Above in Shadow.

With his queen mother changing her position in the argument, Balder backed down quickly. The other Asgardians, slowly and grudgingly, following suit. This about face happened so quickly that Harry wondered if maybe Balder had been speaking too harshly on purpose, giving the jarls and Sif no leg to stand on when he gave in.

Of the original expeditionary force, the Oh Damns, in almost their entirety, would be left behind. A single squad of rocket and Gatling-armed Heavy Troopers would be brought along to provide artillery fire if needed, along with a platoon of Valkyrie. Falcon, Nightcrawler, Doctor Druid, Clea, Johnny, Uzume, and Banshee would also be left behind along with Betsy and Tony. Harry had at first wanted to leave Steve behind as well, but the time-displaced soldier insisted on coming along in case they needed someone in direct command of the Heavy Gunners if Cyclops was busy with ground suppression.

With their plans going forward settled the conversation turned to Danielle and her disappearance. Harry and the rest of the Custodes were extremely worried about their comrade, given the lack of means to find her, but to their surprise, Freya reassured them that Dani was still alive. “Worry not, I can still feel the young Valkyrie, somewhere out there. She called upon my power at one point, although her precise location is now unknown to me.”

“Valkyrie?” Harry asked, voicing the confusion on many of his officers' faces, particularly Colossus and Amara, the two most worried for the Cheyenne

woman, who was their best friend. “I thought you said Dani was still alive? Why are you calling Dani a Valkyrie?”

“Hmm~, surely that is not so surprising?” Freya teased. Since the humans had arrived, lightening the load of the war against the Shadows, many of her queenly barriers had come down in the hours since since. Now, being secluded with only the highest of ranking members of the allied forces, she allowed more of her personally to shine through, rather than simply her warrior queen aspect. “Surely someone who has performed such amazing feats of bravery and skill as Danielle Moonstar has would deserve a place amongst my sisterhood?”

When she saw Harry still looked a bit skeptical, Freya shrugged. “For some reason, I feel an odd connection to the girl, Harry Potter, there is no sinister subtext. It is like she is one already marked to join my sisterhood upon her natural passing. I have felt much the same mild connection to all the women who become my Choosers of the Slain.”

“...Well, if she’s alive, and Emma and Jean are right in saying that they felt elation from her before she collapsed, we’ll have to assume she had some level of success in her task and leave her to handle the rest on her own. She’s good at that kind of thing,” Harry said, sighing in resignation. He privately wondered if the connection Freya felt was more because of Sigyn’s soul hidden in Dani’s blood than than anything his Custodes had done. Though if she’d handled Fenrir... “If we want our decapitation strike to work, we can’t dilute our forces again.”

“I have already stated that I was wrong to convince you to do so, Jarl Potter. Belaboring the point is doing you no good in my eyes,” Freya answered tartly, and Harry chuckled quietly in response. “As for the young Valkyrie, while we cannot split **your** forces further, there is one among **us** that can hunt down both Fenrir and young Danielle Moonstar easily enough and would add naught but another bow to our assault.”

As she spoke, an elven page drew aside the front-door flap of the command tent and Skadi entered. The Huntress had returned to the camp barely an hour before Harry and Hela, having been sent out to find if there was any trail of Surtur’s to follow. Eventually, she had found the point where the Jotun King had been teleported away. From there, she’d made her way back to the camp, killing several small, scattered bands of dark elves while the wounded were transported.

“Is that what I have been sensing? A new faithful has joined us here?” Skadi asked after Freya had explained her new mission. “I thought I had imagined things, but there was a slight tug on my powers near evening tide as if someone new had prayed to me. And yet, it was as if they were not new at the same time? It was as if the believer was one whose prayers I had felt before somehow. It was barely there that touch, yet I can still detect her personality from it. Yes, I will go to this young warrioress’s aid.”

“We’ll provide you with a magic carpet to take you to the nearest point where Emma and Jean lost their connection to Dani,” Harry announced, nodding in thanks to her eager willingness to help. “I also think I’d like to send Wyatt with you. He’s a hunter as well and a long-range specialist with a teleport function integrated into his armor. It’d be good backup just in case you need to get her out of wherever you find her quickly.”

Carol and Kurt, who were also used to teleportation during battle, would be staying in the camp. So would Logan, Sam, Laura, Lorna, Clea, Betsy, Johnny Storm, Tony, and Dr. Druid. Sam Guthrie, Paige, Piotr, Amara, Scott, Hela, E, and Steve would make up the Custodes Assault Team leaving with Harry to Muspellheim.

As for the rest of the Einherjar, only Tyr and Balder would be joining the Custodes. The rest would be left behind, with Sif in overall field command of the Einherjar.

Harry let everyone rest for three hours, time which he spent holding Jean and Emma’s hands, giving them what encouragement he could and helping to feed them their next doses of Pepper-up potion. He watched over them carefully to make certain that there weren’t any issues. Besides the risk of building up a dependency, which they could deal with later, he couldn’t foresee any issues, but Harry had also never seen any study done on the effects of the continued use of Pepper-up potions by non-magicals or pregnant women, so he was concerned on that score regardless. Admittedly, he was also worried about Charles, but Harry could admit at least to himself if not to anyone else, that the two women of the trio were his primary concerns.

He, Clea, Dr. Druid and Freya also spent some time casting spells to hide the Assault Team from sight, up to and including cloaking the magic carpets they

would be taking. However, Freya soon ran into the same problem that Harry and the others had back on Earth; there was no real way to magically hide someone else's mental presence on the Astral Plane from a telepath. This was unfortunate because whatever else they were, the Shadows were definitely psionic in nature.

Even when they all combined their shared knowledge, the group of magic-users couldn't figure out a way. When the impasse remained undefeated, Emma groaned, shifting her attention from keeping Þór from being turned against them back to the real world to give her two cents. "That probably means that you lot need me to come along with you, Harry. Charles is busy defending the camp with Jean but Þór just reached Team Fishermen, so he comes under their protection. With him under that level of protection I can assist elsewhere. No offense Betsy, but you just aren't strong enough to be the first line of defense on something like this. And if you do head to another dimension, none of us will be able to protect you anyway."

"It is almost enough to make me wish I had brought along Cerebro, or indeed that beyond the actual headpiece, the rest of it was at all mobile," Charles murmured dryly. While most of its tasks were to hack into satellites and global communications technologies to warn Charles of unknown mutants using their powers openly somewhere in the world, Cerebro also greatly aided Charles's telepathic reach and, to some degree, power.

Harry tried to talk talk his blonde wife out of her decision, but his protests were only lukewarm at best. Her point on the dimensional barrier was spot on, after all. It was just... the idea of taking her so close to the front lines... it bothered him. A lot. Despite her telepathic abilities, and her sharp tongue should anyone question her abilities, Emma had really never desired or been trained as a frontline fighter. She lacked the instincts and experience, despite the many attempts on her life she'd survived in the past.

Regardless, the Assault Team was ready to go when Harry's watch insisted on telling him it was ten in the morning, although there in Asgard, it was still very much dark out. The Assault Team rose into the air on the large-scale magic carpets, leaving only one behind, while the Valkyries, Harry, Sam Guthrie, and Hela flew along beside them.

**OOOOOO**

Malekith stood up with a sigh, surveying his latest work. Deeming it good, he nodded over to Surtur, who glared back at him from the hallway leading into the special array's chamber. The Jotun King had been recalled by the Shadows, in part due to Malekith needing to alter the dimensions a room in his castle for the draining array. The room needed to be a nine-sided star shape, and there had been no such room in the palace.

Since his arrival, he'd not been returned to the area where the stone jotun were being gathered because the Shadows' entire strategy had suddenly changed. No longer were they going to try to win an outright war against the Asgardians. Rather, they were now determined to play a waiting game until their opponent's psionic defenses buckled. Then, and only then, would they go on the offensive once more.

That was all to the good in Malekith's mind. It was a winning strategy that played to their strengths and more importantly, kept Malekith himself out of the fighting. He'd had enough of that after both losing his hand and then running into Potter for that brief moment outside the halls of Valhalla. That human's magical power was utterly terrifying.

Regardless, he was finished with the array. It was an incredibly complex piece of art that first started as a spiral and then shifted into a pattern that followed the room's layout, each point of the nine-pointed star tipped by the runes that the Shadows had gifted him. All together they marked a smaller triangular shape within the array.

At the center of the room and perforce directly on top of the spiral, Odin lay splayed out on his side unceremoniously. Of course, even though the four jotun who'd carried him there had dumped him brutishly and done their best to harm him, the All-Father was uninjured, not even a bruise forming. As the strongest of the Asgardians, the pantheon's Skyfather no less, it was far beyond any of the means of those present to cause him harm. Even Malekith's semi-serious attempt to give the old fool a matching pair of eyes had failed, his new skinning dagger unable to even prick the thin flesh of the intact eyelid. Surtur's own attempt to take a foot for a trophy had failed as well, Gungnir's edge simply flicking off Odin's skin like it was oil. Repeatedly.

*But while Odin may be too strong to hurt physically, this is something else...*  
Malekith smiled excitedly as he reached down and sent a pulse of magic into the array, watching with wicked glee as light of mixed gold and a deep, cold-seeming light blue began to spiral out from under Odin. Array activated, he then retreated, carefully stepping over the freshly carved runes until he was beside Surtur. Now presumably safe, he whirled back to watch. The light of the array grew brighter, the cold blue and bright gold spreading out through the spiral until it reached the outer edges.

There, the light sped into the first of the nine star points. In the darkness of those points, the light hit the uppermost segment, the triangle of runes that Malekith had been given by the Shadows. The gold tint to the magical light of the array shifted abruptly to purple, although the cold- blue light stayed. The new purple glow continued to darken as more magic continued to flow through the array until eventually it became almost black. Soon, the whole array was alight with magic.

As that magic created a haze in the air, which seemed to build and then go nowhere that Malekith could see, Odin finally reacted, beginning to shudder. Then his body twitched, and for a moment, Malekith feared that whatever fellsionic power the Shadows had been using to keep the Asgardian King asleep had failed. But then there came a change upon Odin. His skin started to lose its ruddy, healthy color. His beard began to lengthen almost imperceptively, as small blemishes and wrinkles appeared on his face and half-clothed form.

“It has begun,” Malekith whispered, grinning as Surtur’s booming laugh echoed throughout the halls of burning castle.

**OOOOOOO**

Danielle Moonstar knew she had felt this sensation before. Before she even opened her eyes she knew that her mind had once more been released from her body. Blinking rapidly, she sped through time and memory for several moments, but not through her own memories. Instead, the memories she saw were those of her ancestors. They were memories passed down through her the blood, much like the burden of her family, the soul of Sigyn, the Victorious Wife.

Most of these splashes of remembrance were extremely brief. One fragment showed Dani the first meeting between a band of Viking explorers and the Cheyenne side of her ancestors through the eyes of a tall, well-muscled man. She had just enough time to see one of his hands rested on a necklace that had the runes for Loki carved into it before it faded away. Another memory focused on a great exodus across a vast plain, all the while fighting with bow and spear against bands of white men wearing dark blue or brown leather outfits, their eyes alight with greed as they rode her people down on horseback. Still yet another memory showed her charging up a hill somewhere in some hellish battlefield, a gun Danielle recognized as a model from World War II clutched tightly in her hand. On the wrist of the hand wrapped around the gun's barrel, a series of beads made to look like animal heads representing ancestor spirits clattered as she ran.

*My family has always been warriors going as far back as the original ancestor who made the deal with Loki and Sigyn,* Dani thought. There was a certain kind of joy in that knowledge and in the knowledge that in her own life, Dani had honored those ancestors by following the same path.

Soon after that thought had gone through her disconnected mind, Danielle's perception changed. No longer was she a wandering sentience lost in the odd connection between her soul and her body's blood. Instead, Dani found herself in a seemingly physical form. However, instead of finding herself on Fenrir's broad shoulders, she stood outside the same lodge where she had met the spirit of Sigyn during their previous discussions.

Looking around the area once more, Dani spoke aloud, a faint smile on her face. "This is the kind of place I would like to call home one day. Although perhaps I would change the scenery just a bit if I could? Maybe add a waterfall to that nearby hillside? Hmm... perhaps not. Much as I like the sound of flowing water, I'm not sure if I would like to try and sleep with it so close by."

"You know this place is technically inside you, yes?" Sigyn's amused voice announced from nearby. Danielle turned to look towards the doorway leading into the goddess's lodge.

"As you are the one who is currently living here that would seem rather rude, wouldn't it?" Dani asked, bowing from the waist as she did so. "Greetings

once more, Victorious One. I humbly ask for entrance into your home to warm myself by your hearth.”

Sigyn laughed quietly at that, moving forward with her arms open. “Be welcome in my house now and for as long as you require rest, Danielle Moonstar.” Then she pulled Dani into a fierce hug, nearly squeezing the life out of her. Of course, that made Dani wonder if she technically had breath to leave her body at the moment, but the young Cheyenne warrior decided to set that aside for now and just enjoy the hug.

“Thank you! You have done all I could have asked—more than we, Loki and I, could have ever dreamed a human could do when he thought up this mad scheme to ensure that I would remain free of the Shadow's reach. At every turn, you have stepped and done the best you could

Danielle smiled at that, although her grin was somewhat wry. “And the reward for a job well done is another job, yes?”

“Unfortunately so.” Sigyn acknowledged, sighing. “My husband is still out there somewhere and thus still not freed from the changes made to his body and mind, and neither am I yet free to live beside him once more. In the meantime... You know that while here, I cannot sense anything going on in the outside world that is not directly communicated to me through your memories? Well, even so, I can tell this war against the Shadows is not done with you or Fenrir. Perhaps it is my understanding of tactics, or of fate, but it is obvious regardless.”

“Fenrir could be a massive ally on either side of the conflict. The Shadows aren't going to just let him remain so disconnected,” Danielle agreed with a shrug. “What happens when either side comes for him, I have no idea. And, if I was conscious, able to see what was going on myself, I wouldn't be here able to speak to you now, would I, Lady Sigyn?”

“True enough.” Now it was Sigyn's turn for her smile to become wry. “With you unconscious, neither of us can see what will come upon you. Ah well. Now, sit. Recuperate. Hopefully, if Skuld and Verdandi smile on us, you will awake at the proper moment.” She then linked her arm with the much younger woman, pulling her gently towards the cottage. “But come, it has been some time since you were here last and seeing things through your memories only as you sleep or

are otherwise unconscious is not the largest window to life beyond this hiding place as I could wish for. Tell me what has been going on, not just with this war I could discern you were fighting, but with everything else in your life.”

Laughing, Danielle allowed herself to be pulled along, reflecting that goddess or no, some things appeared to be universal, and it seemed that housewives loving to gossip was one of them. *Still, if I'm stuck here anyway, I suppose that will be a nice way to spend time...*

**OOOOOOO**

Elsewhere, a woman who could in no way be called a housewife, indeed, one who actively fled the title, was staring down at the trail left behind by Fenrir as he'd raced away from where the Midgardian humans and Hela's wolf Garm had attempted to break whatever enchantments had been lying upon the youngest son of Loki. *And from what Lady Freya tells us, they apparently succeeded too! That is as astonishing as my current mode of transportation,* Skadi reflected, patting the carpet under her as if it were the side of a horse.

Behind Skadi, at the far edge of even her sight, she could see two of the humans from Midgard, the ones named Tony Stark and Johnny Storm, escorting a large carpet, carrying the heavily wounded Garm, away back to base camp. The old wolf had wanted to stay and give her aid, but Skadi had forbidden it. Garm's wounds had been and still were too great to be seen to here. Had he pushed himself anymore...

Grabbing the tassels at the front of the carpet as if they were reins, Skadi aimed towards the ground. Once within range, she shook her head and stared at the prints below, then along the ruler-straight route that Fenrir had smashed through the landscape. “I doubt my skills will be needed if the fell wolf continues to act more bull than wolf.” Skadi snorted, shaking her head somewhat in annoyance. *I am missing the assault on Muspellheim for this?*

However, an hour of tracking later, Fenrir's tracks stopped their straight heading from the battlefield and began to seemingly meander, heading through rough terrain on an uneven, looping course. The signs showed that he'd still headed vaguely away from the battlefield, but on a more diagonal tilt now. Randomly, he would also turn back in on himself, and then away. A few times,

even from the air, Skadi lost sight of the trail for a measure or two, such was the nature of the broken terrain. It was at that point, the Huntress realized, that yes, someone of her skill did need to be sent on this mission.

Eventually, the trail turned toward the outer edge of Utgard and resumed its previous head-on course. Having a sudden guess as to where this might lead, Skadi pushed the magic carpet to as fast as it could go, passing swiftly over an expanse that would have taken her weeks to cover in mere hours. Soon enough, she was staring out into the dark at where the giant wolf had clearly leaped across into the nothingness separating Svartalfheim from Utgard.

Much like traveling between Yggdrasil itself and the realm of Asgard, travel between the other dimensions was possible using the monstrously huge tree as a medium if one did not just use magic. The dark elves, for example, had used their magic numerous times to create what amounted to magical rope bridges to carry them up to Asgard. The denizens of Muspellheim had done much the same in the past. For this invasion though, their bridge had been transformed into a solid thing, a dark mirror of the Rainbow Bridge of Asgard. It wound its way around the central mass of Yggdrasil like a long, winding corkscrew.

Without the means to use such magic, the fell wolf had to have climbed to a high peak before leaping from there to Yggdrasil, just as Skadi, Þór, and the others had done who knew how long ago on their hunt for Nidhögggr. From this location alone, Skadi could guess he'd then made his way down several boughs to the next closest realm; Svartalfheim.

“Well, at least we now know where he went.” With a shake of her head, the huntress goddess of the Vanir urged the magic carpet forward, out into the nothingness between dimensions.

**OOOOOOO**

Team Fishermen held on. Even as Thundra was smacked out of the air by a blow from one of Jörmungandr's many paws, her arm shattered on impact, and the Thing hammered by a smack by the creature's head that left him reeling, blood spurting out of his mouth from his side being crushed, they held. All the other front-line combatants had taken at least a few stray strikes each by then, although only Thundra had been forced to retreat and let Ororo heal her. And

thanks to Harry sharing his newly made anti-illusion spell, Ororo and Wanda had been able to concentrate further on the actual battle in front of them rather than the magical defense side of things, which had quickly raised morale.

And they had held long enough, shown as their promised aid arriving with a cry of “For Odin the Allfather and Asgard!”

Þór flew out of the sky like a bullet, Mjolnir striking Jörmungandr’s head and hurling it down to crash into the ice below. For the first time, the special assault team heard the creature howl in actual agony. Þór’s next strike sent serpent’s head skittering across the ice, but by then Jörmungandr had already recovered from his initial shock and struck back, fang and claws wide. Þór laughed and leaped away, reminding those who saw him of how the Hulk traveled immense distances with superhuman strength.

As Þór pressed his attack, the Sorcerer Supreme slid into the airspace beside Storm, nodding his head to her. “I apologize for arriving so late but getting to Þór and then getting him to trust me was somewhat time-consuming.”

“Was that a joke on how late it must be back on Earth or an actual comment on how long it took you to arrive?” Storm asked with weary good humor, although that faded as she looked over at the distant magic carpet that held Emma Steed and Xian. “I don’t suppose you brought any Pepper-up Potions, have you? As tough as this battle has been on the rest of us, it has been doubly so for our members keeping us safe abroad the Astral Plane.”

“I...” Stephen began before he was interrupted by a loud **Krakoooom!**

The two magic-users turned back to the battle and saw Þór’s hammer had smashed into Jörmungandr’s chest in an armed version of an uppercut. The blow actually lifted several coils of the beast out of the ice and sent the serpent up and sideways to crash downwards onto the frozen ocean away back. Again, a bellow of real pain came from Jörmungandr as hundreds of scales were crushed and shattered by that single blow.

Racing forward, Þór leaped onto the beast’s side, his sparking hammer raised above his head for only a moment before he brought it down. “I may not be able to strike at they who have enslaved my people and slew my children vile cousin of mine, but your hide will do as a start on their debt!”

A claw lashed out and raked the Thunderer aside, smashing him off of Jörmungandr as the serpent quickly twisted around and lunged down its length at him, jaws agape. Even from where she hovered, Ororo could tell that Jörmungandr was at last taking this fight seriously. Those eyes, previously somewhat lucid and almost amused, now seemed blood-streaked and maddened with fury as a roar tore through the air. “Not this time Þór! There will be no victory for you here!”

“Take a moment to recuperate a bit, Ororo. Þór and I will hold the line here,” Strange suggested as he waved his hands to either side. Magical circles appeared out of thin air, arcs of energy, each as wide as a human was tall, blasting down from them. Those magical bolts crashed into Jörmungandr full force, each of carrying a different elemental flavor. Stephen watched, clinically examining the result of his first wave. “Which will hurt him, I wonder?”

“Thank you Stephen. Do you think we could we move Xian and Steed onto Þór’s chariot and tie their carpet to him? A carpet would surely be more agile and maneuverable” Storm inquired.

Stephen looked between the now driverless chariot and the figure of Þór, who was now cursing Jörmungandr as he hammered a paw away. The blow smashed off a claw, but the limb kept on going, crashing into Þór and lifting him off his feet. The Thunderer was sent hurtling through the air ass over teakettle, cursing even harder. Rolling and leaping up, Þór’s hammer smashed into the serpent’s follow-on bite, hurling Jörmungandr’s head aside to be intercepted by a leaping punch from the Thing. “I... think that would be a good idea, although getting Þór’s attention at the moment might be somewhat difficult.”

“Then it is better to beg forgiveness later than wait to ask for permission now,” Ororo remarked.

Thankfully, the goats hitched to the chariot were biddable beasts and allowed the two telepaths to board without fuss. Once in place, Ororo used the healing spell she had learned from Mother Gaia to begin healing both girls. While they were not visibly injured, Charles had passed on how physically ill their Emma had been after holding the line for so long when he had reached out earlier that night.

Once the Thing had flown over with Thundra and the pair was healed of their latest wounds, Storm dove down, flipping around a claw aimed at Þór. Flying over the Asgardian's head, she tapped his shoulder with one hand. "Apologies, Þór."

"Why durst you apologize, fair lady?" Þór grunted, hurling Mjolnir into the claw Storm had just dodged around.

"We traded in your chariot for a magic carpet. Two of our allies needed a better place to rest and you weren't using it. Waste not, want not," she announced before zooming away.

With Þór's bellowing guffaws following her, Ororo recast the spells that would make the magic carpets follow the Thing and Thunderbird before a flare of an overpowered Lumos soon burst out into Jörmungandr's eyes, blinding the creature and causing a howl of pain. This was quickly followed by a gale of wind that sliced into several of the already shattered scales around the massive serpent's head. Several of these broke off entirely and Thundra and Rogue, who had followed their team leader despite her injunctions to rest, instantly took advantage.

Zooming back up towards the Scarlet Witch, Ororo checked on the two telepaths. Directly below her, Rogue's club slammed into the next layer of scales covering Jörmungandr's cheek, while Thundra's harpoon—she had lost her original weapon at some point—stabbed deep between two of the broken scales directly under the serpent's chin.

"How long have we been fighting this monster?" Thunderbird murmured, staring towards the southeast as he recuperated to one side of the ongoing brawl.

"I... huh. Would ya look at that. Must've been near to eighteen hours," Ben grunted, staring in the same direction, seeing the sun just beginning to rise over the horizon. However, this sun was nothing like the sun back on Earth. Here, just as ancient people had thought, the sun rotated around the world, rather than the reverse. That being said, it was clear that Yggdrasil was the real center of the interconnected dimensions and having stood within its boughs, Ben could see why. *That big fucking tree... Makes that sun look small. Although, I'd wager it's at least half the size of Utgard to look so big in the sky.*

Turning back, he shrugged at Thunderbird's shocked expression. "Meh, this still doesn't beat the time I was locked in a wrestling match with the Hulk. We were literally just straining against one another for God knows how long, stuck in the same position man. This is way better."

Thunderbird gave a single finger salute to that sentiment, muttering something that was undoubtedly unflattering in Apache.

Overhearing his two teammates' chatter reminded the nearby Hulk about the news Jean had passed along regarding Dani Moonstar's situation. Looking over to Thunderbird as they all moved around the chariot carrying Emma (the British one) and Xian were resting, the two women leaning against either side of their new transport with their legs a jumble between them, the gamma infused doctor felt compelled to ask something that had been on his mind. "Are you worried about Dani, John? You are of the same nation no?"

"NO." Thunderbird snapped, rolling his eyes while muttering about Banner being a typical ignorant white man under all his green. "I am worried about her, aye. Dani may have been a proven survivor before this, and she does have a certain connection with Fenrir, but all the same having no way to contact the rest of the team is a perilous position to be in. But as to your assertion, she is Cheyenne. I am Apache. Very different."

Ben snickered. "Yeah, kind of like being from the east coast or the west coast, you know what I'm sayin'?" he stated before twisting his carpet around, leaving Thunderbird spluttering behind him.

The others took a bit longer to recover, but eventually, Thunderbird and Hulk rejoined the fight, with Wanda and Ororo following soon after.

Despite the initial impact of his arrival, Þór did not have everything all his own way going forward. Clad in his belt, wearing his Gauntlets of Power, and wielding the real Mjolnir, a weapon tied not just to him but to Odin and Gaia, Þór could match Jörmungandr in strength. But again, Jörmungandr's sheer size and durability meant that injuring him in any meaningful way was immensely difficult.

Thunderbird could shatter granite the size of an average house, as could Thundra or Rogue. The Thing could likewise dust boulders likened to five-story

apartments, the same as the Hulk now that Banner's strength was no longer linked to his anger. In comparison, Þór could now shatter a large mountain.

This was plainly shown in the number of scales that flew away from each strike of Mjolnir, but Jörmungandr had grown so large that he now embodied the idea of a living mountain **range** rather than a giant serpent, and this was with barely a fifth of his full length having managed to rise above the frozen ocean. That impossible size was what turned what would've been killing blows to any creature human-sized or larger, or even beings like Surtur who had supernatural strength backing them, only painful strikes for the dread wyrm.

Shatter limbs, there were more to take their places. The monster had six pairs of claws pulled out of the ice by this point. Snap fangs, there were dozens more. Smash a few scales? Jörmungandr would simply move, his sinuous body. Targeting the same spot over and over was almost impossible, so much could he move despite most of his body still being frozen in the ice. On top of all that, with a healing factor, while slow, any damage dealt would be eventually undone.

Having been smashed off of his purchase near Jörmungandr's head once more, Þór raced along its unending back, making for the slowly healing impact point where the Hulk had torn aside several scales earlier. Mjolnir flashed down, but before the hammer landed Jörmungandr twisted, bringing new scales to bear. Frustrated he'd only hit more fresh scales, an instant later a paw raked down, smashing into Þór while he was distracted.

"Gah!" Þór cried out as a claw slashed him across the face. While Þór could match Jörmungandr in strength, the same could not be said for his durability. The attack opened the Asgardian's cheek to the bone even as another claw punched through his armor, drawing blood from that wound as well, although his armor had stopped most of the blow, making it more like a scratch than anything serious. Even as he tumbled from the counter, Þór struck back in turn. This time Jörmungandr shrieked in pain as not only was another one of his claws snapped off under the might of the blow, but Mjolnir also discharged a hefty amount of electricity into the fresh wound.

A second later, Strange was in Jörmungandr's face, a cutting spell streaking into the monster's gullet. This was a modified example of the Drills of Light that

he knew Harry employed so effectively. “By the might of Cyttrakk, let this spell pierce you whole!”

The refined magic struck true and caused a torrent of blood to burst out of Jörmungandr’s mouth. The serpent writhed in place, entire body shifting wildly. “GRRRAAH!!!!” Jörmungandr’s shriek was so powerful it literally pushed Thundra and the Thing away. The Hulk fell to his side, hands clapped to his ears in agony. Rogue veered off from the run she’d planned to start, and Storm grimaced, shaking her head.

The flailing proved too much and, with a resounding **crack** that sounded for all the world like someone had just broken a continent, the ice imprisoning Jörmungandr shattered. The thickness and overall integrity of the ice had shifted as the battle had continued on due to the dimension’s weather, and now that the sun had risen, the star’s heat had an accelerated impact.

“NO!!!” Storm howled in rage, turning her full attention from the fight to keeping the weather chill. Unfortunately the momentary break in her focus had cost her dearly, and like dominoes falling more and more of Jörmungandr’s body began to free itself. While the dread wyrm continued to fight Þór and the others with fang and several claws, from that moment on, any body part not engaged in battle turned to smashing and clawing at the ice.

“Coward! You will not return to your protective depths if I have anything to say of it!” Þór bellowed, roaring battle cry. He hurled himself forward, crashing into the creature’s outthrust upper stomach area. Several consecutive hammer blows followed, the impacts causing sonic booms that would have severely injured, or at least damaged the hearing of, any nearby bar perhaps the Hulk or the Thing.

Said two individuals were now elsewhere engaged however. Both the Thing and the Hulk had since hurled themselves forward and landed on Jörmungandr’s mountainous sides once more. While the Scarlet Witch, Thundra, and Rogue concentrated on the beast’s eyes, the two strong men were now resolutely climbing up the back of the creature, hammering at the occasional loose scale they came across. Thunderbird was there on his carpet as well, his hatchet in hand, searching for the best place to start hacking. “Damn it, I wish we had thought of pitons and rope!”

“Hah!” the Hulk guffawed, almost losing his grip for a moment. Then a claw scratched at him as if he were a tick on a dog, and the Hulk was flung into the air, his laughter turning into a howl of pain as his arm was ripped and shattered.

“Blast it. Will you just feel this?!” Thundra shrieked as she struck from her place, massive club crashing into the creature's side, feeling altogether useless. This was not a feeling the extra-temporal woman was used to, but she simply lacked the raw strength needed to cause any damage to this beast. Watching Þór in action was making her feel even more useless.

For her part, Rogue had another card to play. *Followin' the menfolk in just poundin' away on this beastie ain't workin'. Time ta think of somethin' else, no matter how annoyin' it may be.* With that in mind, she pulled away from Jörmungandr, flying her broomstick high up into the air where Ororo still flew. “I just thought of an idea, Miss. Do ya think that mah touch might work on this critter?”

Storm blinked. It took her a moment to remind herself that Rogue's mutant power wasn't actually super strength or durability, something that Ororo cursed herself for volubly in several different languages. Those were only accessible to her by way of her primary mutant power, which was to drain other life forms of their various energies for her to use herself. This had been case with the Juggernaut and Sebastian Shaw. If she held her touch for long enough, the change became permanent. *By the Goddess, why didn't that occur to either of us before this!?*

“Pull away the instant you begin to see memories or have thoughts that are not your own... or notice your body changing uncontrollably,” Ororo ordered. “Otherwise, sound thinking, my dear. Follow me in. I will give you an opening to latch onto the beast.”

With that, Storm sent another slashing spell towards Jörmungandr, aiming for his eye. Again the serpent twisted, reaction speed paired with heightened animal instincts making certain such blows were easy to avoid. A dozen cutting spells followed, crashing into together below the monster's eye and creating an interesting looking checkerboard pattern on the scales there.

Jörmungandr howled at the sustained spellfire and darted toward Ororo, his jaws gaping. But Storm evaded once again, flying down and away, twirling around the several paws that attempted to crave into her as she retreated while still sending more cutting spells back at the serpent, always aiming for weakened points. Above and forgotten, Rogue grit her teeth before diving down and landing on Jörmungandr's back. There, she saw the Thing grimly making his way up the metaphorical mountainside, Thunderbird soaring through the air after being slammed by an errant paw. Thankfully, the Apache warrior didn't appear injured as Þór had been.

Once Rogue was certain she had a grip on a protruding spike strong enough to hold on with one hand, she used her other to reach up under her armor. Dented and somewhat mangled at this point, the armor had served her well so far, keeping her alive when even a stray swipe might well have shattered her body before this. Her questing hand reached his destination around her neck, where the runic array that Harry had created for her only a few months into his stay in their dimension hung as it always did.

For the first time since receiving the miracle gift, Rogue pulled off the runic array and stuffed it into her item pouch just as she lost her grip to Jörmungandr suddenly twisting hard to the right in an attempt to swallow Thunderbird whole as the Apache warrior flew in for another run with Thundra following close behind. She could barely hold on to the spike sticking out of the serpent's back, but the bit of snake she'd happened to grab was unfortunately part of the beast that Jörmungandr decided to then smash into the ice. "GUAA!" Rogue choked out as her breath was violently driven from her. She felt something in her back give, though her armor held.

Still, Rogue held on, and as the loop of Jörmungandr she was hanging on pulled away from the ice, she used her teeth to pull off the glove of her free hand. Despite the runic array, she'd decided to keep them as part of her combat outfit since they offered better grip than bare skin and just plain looked badass. Taking a deep breath, Rogue placed her naked hand on the dread wyrm's side, muttering one last, "Here goes nothing."

Almost immediately, she felt it. The vitality, the energy, the strength of Jörmungandr raged through her like the force of a tsunami through a small hose

spigot. Rogue gasped, the sound a mixture of agony and ecstasy. She hadn't used the mutant power she'd been born with for months, and even before then had only used it sparingly. After being gifted the array, the southern belle had then been simply too delighted to be able to touch people again to even think of using her powers. Even in most combat scenarios, the thought never occurred to her. It probably should have, she could only reflect now. As her mind sailed through the flush of overwhelming power, Rogue had one last thought. *I'd have been a much more effective fighter if I could'a turned mah sapping powers on and off. Ah well, too late now. Here's ta hopin' this does somethin'.*

**OOOOOOO**

Despite their best efforts to remain hidden, Harry, Hela and the rest of their team were quickly discovered, and the mental assaults against them equally picked up. For the first few hours, it remained that way, as if the Shadows were uncertain what they were doing so were keeping more power intensive tactics on hold. It was only as the sun rose and the team closed on the dimensional gap where Muspellheim was currently connected to Utgard that the Shadows seemed to realize what they were up to, or had an idea at least.

As they neared where the dark bridge exited onto Muspellheim, Hela flew over to the magic carpet carrying Emma and a quarter of the Heavy Gunners. "How do you fair, Emma?"

"I fare about as well as I look I imagine, which is to say, not good at all," Emma replied, sounding both annoyed and tired, or rather, utterly drained and exhausted. Fighting off Jean's clone had been a similar experience, but it was still like comparing a hill to a mountain.

"Hmmm," Hela toned, looking thoughtful. Then she leaned in, still flying separately, so that their shoulders were touching.

When she gestured to her head, Emma grimaced but obligingly created a brief connection between them.

*"It has occurred to me that while I thanked you for your aid back when we first met, never have I said to you how I have come to admire and, yes, even feel affection towards you. You are a formidable woman, Emma Frost, and I trust that fact will remain unbroken. Whatever the Shadows throw at you, the Diamond of*

*our little family will not shatter under the challenge.*” Hela thought, allowing her emotions to carry over even more than the words she used.

Emma was somewhat startlingly found herself touched by the simple words and the emotions she could sense behind those words. Although she wasn’t nearly as good at getting emotional content like that as Jean was via her telepathy, she could clearly get a sense of how the other women felt about her now. But given who they came from, Hela’s words were quite telling. “I’ll do my best,” she said before adding, “And as for being a most formidable woman, it takes one to know one. Now, get out there and give them Hel, Hela.”

Hela pulled away, mock glaring at the blonde in faux-outrage even as her lips twitched under her half-mask. “Really? Puns Now? Rather lowbrow for one such as you, is it not?”

“You caught me on a bad day,” Emma replied tartly, waving her off, although there was a faint smile on both their faces as Hela rejoined Harry at the front of the formation.

Having almost arrived at their first destination, it was clear to see how Surtur and his folk had made a near permanent connection between Muspellheim and Utgard. The large bridge, unlike the Rainbow Bridge, was not straight, but ran rather like a long freeway built haphazardly between where the two pocket dimensions hung separately in Yggdrasil’s boughs. Instead of being created out of magic or concrete, the construct appeared to be molten metal and basalt. Surprisingly, where the bridge had been somehow melted into place against the mountains of Asgard, the metal and stone had been twisted into odd-looking shapes reminiscent of giant lizards, flames, and tortured faces.

“Good grief, ‘abandon all hope, ye who enter here’ very much? Odd indeed that Muspellheim is not, in fact, connected to the idea of Hell as we would term such things,” Piotr mused.

To Harry, the dark bridge was a reminder that even if the Shadows hadn’t existed, the fire jotun would still very much be warlike and aggressive folk. From the imagery shaped onto the bridge, it appeared that they not only enjoyed burning but apparently eating people alive as well. *The Shadows might have*

*chosen them as their chief servants, but there's a reason why Surtur agreed to become their willing pawn in the first place.*

Following the bridge down through the branches of Yggdrasil, Harry was called into action to defend against newer illusions of the magical variety. However, the spell he had designed outside of Asgard the city worked well, leaving the Shadows to realize they either had to concentrate only on the telepathic side of things or expend more magic than they wished to at that point.

Before the Shadows could decide one way or the other, the assault force burst into the air over Muspellheim, a land of blackened stone and melted glass pieces as large as hills, some of which were startlingly beautiful. Moving through the area, the team could immediately see there were huge rivers of lava flowing throughout the realm, boiling along and out of sight. There were also wide-open areas surrounding strangely built structures dominating the view in places. The buildings also looked strange to Harry's sense of aesthetics. They were built out of fluted arches that crisscrossed over one another, with numerous doors built into most of them seemingly at random. These were large buildings, hill-sized or more at their smallest, and by how they were clustered apart from each other it almost appeared as if the fire jotun were clan-based, instead of a united people.

In the distance, there was a large mountain whose peak was obscured by black clouds of smoke and ash. Instinctively, Harry knew that would be the center of this realm. Even from where he currently floated in the air, he could see bulbous growths pockmarking the mountain, a clearly sprawling castle-like structure. The area around the odd-looking castle glowed faintly reddish.

That, however, was all Harry could observe before the group came under attack. Several large towers, built on the Muspellheim side of the bridge to defend it against any incursion from the Asgardians, came alive. From the tops of two of those towers came spears, soaring towards the attacking team like bolts from ballista. Arrows swiftly joined the spears, but they were few and far between and not exactly aimed well. Even over the sudden shrieking and shouts of alarm from below, and the Custodes and Oh Damns responding in kind, Harry could hear the explosive cursing as several bows broke or the arrows shattered upon their strings.

These attacks were barely enough to make the magic carpets shudder. The most dangerous attacks, in fact, came in the form of magma that was hurled up at them by several hundred of the super-large variety of fire jotun. Most of the defenders not stationed within the towers appeared to have gorged themselves on raw material to the point that some nearby structures now looked very dilapidated.

With the response to Harry's invasion came attacks from Surtur as well. Now in Muspellheim, it barely took the Jotun King an instant to reach down into the tectonic energy of his realm and send several giant spouts of lava up towards the magic carpets from directly below them. At the same time, volcanic rocks the size of boulders were launched from far away, joining the bombardment sent the assault force's way from above as below. It was as if anywhere in the entire realm could become a large artillery cannon, of which Surtur could use to launch incredibly long-range attacks at Harry and his people nearly instantaneously.

"Heavy Gunners, get some distance straight up. Get away from the lava bursts, follow Steve's orders on targeting priorities," Harry ordered, rocketing forward. A protective shield appeared all around the assault team for the first few seconds, blocking the worst of the lava and the rocks streaking towards them. As that first wave of attacks faded and the nearby extra-large jotun roared and began to march forward, Harry also raced ahead of his people, barking out still further orders. "Valkyries spread out and engage. Custodes don't take to the ground unless your name is Colossus and Husk for now. Cannonball, do your thing!"

The Heavy Gunners obeyed Harry's orders instantly. The carpets carrying them shot high into the air, taking them and Emma out from even Surtur's range. Once they were safe from all of the anti-air fire, the team began to rain down rockets on the approaching jotun.

Meanwhile, Steve pulled out his sniper rifle and began to target the enemy far below, aiming for their vulnerable eyes. Before he fired, he remembered that his rifle was one of the prototypes that Jean had originally created and that apparently there was some kind of magical component to it. Letting his steadying hand move slightly Steve found a switch where there wouldn't normally be one. A

moment later he flicked the switch, moving a rune into position within an array, much like someone completing a circuit.

With that done, Steve aimed at a jotun down below and fired. The regular gauss round shot down the barrel, but as it exited the muzzle a brief flicker of magic covered it. As it continued through the magic, the gauss round expanded to the point where it looked like it had been fired from a tank instead of a rifle. Clearing the distance to its target faster than normal human eyes could follow, it struck with enough force to remove the head of unlucky jotun while Steve only grunted a bit. The pull from the runic array on his stamina made him feel like he had just run a half marathon. But given his super-soldier serum-boosted endurance, that really wasn't all that much. A second later he fired again, scanning for any jotun that seemed to be trying to give out orders.

As the Heavy Gunners began to unload rockets into the larger-than-average giants, E targeted several normal-sized jotun. His arms enlarged in every dimension, and his fingers joined together, merging and morphing into four large barrels.

When he fired, his rounds were smaller than the rockets but larger than the auto-cannon rounds. However, instead of exploding on impact, the modified gyro-rockets were revealed to have drill bits on their tips, which allowed them to dig into the jotun. None of these defenders were armored with the same black metal as the fire jotun they had fought before, a possible sign that the jotun were having logistical difficulties. Thanks to that failure the auto-cannons and rockets of the Heavy Gunners were now cutting them down far more easily than before.

In E's case, his rounds drilled in but did **not** explode. Instead, the bullets disintegrated, turning into small clouds of nanites which quickly spread from the entry wound to the rest of the targets' bodies. This was both a disgusting and very agonizing way to die, but E needed the resources to keep using a solid-state projectile-type weapon.

At the forefront of the group racing to confront the charging jotun, Husk saw what had happened to E's targets and had to fight hard to keep from throwing up. "Oh Lord Jesus! That's disgusting! E, you utter bastard, I know these guys are enemies, but by good lord, man, haven't you ever heard ah mercy?!"

“I...” E trailed off as the jotun he’d hit let out wailing cries of raw agony before they just... fell apart. The dust-like swarm of nanites that rose up from the remains flowed up toward him. “I... you might be correct in that Miss Guthrie. I... I don’t think I will ever use such weapons again. However, for right now they—”

That was as far as E was able to get before Surtur made his presence known once more. This time, the Jotun King used a blast of raw power from his purloined spear as his herald. The attack flashed forward from well out of range of even Harry’s magical sphere of influence. The long range attack was relatively thin, about three fingers in width, and a violent scintillating color, something like the gleam of light off a pearl. It was almost pretty to look at despite the lethal potential it contained.

With Harry out of position dealing with another band of overly large jotun, the beam smashed into E without any trouble. Even after being proven to be tougher than Tony’s Iron Man armor, E’s body could not stand up to an attack based off of pure magic. The beam carved into E, punching a hole straight into his chest and out his back, also burning through an unfortunate Heavy Gunner that had been passing behind him on a magic carpet like a plasma torch to butter.

“Dammit!” Cyclops cursed loudly, beginning to bark orders as Harry, catching on to Surtur’s game, raced ahead to block another magical blast. “Everyone spread out, don’t let whoever just did that get the range again! E, are you all right?”

“I feel that describing my current status all right would be a gross misuse of the term, nor can I truly believe that such a question left your mouth Cyclops,” E grumbled, even as what remained of his chest began to explode into nanites, quickly repairing the damage. “There. Now, I am all right. I will need to head down with the close range attackers now, I no longer have enough raw material to build further -rockets.”

“Do it,” Cyclops nodded, Harry again dealing with a third similar magical beam of pure power.

“Sciath na BhFéadfadh!” Harry bellowed. At his words, a huge ball of magic erupted from his outstretched hands, blazing into a wall of energy. The newly built defense quickly blocked the next two strikes from whoever was out there.

The shield was supposed to be able to block any kind of magical assault but to Harry's astonishment his barrier shattered after tanking the second blow alone. *I didn't put in enough power?! That has got to be Gungnir then.*

Thankfully, Harry's magical shield had held for long enough that all of his flying forces had moved as far apart as they could. Nor had they stopped their suppressive fire, allowing the land-based attackers to push on.

Balder and Tyr were the first to move, jumping off of the magic carpet carrying them. The duo followed by Hela, Colossus, and Husk, both in their metal forms. Landing first, the Asgardians' blades flashed as they carved towards two of the jotun guarding the leftmost tower, cutting down several others while parrying punches and spear thrusts at the same time. With the ferocity of their attack, the remaining jotun on the tower's battlements shifted their attention entirely away from the flying carpets to focus on them.

"Methinks we are fighting but the dregs of Surtur's army," Balder mused, as he ducked under an attempted stab from one jotun that appeared to him as if almost as slow as if it were passing through molasses. "Those individuals who were left behind as liabilities. Certainly their combat prowess is nowhere near as high as I expected after our previous clashes."

"Aye, perhaps, but do not let yourself become complacent! You can plainly see their overgrown brethren over there. Who is to say that Surtur does not also hold back a small cadre of elite fighters " warned Tyr as he deflected several more strikes, riposting after each and slaying the defending jotun. Soon, they had gained entrance into the tower.

Following them down Hela, Husk, and Colossus crash-landed into the second manned tower, their way already cleared by an overpowered optic blast from Cyclops that had hurled jotun over the tower's edges and cracked the flooring underneath them. Hela and Colossus landed first, slaying several of the defenders in as many seconds. Colossus was now armed with a cavalry style warhammer and twirled it around himself masterfully, smashing jotun off their feet left and right. Beside him, Hela epitomized finesse and speed, her blade striking out like lightning.

By the time Husk landed and got back to her feet, the tower's rooftop was cleared and Hela had smashed the doorway leading into the tower with a spell.

Above them, the Valkyries had followed orders and spread out, shifting into small semi-squad-based groups of four. One group moved to give covering fire to the two teams on the ground. Another remained over E as he entered the fray on one of the unoccupied towers. The Valkyries there soon appeared a little sick as E's legs and arms shifted into nanites and spread out, slowly eating away at the defensive installation to rebuild the AI's stores of raw material and mass. Once refilled, both the hovering Valkyries and E took off and began to dig into the flank of an attacking force of jotun.

Along with the Heavy Gunners, who'd never stopped firing, the other two groups of winged horsewomen took the fight to the remaining over-sized jotun as well as the regular-sized jotun that were now coming out of the forests nearby. Not even five minutes after, Hela, Balder, and the others burst out of their respective towers, racing to engage the next group of defenders while the Valkyries and the rest gave them cover fire.

As his forces slowly dismantled the jotun defenses, Harry blasted through an approaching giant as if he wasn't even there and began to race across the landscape. He was eager to close with Surtur, an almost manic grin on his face as he lashed out around him at incoming attacks, disrupting them and slaying jotun with frightening ease until he was past their initial defensive line entirely.

At that point, distance came into play in a major way. Now able to see more of the jotun forces, Harry saw that Surtur stood almost at the bottom of the massive hill that was at the center of Muspellheim. Moreover, this was the Jotun King's realm. While he may use Odin's spear to lash out with blasts of raw magical power that no shield other than Sciath na BhFéadfadh could defend against, he could also lob giant masses of molten earth like artillery rounds, arcing them up and over into those attacking his realm from any direction.

When Surtur realized that Harry was racing towards him, he changed his angle of attack, bypassing the Migardian wizard by focusing on the flanks of the advancing assault force. Two Valkyries died instantly to a lava blast even as those below on the ground were forced to dodge a second such attack.

But once more, the humans and their allies adapted. Under Steve's direction one out of every group of Heavy Gunners and Valkyries turned their attention to watching the skies, calling out as the lava or rock came hurtling in.

But of course, this tactic cut into how effective their covering fire could be to those still on the ground. Even as the last of the overlarge jotun that had guarded the entrance into Muspellheim went down in a hail of rocket fire, more of the regular sized jotun had closed. Hela, and those with her, were now completely bogged down.

Cyclops blasted out optic beams several times, mowing down jotun with ease. Cannonball continued to wreak havoc as well, smashing into and through the outer edges of the battlefield, unwilling to hit his comrades as well as enemies. Hela, surrounded, began to use her magic rather than her sword skill alone, pulling away from the momentary battle lust that had fogged her mind when combat had first started.

"Form a battle line! Give me some cover in close," the goddess barked as she lashed out with cutting spells in every direction. She coupled these curses with spells of such intense cold the fire jotun's skin froze in places at a bare touch, causing them to scream in agony.

And if this change of tactics to something less meatheaded was ultimately due to Emma having given her a psychic nudge well, neither woman would ever say.

Behind enemy lines, Harry also came under attack. Other large jotun, unseen until now, rose up to block his path, but those directly in his way to Surtur died instantly. More jotun turned to hurling their own lava or rock at him, trying to catch him in a crossfire, but Harry simply dodged through these clumsy attempts, shaking his head. "It's just like dodging overgrown bludgers, easiest thing in the world."

At that moment, another blast of raw magic flared out, though not towards Harry but his companions. Recognizing this and unwilling to take the chance that his friends and allies would be able to dodge in time even if they saw it coming, Harry cast another Sciath na BhFéadfadh around himself and flew upwards. The shield rang like a tocsin under the blow and Harry grimaced as the coruscating

light momentarily blinded him. When the attack faded Harry instantly returned to his previous course, even as the shield around him collapsed, utterly overloaded. *Huh, the closer I get, the stronger the attacks get. Slightly more logical than I'm used to magic being, but good to know all the same.*

As the last flickering dots disappeared from his vision, Harry grinned like a wolf because ahead of him, he could now make out the clear figure of an overlarge jotun wearing a crown. *YES! Finally, a real enemy I can actually hit!*

Up to this point in the campaign, Harry had slowly become more and more frustrated. The Shadows were by their nature an enemy he could not come to grips with, being semi-psionic entities long without any physical bodies or base of operation in the natural world. Harry knew of no spells that could let him fight them on the Astral Plane like the telepaths could, but at first he'd believed that they would try to attack him anyway.

Harry had bet on them challenging him within his own mind, or barring that, expending a large amount of their magic in an attempt to match him when he attempted to free Odin. But the Shadows had adapted as well and instead opted to play a giant game of keep away as they stalled for time, time enough for his telepaths to tire out and they could really counterattack.

With a howl one part released frustration and one part righteous fury, Harry blocked another blast from Gungnir and immediately responded with his own, the bolt of unformed magical might crashing out to slam into one of the Shadows' remaining tethers. The blast struck Surtur in the side, hurling him off his feet despite his massive size.

Surtur had been preparing Gungnir for another blast—it took him precious time for Odin's mighty weapon to recharge—when his enemy's spell crashed into him. He fell to his side with a cry of agony but still managed to unleash the bolt from Gungnir even as he fell. Gritting his teeth at the pain, the Jotun King screamed out a command to his people. "To me, to me! Rally to your king!"

That last ravaging beam from Gungnir carved through several of Surtur's own people before crashing into Husk's side just as she was taking her position in a makeshift battle line under Hela's direction. The Kansas-borne girl melted under the magical assault, from her foot all the way up to her shoulder her metal body

began to lose cohesion as it heated passed red-hot to blinding white. Her lips pulled wide to let out a shriek like a lost soul, the cry louder than even the jotun devoured by E's nanite rounds. "ARRRGKKKAKAA!!!"

Like the blessing it was, the emergency runic array kicked in and instantly teleported her way back to base camp a moment later.

Cannonball saw this, saw his sister as she screamed in agony, and now he redoubled his efforts to smash through the horde, face grimset and eyes blazing. Using his powers, he pushed off the ground to gain altitude before flipping around and aiming straight towards the next group of large jotun that were attempting to attack Harry. "Oh hell no! You do not hurt my sister without getting your ass kicked in!" he snarled.

A second later, Cannonball proved to have earned his codename as he smashed into and through two of the overlarge jotun before twisting around and coming back for more. Five more of the giants died in quick succession, while the rest of the large jotun tried desperately to protect themselves from the tiny human flying into and through their lines.

Pushing his pain away and roughly getting himself to his feet, Surtur immediately cast an earth spike spell towards Harry. The dimensional traveler smashed it to one side with laughable ease, not even bothering with a magical spell, merely trusting in his Magia Erebea. He responded with a simple if overpowered Expelliarmus. The disarming spell nearly tore Gungnir from Surtur's grasp, but with a pulse of magic pulled from being the ruler of Muspelheim, he was able to fight it off. Surtur in turn responded with a blast from both the spear and his own spells; giant fireballs that lashed out and towards Harry, homing in on him from all sides. There were hundreds of these incendiary constructs, many more even blazing into existence from the molten ground instead of merely forming in the air.

Harry, however, both dodged the blast from Gungnir and managed to detonate the fireballs prematurely, causing them to explode before they reached him. With the air momentarily clear, he zoomed around Surtur, showing the speed and agility that had won him the Seeker position when he was younger. A moment later as he zoomed through two new fireballs that crashed into one another behind him, Harry shouted out, "Fulgur Plumbum!"

From the soot-choked sky a hammer formed of pure electricity swung down and smashed onto Surtur, halting the Jotun King's offense for a moment. This was followed quickly by several extreme cold spells. Recognizing them for what they were, and knowing their danger, Surtur dodged frantically, utilizing his mastery of self-transfiguration to change the shape of his body to dodge what he could and solidify the outer layer of his skin so that the ambient cold couldn't do as much damage.

Even as he tried to mold his body into a configuration as defended against cold as possible, Surtur opened his mouth to spit out more fireballs at Harry. Once more they seemed to automatically home in on the flying wizard. **"Blast you, stand still!"**

Harry didn't reply verbally, instead lashing out with another spell, a battering ram of ice-cold water. He followed this up with another Fulgur Plumbum. Surtur screamed as the water slammed into him, but his previous self-modification protected him enough that he was able to stumble to the side, avoiding the follow up strike. Stumbling, he managed to send out still more stones spikes up at Harry, earthen fangs reaching up to drag him fatally to the ground. Adding to that, the Jotun King again sent out more fireballs from his mouth.

For a second it looked like this would finally be too much for Harry to dodge, but as the multitude of magical attacks converged, Harry only covered himself with a shield. Surtur, seeing this, took the opportunity of Harry losing sight of the battlefield and quickly lashed out with Gungnir. The strike hit true, but the same shield Harry had cast only moments ago held firm, the combined assault only blinding him for a moment.

Surtur was no one's fool, despite his berserk fury at times, and knew that the human wizard was rapidly proving a threat to his life and retreated quickly, falling back towards his castle. While he did so, Surtur concentrated on his control of the land to good effect, launching further artillery-style magical attacks from every direction to cover his escape.

At the same time, the nearest of his folk finally arrived. Giant jotun, fed and prepared for destruction, who had not yet run afoul of the human able to barrel through his people or the humans firing down on them with some kind of explosive weaponry moved in now from the flanks of this assault into their realm.

Their roars thundered through the air and their steps shook the continent as they marched forward as one.

It was for naught. His vision clearing of smoke and ash, Harry slew any of the incoming jotun in his way to an individual so quickly not a one was able to launch more than a pittance of an attack. For all their size, the fire jotun giants lacked Surtur's greater magical resistance and armor, and so to the human wizard they were simply so many targets.

Back near the bridge, the rest of the ground forces were also making good headway despite Surtur's artillery-like magical strikes. They had broken the first defensive line and moved back onto their carpets for a time, racing on to engage the next group of defenders before it could pull back. Meanwhile, the Heavy Gunners and Valkyries had spread out further racing ahead of Hela and the others to help Cannonball smash the spread out clumps of jotun that Harry had left behind him.

By this point, Magma had joined the rest of the attackers out in the open, racing behind the frontline combatants, hurling her bolts of tectonic energy to some effect. At first, she'd helped to wipe out a small band of jotun that had been hiding in one of the supposedly unoccupied towers before with Steve and E's help but now that the main threat came from the ongoing long range magical bombardment Surtur was launching at them, she halted in place.

Another Heavy Gunner had died from one such boulder, and another had knocked Tyr clean off his feet a moment before and even now more were coming in, scattering the Valkyrie and hitting Hela, causing the normally cool-headed to curse like a sailor who just missed leave. It was only a matter of time before they started to lose more people, as Harry couldn't protect them from every direction. But Magma could do something about it.

"Round two, Surtur..." With that, the Neo-Grecian knelt down and sent her mind down into the earth of Muspellheim. Her body had long since changed into its tectonic energy form as she'd worked to stop the jotun from launching further long range attacks. These were proving to be the deadliest type of assault in the defenders' arsenal.

At that moment, despite the efficacy of his control of the land turning out to be his most effective defense, Surtur was still desperately retreating, having no desire to let the human seidr user any closer than he had to. *I need to put more distance between us. Damn it, where are my lords when I need them the most!? Wait, what is... She dares?!* Once again, Surtur felt a presence appear to contest control of the tectonic energies that lied beneath the surface. Only this time, the invader was attempting their coup in Surtur's own realm!

Just feeling that touch infuriated Surtur. **"Foolish human bitch! Blood, bone, and sinew, this land, from one edge to another, is mine! You will never control even a speck of dirt so long as I draw breath!"** Halting his retreat to his castle, Surtur concentrated his mind down into the ground to do battle with his distant foe.

Unfortunately for Harry and the assault team, the Shadows chose that moment to join the battle. Harry suddenly found himself surround by illusions just as a number of the massive jotun were teleported into his way. More illusions were also sent at the rest of the attacking force. This sudden interruption forced Harry to pause his hunt to cast the same area of effect spell he had come up with when racing towards Asgard. "Vide modo verum (see only the truth)!" The spell, once more molded into a standing enchantment, tugged massively on his reserves, but the cost was worth it as it swiftly covered the whole battlefield from Harry on back to his fellows.

Even worse for the Earth force, however, was that this momentary lapse in Harry's concentration on Surtur nearly proved fatal for Magma. Unlike the last time they'd squared off, where neither of the combatants had been familiar with the world they were fighting on, Surtur understood everything there was to know about Muspellheim down to almost the molecular level. Magma's home field advantage, her mutant ability to meld with tectonic forces, failed her within seconds and Surtur was even able to turn her connection to his realm's tectonic energies against her.

An instant later, Magma's energy form began to tear itself apart, conflicting forces pulling this way and that so violently she was almost akin to a human-shaped volcano. "AAAAHHHHHH!!!!" Magma shrieked, her powers turning against her. She but for the quick thinking of Tyr and Harry.

Hearing Amara's screaming and seeing her energy form flaring erratically, Harry knew instinctively that it was somehow Surtur who was causing this horror. Using a hasty, short-ranged apparition, Harry appeared straight in Surtur's face. There, he lashed out with the quickest chilling spell he knew, not wanting to take even a second longer to create a larger, more powerful version. Instead, he simply brute-forced this assault as much as he could. "Glacius!"

What came from Harry's frantically outstretched hands was the pure concentrated essence of Cold, making all of the previous cold spells he had thus far used seemingly tepid in comparison. Despite the Jotun King's earlier attempts to make his outer shell too thick for such attacks to harm him, the sheer power of this assault still managed to utterly freeze that outer shell along with large portions of his internal bloodstream. Surtur screamed in similar agony as he'd caused his tectonic energy-wielding foe, his fists flailing out desperately. All around the two, the ground heaved, but Harry smashed any and all earthen constructs aside with Reductos.

Meanwhile, through the vagaries of the battlefield, Tyr had become the closest allied combatant to Magma when she'd knelt to the ground outside the tower Husk, Colossus, and Hela had previously cleared. Seeing her horrifying distress, the Asgardian warrior bodily charged into her. Pulling her off of her feet, Tyr ignored the sizzling of her tectonic energy form burning into his armor and tunic to the point that the chain mail started turning red. He looked around wildly for what to do, who to speak to before remembering himself and turning to shout up to Steve, "Get down here man! We must remove this one from all contact with the ground!"

Holding his spasming ally like he was, the God of Justice had left himself vulnerable, and many of the nearby regular-sized jotun took this opportunity, hurling their spears towards him and the woman in his arms. Snarling, Hela quickly whipped around and cast a spell that shattered weapons created a dome of magical energy around the two. The protective shield only dissipated Steve lower his magic carpet enough so that he could reach down and pulling the now comatose form of Magma onto it. She didn't seem physically wounded any longer and reverted to her normal body, but she was completely unresponsive, her eyes

rolled up in her head, her body shaking and shivering as if she had just been electrocuted.

Having heard his beloved's cry, Colossus could only see red and tore apart the two jotun attacking him, using the dismembered leg of one to brain the other before he turned to race back towards Amara. When he saw that she was safe for the moment, the former Russian farm boy gave Steve a solemn nod and turned back to the fight. Grabbing up two weapons dropped by fallen jotun he hurled himself forward once more, cutting down the last of the jotun still standing. He then barked orders, his usual self-effacement burned away by his wrath. "Get the magic carpets down here now! We will close with the next batch before they can ready themselves!"

As his assault force moved to engage again, Harry's magical assault had continued unabated, smashing aside Surtur's own magical attacks even as the Jotun King reached his castle's walls. There, as a few defenders on the castle's walls started to engage him, Harry launched his next overpowered assault. "Fragor unda fortitudine!"

The siege-breaker spell smashed into Surtur and his castle at the same time. The king of Muspellheim roared in agony as the black metal armor he wore exploded off his body, his boiling molten blood dripping down its rent remains as well as his face and side.

The castle behind him suffered similarly. The majority of the wall facing Harry fell away along with much of the mountain face along with it. This tore free two of the walls of the room where Malekith had been holed up, watching the runic array he had created to leech off Odin do its work.

For a moment, Harry's onslaught on Surtur faltered a flash of white among the red and black of the scenery catching his attention. Seeing Odin laid out there in nothing but his underthings sprawled onto his side, Harry stared.

Even from afar, Harry could tell Odin had been somehow drained to the point of emaciation. He looked nothing like a god or king, his muscle gone, skin shriveled around his bones, and his beard grown to the point it was longer than he was tall. Honestly it looked as if the King of Asgard had aged thousands of

years. And surrounding the Asgardian Skyfather was a runic array, thrumming with blood red and dark umber energies. *Some kind of draining array?*

But that was all the attention Harry could spare as Surtur lashed out at him from the rubble of his castle's outer wall. A fire spell and a ground spike shot towards Harry while the ground around Colossus and the others rose up to attack them, following up with a dozen more fireballs that homed in on Harry, bracketing the wizard as he hovered in midair. While Harry dealt with those or dodged as best he could, Surtur waited before lashing out with his purloined spear towards the incoming magic carpets.

Once more Gungnir roared in the Jotun King's hand, sending out another blast of energy that, though still condensed, was now as wide in diameter as Harry was tall. Yet still Harry was able to react in time and throw up another Sciath na BhFéadfadh to absorb the energy before returning fire. *Crikey, wasn't more than a year ago using that spell more than once would've seemed both impossible and overkill. Yet here I am, now throwing it around like a party favor.*

By this point, Harry had taken the measure of Surtur, and found his magical attacks wanting. *He doesn't have enough magical power to harm me. Not to mention he sorely lacks any sort of versatility too.* So instead of bothering to defend himself from the next group of fireballs, Harry let them hit him, tanking their explosions while concentrating on his own spellchain.

Although Surtur dodged or blocked most of what Harry sent at him thanks to his control over the ground allowing him to create walls to take the attacks, an overpowered Sectumsempra still managed to slip through and carve into Surtur's shoulder and side. The next spell in the chain froze the Jotun King's new wound, causing Surtur even more agony.

Meanwhile, now protected from Surtur's attacks by Harry's shield spell, the Heavy Gunners were able to begin raining fire down on the defenders of Surtur's castle. At the same time, the remaining Valkyrie fired at the jotun from above. They had lost four of their sisters so far, but still their arrows flicked out like asp's tongues to stab into heads and bodies alike along with Cyclops' eye beams. Behind them the groups could still hear the furious cursing in Russian from Colossus as he took bloody vengeance on any fire jotun in front of him for the

horrible injuries his girlfriend had suffered at the hands of Surtur leading the other close range combatants into battle.

“E, Cyclops, cover Colossus and the others. They’re still attracting most of the attention to them and need the help. Heavy Gunners, you too,” Steve ordered, while still more jotun, now consistently smaller and no longer armed boiled out of several nearby buildings set into the bottom of the mountain. Yet for all of their lack of size or weapons, none of them hesitated in attacking the invaders.

The King of Muspellheim frantically dodged away, again transforming his body so the cone of Harry’s next spell would miss his chest. At the same time, Malekith, whose presence had now been registered by all of the assault force, joined the fray. Spells shot out from him as he simultaneously tried to disappear into the darkness of the rubble all around him.

“Drill of Light! Lumos Proxima!” Harry shouted in quick succession. Hundreds of cutting, lightning and light-based drills of magic blossomed into existence and immediately shot out toward Surtur, who desperately used his mastery over the land once more to creating a series of walls to absorb the various drills. At the same time, he was forced to transfigure himself into various shapes and sizes to dodge any of the spells he could.

Meanwhile, the light-based spell erupted into existence over Malekith’s position. This relatively smaller but far brighter miniature sun burnt away the dark elf’s cover even as Harry concentrated his magical power into his fist, not through the Magia Erebea, but for another spell. Once it was charged, he thrust it out towards Malekith. The burst of nearly raw magical energy impacted the king of Svartalfheim’s various incoming attack spells, dissipating them with ease and continuing on.

Malekith gaped at where the fist of raw magical energy had engulfed his attacks as if they were mere pinpricks. He only just managed to leap aside into the still covered corridor to get out of the ravenous blast. When it struck the area where he had been standing, he could then only stare in further shock as the ground there bubbled and sagged as if struck by a battering ram mixed with acid.

“Abyss curse that human, not even Odin or Freya can throw around raw magic of such potency so easily,” Malekith gibbered. The hated Asgardian rulers might have had the magical potential to do so, but neither had the ability to just throw out such raw magic so quickly. “I, I am not a threat to that one, I am but a passing annoyance.”

This was not a thought that Malekith was used to contemplating, at least when it came to humans, but he was a survivor above all else, and his instincts were telling him that the seidr-using human hovering before the jotun oaf’s castle would wipe him out with the ease of a dragon slaying a rabbit.

Looking around his temporary hiding place, Malekith saw the magic-using human descend to the ground and a second later, another spell flashed out from his hands into the stone of Muspellheim. From said stone arose golems and giant lions appeared made out of the stone of the ground beneath them. Not in any great numbers, but being capable of casting such magic like that despite Surtur’s control of the land in his realm was an appalling sign of how much sheer willpower and magic this human had. That, combined with the groaning, battered form of Surtur, whose massive figure lay half buried under the rubble of the castle’s central keep, painted a very desolate picture for the dark elf king.

“O, once more the rule is being proven, to match against this human in combat is a fool’s game,” Malekith mused, managing to regain some measure of his self-control though the words came out with little of his normal insouciance. “Now, how do I get out of here? It does not appear as if the Shadows seem willing to be involved fur—GAAH!”

A round, metal shield suddenly slammed into Malekith’s back, and sending him flying into the nearby wall. Such a blow would’ve shattered a lesser man’s bones, but the dark elf king merely cried out in pain. He rolled as he hit the ground, whirling to glare balefully at the one who had just dared to attack him.

Seeing Malekith through the haze of battle, the one who had killed Nikolai, he had swiftly left the Valkyries and the Heavy Gunners to dive down, shield first. Now, after having thrown his shield, he rolled from where he had landed, raising a hand to catch his shield on the rebound. Without a word, he attacked, angling his shield to stab edge-on into Malekith’s side.

Malekith hastily raised a magical barrier, forming it barely an inch away from his body before the weaponized shield of his opponent bounced off of it. Several more shield strikes followed as Malekith took the chance to back away, being mindful to try and keep out of sight of the more dangerous human by Surtur while still retreating deeper into the ruins of the castle. However, before he could get too far, the red-white-and blue-spangled shield warrior pulled a small device from his belt and tossed it forward to explode against his magical barrier.

The impact of that whatever it was caused the shield to flicker out of existence, and Malekith backed away hastily as the shield wielder marched closer, pulling out a spare sword he had requested from Surtur. It had matched Malekith's size but obviously lacked the elegance of a blade made by his own people. At the time, it had been needs must, so he'd accepted the subpar offering. Now, he'd wished he'd pushed for something, anything, a bit more worthy for battle. Backing further away, Malekith tried several offensive spells, but unfortunately his timing was off and he passed through a passageway that had lost its roof just as he started casting, the light of his magic giving away his position.

Seeing the spellfire out of the corner of his eye, Harry belted out a Finite Incantatum without missing a beat, the high-powered dispelling magic washing over both combatants below. Steve was unaffected as he'd had no enchantments of any kind on him save for those woven into his suit via runic arrays, but Malekith's spells utterly disappeared. A split second later, Captain America charged forward full bore.

As Malekith prepared to meet the oncoming human, he kept a smirk he didn't honestly feel upon his face, hoping the sight of his nonchalance would get under this man's skin. "My, my, so much anger. Did my killing your acquaintance truly unman you to this extent? Were you two...close? How scandalous!"

Admittedly this was rather random and somewhat crude, but Malekith had only been able to hope for some kind of reaction. That was how he fought after all, by destabilizing his opponents until they revealed a weakness to exploit. Yet this human didn't respond at all, instead grimly redirecting Malekith's sword blow with ease only to lash out with his shield in a blow that caught the dark elf king in

the lower leg, shattering his shin and causing him to fall to one knee. A hasty barrier spell narrowly covering his forearm allowed Malekith to just block the next blow from the man's shield, but then the human's other hand was grabbing his sword arm and flipping him into a wall.

Just before he could slam into that wall, Malekith and Surtur both disappeared, teleported away and entirely out of Muspellheim, once more saved by their masters. Holding onto Malekith as he had been, Steve also disappeared. The Shadows had finally recovered from their shock at the failure of their illusions earlier, and now were putting forth their husbanded strength in earnest.

**OOOOOOO**

Steve retched as the teleportation spell ended, slumping to one side, entirely disoriented by the abrupt shift. In contrast Malekith was able to recover almost instantly, pushing himself to his feet with blade in hand as he wrenched his captured arm free of Steve's grip. With a vicious snarl the dark elf king lashed out towards the human who'd so dared against him, but somehow Steve managed to block the strike with his shield at the last second, rolling just enough to bring it to bear even as his treacherous stomach tried to join the fight on Malekith's side.

With no strength behind the riposte, Malekith's sword skittered across the front of the shield instead of being bounced away, slicing slightly into Steve's shoulder, although not penetrating enough to kill the joint. Malekith whipped his blade back and down, this time aiming for the Steve's leg.

Steve couldn't quite block fast enough as the dark elf king redirected his feint towards his foot at the last second.

Thankfully his were armor-lined and the blade once more didn't manage to penetrate much, but the blow did break something inside Steve's calf. Still taken worse wounds before this new futuristic life of his, and he pushed through the pain this, rolling backward and to the side with his other leg. A second later, Steve stood his back against a weird, metal-glass tree sculpture. Glaring at Malekith, he raised his shield as his eyes flicked around, taking in the area around him, his shield up in front of him.

The dark elf king lashed out with spellfire this time around, a wickedly gleeful smile on his face. “No wizard to help you now!” he caroled, his wide angled spells attempting to wrap around his prey, trying to bind him in place. “Indeed, there is no one to help you now, human!”

Another spell flashed out, but Steve dodged the first spell by pivoting to putt the weird tree between him and Nickolai’s killer. A second later he leaped to the side, shielding his body as best he could from a second and third spell before ducking into a combat roll to the side. Coming to a stop, he launched his shield at Malekith like a discus, causing the dark elf king to grimace and create a magic barrier in his defense. There was a sudden loud ‘GONG’ sound and then the human somehow was holding a rifle “What, where in the—?”

Steve didn’t reply. He’d gotten out of the habit of bantering with his enemies back in WW2, the Red Skull having been more than enough of an abject lesson of why monologuing was bad. Instead, he switched his gauss rifle to full auto, making a point of thumbing over the runic array that had previously enlarged his shots to the size of tank rounds to the off setting, before firing. The gauss rounds crashed into Malekith’s magical shield, the innumerable impacts, causing hundreds of firecrackers bursts of light blinding both men.

But Steve was already moving, sliding into a nearby hole in the ground left by something that he’d seen off to one side.

Nearby, Surtur was having just as much trouble with the sudden shift from one dimension to another as Captain America had, although for a different reason. Moments before, Surtur had managed to rouse himself from having been battered nearly into unconsciousness by seidr-using human only to see said human use some kind of spell to create an army of golems from the earth of Muspellheim itself. Such blasphemy was piing insult upon insult, something Surtur had not been able to bear, and he had once more thrust his consciousness into the ground in order to try and fight off the magic. Being torn from that connection had been immensely disorienting, although it had also undoubtedly saved his life from the human’s next assault.

Thus Surtur lay nearby, nearly insensate, groaning pitiably for all the world like a hill with a migraine. As he lay there in a daze, the Jotun King’s numerous wounds, some of which were very serious, began to close. This was not because

he had any great healing ability as a jotun or anything, but was instead due to the nature of his blood, which cooled and turned to stone even as it seeped out of him. Brought so low, Surtur had no desire, nor ability, to think about what the dark elf rat was doing to make such a racket.

As the flow of bullets ceased, Malekith dropped shield and leaped to one side, still blinking spots from his eyes and wishing to avoid any follow up attack from the annoyingly persistent human he was up against. As the spots faded, the dark elf king took a glance at where he was. Another wicked grin stole across his face. "Ah, Svartalfheim, a good choice, I suppose. We would be caught much more easily if we had gone back to Utgard..."

However, a moment later, his good humor vanished as he took in a more full measure of his surroundings, only now noticing how desolate the area was. Then he saw bodies scattered nearby and even as he used another spell to hide his presence and a second to duplicate himself as he had back in their first contest, Malekith turned his attention away from the garishly dressed human, his eyes narrowing in anger. "And what has gone on here in my absence? If the remnants of the various clans have gone to war without my firm grip around their throats, I swear to—"

The sound of glass shattering and metal screaming as it warped caused Malekith to whirl around in fright only to yelp and leap away in shock as a massive wolf burst out from behind a nearby forest of steel and glass. A reflexive cutting curse only served to cause the wolf to turn in his direction, distracting the creature long enough for the blasted human to scramble away in awe of the huge wolf as well.

"Good grief, that's Fenrir?! Then that means..." Steve looked closer and spotted the body of a armor-wearing human on Fenrir's back, made small by the wolf's bulk. "Dani!"

Before Captain America could consider what to do about this revelation, Fenrir spoke, eyes locked on Malekith. "Hrrm, you look real little elf, and you have an actual scent. That means you might be real meat. That is good, I've gotten tired of guessing which of your folk is real and which is not. Only getting it right four out of every ten times has left me ravenous!"

With that the giant wolf charged forward, his maw gaping wide.

“AHHH!!! Malekith screamed in fear, and tried to run, knowing his spells would do next to nothing to this creature. Diving out of the way of Fenrir’s charge, the dark elf king rolled into a small creak before jumping to his feet, splashing away as the dread wolf, ignoring Steve, turned to come after him again.

Before Fenrir could continue his hunt, however, the Shadows intervened. Several doppelgangers of Malekith appeared around the stream, each of them fleeing in a different direction. This caused Fenrir to pause for a second, more out of frustration than wondering which was real. The Shadows once again had no sense of how important smell was to those of a more bestial nature. They knew how to create the illusion of scents to the extent they could fool humans and Asgardians, but a creature like Fenrir was a different story.

As the phantasms spread out, so too did the magic that constituted their false scents. In no time, Fenrir was able to pick out which Malekith smelled the most real and charged through several real and illusory trees after Svartalfheim’s king.

Still fleeing as fast as he could, Malekith heard the thudding of Fenrir’s paws coming closer but didn’t dare look behind him. As he ran, Malekith spotted an open cave mouth and, desperately raced for it, flinging himself in just ahead of Fenrir’s snapping jaws. “GRAAA!!!!”

Gulping down air, Malekith shook his head and looked back at what he’d just escaped. Fenrir was now tearing into the hillside like a fox would when after a rabbit. This was not a position Malekith had ever found himself in before, but after a moment he slowly pushed himself to his feet, scowling. “Hold, Fenrir! Whatever transpired in battle since this war began, you are still the enemy of Asgard and all who stand with it, are you not?! Why are you trying to devour me when there is a similarly tasty human I know for fact is aligned with Asgard standing right out there!? Would he not be more delicious than one such as I?”

“I remember the tortures and betrayal of the Asgardians, yes. But I also remember the madness forced upon my mind, the unending, ravenous hunger that drove me like a horde of whips! And did you know morsel, that the madness is gone now, that Danielle, she who called me friend, told me about the

Shadows?!” Fenrir’s retort ended in a roar. “You may not fill my stomach, elf, but you will still taste sweet going down the gullet!”

Fenrir ignored the illusions all around him now, concentrating his mind on his sense of smell. His nose told him that the real Malekith, the dark elf king who stunk of fear, sweat, and magic, still hid in the cave he clawed at. He focused on that above all else, and thus the illusions of the Shadows could gain no hold on his mind strong enough to turn him aside.

Beyond that, the impact of the Shadows on Fenrir was miniscule, compared to most others at present anyway. The Shadows could mess with his mind to be sure, but not easily. Like his sense of smell, the bestial nature of Fenrir’s thoughts and emotions protected him from being as easily manipulated as the Shadows could the minds of the Asgardians now that their long term machinations had been laid bare.

The Shadows were also too busy at present to put forth that effort here...

Steve had been following them, hiding himself as best he could under any cover he could find, and had come close enough to hear this. But now the ground trembled and he looked behind him to see that Surtur was on his feet, staring over the debris separating his hill-sized form from Fenrir. In his hands he held Gungnir and now he thrust it forward.

Thinking quickly, Steve came to a decision. *The enemy of my enemy might just be my enemy’s enemy, but I am very much without friends here. And there’s Dani to consider too.* “Fenrir, look out! To your left!”

Surtur’s gaze twitched in the direction of the shout, but the meddlesome human was already moving, racing away even as he fired off a magical blast from Gungnir,. The ravening beam of magic, denser and far deadlier than even Harry or Stephen could accomplish without a lot of concentration, should have struck the dread wolf’s side dead on. Instead, thanks to the human’s warning, the pulse of magic seared across one of Fenrir’s back legs as the giant beast reflexively dodged, the beam continuing towards the human himself.

The beam seared away some of the fur from that leg, but that was all. Fenrir’s hide was proof against magic of most calibers. He was, after all, the wolf fated to slay Odin during the Ragnarök.

Knowing his chance at a sneak attack had come and gone, Surtur instead decided on direct combat and bellowed, **“Die, foolish beast!”** A moment later, the earth around moved to his command, spikes of stone and hands of rock bursting up toward Fenrir, aiming , trying to tie the wolf down, or spear the wolf in his slightly wounded leg.

But the spikes could not punch through Fenrir’s hide, and those that stabbed at his wounded stomach—those slight wounds Garm had caused—instead hurled the giant wolf away, causing him to scramble to keep from rolling over onto the girl on his back even as he snapped at the hands trying to bind him. Fenrir lunged forward, dodging similar attack, fangs bared as he wove his way towards the giant. “Do you think I would not eat you as well?! You may not be tasty or filling, but I am the Wolf Who Will Devour the Sun! Do you think your paltry heat will deter me!?”

Elsewhere on the battlefield, Steve groaned, seemingly forgotten for now. He had managed to Surtur’s attack, but not without consequence, cracking his head against the lip of another cave mouth in his haste. Disoriented and with a screaming headache, Steve tried to push himself to his feet only to freeze as he saw someone standing over him by his left side.

Malekith stood there, having used Surtur’s distraction of Fenrir’s attention to use the magic of his people to shift the earth of the collapsed cave he’d been trapped in. With it he’d been able to get around the previous rockfall that had blocked it from the greater cave system and circle around the dread wolf. “One would almost think Fenrir’s not used to playing well with others.” He drawled, his usual aplomb restored as he stood over the clearly injured human. “Now, where were we?”

However, before Malekith could say more an arrow nearly found his heart, smashing into his breastplate with punishing force. His breastplate stopped the arrow from penetrating his flesh, but two more arrows quickly followed, striking with punishing force, causing him to stumble the human pushed himself to his feet, ignoring his wounds, and bringing his round shield into Malekith’s side.

Malekith, though, still retained his sword, and as he rolled with the blow, he brought it around to bear, using it to send out a series of attacks at the human

while also lashing out towards the direction the arrows had come. With his other hand, he called a ball of Blue-Fyre into existence. "Curse it, who else is here?!"

Skadi had arrived nearly an hour ago. She'd followed Fenrir's tracks very carefully, knowing both of the antipathy the dread wolf had for all Asgardians as well as the fact that she had no chance in a fight against him. She hadn't interfered previously, being worried that Fenrir was about to join forces with the two enemy kings, but now that concern had faded.

Once more an arrow flew, this one taking Malekith in the side. Again, her attack was thwarted, and again, the Huntress hissed in annoyance.

Yet some of the Shadows **were** still concentrating on this battlefield, and suddenly, the positions of Malekith and Captain America shifted in Skadi's mind the moment of change woven into the normal flow of combat. Instantly, she shifted her aim to compensate for the new positioning, arrow after arrow streaking toward 'Malekith', who blocked them all as if he had a shield. Whatever magic it was, each impact still caused him to stumble, forcing him to retreat.

Now free from one opponent, Malekith turned his magics upon the human, cutting spells and binding spells reaching for him. "Can you feel it, human?" Malekith laughed as he realized what had happened. "Can you feel the course of this war turning against you and yours? Pyrrhic though it may be, I think it will be my side who wins in the end."

"I haven't heard a fat lady sing yet bastard!" Steve shot back, ducking down into a ditch made by a previous attack from Surtur. At that moment, another such blast from Gungnir missed its intended target of Fenrir entirely and nearly struck Malekith, who ducked aside, cursing.

Then Steve was gone, racing away even as Skadi tracked him with a hail of arrows. *This battle isn't over, let alone the war. not until the fat lady sings, Steve thought blocking still more arrows, shaking his head. But unless something changes quick, that song's going to be a dirge!*

**OOOOOOO**

By the time Harry and the others had breached Muspellheim's defenses and were pushing Surtur and his reserve of troops to the brink, Jörmungandr was

somewhat confused. He was feeling almost drained, as if this battle with Þór and these Midgardian humans had been going on for weeks on end rather than barely a thirty two hours. Which was just preposterous.

And yet his body felt heavier than it ever had before. Even just general movement now weren't quite as sharp as they normally should be either. And Jörmungandr could not explain this away because of the number of wounds so far accrued since been driven above water either. While Jörmungandr's body had been battered in numerous areas, none of the humans nor their Asgardian ally had caused any injury that was truly life-threatening; the World Serpent was simply too **BIG** and too durable. Even the human with powerful magic couldn't cause any hurt worse than Þór could thanks to Jörmungandr's size and magical resistance.

On the other end of the scale, Ororo was also taking stock of things as the sun reached midday position above them. Ben Grimm had been scraped off of the serpent several times when he went for the creature's belly. The Hulk and Thundra had both been hit by lucky swats. Thundra's legs had been crushed at one point, and subsequently healed by Ororo, although how Thundra had managed to save her broom was a tale in itself. Thunderbird had been smashed into the ocean of ice so hard he'd broken through into the water beneath and had had to be pulled out magically by the Scarlet Witch. And the Hulk's luck failed and he'd been gnawed on before being spat out like a pistachio shell with such force he had flown out of sight.

Þór had also been smacked around true, but his strength was such that while he might've been wounded, he had yet to be forced to retreat for even the slightest bit of time since his arrival. Instead, the Thunderer's hammer blows continued to echo from one end of the frozen ocean to the other along with his booming warcries.

As for the long-ranged members of Team Fishermen, Stephen had taken a stray blast of high pressure water to the back after it had somehow ricocheted off the wreckage of an upturned slab of ice. The strike, unintended as it may have been, had still sent him ass over teakettle, causing him to crash headfirst into the side of a veritable ice floe.

The Scarlet Witch had similarly suffered the fate of being smacked out of the sky, only her incident was caused by a random bit of scale knocked loose by Þór. The shard had struck her with such force it had broken her arm like a twig. The young woman's resultant cursing had made even Thunderbird and Þór look at her askance, turning away from Jörmungandr briefly to look at her furious figure before getting back to business. While Stephen had been able to quickly return to the fray, the Scarlet Witch had not, instead choosing to retreat entirely and deal with her broken arm and sheer physical and magical exhaustion. She soon rose up high enough to retreat to the chariot, joining Emma Steed and Xian.

For her part, Storm was still going strong physically, as were the two telepaths technically, although they had husbanded their strength before this on purpose. This was only because Ororo flew due to her mutant power, however, rather than her magical energy. If she'd had to rely on that drying wellspring, then she wouldn't have been able to keep fighting. Indeed, she had retreated entirely at this point, concentrating all of her mental willpower on keeping her mutant power actively focused on the ocean and freezing the water around Jörmungandr.

It wasn't as easy task, and every time she had to break off to heal the Hulk, Thunderbird, Rogue, or the others she lost that hard fought concentration and the regular weather of Asgard soon moved to rear its head again. Each little crack in the trap allowed Jörmungandr to make more headway in breaking out of the ice and diving back into the water that was, by this point, a few hundred feet below the surface.

Even as he slowly hammered team Fishermen into paste, the giant serpent had not stopped struggling to escape. The voices of his masters commanded it, the Shadows shouting their orders every few minutes into his mind. Jörmungandr had spent hundreds of years obeying the voices, growing fat in the doing. Father? Betrayed. Family? Betrayed. His adoptive mother's lifeless body? Hidden without even a second's thought. All of this and more had been done for the sake of obeying the Shadows and being given leave to feast on anything he wished for eternity. He would not deny them now, and as he started to feel that exhaustion, any hesitance fled.

The source of Jörmungandr's exhaustion was herself feeling somewhat exhausted and quite frustrated. Every time Rogue had touched Jörmungandr so

far, she'd drained just a bit more of the creature's energy. She could tell that she was doing a lot more damage every time she punched the monster afterward at least, breaking several scales and crippling a whole paw at one point.

Indeed, Rogue reckoned she was stronger than even the Hulk by now, but Jörmungandr was still...just... too... damn... big! For every wound they caused, there was so much more of Jörmungandr to fight it was like a band of Smurfs attempting to fight an Anaconda the size of an oak tree.

When next she was flung away, Rogue barely felt the impact as she skidded across the ice. Not even the initial impact hurt much, even though it had hurled the Southern belle off of her former perch low down on the monster's visible back.

Rolling until her feet were under her, Rogue pulled her broom off her back. With it between her legs, she flew back towards Jörmungandr, again, and then around, waiting for Þór and Thunderbird to grab his attention like they did. She watched as the Thing tried using a hatchet to cut at the monster's flank where its body came out of the frozen ocean. The blow sounded like a round from a battleship going off, but still only a few scales shattered under the impact and in return the Thing was smacked away by a simple flex from Jörmungandr.

But that and then Þór's blow from above did succeed in catching Jörmungandr's attention. Seeing that, Rogue dove back in, dodging around a spell from Stephen, or rather a series of spells. The sorcerer had begun to chain his spells together as the fight had dragged on, one after another in deadlier and deadlier combinations. This time first came a spell that condensed several dozen cutting curses into a singular, narrow focus, which cut into and through a several scales in one go. This was followed by a looser kind of spell that somehow added to the damage in a way Rogue didn't quite understand. However it worked, the magic caused blood to burst out from between the already shattered or cut scales.

Landing on Jörmungandr's writhing back near the halfway point of his length that was out of the water, Rogue dimly heard Storm giving out orders through the communicator built into the neck of her combat outfit. "Thunderbird, retreat. You should have been able to dodge that last blow entirely. You're getting too tired, pull back and rest."

“Dammit all, no! I am an Apache warrior! I am not going to run away like that! By the spirits, my ancestors would never let me live such a disgrace down!” Thunderbird snarled, rearing back on his carpet. The magical transport zoomed back in, angling to attack Jörmungandr’s underbelly once more.

Rogue completely ignored this bit of drama, far too busy hammering another blow into the patch of scales to the side of where she was clinging, her other hand gripping a jutting scale so hard she felt it crack under her grip. “Why won’t yah feel it, yah bastard!? Hell, Ah drained the Juggernaut in less time than this, **way** less time! An’ he was runnin’ on god-power.”

Above the fuming Southern belle, Thundra paused for a moment before completely pulling out of her attack run. Instead she shifted around and came at Jörmungandr from behind until she was directly above where Rogue was clinging, punching away. “Rogue, you’re already becoming affected by whatever you are draining from the beast.”

“Wait, what?” Rogue asked, snapping out of her rage and staring up at the older woman. “That can’t be. Ah mean, he’s moving a little slower Ah guess, but—”

“Rogue, you’re at least two feet larger than I am now, and I was head and shoulders taller than you when we arrived. And looking at your arms, I can see from here where your skin is changing into scales.”

Rogue blinked, her confusion quickly devolving into worry. She looked down at her arms. Sure enough, scales were beginning to grow under the skin of her arms, already visible were nothing had not been there what felt like only moments ago. The increased size had probably begun a while back, though Rogue hadn’t noticed.

Rogue stared down at her arms for just a moment as she hung there with her still gloved hand, scowling in thought as Thunderbird was once more bashed away and Jörmungandr and Þór exchanging several blows for the umpteenth time. *What if these changes stay like this like mah super strength did after Ah drained the Juggernaut dry? Lord have mercy that wouldn’t be good at all. Especially if the process keeps on going. What would Scott think? Hell, what would Ah even look like in the first place?*

Her thoughts were interrupted as the Hulk suddenly bellowed in fury while Thunderbird howled in pain and rage Jörmungandr's bulk abruptly jitted sideways, hammered by some great impact elsewhere along his massive flank. This was followed a second later by Þór bellowing his own warcry. "Have at tHEEERK!!"

The Asgardian was abruptly cut off as he was unexpectedly jetted into the sky by an undulation of Jörmungandr's coiling length, as if the serpent was a massive elongated trampoline rather than a giant serpent. While still in midair, a jet of concentrated poison struck Þór, but the condensed miasma did nothing to the Thunderer.

From her foothold, Rogue could already see Storm moving in to help with the wounded again. She could also feel Jörmungandr shuddering, wrenching more lengths of flank violently from side to side, shattering still more of the imprisoning ice. Looking down, the Southern belle realized for the first time that she could see flowing water below the surface of the frozen ocean now.

That glance did it for her. Swapping hands with a snarl, Rogue used her teeth to rip off her remaining glove, noticing absently that her teeth had grown sharper alongside her other changes. With both hands bare, Rogue grabbed onto two different scales, her absorption powers going into overtime.

As the energy flowed into her, she could now actually feel herself growing, transforming. Her fingers grew into claws, her eyes shifted as their pupils stretched into slits like those of a reptile, her hair began to disappear.

Gasping at suddenly feeling exhaustion slamming down, Jörmungandr twisted, the segment where the feeling of weakness centered from flipping to the side and up. For all her new, increased strength, Rogue still lost her grip and was flung up into the air.

Hissing with a mouth far too full of teeth to fully close, Rogue rolled in midair and snarled as she locked eyes with the World Serpent. "Fuck you, ya monster!" As gravity worked to reassert itself, Rogue brought her fists together and angled down onto an already wounded segment of the monster as it rolled underneath her into the perfect position.

For the first time since Þór had originally arrived, Jörmungandr screamed out in true, raw agony. As the double fisted blow rammed home, blood exploded from the wound and back on to Rogue. Jörmungandr twisted and shivered and shook in place so hard more of the ice shattered entirely by accident, and a portion of his flank crashed into Rogue's side, sending her flying sideways through the air.

While Þór and several others cheered at the proof that they were finally wounding the giant monster in a significant way, Storm instead screamed in desperate rage. "No!"

The weather goddess's fury came as she realized that a significant portion of Jörmungandr's bulk had shattered through the ice all along its length, and now, he had twisted around, moving back along his length and having disastrously managed to toss Þór and Rogue out of the way, the World Serpent was preparing break the last of her oceanic prison to bits.

Also realizing this, the Thing raced over to the Hulk. Ben had a mad, extremely insane, and possibly suicidal idea of how to force Jörmungandr back above water once freed and returned to under the ocean waves. *After all, if it worked once before, it can work again, right? Piotr and the rest said they were able to get in and out of the big guy to retrieve that Sigyn gal's body. And we did see Strange do a lot of damage to the bastard's mouth.* "Throw me at his mouth!"

The Hulk blinked, shaking his head at the ludicrous demand. "Wait, what?"

"Throw me at his mouth!" Ben repeated. "Give me a fastball special!"

The Hulk blinked again, speechless, then, with a shrug, grabbed Ben's arm. Twirling in place, he built up momentum and when he deemed it enough, released Ben. Like an orange, man-shaped shotput. The Thing flew through the air, aiming straight for Jörmungandr's wide open jaws. The World Serpent had heaved breathe out one last cloud of poison at Rogue, who he had identified as the source of the exhaustion that had suddenly ramped up within him.

Rogue reeled away on instinct, the sight of the roiling poison causing her to gasp somewhat. But, as the cloud of death converged upon her nothing happened, much to the serpent's annoyance.

Then Ben arrived, flashing between Jörmungandr's jaws into the creature's mouth just before the serpent closed his maw, the creature's head disappearing into the ocean a second later. "Woohoo!"

For a moment, everyone could only stare, Then Þór bellowed in fury and charged forward, grabbing onto the creature as best he could and pulling mightily in an effort to force his cousin back out of the water. "By the All-father, you will not escape me!"

But Þór found that, even with his gauntlets and belt, he lacked the strength to pull Jörmungandr out of the ocean. Indeed, with only the ice beneath him, Þór found himself instead first dragged along, then flung away, much like Rogue had been only moments ago.

Above them, Thundra and the others still airborne simply stared at the spot where Ben and the serpent had disappeared. "What? Just... what? Does that fool of a man think that he can..."

"I rather think he does," Storm chuckled wryly, forcing the lightheartedness through her worry for the rocky man. Snapping back into focus, she spoke into her communicator, getting everyone to gather around. "If I know Benjamin as well as I think I do, we will have a few minutes before he bothers that beast enough to want to surface and try and get rid of him. When that happens, we must be ready for it. After all, we have the perfect way to track him..." she turned, watching as the carpet assigned to Ben moved off, zooming away over the water. "That will do."

A moment later, however, Storm's good humor vanished. Xian and Emma Steed had stood up in the chariot and almost in concert began shouting. "The Shadows! They're pressing in on the Astral Plane. We're cut off from Charles and—"

Steed's voice suddenly broke off, as if she were far too busy concentrating on defending herself and the minds of team Fishermen to bother with words, while beside her Xian's voice rose into a wordless cry of effort before she felt back into the chariot. The final push had begun.

**OOOOOOO**

Ben Grimm slid down Jörmungandr's gullet as the World Serpent retreated through the now shattered remnants of the ice shelf, immediately attacking the walls of flesh all around him. As he fell in the darkness, the rocky man was unaware that his insane move had placed him within one of the few areas within the Nine Realms of Yggdrasil that the Shadows could not reach; inside the body of another living creature.

Using the harpoon he'd managed to hold onto he stabbed out, jerking to a halt as he held him still for a moment. He had just long enough to reach back with his other hand and pull Thunderbird's hatchet out of the strap holding it in place before the harpoon broke then, but Ben still hacked and slashed everything he could reach as he was bounced around, bellowing out, "I might've not been able to hurt ya on the outside big guy, but I'll sure as hell do it from the inside!"

The World Serpent bucked and heaved through the waters of Asgard, diving deeper and away from the enemies who had assailed him. Þór and that human wench had severely wounded Jörmungandr. Oh not to the point where there was any real danger of dying, but pain had become an unfamiliar thing over the centuries and yet in that one battle alone more damage had been accrued than in all the previous iterations of Ragnarök combined.

But now, he could retreat. He could heal, hiding at the bottom of his ocean. There, even Þór would be a fool to follow him. *And even if the warriors of Midgard do come after me, they will lose their primary advantage of mobility. I will crush them all within my coils before devouring them all!*

Jörmungandr's hungry thoughts were interrupted by a pain from inside his vast bulk. Closing his eyes safe behind nictitating membranes the size of sails, Jörmungandr turned inward and searched for the source of such odd discomfort. There! An interloper had somehow made its inside. *Blargh, again!?* The serpent thought with a growl, a fanged scowl of irritation crossing serpentine features as memories of a similar violation from several months back flashed. It had been the same Weather Witch from above the waves! She had been the one to lead a team that had absconded with that woman's body. She had seemed vaguely familiar, as far as insignificant pests could be.

*But I will not let this stone-formed one free as I was forced to do them. I will digest him and make his strength my own!* With that, Jörmungandr sent a mental

command to the symbiotic defenders he held within miles of stomach, just for such an occasion. They had been a clan of troll-kin once, eaten whole. The survivors had begged, pleaded for their lives, and Jörmungandr had graciously made a deal afterward with the survivors. In return for not digesting them as he had their fellows, they would worship the World Serpent in perpetuity. Jörmungandr had rather liked that, food which worshipped the one who would inevitably devour it.

Alas, Jörmungandr recalled now that a vast majority of the troll-kin had been slain in battle by the group that had freed Sigyn's body, including their champion and leader, Ulik. Even trolls could not recover their numbers sufficiently in only a few months without aid. Aid that Those Who Watch Above in Shadow had neglected to give them, seeing no point in doing so as with their tether's prisoner freed, why would anyone venture into the World Serpent's stomach ever again? This oversight was something that Jörmungandr was now somewhat annoyed by, but he knew the same could not be said for his other internal defenders.

A moment later, thanks to the impetus from the strength of the Hulk's throw coupled with Jörmungandr's own movements, Ben slammed down into the serpent's first stomach sack. {}In total he'd made more than half the journey Storm and the Custodes had fought through previously in one go, and in less than a quarter of the time. Of course, he now found himself hip-deep in the acid at the bottom of said stomach sack, which sloshed and splashed everywhere across an expanse that looked like two football fields set side by side, but he'd been in worse places before.

Nearly as soon as he'd gotten his feet under him, the Thing's hatchet and the wooden parts of the harpoon shaft he still carried began to sizzle, the wood of the shafts quickly melting into sludge. Thankfully, Ben's altered skin was made of sterner stuff. "Ain't no acid that can take ah bite outta me, ya snakey fuck!" he laughed, barely feeling a tingle along his shins.

A second later, however, the grin that had been stretched across the Thing's rocky face was wiped away as stomach worms the size of his thighs fell from the ceiling. They plopped into the acid in the dozens, then hundreds. "Oh. Well, this just topped my grossest fights list."

With that, the Thing hurled himself sideways and began to pound on the stomach lining nearest him, digging in with the hatchet before it could completely melt. Surprisingly, he was able to make a cut after only a handful of swings. Leaving the hatchet where it had sliced into oversized snake flesh to sizzle and melt away, the giant worm things finally reached him. “Looks like it’s Clobberin’ Time!”

The worms attacked, but the Thing tore them into pieces with ease. They didn’t seem to have any durability to speak of, so he stomped down on several and punched others so hard they exploded without breaking a sweat. He waded into a mass of the little buggers as more of the giant stomach worms appeared from a passage leading further through Jörmungandr’s vast insides. “Okay then!”

The Thing grunted as still more appeared behind him, pressing into his back until soon he could barely move for how many of the worms had surrounded him. But they were still squishy as hell, which allowed him to literally break through them and make headway. How long he fought the stomach worms alone, he’d never know, but eventually, a group of trolls appeared in the passageway. Each was as large as Ben himself, if not a little taller. They appeared at first glance like Neanderthals from Earth’s past, extremely hairy with deep-set eyes under extremely heavy brows.

They wielded more advanced weaponry than stones and sticks though, each and every one armed with either iron clubs or steel blades. As the Thing neared them though, seemed almost wary of coming too close as the Thing fought on in the acid pool at the bottom of the huge stomach. However, this reluctance ended as soon as Ben nailed the biggest one with the broken corpse of one of the worms. “Hah ha! Get in or get out! Don’t just lurk at the edge of things like the Yancy Street Gang!”

“Slay him for Lord Jörmungandr!” The trolls bellowed as one, tearing forward. They skirted the edge of the acid pool, clearly not as impervious as the Thing, which let the Ben kill several more worms before countercharging.

Kicking two more worms up, he aimed them into the snarling faces of the nearest few trolls. As the forerunners stumbled, shrieking as the acid still on the worms ate into their flesh, the Thing leaped forward, kicking off a wall of the stomach sack to land amongst the trolls. They struck at him, but Ben put his trust

in his stone hide and ignored his own defense in favor of pure offense, smashing the trolls away in droves.

This did result in him taking a few hard knocks from well-aimed clubs, but the trolls' blades merely pinged off of his armored skin. Whenever he managed to land a solid blow and smash one of the defenders down, he'd grab up their weapons and hurl them with all his might at the walls of Jörmungandr's stomach all around him.

Feeling these various strikes and having followed the stone-borne since becoming aware of him, Jörmungandr nearly gagged in pain. Jaws opening wide, the serpent gulped down a sea's worth of water in an attempt to drown the strange human, growling words that reverberated inwardly. "Will you die already, Stone One?!"

On the heels of the rumbling voice that sounded like it came from all around him, Ben suddenly heard a loud swooshing sound that overlaid the sounds of the battle. Looking up from where he had two trolls in headlocks, he cursed as he saw hundreds and thousands of gallons of water rushing down Jörmungandr gullet into his stomach.

Instantly the remaining trolls ceased attacking and began to retreat, save for those Ben held trapped. Those unlucky individuals began to scabble at his arms around their throats. With more pressing issues to worry about, he tossed them aside without a backwards glance. Knowing his time was running out, Ben raced back to where he'd succeeded in cutting into the side of Jörmungandr stomach lining. The bleeding wound was easily the largest injury the Thing had caused so far, and now Ben violently thrust a hand into it, grabbing at anything he could.

His other hand soon followed, and the Thing held on against the torrent of water for all he was worth, unwilling to let go and complete this particular journey from that end of the serpent. As the water level rose, he breathed in deeply, filling his lungs to capacity before clamping his mouth shut. *What was my record again? Stretch said five hours right? I should be good.* Thanks to his stony form, Ben Grimm's body no longer needed as much oxygen as it did before, and so he could now hold his breath for far longer than humanly possible. This had

come in handy many times before, particularly when he and the rest of the FF had fought Namor.

Moments later, water filled Jörmungandr's stomach from floor to ceiling and Ben found himself floating, still holding on fist deep in giant serpent guts. He watched through the haze of water mixed with stomach acid and blood as bodies of trolls and worms alike were pulled away further down Jörmungandr's gastral tract. He could only shake his head as he saw that several of the trolls were still alive as they went by, grabbing at their throats and trying desperately to swim towards what constituted as the ceiling. They would find no air there, however, as Jörmungandr continued to gulp down ever more water.

Once again Ben lost track of time as he just held on there, waiting for Jörmungandr to stop drinking, waiting for the water to settle. How long he hung on, he couldn't quite tell, but even Ben's prodigious lungs began to burn before the water began to recede and finally settle.

As soon as he could breathe, the Thing went right back to tearing away at the wound he'd just been holding onto. *I'm still heeererree!!* He jeered mentally, concentrating just as much on filling his lungs as doing damage.

He was nearly thrown loose as Jörmungandr really began to squirm and buck, his voice a roar that echoed through the cavernous space all around him. "Blast you to the ends of Hel, you golem-faced freak! Why won't you die?!"

Still, Ben held on, a fierce grin on his face. A singular thought blazed to the forefront of his mind with each punch. *I'm going to be the biggest stomachache you've ever felt, beastie!*

**OOOOOOO**

Initially, the Shadows had hoped that Surtur's defenses would slow the attackers down on their own. But with their leader's direct involvement had thrown that idea out the window and with the majority of his army lying dead on the fields of Utgard, Surtur lacked the strength to defend his realm against the assault. Muspellheim was thus written off as lost.

the gestalt took hollow solace in the fact their pawns had, made certain that Odin would no longer be of any threat even if the human magic user and his

allies could free the All-Father from the Odin-sleep he'd been forced into. And really, so long as their tethers remained alive, what did it matter if they lost battles? Every second spent against them was another second the human telepaths weakened under their psionic assaults, and that was the most important thing.

To that end, the Shadows had husbanded their strength most assiduously throughout the night, even as they then were forced to waste a large portion of it to teleport Surtur and Malekith to Muspellheim hours back.

At the same time they kept up their assaults on the Astral Plane as well. The attacks were low level for most part, but that was more to lull their enemies into a false sense of security rather than any surfeit of strength on that battlefield.

Now, with their tether and the being who had proven an even better pawn away, the Shadows launched their next wave of attacks.

They still didn't directly assault the human wizard known as Potter. They had learned that such a tactic was a fool's game. No, the Shadows set their remaining magical energies to attacking the Asgardian main base camp.

Meanwhile on the Astral Plane, what had been a period of only minor activity ended with the abruptness of a tsunami. Unlike magical attacks, which took power they no longer wanted to risk wasting, telepathic assaults only took concentration. And the Shadows had that in spades.

True, a few of their number did have to split off to work separately—a disturbing and horrible experience but one that was deemed necessary at present—on doing what they could to aid Surtur and Malekith against the unexpected threat of Fenrir while another set attempted to help Jörmungandr retreat. However, these few did not have it their own way, as the two telepaths assigned to that battlefield were apparently better rested than the rest of their cursed brethren. They were not as strong, to be sure, but they were tenacious. Still, it would still only take a few moments to overcome them.

And as for those other telepaths? The telepaths that remained in the main Einherjar/expeditionary force's camp faced the rest of the Shadows' combined psionic might. A power that had not waned at all since the expeditionary force first arrived, whereas the strength of the defending telepaths had.

All along, the first line of defense had truly been Jean, Charles, and Emma, and they had borne the brunt of a tremendous degree of pressure for longer than any save one seemed to have ever experienced. A night of dealing with less powerful attacks might have allowed them to recuperate some of their strength, but it would soon prove to be a poor replacement indeed for a missed night's sleep.

**OOOOOOO**

Back at the basecamp, Jean, Betsy, and Charles were all awake, well fed and already working together to create the telepathic barrier around the camp. All of them were still feeling the strain of using their telepathic powers for so long consecutively, and Betsy wasn't as powerful as Emma, that was simple fact. Still, Betsy was actually better at taking instruction from Charles, so while the overall strength of the defense had waned, the reaction time they showed to the night - constant small scale probes the Shadows were launching at them throughout the night had gone up.

But when the real attack came, that did not save them. The sudden shift from small probes to an all out assault from all around the defenders in the Astral Plane began overwhelming the trio of telepaths almost immediately. As the outer wall's chief defender, Jean felt herself buckle, her face paling in shock as she nearly slid out of her seat in a boneless heap. Beside her, Charles held firm, but lines of sweat started to run down his face as his avatar pushed forward to help.

Betsy felt the magnitude of the attack, but only from her support position blocking anything that got through the defenses of the other two. Due to this, and the sheer weight hitting Jean and Charles, it fell to the violette to issue an audible warning. "Everyone, get ready! The Shadows are attacking in force again, and I don't think we can hold them off any longer!"

"Choose who to defend," groaned a groggy but somewhat recovered Amara. Eir and the other healing goddesses had set her to right within minutes of her arrival, but the treatment had sapped any remaining energy she had, and her mutant powers were still sending both physical and mental twinges of pain through her. Still, she was one of the Custodes most trained in leadership still left in the camp. "If you can't defend everyone in the camp, defend who you can. Knock out and incarcerate everyone else."

“You don’t have to worry about me,” Tony piped up, coming over and tapping the side of his helmet. “I figured out an energy-wave shield that can defend my mind against telepathic assault more than a year ago. It’s insanely energy-intensive, but that’s why my suit still runs on a miniature arc reactor.”

“Regardless, it will be my folk who will be the main target of this attack I think,” Freya said, scowling as she turned to Hogun and Sif. “Order all those still well and able out of the central camp. The chosen humans from Midgard can fort up here behind the palisade for a time along with the three of us and my handmaidens. Then the rest of the camp can be knocked out, along with your Oh Damn forces.” Even now her lips tried to twitch into a smile at the name the humans had placed on their normal troops.

Much like the rest of the camp, the wooden palisade around the Asgardian area was not the primitive edifice it seemed at first glance. In truth, it was magically enhanced to a degree where the simple wooden construction could keep out even jotun. In a similar manner, it would be able to keep out most of the Asgardians, who were already camping outside of the central area already in well-organized lodges and tents so that the healers, the blacksmiths, and the main supply depot could be kept in the center of the camp behind the palisade.

The last of the Asgardians in the central camp were hurried out the doors along with the dvergar and the light elves. Some were confused, but others, the dvergar to a man, looked frightened and worried. The knowledge that there would be an incoming telepathic assault that would once more implant lies and falsehoods within their minds and turn them against one another and their new allies horrified them.

As soon as those individuals were gone Wolverine, Coyote, Uzume, and the rest of the expeditionary force that had been left behind took up positions on the palisade beside Sif and Hogun. They were soon joined by Husk, to much amazement and shock, who smiled wanly at them all even as she hefted a mace Hogun had found for her. She still looked a little ragged, but the worst of her wounds had been healed. Still, few would ever forget Paige’s screams as the healers tore her ruined metal skin off forcing her back into her fleshy body for treatment. Nor had she assumed her metal form, instead changing into stone for the coming battle.

Freya also joined them with half of her remaining Valkyrie. The other half had volunteered to have their lady knock them out, which she did promptly and with as little pain as possible. Once organized and arranged, Freya, Clea, and Tony then took to the sky, raining down stunning spells—or in Tony’s case knock out gas—throughout the rest of the camp. The news of the coming assault hadn’t been spread throughout the camp, to avoid panic, so this caused quite a hue and cry. Riding her steed over the camp, Freya’s hard gaze hardly flinched. It had to be done.

At the same time, the Heavy Gunners left behind by the assault force took to the air once more. Their mortar guns were now loaded with a special stun round that Tony Stark had invented earlier that day. He had only had time to make a hundred canisters, but they all hoped that would be enough. The majority of the Orbital Drop Marines had already agreed to be knocked out by the magic users, their commanders knowing that there were too many of them for the telepaths to defend.

This all took a while, and Jean and Charles poured out their telepathic strength to hold the protective wall together over the minds of everyone within the camp for as long as they could. But when Jean felt herself losing consciousness, she forced herself to speak the words, to warn Charles as the darkness crept in. *“I’m about to go, Professor. Pull back with Betsy. Protect those you can!”*

Simultaneously, she sent a message out to Emma (the British version) and Xian, warning them of what was about to happen. *“You two are going to be on your own from now on. Not even Charles will be able to protect both us and lend you help at the same time.”*

Betsy was reluctant but ultimately knew her telepathic powers weren’t up to stepping into Jean’s shoes when she fell. Wordlessly, she dutifully retreated alongside Charles. The move was almost like an army retreating from the outer edges of a defensive position to an inner layer. Now, instead of trying to defend the entire base camp along with supporting Team Fishermen, Charles and Betsy defended only the conscious minds that were still active in the center of the camp.

These minds included Clea, Freya, Sif, Hogun, only two of Freya's strongest handmaidens, the heavy troopers stationed high above them on their magic carpets, and the remaining Custodes. Of this final defensive front, only Clea and Tony could defend themselves from psychic assault.

When Jean fell hardly five minutes after Charles and Betsy had retreated, the Shadows plowed on, instantly flooding the minds of the Einherjar with an immersive illusion that told them they were not, in fact, in a camp at all but actually attacking an enemy fortress. From one moment to the next, the central camp was no longer the location they had to defend. Rather, it was and always had been the target of their assault.

Yet even yoked by the Shadows, the human jarls kept a firm rein on their folk. Soon arrows were flying up to the Valkyries and the carpets over the camp. These same men also started to shout and demand some measure of order from the men racing to assault the palisade. The Einherjar eagerly responded, spreading out to encircle the palisade and attack from all sides instead of bunched up at the front gate.

Sif grimaced, staring at friends and acquaintances alike as they charged toward her portion of the palisade with blood in their eyes. She fingered the hilt of her sword, shaking her head. "It would sit ill with me if I were forced to strike these men down so ensorcelled."

"Then don't use your blade," Hogun grunted, holding up a large club. It wasn't his war mace, to be sure, just a simple wooden shaft about as long as his forearm wrapped with leather. "Use one of these. Smack them over the head, knock them out. Swing harder at the Asgardians rather than the Asatru. Simple."

Above, the Heavy Gunners began to fire their knockout rounds, angling the mortars as if they were a line-of-sight-weapon. The Heavy Gunners' rounds went off among them, ball lightning exploding everywhere. The cylinders resembled old-fashioned canister rounds from the Napoleonic era but acted almost like a taser had somehow been set to 'storm'. Hundreds, then thousands of the Asgardians and warrior spirits succumbed. Unfortunately, more than half of the Asgardians so struck could throw off either the attack from the two magic users or the attack from the Heavy Gunners.

In reply, the spears and arrows of the Asgardians among the ensorcelled Einherjar were no real threat to the soldiers upon their magic carpets, too high for most to ever hope to reach. A few did manage, however, and more than one of the Heavy Gunners cursed in worry as an arrow smacked into them, smacking them off of their feet, and were only saved by the fact that distance robbed the successful arrows of any penetrative power.

One unlucky ODM even took an arrow through the visor, having leaned out over the side of his magic carpet to fire another mortar. "The hell!" The operator gasped, staring at the arrowhead embedded in his visor, about half an inch away from skewering his eye. Breaking the shaft, he rolled back onto the center portion of the carpet, shaking his head in shock. "I don't know what's worse guys, being hit by an arrow of all things and watching it crack your visor or being hit by an arrow in the first place."

Protected from the Shadows, Clea, Amora, and Banshee went to work attacking the mentally enslaved Einherjar. The most dangerous of the trio. Clea hammered regiments of the attacking warriors with stunning spells so powerful that it seemed as if a small tornado had just appeared, hurling people around through the sheer impact even as the magic of the attack knocked them out.

Meanwhile, Banshee concentrated on the areas around the palisade's two entrances, paralyzing his targets to the point of uselessness or straight up knocking them out with the concussive force of his scream. Unlike the Heavy Gunner's knockout-style ordinance, Banshee's assaults targeting their ears were, while smaller in scope, extremely effective against both humans and Asgardians. The same could be said for Tony's repulsor strikes, as looked for anyone giving orders, knocking out specific commanders among the Einherjar.

In contrast to the other's more straightforward attacks, Amora used her magic on various places around the wall. Sticking spells, spells to transfigure clothing and the ground were liberally thrown around, looking to impede rather than incapacitate. She was so successful that several sections of the camp soon became so congested the ensorcelled attackers couldn't get through their own comrades.

But for all these efforts, there were a lot of attackers, and the defenders couldn't be everywhere. Eventually, ensorcelled warriors began to reach the

palisade, throwing up grapnels and pulling themselves up to the nearly undefended battlements. There, they faced Freya, Sif, Hogun, and surprisingly, Amara. All present were armed with clubs, or a staff in Amara's case, although the Asgardians looked at her askance.

The Neo-Grecian did not back down, nodding over to Dr. Druid, Uzume and Nightcrawler. The older magic-user looked resigned as well as not entirely recovered from his earlier exertions. "Defend the wall. If we have to pull back, or if they start to spread out too much and Amara's magic starts to fail us, we retreat to the tent with Jean and the other telepaths. No way am I letting Jean or Emma get their heads caved in on my watch. Harry would turn as all inside out."

While Freya was somewhat amused by the young girl taking command, she recognized that the others were all nodding along, deferring to her automatically just as they'd done when she'd suggested they start knocking out possible victims of the Shadows before they could be turned against their fellows. It was impressive and marked what kind of man Jarl Harry Potter was to the queen; that one so young could be trained to lead so naturally. Then Freya was too busy whacking heads as they came up over the battlements to spare such sentiment a second thought.

To make a bleak situation worse, beyond the outskirts of the embattled camp still more danger approached. Scores of stone jotun suddenly appeared in the forest beyond the camp's edge, teleported there in clusters by the Shadows. Many of these clusters activated the traps, both magical and not, that had been placed out there just for this sort of occurrence. The stone jotun also set off the signals just designed to make light and noises to warn of incoming enemies. While that was purely annoying at present, the other traps reaped a heavy toll as they went off, slaying or at least disabling any caught in their areas of effect.

It was a semi-wasteful use of the energy they had drained from Odin, but the Shadows largely felt it was worth it. The illusions they were using to keep Fenrir, the human who had come along with Malekith, and the other two busy in Svartalfheim weren't taking much of their energy. Indeed, Skadi was now under their control and attacking the others, although turning Fenrir himself was proving bit beyond the Shadows at present due to their concentration on the base

camp and the majority of the humans there. Once the last of the telepaths had collapsed though, Fenrir would become their tool once more, they were sure of it.

Then the wizard who had troubled them so often and the other foreign magic users would be faced with an utterly unwinnable battle: fighting their own people, the Asgardians, Surtur, and Fenrir.

Roaring and bellowing in challenge, the jotun, controlled by the Shadows just as much as the Einherjar, charged forwards as clans, each clan aiming for a different part of the camp to invade so that they could reach the palisade from multiple fronts, thus dividing the efforts of the defenders. With their minds full of the illusions of the Shadows, the Asgardian Army separated, creating clear lanes with which the stone giants marched towards the palisade unmolested, even as the jotun trampled over their tents and other belongings indiscriminately. What they were seeing no one knew, but obviously the illusions seemed to treat the jotun as some kind of reinforcements.

When Freya caught sight of this new development, she began to curse volubly. In contrast, Amara started chuckling evilly, causing the queen and many of the Asgardians to look at her. But Amara ignored them, barking into her communicator. "Heavy Gunners, switch loadouts. I want half of you to concentrate on the incoming stone giants. Keep them away from the wall. Remember, boys, those guys are not our allies, so no kid-gloves for them!"

"OORAH!" The Heavy Gunners replied to a man. The Gatlings and a few rocket-armed Heavy Gunners instantly made the switch, leaving only the mortar teams for the most part staying focused on using the stun charges. While switching their weapons around—the Heavy Gunners' weapons were modular—had allowed them to fire on more targets, that really wasn't as important as the fact that now they could cut down on the enemy reaching the walls in a more permanent fashion. In this case, that meant making large stone jotun into small rocky chunks with every weapon they had.

Watching the impact the Gunners had on the jotun, the Queen began to laugh. Meanwhile, Clea turned her attention from trying to immobilize or slow the enslaved Asgardians to assaulting a band of stone giants that had gotten too close for comfort. Special stone cutting and stone-shattering spells soon reduced the front of the approaching formation into so many dismembered corpses.

It was soon apparent that, contrary to any expectations based on the names of their species, the stone jotun had barely half of the durability of the fire jotun and even less than that in terms of magical resistance. They were by far the weakest descendants of the mighty jötnar of the past, with whom the Asgardians had warred and intermarried with for so long.

Clea's next spell transfigured a large earthen wall in front of the side of the palisade she guarded, forcing the ensorcelled Asgardians to either side of the construct. Some tried to climb over it, others yelled to pull back and wait to assault other areas with their new reinforcements. Ultimately, they pulled back, causing Freya to snort in a distinctly unladylike manner. "Whatever illusions are gripping their minds, there's clearly no coordination between the jotun and the Einherjar. We need to—"

**\*BOOM!!\***

Freya's voice cut off as there was a thunderous crash as a group of dvergar, who had somehow already tunneled under a thorny barricade erected by Dr. Druid, began to hammer at the front gate leading into the palisade with a makeshift battering ram of some kind, the shape of it Freya and the others on the wall couldn't make out from their vantage point. The dvergar swung with power that no equal number of humans could have matched, but the magic of the palisade stood them in good stead.

As the dvergar swung once more, Garm finally joined in the fight, giving a dreadful howl. The large old wolf leaped forward from where he had been resting at the center of the camp, long since healed by several of the local goddesses from the wounds that Fenrir had given him but not sure where best to join the fight. Garm hadn't been included under the umbrella of protection that Charles and Betsy were using to guard the minds of the defenders, but for the moment it seemed as if the Shadows had overlooked him regardless.

Watching as the massive guardian of Niflheim leaped over the palisade and landed amongst the battering ram team, knocking the dvergar around like pins, Freya considered that such was a most foolish oversight indeed. With the dwarves down, and not likely to get up without healing, Garm then charged forward, smashing nearby formations of Einherjar before turning to one side and crashing

into a similar group of jotun. There he bit and tore whereas before he had only smacking his victims around.

After a moment of watching the force of nature that was Hela's familiar at work, Freya picked up where she left off, her tone somewhat droll while in the background, the sounds of battle and Garm's howls rose in equal cacophony. "As I was saying..."

**OOOOOOO**

Watching all this in their own unique fashion, the Shadows were ecstatic. Once more, they had avoided the need to fight the Midgard wizard who had been the source of much of their troubles or his coterie of fellow human magic users, something they were extremely leery of after their last attempt to get into his mind. Jörmungandr had now also retreated into the depths, leaving the team of humans sent after that most massive of their tethers out of position to help the rest of the humans and unable to continue their mission. It was only a matter of time until the two telepaths there faltered, after which that most formidable team would be turned against one another in delicious irony.

Jörmungandr's interior wounds and the discomfort caused by the stony Midgardian who had somehow invaded his innards did not matter to the Shadows in the least. So long as their tethers ultimately survived when this Ragnarök ended, they would just reset everything, and the earther within Jörmungandr was not a threat to his life

Indeed, a large segment of the gestalt was wondering if they they might even be able to use the magic accumulated from the deaths of the Asgardians to incorporate the humans from Earth into the next cycle in some fashion. Just enough to bolster the hope their slaves had of finally being free. Such theatre would make the resultant despair of their inescapable fates, and the taste of the magic taken from their slaughter, all the sweeter.

Or they would simply die.

Either way, the Shadows were pleased. They would survive, even if this cycle had pushed them farther than they'd ever been before, even to a point that most of their magic had been expended.

All it came down to was how long the last human telepath could stand before falling. Once that happened, the rest of the remaining humans and Asgardians would turn upon their magic users, allowing the Shadows further opportunities to turn them against their still-fighting fellows. Yes, although it had taken a while, the Shadows felt that they had finally turned this war entirely in their favor, even if they hadn't yet neutralized their greatest threat himself.

**OOOOOOO**

Back in Muspellheim, Harry grit his teeth in fury as he stared at the spot where Surtur had disappeared. Clinging down with some difficulty, Harry glanced over to where Odin lay, and where a blue-skinned dark elf should've been as well. "Dammit! So much for hoping that the Shadows didn't have enough power left to do anything," he grumbled, hopping down into the still relatively intact chamber with the runic array. By some miracle, only the ceiling had been shattered by his earlier siege-breaker spell.

As he had half-expected, Odin looked far worse close-up than he had at a distance, which had been bad enough. The All-Father was still breathing, and his body showed no sign of rigor mortis, but it had obviously been drained almost entirely of power. Which brought Harry back to the reason he'd come down to the chamber instead of getting in touch with his team. *So the Shadows, or their servants somehow figured out how to drain his life force and magic? But then, where did that energy go? I don't see an outflow rune... Where...*

Staring down at the array, Harry absently lifted Odin off of the floor with a simple Leviosa spell, holding the god of Kings in the air as he broke down the array in front of him. Without a source to drain from, the harsh blue light and darkly purple energy of the array faded instantly, sputtering out like a candle.

Harry waited until the chamber was entirely dark, then conjured a small Lumos. Moving around the array, he studied each of the runes, many of which he recognized. Some he didn't, but he had seen a style similar to those before in the Asgardian camp, mostly on some of the equipment the Alfar wore. *Stands to reason that those are the runes of the dark elves. And the rest are Asgardian, which I've always been somewhat bemused by the fact that the Asgardians here use a runic language that is so like the ones from my old dimension. No, Potter,*

*focus. You're looking for something entirely different, and it has to be here somewhere.*

Harry moved through the chamber, tracing the array to the first of the nine points, where he knelt down, staring at the triangle-like tip composed of three runes. "Got you..." He whispered, his expression turning into one that Garm would have envied for the second time that day.

However, Harry had not thought entirely through the implications of what it meant for the Shadows to have waited until the last moment to teleport away their tether and pawn. Elsewhere in Muspellheim, things were not going nearly as well for the rest of the assault force.

From her position with the assault force, Emma was only the first to collapse. Nearer to the point of conflict with Surtur than she probably should've been, she was the first to feel the full pressure of the renewed mental offensive. She collapsed within seconds, a cry of anguish rending the air as her eyes rolled up in her head. She fell to one side, boneless, bleeding out of her eyes, ears, mouth, and nose.

The Heavy Gunners who Emma was sharing a magic carpet with all froze, only two of them turning to reach for her after a moment's pause. Before they could reach her the psionic assault struck them. Several of the Heavy Gunners instantly fell under the Shadow's sway. Instead of illusions, which their suits might well have blocked for a short while, the Shadows were now inside their very minds, controlling them like puppets. The now-enslaved humans quickly turned their attention to the nearby Valkyrie and the troops on the ground, their rockets and autocannon rounds firing within seconds of Emma's scream.

Coming under unexpected attack from their allies, the Valkyrie scrambled in every direction on their flying mounts, firing back as they could. Unlike most of the controlled Heavy Gunners, they did not miss. Two of the Shadows' puppets fell, their powered armor penetrated by the magical arrows of the Valkyrie. In return, only one of the horsewomen went down.

Luckily, while the explosions the rockets caused hurled them around, Colossus, Hela, and Tyr were practically immune to hurt by them. They were not immune, however, to the Shadows. They, along with Cyclops, soon found

themselves falling under the sway of the insidious puppeteers. The only exceptions to this widespread coup were E, for obvious reasons, and Hela, who had developed magical means of protecting herself based off of a set of spells that Stephen and Harry had taught her since her Seidr Man had freed her from the Shadows.

The Asgardian Goddess of the Dead now found herself fighting all three of her fellow close combatants. Thankfully though, Harry's use of the golem-creation spell earlier on had already tipped the numbers game dramatically in their favor. The few surviving jotun were struggling against more than thrice their number of golems and were falling quickly.

Flying over the battlefield under his own power, E dove out of the way of a kinetic blast from Cyclops' eye-beam, watching as the X-men's leader twisted around to bring his deadly beam to strike up at another target, one of the magic carpets carrying a group of Heavy Gunners, those on his own carpet having split off already. Now, those Heavy Gunners being targeted also used their jet packs to get back down to the ground, where they fired at everyone, including one another.

At that point, E had decided on a rather drastic course of action. His arms disappeared into several fist-sized clouds of nanites, which flew in every direction seeking out his comrades. *I must focus on incapacitating without hurting the men within as best I can. How much that limits my abilities is sincerely annoying.*

The Heavy Gunners were, of course, the easiest to deal with. Swarms of nanites covered large sections of their powered armors, and when enough had landed, the tiny machines released the energy stored within them in a single sharp jolt. So many volts at specific points overloaded the powered armors' systems, shutting them down, trapping the individuals within. E felt that such a fate would not be pleasant, but it was the best he could do.

Another group of nanites appeared from his feet, eating into the ground underneath him to rebuild his reserves while E sent more of their fellows in swarms towards Cyclops, and then even more over to Colossus. Distracted by combat with Hela and several golems he had attacked, the metal-clad Russian proved far less of a threat despite being closer.

For Colossus, a loud enough carefully regulated noise straight into his eardrums was enough to knock the metal-clad man unconscious. Cyclops was similarly dealt with, and with much more ease, however Tyr and Balder were proving to be completely immune to such a tactic. Two of the strongest Asgardians, their ears were also just as strong as the best of them.

Arrows abruptly slammed into E, courtesy of the Valkyrie above, all of them having turned to focus on E as one. The Shadows had become greatly annoyed that this creature who they could not get any handle on had taken away so many of their toys in Muspellheim so quickly.

Yet while several of those arrows did penetrate his metallic body, and he was even knocked onto his back by the impact, E's nanites simply repaired the damage as quickly as it occurred. And while the magic on the arrows seemed to negate his nanites ability to eat them, the ground was still under him providing material.

Even as more arrows hit him, E Lifted his hands once more. Another cloud of nanite burst out towards the Valkyrie. In response, the sky riders attempted to scatter even further, racing away in every direction. But they had waited too long, and the swarms caught up with them, one after another. Although the Valkyries too seemed to be immune to any sound-based assault, enough electric shocks to their spines garnered similar results.

By this point, Tyr and Balder had pushed Hela back towards E and the massive crater his nanites had eaten out of the ground. Hela was an excellent swordswoman, and far more magically powerful and active than either of her opponents, but with both of them in her face as they were, she was forced to only use small-scale, quickly cast spells. Worse, any magic that she attempted to use to blind or otherwise non-fatally incapacitate the two was simply brushed off.

With the Shadows pulling the strings, their puppets didn't need eyes, or any of their other senses, and both Asgardians were so durable that stunners, or similar, would hardly bother them at all. Hela did manage to occasionally cause Tyr to stumble here and there, but Balder completely ignored her magic, none of it phasing him at all.

“Well done E, but beware!” Hela barked out as she was backed to the edge of the large crater that had been steadily growing as E used his nanites so profligately. Even as she spoke, an extremely adroit move with his blade caused Hela to mistime a block and Baldur’s sword caught her across the chest, sending her sprawling backwards. Thankfully, the attack hadn’t penetrated her armor, but her chest was now stinging something fierce.

Grimacing, as much as his robotic face could allow, E turned his attention to them, his arms shifting into long sabers with wide shields on either side. As the constructed weapons grew into existence, the crater underneath the synthetic life form became another foot deeper at the bottom. “This is not going to be pleasant.”

Then, Harry appeared, landing nearby with a scowl. Pointing at the two enslaved Asgardians, he sent out a chain of prepared spells. Tyr was bound in place by the magic with ease, and quickly knocked unconscious by the combination used as several large explosive spells struck his head from both sides, bouncing his head literally between them for a few seconds. It wasn’t so much the explosions themselves, but the repeated impacts to his brain that finally had the god of justice succumbing, although Harry doubted he would be out for long, hence why Tyr was also tied up so much he resembled a mummy.

Balder, on the other hand, ignored Harry’s spells just as he had Hela’s, the magic slipping off like he was a greasy pole, unable to get a grip on him in any way. He whipped around toward Harry, dodging a strike from E in the same fluid motion. A backhand from the Asgardian prince’s magically enhanced blade carved through the android’s arm, despite its built-in shield, and Balder charged at Harry in the next second. The intervening distance was crossed so fast by the Shadow-controlled warrior that Harry had no choice but to backpedal quickly.

*This must be part of his protection, the Blessing Freya laid on Balder so that nothing but mistletoe can harm him! Still, Harry knew that even such a geas as this could be overcome with sufficient power. Balder told us about how he’d been shocked when Surtur had injured him with that ruddy spear. Still, with the fire bastard now gone and us running out of time I have to worry about conserving my own magical reserves for now. Although... I wonder...*

Unwilling to use any more of his magical strength than he needed to at present, Harry decided to try a trick first. He reached down, grabbed up a piece of volcanic rock and, when Balder attempted to stab him through, he negligently tossed it at the Asgardian's chest.

The portkey he had cast onto the stone activated and, a second later, Balder was gone, popping out of existence. "Yes! So if it isn't a direct attack or creating any sort of negative effects like halting his movement or blinding him, magic **does** still work on Balder. I had hoped, but still...."

"While it is all well and good that luck has gone our way for once in this conflict, I rather doubt that simply sending him wherever you did will halt the Bright One for long," Hela grumbled. The Lady of Niflheim sounded a little put out that her sword fight with the two Asgardians had been ended so abruptly. Or maybe it was that her Seidr Man had managed to get his magic to work against the pair when she had not. "Especially given that this is clearly the work of the Shadows and their mental domination. E's quick-thinking might have saved us from our own men slaying one another for the most part, but Balder is not reckoned one of the strongest of my people without due reason."

"I quite agree," E said, another nanite swarm coming out of his feet and the large wound to his arm. Soon enough, the injury was repaired, the metal looking as good as new, although by this point the crater the nanites were making beneath E's feet had grown so large it looked like a meteor strike. "However, what we should do now eludes me. We may have won the field, but I fear that we have taken too long to do so. If Mrs. Frost was overcome here in Muspellheim, it is only logical to assume that the Shadows will have pressed home of the advantage on the Astral Plane elsewhere. Nor do we have any idea where Surtur and Malekith were teleported to."

"True. We can only hope that Freya, Jean, and the others back at camp will have created some measure of defense just in case something like this were to happen. As for us..." Harry looked around at the rest of the unconscious members of their attack force, shaking his head before looking back over towards Surtur's palace and the runic array within the nine-pointed star chamber. "At every turn, the Shadows have proven to be far too adaptable, more so than we'd believed them to be. But they made a mistake here."

Hela looked at him strangely, her teeth bared in a snarl. “How so? Because from my perspective, E is quite correct. The Shadows whisked away the one real target we were here for, leaving us no idea where they’d been taken, and then our own troops were turned against us en-masse!! Certainly, finding Odin alive is a pleasant surprise, I suppose, but not enough to --”

“But what if I told you that what they were doing to Odin is the mistake they made?” Harry interrupted, lifting away, gesturing for Hela to follow. “E, put the others onto magic carpets and keep them on lockdown. I know you can’t move the carpets yourself, but they should be safe enough from Balder if he’s sent back if you get can get them into the air. I doubt the Shadows would have him waste time going after the others when Hela and I are still active.”

As an android, a synthetic life form, magical objects and many spells didn’t acknowledge E’s existence, for lack of a better description. He simply wasn’t alive in the terms that the magic of say, a magic carpet or a ward would understand. Some wards worked on him, the Fidelius for example, and he could make use of runic arrays and doorways as well, so long as someone else was there to activate them. But for the moment, he was baggage.

E nodded and moved to comply, lifting the unconscious soldiers and Valkyries one after the other into his arms and up into the air.

As he was busy with his assigned task, Hela followed Harry back towards the room where he’d left Odin. Harry was almost surprised the old god was still there, but it made sense if the Shadows had left him behind in their haste to reposition one of their all-important tethers.

Catching sight of the floating figure of the nearly naked Sky Father, Hela snorted, shaking her head at the sight and looking away deliberately. Despite acknowledging that many of her long-term memories had been manipulated by the Shadows, she still didn’t particularly like Odin, and seeing the focal point of so much of her past ire like this was both amusing and somewhat disturbing.

Taking in the runic array that filled up the chamber she’d been led to, Hela grimaced and deliberately stayed away from the center of the spiral. “It is an incredibly intricate work, to be sure. But what exactly are we looking at? I can tell

it is a mix of styles and should absorb something, magic perhaps? But there are several runes that are utterly unknown to me.”

Harry gestured to the large runes directly underneath the floating Sky Father. “Those are transfer runes I think, from the dark elves’ school of runes, whatever they call it.” From there, he backed away, pointing to one of the points of the star. “These three runes set at the points of the star, just by where they are positioned in the array alone mean they **have** to be destination sigils. Some rules of runic arrays are universal I’ve come to find out, and that is one of them That goes especially for an array where you’re using the magically significant number of nine to further enhance the impact.”

Hela’s eyes widened, and she stared at the runic array with new appreciation. “And if you know where the energy was being sent, you believe you can what, trace or attack the recipients somehow?”

“I **know** I can. If magical energy can travel along the current created by the array, a spell crafted to carry my willpower can do the same. After all, there’s only a very thin line between will and magic for those of us with magical cores, and that line becomes even thinner at the deific level. In this case, the runic equivalent of a Legilimens spell.” Harry frowned, staring down at the array for a few moments before shrugging. “Controlling the energy I send along the path will be more difficult for me than it would be for, say Odin himself, sure, but I think Stephen and Clea’s lessons on utilizing raw magic will come in handy here.”

“You are not telling me something. Out with it, my Seidr Man,” Hela ordered, scowling at him.

“... Sending out my will like this, purposefully into wherever the Shadows will be, means that they in turn will be able to attack my mind and soul. It may come down to a pure contest of will. Worse, I don’t think I will be able to retreat once the battle’s kicked off. Coming back at all is going to be tough enough,” Harry answered reluctantly, worry plain in his face. “Yet, given Emma’s collapse and what it implies is going on elsewhere, I don’t think we have the luxury of playing it safe anymore.” Given that Harry’s attempt to use a magic mirror to get in touch with Jean had failed, and no other means of communication they had here could reach across dimensions, Harry knew that things were going poorly back at the base camp.

In contrast to her Seidr Man's tense apprehension, Hela's concern faded instantly and she laughed, leaning forward to kiss Harry's cheek. "Is that all? You may have concerns on that score, my husband-to-be, but I do not. I have often questioned your decisions. I have often questioned your knowledge. I often see your sense of humor as bizarre, and I have commented numerous times on how you have a disturbingly high level of empathy for a king. But never have I ever had cause to question your honor or your will."

Harry smiled at that, pulling Hela into a hug and kissing her lightly on the lips before pulling away. "Thank you for the vote of confidence love. How long do you think it will take Balder to get back here from the bridge?"

"Without any enemies in his way? No longer than half an hour, perhaps less. That is, of course, as long as we are not entirely wrong about the hold the Shadows have on him emphasizing the two of us as high priority enemies," Hela mused.

"Do you think you can hold him off on your own?"

A part of Hela wanted to brag that she undoubtedly could, but while she was more than Balder's equal in raw magical power, in a martial contest, she knew she was not the best match against the prince. And as Harry had confirmed, no negative or status-changing magic could work on Balder, and that left Hela without many options. "Prepare another portkey just in case. I can perhaps hold him off for a half-hour to an hour. No longer than that can I promise without aid."

Knowing what it had cost Hela to admit such weakness, Harry simply nodded, and when she asked, used a nearby wooden pole of some kind to create the portkey, its head having been removed by the rubble of the mountain when Harry had hurled Surtur through castle and mountain alike. The piece of rubble briefly glowed blue before the light faded and he held it out to Hela. "Toss it at him and say the word 'activate.' This one will trigger on verbal command rather than touch."

Hela nodded, took the portkey, then leaned forward and kissed him again. This time was no mere peck. It was a long, hard, and deep thing, with open mouths and twining tongues. The kiss only ended when Hela's slightly more

advanced hearing picked up the sounds of someone running up the mountainside nearby.

With that, she pushed Harry away, turning and leaping up and out of the shattered roof. “Go, my Seidr Man. Go and finish this! Free my people from their endless enslavement. I will hold the Bright One off.”

Outside, Hela found Balder racing up the incline of the mountain, sword in hand, with a wild, almost insane burning in his eyes that should never have been on such pretty a face. To her surprise, he didn’t shout any imprecations or indicate what exactly he was being forced to see, as Heimdall had outside of Asgard. This was because, unknown to the goddess, instead of trying to do to every individual Asgardian or human mind as they had done to Heimdall, the Shadows had instead taken the same route they had for the civilians that Harry and Hela had run into in Asgard the city: that is to say, they had simply pushed into Balder’s mind the images of their targets, labeled them as foes, and then ramped up feelings of hatred and aggression for said targets. This method of mental domination wasn’t deep or intricate and needed constant oversight, but it worked.

Regardless, Hela moved forward as if to engage her cousin blade-to-blade, only to instantly stop when he tried to close the last few meters. Quickly, she gestured to the ground, which morphed into a sludge with a bit of magic. The bespelled earth eagerly reached for Balder, the tendrils of stone reaching up like a living thing. Without the Jotun King present, Muspellheim had no defense to Hela’s spells, unlike the man walking on it. Therefore, as liquefied balsamic rock reached for his feet, a nearby fissure cracked open and spewed lava toward Balder as well.

But the Bright One simply shattered the reaching fingers of molten stone around his feet with a contemptuous kick and whirled his sword at such a speed the lava spun away as if it were was so much water hitting a fan blade. Attack dealt with, Balder charged forward with a growl, barreling through several other Transfiguration-type constructs with similar ease. Hela was soon forced backward, but gracefully leaped up onto a nearby boulder as he closed, where she struck down at his head with her sword.

Balder blocked, but when he went to counter, Hela tapped her hand onto the rock she stood on, whose shape instantly changing. A stony fist punched out at Balder's face, causing him to stumble, although the surprise attack didn't actually hurt the Bright One through his imperviousness.

Then, Hela was behind him, her next strike flashing out. She caught him in the back, but between his armor and his mother's magic, her blade did no damage at all while the sound of a bell the size of a hill rang out as steel met armor. A strong back kick caught Hela in the stomach, throwing her back and rolling down the hill with a squawk. A hastily conjured grapnel appeared with a whisper, and Hela used her tumbling momentum to hurl it up at him. The near-to blind throw snagged Balder's leg. Before he could react and set himself, Hela tugged on the princeling hard, pulling him along with her down the mountainside.

Righting herself, Hela smirked as she saw Balder shredding the rope around his leg as if it was so much string. Now a more significant distance from her Seidr Man than before, the Lady of Niflheim slowly circled her ensorcelled foe, angling to bring him even further away. When Balder hurled himself down the mountain further towards her, outstretched sword pointing towards her heart, her smirk only grew. "Excellent. Follow the leader away from the real threat to those who have so violated your mind oh cousin of mine."

Meanwhile, back in the chamber where Odin had been so drained, Harry looked up from his work as he heard a shriek of metal on metal, so loud that it probably would've rattled a normal person's bones, such was the strength of the two fighting. He thought to go and help his lady for a moment, then shook his head at himself. "She wouldn't thank me, and this is more important, Harry. Remember that."

With that, he turned to his work, examining the runic array below him, mentally preparing his own, having already cleared out a space in a nearby room where he would carve the array down into the stone. Over the next forty minutes, Harry toiled in silence, slowly puzzling together his version of the array, using four new runes that he'd discovered from the draining array, along with a few others he had learned previously.

He was almost finished when Hela appeared in the opening. She was a little battered around the edges; her sword shattered, armor scuffed, and she had cuts

in several places. There was also dried blood around the corner of her mouth that had been hurriedly wiped away, and even from where he stood he could see a large bruise was forming on her cheek. Yet for all that, she was smiling a grim little smile. "I require another portkey, I fear. I held him off as long as I could before using the last one, but unless I continue to send him away, Balder will overcome me soon enough. My conjurations and transfigurations are only helping so much."

"You've held him off nearly long enough already, Hela," Harry answered while shaking his head, although he still paused working long enough to grab up a nearby piece of stone debris and set the same portkey enchantment on it as he had last time. He held the finished product out to Hela, who took it gratefully. "I don't know how long the actual fight will take when I send my will out to wherever the Shadows are, but I think I only need another two runes worked in, and then I'll be ready."

A part of Harry had hoped that he would have time to go over his work. After all, every detail mattered when working with runes, and even the tiniest mistake could mess things up so easily. However, he knew it was an impossible hope. It was only a matter of time before Charles fell, and after that, Freya and the rest of the defenders at the camp would find themselves under the Shadows' sway once again. Team Fishermen would be cut off from all chances of being helped, and would be overcome in turn. If he didn't take the battle to the Shadows now so they couldn't concentrate on the telepathic side of the war, then E, Tony, and the magic users would find themselves alone, battling the entirety of the Einherjar and their own expeditionary force combined.

"I will attempt to hold him off as long as possible," Hela said, blinking in confusion as Harry created several more portkeys. This time he'd used smaller bits of rubble holding six small stones out to her.

"Just keep hurling these at him every time you can. Either it'll buy us enough time for me to get this done, or it'll make his stomach rebel to the point he'll be completely unable to fight. Either/or works."

Hela chuckled at that as Harry turned away and marked down the last of the runes he'd needed into his array. He gazed at his rushed creation, mentally

walking through what should happen, then knelt down, placing his hands on either side of the primary energy intake rune. “Wish me luck?”

“Bah. I have said it before, but I will remind you again, my Seidr Man. Luck is for fools. You, my husband-to-be, are a great many things, but a fool is not one of them. You have skill, and thus you have no need for luck.” With that, Hela turned away, once again hearing once more the sound of running feet in the distance. By the time she’d reached the shattered rooftop leading out onto the mountainside, Balder was close enough to slash at her as she emerged out of the rubble of Surtur’s castle.

“GAH!” A hastily tossed portkey caught Balder in the shoulder, sending him away once more just as Hela flung herself back to avoid his searching blade. Thankfully, it disappeared with the rest of the ensorcelled Bright One, and right before it would have clipped her skull. Hela turned to toss a final quip over her shoulder, only to pause. Harry was slumped forward in the middle of the chamber he’d built his array in, his body now covered by a visible aura of magic osculating around him. She grimaced as she noticed fresh wounds beginning to appear on his slouched figure before resolutely turning away.

The die had been cast, and all that mattered now was seeing what would give out first: Charles, Betsy and the other telepaths, the wounded Surtur in his fight with Fenrir, Jörmungandr and Ben, or the Shadows and Harry.

**OOOOOOO**

Harry had not told Hela one important aspect of this gamble, that being he had no idea of how the process of using an avenue designed to only take ‘simple’ magical energy would mindt his mind, body, and soul once he’d sent his mental projection along it. The answer was, it was excruciating. After all, the array had been designed specifically to suck out magical energy, regardless of the target’s wellbeing.

The pain was like having a bad migraine, but then accompany that by adding in the feeling of flensing knives carving into his astral projection. He’d only learn later that the damage was so severe it even imprinted itself onto his body back in Muspellheim.

But Harry was no stranger to pain. In truth, what he was suffering now wasn't even the worst he'd ever felt, not by a long shot. Focusing on that, he grit his nonexistent teeth and pushed forward. His surroundings were a whirl of color and light and dark and chaos and order and nothing and everything until, eventually, his senses suddenly returned. Once they did, he had to take a moment to orient himself.

At first glance it appeared almost as if Harry had just merely thrust out a projection of his mind onto the Astral Plane, only this time without the aid of Jean or one of the telepaths, which had previously been impossible. As his mind traced the pathway of power opened by the runic array, Harry felt his consciousness diving deeper, deeper beneath the surface of the Astral Realm where most peoples' minds resided.

Eventually, he found himself in an area that, oddly enough, reminded him almost like a miniature of the pocket dimensions around Yggdrasil. Only instead of residing in the branches of the tree, this realm was separate from the Astral Plane, clearly delineated by a circular dome of lethal green and roiling purple energy.

Within, Harry could make out that the realm was... nothing. There didn't seem to be anything real within the realm itself. The energy barrier on this side, on the other hand, wasn't the same. Instead, it acted like a projector screen showing numerous scenes from across the realms visible simultaneously on the various segments of its enormous surface area.

In one segment, the focus was on the image of Jörmungandr swimming under the surface of the ocean while Ororo and the others could be seen following him from in the air. Xian and Emma (the black-haired one) were clearly fighting off a telepathic assault from the back of what Harry supposed was Þór's chariot while everyone else was trying to spread out or, in the case of Ororo and Strange, prepare for combat.

In another, larger fractal, a full battle was playing out in the remains of the Einherjar's camp. Wolverine and Laura held the shattered gateway while vicious fights were occurring scattered before the wall. The remaining defenders were clearly trying to not kill the ensorcelled attackers, given their choice of weapons and the spells Harry recognized. The attackers had no such compunctions, and he

could also see that several of the Valkyrie were wounded. Just then, Coyote teleported with someone off the roof. To one side, the Heavy Gunners were now also being knocked out by Clea, and Harry realized that Charles and Betsy were removing still more minds from the pool they had to protect from the Shadows.

In a third section, Surtur and Fenrir brawled across a strange landscape, while elsewhere in that same viewpoint, Malekith was toying with Steve, alongside the goddess Skadi, who Harry had met last night. Harry started as he finally caught sight of something—no, someone—on Fenrir’s back! There, rag-dolling as the dread wolf fought and howled and raged, was Dani, still tied in place.

All of this, along with dozens of other images, was all sprawled across the outer shell of the dome, reflecting the images back into the nothing area within. And in the center of the area, there was cloud of darkness. It was a barely contained amorphous blob, like someone was actively trying to condense several disparate storm clouds into one and barely succeeding. Within that roiling sphere, various pieces moved and shifted, darkness on darkness, black on black, as smaller bits of storm clouds moved under their own power, possibly showing the separate entities that made up Those Who Watch Above in Shadow.

*This... this is it? No bodies, no life, a bare minimum of individuality? The Shadows really do live vicariously through the eternal plays and games they put the Asgardians through. Why? Harry questioned, staring at the blob, absently noticing that the Shadows had yet to respond to his intrusion. Is death really so terrifying that you would so remove yourself from life to escape it? I’d almost feel sorry for them if I didn’t know they were murder-happy slave-making fucks who deserve to meet Death face-to-face almost more than anyone else I’ve ever had the displeasure of meeting.*

Banishing such thoughts, Harry smirked as the situation touched on a memory, one involving another deep, dark place infested with evil abominations of darkness and shadow. Smirk stretching to a truly evil grin, he created a mental impression of one of his favorite spells. “*Expecto Patronum!*”

Instantly, a pure blazing light exploded from his astral body. As close as he’d managed to get to them, the ball of Shadow-shades couldn’t dodge and instantly burst, the individuals within—if they could be called that—shrieking in

pain, confusion, fear, and rage. The suddenly parted Shadows raced every which way within their pocket realm, to get away from the unexpected light that burned so hatefully into the hollowness of their beings.

One moment, the Shadows felt as if they were on the brink of final victory. The humans were finally beginning to be overwhelmed by a mixture of last-minute, teleportational legerdemain of their remaining jotun and sheer psionic power. Then they had become aware of something, something new, there, in their own realm! Turning their attention that way they found a astral projection where none should be. And it had looked disturbingly familiar; the image of the Midgardian wizard plain, the one who they blamed above all others for their current travails. The projection had stood there, glowing with navy blue, gold and white energies.

And then ***PAIN!***

It had long become a foreign feeling. The Shadows, formless, bodiless entities had been inhabiting their own separate realm of the Astral Plane since time forgotten. Indeed, they had been there far longer than their deal with the Asgardians had existed. Odin and his ilk were not the first so-called 'Gods' they had tricked into hidden slavery.

. They'd had no bodies to attack, to age or become sick. They'd had no senses to strike at, at least in the terms that the average mortal would understand the term. But now, those self-same bodiless spirits, Those Who Watch Above in Shadows felt pain. They felt a mind-ripping agony, a searing of their spiritual being.

The Shadows scattered, and as they did, the burning agony faded slightly, allowing them to once again think. Gathering their collective willpower, the Shadows halted all attempts to fight their way through the flaggin telepaths, halted even aiding their precious tether Surtur against Fenrir with their illusions. What did those separate battles matter now that their very realm had been invaded?

**OOOOOOO**

In their tent at the center of camp, Charles and Betsy were hanging on by a thread, their defenses on the Astral Plane crumbling. For all his age and power,

even Charles could be worn down by constant pressure. But then, just as Betsy teetered off the edge into unconsciousness, the Shadow's attacks... completely disappeared.

They did not slowly ebb away, waiting to rebuild their strength for another assault. No, it was a sudden, full retreat. For the first time since the Shadows had become aware of the expeditionary force in Yggdrasil's boughs, Charles felt his mind and powers no longer under any kind of attack.

Utterly flabbergasted, the professor checked several times, but there wasn't even the faintest touch of the Shadows on the Astral Plane any longer.

His eyes snapping open, Charles tried to speak, but found his throat far too dry despite the fact he could still feel and taste the blood that leaked from his mouth. It took him a moment to release his grip on his wheelchair enough to reach for a nearby glass of water. He took a long drought before shouting at the top of his lungs, his hoarse words becoming clearer as he went. "The—the Shadows! The Shadows are gone! They've pulled back entirely!"

"Why do I get the impression I should be saying something like in that Transformer's movie? Potter did it, he turned the tide?" Husk quipped, from where she and Amara had raced along the wall away from the others to help defend another section.

"Probably because it's true. Now help out with those stone lungs of yours, if we can get Freya and the others to wake up our forces, we can turn this fight around too!" Amara ordered.

**OOOOOOO**

Harry grinned viciously at the Shadow creatures formed into wraith-like individuals reminding him very strongly of Dementors in appearance, or perhaps mutated lethifolds. They were vaguely humanoid in shape, their forms below the 'belt' becoming more ephemeral as it descended to their absent feed. To a one they shared the trait of wielding wide, clawed hands of condensed darkness, the limbs coming out of what strangely looked like long, shadowy wizard-style cloaks, complete with hoods. None of the Shadows made the effort to form faces. Perhaps they couldn't remember what they'd looked like in life?

And then they charged forward, clawing at Harry's astral form with all the fury of a mob.

Harry in turn was clad in the blazing energy of his Patronum, coating himself in blazing light. For a moment, it was a clash of opposites. The dark energy of the Shadows tore at Harry from all sides, trying to injure, to kill, to drive him away. While many of the Shadows' claws glanced off his shining armor, a fair number cut into his glowing form. Where the darkness got through, jolts of pain shot through Harry, forcibly reminding him of the times he had been subjected to the Crucio.

The Shadows were fast as well, able to dodge his counters with ease. And as Harry missed one, others would attack from every angle. "GRRRAAHHH!!!" Harry howled in pain, lashing out in every direction, adding his magical might to the battle. But to his shock, his spells, simple spells like the Reducto and the Protego, didn't work. They didn't fizzle out as if suppressed, or appear but do nothing like against Balder, they simply didn't appear at all.

Despite Harry's concentration, his magic, his main arsenal against any foe, failed him. Taking advantage of their foe's surprise, several Shadows sliced into him from every side. "FUCK!"

As the Shadows continued to close in, and Harry's original Patronus spell began to fail, he knew he didn't have time to contemplate why his spells were failing. *Patronus alone it is then.*

Perhaps it was because the Patronus spell didn't just produce a material form, but it also had a psychic component, the Patronus did, very obviously, work here, and it hurt the Shadows something fierce. The spell was only supposed to create an aura of good feelings and happiness, not just create an energy form in the material world. *Another way to say it is that it weaponizes positive emotions, condensing the caster's selected memories of happiness, joy, excitement, etc. to the point it created light. So...*

Harry grimaced as he ducked away from another claw seeking his eyes, trying to complete his thought. *So was it the light or the positive emotions that hurt them? No...* he realized, shaking his head. *It wasn't just light or emotions. The fact is that the Patronus is an extension of---* "UGGH!!!" Harry snarled as

several blows shredded his astral body, pain lancing into him. The attack nearly caused his astral self to come apart for a moment, so sharp and widespread was the pain.

But Harry held it together, and moment later, his astral self began to glow brighter, the Shadows skittering away in mass bar one, whose clawed hand had been caught in Harry's chest due to how deeply it had penetrated. The light Harry projected also seemed to cause the Shadow entities pain, and he grinned toothily. *If you're weaponizing emotions, that's just a different way of saying you're weaponizing your willpower. So, willpower made manifest then? I can work with that.*

As the other Shadows watched in horror, Harry's light pulsed, overcoming the Shadow impaling him. The entity let out a psionic scream of fear and torment and then, the Shadow disintegrated, leaving Harry's astral self in a new form as the light dimmed ever so slightly. Having used the existing template of the Praetorian-style Patronus, Harry had clad himself in new armor much like the Praetorian knights he had used to clear Camelot of the Dementors, complete with a sword designed to look like the sword of Gryffindor.

"Now, let's see which of our wills is stronger, ya ruddy cocks!" With that, Harry struck. The Shadows retreated before him like dust before a fan, even as they got over their shock at seeing one of their member reduced to the point of losing form. Realizing just what was at stake now, the remaining Shadows began to attack once more.

But now, with his greater understanding of the nature of this realm and what could hurt his enemy, the battle became that of will versus will. Every attack, every strike, became a question; which was stronger, the light or the dark. And as Hela had said, Harry had willpower to spare.

But this assault on the representation of the physical wasn't all the tricks the Shadows had up their non-existent sleeves. Here in their own realm, the Shadows' ability to attack him was severely limited, as they couldn't get through his mental defenses, to take control of his mind, they were still able to create various illusions pulled from the previous attempt to attack Harry's mind via twisted memories of his past.

Around Harry the images of his dead friends from his past life appeared. Neville. Hermione. Fred and George and Luna and all the rest of them appeared, screaming bloody murder about how he had left them to die, about how he should have died with them.

“You left me behind Harry! You said you loved me, but then let me go home with no protection! You don’t deserve to be happy when I died tortured in the worst way possible!” The phantasm of Hermione shrieked like a banshee, taking some of Harry’s guilt and a thought he had wrestled with several times and turning them into a weapon once more.

“You led us into battle mate, you led us to our deaths. Why should you get to live when none of us will ever get the chance thanks to you?!” Neville and several others demanded, damning him with every word.

Meanwhile, the Shadows continued swiping at him with their claws, forcing Harry on the defensive as the voices of his dead friends hammered into him. However, this type of attack was one Harry had dealt with before, and no matter how much it hurt, he knew he could push passed them, slicing and battering the Shadows aside. Every time he managed to hit one he could feel his ‘blade’ cut into something, the Shadow in question shrieking as light overcame its form. It was incredibly obvious that pain was so foreign to them even the potential for it practically paralyzed the Shadows, their movements becoming more forced and unnatural as more of their number were wounded.

Then, somehow, came the memories of what Harry had ordered done to the Shi’ar Empire. Perhaps the Shadows had pulled them from the thoughts of The Thing or the others who’d been involved. Perhaps Harry’s astral projection carried memories as well as his willpower. Regardless, the Shadows must have realized that bringing out his old friends to condemn Harry hadn’t worked. Instead, they tried to break his will by pointing out that he was no better than them or the Shi’ar government he had consigned to destruction. They whispered that he was only interested in growing his own power, building his own empire.

But once more, such a tactic didn’t work. Although Harry had shed a few tears for the friends he’d never be able to see again, he had moved on, leaving behind his guilt and racking grief. And while a part of Harry was still guilt-ridden about what he had done to the Shi’ar, What he, Ororo, and the others had helped

to set up afterward with Corsair and the Starjammers would help mitigate the Shi'ar tragedy tremendously. Even now, Harry knew that the decision had been necessary. Earth had too many enemies to miss the chance to remove one.

*"This is all you are illusions and trickery,"* Harry said softly, shaking his head even as his voice rose with every word. *"All you have ever been. You are shadows, illusions, falsehoods, trickery, and mind games. You are nothing **real!**"* Harry bellowed. Like a detonating bomb, the Shadows were flung away, unable to touch his astral representation any longer. *"And it is time to do away with you!"*

With that, Harry went on the offense. The light of his astral self became brighter, his presence a small star in the strange, sub-dimension. He lashed out with his sword, cutting at every Shadow entity within reach.

The Shadows tried to strike back, but every time, just like before, it became a matter of which side had the willpower to break the defense of the other. Their touch might've caused Harry intense pain, and he really wasn't looking forward to seeing how much of that agony was being carried over into his real body, but it didn't break him as his blade did the Shadows. The instant they felt the pain of his sword's edge, the Shadow in question lost any desire to continue the contest but was unable to get away. Each and every one simply couldn't think when in agony, and thus the contest became one-sided.

Soon, Harry was cutting them away one from one another, culling each of them from the herd. The wraith-like forms of the Shadows could only take so much before they exploded or sliced apart. There were attempts to focus through the mind-numbing pain, to try and concentrate, through Harry's assault, but to no avail. It was too much, too unfamiliar and all encompassing, and in the end Harry's strength of will was just too great for them to overcome. All they could do was suffer as they clung to existence. It was similar to a cloud formation, one that that, even if dispersed, would linger on in remnants.

But no longer could the Shadows be called entities in any fashion. No longer could they constitute themselves out of their darkness. No longer could they even form thoughts. Harry had torn asunder everything that had made the Shadows able to think or feel, cutting them into ever smaller pieces. And as Harry grimly kept up his work, even those pieces faded into nothing. The small sub-dimension soon began to come apart at the seams, the last of the combined

power and will of Those Who Watch Above in Shadow failing in the face of their utter defeat. All that was left to the powerless, twisted souls that had been the Shadows was pain and the agony of being creatures that had once been gods to gods, torn down by a single semi-mortal human being.

**OOOOOOO**

From the first moment Harry attacked the Shadows in their own sub-dimension, he was already making a difference elsewhere. With their complete focus on survival and destroying their adversary, none of the Shadows' attention was left to to keeping their various machinations going elsewhere.

For example, the illusions that had worked to subvert Skadi, Steve, and even Fenrir's minds ended abruptly, leaving Malekith and Surtur to their own devices.

As the extra-dimensional battle began, Surtur had just pinned Fenrir. The two combatants had fought for what felt like hours, and in that time the Shadows had finally discovered a mixture of visual and olfactory tricks that could momentarily confuse the dread wolf, thanks in large part to Surtur's odor being much easier to duplicate than that of a flesh and bone individual. For just a moment Fenrir had been vulnerable, freezing in indecision, sure he'd suddenly been surrounded by multiple jotun.

Surtur had then used his mastery of earth magic to lock down Fenrir's hindquarters, get behind him, pinning the massive wolf on his side using his own impressive weight. Finally in a position of power over his foe, the Jotun King had then begun stabbing him with Gungnir, but Fenrir's fur and hide had still proven proof against such an assault.

As the bladed head of Gungnir had come down over and over again, it became obvious that Fenrir's durability was slowly being overcome. Despite Fenrir's desperate gyrations, Surtur was working into a position to stab Fenrir through the mouth or eyes. Even the dread wolf's nigh unbeatable magical resistance and durability could have survived such an attack on such vulnerable targets.

And then Surtur's had mind filled with the shrieks of his patrons. So closely linked were they to their tethers at that point that the Shadows' sudden agony

even traveled through their link to their servants. The king of Muspellheim had reeled, a majority of his weight still pressing down on Fenrir even as his hands shot to his head, grabbing at his skull as he howled at the pain of his lords and masters, the sheer agony threatening to drive him insane.

Now, as Fenrir tried to break free of the weight on his back and the half-formed earth prison keeping him bound, Dani, who had long since woken up, decided to act. Her previous wounds had not healed by any means, of course, and by now she even added more to the tune of what felt like several additional broken bones. Indeed, she knew that were it not for her mangled power armor, she might well have died at this point due to blood loss alone. But some of the features of that same armor were still keeping her alive, even if its vaunted emergency array had somehow been broken by Fenrir's drool, and she had been able to understand what was going on.

As she felt her side and back smack into the ground again, Dani concentrated for a brief moment, forcefully pushing through the haze of pain that muddled her vision and thoughts. In her hands, the unbroken rope that tied her to the Fenrir's back shifted into a spear, and she immediately fell off Fenrir's back, rolling down the hill Surtur had raised in an effort to keep Fenrir pinned.

The various pains she felt flared into unified agony at the jarring motion and Dani tried to clench her jaw tight, but in the end she couldn't fight it, and a long squeal of pain came out as she rolled. Fenrir's massive head to snapp towards her, some of his battle lust fading at seeing his long slumbering passenger awake. Locking eyes with the dread wolf, Dani pushed through her pain to speak. "Aaaaa! Gg, gguh... The, the spear. Fenrir, the spear. Get it out of his hands! It's the only th, the only thing he has th, th, that can hurt you!"

By then, Fenrir's desperate scramblings had broken enough of his half-formed prison that it was more of an earthen blanket than anything else. Before Surtur could even try and push through the agony of his gods, Fenrir bucked hard, throwing Surtur off his side. The giant jotun cried out as he flipped back, hit the ground, and rolled away like a ragdoll. Each time he crashed back into the ground caused a minor earthquake, and Dani couldn't help but scream again as the erratic movements of the earth hurled her off her feet and to the ground.

As Surtur tumbled, the combination of the agony of his masters, his own wounds, and the force of his tumbling caused his right hand to finally go limp, releasing Gungnir from his grip. The mighty spear, loose for the first time in millennium, clattered and rolled away into a nearby ditch the various battles of the day had torn out of the ground nearby.

Nearly insensate from the torture of her injuries, Dani just barely managed to keep her senses, and her grip on Sigyn's Gift, which had shifted into a small knife, thankfully. Now she watched as Surtur came back to himself somewhat, at least enough to dodge to the side of Fenrir's charge by shifting his body into playdough, the wolf barreling through a hole made by Surtur. She grit her teeth in frustration. Even with as much damage as the Jotun King had taken, he was still keeping up with Fenrir.

That's when she realized that his latest transformation had put Surtur's head directly over where she lay, Quickly checking, Dani his hands were well out of position. In an instant, Dani moved. Gathering what remained of her strength, Sigyn's Gift responded to her will and shifted into a javelin, which she hurled upward with all her might. "RRRRAAAAAHHH! FLYYY!!"

The javelin flew straight as an arrow, stabbing into Surtur's eye, overcoming the Jotun King's limited durability there into the overlarge orb.

"ARGH!!" Surtur screamed, real pain from his own body finally washing away the last vestiges of the Shadows' pain-filled shrieks from this mind. Instinctively, he lashed out, his foot catching Dani and kicking her away. She sailed through the air before smashing side-first into a nearby tree of glass and metal. Momentum abruptly cut, she slumped down to the ground, as limp as a marionette with its strings cut.

Lost in his agony, and half blinded, Surtur didn't see Fenrir leaping at him once more. He did, however, feel Fenrir's jaws as they clenched around his throat.

Instead of flailing in panic, the Jotun King snarled and wrapped his large arms around the wolf, squeezing hard. He might've thought to use magic, but he couldn't concentrate through his mounting injuries enough to use magic. Beyond his now ruined eye, the wounds Harry had caused had opened up once more,

weeping lava. Fenrir's claws occasionally caught on them as well, ripping them open further.

The two titans rolled and grappled, tossed and turned. Again, the whole dimension of Svartalfheim shook around them as the fight continued. Neither foe would give their adversary an inch, Fenrir struggling to close his jaws and tear open Surtur's throat while Surtur put every drop of strength he had left into frantically crushing Fenrir's spine between his arms. All the while, his conscious mind was rapidly tearing itself apart under the weight of the Shadows' pain. The torturous sensation wasn't like his own body's pain, which he could push through. No, the shrieks and phantom cuts and burning wounds transmitted directly into his mind could not be ignored, every one of them just as real and painful as the last.

in Svartalfheim the impact of Harry's direct assault on the Shadows might not have had as direct an impact close by, but it was still certainly felt.

The mental domination imposed upon Skadi, which had covered her perception of the world around her, faded just as she and Malekith were about finish Steve off. The great huntress blinked, freezing for a moment, desperately wondering which was real for a moment, what she saw now or what she'd just been seeing for the last however long. Instantly, Steve took advantage of such hesitancy, taking the goddess's feet out from under her before shield charging an equally flatfooted Malekith.

The dark elf king recovered quickly though and dodged just enough that the charge didn't catch him clean. It still did knock him aside, and Steve was forced to turn to keep him in eyesight, grimacing as his wounded leg took his weight for a moment. Hunkering down now that the fight was, at best, back to one-on-one, he lashed out with his shield once more.

On the ground, Skadi shook her head again, her mind heaving to reconcile the sudden shift in perception. What was real? Was it now? Or what had been? Nearby, she heard Surtur's cry in anguish. Turning her head in that direction, she yelped as she, the spangled human, and Malekith were nearly hurled into the air as the ground suddenly heaved beneath them.

When the rumbling ceased and Huntress was able to turn back to the closer fight, Skadi saw the shield-wielding human and the dark elf king again trade blows. Malekith was trying to get an attack spell past the human's defense with his off hand with little success, despite the wound to the human's thigh and lower leg. Meanwhile, the human's own offense was thwarted by the very need to defend himself from his opponent's magic. Just then, Malekith tried to use his multiplication trick, but it failed as the human kicked up gravel off the ground and into the illusions before they could even settle or attempt to spread out. The one the stones hit was obviously the real one, and the battle would continue.

But it was the sight of the human's wounds that decided it for her. Neither had been there a moment ago, but Skadi could remember those injuries had existed when she had first joined the fight. *Illusions! The Shadows must have been playing with my mind and senses once more. Blast them to Hell! I don't know why, but their influence is gone now!*

With that thought she hopped to her feet and swung her spear at Malekith. The blow nearly caught him in the side of the neck, but at the last second he caught sight of it out of the corner of his eye and dodged just enough so that she only grazed him. In response, he lashed out with an attack spell which Skadi easily blocked with that selfsame spear, cutting through the cutting curse launched at her. "My sight is true once more! You will not escape me this time dark one!"

"We shall see," Malekith taunted even as he dodged a blow from Steve and leapt away to land on a nearby boulder. Using the momentary space, he, lashed out with spells at both his opponents. Without a word between them, Steve and Skadi separated, coming at their shared foe from two different directions at once. Cursing, Malekith wheeled back and frantically looked around for a way out. His continuous use of magic was beginning to tire him, and he hadn't exactly been fresh when they had arrived here in the first place. Worryingly, there was no help from the Shadows this time, and he already knew there would be no help from Surtur. For the first time since this war began, Malekith was on his own, a feeling that sent a shiver down his spine even as his opponents closed.

**OOOOOOO**

Far away, across a dimensional gap and in the vast ocean of Asgard, Jörmungandr had been trying desperately to ignore the pain that the stone-like

human was causing him. And perhaps, if that pain had remained the only discomfort to deal with, the serpent might well have succeeded. After all, even a dullard knew it was better to suffer through a stomach ulcer to eventually shit out one annoying insect than deal with several more insects that had proven they could truly cause harm.

But it was not to be. Jörmungandr was instantly impacted by Harry's distant assault on the Shadows. In agony, and their shrieking reverberated in the serpent's mind, and the pain reverberated there, the pain of those who'd never considered the idea they'd ever feel such horrible sensations. It was too much, too much, and it was all thrust into Jörmungandr's mind like so many daggers of agony.

In an act of karma, the screams of the Shadows, the same Masters that their largest tether had willingly pledged to, slowly drove their servant mad. Jörmungandr couldn't stop nor block the Shadows out, and their screams never ceased. The sound alone drove out any thought or instinct of self-preservation.

Soon enough, Jörmungandr's vast bulk burst out of the ocean like an island chain rising up out of the waves. This was accompanied by involuntary thrashing, the strength of which caused numerous tsunami-level waves to ripple out from where the World Serpent rose to bellow a cry of agony.

It was so loud that Strange was forced to use his magic to block out all sound around himself and the rest of Team Fishermen. Even Þór was grateful for the spell that snapped into place, protecting the hearing of all present.

Two hours rest might not have been much, but Thunderbird, Thundra, and the others bar Xian and Emma Steed—who'd collapsed some moments ago—felt as if they were fully battle-ready. And as Jörmungandr finally burst out of the ocean once more, they were ready, having followed the serpent thanks to the magic carpet tracking Ben.

Now, magic bolts lashed out en masse as Stephen called out a series of large spells he had prepared for this type of moment. "By the Blood of the All-seeing, be bound in place, unable to move without my leave!"

These spells couldn't keep Jörmungandr entirely still; the World Serpent was simply too monstrously huge and too magically resistant for that. They could,

however, keep the beast on the surface. But, for some reason unknown to the sorcerer, Jörmungandr didn't even acknowledge his spells. Instead, there was just more shrieking, no longer even coherent words.

"Something seems to have happened," Storm mused as she called lightning to come crashing down, aiming for areas of Jörmungandr's body that had already been the most brutalized by the others.

"Indeed, it seems as if what little mind the monster had previously has fled," Stephen answered, sending down more spells, now also aiming for weak points. There were bowel-exploding curses, curses to freeze the blood, even curses to implode the target area in the mix. Most of them wouldn't take, but if even one out of every ten hit a previously weakened area, it was energy well spent to the sorcerer. "I wonder why?"

"I rather suspect that my love has had a hand in whatever this is," Storm said before beginning to laugh as Þór and the others closed in.

The Thunderer led the way, his mighty hammer crashing into the side of Jörmungandr's massive head, shattering several teeth the length of three men tall. Now completely maddened by the Shadow's demise, Jörmungandr's retaliatory bite missed by half a mile, the dexterity and control that had made it so deadly for Team Fishermen to attack previously entirely gone. Such was the complete collapse of the serpent's mind that there wasn't even notice of Rogue, Thunderbird, and Thundra landing on individual lengths of broken scales. The three dug in with gusto, tearing out bloody, dripping chunks of tender skin that had been long hidden underneath said scales.

"Ugh, this is no place for a man with multiple PhDs," Hulk grumbled as he landed next to Thundra.

"Shut up, Brain-boy and start tearing," the extra-temporal woman warrior shot back.

The only enemy that Jörmungandr seemed capable of recognizing was Þór, who led a merry chase as the others did their damage. Eventually, after ripping and tearing for so long the motions were becoming ingrained in Team Fisherman, when the sun rose high in the sky, the damage done finally began to pile up. The team wasn't just carving out flesh at that point, they were ripping out nerves and

shattering bone. Jörmungandr screamed through it all, giving voice to the agony of the Masters that had broken the mind of their own servant in their death throes.

Then Rogue broke through a particularly tough piece of fleshy muscle and reached a vertebrae. Once she realized what exactly she was looking at, she reached with all of her stolen strength and tore into it. At first, the bone only cracked. As she kept pulling and tugging, however, there came a sudden **snap**. Chunks of the vertebrae broke off, taking yards of spinal cord with them as Rogue fell back at the abrupt loss of resistance. Almost at once, Jörmungandr seized, completely coming to an unnatural stillness. A second later, the World Serpent went limp, head free falling and crashing down into the ocean.

Shocked but thinking quickly, Ororo hastily used her mutant powers to freeze the ocean directly underneath them all before Jörmungandr could disappear down into the waves lost forever. Between her own power and Stephen's, the two magic users swiftly created harpoons and ropes. Þór and the others stabbed the constructs into the giant serpent and pulled Jörmungandr's head and upper length up and out of the ocean as much as they could. No one was willing to take the chance that whatever malaise was affecting Jörmungandr's mind would disappear or that even such horrible wounds might eventually heal given time. After all, many of the initial injuries they had created at the start of their hunt had healed entirely by this point. Even close to death, the monstrous Ouroboros still had insane levels of endurance and stamina.

Therefore it was with grim, solemn faces that Team Fishermen reeled in their catch, slowly heading back to the shoreline where the battle had begun. The oceans crept higher as they hauled their prize along, but Storm left the others to it. Instead, she rose into the sky alone, calling upon her mutant powers to mend the insane amount of damage she had caused to Utgard's ecosphere by keeping the ocean frozen as long as she had.

Just as they reached the shoreline, tired and worn and not a little wounded, there came a tremendous explosion of water and blood from farther down Jörmungandr's immense body. Stephen moved to investigate, spells at the ready, and found Ben Grimm had punched his way out of the beast, blood and guts

covering him from head to toe so thickly that even the ocean's waves couldn't wipe it all away before he surfaced.

Stephen wordlessly used a spell to levitate Ben up into the air, one eyebrow rising as he saw the state of the stony man. "Excuse me a moment, Ben."

"What for, Doc?"

Ben's question was followed by a yelp as Stephen gestured down with his extended fingers, directing the spell keeping Ben aloft down into the waters again. "You desperately need a bath my friend."

The sight of Ben's large form being dunked over and over again, the man sputtering and cursing indignantly the entire time, caused Thunderbird and Thundra to break out in wild laughter. Even Þór let out a hearty guffaw, shaking his head as the three of them continued to pull the now moaning Jörmungandr up onto solid ground. Eventually, Ben was cleaned enough for Stephen's liking. The Sorcerer Supreme then raised his freshened up friend into the air to float beside him until his magic carpet, which had dutifully followed him for so long, dove down underneath him.

Ben glared over at Stephen as they slowly descended, but his stink eye subsided as Thundra flew up to sit beside him, dropping the rope connected to the harpoon that she had been previously pulling. She leaned against his side, staring down at the incredible monster they had just defeated. The fighting now over, all that was left was the execution. "The women of my home world will never believe such a monstrous creature existed, let alone that we killed it."

That execution Þór saw to right then, marching up the monster's quivering snout to a point high up between bloodshot eyes. Even now, Jörmungandr was still keening, mind broken from the reverberations of the Shadows' own deaths, or at least, as far as they could die anyway. Some vestige of them would still cling to existence until the tether that was Loki was dealt with. Until then, all that existed now were simply whispers on the wind, dark memories quickly forgotten.

Looking into Jörmungandr's eyes, Þór saw that madness reflected there and shook his head slowly. "Bestial hunger you had cousin, and bestial hunger you allowed to control your actions. A maddened beast you have but become now. I

could wish you could hear me as I mete out justice to thee, but whatever has happened to you has robbed me of that joy. So be it. Still, I will finish you.”

With that said, Þór brought Mjolnir down, shattering the scales over Jörmungandr’s forehead with each strike. The power of the blows held so much of Þór’s power that a sonic boom nearly knocked the Hulk off his feet, the others clapping their hands to their ears. It took several dozen strikes, and Þór was quickly just as drenched in blood and guts as Ben had been mere moments ago, but eventually, he reached Jörmungandr’s thick skull. Another dozen strikes were needed to crack the stone-like dome of bone, but finally, Mjolnir smashed through and into the brain hidden inside. After so much death and destruction, Jörmungandr knew no more.

For a moment, as the pitiful creature’s final convulsions rocked underneath his feet, Þór looked down at his hammer, lost in thought. When even those died down, he then looked up at the others, true allies all. With the battle over, he was at a loss as to what to do. “What now?”

“Bathe!” Came the echoed cry from every throat.

Þór began to laugh, long and loud. Such humor did much to begin shaking off the immeasurable grief at what he now knew he’d lost. He and his folk were still alive, and if Ororo was right, perhaps they too were soon to be free. If so, the future was once more wide open for his people, and he longed to grab it with both hands. *Or perhaps one hand? I must needs speak to the Lady Sif, after all.*

**OOOOOOO**

At Charles’s shout, Freya took advantage in an instant, waking the ODM troopers and several of her own folk while the Einherjar, no longer under the control of the Shadows, turned on the jotun in their midst. The battle was close and horrible for a time, but the numbers of jotun present were not enough to sustain any combat for long. Once the fighting there died out, Freya sent a force of ODMs and Dr. Druid toward the dimensional border with Svartalfheim on the remaining magic carpets. She figured that between the assault force and Danielle and Skadi, the two huntresses were more likely to need aid than Team Fishermen.

**OOOOOOO**

It was the battlefield in Svartalfheim which was the last to fall silent.

The battle of the two titans ended in a loud, gurgling cry as Fenrir at last overcame Surtur's durability, tearing his throat out. The Jotun King's bear hug had broken a rib or two. Unable to concentrate enough to use magic, and without the aid of the Shadows, or Gungnir, Surtur had been forced to rely on waning physical strength alone.

Meanwhile, Malekith, also bereft of the help of his benefactors, now battered and exhausted, found himself similarly overwhelmed by the seemingly tireless red, white, and blue-spangled human and Skadi. The Huntress's spear could block or shatter any spell sent her way, just as the human's shield seemed able to survive any of the attack spells sent **his** way. That was not an easy proposition, as both his opponents were extremely quick and easily able to dodge or avoid any spells he tried to use on the surrounding area for his benefit.

Worse, Skadi had proven to be utterly immune to Malekith's illusions and trickery. When the dark elf king had caught the human with the same sound-based deception spell he had caught the red shielded one in previously, Skadi had managed to block his follow up attempts to stick the human from behind. Similarly, the human seemed able to discern which of his body doubles were leaving actual footsteps if he tried to escape, thanks in large part to how broken the ground was around them now.

Eventually, simple physical exhaustion caused Malekith to make a mistake. In an effort to finally get around Skadi's defenses he overextended and couldn't quite retreat in time to avoid the human's blow.

The dark elf king's collarbone shattered as Captain America's shield took him in the side of the neck. Malekith's sword dropped, his hand suddenly numb and nerveless. Before he could try anything else, Skadi ran him through, her spear tip taking him high up in his chest.

Malekith glared at the Vanir goddess for a few moments, then the light of life left his eyes, and he slumped forward. Skadi stepped backward, letting the corpse fall to the ground unceremoniously. She spat on freshly dead dark elf before looking up as a shadow loomed over them.

Steve was already staring upwards, readying his shield as he glared at Fenrir despite feeling more exhausted than the super-soldier had ever felt in this second life of his. *Still nothing like the bad days of the war, but God as my witness it is close.* “Well, Fenrir? You fought Surtur and won. Was that enough for one day, or are you going to pick a fight with us too?”

The dread wolf’s sides were heaving, his muzzle flaring as he pulling in large gulps of air. One of his legs didn’t want to work quite right, and one eye wouldn’t stay open, caked as it was with blood, although it was Surtur’s magma-like blood rather than his own. Despite having torn Surtur’s throat out moments ago, his fangs and mouth seemed uninjured. Truly, Skadi thought, this beast was well beyond her and her human ally’s ability to fight.

Luckily, Fenrir didn’t seem to be in any hurry to attack either of them, though he didn’t exactly seem happy to see Skadi. “... I do not take with the Asgardians. I have genuine grievances with them. But Danielle Moonstar, she broke my hunger madness. She called me friend. For her, I will stay my fangs. This time.”

“Good. I have interest in that lass too.” Skadi raced over to where Danielle had been flung by Surtur’s hasty kick. She knelt down beside the girl, checking her vitals as she motioned Fenrir to come closer. “Unless any of us have a means of reaching across the dimensions to call for aid, you will have to carry her again wolf. And... I suppose myself and the man with the shield as well. I do not think either of us can get across the dimensional gap on their own. Not from this direction at least.”

Grumbling, Fenrir followed, but thankfully for his sensibilities, help was already on the way.

The Ragnarök War was over, and at last the allies had emerged victorious.

**OOOOOOO**

Danielle opened her eyes and found herself staring up into a woman’s face. It was the face of a woman somewhere around her age, or maybe in her late 20s? Somewhere around there.

Regardless, Danielle found herself unable to look away, not even to blink. *Oh no, she's sexy!* Was the somewhat bleary thought that went through her mind as she stared at this strange, new face.

That face had high, thin cheekbones, the skin that of a woman who spent a lot of time outside, although she had no crow's feet around her eyes. The face was marked instead with blue whorls around the woman's left eye and three blue claw marks that ran down her other cheek, with pouty lips currently set into a beautiful smile.

That smile caused Dani's heartbeat to race while hawk-like eyes gazed into her own. Only now did she see that the entirety of her face was framed by dark black hair interspersed with white streaks here and there. Instead of age, the streaks caused the woman to appear all the more striking, much like Ororo's hair did the African woman.

A featherlight touch against her cheek caused Danielle's eyes to look down slightly, seeing one of the woman's fingers tracing her cheek before looking back up at the woman, she finally spoke. "Well done, young huntress! Not just in this hunt either, but in your total dealings with Fenrir and before. Your Jarl and friends have all been singing your praises since we returned victorious. Though I acknowledge that Freya might have some claim upon you, I will fight even my queen for your worship!"

Danielle found herself blushing more with each word than she ever had since she'd had her first crush. Desperately, she stammered something, causing the woman, who she now realized could only be Skadi, goddess of hunters and skiing, to laugh as she pulled away, shaking her head. "Calmly, young huntress. Calmly now, my Dani!"

Despite knowing that the 'my' bit of that sentence probably had more to do with the goddess's previous comment about fighting queen Freya for her worship, Dani could not stop a shiver from racing down her still somewhat exhausted body. As she shifted this way and that in embarrassment, she noticed due to an absence of pain that the wounds she had taken during the campaign were now gone.

That could only mean one thing. Despite still being embarrassed and her wildly unhelpful horny thoughts, Danielle concentrated on that concept to the

utmost. *We won. We really won! But... at what cost?* “How, h-how is everyone? If we didn’t win, I wouldn’t be here, but what did it cost us?”

This won her another smile of approval from the goddess leaning over her, and Dani found the woman’s arms soon sliding around her slightly, lifting her up and pushing her back to sit up. Skadi turned her head to shout over her shoulder that Danielle was awake before turning back. “Yes, we won. You won your battle, and Jarl Potter found the means to rout the Shadows. Whatever they once were, they are gone now thanks to him. And thanks to you, we did not even have to face Fenrir in this war. Jörmungandr also was dealt with by you humans for the most part. Your Jarl’s plans worked there far better than at any other point it seems, and Fenrir killed Surtur in a fitting twist of fate.”

Danielle’s eyes widened. “I... I remember that, I think. I... Did I hurl a spear at his eye?”

Skadi smiled even wider, although she was interrupted from answering as a massive snout poked its way into the tent. Hela’s voice filtered in from outside, her volume alone making clear she was shouting, “Let the poor girl be Fenrir! She will go hunting with you soon enough, I’m sure!”

A moment later, Harry Potter pushed his way in and, with a gesture and a slight flash of magic, rolled up a portion of the tent to allow Danielle to see past him and Fenrir’s bulk both. She immediately saw that her friends had been waiting for her outside. She smiled at her leader, who smiled back until he brought his hand down in a chop to the top of her head. It was a very light blow all told but still made Danielle’s eyes cross for a moment.

“That was for following through with your own personal plan rather than trying to retreat with everyone else. While I am proud of what you accomplished, please don’t try to do something like that again. Remember, there are many people who would be very sad to see you die, all right?” Harry growled, shaking his head.

*Even if it could be called an open question if you would truly die permanently here in Asgard given your faith. Still, she came far too damn close to it, and Nikolai did. Her body was more broken than whole when she came back, it’s a wonder she lived at all, especially after whatever it was broke her spine.*

Unaware of Harry's thoughts, Dani nodded, trying to look sheepish and apologetic. Unfortunately for her, the look did not fit her very well. Still, after only a second of glaring at her, Harry asked solicitously if she was well enough to move. When she answered in the affirmative, he helped her off of the medical cot she'd been laying on and, between them, Harry and Skadi helped her outside, where she was instantly greeted by her friends, especially Fenrir. Harry left them to it after giving Danielle the news that Sigyn's Gift had been slagged beyond repair by Surtur's blood.

Harry stepped back for a moment, watching as Freya arrived at the head of a contingent of several of Valkyrie. The Queen almost instantly kicked off an argument with Skadi as to who would claim Danielle as a follower, and Harry could only shake his head. Leaning against Hela, who leaned back into him, he looked around the camp as he thought on the cost of the war.

Nikolai remained the only death among the Custodes, although it had been a touch and go affair for Husk, Amora, and several of the others. Emma and Jean were both still out, along with Steed, Xian, and even Betsy. All of them would be all right in the end, having since been seen to by Harry and Ororo both, much like the rest of their wounded. Those wounded amongst the Einherjar were to be helped along by the more mundane healing abilities of Amelia and Una as well as their own healers. But all of the telepaths bar Charles were still unconscious, their bodies paying the price for the effort they had put forth.

Thinking on it, Harry swore that all of the telepaths, especially Charles, would be excessively pampered and feted after recovering by the Asgardians and expeditionary force. Without them, everyone knew there would never have been anything close to a victory in the first place.

And without Harry and Storm, the Orbital Drop Marines would have been dealing with hundreds of casualties. As it was, they had still lost ninety-three men between the various battles. In spite of that, the Oh Damns and their leader Falcon had most decidedly proven their mettle here. Harry had already made plans to immensely expand the project over the next few months once they got back to Earth.

For now, though, all that remained was for Odin to be well enough to once more take his throne and make certain that, beyond dealing permanently with

the Shadows, Earth would get its due compensation for their efforts in this war. *The time for being a hero is over*, Harry thought with a mental sigh, as Hela, ignoring the fact that they were in public for once, nuzzled into his side, smiling faintly. That smile grew into a downright grin as her Seidr Man's arm slung over her shoulders. *The time for being the king is about to begin...*

### **End Chapter**

Even now, I am not really happy with this chapter. I think the final confrontation with the Shadows needs work, at the very least. Still, I hope you enjoyed it, and that I will be able to get the next Stallion chapter up tomorrow.