

Hey all. This has been edited by Observanc3, which hopefully means that there are very few mistakes. I would apologize for its lateness, but hopefully the quality will offset that.

If any of you know about an old review I have had trouble finding about terraforming the magic way, I would be very grateful.

{Frown}

## Chapter 51: Winding Down, Gearing Up

After two days of revelry, Harry had made the executive decision to return the majority of his folk to Earth. Luckily, the return trip from Asgard proved far easier than the one they'd faced traveling to Yggdrasil had been. With the Asgardian warriors and their non-Earth human forces having moved back to Asgard the city, Freya simply opened the Rainbow Bridge and let them through, countermanding Odin's previous orders on that score. "While that decision made some sense at the time, looking back on it, it was undoubtedly a ruling influenced by the touch of the Shadows on my husband's mind. While I do believe that having a permanent, continually running connection between our realms and that of Midgard would not be a good idea, perhaps now that the fanaticism of Christianity has appeared to have run its course, a connection with Midgard would be acceptable. So long as we control it from our end, and that your fellow humans understand we are not willing to deal with salespeople at our door, so to speak."

With a word and a touch of Freya's hands upon one of its banisters, the Rainbow Bridge shifted structure. The magic-made solid bridge rippled like water, coming apart along the center. One of the segments broke away from Utland, twisting around and pointing to seemingly nothing. The other half of the Rainbow Bridge grew in width until there were two full sized Bifrosts where there had once been only the one. At that point, Amara and Hela were called forward to share their memories of the other side, allowing Freya to situate the end of the newly reformed bridge to the same geographical point that the expeditionary force had originally used to cross the dimensional divide to Yggdrasil.

Once that connection had been made, Harry led the X-men through first while leaving Steve and Jean in charge as the others followed. As the leader of the Custodes Mundi, Harry had an extremely difficult duty to see to first and foremost.

Quickly using a runic doorway to port through to Charles' mansion, Harry and the rest of the X-Men smoothly moved out of the storage room where the doorway had been placed, walking up into the main foyer of the mansion, where they were greeted by Jubilee. The teen perked up from where she had been laying out on her back watching TV. "Oh, it's you all. You're back. Great, maybe you can stop Warpath from forcing six-hour exercise regimens on us."

"Don't count on it," Scott answered firmly, almost towering over the girl with a frown.

The faint twitching of his lips gave away his real feelings, while Harry, quite irrationally, felt a burst of real anger at the naïve girl. *I know I shouldn't be angry at her, but damn it, given what I'm here for, that attitude just pisses me off.*

"I do hope that doesn't mean you've been slacking off on your schoolwork, Ms. Lee?" Charles questioned, touching Harry's arm as he rolled forward, having seen and felt the rictus of anger on the younger man's face. The light warning note in his voice caused Jubilee to scowl and roll her eyes before hopping to her feet and exiting the foyer.

"Teenagers," Scott muttered.

This rather ironic statement was somehow just the right thing to cut off Harry's spurt of anger at the knees. He snorted, looking at Scott with a jaundiced eye. Catching this, the leader of the X-Men had the good graces to look a little embarrassed, knowing he'd had his own teenage issues, although he maintained that the drama within the new class of students was at least three times as high as his own class's had been.

After a second thought, Scott sobered and gestured upwards. "Laynia usually hangs out in the solar, the greenhouse, her room, or down at the local library."

"She's actually in the greenhouse currently," Charles added, a brief hand raising to his temple before he located the young woman in question. "Do you—"

Harry shook his head, cutting off the professor from finishing. "Thank you for the offer, Charles, but no. I have to do this. If you could send Piotr and Amara up when they arrive, I would appreciate it, though."

After having been rescued along with her brother from the Winter Guard Program, Laynia had not wished to make a life based upon using her mutant powers, although she had agreed to occasionally help out the X-Men or the Custodes if asked. Instead, she'd gone on to test into one of the local colleges in New York and had spent most of her time studying for her various classes. That was why she stayed in Charles' mansion instead of Camelot.

True to Charles' words, Harry found the young Russian woman in the greenhouse, the same one that Xavier had originally created for Ororo years ago. Indeed, seeing Laynia sitting where Ororo had once sat many a morning as they'd flirted gave Harry a brief moment of pleasant *déjà vu*, despite there being little similarities between the two women.

When Laynia looked up, that brief moment ended. She looked at him, and before he even could open his mouth, her face closed down. She set the textbook she'd been reading to one side, and the pen in her hand went up in flames as her Dark Force powers activated for a moment. "N-Nikolai?"

Somewhat thrown by her quick understanding of what was going on, Harry paused for a second, then continued to walk forward, saying nothing. As he did so, the hope that had been flickering in the former ballerina otherwise stoic gaze faded. In its place, tears began to fill her

dark eyes, soon trickling down her reddening cheeks. By the time they did, Harry was across the room, pulling the now-weeping young woman into a hug and gently stroking her hair as he murmured, "I'm sorry, I'm so, so sorry..."

Laynia simply sobbed into Harry's chest for several quiet moments, her mutant powers activating then fading, activating then fading under her emotional distress. When she did manage to speak, her words came out in thick, tear-slurred Russian, which made Harry very thankful for his translation spell. "I... I knew, you know? I knew the moment he agreed to become part of the Custodes that N-Nikolai would eventually get—get himself killed in the line of duty. But in a way, that's all my brother ever wanted. To fight for a cause he believed in—not for some military goal, not for Mother Russia, but a cause bigger than nationalism. I could never understand that. I, I could never understand why Nikolai felt like he owed the world on some level. And it finally killed him."

"Some men, some women too, are happiest when they're fighting for a cause, when defending others," Harry answered softly, knowing that kind of calling himself. "I'm sorry that following my leadership led to his death, Laynia. But I am not sorry that he joined the Custodes. If he hadn't, he wouldn't have been the Nikolai that you knew and loved, would he? It's cold comfort, but it is all I can really say."

Laynia let out a long, rattling sob at that, but even still Harry could feel her nodding against his chest. He continued to hold Laynia for a time, letting her cry all of the tears she could in huge wracking sobs as she faced a world without her brother in it.

Eventually, she began asking questions through her tears, and Harry explained how Nikolai had died and the mission they had been on at the time. He ended up spending the rest of that morning with her there. At that point, Piotr and Amara had also come through via the Rainbow Bridge and the various runic doorways. The two of them quickly took over, along with Scott, who had stopped in to give his condolences as well. The X-men leader mainly left it to Piotr and Amara though. Piotr had been Nikolai's closest friend and Amara had been quite close to both siblings.

Under normal circumstances, Rogue would have also been there. She had become Laynia's best friend after Laynia had moved into the mansion. But the Southern belle was staying in Utland for the time being. Draining Jörmungandr to such a degree had, like draining the Juggernaut, changed Rogue physically. Where at that time, the changes were mostly unseen, this time, Rogue had grown 3 feet taller, 2 feet broader, and her skin had been replaced by scales, to say nothing of the newly grown claws and fangs. To say that was something of a shock to the system after the adrenaline drained away was an understatement.

This was made worse by how bad a reaction Scott and a few of the others had to her new appearance. They'd tried to make up for it since, but given Rogue's previous self-esteem issues, it was no wonder she had wanted to stay in Asgard. Indeed, even there she had basically

sequestered herself away while waiting for Charles to provide her an image-inducer like the one Kurt used in public.

Thinking on it, Harry hoped Rogue would get over this without his intervention and if she needed help beyond the image inducer, she already had a support system in place. *Beside, I don't think I can really do anything about it. That is, if it really is a permanent change like what happened when she drained the Juggernaut anyway. If it turns out it isn't, a simple vitality-draining array might be able help. Although, I'm getting antsy just thinking how long it would take to fully reverse all the changes.*

Before returning to Australia, Harry checked in with Sage to ensure that no business or political issues had cropped up while he'd been away that she needed him to handle. Getting a generally negative response, he then he checked in with General Murphy and the returning ODMs. Once their three commanders and Sam, still in his Falcon gear, were gathered, Harry began. "It will be interesting to see what you all report in your AARs, but from my perspective gentlemen, the Orbital Drop Marine project has proved its worth."

He waited for a second, but when Sam and the other officers who had been on the expeditionary force nod, he went on. "With that said, I want the project's size to be increased tremendously. Sam, I'm not going to jog your elbow on what kind of training you do, but I want the training center's size enlarged within the week. You have three companies of veterans now, induct some fresh blood and parse them out amongst them., Then, when the center is ready, I want you all to start training four times your number and then keep going."

Sam winced at that order, knowing as soon as he heard it that he'd have to take a higher rank to make it work. Not to mention he'd need to put together a logistics staff.

When he tried to protest that he didn't have the training for such a large roll, Harry simply shrugged in response. "Neither did I. Do you think I've done some kind of official training for leading this whole Avalon Empire thing? Or that I took classes for anything on the commercial side of things?"

Sam winced, acknowledging the point, while the three company commanders all looked at one another before one shrugged their shoulders. That had nothing to do with them. Still, after a quick consultation, one of them asked about what kind of trainees Harry wanted to see.

"We've already opened our doors to veteran sailors and base personnel. We'll start to do the same for ground pounders, both Army and Marine. And I don't want to hear about any sort of rivalry or whatever popping up due to who was in what previous service, gentlemen. They join up with the ODMs, every man and woman become Oh Damns first and foremost."

"That does needs to be emphasized," the American company commander, Sean McClintock, said firmly. "Especially if we're going to continue to ask for troops to be seconded to us from various nationalities. Anyone, and everyone, who joins up needs to acknowledge they're

leaving past loyalties behind while in service and take that oath with those trust-me arrays of yours.”

“We’ve been talking,” one of the others, the Australian commander Jeff Blaze, said, raising his hand for the floor. “The sheer maneuverability and firepower that even a single company of ODMs bring to a fight is incredible. We weren’t fighting a par enemy over in Neverland, but it still gave us a glimpse at what we would see on a more modern battleground. And that’s to say nothing of the durability of our powered armor. Even the standard armor is like something out of science fiction, and that kind of durability and firepower will go to people’s heads if we let it. We must keep up a sense of duty, camaraderie and purpose that define the Oh Damns’ mission even as we enlarge to meet your goal, Lord Potter, or else we’re going to end up with a bunch of yaks who think they’re immortal until they aren’t.”

Harry nodded, no longer batting an eye at the ‘Lord’ part being added to his name. It had become something that all of the Oh Damns, and even a large majority of the Custodes and X-Men, had begun to use in formal settings like this and he had by necessity—and a bit of badgering from Emma—come to begrudgingly accept it. “I agree, but I also think that you all and Steve are up to the task.

“We’ll also need to start advertising for fresh inductees. I’m sure there are plenty of people who want to sign up to defend the Earth on the ground and just have no prior training,” Sam mused, tacitly agreeing with both Blaze’s words and Harry’s a faint smile on his face. “And there’s the draftees to consider too.”

“We’ve already begun to do that for Admiral Whitaker and the fleet,” General Murphy pointed out. “There are only so many veterans, sailors and officers both, that can be lured back into the service, after all, especially considering that we’re dealing with a void navy fleet rather than a wet navy here. There are entirely new sets of skills needed for the former as well, not to mention the inherent dangers far outclasses the latter’s on a day-to-day basis. Ironically we’ve still had more luck crewing the Raven crews than filling spots on the capital ship crews, although we’re still well below the numbers we need to see there too. Of course, that includes not having enough Ravens to put the would-be recruits in either. But the bottom line stands; we need a lot more personnel and some means of speeding up their training without cutting down on quality. The draft is going to help sure, but not quickly, and the majority of who we get from it will be green as grass.”

The Avalon Empire had a military draft as part of its Bill of Responsibility, Those eighteen to twenty-five years old were compelled to spend a tour in the EDF after going through the mandatory basic training. The process of drafting these recruits had already begun, pulling young men and women from whatever other job they were doing or roll they were fulfilling and shipping them to training centers.

The process wasn’t without bumps of course, and it had truly begun well before Harry had even spoken to the UN. In the main, the people of Harry’s domain were by and large more

than willing to do their part, regardless of their original reasons for immigrating to the Empire. Even some of the Savage Land tribes had agreed to take part, although obviously their training had, by necessity, been designed to be much more in-depth and wide-ranging since few had any knowledge regarding technology, let alone space-combat. The protocols for such trainees were similar in scope to those hailing from third world countries who had also volunteered. Still, that process too had begun almost as soon as Harry had taken over the Savage Land and Pinoptes and Ororo started to build up the educational network there.

But the problem was that any training, at any level, took time. The draftees— at least those from societies with higher technological standards—would be in the military for between eight to thirteen months of training and then service equating to a total of four years, regardless of military branch. That was a considerable chunk of time admittedly. Even the pre-trained naval personnel seconded into the EDF needed at least two months on average to get used to operating in a space-based navy.

“...I hadn’t wanted to do this, but you’re right, we need to speed up the training,” Harry admitted with a frown. “Kitty and I will create a few more time dilation chambers and figure out where to put them in the various bases and training centers. We’ll have to add a disclaimer to the contracts the inductees sign, as well as add to the available medical personnel heavily. We’ve seen that non-magical folk suffer from extreme headaches and disorientation when faced with temporal manipulations for more than a few days at a time. We might even need to break the training up with rest days.”

He paused then, frowning as he thought about what would be needed, resolving to get Kitty, Ororo and Dr. Druid on this job with him as soon possible before coming back to the here and now, with a shaking of his head. “Sam, you’ll need to do the same with Steve and Murphy on the Oh Damns side of things. In the end, the goal is to have enough ODMs on standby to drop a full battalion on at least one out of every twenty cities across globe. That manpower will be needed in case any extrasolar threat gets by our fleets.”

At that point, Harry opened the discussion up to any points any of the others had, with Murphy and Sam taking notes. Eventually though, the discussion began to wind down, and Harry turned the conversation to something far more poignant. “When we’re done here, ask the various chaplains here on Fortress Mars when they want to hold the funerals for our men. I understand that we all joined the wake the Asgardians threw to celebrate not only their fallen but our own, but we have to be aware that some individuals don’t see that kind of thing as the proper way to mourn. If any of you wish to show up for the funeral for Nikolai, send a message to Camelot. Father Garnoff will be taking care of the details. Regardless of how any of them go about their duties to our dead, I’ll be present for every funeral.”

All three company commanders nodded somberly and the room fell silent in a shared moment of understanding. None of the men present, Sam included, were new to the weight of

leadership, and all of them had been forced to bury men before this, to carry the consequences of their positions.

“Ahem. Do you think we have the logistics in place to support enlarging the training regime like this?” General Murphy finally asked, breaking the silence and playing devil’s advocate to Harry’s plan. What the commander really meant though, was that they didn’t. Not in terms of people anyway. When called on this point, he admitted it, and Harry sighed.

“So we’ll need to use time dilation chambers in even greater numbers than I feared. Well, we’ll still have to do it, because the alternative is to keep generating too much raw material without the people to use it. Get with Forge and Sage, Murphy, start figuring out where to place the various training centers. If you know of any logistical bottlenecks off hand, bring them up to Sage or me sooner rather than later. We’ll make any deals needed to overcome them with Earth’s available resources. I want us to expand our training centers to match our needs within the month.”

Murphy nodded in stoic agreement and breathed an internal sigh of relief at the one month deadline. That was at least possible, on his side of things. Whether or not Potter could come through with his end of things, well, Murphy had learned long before this not to bet against his Lord’s abilities.

After another hour of discussion, Harry eventually took his leave, heading back to Australia. Approaching the designated area, the Rainbow Bridge appeared without his needing to do anything. Coming through, he nodded to several of the Asgardians nearby, including All-Seeing Heimdall. Between Charles and Emma the two powerful telepaths had managed to clear the man’s mind and body of the taint the Shadows had imposed on him above and beyond the normal level of control the Shadows placed on the Asgardians. Although, much like with Hela, it had been an insanely painful process. Still, Heimdall appeared to be hearty enough as he stood guard over the Asgardian side of the split Rainbow Bridge.

Opposite his arrival point, Harry saw a long continuous line of people leaving Asgard the City toward Utland. With the muster of the Einherjar now over, most of the jarls and their folk were leaving, be they the warriors who had fought or the civilians who had fled to safety. Just standing there, Harry could sense the golden city was far emptier now than it had been even when he’d passed through the Rainbow Bridge just that morning, the background noise far less.

That didn’t really surprise Harry. While the number of people still leaving was impressive, that movement had kicked off the instant Freya had returned to the city and declared the war won.

What was surprising was seeing Tony Stark still present, lazing about in a chair by a forge set along the main road, arguing about something with an assembly of dvergar. All of those present were drinking from large mugs of ale but seemed sober enough as Harry moved

over to them from the main road, clapping the human inventor on the back. “Tony? I would’ve thought you’d be one of the first heading back to Earth.”

“Now what could possibly give you that idea when there’s still so much learning about metallurgy to be had here with these fine fellows?” Tony threw back, not even slurring his words a single bit. Apparently a playboy lifestyle had given him a liver fit for a dvergar. “They’ve even told me about something that could be of interest to you, Harry, and not just me. They call it the ‘Odin Forge’ or some such. From what I can understand, the metals refined at that forge are of supernatural quality, without any of your magic muckety muck being involved. It’s simply the heat and smelting rate unique to the forge. It’s what they use as the staple of their best armor sets, like Odin’s, or Freya’s, or Baldur’s lamellar. Some of their weapons are even made that way, with the actual magic added in after the weapon’s been crafted. If we could expand the process, we might be able to build our own starships far, far sooner than we would be otherwise.”

There was no way to create Orichalcum in large quantities, even with Polaris aiding the mining process making gathering the raw materials easy. It was the magical side of things that lagged badly, as only Harry could use the Blackfyre spell that was needed to give the metal both it’s final tempering and magical properties. And, alas, more magic in the form of a temporal displacement array messed with the process. Harry’s one experiment in that area exploded on him, literally. That was why not even all the Custodes had that kind of armor, either the heavy variant or the light.

Similarly, processing the raw materials Polaris and the mining ships gathered into other, more useful forms, specifically electronics and battle-rated armor, remained a bottleneck that hadn’t proven solvable by throwing money at the problem. So hearing about a metallurgical process that was at the level of Orichalcum but could be perhaps made in large quantities was interesting on many levels made even more so by the fact Harry had seen Gungnir in action. He knew the quality of Asgardian metalwork was toeing the line of being supernaturally high-grade even without the additional enchantments they worked into their best gear. “That does sound interesting,” Harry said mildly, not wishing to show the dwarves how important this could be. Not before he could make a deal with Odin.

Yet even as he spoke, Harry was examining Tony speculatively. Seeing that the normally gregarious man was now unable to meet Harry’s gaze, he asked the dvergar to let the two of them speak for a bit in relative privacy. The dvergar all nodded agreeably, turning to their own conversations, ones that Harry could barely follow despite the translation charm still active. There was something about gravity? That was all Harry could make out before he turned his full attention to Tony. “That’s not your only reason for staying though, is it?”

Tony grimaced, but refused to answer immediately. Harry waited patiently, sticking his hands into his pockets as he leaned back and got comfortable. He knew Tony would break long before he would even have to consider speaking again. He’d begun to cultivate a kind of silence



that could sort of just... sucked the words out of the people being subjected to it, a concept he had gotten from a certain series of books written by a fellow Brit.

“Dammit, I’m not good at all this introspective shit!” Tony grumbled, breaking under the quiet just as Harry had expected. The man sighed before admitting, “I... you know Pepper and I... we’re... together. But I... I have major issues with real commitment, okay?! And... Well, during my forced convalescence and house arrest, I’d allowed my eccentricities and old habits out to play. I thought it’d push her away, seeing every shitty thing I could do all at once. But wouldn’t you know it, through it all, she stuck with me> So I... I just kept doing it. But now? After hearing a real-life Goddess of Love tell me that Pepper and I are bound together? It was... it was an eye-opener. So I’m kind of just... staying away from her... from us... for awhile until I can figure out a way to apologize for, you know, being me... if that makes any sense?”

“If you weren’t you Stark, I doubt she would’ve fallen in love with you in the first place,” Harry answered dryly before clapping the older man on the shoulder. “We all make mistakes. Trust me, I’ve made enough for a lifetime, both in my personal life as well as the leader of this whole boondoggle. I think, instead of concentrating on apologizing for anything specific you might have done, like putting your work or your hobbies ahead of her, you should simply.... Hmm...”

Harry trailed off, the beginnings of an idea percolating in his mind, before snapping his fingers. “You could bring her here! Set up something romantic, just the two of you, and thank her for just being her. Don’t even bring up her putting up with you. Not then. That would set the wrong tone, I think. Instead just make it a ‘get away from it all’ kind of trip. I think someone like Pepper will understand how much that means to you, and will greatly enjoy it for her own reasons as well.”

Tony nodded along, although internally he was somewhat miffed that he’d ended up accepting romantic advice from someone younger than him. Harry was at least four, maybe five years his junior after all. Still, that didn’t make his advice any less useful. The guy had four permanent paramours for crying out loud and they all somehow co-existed in some sort of bizarre harmony. So he sucked up his pride and just nodded firmly. “Thanks, Harry.”

“No, thank you, Tony. If not for your help, the ODMs would never have been able to fight as they did in this campaign. You kept them supplied with not only ammunition but also spare parts, something I hadn’t seen the need for before General Murphy pointed it out to me. Between the two of us, I think you can consider your house arrest over with. I’ll ask Wanda to drop by and install a runic doorway in your home, and you can start working on various projects with Reed and Forge if you want. I don’t want to hear about you trying to take over, but you have a lot to contribute Tony, and I’d like to see what you can do.”

Tony nearly sagged in relief, his face openly showing how he felt at finally having the chance to do something real again for long periods of time. There was only so much house arrest he could take, with its limited access to, well... everything (even though Harry had

already helped him break said arrest for short amounts of time in the past). Not to mention any self-contained home projects he'd found to do just felt lacking for some reason. But now, being able to work with the Avalon Empire's resources and all that entailed? Well, Tony was going to have trouble not acting like a kid given the keys to Willy Wonka's chocolate factory on Christmas morning. He couldn't wait to tell Pepper—

The thought of Pepper brought Tony back down to Earth, and he nodded at the young man that was, he was just now realizing, about to become his boss. "Give me some time to finish trawling the locals for intel, and figure out a way to set up a romantic getaway or something for Pepper, before you go back again okay? I'll have something ready by the time you can convince her to come through."

Harry nodded, then jokingly prodded, "And should I tell her what to expect?"

"No, but you should probably tell her what she should wear for the trip," Tony answered, and the two men laughed before parting ways.

Leaving Tony to make his apologies—and last minute information grabs—with the dvergjar, Harry moved on through the now somewhat empty streets, mentally counting off who else would probably still be in Asgard. The sight of Danielle talking quietly to Skadi in an open plaza was not a surprise, nor was the fact that there were several dozen Valkyrie hovering nearby, chattering excitedly to one another as they watched the two converse, their eyes mostly locked on Dani. Like their patron goddess and queen, the Valkyries were apparently delighted at the idea that Danielle might be joining their number, even though the young Native American woman hadn't completely decided if she would just yet. They were almost possessive of the girl already, as was Skadi, and this had spurred a low-key territorial struggle between the Huntress and the various Valkyrie.

Despite being the subject of this conflict, Danielle didn't seem to have any issues with it and spent equal time with both Skadi and the various Valkyries she was closer to. Although, to Harry's eyes, it appeared more and more that the young Native American woman's interest in Skadi didn't exactly stem from a desire to worship the hunting goddess. *Well, perhaps not in a religious sense now that she's met Skadi in person.* Jean and Emma had clued him in on the fact that both had picked up Danielle was somewhat enamored with the Huntress, and seeing them now, Harry could see it too.

Jean had also returned to Earth with the rest by now, looking forward to having a few days of real, recuperative rest. Ororo, in contrast, had mentioned to Harry this morning that she, Þór, and Njord were still working, though nearly finished with, their task of reconstructing the natural weather patterns of Utland. Not, and it had been noted here quite emphatically to him at the time, repairing said patterns. Apparently, there hadn't been enough left of the massive land mass's weather to repair after the war was all said and done. Those able had been forced to rebuild it from scratch, taking clean air and non-saline water from Svartalfheim and Yggdrasil for building blocks, thanks to the remnants of Jörmungandr's miasma.

After that, Ororo also wished to procure the frozen body of Sigyn from its resting place in Camelot and bring it to Asgard. Harry and Ororo wanted Freya's take on Sigyn, the protective coffin around her, and how Loki and his wife had shielded her from the Shadows' influence. The plan after that was for Ororo to check in on Laynia to see how she was handling things before officially becoming Harry's chief spokesman back on Earth. She would only return to Asgard when Odin was well enough to meet with them all.

Of the other combatants who'd fought and bled during the war, only Emma, Rogue and Hela remained full time in Asgard the city. Hela was out and away from the capital city with her lupine brother, the two dead set on searching for their remaining wayward sibling, the eight-legged stallion, Sleipnir.

Of whom there was as of yet no sign. The unwillingly domesticated eldest son of Loki—who was actually Sleipnir's biological mother through machinations the Trickster God and Odin had concocted to carry out the paying of the dvergjar craftsman who had built the walls of Asgard—had seemingly disappeared completely when Odin had fallen to the Odin Sleep and had not been seen since. Both siblings feared that their elder brother might have died during the original Ragnarök, like Þór and Sif's children, and not revived like them and a few others. How the Shadows had decided who would die for good and who wouldn't, no one understood, but the two of them were canvassing Utland from one end to the other in their search for him.

Meanwhile, Rogue had chosen to remain. In the same vein as Jean but on the opposite choice of locale, Emma had decided to stay to take a well-deserved vacation from her business operations back on Earth.

The blonde was, therefore, the only one to greet Harry as he came to the main building they had been given once they'd officially arriving in Asgard the city as recognized guests. She nodded her head towards him, then over at a nearby table where food sat, still steaming and looking delicious. "The others have already eaten, bar Tony, though given his new friends I wager he's made up for that with the amount he'll drink."

"Has there been any word on Odin?" Harry asked after exchanging a kiss with his blonde wife. She moved with him, sitting across the table as he began to eat.

"None. And as much as I'm enjoying the break, I still say we should all be transferring back to Earth instead of sitting here twiddling our thumbs. Staying here just waiting for Odin to meet with us gives us the appearance of supplicants. That's not the impression we need to be creating here Harry," Emma answered, immediately launching into her argument for their next move. Again.

"And if we leave now and return to Earth, Odin will without a doubt wait until the memory of his people needing our help has faded from their collective memory before contacting us," Harry replied, once again countering Emma's point. He knew the Asgardian king wouldn't hesitate to do whatever was necessary to lessen the appearance of any debts he

owed. It was just in his nature as a king. “We need to strike while the iron is hot. We can’t let Odin put any distance between our saving him and his people and our demanding payment for services rendered. That’s why I was willing to help rebuild all of the rural towns over the past few days. Not only does it keep us present here, in more ways than one, but it only deepens the debt Odin will find himself in when he wakes up.”

He then smiled with a small bit avariciousness entering his expression. “Tony has also pointed out to me that the Asgardians have a lot to teach us regarding metallurgy, at the very least. And he didn’t mean just about infantry-type weapons either, but on the scale of starships. Imagine armor that could stand up to, say, a blast from the Phoenix Force. Anything like that would sneer at any lesser weapon. And... there’s also my own projects I still want Odin’s help with.”

One project, really: the project to turn himself into a Titan, with a capital T. Harry knew he was close to a solution through his own designs, but he couldn’t quite figure out how to get the runic array he’d been developing to work right. *I’ve got the power source, my runic knowledge, Stephen’s and Clea’s, and the information Death and the Phoenix passed on to me. But I just... can’t... Make. It. Work.*

“Alright, I supposed those are logical points, but in that case, we need to do something about our domicile here,” Emma scowled, waving a hand around to encompass the whole of the room they were currently in and beyond. At the same time, her foot was rubbing up and down Harry’s leg, causing an odd contrast, pulling his attention in two directions in a way that Harry knew Emma enjoyed. “This place is a guesthouse. It’s the kind of place you offer those who you’re taking care of because they don’t have their own resources, who need your help. Again, it’s about projecting the concept that we are equals here.”

Harry nodded thoughtfully, then asked Emma politely if he could finish eating before they worked on it. She looked at him quizzically, wondering what he meant by that, but agreed. When one hand fell below the table and began to give Emma a foot massage, she gasped a bit, but seeing Harry continue eating with one hand and still show good manners, she continued her little game, shifting the attention of the conversation shifted to Hela and her wild brother. “Are you really considering letting Fenrir return to Earth with Hela?”

“Even with the influence of the Shadows removed from their minds, the memories of the Asgardians are so screwed up that there is very little even Charles can do to return them to normalcy, whatever that might be,” Harry answered, taking a sip from a flask.

Meanwhile his other hand continued to give Emma’s foot some attention, something that won a little whine from her even as she waved her hand indicating he should go on. Emma had helped Xavier for days on that project and understood better than Harry did that the Shadows didn’t just suppress the Asgardians’ memories, they erased them. That was irreversible because there was nothing ‘original’ to work with.

“Fenrir knows he was manipulated, but he also knows that the Asgardians treated him horribly. Even knowing that they too were also manipulated doesn't change that fact, and he has no desire to stay here if he can help it, and I agree. Besides, as you just pointed out, we're not here as supplicants. Thanks to those lessons you and Ororo crammed into my head, I also know that there has been a long history of foreign embassies on Earth giving local nationals asylum,” Harry teased between bites, releasing her foot from his other hand, much to Emma's well-hidden chagrin.

“Hmm... You have a point. I hadn't considered it from the wolf's angle,” Emma agreed. “And since Camelot already houses Garm, I suppose another super large, super dangerous monster won't have much of an impact.”

Harry snorted at that, although comparing Garm to Fenrir was a bit misleading. Garm was dangerous, certainly. By sheer size alone he could take on most dangers without issue. But he was also intelligent, battle tested, and devoted to Hela. Fenrir, on the other hand, in terms of physical combat, was more dangerous than even Jörmungandr. The World Serpent, despite his size aiding him defensively, had paradoxically been somewhat crippled offensively by that selfsame bulk. In contrast, Hela's younger brother had very few weaknesses, and many strengths. The fact that Fenrir's saliva could completely erase magical constructs made him incredibly dangerous on its own, so Harry was very happy to see he wanted to join them instead of remaining here on Asgard.

Once he was finished eating and the two of them had spent some time on a nearby couch, Harry and Emma stepped out of the house together and onto the street outside. Once in the fresh air, Harry asked his blonde love for her opinion on what she thought an appropriate building to house them would look like. “Think of us as a foreign embassy, as you said.”

Grinning, Emma began to describe what she envisioned any such building would look like, ticking points off her fingers as she went. As she spoke, Emma followed Harry as he walked around the building they'd been given, measuring the distance between it, the home of an Asgardian who he'd been told had fallen in battle, and their nearest neighbors. Deciding there was room enough for what he had planned, Harry reached out and touched the outer wall. Closing his eyes, Harry filled his mind with the image Emma wanted the building to look like and slowly superimposed that image over the reality. Transfiguration on this level didn't really have a specific verbal spell to guide the magic but it was still well within Harry's imagination and magical power. Easily.

As his magical power flowed through him and began to wash over the building, Harry grimaced, feeling a sudden pain in his arms, chest and back. The damage that the Shadows had done to his Astral Form in the final battle still occasionally bled into the real world in the form of new scars that would appear on his body, glowing blue with eldritch light. When it had first happened his ladies had been concerned, but after many self-checks and even a diagnosis by

Freya herself, the verdict had ended up being that only time could heal such wounds. Therefore, Harry pushed on, focusing on the image he'd created in his mind.

As Emma watched, the entire house they'd been given began to shimmer, rippling as if it were a mere mirage. Then its whole structure changed, shifting from a tenth century Norwegian-style home that mixed the styles of that of a chieftain and a temple to something that looked almost European in nature, perhaps Middle Ages in outline and size. The structure now appeared much more imposing and official-looking than its previous design, and Emma nodded in satisfaction. While nearby, the Valkyries, Skadi and Danielle who were still in the area watched in varying degrees of astonishment and wonder. "That will do nicely, Harry, thank you."

Bowing grandly towards her as the pain in his chest and arms faded again, Harry pulled his hand away from the wall and gestured for her to follow him back inside. Once they'd entered, Harry continued to use his magic to further create the correct ambiance, complete with altering the internal layout to account for a viewing hall, private suites fit for nobles, a dining room, and a large, roofed area in the first floor courtyard large enough for Fenrir and Garm to be comfortable within. Thankfully, the two wolves had buried the hatchet after the Shadows had been dealt with, so they could peacefully coexist in the same quarters if needed.

Danielle and Skadi entered the building soon after the work on the interior had begun. When asked her opinion on things, Skadi agreed that this was the way to go about pressuring Odin. "Whatever he is as an individual, as a king, Odin is officious, arrogant, demanding, and authoritative. Letting him dictate terms even before the meeting takes place is not a good idea. Nor is Lady Freya without subterfuge or guile."

Later that evening, Ororo arrived with Pepper in tow. After a brief stop at the newly remade embassy, Ororo had gone back to Earth, as she'd planned, and returned with the body of Sigyn locked in its eternal sleep. A quick call had ascertained that Pepper was free, and worried enough about Tony still not having returned to agree to journey to Asgard.

After meeting the two at the Rainbow Bridge, Harry spent a few moments with the redhead, guiding her toward where Tony had apparently gathered enough materials for a picnic of all things. The sight of the Rainbow Bridge had nearly overawed Pepper. Even so, Ororo and Harry were able to get Pepper moving again, even if she continually looked over her shoulder at the split bridge... and at the woman in the diamond coffin who trailed behind the African woman.

Tony met them outside the new embassy building, a pair of horses in tow. There, Harry and Ororo stood with their arms around one another's waists as Tony presented Pepper with a bouquet of roses. The bouquet was made from Midgardian, Asgardian, and mechanical flowers, the last of which had been beaten into shape from various metals. Pepper laughed at Tony's showmanship, and at the sight of the two horses. Her breathless exclamation of, "But I thought you hated riding?" seemed to indicate that Tony had taken the right angle with that idea.

Harry nodded in approval when Tony continued with his plan and answered with, "You're right, I don't like riding these animals. I think they're grossly inefficient compared to modern transportation technology. But I also know that you love horseback riding. And tonight... tonight is all about you."

For her part, Pepper's blush was nearly incandescent at such words, only outshined by her smile.

Leaning in, Harry whispered into Ororo's ear, causing her to shiver. "He's handled this quite well so far. It's looking like Tony's truly, ready to leave behind his former 'playboy, egotist, mad inventor' persona entirely. What do you think?"

"While I would say the mad inventor portion of his character will stay, I do agree that it seems as if Freya's words have acted like the proverbial final straw that broke the camel's back. Having a Goddess of Love that his feelings for Pepper were really love, and that they were reciprocated, was likely what he needed to... well... get over his own fears and hubris, I suppose you could say," Ororo murmured back as she leaned into her lover, shaking her head. The two watched the older man and woman fumble like teenagers for a few minutes more before Ororo turned and kissed Harry on the cheek. "But come, we need to see Lady Freya ourselves."

Gathering Emma and Dani, the earthers headed off to Valhalla, where the Vanir Queen of Asgard greeted them in the doorway, smiling somewhat whimsically as she nodded toward Harry. No longer was Freya garbed for war. Instead, she wore a flowing, diaphanous dress, which hinted at the body beneath but showed little, embroidered with crisscrossing living flowers of various kinds and there were flowers in her hair as well. Combined, the effect denoted her realm of power as goddess of love rather than a goddess of war. When she spoke, Freya's voice was both regal, teasing and gentle.

"My folk have spoken to us of your renovations to your dwelling place, Jarl Potter. As a woman, I have to admit I approve of both the changes and..." she glanced at Emma with a knowing smile, "...the reasons behind it. As a Queen, however, do not expect me to acknowledge such reasons or anything else on the diplomatic front without my lord husband's say-so."

"Understood. Appearances need to be maintained, but we have something more important to discuss with you right now," Harry answered instantly. It seemed he was too fast if Emma's elbow to the side was any indication, but Ororo didn't react to any perceived faux pas, and Freya merely chuckled.

With a gesture, Ororo settled the transparent coffin encasing Sigyn's body on the ground. "his is Sigyn, Loki's wife. Or rather, her body, as we have previously told you."

Instantly, Freya turned her attention to the woman inside the coffin, frowning thoughtfully as Harry used several diagnostic spells on both her and the crystal encasement. For all his power, his magic could still barely tell that the woman was really there within whatever it

was, but there didn't seem to have been any reaction, positive or adverse, to bringing her back into Utland or even here in the halls of Odin himself, which Harry had hoped might happen. But neither did there seem to be any sign of the Shadows' demise having had an impact on the crystalline creation.

At first, Freya remained concentrated on the woman's face alone, cocking her head to one side as she did so, pulling at her long braided hair, which she now wore in a single braid down from one side of her face. "Strange. I do not know her. Yet... the more I look upon this woman's face, the more I feel that I should. Curse the Shadows and their rape of my memories!" Even Freya, the Mistress of Seidr, had found that she could not recover all her memories from the time before the Shadows had first begun to manipulate them. Some things were just too far gone for magic and telepath both. "And you say that this Sigyn's soul is embedded in dearest young Danielle's very blood?"

She looked over at Danielle, who nodding in the affirmative. Seeing the fond, yet clearly greedy, expression on the Asgardian Queens face as she looked at her, Dani gulped. Taking a deep breath, she pushed that aside and hastily explained how she had first become aware of her connection to Asgard when Hela had attempted to pull her into a dream-walk in order for Dani to pass on a message to Harry, since the younger goddess could not approach him directly at the time, for her mistress, Lady Death.

The mention of one of the Endless in their highest forms caused Freya to twitch, her sharp, possessive expression even fading somewhat. Breathing in relief as the weight of the goddess's gaze lightened somewhat, Dani went on to describe how, instead of arriving in Niflheim, her spirit had found Fenrir instead. In comparison, Dani's recounting of making direct contact with Sigyn once she'd become aware of something hiding within her blood was far less fraught, simply being due to a trip out beyond the Shadows' influence. "I imagine now that they are gone, Sigyn and I will be able to speak more often, for longer periods of time, and more plainly, but I haven't tried to do so as of yet."

"Do so," Freya nearly ordered, leaning forward with a frown. "Although, if Sigyn were struck by a geas of some kind, the magic of it would still keep her from speaking too plainly. Hmm, tell me more about Sigyn herself, dearest, and where her spirit resides within you."

Dani obeyed, describing her take on the woman's character from their brief interactions and the cottage that Sigyn's spirit stayed in. The fond smile on her face however, told Freya just as much as her words, and she turned back to look down at the woman's body, scowling. Only a portion of that scowl came from the jealousy of a goddess garnered by the sense of a goddess realizing another deity had a connection to an Asatru. "She sounds like a woman I would dearly like to know, and her apparent devotion to Loki, and vice versa, speaks well of them both in a way that my addled memories say I should not expect from him. Still, I have gotten used to the fact that Loki is not really my husband's mischievous son, rather his brother, so I suppose this is just more of the same. The idea that the Trickster is my Brother-in-Law instead of foster son is



somewhat disturbing now looking back on past actions, and yet, a part of me cannot help but be thankful that our eyes have been opened to the truth of his nature.”

*So long it has been, that Loki seems to have been an unwilling tether. Sigyn’s words to my young Valkyrie-to-be say as much, yet... he is still the God of Deceit... and yet still, if he was so faithful to his wife... Freya scowled angrily to herself, shaking her head. It is a foul day indeed when one cannot trust one’s own memories, and it is made worse yet again for Loki’s involuntary role in the Shadows’ most favored play. I supposed I will cling to the idea that, whatever else, he was devoted to Sigyn, and let that speak for his character moving forward.*

Turning her attention back to the motionless Sigyn, she asked, “Have you attempted to use a touch of your blood upon this crystalline coffin, Danielle Moonstar?”

Harry nodded, while Dani twitched at the semi-possessive tone Freya had used when she spoke her full name. “We’ve tried that. We’ve tried taking it out of the solar system and away from the Shadow’s reach. We’ve even tried to have Danielle be in contact with Sigyn while her hand is against the crystal while outside the solar system. Nothing so far has worked.”

Freya’s frown deepened. Not looking away from the imprisoned goddess, the queen spoke, “Eir? Fetch me a diviner.” With a silent bow, the healing goddess departed from the hall. When she returned minutes later, the requested item was a small piece of metal that looked like someone had taken two green branches, twined them together, and then set a ruby at the center of the joined length. Freya stepped off her throne and laid a hand against the outer coating of the crystalline coffin, still frowning in thought.

Again, nothing happened. However, when she laid the diviner on the crystal and channeled magic into the green metal branches, the ruby at the center of the device began to shine briefly... before sputtering out. Indeed, it did more than merely sputter out. The ruby, once shining, faded, becoming gray and worthless, before slowly turning to dust, a process that spread into the green branches. By the end, the entire diviner didn’t so much age as it simply seemed to dissolve away.

“Ah, I know what this is now. And I say it makes me even more shocked at what its existence tells me of Loki’s true character,” Freya mused, shaking her head in shock.

The others all looked at her, while Ororo used a brief gust of wind to brush away the dust from the top of the crystal coffin. “I take it you are going to tell us what it is, Milady?”

Freya tapped Sigyn’s coffin lightly with a knuckle as she explained, her tone morphing into that of a teacher. “As you all know, sacrifice is one of the most powerful of magics in existence. That title extends into the deific level as well. This coffin is called the Crystal Of Sacrifice. Such a construct can only be created by a god or goddess who willfully sacrifices an aspect of their divinity to protect the receiver. For instance, if I wanted to try and create something, of this caliber, for whatever reason, I would have to give up my influence over the sphere of fertility, or one of my other even more powerful aspects. In return, the Crystal of

Sacrifice will protect whatever is inside of it from any and all outside influences, no matter what. Loki gave up a portion of his essence and soul to make this.

“I see...” Harry sighed, mentally saluting the original Asgardian Trickster God for his devotion to his wife. “I think this tells us a lot about what Loki felt—feels—for his wife. I think I even know what he sacrificed. I’ve talked to Þór over the past few days and have seen recordings of Loki fighting on Earth. From neither source did I witness any sign that he had any kind of self-transformational or transfiguration powers at all. But, as a God of Fire, he would have had to have had that kind of power, to a greater extent than even Surtur. Þór told me a story about one of his adventures when he was younger and there is the whole tale of Sleipnir as well. Yet can any of you say you’ve seen him use transfiguration powers while you were under the sway of the Shadows?”

Freya’s lips quirked this way and that as she thought back while around the Asgardian queen, her handmaidens whispered to one another before turning to their lady and shaking their heads in unison. Still, if her adopted son said that Loki had once had those powers, then she would stand by his words even if her own memories did not. “So even if he returns, Loki will not be the God he once was. Then again, many of us are lesser now than we should be. Including myself.”

Freya’s lips twisted wryly at those last words, remembering her conversation with the Amora, the so-called Enchantress, that morning. The two of them had felt a connection when they’d seen one another for the first time upon the expeditionary force’s arrival at Freya’s camp. That, combined with the story of Volstagg and what had been hidden within him, the death of Odin’s Wanderer aspect, the impression of the spell that had snuffed him out, and the fact that the Shadows had seemed to believe those same spells would be effective on her had told Amora, and later Freya that she had been an aspect of Freya.

In the same breath, the Enchantress had refused point-blank to even consider the idea of rejoining Freya. Indeed, so put off by the very concept was she that Amora had not even registered the fact that Freya had been joking when she’d brought it up. “No! I will not attempt to merge with you nor countenance any attempt to do so!” The younger-appearing blonde woman had barked, not so much angry at Freya for confronting her about their connection as the fact that her very existence was completely due to the Shadows. “I will not return to Asgard, and I will not give up my life.”

Freya had trouble calming the younger woman down at the time, but did succeed in doing so eventually. Yet truthfully, the idea of merging with Amora had not even occurred to the queen. While Freya did feel that doing so would probably return her to an eternally youthful base form rather than her current pushing middle-aged self, as well as probably enhance her raw magical power back to what she was told it had once been, she honestly saw no need for it. Oddly, Freya had somehow managed to retain memories of how she had been before she and Odin had married one another, and she actually feared that returning to her full

power could impact not only her sense of self, but her decision-making capabilities and other mental faculties.

Yet even remembering her 'party girl' ways, Freya was still somewhat bemused by the choices Amora had made in her life as a woman of Midgard. Being an actress or model was fine, the Goddess of Love and Lust could see that easily enough. But how material the younger woman was, and how wedded she'd become to the way of life on Midgard was something else; her love of television and sitcoms was downright bizarre. The level of cultural inculcation the other woman showed was nearly mind-boggling.

"Regardless, there is no way to free the victorious wife without Loki present to figure out the trick that is locking the Crystal in place. Which, considering he is the Trickster God, makes all sorts of sense when you think about it," Freya murmured, shaking her head. "But... what about removing Sigyn's soul from Danielle? Would there even be a point in trying to do so at this juncture? Is she acting as a passenger or parasite, feeding off you in some manner?"

"Passenger," Dani, Harry, and Ororo answered, causing Freya to chuckle at their impromptu synchronicity.

Harry went on to elaborate. "Very much a welcome passenger Lady Freya. You'd seen Dani's former weapon before its loss. She might not be able to help directly, but Sigyn has still made an impact in other ways. We have also studied Dani's body closely with all of our available magical and medical technologies and can detect no sign of Sigyn draining her vitality or anything similar.

He gestured down to the coffin. "With that said, there would be no point to removing Sigyn's soul right now without somewhere worthwhile to put it. Unless... Are you suggesting you and Odin can, between you, create life enough to fashion a new living body for her?"

Picking up on the subtle double-edged tone in Harry's words, Freya winced, raising a hand to concede the point.

Before she could speak aloud, however, Dani cut in, again. "Besides Lady Freya, it might not just be Sigyn's soul within my blood. She keeps saying that her realm is mine as well, and that I can re-create it as I wish. But even so, several facets within her long house are always there no matter how I imagine it. There has been, as far as I can recall, always the fire, a few pictures, a boar's tusks, and other odds and ends I've never examined. At first, I thought they were tied to Sigyn herself. But now, I also wonder if those bits and pieces could be representing Loki in some fashion? I mean, I've heard about how such items can represent memories when magic users use Occlumency, so..."

"...You think these constants could represent not Sigyn's, but Loki's, memories," Freya questioned exchanging looks with Ororo and Harry. She noted the odd looks on their faces and realized she felt something of the same shock herself.

Mind and soul magic on such a scale was both humbling and terrifying to consider. Tearing away an individual's memories weakens them tremendously and, in the case of a deity, whose memories—like their souls—were interconnected with their very being, would be quite painful. Taking the soul out of a body and hiding it within the blood of someone else, anyone else, was a monumental task only a god would have considered, and that under great duress. Taking one's own memories and ripping them out to hide them with another's soul... such an act spoke of love and trust beyond the norm. *I wonder if I would ever have been willing to risk so much for Odin, or even my own children. It's rather humbling to think about, especially considering it is coming from someone with Loki's history, true or manufactured.*

Danielle, who had no real knowledge of magic to understand how difficult what she had suggested would be, simply nodded.

"If Loki is needed regardless, then we'll take her back to Midgard with us," Harry said, Ororo instantly moving to do so. Dani quickly following the African goddess out of the hall, leaving Emma and Harry behind.

Turning to Freya, Harry set aside the problem of Sigyn to address the main issue that was keeping him there in Asgard. "I hope it doesn't take too much longer before Odin is ready to speak to us," he stated with as much authority as he could muster, which as this point in time was no small level considering even at that moment, still not fully recovered from the war with the Shadows, he was teetering on the edge of ascension. "If it does, other matters may force me to leave prematurely and assume that a debt will owed. Said debt would then obviously be liable for call at any time in the future. In the manner of such things, that would also mean regardless of whether or not Odin wants to pay at said later time."

Understanding the mild threat in Harry's words, Freya nodded gravely to the wizard in her hall, a faint promise to relay his words in her steady gaze. Nodding in return, Harry and Emma turned to join the others as they walked out of Valhalla.

**OOOOOO**

At the same time that Harry was heading back to the newly transfigured ambassadorial mansion, life continued for those who had already returned to Earth. For the majority, this meant getting back to work in various forms. Some welcome, some not.

Carol groaned as she watched Steve push his way between Admiral Whitaker and General Murphy, both of whom had risen from their chairs, once again, to bellow into each other's faces. Despite there finally being near enough Doom-designed droids to throw at any construction projects, they had still run into the bottleneck of there being only so much material coming in from Earth. Those resources, from rubber to high end electronics was then fought over for a variety of projects, namely making the Raven Spires livable, starting the upgrades planned for the stolen Kree ships, building general-use spacesuits...

The list went on. With all of that, it had been inevitable that adding on the building of more power suits for the Orbital Drop Marines to the discussion would be like the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back.

At first, everyone had agreed on their priorities: Fortress Mars and its gravity trap, the center of the solar system's defense. Then, the fleet would be retrofitted and upgraded. Following that would be the Ravens, their spires, and then the massive warp rings. But then reality had set in, and the fact that there was only so much material coming in had smashed headfirst into the fact that there were so many smaller projects going on congruently. People were now arguing left and right about where to allocate the few resources remaining that weren't yet allocated.

This wasn't helped by the fact that the Ravens, who were supposed to be the EDF's main in-system combat punch, had yet to go into mass production thanks to several logistical issues or that the interiors of the Spires themselves were so far behind their exterior work. Not to mention each of those Spires were so large they should have been considered an individual base each, equivalent to a modern carrier, and they just didn't have the command personnel to man them.

This all boiled down to the current problem; the Avalon Empire finally had enough construction crews but with their current level of resources, they were facing the issue of who's project got priority first. Which was made worse by Harry's personal order to expand the ODM program.

*It really didn't help matters when Murphy tried to pull rank on Whitaker by being senior to him in terms of service length. Or when Whitaker responded by calling himself the Fleet Admiral, considering he's the only admiral we've got, and then called the fleet the senior arm of the Empire's military. I'll admit that was a good counterargument, and Murphy kind of asked for it, but dammit, Potter! Why am I the one dealing with this shit?* Carol groaned, this time not at all internally, as Steve explained once more why the Orbital Drop 'Marines' would not be organized using the army model, despite what Murphy wanted, and why they were following the marine model instead. This time, he used smaller words.

Above Fortress Mars, Lorna Dane, in full Polaris regalia, hummed away happily as she pulled a large asteroid behind her through one of the jump rings, bopping in space to a tune playing over her earbuds as it restarted after fritzing out coming through the magical field. *Yep. Fighting is all well and good, but this work is just so easy and restful it's amazing. You know, maybe tonight Betsy and I could get Steve to take us out on a date? Europa's actually looking kind of awesome these days.*

While people were still arguing over the official name, Europa was so far the name that had stuck in unofficial discussions about the budding city in the Savage Lands. With a growing population last clocked at several hundred thousand, it didn't exactly qualify as a mere town

any longer. *And then there are the locals. Their food might be more of the street vendor or firepit variety, but Steve has mentioned how much he likes a good barbecue.*

“Space Watch, this is Polaris towing asteroid 216-Kleopatra. Where do you want it?”

In front of her, several dozen small mining vessels cruised in a holding pattern above Fortress Mars and the five asteroids already in orbit over the glassed world which she had moved into orbit previously. These were small, blocky, crude-looking ships designed by Forge, and although the interior of the tiny vessels didn't match the exterior thanks to a mix of magic and technology, they were still leagues behind the pilfered Kree ships.

As Polaris watched, the crews manning the ships moved around the asteroids, placing strings of small, synthetic blue diamond mirrors held in ring-like constructs. Each construct contained small tracking devices, miniature thrusters powered by attached batteries, and were connected by the Reed Richards equivalent of a Wireless control system linking them all back to the mining operation's motherships. These small devices from the genius inventor, and the motherships they broadcast to, were the keystones of the quickly growing space mining operation along with the Doom-designed construction droids.

As the Space Watch controllers responded, Polaris hardly paid their actual words any mind, long used to the process by now. She began to move the asteroid into position as directed, her mind already more on the date to come than anything else. *And, of course, if it happens that poor Betsy just can't get away from her business to join us well... that's just too bad.*

Having gone home to Britain after returning from the Asgard expedition, Betsy had been surprised with a call from her brother. Even more surprising had been finding the newly crowned King of Britain waiting for her at the Braddock estate when she'd dropped by. She knew that Britain was one of Harry's closer allies, yet when pressed, she had hesitated when young King Duncan the First had asked her for a report on the events that occurred in Asgard.

Still, the young King's first words had eased her worries somewhat, as did the fact he wasn't speaking in the royal 'we' despite being obliged to use it. “I am mostly uninterested in the magical side of things. I simply wish to know how the ODM concept worked in practice. I know Britain cannot buy the plans for the two types of power armor Lord Potter's and his design team have come up with. But Britain isn't the only world power working on that idea for their own military. That started immediately after Mr. Stark showed up in his Ironman suit and has continued in many countries since. Still, there are aspects to the Orbital Drop Marine program on the tactical level I am most interested in, and would be satisfied learning more of.”

After thinking it over for a few seconds, Betsy had bowed her head in acquiescence. “So long as Your Majesty realizes I'm not going to be sharing any military secrets, I don't believe Lord Potter would find any issue in me sharing details of how the Drop Marines performed.”

“Considering I’ve recently nixed the idea of Our government creating its own superpowered mutant force completely devoid of Harry’s influence, I think that to be the case, yes,” Duncan answered with a chuckle before leaning forward. “Now, tell me what happened, and don’t skimp on the details.”

Elsewhere, even the regular Oh Damn troopers were likewise busy with various tasks. Throughout the various EDF installations, the Marines were writing up their after action reports about the battles they’d been in, working with their officers to develop methods to speed up the training regimen, or going over their personal suits writing up requisition forms for anything they felt was too damaged to be repaired or wasn’t quite working right. Many had nothing but good things to say about the high tech gear, but there were a number of more experienced men and women who were eager to point out places for improvement.

At the Xavier mansion, Scott had dived back into his role as leader and teacher. From the moment he returned there wasn’t a second he wasn’t putting Jubilee and the others through their paces. He’d been impressed by James’ ability to kept the flighty youngsters focused on training while he’d been gone, but no matter how good Warpath had proven himself to be, he had still wanted to remind them all that while they could grumble all they liked about the training, they didn’t really have a choice in the matter. So long as their powers were a danger to others, and they didn’t want to get arrested for one reason or another, they needed to train to control them.

The remaining members of the Custodes Mundi were pretty busy as well. Violence had flared up around the Black Sea between several mutant supremacist and anti-mutant groups, and Wendy Sherman, the young mutant with the electrical powers who had come to lead the retrieval team as Stinger, had requested help from their parent group. This had them splitting up into smaller bands and even bringing in Morph, Mystique, Logan and Laura to put more boots on the ground. The fact that such a dispute had grown so large and become so violent so quickly had been a clear sign that while anti-mutant and mutant supremacist movements were becoming more marginalized in more developed countries, elsewhere in the world they were still going strong.

Well, those that resorted to violence anyway. The truth was that the anti-mutant sentiment was still very much alive in even first-world countries, clearly visible in the slanted reporting of various news agencies and the passing of numerous municipal laws and codes that made life harder for anyone not a baseline human. But even there, such bigoted efforts were losing headway with each reporter or anchor called out or lawsuit filed. And at least at the federal level there was a clear shift towards pro-mutant laws.

Johnny, Ben and Thundra, as it happened, had found themselves along with Reed needed elsewhere before they’d even been able to return to the Tower. In their absence, the Inhuman’s perilous internal politics had reached a boil. Such was becoming, in Ben’s words,

“Too damn normal!” at this point. “Honestly, if Black Bolt doesn’t want to kill his brother, the least he could do is let us do it!”

Bruce was speaking to several lawyers in Canada, trying to work out what he would be doing for the Canadian government to pay for his part in the Montreal rampage. Meanwhile, Charles and his young Vietnamese protégé Xian stayed behind and helped Laynia as best they could with accepting and working through her grief.

Indeed, just about the only person who wasn’t hip-deep in work of some sort within hours of returning to Earth had been Jean. Instead, she’d been spending time with Melody and the other kids in Camelot, getting to know more of those who’d been rescued and brought in by Wendy’s crew. However, even there, she wasn’t actually in charge. That burden fell on the teachers. Much to her delight, this meant that Jean was able to play the cheerful, happy observer as Melody and her little gang would bring other kids over to in ones and twos, while Jean just laid back in a comfortable chair and allowed herself to be waited on hand and foot by Cory and the house elves on kitchen duty.

As the evening of that first day back on Earth slowly ticked by in Camelot, and another snowstorm began to batter away at the castle’s exterior, Jean stared off into the distance, smiling somewhat wryly. “I’m getting the feeling that there are a lot of people out there who are very busy right now.” Blinking, she shrugged philosophically. “Considering the punishment the other telepaths and I took in Asgard, I’m just going to say **thank goodness** I’m not one of them anymore.”

OOOOOOO

Perhaps it was thanks to Harry’s parting words with Freya, or perhaps it really was because he had finally finished recovering at last, but regardless, Odin was quick to reach out after Harry had transformed their temporary dwelling. Before the sun had even risen over the horizon, a brightly dressed man Alfar outside the mansion, informing the Earthers that Odin would see them now.

By that very line and the use of a mere Alfar as a messenger, Harry knew that the games were already afoot. It was meant to imply that they were not worth one of his sons coming to tell them Odin was ready to meet Harry and his party, and that they would meet at his pleasure. *Mind you, I doubt Baldur or Þór would have liked to do it. Baldur sees us as friends and Þór couldn’t care less for politics.* Regardless, Harry released the wild Emma to respond in kind.

“I am afraid that just will not do. One King does not summon another, good Alfar. This is to be a meeting between equals. Granted, it might not be happening on neutral territory, but your King needs to remember that we are not here as supplicants or worshipers in need of aid. Perhaps you... misspoke?” Emma drawled, one eyebrow raised in sardonic questioning of the messenger. The use of her eyebrows alone to convey additional meaning to whatever she said



was perhaps one of Emma's greatest nonverbal tools; the oldest surviving Frost able to impart entire sentences with a mere tilt or bend of an eyebrow.

The Alfar in question bowed his head quickly, quickly enough to make it clear to those watching how nervous the elf was and amended his earlier words. After allowing him time to do so, Emma went on smoothly, "In that case, if King Odin is willing to treat with us, we will meet with him in three hours' time. That will allow us to properly prepare and perhaps for any other errors in communication to be smoothed away before we arrive."

Dani, who'd been called in as soon as word had spread through the castle that an Asgardian messenger had arrived, rolled her eyes at the older woman's behavior. She turned to look Harry's way as the poor messenger beat a hasty exit, chased out of the hall by Emma's imposing silence and icy stare. "Is all this really necessary?"

"If we were meeting with Odin as mere individuals, then no. And, if the story of how we found him in Muspellheim hadn't already spread like wildfire, I don't think he'd be trying this power-play either. The problem is, as Odin sees it, he needs to prove to his people that he is still the same, strong king he's always been, even as he must acknowledge that he needed our help in the end. That's a tall order, and I don't envy him the tight rope he's walking," Harry answered wryly, shaking his head. "Most of this panoply and bluster is just that, for form's sake. I think once we get the song and dance in front of the public out of the way we'll find that Odin is more than willing to admit that he owes us, so long as we don't humiliate him or try to take advantage of his current weakness."

"That's good to hear at least. Although I could do with a lot less in the way of this political junk," Dani muttered, before looking at Harry with a half-dreading, half-wary gaze. "Does this mean we have to dress up?"

Snorting, Harry shook his head. "Yes, although since this is Asgard, and it **is** a warrior society, I don't think the regular dress rules apply. Or at least, I'm not going to follow them on that assumption."

Dani smiled happily at that, saying she had an idea for what she wanted to where already, while Ororo and Emma shared a glance rolling their eyes in concert, although they had to admit, they understood their lover's point. The Asgardians were indeed a warrior culture. What would impress the high society types on Earth wouldn't be nearly as effective on them. Luckily, the two women had already thought of this and had Harry and his transfiguration powers available to create the designs they had already thought up.

Just as the clocks struck three hours since the Alfar messenger had been sent back to Asgard with their riposte to Odin's first play, Harry and his party arrived before the giant entrance of Valhalla, its twin doors of gold and steel opening before them. True to Harry and Emma's expectations, when they entered Odin's hall, it was clear that it had been transformed.

Every wall and pillar was hung with bunting, bright bolts of blue, green, gold, and yellow swaths of cloth hanging in the air high above and wrapped around everything else. On every pillar was a massive tapestry depicting some ancient battle. Most of these featured Odin in some way, and were magically enhanced so that portions of the battle played out on the tapestry in endless loops. Magical balls of light floated around the area in place of lit sconces, creating an almost sun-bright light, adding a natural warmth to the scene even as they bobbed around like living things. Lastly, as the massive double doors ponderously swung open to admit Harry and his band, a series of Alfar musicians began to sing, their voices rising and falling in a wordless hymn that denoted majesty and power. The volume of the music hammered into its listeners, surely enhanced in some manner as well.

Lining the walls of Valhalla were the Asgardians. Men, women, warrior or healer or civilian, they were all there. Intermixed with these godlings were select karls and jarls among the Asatru who lived in Asgard and Utland, those whose courage and worth had won them a seat in Valhalla in their past lives. For some, this was the second time they had proven worthy of standing beside their gods in battle eternal, and they wore small trinkets of gold on their forearms or shoulders to denote that fact. For others, born in Utland to warriors who'd been brought over the Bifrost during the first Ragnarök, this was the first time they had been in Odin's hall, and these warriors were obvious in their wide eyed wonder.

As Harry and his party stepped forward and entered, the gathered crowd let out a raucous cheer. "King Potter, and his honored party!" The baritone announcement by Heimdall, in his role as Herald, rolled through the air like thunder. That cheer, along with the humans from Earth and the two offspring of Loki being called "King Potter and his party" by Heimdall was a good sign that regardless of the play that they were putting on right now, Odin was willing to meet Harry on an even footing.

At the far end of the hall, Odin had stood up from his throne, resplendent in his best lamellar armor, much like Balder wore during the war, which shown in the magical light of the hall with regal splendor. Over his shoulders, Odin wore a lion's pelt, causing Harry to briefly wonder if the King had perhaps deliberately exchanged it for his normal wolf pelt. *It would have been somewhat impolitic given Fenrir and Garm's presence.*

Atop Odin's head rested a crown wrought of steel, stone, and gold in equal measure, the band and each prong marked by runes for wisdom and several etchings of branches demarking the boughs of Yggdrasil. In his off hand, the King of the Asgardians held Gungnir, returned to its rightful owner.

But more than his armor or his crown, or his spear, Odin's **PRESENCE** washed over the hall, uplifting his folk while pressing down on Harry and his. Here, Odin's aura said, was the Judge of Kings, Sky Father, and Elder Power. To hide was impossible, to flee an admission of cowardice. Come forth and be judged, as you would upon the anvil of war. Bow ye mortals, for you are naught in the face of such might.

But Harry, Hela, and Ororo responded to this by flaring their own auras in kind. Hela was a goddess of Death, and refused to cower before any but her Lady... save perhaps in certain specific circumstances involving her loves. Harry had been on the cusp of becoming a new god of magic not once, but twice, and his magical power remained close to that limit, as did his will, a line where those two things merged. And Ororo was the student of Gaia, Earth Mother, and her own might was vast as the sky. While moving forward without bowing before Odin's might was like pushing against a heavy wind, the trio did so, protecting Emma, Dani, and Garm behind them.

Fenrir needed no such protection. Rather, he needed Dani's calming hand on his side, her empathic powers working through that gentle, touch to keep him calm as he willingly walked into the den of his greatest enemy.

As if to counter her husband's overly stern mien, Freya also stood, one hand resting on his arm lightly, her own smile warm and welcoming. While a crown also rested atop her head, this one was crafted from a mixture of living flowers, various precious metals, and priceless jewels all woven together. Her clothing was much the same as what the Asgardian queen had worn the previous day; a long diaphanous dress that demonstrated her femininity to good effect without actually showing anything improper.

To either side of the ruling couple stood their sons Þór and Balder. Both were garbed in their preferred styles of armor although, by the expression on Þór's face, it was clear the Thunderer did not want to be there at that moment. *"Good grief, when one thinks of the God of Thunder, one does not normally think of him as a browbeaten little boy forced to dress up by his parents and behave. Yet that is the impression I'm getting here,"* Emma sent telepathically, causing Harry to snort internally.

The humans were not cowed by the pomp and ceremony. Indeed, they had come armed—or rather, armored—for just this sort of warfare.

Harry strode forward at the head of his party, flanked by Ororo and Emma. He was clad in his Crysia suit, and for this special occasion, the advanced armor's color had been changed to a bronze and dark blue theme, accompanied by a black cloak that flowed out behind him. Resting upon his head, he wore a thin crown, one that Ororo had prepared for him herself. Its existence had been a surprise to him, as well as finding out that his ladylove had worked on it for weeks prior to this without telling him. Ororo's creation was made of silver and gold twined around one another like the limbs or roots of a tree, a single emerald set into its center over his lightning bolt scar shaped to almost look like a continuance of the scar in question. To complete the ensemble, at his side he wore the Sword of Gryffindor, and even his hair looked somewhat combed.

Emma stalked forward behind him in her full Diamond persona, her hair flowing down her back and shoulders like a waterfall, her face a cool mask of utter calm. She'd chosen to wear a flowing white dress that fit her tightly at the neck before slowly loosening up by the

time it draped over her stiletto-clad heels. On her left hand, she wore the ring Harry had crafted for their wedding, a masterwork of platinum and glistening diamonds. Beyond that single adornment, Emma had a wide belt around her waist, the brown of it contrasting sharply with the white of her outfit. This was a gift from Freya to her, Jean, and the rest of the telepaths. Each belt had a small suite of defensive enchantments on them, nothing like the amount Harry could cast but somewhat longer lasting without needing to feed on the wearer's vitality.

By Harry's right, Ororo walked, resplendent in black and gold robes fit for any queen. Her aura and body language were such that all there would later whisper in their cups that she matched even Lady Freya in majesty. On her silver locks, Ororo's, normal headdress had been transfigured into a crown of gold, the spellwork matching it to her outfit's gold and black patterns. Like Emma, the only piece of jewelry beyond that she wore was the Panja ring given to her by Harry. The gift tinkled as she moved, unheard under the shouts and cheers of the crowd.

Opposite of Ororo on Harry's left Hela, strode with her brother Fenrir on one side and Garm behind her. Unlike most others, Hela only wore her typical armor set, having waved away any ideas of changing her state of dress. Instead, she had made a few concessions in the form of jewelry. First, her normal half-mask had been replaced by one that looked almost as if someone had carved a replica of her face out of onyx stone. She also wore a necklace—almost more a choker given how tight it was around her throat—of tiny steel, stone, and emerald links. Where that piece of jewelry had come from, Harry didn't know. Unlike with Emma and Ororo's dresses, he'd had nothing to do with any part of Hela's outfit, at her personal command. Even so, she definitely made it look good, and the secret smile Hela wore when Harry had first complimented her on the choker had set Harry's pulse to racing.

The two wolves, Fenrir and Garm, had not been cleaned up very much. Garm had flatly refused to do aught but fling himself into a stream to get rid of any smell, proud of his scars and his wild nature, seeing anything more as useless frippery. The fact Hela agreed was all the guardian of Hel needed to ignore Emma's demands or Ororo and Dani's cajoling.

Fenrir had acceded to the same thing, but flatly refused the offer of a combing, furious at the very idea that he would ever be or need to "Be combed and brushed like a pampered pet to be taken seriously by these Asgardian fools!" The two of them prowled forward, their lips pulled back to bare fangs, the look in Fenrir's eyes in particular causing several Asgardians and Asatru alike to twitch, that look calling out to the most primal part of their brains, speaking eloquently of death.

On Fenrir's other side strode Dani. Out of the entire human party, she'd been the only one to come dressed in something that could almost pass as matching the local garb, a mix between her semi-repaired power armor, which covered her legs as pants and booted grieves, and the traditional armor of the Valkyries, which she wore up top to cover her breasts, shoulders, and back. Like Ororo, Dani wore an altered headdress, though this one appeared to

be a combination of a Valkyrie's winged helm and the feathered headdress of a Native American war chief.

Behind the rest, nearly overlooked by the raucous Asgardians stepped Sage. Unlike any of the others of Harry's party, she had flat out refused to wear any sort of dress or robe, instead hard lining that her day-to-day suit from her position as vice-president and chief secretary at Magical Minds was formal enough attire for business of any sort.

It was an odd hang up to Harry, but in the end neither he nor Emma had been able to see how it could be construed by Odin or any Asgardian as a slight, and had allowed Sage's stubbornness to stand.

As they closed with the Asgardian royal family, Harry took in more details of Odin and had to hide a wince. Underneath the weight of his Presence, Odin was still not looking well. There appeared to be a limit to how fast even Freya and her ladies could help him recover from having his vitality and magic so horribly drained. *And I well know how fucking painful that had to have been for him*, Harry ruefully admitted. The Sky Father still looked powerful, there could have been no doubts there, but he was now like a gaunt, aged tree that had lost all its leaves and much of its bark and signs of verdant life yet still stood undeniably strong.

This was proven when Odin raised a hand for silence and the entire hall became still within seconds. "My people! Vanir, Aesir, Valkyrie, Alfar, dverggar, Asatru, Asgardians all! We are here to give thanks to our Midgardian-born friends for the aid they have provided in freeing us from chains so duplicitous in nature we, to a man, had been blinded to their presence binding us in slavery so profound as to make the very stars weep! For that, they have my thanks as Odin, All-father. Yet brought a military force in to help us, not just yourselves as individual adventurers. To have come as adventurers would've been the act of individuals, and as such, individuals could have been rewarded by my hand alone, as friends. And they will be!"

This was answered by a roar of approval from every native throat present. Men, women, even race didn't matter just then as every single person living in Asgard and Utland knew they owed their lives and freedom to Harry and his people and they deserved such thanks.

Again Odin raised a hand, and again the hall fell as he continued, becoming more serious, if such a thing was possible. "Yet it is understood that you, Harry Potter, put forth your Empire's strength as a people to aid us. And as such, we must also speak as between Kings, Lord Potter."

"I agree," Harry said, speaking for the first time into the silence following Odin's final words, glad the Asgardian ruler had tried no tricks and had openly recognized their peerage so quickly. "Personally, I would have agreed to come for friendship's sake with the Lady Hela, as would many of my followers." He turned lightly and smiled at Hela, then nodded to Þór and Balder, who grinned or smiled back at him.

Then he sighed, gesturing around to cover the entire prepared panoply of the hall. “But, as you said Lord Odin, to truly battle the Shadows successfully my nation was required to put forth its military strength, and that puts us beyond mere friendship. Although, I would say that we should get the personal side of things over before speaking of the impersonal, political doings of alliances and agreements. That is, of course, if you too are not opposed to such?”

Odin nodded firmly, although his lips twitched in a wintry smile under his beard. “Indeed, I suppose there is no fault in expediting that which will proceed more quickly in the long run. Let us get the easy part over with first then, shall we? What would you personally ask of me, Lord Harry Potter, King of the Avalon Empire?”

Harry hesitated. A part of him really wanted to know the story of how Those Who Watch Above In Shadow had tricked Odin and his people so badly. It burned at his curiosity, and likely Odin would never reveal the full story unless pushed, but ultimately, he’d already heard pieces from a few sources, including Odin himself, and his desire to know where Those Who Watch Above In Shadow came from and how they had initially gotten Odin to trust them wasn’t the most important piece of knowledge the All-father could share. *No, that honor goes to his runic knowledge.*

“Your mastery of runecraft and magic is well known, Lord Odin, just as is as the price you paid for it. It is the epitome all those true seekers of knowledge must acknowledge in the end; that they much pay for their wealth,” Harry began, the formal wording coming to him slowly but with a certain weight to them as he spoke. A bargain was being made here, and such things had a significance to them between beings of power, which Harry had to admit he now was however much he clung to his humanity, that went far beyond that between mortals. “I have an ongoing project, a runic-based enchantment that I am working on, for which I would you ask your aid. I am not, to put you at ease, asking you to power it, just to give me your thoughts and hard-won knowledge on how to succeed in making the array work. There is more, but I would rather not speak of it at present.”

Staring at the barely mortal man before him, Odin’s one eye narrowed speculatively. He had to wonder just what Potter was hiding, as his request was certainly not what he’d been anticipating. Odin had expected a request for some work of hand or magic, perhaps, or worst case, simply a blank pledge to help him in the future, as he had alluded to Freya just the previous day. But Odin nodded in acquiescence, “We will speak more of your reward later then, but I agree to it. And what will your queens require for their aid in my people’s darkest hour?” Here the Asgardian king turned to look between Ororo and Emma.

Ororo stepped forward first, acting as the more senior between the two women. “Lord Odin, I would ask for a selection of herbs and plantings from Asgard, Utland and Svartalfheim if possible. I wish to explore the strange and magnificent plants, and their magical properties, that might be found here that do not exist on Midgard.”

While she hadn't kept up her hobby of taking care of plants since moving into Camelot with Harry, Ororo still looked back fondly on the memories of the arboretums at Charles' mansion and High Note and hoped to create something similar in Camelot. Moreover, many of the poultices and potions that the Alfar and the human healers had used for the less serious wounds during the war had been very interesting, and the metal and glass plants of Svartalfheim had instantly intrigued her when Dani, Steve, and Stephen had shared their adventure with the others.

"Such a request will take time to gather, and since you included the plants of the Alfar within your boon, you know well the treasure you are asking for. Yet it will be done, although must needs it will come to you in small allotments rather than all at once," Odin warned. Such would also involve a lot of talking to his Alfar servants, but they would cave to his orders eventually, as they always did. "Further, can you speak for those who joined you in fighting the Dread Serpent as well? While they might represent a unit of your nation's military power, it is also true that they went above and beyond in facing that foe above all others."

Ororo bowed her head regally, wordlessly showing her understanding of what Odin was saying and thanking the King. A beat passed before she answered verbally. "I can, your Majesty. Those who fought with me gave me their thoughts and, to the last, expressed their desire to be paid in terms of weapons specially designed for them in mind. The abilities and skills of your smiths were well known to them before their endeavor and have only gained in reputation since."

"So it will be done! Much like your other boon, such will take time, but with the Rainbow Bridge now open creating and delivering such weapons is certainly possible." With that, Odin bowed his head lightly, formally agreeing to the terms. The ponderous nature of the motion was as good as a sworn oath, or perhaps better since it was coming from Odin. In response, Ororo bowed at precisely the same angle to show her respect and acceptance of the terms set.

As she took a step back, Emma stepped forward. Odin looked upon her thoughtfully. "And what will the representative of the mind warriors ask of us? That belt around your middle is but small recompense for the pivotal role you and yours played in freeing my people from the Shadow's influence. Not only did you defend our folk, but when Heimdall, The Ever Watchful, was subjugated to especially forceful domination, you could free him in a way even I could not have."

"Lord Odin, as with my fellow Queen, I may speak for my fellows in this. One and all, we would ask for your martial artisans to join with ours in improving our armor. The armor Lord Potter can supply us with may be of immensely worth in many ways, but there is a limit to how protective they can be, magical or physical, without compromising themselves in other ways or draining those of us without magic of our vitality. I hope working together that such compromises can be dealt with through the agreeable trade of smithing knowledge and

techniques. However, I understand the nature of such things and fully acknowledge some compromises might need to be made.”

“Oh, I rather imagine that we will be meeting our compromise quotas soon enough,” Odin murmured, and Harry snorted as a laugh went around the gathered hall before Odin banged the butt of Gungnir against the floor. “Very well. I will intercede on your behalf with the dverggar and will put forth my own knowledge in the endeavor. Together, we will forge armor for you and the other mind walkers the likes of which will be the envy of every world in your dimension.”

With that, Odin looked to Hela and her brother. “And what of you two, daughter and son of Loki and Angrboda. What would you ask of me as individuals?”

“To be released!” Fenrir growled out, his rumbling tone instantly sending hands to weapons everywhere within the hall as he glared at Odin. For too long, Fenrir had believed Odin to be the source of all of his torments; his madness, his hunger, his being chained when he was younger to be tortured and broken in spirit and strength. Now, while he intellectually knew that some of that had come about due the Shadows, and that some of his very memories were not real Tyr still had both of his hands where he stood among the audience the Dread Wolf still resented the king of Asgard and the ostracization that had made him such a good tool for the Shadows.

Dani’s hand stroked his fur for a moment, and Fenrir looked down at her before looking around at the gathered Asgardians. “I wish to be released,” he said again, his words more formal this time, yet still a growl. “I wish for you to honor Lord Potter’s acceptance of my plea for asylum, that I leave Asgard behind for good. Too long myself and yours have been at odds All-father. Even with our new knowledge, there has been too much bad blood between us for it to ever be truly forgotten. But it can be ignored, I think, especially so if I am no longer here among the boughs of Yggdrasil.”

Odin stared back at Fenrir, at the Beast of Ragnarök. More than any other aspect of continually being forced to relive that horrible war, Odin resented the creature standing in front of him. Of all of his folk, only Odin had been able to retain enough of his free thoughts and memory throughout the ages to realize how often they had gone through the cycle of Ragnarök and remember some of the agonies he had felt dying one time or another. Each and every time, without fail, he knew his suffering had been at the fangs and maw of Fenrir. Was it any surprise that he had never truly tried to change how his folk treated the wolf cycle after cycle? It was shortsighted, he knew, but he had taken delight in it all the same.

Yet now, with at least a chance to start over, Odin worked to rein in his personal hatred of his blood brother’s child. *Let the King make the decision here, not the individual, One-Eye!* “Very well. Fenrir, son of Loki. You are a free creature and may go where you will beyond the realms of Asgard. You will never be followed, nor tormented, by any of mine hereafter forever more.”



With Fenrir dealt with, Odin turned to Hela, sighing faintly as he gazed upon the masked goddess. “And you, niece? Well do I know that it was your connection to Lord Potter that brought him and his forces into play, ultimately leading to our salvation. Yet, even now, I can also feel the stirrings of destabilization. Without the realm of Niflheim to support them, and with the damages done to Muspellheim, Utland, and Svartalfheim, the realms of Yggdrasil do tremble. Niflheim must be returned for the balance to be restored. So then, what price will it take for you to expedite that? And what pay do you desire for your aid in the war?”

The stirrings that Odin mentioned were not a comment on the overall stability of Asgard or the rest of the realms’ physical makeup. Every realm connected to Yggdrasil had its place in the vast tapestry of enchantments that bound together the pocket dimension of Yggdrasil. That enchantment had been reworked by Those Who Watch Above In Shadow as part of their plan to cut off access to Asgard as well as the other realms from Midgard.

This scheme had culminated with not only the desired isolation, but also the merging of the dwarven, Alfar, and jotun realms into a new Utland, a feat not even Odin could have accomplished. The new, smaller format had been more efficient in cycling magic through the realms, a plus for the Shadows, and a byproduct of that increased flow had made the remaining realms healthier in various ways, although far less diverse in terms of people.

But when Hela tore Niflheim away from Yggdrasil, she had created a destabilization in the magical tapestry. The Shadows had stepped in to keep the system steady, but with them gone, that task had fallen to Odin, lest all the realms and even Yggdrasil itself face terrible collapse in the face of chaotic wild magic. Thus far, The Sky Father had stepped up, but doing so had severely slowed his recovery. Unfortunately, there was no help for it; such work was far too complex and over far too much area for even Potter and Strange to have helped.

Hela had also cut off Odin and Freya from their positions in the resurrection system leaving the faithful dead of the Asatru who had died as warriors the only option of being sent to Niflheim. But that was not how the Asgardian system for the afterlife was supposed to work. All souls going to Hela’s realm only empowered her while detracting from Odin’s military and magical might. Now that the way to Midgard had been secured, Odin meant for the entire system to be restored so that any Asatru who died well would once more be able to be claimed by him or his wife.

“In return for this, I would require but two things All-father,” Hela announced, her tone stern. Beside her, Fenrir huffed, but observed Odin closely. “First, tell Fenrir and I what has happened to our elder brother, Sleipnir. We have searched for him for days on end and have not seen hair nor hoof of him.”

“...Truly, I do not know. Sleipnir was taken out from under me during the first Ragnarök, and since then, the eight-legged horse I’ve ridden to war with was not his equal, a pale facsimile,” Odin mused. “That creature mayhap died somewhere or was never truly alive enough to survive without the Shadows’ influence? Heimdall?”

“Your Grace, I can see all, but I do not see Sleipnir anywhere within the realms of Yggdrasil. Nor do I see a trace of him upon Midgard, which I can also espy now that the Rainbow Bridge connects our dimensions once more,” Heimdall replied, his voice even deeper but far less strained than Odin’s.

“Then the facsimile no longer exists, whatever manner its demise might have taken. As for the original, whether Sleipnir is dead or not, I cannot say. Even my memories of that vile battle are but a faint echo of what they should be. Þór?”

Suddenly being called upon like that Þór frowned, and he ran a hand through his red hair for a moment as he tried to remember. His face twisted in remembered grief as he returned to the fragments of the horrors he could recall. “I cannot say, Father. You were with the cavalry when last I saw thee during that battle. Tis an affront to admit, to even contemplate, but I couldst not even say how you fell, in the end, let alone your mount.”

Fenrir growled a bit at how Þór spoke of his brother, something about it causing his hackles to rise. Hela simply sighed in frustrated resignation. “Truly it can be said that we of Loki’s get do not have gentle fates. I can only hope that if he did die, he met his end fighting as best he could, and did not suffer the eon-long torture we have.”

Odin and his family all nodded in understanding before the All-father brusquely moved things along. “And as for your other request?”

With a final thought to her lost half-sibling’s unknown fate, Hela also moved on, a faint smile appearing under her accented mask. She pointed at Harry and said simply, “I wish to wed my Seidr Man. I have come to love him in the ways a woman does a man and wish to join my fellow wives in his bed and not just at his side. To that end, I wish for your blessing.”

That caused quite a stir from the watching Asgardians. Few among them had realized the scope of Harry’s relationship with Hela, let alone that he was involved with Jean, Emma and Ororo. Indeed, the only one who knew the full extent of that relationship was Freya, who looked about as pleased as punch by Hela’s declaration, her lips twitching at the faint flush Hela’s bold declaration had evoked on Harry’s face. But harems were not a thing in Norse culture, and the revelation that Harry had multiple wives shocked many.

“BY the All-father Potter! How can any man have more than one wife without being henpecked to death?!!” Þór immediately bellowed in shock, before quickly paling as he felt his mother and Sif’s eyes on him from different directions. Considering the fact that he had made Sif aware of their former relationship, and the warrior woman had still not indicated she wished to try and return to it, her stare was a particularly torturous mix of giddy hope and sharp, painful dread. “Erk...”

“Yeah, you done goofed,” Harry snorted, stifling a grin from breaking his impassive mask. He collected himself before announcing, “I too would dearly appreciate your blessing

upon my union with Lady Hela Lord Odin. I have come to love Hela as do my other wives. You need not be concerned that she will be treated in any way below that which she deserves.”

Odin let the shouts and exclamations from the watching crowd wash over him for a moment, staring hard at Hela as she turned slightly to send a smile toward Potter for his words. While he could not discern the loving connection between the quintet as his wife no doubt could, Odin could see well enough that Hela had no reservations about her decision. She truly wanted to marry a mortal, human, lordling wizard. *Still, given his power, I doubt that Potter’s life will be as short as the human norm. And if my niece wishes to join a pre-existing group, and none involved object, then it is her business. Indeed, one could almost see this as a political marriage that has the benefit of being a love match. Yet...*

A small smile full of mischief crossed Odin’s face as he looked at his niece, although by the time he silenced the hall this time it was gone, only a light sparkle in his one eye revealing his barely hidden humor. “I will agree to give you my blessing, niece, but I will not officiate such a wedding, nor will I give you away in your father’s stead.” He waited a moment, watching as Hela’s face hardened, and Potter looked at him worriedly, Odin smiled. “Not until you have your father’s blessing as well.”

“But—but no one even knows where my father is! Let alone what kind of temperament he might have now,” Hela protested, aghast at such a decree, while Ororo and Emma shot her commiserating looks.

“Indeed, and we believe he is probably an anchor for the Shadows as well. The fact he so often served as an antagonist in their various plays, where you all were but puppets, lends credence to such a thought,” Harry added, now scowling. *Is he serious?*

“The pair of you are the next best thing to true immortals. You both should get used to thinking in the long term, instead of only focusing on the short. Besides, what proper wedding can there be without the bride’s father in attendance?” Odin answered sententiously. “I will cheerfully officiate the ceremony, make no mistake, but only once my brother is found and returned to us. Until then Hela, you will simply have to wait. Or... perhaps you could look upon this as motivation to find and bring him home. After all, your Seidr Man has access to ships that could carry you across the stars of Midgard far faster than any magic of ours could accomplish.”

Hela ground her teeth, but knew Odin’s words held some merit. Searching for her father throughout the limitlessness of Midgard would be an interesting journey to be sure, and perhaps even necessary on a familial level, not just for the All-father’s amusement. And she was not so petty as to allow Niflheim’s continued absence from Yggdrasil’s boughs cause harm the other realms just out of pique. Even so, she took a deep breath least she speak something better left for private ears and exchanged a glance with Harry. Meeting his steady gaze, she took a moment more to bask in his open acceptance and support for whatever she decided. Finally, she sighed, acceding the point with as much grace as possible while nodding.

“Good. And now that such has been agreed, let us move on.”

Odin turned his one-eyed gaze to address Dani, the young woman visibly steeling herself, when Freya interrupted with a gentle cough. The king of Asgard paused as his queen came forward, stepping down the dais to stand in front of Dani. One hand gently rose to touch the Cheyenne girl under the chin, and Freya smiled as she looked into the younger woman’s eyes, her considerable power coming to bare on her. “And you, Danielle Moonstar? What might my young Valkyrie ask of me?”

From her place in the crowd, Skadi huffed in irritation, almost pouting at the unfairness of it all, as her companion, Sif, had to bite back a snicker. Skadi’s words, however, cut through the other woman’s amusement. “Claim-jumping little—”

“That is our queen, Skadi!” Sif hissed sharply, cutting off her friend’s muttering. “Draw too much her ire, and I will not be able to stand beside you when she turns that attention of hers to you.”

“Her rank makes my words no less true,” Skadi hissed back, although she did lower her tone further and made no move to interfere.

As the two goddesses watched, Dani remained silent to the Queen’s question, clearly thrown off by the intensity in Freya’s gaze. In the silence, Odin and Harry exchanged glances. ‘Women,’ the look seemed to convey, accompanied by empathetic feelings of exasperation men in most every dimension will feel at one time or another when their paramours up and toss aside their plans without so much as a by-your-leave. Thankfully for the two men, perhaps, the womenfolk around them missed this moment of masculine comradery.

“I was merely obeying the orders of my heart and my King, Queen Freya. I can ask for no recompense for that,” Dani said, smiling whimsically. “Besides, it was fun.”

In actuality, Dani would have asked for something like Sigyn’s Gift if she thought such a request would be granted. She’d bonded with that weapon over the time she’d wielded it and greatly missed it since the weapon had been melted into a bare clump of scorched metal and char from Surtur’s blood. However, Dani also felt that asking another god or goddess to craft her a similar weapon seemed like a betrayal against Sigyn. So, she kept that desire to herself.

Dani’s humble words won shouts of approval from the crowd, while Fenrir snorted at his friend, his tail wagging only once as he watched the two women closely. Both Freya and Skadi smiled at the young woman’s response, the mortal that had caught their eye checking another box on their internal lists. “You would ask for nothing? You, who have proven your worth as well as any blooded Valkyrie amongst my sisterhood?”

“I have a life yet to live and a duty to my Jarl, my Lady,” Dani responded, working hard to keep her tone and wording as formal as she knew how under the pressure of that gaze.

“While I am flattered beyond measure that you deem me worth such special attention, I cannot answer that such an esteemed call as of now.”

“The key word in that sentence, my dear, is **now**, is it not?” Freya answered, chuckling as her eyes gleamed.

Watching the conversation unfolding before him, Harry suddenly wondered if this was Freya’s real personality shining through; somewhat possessive, extremely playful, yet with an undertone of seriousness able to throw away formality at the drop of a hat. Glancing to his sides, he was able to eye both Ororo and Emma, the two watching the elder Queen in action yet making no move to intervene. Hela and Emma had warned Dani something like this might be coming, and once again his lovely wife had been right on the money. *So, the question is, should we interfere or what?*

As if sensing Harry’s growing concern, Emma subtly shook her head once without taking her eyes off of the two women at the center of this little moment.

“P-perhaps? I... I will admit that I love what I have seen of Asgardian culture so far, and I have experienced great joy in exploring Utland alongside Skadi and Fenrir for fun. But, as I said my Lady, I already obey one Jarl. I cannot obey another. A-and I have always been drawn more to the worship of Skadi, th-than any of your personas,” Dani stammered, her will finally starting to fray under Freya’s attention.

At the mention of the other goddess, Freya’s lips twitched into a small frown for a brief second while in the audience, Skadi pumped her arm once in victory. Still, Freya did not answer immediately, instead taking the time to properly examine Dani more closely. She turned Dani’s head this way and that, the younger woman powerless to stop her staring back into the goddess’s eyes unblinking. As her prodding slowed, Freya’s smile suddenly widened into one that could be called cherubic impishness. She leaned in, nearly nose to nose with her prey. “So that’s how it is hmm? You know, my dear, worship in one form need not restrict that in another ...”

At those low, almost sensual words, Dani instantly flushed, thankful she was facing forward and her face was mostly unseen by any in the surrounding audience. Unfortunately for her, Freya, the Goddess of Love, was still in her face and saw her reaction quite clearly. The goddess chuckled throatily, stepping back, before formally curtsying to Dani. “Your task, Danielle Moonstar, although not as dangerous nor as lauded as that of the team that brought down Jörmungandr, was just as important, make no mistake. Even if you ask no boon from my husband or me, you still deserve something for your efforts. Brunhild!”

The Valkyrie so called stepped forward from the section of the crowd the queen’s warrior maidens had been densely packed in. Brunhild was a tall, extremely powerfully built woman that could have given Thundra a run for her money in the strength department. Unlike her queen, the Valkyrie’s spiky blonde hair, which was almost the same color as Emma’s, was

cropped short into a buzz cut instead of long and free flowing. She also wore an intense expression as she neared, and kept such a look even as she knelt to one knee and clanged her sheathed sword on the ground in front of her, pommel up. “My queen, what would you command of me?”

“You are the greatest blade among my Valkyries Brunhild. Sword, spear, staff—you have mastered them all. I bid you travel with these Midgardian folk back to Earth. I give you the task of training our young future sister here in the arts of blade and spear.” Brunhild nodded once in the affirmative, bowed to her queen, and stood back. Freya then turned to Harry, cocking her head to one side almost coquettishly even as her eyes held firm and challenging. “Ah, but this will not be a problem for you and yours, will it, Lord Potter?”

“Er, no. Obviously not,” Harry answered, a hair’s breadth from flinching. He’d had more trouble throwing off the impact of Freya’s aura just then than he had Odin’s earlier. *The difference is like comparing a blast of cold water coming at you at high speeds and a nice-smelling gas released in your direction*, he mused somewhat sardonically. “Although, perhaps that’s a good segue into the next topic of this conversation?”

Odin nodded eagerly at that, and for a moment, Harry worried that the older king would try another sort of power play here; to try to make them stand while he sat back on his throne while they hammered out whatever agreements they would reach. However, Odin didn’t go for such a childish tactic in the end. Instead, he made a simple gesture, and several Asgardians came forward, bringing along a series of chairs along with a square table that they set between Harry and their king.

“Indeed. I trust you have brought your own scribes? Good. Now that the business between us as individuals has concluded, it has come time to discuss the dealings of our disparate nations.” Odin’s one eye gleamed with cagy good humor as he gestured again with a broad hand. The surrounding crowd found themselves in front of several tables that suddenly rose from the floor. As all of them sat where they wished, a ward sprang up, allowing them to talk amongst themselves without interrupting the negotiating parties at the main table.

The ward actually had quite good timing, as Skadi’s ability to control herself had ended about two seconds after the ward popped into existence. “Damn that woman! Dani is one of mine! With the machinations of the Shadows lifted, I’ve realized she’s prayed to me ever since she forsook her people’s beliefs and became an Asatru in the first place. I will not allow my first, true priestess in centuries to be poached from me!”

“Good grief girl, calm down blast it! Our believers can follow more than one of us, or has it been so long since you had a new follower you forgot that?” Sif grumbled, dragging the shorter goddess down onto a chair at one of the tables against one of the outer walls. She smiled in some relief as Dani instantly moved towards them, Garm and Fenrir in tow, with Hela stalking beside her. “See, here comes the child now.”

Skadi had scowled at her, not enjoying being called 'girl' since she knew the other goddess called her that as she had not felt the touch of a man. But she now perked up smiling in welcome as Dani slid into a chair next to her, with the two wolves laying belly down behind her.

Meanwhile, at the front of the hall, Harry sat in the chair across from Odin, leaning forward as he stared at the Sky Father while Emma and Ororo sat to either side. As they did, Harry felt Emma touching his mind, going underneath his invisibility cloak-based mental defense via the existing connection created by Jean, while also reaching out for Hela. If they expected the loss of their local advisors to mean that they no longer knew the worth of what they could be asking, then Odin and the semi-amused, semi-annoyed Freya would be sorely mistaken.

*"I find it both amusing and interesting to note how quickly Þór removed himself from these discussions. Even though he should be Odin's heir, it is very obvious he doesn't have any love for politics,"* Emma drawled, not even a twitch of her lips showing her internal amusement. *"It's something that you and he have in common, Harry."*

*"Ah, but my dear, I've been forced to... what was that term that Illyana used recently? 'Get gud scrub'?"* He could feel Emma laughing along their connection, despite her face remaining in its stern, commanding visage as she thought of the young Rasputin. *"And while I would hate to inflate your ego any further, I've also had you and Ororo by my side."*

The loving, possessive tinge added to that last thought nearly broke through Emma's self-control. After a moment and a deep breath, however, only her hand squeezing his thigh underneath the table made it through her impenetrable barriers to show her true emotional response to the claim.

As they all sat, two Alfar came forward, sitting at the still open end of the table to Harry's left. Harry signaled to Sage, who had come through the Rainbow Bridge specifically for this portion of the meeting, and she sat across from them, to his right. She immediately placed a small, Reed-designed printer to her side before holding up a hand. From the metallic bracer on her forearm, a small series of lights blinked on. As the lights began blinking faster and faster, a hardlight keyboard appeared above them. Odin and Freya blinked in surprise, neither having felt any magic from the woman who, until now, had been a completely silent and unassuming part of Potter's retinue.

"This is not magic, your Majesties. This is science. I have on my wrist what is known as a computer, which has a projection element built into it. That is what you are seeing above my arm now," Sage answered before either god or goddess could even ask a question.

"I have heard of this technology, and even of computers. Very well, I will allow its usage, although some warning would be polite in future endeavors," Odin murmured, staring at the thing on Sage's wrist in calculating interest for a moment before very clearly dismissing it as but

a bauble. He then looked to Harry, his facial expression making it seem as if he was almost bored with it all, a sure sign that the real bargaining had already begun.

What followed was a polite but extremely cutthroat battle of words and wits. Both kings understood they had resources the other wanted, and both knew Odin knew that he owed Harry, but he had already settled a large portion of that debt through the individual rewards though, and now he instantly moved to settle the rest of it by stating that he would pay reparations for any soldiers that Harry had lost in the expeditionary force's campaign.

The haggling about the price of said preparation actually took more time than Odin accepting the responsibility. After all, Odin was willing to pay his dues, just not be taken advantage of. In the end, Harry knew that the families of the ODMs who had fallen, as well as Laynia in particular, would not want for money for a very long time, if ever.

With that matter settled without much issue, what the Avalon Empire as a whole desired from the Asgardians came to the fore. At that point, the battle of wills and smarts became more vociferous. Harry started by stating his position plainly; that what he wanted was a defense treaty with Asgard along with a series of trade agreements.

From the outset, the defense treaty became a sticking point purely due to the fact that Asgard was simply not in a good position at that moment. However, Odin couldn't deny that Harry had already come to his aid, so the demand was viable. Even admitting that, the exact wording of the official agreement still took more than an hour to satisfy both parties. Odin did not want such an agreement to continue on into perpetuity and further, most certainly did not want to be forced to come to Harry's aid against any terrestrial threat or be involved in human politics whatsoever. Harry was willing to concede the first point after much argument and didn't even bother arguing the other two, as he saw no reason he'd need such from the Asgardians anyway.

But Odin had yet another condition to tack on, once he saw his opposite's easy acceptance. He also wanted interactions between the humans of Midgard and his people to be held with the understanding that the Asgardians were Gods, and thus were not to be held accountable to human laws. "Now that the Rainbow Bridge is open, all of Asgard once more feels the flow of faith refilling us, charging our powers. Many of us will still be lesser than we were in the times before the Shadows, but we are Gods nonetheless, Harry Potter!" Odin roared, banging the table with one hand. "I will not allow my people to be held accountable by the laws of Man. They will answer to me and me alone!"

Now that the debaters were cut off from most of his folk, Odin's stern exterior had faded. He was still aloof, but his wording had changed dramatically, and he had reined in his Aura, as had Harry and Ororo. The first act was over, Odin's position as a just, powerful yet thankful king had been secured. But now, it was very clear to everyone watching from the fringes that they were seeing an argument occurring. All so inclined looked on with great interest as more and more braggadocio and histrionics gestures were thrown from both sides.



Knowing that he had to give as good as he got, Harry shot to his feet, arguing back complete with banging on the table that while he understood that Þór and those who came to Earth's aid when asked should not be held accountable to local laws when it came to property damage or such, that didn't mean that they should not still have to obey the local command structure in times of war. "Even you Asgardians can't be everywhere at once! A single warrior on their own cannot be as effective as one who works with a multi-armed military like the Avalon Empire. And why are you so worried about breaking our laws in any case? It isn't as if you're going to be constantly sending people through to wander around is it? Or do you fear they will follow the example of Lady Freya's sundered aspect?"

Odin blustered in return but came off more than a little shifty in spite of his denial. The Sky Father did not want to admit the truth to the younger king, that several of his folk, led by his son Þór and his estranged wife Sif, already wanted to go to Midgard and just explore more. Only Þór had been there for any length of time. Odin even knew the cause for their intense interest in Midgard, and couldn't blame them if he were to be honest with himself. This was a direct result of the influence of the Shadows being removed from the minds of his people.

While they now knew that they had been used, only Þór had yet managed to regain his full memories of when the Asgardians had still been able to freely travel between Asgard and Midgard. It was something Þór had been having a devil of a time reconciling with during his interactions with others, particularly Sif.

For every denizen of Asgard bar Odin, their memories resembled that of two types of Swiss cheese that were molded into one exceedingly confusing mess. One layer was the version built at the hands of the Shadows, which dominated what the people knew to be real. The other layer consisted of bits and pieces of their real memories, which had slowly been returning over the past few days. Oftentimes, these older, truer memories seemed to contradict one another in their fragmented state, or floated, disconnected from others.

This was not a good feeling for any, especially those such as Hogun and Fandral. Both remaining members of the Warriors Three feared that they, like their late friend The Mighty Volstagg, had been created by the Shadows from power stolen from some pre-existing Asgardian that may or may not have survived the First Ragnarök.

So for many, they simply wanted to research and examine the histories, legends, and mythologies that had been left behind when they had retreated and Those Who Watch Above in Shadow had cut off the realms of Yggdrasil from Midgard so long ago. The belief, the hope, was that just a journey would be the only way to mend, if not expand, their knowledge of themselves.

Still, that was an internal issue, and Odin could handle it reasonably well so long as Potter himself didn't block such research expeditions. Additionally, the inherent weakness such a need revealed in the Asgardians was not one Odin wanted to mention, allies or not.

Beyond all of that, the real main sticking point regarding obeying local laws, however, dealt with the Asgardians and their faithful: the Asatru who had kept the faith on Earth. Odin refused to be bound by any mortal law that interfered with how he or his folk responded to their supplicants. Of course, most of the time an Asgardian wouldn't be responding to prayers in person, rather merely giving their energy or attention to a faithful in need. All of the Asgardians preached self-reliance to a certain degree. But, in times past during periods of great distress, Þór for example as the common man's Protector, appeared in person.

Such rare, but inevitably important occurrences were what concerned Odin. "What my sons, or any of my people, do from that point on is entirely up to them. I will not have mortal law interfering with us when it comes to aid for our people!"

"Or consequences for yourself when you cause any trouble, such as your Wanderer aspect had?" Emma asked, a single eyebrow rising in sardonic inquiry as she stared hard at Odin, although the Sky Father appeared immune to the power of the eyebrow. In contrast to the god across from her, the blonde refused to put on a play for the audience around them, simply looking the picture of cold, precise control. Such made the histrionics of the others stand out all the more. "I believe our spymaster was able to determine your aspect racked up quite the list of offenses while making its way on our planet. Twenty three counts of illegally crossing borders, eleven counts of generally causing trouble for local governments, stealing food too many times to count, and one count of kidnapping a young mutant by the name of Clarice Ferguson, who goes by the name Blink, whose powers you made profligate use of during said escapades."

Clarice, or Blink as the young woman had chosen to remain so named, had been taken in by the X-men after the end of the war. She'd immediately professed a desire to join the second combat team—and Harry and Scott had already spoken on the topic. Jointly, they'd agreed on putting Thunderbird in charge of that group going forward once they were trained to a decent level, while transferring Warpath back to the Custodes. James had done a great job training the younger team while they'd been gone, but the older Proudstar brother was still far more experienced in terms of leadership. Until then, the second team would be used to bolster the first for specific missions if needed.

"My Wanderer Aspect was my flightiest, tis true, and oft liable to cause mischiefs while out and about. But that food would have gone to feeding that young mutant Harry Potter, who is part of your charge, as I understand it. As for any trouble with local officials, I am also the Judge of Kings. I imagine that a lack of practice caused a little of my other aspects to bleed into the one I sent forth. And since my Wanderer was but a means to that end, and had little in the way of true autonomy, no doubt that contamination influenced its behavior," Odin answered virtuously, the perfect image of an elderly statesman correcting a younger peer's misunderstanding.

Harry was almost tempted to ask if Odin was judging him that very moment but refrained. He'd not give the old man such a blatant opening. From the twinkle he could see in the All-father's one eye, it appeared as if Odin was hoping for some reaction along those lines. "I would be willing to provide lawyers for any local issues, so long as such does not involve too much property damage or death at the hands of the Asgardian party involved, but no one appreciates when foreigners come along and mess up in their country. If you allow such incidents, you will **undoubtedly** cause trouble, and by that, I mean for your Asatru. As you yourself said, even if your sons or another appears to aid a follower, none of you will stay around for long. The clean up afterward will be the issue of the locals, and they'll be looking at your worshippers with unkind eyes."

The two lords haggled back and forth on the point for nearly an hour. Eventually, Harry was willing to agree that in the various territories of the Avalon Empire, the Asgardians would be free to act however they wished and legal defense for any actions taken outside of its borders. Considering he didn't really think that any of the Asatru in his realm would run into issues that needed divine intervention, that wasn't exactly a big concession, though he argued against it long enough that it seemed to be. Harry was also forced to admit that his influence in the Middle East, and parts of the northern European countries, was not that great. He had excellent relations with Finland, and trade agreements with Norway and Switzerland, but had little to do with Denmark or Scandinavia. Also, those agreements were more with Magical Minds than the Avalon Empire proper as one government to another. As for the Middle East... well, the Mullahs had yet to declare him Shaitan reborn, but they had certainly done everything else so far.

But in return, Harry demanded that the Avalon Empire would gain access the metallurgical processes that Odin and the dvergar had created, the so called Star Forge. And that, in bulk.

This stipulation led into even greater histrionics than before, with Odin bellowing out about how Harry would drain his people of their very life's blood by taking their secrets. But Harry was adamant and gave as good as he got, pointing to all the trouble that backing the Asgardians legally in other countries might bring him, and the amount of freedom the Asgardians would have in his own territory.

But what actually tipped the balance in the Earther's favor was the knowledge of the Empire's preexisting space-based industry. When he heard that, Odin seemed almost childishly fascinated with the idea of space travel. Odin had traveled to the small star that served as the sun in the realms of Yggdrasil on occasion to use it as a special part of the smelting process the dvergar called Star Forging. But to use the far larger Sol that Midgard orbited, a star so vast it had nine planets circling it rather than vice versa? Now that would be a treat. So Odin gave in, although he did warn Potter that, "When it comes to the specific trade agreements between our nations, expect to quail in your boots at the price that work will demand!"

Harry took this with aplomb, already having assumed he would be paying through the nose for access to Odin's Star Forge method. But what he could get out of it would be incredible. Being supplied with a material equivalent to Orichalcum—or perhaps neutronium, to use a sci-fi term—in bulk rather than in the small amounts he could create via Blackfyre and his existing forging process? Oh my, yes.

Eventually, the exact wording of the various agreements was ironed out, and the mutual defense treaty between Avalon and Asgard was written. One copy of the treaty was printed out by Sage and given to Odin. The other copy, hand written by the two somewhat enraptured Alfar scribes, who stared at Sage's hardlight device avidly, was presented to Harry.

At that point, all that was left was the naming of the witnesses and said witnesses reading over both copies of the treaty to ensure no unspoken terms had been slipped in to the detriment of either side. Odin had magnanimously agreed that Hela could serve as a witness for Avalon, while putting forth Balder as Asgard's, but before he could name the third Harry had interjected, throwing a wrench in the Odin's smooth-talking. "I think these two are great choices, but why don't we have Tyr serve as third witness? Surely no one would doubt his probity or honor?"

Odin twitched slightly while Emma laughed inside their heads. *"Score one for you, Hela!"* she sent, also sending along Harry's affectionate thoughts. Their goddess had guessed Odin would make a play in selecting the third witness, and it appeared she'd been right to have Harry interject.

*"But of course. Odin is not known for being both wise and sly without good reason. He will try anything to game any agreement reached for his benefit,"* Hela sent back, preening as she, Tyr, and Balder stepped into the protected area, grins on their faces as they crossed the ward line.

"Without sound, Father, this has been a most hilarious show. Þór, Fandral, and a few others have taken to providing a dialogue for us," Balder laughed, holding out a hand for one of the treaties.

"Indeed, Þór's attempts to bellow like Lord Odin, and only succeeding in sounding like someone who has eaten a few too many mushrooms, has been hilarious," Tyr agreed.

While Odin smiled at the levity, Harry could only snort. *So this kind of debate is just a different kind of flyting for them, hmm? Well, at least everyone else is enjoying the show I suppose.*

The three witnesses read over both copies of the treaty first, compared notes with one another, and soon agreed that the two copies matched. One after the other, they each placed their own sigils upon the documents, claiming them true. As the God of Justice and Law, Tyr's position as a neutral party in the back-and-forth would be unassailable. Indeed, he and Lord

Odin had almost come to blows several times in the past due to how Odin played fast and loose with contracts and his given word when it suited him.

But there would be none of that here, much to Odin's chagrin. He'd expected the barely mortal lord to demand one of his queens be the third witness, thus making the trio, and the treaty, suspect of bias and ripe for appeal. Calling the God of Justice forward like that right from the start would all but make the agreement ironclad.

After the trio had left and the copies of the treaties given to Sage and Lady Freya for safekeeping, the debate moved on to the next topic, which had already been hinted at: into discussing the trade agreement between the two countries. Here, the original terms that Balder had made in Odin's name with the UK were used as a starting point. Goods, clothing, designs, modern appliances, and so forth would flow from the United Kingdom and the Avalon Empire into Asgard at set prices. And as Odin had warned the material from the Star Forge would cost a lot. Yet that conversation was markedly simpler than the previous one, and within another hour or two, the haggling, the agreements, and everything else were finished. Odin stood as the three witnesses once more placed their sigils on two copies of the latest treaty. "And now, my good people, you have waited and watched these talks while being unable to leave for long enough. This Thing is done, and we may feast!"

With that, men, women, and Alfar dressed in colorful clothing appeared from every corner, laden with food and drink. The Asgardians roared in approval.

Harry and his party quickly found themselves sitting with Odin at a table situated at the head of the hall. As the feast carried on, Odin proved a magnanimous host, engaging each of them in turn in discussions regarding the battles they'd participated in or inquiring on the wonders of Midgard. He listened intently as they were plied with food, only commenting on the rare occasion he needed a clarification.

Even Fenrir was treated well as the merriment commenced. A whole roast ox, basted in some kind of the spicy rub, was brought out for the giant wolf to share with Garm. Both were quite happy at this delicacy, and while Fenris was still somewhat disturbed that Odin hadn't been able to answer his sister's question regarding their older brother, and despite his general feeling of loathing towards old One Eye that were yet to abate in their intensity, there were no complaints to be had between them.

For his part, if Harry wasn't speaking to Freya and Balder, he was solicitously seeing to the needs of his present three ladies, almost as if they were on a group date. Emma quite enjoyed the attention, while Ororo was simply pleased by it, but not surprised. Hela, on the other hand, could hardly repress the blush threatening to burn below the edge of her half-mask, but still returned Harry's interest here and there.

Still, as the party waxed on the three ladies fell deeper into their own conversation, one which eventually turned towards Freya and became exceedingly—and intimately—feminine in

nature. Harry was thus left to quietly bow out, with Odin doing the same with a familiar shiver. Bereft of his ladyloves, Harry felt no compunction about following Odin as the Sky Father jerked his head towards an entryway at the back of the hall, following as the two practically snuck out of the party like little boys trying to escape bedtime.

The two men walked up a flight of stairs into what was very obviously Odin and Freya's private quarters given the opulence of the tapestries they passed and the lack of other people in this segment of the hall. From there, they wound ever further upward until they came out onto a balcony. The railed alcove was set in a small, nearly invisible tower and stared out over not Asgard the City or the distant Rainbow Bridge and the mountains of Utland beyond, but rather into the boughs of Yggdrasil and beyond.

Here, separate from the merriment below but for once able to stand purely as equals, the two men settled into already present chairs as an extremely elderly Alfar appeared as if by magic. The smartly dressed elf was easily the oldest example of his race Harry had yet seen, with an actual beard to go along with his solidly white hair, and in his hands, he held a wide tray. This held two mugs and a hand and a half-sized barrel of some kind of alcoholic beverage. After setting the tray on the table, he poured the barrel's contents into both mugs before stepping back, bowing creakily and disappearing as abruptly as he'd come.

Odin raised his mug first, Harry following, and the two clinked their drinks together before taking a swig, Harry murmuring a mental apology to Jean as he did so. *Sorry Jean, I could get away without drinking before, I don't think that's going to fly this time. Still, I suppose the promise to not drink I made with her can't really be allowed to impose on politically necessary things like thissss GOOD GOD!*

Harry's thoughts broke off as he gasped, shaking his head furiously at the impact of the drink hitting his tongue and his throat. It felt like dragon fire going down, making even fire whiskey seem tame in comparison. Yet, for such a burning, the liquid still carried a sweet, almost honey-like accent to it. "Bwah! If—if you ever wish to add your local meads to your trade goods, I can already tell you that would fetch a high price," Harry rasped.

Odin chuckled at that but did not reply, instead raising his mug to take another sip. Setting the drink aside, Odin merely said, "My thanks to you. I realize that we have already spoken of payments and boons, yet even so, I wish to add a sincere thank you, man to man on top of the political nonsense we've had to deal with for most of the day."

Harry chuckled quietly at that, and once more, the two clinked their mugs together, falling into an almost comradely silence like Harry would have with Ben Grimm or Steve. It wasn't quite the same, of course. Odin was **not** his friend, and probably never would be. But Harry could see his future-self approaching Odin much like he did Doctor Doom. *Indeed there are several parallels to be seen there.*

The two rulers sipped at their drink until both mugs were empty, and the elderly Alfar appeared again to fill them up with something much less potent. Once they were alone again, Odin became serious. The Sky Father didn't turn to look at Harry, instead simply stared out into the darkness beyond Yggdrasil's boughs, probably seeing quite a bit more than Harry could despite having only one eye to do the seeing with. "That which you wish my personal aid in. It is a dangerous thing, yes? Something normally beyond the scope of mortal men? Something... transformative perhaps?"

"You see deeply, Sky Father." Harry acknowledged before explaining how he had pushed himself to the extreme limits a human being could be pushed when it came to containing magical power. He recounted how he'd almost crossed the line between mortal and deity but had pulled back, fearing the changes he had felt to his very essence, and instead had sent the excess magic into the Earth's ley lines. From there, Harry explained the conversation he and Ororo had previously had with Gaia nearly word-for-word, somewhat shocking Odin due to Gaia's blatant mentioning of He Who Stands Above All and the fact that there was no longer room in the universe for a new Sky Father. The old god chuckled, his face creasing with a fond memory as Harry relayed how Gaia had looked at the time.

When the retelling was fully done, Odin understood and agreed with Gaia's words. Creation was no longer young, and there were indeed rules even Gods had to follow. *That is part of what made the damnable Shadows so dangerous. They had sacrificed so much, but in return, they were allowed to play the rules far more loosely than the rest of us, which is what we thought we needed when we originally met them, the silver-tongued bastards,* Odin reflected, grimacing internally. *I thought I saw beyond their honeyed words to the truth, divined what they truly desired, but I was so, terribly wrong. That, and we were desperate to stave off the looming war against the Christian crusaders. Hmmp. Now that those savages have set aside magic for the most part, and their faith has become so flaccid a thing it starves their God instead of sustains, interacting with Midgardian humans en masse once again should not be so dangerous a thing.*

The idea that Potter would be fit for the mold of a new God of Magic was understandable, as was his likewise unwillingness to be so. However, Harry's decision to attempt to ascend through becoming a Titan was something that Odin had never heard of before. Indeed, he'd only vaguely known what Titans were at all due to having been told of them eons ago when he and Zeus had sparred together as young gods. The idea that the title meant something more, something altogether different from a way to describe the monstrous foes his old friend had defeated in his rise to power, was another surprise.

Yet even with that, he still likened Thanos, who he had heard of before through various means, to the ancient Stone Lords of the jotun his people had warred against for so long rather than the Greek Titans, only of far greater power and potency of course. *And intelligence, apparently, or else Potter would not be thinking about this plan of his. And, while I have never heard of such a scheme before, it is still a laudable and worthy goal. Potter wishes to push*

*himself to new heights, to protect himself and his own no matter the opposition, all without losing what makes him who he is in the process. Would that more kings understood the mental and emotional toll endlessly striving for power takes on them without precautions.*

“You do realize that unless you already have a strong starting point, any help I could offer in this project of yours would be minimal at best?” Odin asked, the words paining him somewhat as he very much did not enjoy admitting to any kind of weakness, be it in terms of knowledge or strength, or ability to give aid.

Harry nodded, he understood that point just fine. Without another word, he pulled out a rolled up parchment from a small pouch hung at his waist, laying it out on the table between himself and Odin. A flick of a finger and the Asgardian king had light to see by, at which point he stared down at the diagram etched out on the parchment.

It was the formation of the runic array Harry designed so far. While there were clear changes, he’d actually taken the base schematic from array the Shadows had used to drain Odin and reversed it in many ways. For example, he’d turned the points of the eight-sided star inward while the outer edges, which made the new points, wrapped around to form a circle, and had built it into a 3D-array rather than a flat array so it would surround Harry from all sides instead of just be on the floor. He’d long scrutinized the simple shape of the array, but its current shape just felt right. Further, a lot of different materials were listed as being part of the original. The array also incorporated the two runes that the Phoenix Force and Lady Death had shared with him in return for not killing Galactus, each placed with care so that all power involved passed through them.

For all that, there were still blank spots that kept the array from functioning. These empty holes were being left blank because Harry lacked the runes he’d need to obtain certain magical properties. Ultimately, after all of his toiling, he’d had to admit that his knowledge of rune-craft simply wasn’t up to the task.

As his specific purview was runes and magic, Odin could follow most of what he saw on the parchment almost instantly. It was fascinating to think a mere human, wizard none withstanding, had created such a piece, but it wasn’t the most impressive work he’d ever seen. However, a glimpse at the central foci of the array caused the Sky Father to rear back in shock as he spotted two particular runes Harry had been given by the Phoenix Force and Lady Death. “By my Father’s name, what are those?!”

“Aha.., those are... gifts... from certain... higher powers. Two certain, ah, Endless ladies who I’ve met through my adventures passed them on to me in return for an agreement reached. They’re particularly fond of Hela and Jean as well,” Harry answered, trying not to come out and say he’d spoken multiple times with what amounted to Life and Death.



However, Odin understood instantly and stared hard at his fellow king for several moments, trying to discern if he was joking or not. When he eventually spoke, his words took Harry by surprise. "You have been within the Mkraan Crystal then?"

Harry had thought speaking to Lady Death, and the Phoenix Force besides, would have been a more salient point, but apparently not. "Yes. We were summoned there due to our nearly successful attempt to kill off... well, call I call him the universe's trash eater, but I suppose, World Eater would be his more known title." *And I still find it annoying that I didn't have nearly as much trouble getting to grips with Galactus as I did the Shadows. Bloody psionic Dementors.*

Odin's dry expression demanded more explanation, which Harry willingly gave. As he was regaled with a tale worthy of his own hall's glory, Odin leaned forward again, now staring down hard at the array. He managed to spot several other runes, ones he'd never seen before, whose meanings he initially had trouble discerning. Using a finger, he traced his way through the schematic slowly, calculating the amount of power this... this **monstrosity** would need to work and what it was still missing.

After a number of contemplative moments, Odin looked back up at Harry, single eye grave. "You are playing with incredibly dangerous powers here, Potter. The kind even I would hesitate to roll the bones with. And I am not talking about speaking to two of the Endless Forces in the Mkraan Crystal, the center of all dimensions."

"I know," Harry said, nodding his head whimsically in acceptance of the fact. "But ascending to Titan-hood should be tough, tougher than godhood even, or else everyone would be doing it." While his tone was light, there was no whimsy in his eyes at all when Odin looked at him. No, Harry understood perfectly the dangers inherent in what he was attempting. He would either turn into a Titan or become a magical bomb powerful enough to wipe out the entire solar system. Since he couldn't exactly test the array, there was no way to see which result would occur until he tried it for the first time. Such was the hazardous nature of what he was trying to accomplish.

Holes aside, it was very clear that the array in front of him wasn't complete as it was, even the sections that were drawn out. There were mismatched connecting runes, incorrectly applied runes of transference, and runes for the mind and one's will were just... missing. Odin almost snorted. *As well they should be. Such runes do not exist.* "You are not merely asking me to take a simple look over your work, are you Potter? Your boon would ask of me to create runes for you, specifically to use within this array, to finish this great work."

"Yes," Harry answered instantly, seeing no reason to deny the truth. "You are the premier Rune Scribe of Asgard. Your will created the entire runic structure my people called the Futhark alphabet, the runes that you gifted to your followers so that they could better utilize magic and write down their histories. I know Futhark, or... at least the Futhark from my home. I know the kanji of the Japanese and how they can be used in the place of runes. I have learned

several other runic languages and can see magic in the very air. But what I cannot do is create new runes. I know what I need. The problem is I am still just a mortal, and no matter how powerful I may be, there are certain things outside my ability to accomplish alone.”

Odin stared at Harry then down to the table again and the diagram resting there. “So you do understand what you are asking of me. Good. Hmmm. I suppose we must start at the beginning. Tell me what you want these runes of yours to do.”

Breathing in sharply, Harry immediately began to speak. It took him a few minutes to explain everything in detail, but since Odin was already looking at the work he’d already completed, the Sky Father already had an idea. With Harry’s further input, he could see what would need to be done. Eventually, Odin nodded. “Leave this with me, Potter. I will ponder, and I will craft, and in the end you will have your runes within the turning of the seasons.”

Harry nodded and wordlessly pulled out a bottle of fire whiskey from his pouch, topping up both mugs instead of waiting for the aged Alfar to appear again with another barrel of whatever it was they had been drinking earlier. “I doubt you’ll find the impact of this drink as strong as your ale, but it’s at least nearly as tasty. In any event, here’s to a fruitful alliance, Lord Odin.”

“And to you as well, Lord Potter,” Odin answered, once more banging his mug against Harry’s.

**OOOOOOO**

When Dani found herself waking up once again in the dreamlike state of Sigyn’s farmstead that night, she chuckled into the grass. Somehow she’d arrived in the internal realm in the same fetal position as she’d gone to sleep in. Looking around, she found Sigyn standing nearby, a kindly, matronly look in her eyes. “I don’t think this is a coincidence. Were you listening in on us my lady, just waiting for us to discover what Loki had done to protect your body?”

“Hah! My dear Dani, while my husband may be the Trickster God, I am not so inclined,” Sigyn answered with a grin, her smile widening as Danny hopped to her feet and bowed, formally asking to spend time in the older woman’s home. “And of course you are most welcome. But truly, no, I was not waiting for anyone to solve that mystery, although I am grateful that someone did. Exactly how did that come about anyway, might I ask?”

Dani began to explain, reflecting as she did so that she was still having trouble understanding where her senses and Sigyn’s connection to the outside world met. When she verbalized her confusion, Sigyn cleared up the mystery for her. “It isn’t through your senses that I sense the outside world, child but your memories. since your discussion with Queen Freya about Loki and I is a very recent memory, which isn’t imbued with any pain, shock, or any emotion of that nature, it didn’t grab my attention. I don’t go through all your memories after

all, just those I feel are most important to me and to your life in general, and even then not too many or too often.”

She paused, smiling faintly, her gaze far away. “That being said, your Jarl has it right. My love did sacrifice his powers of transfiguration and self-transformation in order to create the Crystal that has kept my body safe all this time. It was a power that he had always greatly enjoyed, but it was also the power that always got him into the most trouble. Out of it too more often than not as well, but...” Sigyn snickered, shaking her head in fond exasperation as she remembered an ancient conversation long past.

“Loki always desired to end an argument between us with laughter or a joke,” Sigyn remembered fondly. “He ended the last row we ever had, which was begun by his latest ‘joke, by swearing that if he had to get up any power, for any reason, then he would gladly choose the power that had allowed him to understand the pains of a woman far too well for any man’s comfort. Apparently his time as a mare truly did not agree with him.”

That caused the young Cheyenne girl to break into peals of laughter, and with smiles upon their faces the two women headed into the longhouse together. Once inside again, Dani looked around. Seeing the eternal fire, and the other items that were always present regardless of how often the rest of the interior changed, Dani raised the idea that she had previously brought up to Harry, Ororo, and Freya. “Some of the items here... Are they... are they Loki’s... memories?”

“Well spotted young huntress!” Sigyn exclaimed, her smile of pride shifting into a impish smirk as she noticed her guest’s faint little blush at the title of ‘huntress’. In truth, the only memories that Sigyn had been able to access since the defeat of Surtur had been those of Dani’s dealings with Skadi, and she was eagerly looking forward to teasing the poor girl about her ever growing crush on the Goddess of the Hunt.

That was for later, however. Now was for business.

“Several of these items are my dear husband’s memories of . Born from an act of madness, they are the result of a plan scraped together in the face of sudden betrayal clamping its jaws upon us. but built on a strong foundations of the original plan he had concocted to save me should things go awry. I still do not know what exactly Loki saw in the shadows that had concerned him to the point of such caution, or truly if there was anything at all. Perhaps it had simply been that he had looked at serendipity, and found it too good to be true? I know not. But between us, we hid my soul, entombed my body and sheered away select memories of Loki’s deemed too important to potentially lose, attaching them to mine own soul. I have guarded those memories within the blood of you and your ancestors ever since.”

Dani let Sigyn have a moment of silence before deciding to move the conversation along to a somewhat less fraught, but still connected, topic. “Do you know of any way to find Loki? And if you do and we succeed in finding him, is there a way to return his memories to him?”

“As to the finding of my husband, I am afraid I can offer no help. Even if I were not trapped within your blood as I am, I still lack in the skills of Seidr to do so.”

“I was afraid of that,” Dani grumbled. “Harry and Lady Freya both said finding someone in the void between dimensions after so long would be next to impossible. Even Skadi has said that there is no way to track someone who has fallen through the endless void. And my second question?”

“There I can actually be of use. All you must do is share some of your blood with my husband in some fashion,” Sigyn explained, shrugging her shoulders. “In so doing, my soul and the memories I keep will be able to interact with his essence, his memories joining his mind once more. I do not believe that I will be able to communicate with him directly as I do with you, however, although I am uncertain on that point. But the memories will certainly serve as a slap upside the head for that scoundrel.”

Dani barked another laugh at the unexpected turn of phrase, which shoved aside her chagrin at the idea of somehow having to share blood with Loki. “Why am I not surprised that the woman known as the ‘Victorious Wife’ knows when to apply a little punishment?” The two women laughed again, but after a moment, Dani quieted and shook her head. “Do you think that Loki has been subjected to the far deeper, more sinister method of control and subjugation that the Shadows used on Heimdall, Hela, and Odin?”

The method had never fully taken with Odin, hence why the Shadows had needed to either force him into Odin-sleep and continuously keep a large amount of their attention on him lest he break free. In contrast, both Hela and Heimdall had been completely helpless against the intrusions of the Shadows. The two had been forced to go through insanely painful processes to have the influence of the Shadows removed from their minds, memories, and bodies. *I’m still thankful that they haven’t been forced to do that to all of the Asgardians. And of the two, that Heimdall had been something of a rush job, according to Emma. He was lucky that their influence wasn’t nearly as embedded into him as it had been in Hela.*

“Almost certainly. You have no doubt seen the pattern of course: how Loki and his children were set up as the enemy of the Asgardians prior to and during Ragnarök. Jörmungandr, the traitor, turned to them willingly and was given his requested roll of undefeatable glutton. Fenrir, once so young and foolish, was made the ultimate monster all too easily due to his bestial form. And Hela, due to her connection to the Realms of the Dead, was obviously to play an excellent villainess, although... obviously their control of my step daughter’s actual actions, if not her thoughts, had always been limited due to her very connection to Death.”

“With a capital D,” Danny quipped, before remembering Fenrir’s half-brother. “Sleipnir was just killed off, I’m assuming? Odin said the being who’d been acting as him was just a mindless construct.” When Sigyn merely shrugged her shoulders in helpless ignorance, she nodded again sadly. “Pity, I would’ve liked to have met him.”

“You’ve been doing a magnificent job with Fenrir, my dear. I have no doubt that you would have done just well with my husband’s eldest child,” Sigyn answered, shaking her head at the pointless loss. “But yes, my family was made to be the villains in the games of the Shadows and no doubt the chief villain would have needed to be controlled as tightly as possible. Loki will certainly need to be put through the same kind of treatment that your Jarl and his blonde wife had to perform with Hela and Heimdall.”

Dani winced at that, but to Sigyn, any sort of pain was bearable if it meant she would be able to see her husband again. And she knew that Loki would have felt the same. A trickster, a jokester, a wanderer, and a rakish scoundrel he might have been, but Loki had also been, her loyal, loving husband, and she knew in the end that that mattered far more than all the rest.

So she waited a breath and then changed the subject, tired of such dreary thoughts. “As I said, I was not waiting for you and your Jarl to find out the true nature of my body’s defenses. Instead, I was trying to re-create my gift to you. Unfortunately, when I crafted it the first time I seem to have used up a large amount of my stored energy in doing so. I’m afraid that re-creating that gift is beyond me at present. I’m sorry my dear.”

Dani sighed wistfully, but she had thought something of that nature might be the case. “Understood. The weapon doesn’t make the warrior anyway. I’ll make do.”

“Well said. Now...” Sigyn abruptly leaned forward, and suddenly Dani found herself wondering if perhaps Freya and her host also shared some point of origin, as the impish nature of the smile on the older woman’s face would’ve looked at home coming from the Asgardian queen. “Tell me about these feelings of yours for Skadi, my dear. I had thought that you were pining after Piotr and Amara, but now I am wondering...”

Groaning, Dani knew she was in for another session of grilling regarding her romantic prospects. Still, as she accepted her fate she made a mental note about everything else they had discussed. Harry would want to know.

**OOOOOO**

The next day, as Harry and the rest of the diplomatic group traveled back to Earth, Hela instead flew up and out of Asgard. Penetrating the dimensional bubble, Hela fell down into the boughs of Yggdrasil. From there, she flew through the boughs for a time, travelling always down and to the east. For a number of days she traveled through the boughs of the World Tree, all the way from where the Asgard-Utland dimension hung from branches of the tree like an elaborate Christmas ornament, to her destination. She caught a glimpse of Svartalfheim through the green leaves at one point, the dimensional sphere glistening black and silver in the starlight, but she ignored it to travel down further still.

As Hela descended, she sent out her magical senses, feeling the weft of the flow of magic through Yggdrasil and its subordinate dimensions. Following that sense, she moved towards where her own realm had once resided, feeling Odin’s work there to keep the flow of

magic moving. It was a undoubtedly a brute force approach to the issue, but Hela knew it was the only solution available to him without access to Niflheim itself.

Nearly a week after she had left Harry and the others to see to her duty, Hela landed atop a branch from which thousands of lesser branches arose, enough indeed to be called a forest in its own right. Yet directly in front of her was a wide, vast expanse an area where no smaller branches grew from the huge boughs directly below. Instead, the forest rose up from either side, like grasping hands to seemingly cup something no longer there. Here was where Niflheim was supposed to reside.

A small part of Hela wondered if her realm had always been here, even back when Yggdrasil had been more widespread, when the Alfar and the stone jotun had their own realms, when Utland had not been so interconnected with Asgard. If not, the inquisitive side of Hela wondered how long it would take her to find that original position, but the majority of her mind was very much against it. *I have other duties to tend to, and my Seidr Man and sisters-in-love to return to besides.*

With that, Hela stepped forward. An hour later she deemed that she was at the center of the clearing zone and stopped, raising her hands to the endless sky. Behind her mask, from her eyes a dark, cold blue light flashed, more of the same spilling from her mouth as she let out a silent scream.

Around Hela, a bubble of Other appeared, coated in the dark blue light. It was a vision perhaps, of Niflheim's own dimensional bubble, as if seen through a pane of colored glass. Out and out the bubble expanded, growing larger and more distinct as it did. In contrast, Hela herself seemed to become less real, her edges becoming less defined amongst the details of her reemerging realm.

After an eternity, Niflheim was fully returned to the boughs of Yggdrasil, the realm settling into its position as if it had never left.

Stumbling, Hela found Garm's flank under her arm, lightly pushing her to the side to slump into her throne in Hel. "Mistress?"

Hela did not respond verbally, instead scratching her loyal guard's ears as she felt the magic of the realms reconnecting with Niflheim. The entire process took some time, but when it was finished, Hela could immediately feel several of the souls of the dead she'd been keeping move, shifting away from her control to that of Odin and Freya to be judged. She also felt when a portion of the power of the Asatru's faith hit her veins, energizing her. It wasn't as much as it had been in the old days, before the Shadows, but enough for now. "I am well, my wolf. For the first time since the Shadows struck us down, everything appears back in order. And that, that is a glorious thing."

OOOOOO

Back on Earth, while Hela was away seeing to her own business, Harry's first job turned out to be meeting with King Duncan and his shiny new PM, telling them about the reopening of communications and trade with Asgard, as well as the new agreements Asgard now had with the Avalon Empire. For the moment, after all was said and done, that was all Harry needed to do on that front. Sage had already set to building up a reserve of the needed goods to meet their side of the trade transaction. The UK would be able to quickly follow suit, having long since already prepared a surplus of modern goods of various sorts before the Shadows had even cut the connection between dimensions.

Leaving Britain, Harry also sent out a surreptitious word to the US, Norway, Denmark, Scandinavia and other such places where he knew the Asatru faith was still followed in scattered communities. That would be the segue to helping any of the Asgardians who came through to find Asatru in need of direct intervention. A subtle message reminding these governments of Þór and Balder's existence, and the fact that there were other Asgardians out there as well who might just stop by, would hopefully do as warning enough without Harry needing to get his people further involved. Harry was mostly concerned because Odin had made such a point of mentioning people being beyond human law. Maybe Odin expected trouble to occur, or was simply being prideful, wishing to make it clear Odin felt humans were beneath him and his people. But there was little else Harry could do about it at the moment other than this message to the local governments and later providing representation if needed.

And honestly, he had more important things on his mind. More important, and more emotionally taxing. A series of funerals began the very next day after Harry returned to earth, Nikolai's funeral taking pride of place that first morning.

It ended up a dreary, overcast day, and Harry stood with Ororo and the rest of the Custodes in the deep snows of Camelot as they watched Father Garnoff preside over Nikolai's funeral. Laynia and the X-Men, Stinger and her team, and many of the children who had known Nikolai, in particular those rescued with him in Russia all that time ago, stood in audience as well, their faces somber even as Melody sang under her breath, a brief dirge for the dead. Rahne and Piotr lowered the casket into the ground, and when they stepped back Harry came forward with a shovel and proceeded to help with the burial by brute force, rather than magic.

After the ceremony had ended, Harry, Ororo and Steve made appearances at two other funerals that day for members of the Orbital Drop Marines who had been Jewish and Hindu. The following day was devoted to those of the Christian faiths; Protestants, Eastern Orthodox, and Catholics. A third day was devoted to all those who had marked 'not applicable' on their applications in terms of their religious practices, those who didn't believe in any organized religion at all, or who believed in smaller religions that didn't yet have a representative within the Avalon Empire, and so forth.

This happened to include four Asatru. Their souls, Hela had reported, had been sent to Niflheim, and there was a possibility they would be reborn within Utland at some point in the

future. How that would actually occur was up to Odin though. Since the men in question had fallen in battle, and had proven themselves exceedingly capable, they fell under the Asgardian ruler's purview instead of Hela's now that their resurrection system was back in place and functioning again.

When asked how long such a decision would take, Hela had simply shrugged. It would take as much time as needed for Odin to make such a decision. If they would be allowed to meet their still living families was not a question however. The dead would remain dead to those who knew them in life. Asgard was to a new beginning for them all, and it was best if that such a break remained clean.

At each funeral it was the same, a somber atmosphere, with silent watchers. A man or, in one case, a woman, presided over the ceremony as friends and loved ones gathered. The Orbital Drop Marines were mostly unmarried thankfully, but the few times parents were able to attend was not exactly a good experience either. Harry and the fallen marines' immediate commanding officers dealt with many tears, but each faced this task as best they could, as stalwart as they could.

Despite Harry's best efforts to propagate the feeling of 'a stiff upper lip' the funerals, and especially Nikolai's still created a pall over Camelot. All the Custodes, Harry and his ladies included, were shaken by the loss of Nikolai and the ODMs who had died. All of them knew it could have been far, far worse, but the loss of a friend hit them all hard.

It took the kids and their normal innocence, vigor, and good cheer nearly a week and a half to break through the dismal funk. They did this mainly by restarting the prank war between Hela and Illyana, kicking the end of the armistice off with a clear victory for the increasingly mischievous blonde cherub.

It was one unassuming afternoon, and Harry, Hela, and Jean were sitting in the dining hall, eating together and talking about, of course, the business of running Avalon. Emma was busy once more on the business side of things, and Ororo had been called away to the Savage Lands to mediate between one of the Savage Lands' original tribes and a band of scientists that had stepped on their toes in no uncertain terms by treading into sacred ground. Harry had initially thought to go with her and express his displeasure to the scientists about their lack of tact, but ultimately he'd decided that Ororo would probably be far more gentle about it than he would've been in the mood to be.

He and Jean were discussing which think tank they believed Tony should devote most of his time to now that he was fully onboard with the Avalon Empire and the power armors of the ODMs only needed miscellaneous tweaking. Harry was of the opinion that their resident mad inventor should join Forge designing the Fleet's Earth-based ships. For all his genius, Reed either didn't understand or refused to acknowledge that warships needed to be designed to destruction: that everything within needed to be designed to last under fire and there needed to be a metric ton of redundancy built in so everything was as easy to repair as possible while



still being effective and efficient. It was the same premise that was behind why most modern tanks still had a loader for their main artillery instead of an autoloader. Such systems broke down and constituted a deadly hazard to the tank if hit mid-battle.

Jean on the other hand was of the opinion that Tony should be put in charge of looking into one of their chief bottlenecks, that being creating an assembly line and industrial sector to design, produce, and advance circuitry, microchips, and any other interconnected items. "Tony's the only one of our resident geniuses who has any knowledge about mass production. He could solve that problem for us, and then when it's done he could move on to other similar areas."

"I think we'll need to push for more from Taiwan then, unless another source of similar materials opens up," Harry grumbled, shaking his head. "We do need more microchips, and as it stands they're the world's leading experts in the field, on top of being the best at a lot of other things we need. I hadn't up to this point dealt with them directly, because I was concerned about how badly that would affect the global economy and China's view on the subject, but now I don't think we put it off any longer."

"Regardless of that, Tony should still be put in charge of building up our own microchip infrastructure. We could set it up in the Savage Land," Jean considered. She sighed. "Let's face it, Taiwan is going pell-mell to feed the world's demand in that area as it is, and if we demanded more, someone else would lose out as a result."

Harry nodded, that exact concern having occurred to him before as well. "True, and like I said, the Chinese Dragon is already grumbling given how Russia showed its military to be something of a paper tiger outside of a few high-tech units during the Eurasian war. I don't necessarily want to get them angrier further with me than they are already, but I will if I have to."

Up to now, the Avalon Empire's needs in terms of high-end circuitry had been met by either utilizing the pre-existing Kree systems from their acquired ships, employing pre-existing commercial avenues such as Frost Enterprises, trading with Doctor Doom and Latveria, or digging into the surplus supply that Magneto had built up in the Savage Land that they then coupled with Prometheus 2. But now that they were not only replacing the weapons on the Kree ships but attempting to mass-produce Ravens, working on making the Raven Spires livable and building up the Orbital Drop Marines with their power armor and so forth, they needed far more than their previous supply chains could accommodate. Prometheus 2 and their construction droids just couldn't meet every one of the ever-growing list of demands.

That meant that Harry's direct agreement with Taiwan, which he'd made after announcing the creation of the Avalon Empire, was getting more important as more of their construction droids—which had been manufactured using microchips bought through Frost Enterprises—switched from building more of themselves to the aforementioned tasks such as mass production of the Ravens. That alone was a major drain on their time and resources and

didn't even account for the Raven Spires or the ongoing project to cut down on the number of personnel needed to fully man the Kree ships. All twelve of the planned Raven Spires were already hollowed out and ready to be made into bases, but out of that number only two were fully online. Latveria and Wakanda, two other sources of high-end electronics, could not meet the Empire's needs while also continuing to sustain their own local needs, which was especially true for Latveria given how it had grown since the end of the Eurasian War due to Doom annexing segments of his eastern neighbors.

"Well, we should really ask Tony what he wants to do," Harry said with a shrug. "He's officially out of the doghouse with me, so whatever he wants is fine, so long as it doesn't involve—"

The conversation might well have continued on a similar serious vein from there, if not for Hela squawking in outrage drawing Harry and Jean's attention towards her side of the table. "GAHH, hot! Wha~a... Ahh..."

They both watched in some surprise as Hela waved at her open mouth in as if it were burning. When the waving did no good, Hela grabbed at a nearby pitcher, putting it to her fiery lips and draining its contents down quickly.

"Huh... was that pitcher there a moment ago?" Jean inquired, confused. Normally a house elf would refill their glasses. They'd never needed to do it themselves here in Camelot.

"Not at all..." Harry snorted, looking around the hall. "I sense shenanigans afoot."

Setting the pitcher down, Hela opened her mouth again, to berate the house elves for getting her meal confused with someone else's or perhaps to complain about the same as it was well known by now that Hela could not stand spicy things. However, whatever she'd meant to say would go unheard, as instead of a tirade, another squawk came out, this one more avian than angry. Several more squawks followed and Jean lost the battle to contain her giggles.

Nearby several of the kids began to laugh, while Illyana leaped out of her stool and began to dance in place. "Yes, yes! We got her, we got her! Woo!"

Harry was reminded of some of the pranks that the Weasley twins had made. Shaking himself free, he looked over at his young apprentice in some surprise. "Did you put something in her food,?"

"Nope! Hela always checks her meals with spells and stuff to see if there's anything wrong with them. Figuring out where Hela was going to sit was troublesome, but once I figured that out, I got one of the younger house elves to add some spice to her food, told him she wanted to challenge herself. But I knew that Hela would reach for the water quick as can be, not thinking to check where it came from," Illyana answered, as proud as a general after a successful campaign. "It was a team effort."

“Hehehe, I snuck the charmed water pitcher onto the table,” another youngster added, one Harry realized he didn’t recognize. He looked to be of Arabic descent and looked quite proud of his achievement.

“Right! And that’s where my master plan went to work. There’s a spell on the pitcher; anyone who drinks from it will start to talk like a bird!” Illyana laughed, still dancing in place as the other kids around her cheered. “I got you! I got you! I got you good Hela!”

“So you did,” Harry laughed, Jean tried to muster the willpower to look censorious, utterly failing as her previous giggles shifting into outright laughter as more laughter rose up from the rest of the onlookers. This was a mixed bag of Custodes, youngsters and the normal inhabitants of the castle like Kitty’s parents, the teachers, Rahne, and a few of Wendy’s teammates including Morph, who had shifted his head to be larger than normal so he could guffaw at the sight even louder.

Seeing the normally prideful, extremely self-contained Hela squawking and grabbing at her throat was a hilarious sight for most of those dining in the hall. However, Harry knew something that Illyana had yet to truly grasp. “But you know, owning up to the fact that you are a prankster is something of a double-edged sword, my dear.”

The young Russian girl looked confused for a moment, then hurled herself to the floor as a spell flew towards her from Hela, who obviously didn’t need to actually speak to cast spells. The plate of food that Illyana had been eating turned into a large mouse, causing several reactionary shrieks and shouts. The newly born mouse instantly skittered away, leaping down to the ground to head towards the nearest wall. It didn’t get far before Garm leapt on it with a huff of laughter. Meanwhile, a red-faced Hela continued to silently fire spells at a now hastily dodging and shielding Illyana.

During the scuffle, a few of the other children, innocent or not, were struck and turned into various small rodents as well. This did not seem to slow the goddess down, although when one of mice squeaked out, “Defend yourselves!” whatever minimal amount of calm might have been had disappeared instantly. Ignoring the admonishing calls of the teachers and Kitty’s parents, the entire hall devolved into a battlefield with the young mutants, accompanied by Wendy, Morph, and Anne Marie Cortez, turning their powers on Hela, , magic and energy blasts flying toward her set to the former mutant supremacists’ equivalent of stun.

All this gave Hela was more targets for her wrath. An instant later, what had been carefully targeted spells became wide-angled spells, sending several kids to the ground in uncontrollable and involuntary guffawing, while others turned orange and blew up like Harry’s aunt Marge once had back in his original world, floating up to the roof with squeaky giggles and hiccups. All the while Hela shielded herself or dodged the various mutant power-based attacks coming towards her without slowing down a bit.

Harry looked on for a few seconds, a grin slowly growing across his face before he hopped to his feet. Standing in the middle of the storm, he flexed his wrists, and began to cast spells; color changers, form changers, ticklers, and spells to also send the victim bobbing up to the ceiling, like Hela's former victims. At the same time, a Protego the equivalent of Fort Knox appeared around Jean as Harry glanced at her and the retreating adults. "House elves, if you could get anyone who doesn't want to participate out of the way?"

Not waiting for an answer, Harry stode after his Asgardian girlfriend. "Oh, Hela~?" he sang.

Hearing such words, said in such a tone, Garm, who had originally hastily ducked underneath the chair, and was wishing that he had gone to Finland to hunt with Danielle and Fenrir, instantly took to his heels. *Oh no, most certainly not. I have been around my mistress and Illyana's prank wars too often as is. I refuse to get involved in an all-out battle if Potter is getting involved, regardless of what manner of spells are being flung around.*

Hela turned from where she had been busy blocking a stream of super-condensed air with one hand while the other projected a shield that was blocking a spout of water directed at her from another young mutant. A third child, this one appearing like some kind of bird-shaped creature, dove down at her from above but was rebuffed by some sort of invisible wall. Hela nearly ate a blast of magic for her momentary distraction, the effect of which she had no idea of, nor the desire to learn.

She glared back at Harry, who held up his hands in faux surrender, all of his fingers sparking and flickering with magic. "Nothing deadly, nothing truly debilitating. Otherwise, have at thee love." With that, he bowed and launched into his next spell.

The remaining children, teens, and Custodes who still fought turned on both adults with equal fervor, Hela and Harry standing in the middle of the dining hall making too open of a pair of targets to resist. The two magic users utilized various nonlethal charms and transfiguration spells in retaliation, and while Hela still seemed somewhat miffed at the squawking that came every time she opened her mouth, her wide grin showed just how much fun she was truly having. And although many of the children were a little disturbed at seeing Harry, the Lord Potter that only a small cadre of their peers had gotten to know before now, now cackling like a madman as he flung spells at them and at the raven haired beauty in the mask in equal measure, one by one their apprehensions faded in the face of unmitigated fun.

From her position behind a turned over stool, Illyana tried to organize some sort of team defense, but with the sheer chaos in the hall, few among her coterie could hear her, let alone desired to leave their own cover to potentially aid her. This started to change when Morph slid into the empty spot next to her. "What's the plan boss lady?"

Illyana stared at the teen, then began to grin. "Let's get this thing organized second in command! Tell everyone to try and encircle them; attack them from all sides!"

From her new position near the front of the hall, Jean watched all of this unfold feeling almost the same amount of jealousy and annoyance as she would've normally when faced with her pregnancy stopping her from being a frontline combatant in actual combat. Still, at least was a just for fun and show, she could sit this one out she supposed. Not looking away from the small-scale civil war, Jean politely asked one of the house elves to grab some popcorn for her. "If I'm stuck watching, I might as well do so with all the creature comforts possible."

"Well, I hope at least father's song isn't going to be so sad now," A sudden, small voice said beside her, causing Jean to jolt in shock. Turning, she spied Melody standing next to her, also enjoying the battle unfold. "He and the rest of you adults have been so sad about Nikolai and the others you lost. You've all forgotten that grieving for the dead shouldn't stop you from being happy in their stead."

Digesting that overly mature sentence, Jean put a gentle arm around Melody's shoulders, pulling the small girl into a hug and up onto the very comfortable circular basket seat she was sitting in at the moment. In turn, Melody seemed to almost curl around her protruding stomach in tender care. "That is a very wise outlook on life, my dear. Thank you for helping to cheer us all up. Feel free to do it again whenever you see us old fuddy-duddies being sticks in the mud in the future, okay?"

Melody giggled, leaning against the redhead's side, the two continuing to watch the chaos unfold in front of them together.

**OOOOOO**

Over the next two weeks, Harry made it a point to get to know the newer kids better, separating his days into work time and play time as he got back into the swing of things. It honestly proved far more beneficial health-wise than working himself to the bone to keep from wallowing in their losses at Asgard. Several of the newer children were of an age where they would need to be sent to actual middle school or high school, and Harry spoke with each of those students individually. He then worked with Camelot's teachers to figure out if they would do better going to the high school in New York and keep under the auspices with Kurt and the other youngsters from Xavier's mansion still there—Kitty had made the decision to test out of high school entirely, with her parents blessing several weeks ago—or to the high school that had opened in the Savage Land.

This was all being handled because ultimately, Harry wanted to keep Camelot for the Custodes, the elementary students, himself, and his various projects. "Predominantly it's because of Melody and Illyana if I'm honest. I want to keep the two of them close, for obvious reasons, and I don't want the education of the older kids to suffer because of where my focus is," Harry explained to Emma one night as she joined them for a dinner. Or rather, for her it was a late lunch, as Emma, despite being formally married to Harry, still spent most of her time in her own mansion in New York running Frost Enterprises.

“That and having the little rugrats around is a hilariously way to stay cheerful,” Jean added, chuckling to herself as Hela scowled. The goddess dug into her soufflé dessert with gusto. She’d never tried one before that evening and had found the cherry confection quite delicious. “Aren’t they, Hela?”

“Just you wait my dear Jean. My vengeance will be the stuff of legend,” Hela grumbled, doing her best to look cross. Unfortunately for her, those listening could tell that her words really had no heat to them any longer.

“Anyway, keeping to the subject at hand rather than going off on an amusing tangent, I think in the future we’ll use Camelot as an inflow center. Kids at the middle school and high school levels can then be sent on to the Savage Land. I’m afraid we’ve reached the limit to how many students we can send to the local high school near Charles and Scott,” Harry announced with a shake of his head. “It’ll give the kids a few years to think of pursuing full citizenship and what that entails, while still getting a good education, before they’ll need to decide what they want to do with their futures.”

“Since few of them have families they wish to acknowledge, or vice-versa, thanks to their mutant powers, that kind of fresh start seems like an excellent idea,” Emma agreed.

“And we already have an educational system in place in the Savage Land,” Ororo said proudly, and well she should. That had been one of her personal major projects, alongside Pinoptes. “We’ll always face a distinct challenge in mutant education considering how their powers can affect their daily lives and need to be trained one way or another, but we are old hats at that now. This new influx we’re expecting is larger than most we’ve faced in the past, but we **are** prepared for it. If you want to keep the castle for just the youngsters and the rest of us, my love, that’s perfectly fine, although we’ll need to talk to a few students through how to operate the runic doorways to come and go, given such a decision will be splitting up sibling pairs.”

“Siblings can stay here for sleeping then, we still have enough space for them. But yes, I would prefer they spent most of their time at the schools in the Savage Land,” Harry answered.

“We might also need to allow students hailing from your Middle Eastern or third world countries more acclimatization time, as well as supplementary classes,” Hela mused, adding something to the conversation for the first time since her soufflé had arrived. “Recall that they will be coming from cultures and societies very different from our own and will need time to get used to the Empire’s social mores, or even those of America.”

Storm agreed with this with a nod, indicating that she and Pinoptes had already begun creating seminars to help with that kind of thing. Still, she added that she would like to vet the existing population of the Empire to see if they could find someone, or more optimistically, two people to teach such classes.

“But none of you have any objections to keeping our center of government here in the castle? As well as an elementary school?”

Hela grumbled and Emma rolled her eyes, but neither of those were exactly objections. Additionally, Harry knew that Hela’s disgruntlement was merely due to her annoyance at present at how Illyana had planned out such a basic trap and still succeeded in pranking her. Even Emma’s stance was mostly pro forma due to her dislike for children in general being so well known. Seeing that there were no real problems, Harry turned their attention to other things, refusing to be serious any longer that evening. “So, what about that new referendum that came up from the Council of Prefects? A sports league, was it?”

**OOOOOOO**

Harry would get his serious quota the next day. With Sage’s able aid, he continued to expand Magical Minds’ commercial reach, specifically into the law enforcement sector. His potion brewers had finally produced a large enough surplus of Veritaserum that the Empire could afford to start selling it to outside powers. Harry knew that Emma would be positively gleeful by the results once those sales began and the profits rolled in. Interpol, various sovereign nations, and specific law enforcement agencies the world over had been shown samples of the truth serum weeks ago and were salivating to get their hands on it. There were some questions about the legality, if not the ethics, of using a magical potion to force someone to tell the truth, but since the Avalon Empire already had its usage set into its laws, those on the fence had a good precedent to look to and follow. Moreover, Harry had used the potion himself previously in somewhat public settings, if only occasionally, and the various governments knew what he could do was the real deal, so they’d been preparing for this for a while.

On the other hand, Harry was well aware of how badly Veritaserum could be abused if it fell into the wrong hands. Taking that into account, he’d decided that he wasn’t going to sell the truth potion to anyone until its use was accepted, controlled, and in the books so to speak. That would probably take a while for even allies like the UK to implement effectively, but even so, the going price for even a single, five gallon ton of Veritaserum was ten times the amount of any of Harry’s other potion-based services.

More importantly, and much more serious, was that Harry had to deal with business on the military side of things as well. This kicked off with him and Kitty working on several time dilation chambers in the US, Canada, and Savage Land training centers for the ODMs. The former area in Fortress Mars where the construction droids had first built so many of themselves had also been turned into the training area for the space marines. From there, Harry met with Murphy, asking the commander about the overall progress of the rest of the training centers elsewhere on Earth.

That is how Harry ended up staring at Murphy from across his desk in Fortress Mars, wide eyed and slightly slack jawed. “I’m sorry, how many people are signing up?”

“From India alone, we’ve had nearly two million men sign up for EDF training since we opened the training center there. But don’t let that surprise you Harry, or get your hopes up,” Murphy said with a snort. “We’re in no way certain how many of those recruits will pass the physical exams, let alone survive basic training, figuratively **and** literally.”

Harry winced but understood that the man had a point. Already there had been a number of deaths due to training accidents in both the Orbital Drop Marine program as well as on the Earth Defense Force side of things. As cruel as it sounded, thankfully these deaths were only among the raw recruits. The trained personnel coming in, the veterans, and those individuals seconded to them from their parent militaries had a far lower rate of accidents.

“And before you say anything, we’re already doing everything we can to make the training as safe as we can. If we do any more, we’d need to expand the use of those time dilation chambers of yours, and the cool down periods. We’re already getting major complaints among the Orbital Drop Marine recruits... I think you severely underestimated how normal people’s physiology would react to that kind of thing,” Murphy said, shaking his head as he waves a few forms at Harry. Then, he stands as well. “And we seriously need to expand our officer core, Harry. I need a larger staff, Whitaker needs a larger staff, the Ravens need local commanders and we need more oversight on the training centers. A lot more.”

“Alright, and how do we get it? We will **not** become an offshoot of the American armed forces, or even the British,” Harry warned.

“Well if you’re asking me for my opinion, I think...” Murphy launched into his spiel from there, Harry taking notes. Eventually he heard enough that he ended up getting Sage and a few of his contacts with various governments involved. He hadn’t previously had a direct link to India before this, but Harry decided to set aside a few days to create one if these were the numbers the country could offer. While he knew that the initial two million figure wasn’t really all that amazing in comparison to the sheer number of tasks, jobs, and everything else the Avalon Empire required, especially when nothing near that number would actually pass the trainings recruits went through, just hearing it flat out had thrown him. He hadn’t even thought to ask how many were coming from neighboring countries or who had expressed interest in becoming an Avalonian citizen.

As the usual workload of a world leader built up, something else occurred three days later that Harry had been quietly longing to happen for a while. The long awaited event had the potential to actually solve one of the larger materials issues the Empire was facing, although Harry didn’t want to hold out hope for what was going to happen going into this particular meeting. A meeting which had been set up by the Fantastic Four.

Harry rose from the chair in the neutral conference room that Reed Richards had put together, bowing his head lightly towards the two individuals who had just entered after Reed and Susan. Beside him Emma tilted her head down even less, icy mask fully in place. “King Blackbolt, it is good to meet you at last.”



Blackagar Boltagon, the Inhuman king known as Blackbolt, was first and foremost tall, and as lithely well-built as Harry himself, although the interdimensional traveler knew that the man was also as physically strong as the Thing though his musculature wouldn't speak to it. He wore a black suit from top to bottom striped in lengths of white that carried the likeness of lightning bolts. When he moved his arms, it was clear that the suit had what appeared to be wings like a flying squirrel's connected from his arms to his body. There was also what looked like a tuning fork stuck to the forehead of his suit, and while others might have seen that as somewhat silly, Harry knew that it was a sign of Blackbolt's true power. The king's voice alone was apparently so powerful that even a whisper could destroy a city. His body's durability and strength was simply an offshoot of being able to survive the force of his own sonic powers.

Blackbolt's face was also stern and grim as he entered, lines of what Harry knew to be fatigue and grief carving into his face. Yet he still bowed his head politely in turn, taking a seat across from Harry as Medusa slid into a seat across from Emma.

"It is good to treat with you as well Lord Potter, although I do find myself in the uncomfortable position of needing to apologize. I realize that you had initially reached out to us via Medusa and her sister Crystal, and we have not responded formally before now, in any capacity. You must understand that for we Inhumans, the outside world has never been a pleasant place," Medusa answered, speaking for Blackbolt as was her role as his advisor. Not a whisper came from the Inhuman king, and Harry supposed he was grateful for that. "And that reticence was not helped at all by our latest... personal problems."

As Harry had been warned of Blackbolt's power before the meeting, and Medusa's role, he took her speech in stride, smiling in thanks to Reed as he and his wife left the negotiators alone together. "I understand how that can be, on both accounts. If Reed was able to share any of my own past with you, you would know that back in my own dimension, I was part of a small, extremely insular community with our own homegrown terrorists who believed that our powers made us superior to those outside. At least yours didn't want your people to rule over the rest of the world as ours did."

"No but ranks of the xenophobic isolationists were far more powerful and numerous than we'd expected," Medusa stated, keeping her tone and voice vague, Blackbolt not wanting to go into Inhuman politics with yet another group of outsiders. "They have caused us numerous problems on numerous occasions."

No more detail was needed. Ben Grimm had given Harry an abbreviated lowdown after the Fantastic Four's latest mission to help Blackbolt keep his throne. The king's brother, the so-called Maximus the Mad, who also happened to be a genius inventor, had instigated yet another rebellion. This time, he had openly garnered the popular support of members of Inhuman society in direct opposition to Blackbolt's own known desire to reach out to the outer world. The fact that the king wished for this so that their relations with Earth would be on their own terms rather than being forced upon them at a later date was conveniently forgotten.

Indeed even now, fresh from being liberated from Maximus' iron fist, the majority of Blackbolt's people were still against the idea of having anything to do with the outer world.

But Blackbolt, with Medusa keeping him informed about the Avalon Empire's doings along with everything else that had been going on, information she sourced from her sister Crystal who had regularly been spending time with Johnny Storm in the outer world to her frustration, knew that the isolationism of the Inhumans wouldn't have lasted for much longer regardless of his people's feelings. Indeed, many others from Earth already knew about their small lunar civilization for months, if not years by this point. And he also knew that it was only that Harry had never been interested enough to investigate them after Reed had informed him that the Inhumans weren't a threat to Earth that had kept their closed-minded ways intact for so long.

"I'm sorry to hear that, and doubly sorry for any trouble your willingness to open up a dialogue between us has caused. However, I cannot truthfully say I'm sorry for the fact that you were able to do so," Harry said, Emma's diplomacy lessons holding strong. "I feel that there is a lot we could offer each other but let me state clearly now that I have no wish to try to rule over you, enforce my laws upon you, or to even introduce you to the rest of Earth if you are against it. The Avalon Empire can and will treat with the Inhumans as if you are an entirely separate nation from the rest of the planet, as we have done with others of Earth, if you so wish."

"I thank you for your frank and encouraging statement," Medusa announced for Blackbolt, the king sitting stoically beside her. He hadn't moved an inch since sitting down, only his fingers moving occasionally.

As the redheaded woman spoke, Emma finally chimed in, *"I'm detecting some kind of telepathic communication between them Harry. It feels something like what you, Jean, and me have developed, although I think it's a little more... automatic than that? Blackbolt is the source I am certain, but he doesn't feel like a full bore telepath. Is it some kind of telepathy-based connection between family members?"*

Tapping her knee under the table to indicate he had heard her and understood, Harry kept his attention on Blackbolt as Medusa continued. "And that is something we shall want in writing. That the Avalon Empire will not try to force open our borders to further interaction or trade must be paramount in any future agreements. Any trade that does occur will by necessity be between the government of Attilan and the government of the Avalon Empire alone. There will also be no attempt to come in and sell our citizens goods and services they do not require. And there will be no attempt to force us to allow your corporations in for their profit as has occurred so often in human society."

"Agreed. We can write that up right now if you wish," Harry answered instantly, nodding over to Mary Jane, who'd been typing up every word spoken. He had no problems with those demands, hell, he'd have given the Inhumans such assurances without even being asked slash told.

Blackbolt instantly nodded in turn, and Medusa and Harry worked on the appropriate wording for the agreement for a time. Once settled, Medusa's spoke again in Blackbolt's stead. "Now that that is out of the way, we can move on to what we both want from the other. I believe that we should be open and upfront about these things, and in that spirit I must inform you that we would like to leave the moon. Where my people go from that point is understandably up in the air, but ultimately we desire to terraform a planet for ourselves."

Harry wasn't quite sure what to say. That was the last thing he'd expected the king of the isolationists to put forth as a major demand—after the expected restrictions of course—and he had to admit he was thrown.

"... While I obviously have no issue with you and yours moving the location of your civilization, I have to ask... are you able to see to that terraforming yourself or even the transfer of your people?"

"We can construct a starship of our own," Medusa answered, smiling as if at an inside joke known only to her and her husband. "But terraforming a planet is beyond our current means. We believe it to be within yours however. And we are willing to pay for it."

Harry thought about it for a moment, then shrugged. He had already agreed to push forward terraforming some of the moons of Saturn as it was and had recently figured out a way to do so. One more terraformed dwarf planet wouldn't matter overmuch to him. "I will say yes, I can indeed terraform a planet for your people, although the caveat is that the planetary body in question has to naturally be the right type to give me a starting point."

With a few touches to the hidden keyboard set into the desk they sat at, Harry pulled up an extremely detailed holographic map of the solar system. He pointed out various points of interest here and there; the territory Doctor Doom had claimed for himself, the areas which had been turned over to the Defense Force, the helium cultivation structures, the numerous and still growing number of jump rings scattered across the system. Several of the jump rings, which was what the Raven pilots called the spaceborne teleportation rings, were also in orbit over Earth and Fortress Mars. After all, the Ravens would need a way to enter the network, not just exit.

Medusa and Blackbolt took in the expansive sight, and while they digested just how far humanity had really expanded in such short a time, Harry willingly turned the controls of the mapping system over to the two rulers. The wide looks in their eyes actually brought a grin to Harry's face, which Blackbolt didn't fail to notice. The other king's eyes flicked to him, and his lips twitched, which caused Harry to chuckle. *Much like with Doctor Doom and Odin, I don't think Blackbolt and I will ever come to be close friends, but it's good to know that the silent king does have a sense of humor.*

A second later Blackbolt actually bodily moved for the first time, turning his attention to what Medusa had been doing. Within seconds, a series of small moons in the orbit of Jupiter

were pulled up, enhanced and enlarged until they filled the air between the two rulers, gone over, and then one of them selected.

“What would it take for you to terraform this moon for us?”

Harry looked at the relatively small celestial rock that Medusa had highlighted in yellow thoughtfully. He brought up a set of his own notes on the planetary body, frowning as he read. “Your pardon your majesties, I didn’t think you would ask for me to terraform something for you. This might take a while.”

Graciously waving away any supposed concern or frustration, Medusa turned from the holo-map to Emma and the two were soon making small talk as Harry went over his notes, with Emma helping him to get in touch with Carol and Sage telepathically. After a roughly ten minutes of this Harry had his answer. “It is certainly possible, but it will take time and effort. That and a lot of viable soil. Like, a lot. But now that we’ve that out of the way, what would you be willing to trade for such a monumental labor?”

“Whatever it ends up being, we would prefer to make our payment in one lump sum . While some of us Inhumans are willing to acknowledge the outside world, few are willing to truly interact with you, or any other sentient beyond our borders,” Medusa warned with all the gravity of her stone-faced husband. “And even then, I can think of a handful that would gladly choose the latter.”

Harry grimaced, reminded all too clearly of the blood purists in his old world. “How we go about the transfer of whatever goods we agree on is something I am perfectly happy to leave in your hands. If your people are so xenophobic that they don’t want to come into contact with mine, we could probably do the handoffs completely through droids and unmanned ships. That being said, any trade items will need to be of a particular nature, as there are certain high-end resources that my people need and are having trouble sourcing in the necessary quantities on Earth.”

He held up a hand as Medusa made to speak. “And these goods are such that I will need to receive them continuously. I don’t see a way for you to produce enough all at once to deliver it all in one single allotment.”

“... What goods exactly are we speaking of here?” Medusa asked slowly, a hint of suspicion creeping into her tone.

“Microchips, computer motherboards, control system hardware,” Harry counted, raising a finger as he listed each point. “I can supply the raw material if that is or becomes an issue. My problem is not that I don’t have resources, it’s that I don’t have them in the correct forms. So that is what I need from you, your ability to manufacture high-grade technological components, made to match or exceed specs we would provide you.”

“You have a... I believe it is called Forge Two, correct? Surely, from what we’ve heard, such an installation can create these things for you?”

“Prometheus 2,” Harry corrected, “And while its production capacity can match the needs of any one project, say... retrofitting the weapon systems for the Kree ships we captured, that’s but a fraction of what I need. As it stands, the Earth Defense Force will be growing exponentially for the foreseeable future, and so too will the quantity of the bits and bobs needed to run it. And unfortunately, while my construction droids are amazing at building and repairs, they’re not equipped nor programmed for finely detailed fabrications.”

Medusa raised a disbelieving brow, and Blackbolt beside her took a deep breath. “I have still not heard a credible reason for why my people cannot just make our payment to you in one lump sum. Would not a million each of microchips, motherboards, processors, and the like delivered to you all at once not give you the buffer time required to increase your own means of production?”

“It would,” Harry agreed. Medusa started to grin in victory, before he dropped the real bomb. “If my needs weren’t measured in terms of trillions of the resources you just named and more besides.”

The room fell silent. For the Inhumans, it was due to pure shock. Such a number was hard for even them to comprehend, at least when it came to the mass production such a goal would require. For Harry and Emma, they were quiet because they were fighting to keep from laughing at the stunned looks of their opposites.

Once the two Inhuman royals had recovered themselves, Harry again found himself embroiled in haggling. Eventually, he and Blackbolt, through Medusa, agreed upon the price, with him actually winning out on being paid in allotments over time, on the that an Inhuman in their trust would be able to periodically check the terraforming project whenever they desired. From there the matter of when Harry would start said project came up, at which point it became clear that while they could start paying for it now, the Inhumans would still need the resources to do so. And apparently to repair Attilan as well. Which was also a ship.

Recognizing just how advanced the Inhumans really were, to have a space-faring city-ship already, Harry couldn’t help but whistle. “Well, I can say this for the Inhumans, you all don’t do things by half measure. And I would be more than willing to provide you with raw ore and such, both for your repairs and for you to use in relation to my half of the agreement, for a price.”

Rolling her eyes, Medusa launched the room back into the previous conversation. This time through took far less time however, and soon, Harry was standing while shaking hands with Blackbolt, who nodded to him while his lips quirked wryly. Harry got the distinct impression that his Inhuman counterpart had enjoyed all of that about as much as he had, which had been not at all.

Still, Harry walked away from the meeting very pleased, a treaty in hand.

**OOOOOOO**

After that, things settled down for a time. With Sage running the day-to-day operations of Magical Minds, and the governmental infrastructure of the Avalon Empire in place for the most part, Harry only had a few executive-level decisions to make for both. What he really spent most of that time on was the EDF, in particular following up on General Murphy's words on needing to bring more officers and command staff for the Raven Spires. This effectively devoured several months' worth of his time due to all the meetings he'd been forced to attend, but eventually, there was a real command structure in place. Luckily, since the Navy already had one close to fitting his needs he'd been able to copy large sections of it for his own use. Harry had also worked closely with Admiral Whitaker from the start to bring in captains, commanders, and commodores as well, so Harry had an idea what kind of personnel he wanted going forward.

Perforce, most of these personnel had come from other nations, specifically the United States, Britain, India, and, surprisingly enough, France and Japan. While Japan's military was small and called a self-defense force, they were extremely well-trained, used to working with high levels of technology, and even used to working with others and being part of the US's sphere of influence in the Pacific. And France, although derided in popular American and British culture ever since WW2, and having initially protested Harry's demands for manpower, actually had one of the larger, better-trained militaries in the world who had served extremely well during the Eurasian War.

In terms of executive decisions, most of Harry's work had been signing off on a few things here and there, mostly dealing with the Avalon Empire's response to violent anti-mutant or pro-mutant factions. His response was the same for both: squash them wherever they appeared with extreme prejudice. His tolerance for the intolerant had reached new lows after returning from the Shi'ar, and even those within his own lands weren't exceptions.

One such incident that had unfortunately kicked off within the Empire's borders had ultimately resulted in an extended family, many of whom had signed up to be trained in zero-g mining conditions, being returned to the United States when several male members of said family had assaulted two young mutants. The adults had lost their jobs, the family as a whole had been hit with heavy fines, and the perpetrators had been tried and sentenced within a day.

Another blowup had been caused by a pro-mutant group that had sprung up in Norway. The idiots had gone on a rampage and had tried to take over the city of Egersund. One of the mutants had been able to control concrete and, coupled with an extremely wide area of influence, they'd made a good try at it. That is, until a Magma-led team of Custodes Mundi had arrived.

Once his team had mopped up the criminals, Harry had been forced to make a public statement that the Avalon Empire stood for equality, not pro-mutant superiority, when it was revealed the captured mutants had apparently cobbled together their manifesto from spliced statements that he'd made in the past. After that, he'd also announced that he would be willing to help defray the costs of the reconstruction projects within Egersund as a show of goodwill.

That kind of threat to his public persona, born and based in the manipulation of technology, had necessitated the creation and utilization of a new system by Reed Richards: the International Emergency Override System. When Harry had made his speech, and whenever he needed to do so again, everyone with a TV or radio heard it live, regardless of geographical location or nationality. It might've been a tad excessive, but Harry most decidedly didn't want any sort of supremacist movement able to use his words for their own ends ever again.

Thankfully, the Northern European Strategic Command had been quite happy with Harry before that incident, and a majority of Norway's civilian population hadn't blamed him for the pro-mutant group's acts. The actual Norwegian government hadn't really been happy with Harry at the time, as he'd pushed hard on making mutant equality the law in payment for the Custodes interceding, something that the somewhat conservative sectors of the population hadn't particularly appreciated. However, all of the other countries of the NESC had already done so, and within a few weeks of that incident, Norway had been forced into progressiveness.

To keep an eye on the newest member to the equality movement, Harry had directed Sir Dennis to do what he did best. It would be worth mentioning that by that point, Dennis had several thousand agents in his employ, having built his information broker business into a real intelligence network. Most of those involved had been chosen by Natasha or Mystique and were, barring a few, experienced. Some were undoubtedly reporting to more than one master, but since none of those agents operated within the Empire, Harry hadn't been overly concerned by their presence. Following Harry's order, Dennis had sent a few of his assets into Norway to make certain that the country followed through on actually enforcing its new laws. The Empire hoped the Norwegians would prove trustworthy on that point.

There hadn't been any issues so far, and Harry was grateful to the NESC for also making sure its member state played fair and true. The NESC was the northern European equivalent of the European Union. Previously, Norway and Denmark had made noises about joining the European Union, but while that body had weathered the storm of the Eurasian War and come out a little more solidified after such a turbulent time, Finland and Sweden had come out of the fighting making noises of creating their own union, built around the pre-existing agreements they had with Harry via Magical Minds. When Harry had later come out and declared the creation of the Avalon Empire, Norway and Denmark, along with Iceland, had made an about face and decided to join in with their neighbors instead of the French and German-led EU.

His response to the Norwegian incident had not been the only statement Harry had had to make wearing his Imperial Hat either. Some time later, he'd made a public statement in front

of the United Nations. Despite the physical power of the organization having decreased tremendously, it had still been a very good way to get his words heard by people in power the world over without needing to use the IEOS, which he knew overuse of would cause tremendous backlash. In that address, Harry had also not only stirred the pot and rocked the boat, but thrown out the whole kitchen sink. As he'd been wrapping up, he'd ended the speech by formally declaring that the Avalon Empire accepted Taiwan's right to sovereignty.

Needless to say, this did not go over well with China. Not even America had gone so far as to accept Taiwan's sovereignty, to say it was a separate nation from China, something the Chinese refused to acknowledge despite it having been a physical fact for decades. But Harry needed microchips and semi-conductors that Taiwan made, and until the industry of the Inhumans was up and running, Taiwan and Latveria were the only two real sources of such things in the bulk necessary.

Even there, Doctor Doom had his own concerns to see to, such as his homegrown industries and rebuilding the various infrastructure destroyed during the Eurasian war. Nearly the entire eastern half of the European Union had also been making overtures to him as well, not quite begging for his aid, but close. And since China had been dragging its heels on the manpower issue after the war ended and didn't have any other goods Harry was particularly interested in, he was willing to put the screws to them politically.

Thankfully, not everything Harry did over the next few months was as annoying as the commercial and military sides of things. Several times, Harry simply went flying with Kitty in space. The young woman, in full spacesuit, enjoyed being tugged along by her teacher's magic as the two emplaced new jump rings throughout the solar system, the sights beyond anything she could've dreamed of. He'd also made certain to give all of his ladies the attention they deserved. He took each of them out on dates, sometimes just one on one, sometimes in smaller configurations of the greater quintet.

**OOOOOO**

Two months after Harry and his people had returned from liberating Asgard, Harry and Odin stood on a platform passing Mercury on their way to the Sun. Between them, at the platform's center, a crystal ball inlaid with glowing runes sat on a pedestal, which Odin used to direct the platform forward. In what felt like moments, they were deep into the corona of the sun.

The platform, in actuality, was sticking out of the top of a large octagonal structure, about half a mile long, the front point of which faced towards the sun's core. While its exterior appeared almost simplistic in design, its sides rugged rather than smooth, the interior was quite intricate in contrast, lined with pressure plates made of solid diamond, more diamond than could ever be found on Earth. Harry had in fact sent several tons worth of coal and diamonds, taken from dozens of asteroids he'd had farmed, to Asgard for this, a far larger version of Odin's Star Forge, and now he was eager to see his investment pay off.



Inside the forge was a crucible-like chamber, the walls of which would collapse inward when in use, crashing together like a pneumatic forge, only at far higher speeds and with far greater force than any merely mechanical object could ever have devised. Around the most pointed edge of the forge were small flaps that opened, meant as a vent to gather in the power of the sun, funneling it into the forge's interior controllable amounts of time. The walls, in fact the entire forge itself, was powered by magic and directed by the dvergar, who manned various stations throughout the structure and were magically linked to it so that they could use their gestalt senses to guide the smelting process with their combined knowledge and experience.

Above the Star Forge, Lorna followed, dragging several hundred tons of various metals, each of which had been separated into exact portions that Odin and the dvergar had dictated. This was a process they had mastered in the past, it had simply been the size of the operation that had caused them some issues at first. Happily, the consummate smiths had solved those quickly enough, and so here they all were.

Harry kept his magical shield around himself and Lorna above as they closed with the sun. He'd deliberately made it as opaque as possible to save their eyes as they'd pushed ever deeper toward the heart of star, but at such a close distance even his best efforts weren't enough to block out all of the light. But while he, the dvergar, and Odin could take the brightness and heat with aplomb, Lorna was having issues.

"How much farther are we going, Harry?" Lorna asked, her anxiety showing in the use of his first name as she was normally very good about not doing that in front of more formal people.

"We are almost there now," Odin answered instead, sweat beading his weathered brow, the only sign of the insane heat beyond Harry's shield. "If my calculations are correct, the ideal position for the Star Forge here in the heart of Sol will be upon us in moments."

"Can't happen too soon for this girl!" Lorna grumbled, another sign that she was really feeling the heat, pun intended, Harry thought to himself.

A moment later and Odin waved a hand, the forge halting in place, it's magic-based antigravity systems making a mockery of physics. Harry and Odin moved off the platform and over to a series of runes set into the side of the crucible chamber. Odin pointed them out to Harry as they worked, adding that, "How often you will need to charge them is in question, given the forge's size and how much you wish to get out of it. But it will work. A metal that is in no way magical but made through magical means, durable beyond measure."

Nodding, Harry leaned forward, placing his hands on the specially designed receiver runes. His power flowing out into them, and even within the sun itself they lit up like beacons. As he did so, one of the nearby dvergar worked a series of controls, opening the top of the crucible like an iris shutter on a camera. From directly above them, at another dvergar's command, Lorna set to feeding huge, man-sized chunks of various metals down into the

chamber. She watched as they passed out from under Harry's shield around them keeping them from melting into the forge below where they most certainly did begin to melt, all forming together. At the same time, the dvergar bellowed to one another in their own tongue, segments of the forge's interior moving and mixing the metal concoction as it flowed under their direction.

When the crucible intake pit was full, Lorna paused her work and waited for the go ahead to descend. When Harry's shield expanded to cover the distance between her and the forge, she dropped down, landing beside Harry with a slight stumble. He touched her shoulder gently, having finished his own portion of the operation, and looked at her with concern. She smiled back at him wanly but shook away his worry. The two then turned as yet another dvergar began to work a different series of controls. Suddenly there came a sound of clanging metalclanging, that almost filled the universe to her, causing Lorna to stumble away from the side of the crucible only for Harry to once more catch her shoulder, holding her upright.

The clanging was soon followed by several dozen more in quick succession, so fast Lorna couldn't tell what was going on anymore. She felt sick, her world was spinning, and she could only stumble weakly against Harry, as he murmured, "We might want to look into removing the air bubble from around the forge in the future, given how badly the sound travels."

"What?! I can't hear you!" Odin shouted in return, his beard twitching in amusement. He knew that speaking was useless now, all voices drowned out by the sound of the crucible's interior hammers working away, each made of diamond from head to shaft. Only the dvergar could communicate during a forging, and that was only due to their telepathic connection.

Eventually, the mind-numbing noise ceased, and Harry shifted Lorna down into a sitting position on the floor, checked her one last time, then flew to the back of the crucible just as the internal workings moved the finished ingot of metal out of forge proper. That bar of metal, by the way, ended up being twelve by twelve feet by eight inches thick and extruded so slowly it gleamed with enough heat that it almost seemed to be challenging the Sun's radiance.

Smirking at the sight, Harry gently cooled the newly created metal using his magic, creating a bubble around it as he had around the forge itself and vanishing the air inside the interior space of the magical sphere. The construct grew noticeably chill until the glow signifying hot metal disappeared. What was left was a metal that appeared almost, but not quite, gray brown in color. It was a very odd color for a metal to be admittedly, but Harry was no expert despite his own experimentations with Orichalcum so he hoped that meant a success.

"Now we get it back and test it," he said, his voice carrying through the com-link back to the crucible itself.

“Worried you have not gotten your money’s worth Lord Potter?” Odin guffawed, showing no real issue with Harry’s desire to test the new metal. As he spoke, the Sky Father turned the Star Forge up and back away from the sun, eagerly looking forward to what was next. It turned out he’d had every right to be amused given the tests the metal would survive not an hour later.

OOOOOOO

Jean stared at the ingot of unnamed metal across from her, amazed. It only now looked as if it were melting at all, and she’d had to resort to searing it under Phoenix Fire for even that. Cutting off her attack, she looked around at the various other weapons that had been used on Harry’s latest impossible feat. The weapons that Reed Richards had designed for the Ravens hovered off to the side, a range of contemporary munitions were haphazardly strewn about, and in the distance, several of the former Kree ships waited in space, including the current flagship of the Earth Defense Force, the Warspite, and the Kree Doom Bringer.

“Harry—er... Lord Potter? Exactly... um, exactly how quickly did you say you could cover my ship with that kind of armor?” Admiral Whitaker asked, his near hysterical voice coming through her com-link sounding somewhat strained. He gave a mad giggle before clearing his throat to continue. “That new metal of yours just shrugged off a sustained blast from my ship’s primary weapon systems and barely looked singed.”

“It stood up to me for a few seconds there too,” Jean added, shaking her head. That kind of firepower, quite literally, had wiped out entire Kree fleets before, the ships reduced to floating char in moments, and yet this ingot had survived. Melted around the edges, maybe, but it had survived all the same.

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves folks. There are a few other tests we need put it through. Þór, ladies first,” Harry announced, a grin clear to be heard over the com-link network.

The redheaded God of Thunder bellowed in fury. “Who told you that tale?!” he roared, moving forward. Lightening crackled, thunder rumbled, and the metal went through another round of proving.

Continued trials aimed at destroying the new metal proved that it was still susceptible to some forces. Jean, Harry, Þór’s hammer, Odin’s spear; if the source of attack was purely magical in nature the metal would in fact break down, slowly but surely. In contrast, anything of mundane origin would most likely be unable to penetrate it without a significant amount of punishment first.

Later that night, having bid Odin farewell with several wines from around the world, Harry raised a glass of his own in a toast. “Gentlemen,” he said, his audience of Reed Richards, Forge, Admiral Whitaker, Tony Stark, E, and General Murphy all looking back at him. They nodding their heads firmly in a show of attention as he continued, “I do believe we are in business.”

“Excellent. In which case, I think that E’s super carrier concept is the best to go with going forward,” Tony began, and Harry leaned back, watching the eggheads and the military men speak, smiling at how far they had come.

OOOOOO

In a way, the calm after the Shadow War was an almost idyllic time, and several months passed in such a manner. Projects were pushed forward, people were trained, deals were made, and... Children were born. First came the newest member of the Richards family, a seemingly perfect and normal baby girl born to Susan Richards without much fuss. The Richards named the girl Susanna.

Not a few weeks later, Jean gave birth to twins. Of course, this being Harry and his family, the births couldn’t have occurred in any way near the normal fashion.

After Jean’s contractions had started, they’d stayed in the headmaster’s chambers, where the necessary staff quickly convened. With Jean magically asleep on a their bed, specially transfigured for the occasion, Amelia Voght stepped forward. She laid a hand gently on her stomach, glancing towards the unfamiliar doctor Harry brought in especially to handle the birthing process since it was something neither she nor Una had ever done before. The man nodded, looking up from where he had been situated between Jean’s legs. He was clearly worried, yet also intrigued, by the fascinating alteration to the normal procedure Amelia had proposed. “They’re ready now! Whatever you’re going to do, I suggest you do it, or these two are going to be born the old-fashioned—”

Before he could even finished, the man’s eyes widened as Jean’s body became incorporeal under Amelia’s touch. With little opportunity to use it publically, many had forgotten that her mutant power allowed her to transubstantiate solid matter into vapor. Anything she touched she could turn into a gas, including herself, so long as it was within her line of sight.

In this case, that meant Jean’s body turned into gas, but her two unborn babies did not. This also meant that they could partially be seen through the insubstantial fog of Jean’s vaporous body. Seeing the babies, two female house-elves, known for their incredible love of and care for babies and children, stepped forward. Together, they used their magic to gently pull the two babies out of Mist-Jean as she hovered on her bed while Harry and Ororo and Hela watched on the sidelines. Harry and Ororo would have volunteered for this role, but there were Laws about using magic on newborns, and it would’ve been a bad very idea to even attempt to do so there in Camelot. Only house-elf magic, so singular and unique, not to mention firmly Good, was not in danger of harming the baby in any way.

Emma also stood nearby, although she was the only woman present who wasn’t at all interested in the process currently unfolding In the room. In fact, she’d even turned away to

hide a yawn. It was nearly four in the morning her time, and she'd been asleep when the labor pains had rocked through the psychic connection Jean kept open between them all.

Moments later, the two babies were successfully pulled out from within Jean's body, their umbilical cords the only things keeping them attached to their mother. After a quick second to stare at his firstborns, Harry reached into Mist-Jean and used a pair of scissors to cut the half fog-like, half solid umbilical cords. Neither the babies nor Jean felt any of that, although both newborns had already set to wailing mightily anyway, neither seeming to be too happy they'd been removed from the warmth and safety that had been their home for so long.

As the doctor watched gapemouthed, the two matronly house elves wrapped the babies in towels, wiped them off, and then set them down to either side of Jean, who was awoken with a quick wave of Harry's hand. Smiling fit to burst, she gathered her twins into her arms, staring down at them in absolute wonder of which only about half was actually from seeing the two lives that she and Harry had created between them in front of her. "That was... I shouldn't call it anti-climactic, but it certainly feels like I should? For all my screaming earlier and the pains of the last few months and the trouble of dealing with getting around at all... that was... easy, I guess? I'd say the only issue I'm dealing with now is that I feel terribly empty. Weird."

"Madam, if this technique of yours ever becomes known in the wider world, you will literally have a war on your hands for it. Women the world over would cheerfully murder to be able to give birth so easily," the doctor said while chuckling, shaking his head with a little smile as he moved forward to examine the babies along with Amelia and Una.

"There's only one of me doctor, and I most certainly am **not** going to spend my every waking moment helping women have babies for the rest of my life. It's an amazing moment, but it isn't my calling," Amelia answered wryly. "On that note, these two darlings at least appear to be particularly healthy."

Fifteen minutes later, the doctor agreed and announced the same, although Harry wondered if half of that time hadn't been spent by the doctor trying to convince Amelia to go into public practice. Eventually, the man was gently ushered out the door, along with Amelia and Una, both of whom gave the family their well wishes as they left. Barely seconds after getting the room to themselves, Ororo was nestled into Jean's left side as Harry did the same at her right, Hela and Emma moving to sit on the bed peering over their shoulders at the two bundles of joy in Jean's arms.

The new mother handed one baby over to Harry, watching lovingly as he cradled her, almost automatically understanding how he had to hold the little girl as if by instinct. Ororo, lost in her own head, was fascinated by the little boy that Jean had kept hold of, her eyes locked on his cherubic face. Unlike his sister, who'd somehow managed to fall asleep shortly after the first round of examinations, the boy was awake, staring around at the new world with interest. When Ororo held out one of her fingers in front of his eyes, his gaze locked onto it as

she gently booped his nose. He babbled with glee as she rubbed a tender finger down his cheek. "They're so soft and precious."

Harry hummed in agreement, leaning over to give Jean a tender kiss on the cheek. Straightening, he made sure to continue rocking his newborn daughter in his arms, unwilling to wake her precious sleep. At the sight of such paternal love, Ororo finalized a decision that she had been thinking over for a long time. Hela, meanwhile, looked at the scene with longing, a maternal part of her awakening within her that she hadn't even known she'd had the capacity for.

Emma, always the exception, felt no such pull towards motherhood, although she did have to admit to feeling a strange warmth of care towards the two babes, which deepened as she locked eyes with the still inquisitive boy, whose gaze was filled by emerald eyes a shade between Harry and Jean's own. She was about to say something when several knocks banged from the door to the headmaster's quarters. Snorting, she changed what she was going to say, instead asking, "How much do you want to bet that's the children?"

"No bet," everyone on the bed said as one, laughing. Emma laughed too, even as she hopped to her feet and headed towards the door, which banged again. Just this once, she knew she would have to put up with kids invading their space. And for once, she couldn't even work up her normal annoyance at the thought.

Opening the door a crack, Emma peered out, seeing Melody, Illyana, and several other boys and girls whose names she'd never bothered to learn. Most of them were well known to Harry and her other lovers though, she knew. She pushed her hand through the crack, waving it with admonishment. "There isn't nearly enough space in here for all of you little gremlins. Most of you are going to have to wait to see the babies until tomorrow."

There were groans of disappointment, but thankfully, most of the kids had been there more for curiosity's sake than anything, interested in just seeing a baby but with no real plans to stay. Some had even seen babies before. However, the fact that these babies were from a wizard and a mutant made them so much more interesting.

"Are they floating?"

"Is lightning coming from their eyes?"

"Is fire!?"

"Do they have elf ears? I have a bet with my big brother on whether or not they'll have any obvious signs about them," one young wag opined.

"Only Melody and Illyana may enter. Again, the rest of you are going to have to wait till tomorrow to see the babies and have your curiosities fed," Emma repeated, making shooing motions even as she opened the door. She held it open with a hand and let the two girls sneak under her arm before closing it to a sea of disappointed faces.

Melody and Illyana fast walked into the room at speed, crawling onto the bed and curling up with the rest of the people on the bed, which had grown magically to accommodate them all. Melody laid her head against Ororo's stomach, staring up at the baby boy that she soon found herself holding. Bright eyes met bright eyes, and a happy little gurgle coming from the babe's mouth as he waved his little hands at her.

Meanwhile, Illyana was feeling rather irritated that the baby she was staring up at was asleep. "What are their names?"

Harry and Jean exchanged a laugh, shaking their heads. "We've actually talked about that for a while, and we decided that I'd get to name the boy, and Jean demanded to name the girl. That little man there is Sirius Potter-Grey everyone."

"And this is Rachel Potter-Grey," Jean said, reaching out her hands towards Harry, who very reluctantly handed Rachel back over.

"Hello Rachel and Sirius," Ororo whispered reverently, silently asking Melody to hand Sirius over, which she did. With him in her arms, she leaned down and kissed him on the cheek, at which point he nuzzled into her neck. She raised him up slightly, and his body hung limply against hers like a cat's, though his eyes stared at her hair in complete fascination. "Welcome to the family."

Time marched on, especially during peace, and the next most important thing that happened to Harry after the birth of his and Jean's children ended up being his wedding to Ororo.

The girls, with Harry's acquiescence, had months ago decided that this was the one wedding that was going to be both a personal union and a political and social event. This was predominantly because Ororo had been by Harry's side from nearly the very beginning, particularly from the moment he had appeared on the international stage.

It also couldn't be denied that Harry and Ororo had been the start of their little polycule. Even now, their personal relationship was the one the others all orbited around. Indeed, when invitations to the wedding had first been sent out, the various responses they'd received from world leaders they'd been working with for any length of time had been various degrees of, "Wait, you're not married already?" in various tones of incredulity or shock. Still, all those invitations, except the one to their Chinese contact, were accepted.

The wedding was held in the ancient African city Harry and Ororo had discovered months ago. The magic embedded in the stone pillars they had discovered months ago had begun to clear the city of overgrowth and had basically completed their purpose by that point. As the guests arrived through the various temporary runic doorways that had been set up, they had all, every one, stopped and stared in awe.

The African Defense Organization leadership had been told in advance that the wedding would happen in Africa. Every one of them—bar the Egyptian representative—had imagined that it would be held in Cairo or Alexandria as it was well known that Ororo had lived in Egypt as a young child.

These... sprawling ancient ruins that looked better preserved than Pompeii was not what they had expected. Architecture made of stone in a strange Carthaginian and Egyptian mix spread out in every direction from where they had arrived in a wide thoroughfare. A waterway of crystal-clear water wound its way sinuously through the area, lined with the remains of small gardens. Fish swam in the canal's waters, and large trees sprouted here and there between the pillars, their canopies wide and arching.

To Harry's consternation, one of those awed guests was in fact T'challa. As one of the leaders of the African Defense Organization, they hadn't been able to exclude him from an event happening within Africa. But at least now, Harry was able to have a private chuckle when he and the other ADO leaders nearly stumbled into one another as they stared around like star struck children. Even better, the young king also arrived with his girlfriend, one of his nation's diplomats. So there was at least the possibility that he'd finally gotten over the last of his jealousy towards Harry.

As they were led down the path to the place where the ceremony would be held, many of the guests noticed that the buildings were not uniform but showed a multitude of carvings upon their walls that were both ancient and well-preserved. Some depicted daily life of the people who'd once lived in the city. Others, which interested T'challa far more, showed a map of Africa, with the location of this city marked with a star. Numerous roads radiated out from the star like sunbeams. "It would seem as if our ancestors created the idea of all roads leading to Rome before the Romans did. Alas, I suppose it is too late to ask for royalties for the use of that phrase."

His attempt at a joke won polite chuckles from his fellow Africans, men from all over the continent, all united here under the auspices of ADO, and now in the awe they felt of what they were seeing here. As native Africans, they'd grown used to the natural beauty of Africa, the trees, the plains, the deserts, the birds, and animals. Nature had been right outside their door their entire lives. But something like this? A history unknown to all of them and hidden away in the depths of their undeveloped continent? That was something else entirely, and more than a few didn't quite know how to take the discovery.

They weren't the only ones in awe, and Piotr and the other minders would have a time of it keeping the adult guests, let alone the children of Camelot, from exploring farther. Adventure time, the kids were told, would come after the ceremony. But despite that, the kids could hardly bear to ignore the allure of the unknown that called to them.

Thankfully, of the children of Camelot, who were all in attendance at Ororo's insistence, only Melody, Illyana, Christopher and Jesse—the two brothers Ororo had first saved in Sudan



long ago—had roles to play. Melody, as it should have been guessed, was the child who had no interest at all in anything but the wedding. The duet she saw between Ororo and Harry visibly growing louder to her senses despite the fact they had separated before the wedding proper.

“You have about forty minutes before the wedding is supposed to start, Sirs,” Stinger, or rather Wendy at that moment, said with a grin as she and Morph greeted the still wandering members of ADO, handing out nametags and gesturing to the other side of the waterway, where a similar runic doorway was letting in delegates from the rest of the world. “If you want to explore a bit, no one will stop you. But please be in your seats ten minutes before we begin.”

“Where exactly are we?” Asked the South African representative, his English having an accent that Wendy couldn’t quite place. Evidently, he hadn’t noticed the large carved maps along the walls marking the stone around them.

“Uncharted territory, Sirs,” Wendy answered with an airy wave toward the nearest such map. “After the wedding, this entire site will be turned over to you all, to be used as the headquarters for the African Defense Organization if you so wish. Harry—that is, Lord Potter, will be footing the bill to bring in everything necessary for contemporary living while retaining the original architecture. I think he said something about it being a wedding present to Ororo’s original people.”

While Ororo had not traveled across the African continent in her youth, nor when she’d temporarily focused on rescuing nascent mutant children, most Africans who knew about her—and weren’t bigots—considered Ororo Munroe one of their own. These representatives were no different. They all smiled proudly at the announcement, even T’challa, although he looked a little wistful for a moment.

The expression quickly passed, and Wendy continued to lead them forward while Morph stayed behind to assist any other over-awed guests. Wendy took her charges across the thoroughfare, gesturing to where the wedding would be taking place. This was in front of a large building that must’ve been the equivalent of the palace at one point, with a set of stairs leading up the ziggurat-like building. Tables and chairs had been out there.

Once that was done, and Wendy was certain that they all had a way to tell the time, they were allowed to go off on their own. Wendy cheerfully ignored the shouts from the nearby children, who were decidedly not allowed to go off and explore alone. Nor were the Africans, truth be told. Indeed, many a gray-haired elderly statesman could be found looking around in awe at the place, filled with an urge to explore. Even by complete happenstance, there was always someone else present wherever someone thought to investigate.

All too soon for many, the delegates were all called back to the square in front of the palace. There, various Custodes Mundi members acted as ushers, guiding them to their seats. The children of Camelot had been assigned to the front row, along with Kitty, her parents, Jean, and Emma. The next row of seats had been reserved for friends and members of the X-Men and

Custodes Mundi, which was much the same thing, really. The ADO members discovered that they'd been interspersed with the rest of the guests, all other representatives and diplomats. Since there was so much space, there was no issue with crowding despite the several hundred people present.

"I wonder whose customs they're going to choose to follow? The setup looks somewhat Christian to me," murmured one of the delegates as he was ushered into a seat. "If you ignore our surroundings, that is."

"Actually, according to what Ororo told us, they've basically picked and chose different aspects of wedding ceremonies and sort of muddled them all together," Paige announced, causing the older African gentleman to look at her in question, and the Southern brawler shrugged. "Well, neither Harry nor Ororo have extended families, unless you count the Camelot kids, and most of the wedding ceremonies they looked into were more about two family groups coming together rather than the individuals. and those that aren't about that, are about making certain that they can provide for the next generation. Which... is kind of obvious so... yeah." The Guthrie girl shrugged again, helped the older man into his seat, and then moved on quickly, embarrassed at realizing she'd spoken out of turn.

Regardless, her words were passed along, and when the wedding ceremony finally began, everyone knew it wouldn't match anything they had expected. Even so, they truly didn't realize how much that would be the case...

Hela stood on the stairs leading into the palace behind, wearing a long white dress covering her from neck ankle and a matching white half-mask, the white just a shade lighter than Hela's skin tone. The only color on Hela beyond white was her hair, which was its normal lustrous black and on her lips. These, Hela had painted a light violet for the occasion which appeared to pop against her pale skin.

Harry stood in his tuxedo a step below and to the side of her, the same one that he'd worn for his wedding with Jean, although the undershirt was a different color. This time he'd been given a pale blue to wear by his ladies. The clip on his neck was also slightly larger, a pearl matching that of Ororo's eyes when she used her mutant power.

He smiled down at the kids, getting wide grins in return before nodding at Ben Grimm, Reed and Susan Richards, young Susanna in her mother's arms. Then he traded looks of respect with Doctor Doom and his newly crowned fiancé, Paris Lourdes, the power couple sitting in the row directly behind the Custodes Mundi. He'd spent most of that morning talking with the not-so-good Doctor; finalizing certain plans, ironing out more trade agreements, generally making certain that Doom understood that the upcoming terraforming projects focused on the various moons of Jupiter would not expand beyond that body or interfere in Doom's own plans around Venus.

His thoughts about politics and plots ceased as drums began to play from out of sight. A low, deep throbbing beat quickly segued into a quick staccato rhythm as all the guests turned to take in the sight of Ororo striding into view down the thoroughfare and into the square. Ahead of her, Melody and Illyana walked in step, tossing out flowers of various types and colors. Directly to either side of Ororo Christopher and Jesse kept pace.

Christopher had chosen to wear the traditional garb of a Nubian warrior, spear and all. Some might've thought he looked childish, if not for the fact that his spear's edge gleamed in the daylight, sharp and deadly. While the rest of his garb might have been a mere costume, the weapon was not, and more than one ADO member recognized this. Jesse, likewise, had chosen the gear of an ancient Egyptian charioteer, and wore a bow on his back with a khopesh in his hand. Looking at the two, it was clear that they were acting as Ororo's "guards," the brothers ready to fight off anyone who would attack the coming bride. Yet as anachronistic and seemingly out of place—yet somehow one hundred percent accurate—as the boys' uniforms were, none of the guests looked at the two youngsters for very long, enchanted by Ororo.

She was every inch a Queen, and stepped forward with confidence as the two flower girls hurried ahead of her, wearing a gold and black dress of somewhat Moroccan design. From her knees up to her neck, the black cloth was shiny, reflecting the light in odd patterns as she moved. Golden embroidery accented the strips of black fabric, edging around it, down the center of her chest between her breasts, covering her upper arms with whorls in images of vines and leaves. Where the ethereal dress ended, its gold seemed to continue right out onto her skin. Henna markings had been somehow made to gleam with gold instead of the slightly darker color they normally would be, swirling down her arm and merging with her Panja ring. It was as if the ring that Harry had created had become part of the rest of her outfit, even though that outfit had none of Harry's craft in it, instead having been made by Ororo herself.

Below Ororo's knees, the black of the dress shifted until it was nearly transparent, but not quite, and more could be seen there; the gold embroidery there shifting and writhing with her strides. Her long silver hair was done up in a bun and, for now, tight to her head, allowing all to see the circlet of gold she wore upon her head, the same crown she had worn when meeting Odin and Freya in the halls of Valhalla. And unlike some traditional weddings of African cultures, particularly Islamic ones, her face remained uncovered and glorious as she stepped forward.

As Ororo moved down the aisle, she looked neither left nor right. Her gaze, her entire focus, was locked on Harry. Her lips, dusted gold, formed a warm smile, which matched Harry's own loving grin. Only able to catch Harry's side of things since she was in front of Ororo, Melody, who had been half out of it even by her pre-Harry standards since she had arrived here, began to hum to the wedding march. Her head bobbed from side to side as she moved along beside Illyana, her mind adrift in the orchestra her mutant powers allowed her to experience. Still, even preoccupied, she continued to throw out flowers, so that was a good thing.

Soon the four children split off, leaving Ororo to walk the last few steps up the stairs to the palace by her own until she stood beside Harry, the two in front of Hela. The pair tore their eyes from one another with effort and looked to their Asgardian goddess. Hela smiled at her lovers with an indulgent grim before raising her hands to begin the service.

She never spoke, however, because suddenly, a light touch on her shoulder caused her to freeze as a collective gasp of shock rippled through the crowd. "Would you mind if I cut in, dear?"

Turning, Hela smiled slightly at the sight of Gaia standing there behind her, gaze kind and joyful. Once more, The Earth Mother wore her guise of the Matron, appearing as a middle-aged woman with weathered and tanned skin whose dark brown hair flowed down to below her rear in a series of intricate knots. She wore a dress made of interwoven, and still living, vines and flowers, covered her from neck to ankle, the flowers slowly blooming and closing as the onlookers watched. Upon her head was a crown of leaves, no one leaf like any other, representing the whole gamut of the world's trees, and around her, birds flew for a moment before settling down on nearby rooftops.

Most of the Custodes Mundi didn't react overmuch to her presence. Some had met Gaia before, if briefly, while others had simply become used to people, beings, and entities besides popping in and out of their lives since moving to Camelot. But for the rest of the audience, barring the Fantastic Four and Doctor Doom, the feeling of divinity struck like a mace, causing eyes to widen and knees to buckle as if their owners felt the urge to kneel before this woman even as they sat there. No one could look at this woman and not understand on some fundamental level that she was divine in some fashion. Many, the Christians, Jews, and Muslims among them, immediately felt their minds grind to a stuttering stop, having trouble mentally fitting that truth into their worldviews.

For those who knew about them, the Asgardians were easy in comparison. None who had met any of those who had come to Earth could deny the Asgardians were powerful, but none who had come to Earth created this impact in those they met, save to the Asatru their followers. For those who didn't believe, they were simply an alien race who had in the distant past come to earth and been taken as gods, simple. Easy to understand, if not accept. But Gaia's aura couldn't be denied, not by any human born of her soil, and it filled the majority of the audience with equal measures of awe and fear.

"As you wish, Great Mother," Hela replied, bowing her head with respect to the ancient goddess of Earth. Straightening, she stepped around the bride and groom and headed for the front row. Picking up Melody from her seat, she sat down and set the child on her lap. The young mutant was still almost entirely unresponsive, having long since lost herself to the powerful duet of Harry and Ororo's individual songs merging together into one.

Alone now on the steps above the couple, Gaia stared out over the heads of her Chosen and the Life Guardian. Looking out into the crowd, where her gaze rested, men and women

bowed their heads in respect, fear, awe, and more. The only ones not doing so being Emma, Hela, Jean, and Doctor Doom. Of those four, the Doctor simply stared back at the Goddess of the Earth, before slightly nodding his head once as if in acknowledgement of her power, if nothing else, before looking on in interest as she began to speak.

“Love. Love is like a garden. You reap what you sow, what you work for. Before you stand a man and woman who, despite all the other demands on their time, have made together the most beautiful garden they possibly could. Who, in millions of iterations, billions of timelines, trillions of possibilities, should never have been able to meet, let alone come together as they have done so here. And it is together that they have forged a future together. This was not Fate. Simple chance and luck brought them into contact with one another. And everything since that first meeting has been of their own doing, their, their own love for one another and for the world at large.”

Gaia smiled then shook her head. “Normally, there would be several speeches at this point in the ceremony where both your families and yourselves would declare to one another. Declare how much you mean to one another, how you had come to love one another. But through the trials of life you have been left bereft, alone, and there is no blood here to speak for you. Instead, you made that family for yourselves, and there need be no parents to give either of you away, one to the other. And as for speeches of devotion? Such things would be superfluous, don’t you think? Your garden speaks for itself, your love clear and pure. Thus, there is only one question that remains to be asked which now must be answered. Do you, Harry James Potter, Wizard of another world, and do you, Ororo Munroe, Beloved Chosen of Gaia, wish to bind yourselves together for now and all of time?”

While anyone could have made that same speech, somehow Gaia’s words felt as though they had a weight to them, a reality transcending the physical world around the prospective bride and groom that built with each word until a weight hung in the air, a promise bearing down on the two lover. Yet, for all the pressure behind that question neither hesitated even a fraction of a second. Harry and Ororo simply looked at one another and, as one, declared, “Yes.”

“Then hold out your hands towards me.”

Harry and Ororo did so, their palms facing downwards. From the stone of the platform, a short plinth of earth rose in front of them. At the top of the flowing stone, a chalice appeared. As it settled into place, Gaia took a moment to nod to Illyana. Harry’s young apprentice rushed forward, her small basket heavier in her arms, the flowers there joined by other things. She held it underneath the hands of her teacher/parental figure and the woman who’d become such a big part of his life, and both reached in and grabbed a nut a piece. At the goddess’s direction, they snapped the nut between them, and then turning to one another, fed the bits to each other.

“Kula nuts, so that your marriage will be bountiful,” Gaia ordained, before gesturing with one hand that the bride and groom reach into Illyana’s basket once more.

There, the two found their hands plunging into living flowers, coming out holding vines of white flowers that grew up their arms for a moment. Those vines wound around a giggling Illyana before spreading out along the ground to cover the steps leading up to the palace and the grounds, stopping just shy of the feet of those in the front row behind the quartet on the steps, and all but the strongest-willed among those who watched felt a surge of joy and delight wash over them as if emanating from the flowers. As Harry and Ororo pulled back their arms, the vines around Illyana faded, and at an unspoken signal she rushed back to her seat by her brother and Amara.

“And white lilies in abundance, so that your marriage will forever be wreathed in happiness,” Gaia said, wondering why Harry appeared thunderstruck at her words rather than the subtlety of the life magic she had just used.

Gaia had never been told much of Harry’s past, though she knew he was Fate Marked and came from another dimension. Harry had never spoken of his parents in front of her, never even mentioned his mother’s name in her presence. But to Harry, her somehow randomly choosing white lilies indicated something far more profound than her words.

“Lastly, a sacrifice of blood, so that you may never forget that your lives are as one now and forever.” Gaia announced, setting that mystery to one side. At her nod his way, Christopher stepped forward, placing a tiny platinum dagger in Harry’s hand. Not even pausing for a moment, Harry held the dagger firmly to slice his palm, then Ororo’s. The two of them then pressed their palms together, the cuts bleeding together. A few droplets dripped out from the joined hands and down into the chalice in front of them. When the blood hit the stone, it disappeared, a band of magic bursting to life in its stead. Flowing into twin streams of light, the magic wrapped around Harry and Ororo’s wrists, binding their hands together. Gaia placed her own hands upon the union, adding her own magic to the mix.

“Thus, I pronounce you man and wife, Harry and Ororo Potter!” Gaia declared, each word again thrumming with power as the two created between them a magical bond. It wasn’t like the soul bonds that had featured so prominently in the Wizarding World’s romance novels. They wouldn’t be able to share thoughts or feelings without Emma or Jean being involved. But their magic had been joined together, giving Ororo access to Harry’s reserves and vice versa. Later, they would discover that it had also given them a sense of one another, if not emotions or thoughts, simply directional awareness. They would always know where the other was at any given time, near or far.

That was for later though. Right then, Gaia lifted her hands from where she had been holding Ororo and Harry’s, where they had clasped together. Then, smiling mischievously, she winked at Harry. “You may now kiss the bride.”

With their hands still fast together, Harry pulled Ororo slightly across towards them, leaning in and kissing her deeply. For a moment that was an eternity, the rest of the world simply stopped existing. It was just the two of them, kissing, expressing their love for one another.

Eventually, the cheering and whooping of the crowd and Gaia's gleeful, almost dirty laughter broke through eventually and interrupted them. Ororo was slightly embarrassed but still turned to face the crowd, waving one hand to them with all the gaiety of a truly happily married woman. Harry did the same, and their free arms wrapped around one another as the Custodes, the X-Men, the children, the delegates, and everyone else cheered.

Of course, this being a public ceremony, there were many well-wishes to take from guests and small discussions that had to be held. Harry and Ororo stayed center stage for all of it, shaking hands and making nice with everyone there, although both very much preferred Jean and Emma's heartfelt hugs and Hela's snarky well wishes to the well-meaning, but somewhat pat and remote, handshaking they had to do with the various delegates, representatives, and diplomats.

Indeed, Harry spent whatever part of his thoughts weren't on Ororo during this time wishing he was a kid again, exploring the ruins with Christopher, Jesse, Anechka, Illyana, Melody, and the other children.

That somewhat tedious aspect of the wedding continued well into the evening and after Harry felt like he'd shaken every hand present, the reception had kicked off. Food that had been prepared was eaten, music played, dances done, and Jean and Scott had even prepared speeches about how Harry and Ororo's courtship had first started, which had drawn laughter from many in the crowd.

But eventually, the fireworks were over, and the guests were sent on their way. The children had long since been sent back to Camelot, with most of the Custodes Mundi and X-Men having gone with them. Once the last diplomat had been seen off through their runic doorway Emma, Jean, and Hela sought the two newlyweds out. The trio left lingering kisses on Harry and Ororo's lips, then left in a whirl of cheerful laughter so the two could enter the palace alone.

It had been decided that the two of them would have to first night as a married couple there in the ancient city rather than back at Camelot, as had been the case with Emma and Jean. Somehow, especially with Sirius and Rachel having come along, it just didn't seem right to return to the castle for a 'them-only' night, even if they did so in a different room. It was probably irrational, but neither of them cared overly much and Emma and Jean had both agreed.

Alone at last, Harry and Ororo wound their way through the ancient palace, nuzzling, kissing, and feeling one another up, almost acting like horny teenagers. But the self-control that

they'd developed over their long romance allowed them to resist completely giving in to their urges too soon. That being said, pieces of clothing did still start to come off in the hallways, trailing behind them as they moved until finally, they found themselves in a grand bedroom.

Whether it had been the ruler's bedroom or someone else's didn't much matter. The bed, which had been made up of feather stuffings and silks and would've been entirely out of place to find in the ruins of an ancient city, had clearly been prepared for them by some of the house elves. Thankfully, that meant it was more than large enough for the two of them, and that was enough for tonight.

Soon, Harry found himself hovering over Ororo, sucking and licking at the milk-chocolate colored skin at her throat as his hands began to play with her perfect breasts, bare once more to his loving caress. The Panja ring that Ororo never took off, and the golden henna worked into her skin gleamed still on her lower legs and forearms in light of the moon from a large window, but Harry was far too interested in the texture of her dark chocolate nipples, the feel of them already hard under his fingers, the taste of them as he dragged his tongue over them to take notice. He wasn't too focused to miss the wet and throbbing heat that was grinding against his barely clothed crotch though, and nuzzled lovingly into her shoulder before moving further downward.

Feeling herself heat up under her husband's ministrations, Ororo wound her fingers through his hair, pulling his head up from where he'd been devouring her breasts into a searing kiss. Their tongues began a duel instantly, one that was furious, and passionate, during which Ororo shifted them around so that she was on top. And as Ororo and Harry broke off their tongue duel in order to breath and Harry instantly began to work on her neck, moving downward once more to devour her right nipple. In response, She ground her panties against his iron-hard length, the thin barriers of their sodden undergarments just barely keeping them from becoming one.

The enticing action caused Harry to nearly buck her off his waist, so wound up was he from all the teasing and flirting, and he growled, sending pulses of pleasure through Ororo's nipple.

Ororo felt a shiver jolt down her spine at the sound, as she always did whenever she was able to rouse it from her lover, but there was something else on her mind than the pure passion and the joy of finally being man and wife. She pulled back upwards into a brief kiss, breaking it off just as his tongue started to enter her mouth, instead pressing her forehead to Harry's, locking eyes with him.

They paused there for a moment, taking each other in. Then Ororo leaned in, kissing him ever so gently, before saying softly, throatily. "No spells tonight, Harry."

Harry blinked, before his eyes widened. He understood what his wife was saying: no contraceptives. "Do you think it's time? Are you sure?"



“Yes!” Ororo answered immediately, voice growing huskier with every word. “This way, our eldest children will grow up with Sirius and Rachel almost the same age. I think that would be magnificent, don’t you?”

Harry gave a chuff, his heart feeling like it was fit to burst again. How did he deserve this woman? Or any of them? “I think having kids with you would be magnificent, my love. And I think that you’ll be a magnificent mother too. Of course, I think you’re magnificent, period,” he quipped, leaning in for another kiss. “And if that is what my lovely and magnificent wife had decided, then I cheerfully agree.”

Ororo laughed, then gasped as Harry used both of his hands to rip her poor undergarments off, not having noticed that as she had been speaking a uncontrolled burst of magic from her had similarly divested Harry of his boxers. Before she could fully process that nothing now lay between her wet flower and his shaft, Harry moved again. The feeling of him sliding inside her caused Ororo to moan, mirroring her husband’s groan, and from there the night continued on, passion and love overflowing.

OOOOOO

Thanos stood aboard the bridge of his commandeered Skrull fleet flagship watching an animal the size of a small planetoid being bombarded from long-range. Nearby, two actual planets, which had been terraformed through some unknown means to support life when they should not have burned from one end to the other.

Taking it all in, Thanos could only smile, breathing in deeply, ecstatically, his eyes alight with mad fervor. He knew in his heart that his Lady will have felt it, this gift of his. *That being said, I know she does not approve of such grandiose, dull offerings. And I will admit this display lacks my normal artistry. It has been too... too painless, too clinical. But for a segue to what I plan to do to Earth, and the Avatar of the Phoenix Force, this should at least grab her attention and make certain my Lady’s eyes are on me going forward.*

It had taken some time, far too much time, to trace the Brood back to its true point of origin, but eventually they had done it. Thanos was pleased his daughters had accomplished their mission so quickly. Now though, Gamora and Nebula stood before him, their faces lit with pride at completing what had been the toughest part of their father’s latest campaign. “Well done the two of you. Not only did you succeed in the initial assignment to send me a live Brood along with an infected Skrull, but when it became clear to you how widespread the corruption had truly become, you were willing to set aside your pride and competitiveness and work together with Loki to root out its source.”

“I could wish that we had been able to reform or surgically strike against the Infected, father,” Gamora said with a sigh, “But the deaths of those innocents were necessary to save the greater whole.”

Indeed, the Brood had invaded the Skrull in a most insidious manner, spreading their transformative genetics through various populations throughout the Empire so far before they had begun to attack openly it had astonished even Thanos. Not once had any of the Infected ever caused trouble enough to be discovered, until they had at least half the local population of whatever planet they were invading suborned. But Thanos had been able to devise a genetic scanner, one that allowed its wielder to see who had become infected and who hadn't. With the scanner spreading throughout the Skrull Empire, they had been able to identify and quarantine the segments of the population that had been infected, stopping all traffic from those planets to as yet-untouched worlds and visa-versa.

Then, Loki and his daughters had gone down to each planet in those sectors and, either working with the local authorities or against them, ousted the infected. This had, of course, resulted in several minor insurrections across the Skrull Empire as the infected fought tooth and nail against the exterminations. At the same time, the true Brood had invaded from beyond, their turned soldiers having taken command of even more Skrull ships, as had previously occurred against Fleet Overlord Len'Dok's command.

Several planets had been lost before Nebula and Gamora, or Thanos' other agents could arrive, of course. They had been scoured from orbit until all life signs had been extinguished. It was only in such a manner that the Empire could be kept clean and free of future threats, and thus useful to Thanos now and into the future.

"Sire, the Fleet Overlord is here," Maw announced, going to one knee in front of his lord. Thanos turned, nodding to the psionically powerful alien that had served him longer than most others. With a gesture, Maw turned and opened the doors to the bridge with a bare nod.

Fleet Overlord Len'Dok strode in, his bearing erect, his posture sure, appearing unaffected despite Black Dwarf's presence behind him, double-bladed battle axe in hand. That was quite courageous, although the middle-aged Skrull male's eyes did remain locked on Thanos, showing a hint of fear. But even then, only a hint. *Good. He knows I am stronger than he, and he acknowledges that I command him. Yet he also understands that he did his job as well as could be expected and is stout enough not to be reduced to a blubbing mess. Excellent material.*

Unaware of how much Thanos had read into him just by watching him walk onto the bridge, the Fleet Overlord continued to stride forward until he stopped an appropriate distance away. He saluted in a crisp, practiced motion. "Your Imperial Majesty."

"Your Imperial Majesty? Really? Given the groveling of the other fleet officers, who clearly understood the new disposition of power within the Empire, I had expected more from the only man to avoid answering his new lord and master's summons," Loki drawled, his tone sardonic as he moved from where he too had been watching the bombardment of the massive Brood vessel.

As Thanos himself had been doing, Loki had ignored the debris around the flagship, both organic and not, as it passed by the viewing window, even when some of it was quite close. The fighting had long since moved from the outer edge of the star system to deeper inward, and now the flagship hovered in space where the interstellar battle had begun. The detritus this far in had originally been so thick they'd actually had to incinerate some of it so that Thanos could watch still yet distant last stages of the campaign.

Loki had noticed something. Both of Thanos' daughters had trouble looking away from the death and destruction around them. One looked upon the results of the campaign with an almost reverent fervor. In contrast, the other was careful to conceal her disdain and sadness. *Well, well, well, it would appear as if the robotic one is just as bloodthirsty as her father. But the other one... hmm, Gamora might just have a soul somewhere under all that conditioning. How delightfully interesting.*

"I explained my absence from that meeting in the letter I sent in my stead... Stranger," Fleet Overlord Len'Dok intoned with dull politeness, despite answering instantly. "And judging by the fact that Lord Thanos did not take away my command the instant he arrived in the Meridian system, I can only imagine he understands even if you cannot." Meridian had been the only anchorage remaining to his Grand Fleet once the Brood and their infected had begun to reveal themselves.

"I understand it well enough, and no one is saying you didn't do your job, but I am merely wondering where your loyalty lies. Self-interest and self-effacement can come in many forms after all," Loki drawled. "While you continue plotting against your lords."

Thanos, hitherto silent, wasn't about to let that pass. "You would know Loki, would you not?"

The Trickster simply laughed in response. It was true, after all, but both he and Thanos knew who held the whip in their agreement, for there was no carrot or stick. The Asgardian stepped closer to the Fleet Overlord, his eyes boring into the Skrull as he continued his mild interrogation while Thanos allowed it. Loki had a way of ferreting out secrets and lies that even Thanos had found useful, if not respectable. "I would indeed, hence why I am so questioning. I question this upright, militaristic Fleet Overlord's willingness to simply go along with our usurpation of his people's sovereignty. Especially with the public following he has garnered as a result of this crisis."

"I am a soldier. Nothing more," Fleet Overlord Len'Dok bit out sharply. "It is not my place to make policy, nor is it my place to lead my people. I obey orders from on high and defend them. If the potentates have bowed to Lord Thanos, then I, a soldier will do the same."

There was a slight, barely there wavering to the Skrull's words, but nothing in his body language or eyes suggested anything beyond what he said. He was afraid, as all lesser beings should be in his presence, Thanos knew. But he stood to his duty with actual courage. Nor was

there any self-effacing aggrandizement to him. That was already far better than the more obvious obsequiousness that Thanos had dealt with when he'd brought the other Skrull flag officers to heel.

"Excellent. You will serve me well, Len'Dok. And in so doing, you will serve in the betterment of your people. Once my own objectives have been met, you and yours will be raised to new heights atop the corpses of your enemies."

The Fleet Overlord cocked his head to one side at this, and Thanos went on. "For now, you will command a war fleet of mine, a Grand Fleet in Skrull terms. You will be coming with my allies and myself to a certain star system, and there... there you will aid me in wiping out all life within."

While Thanos had been busy dealing with the Brood, he had not been idle when it came to Earth. He had learned through the intelligence network of his Black Order that Potter had built up a kind of slap and dash military by stealing it, quite literally, from bits stolen from the Kree. He'd then beaten off an incursion of Badoon with it.

From that alone, if he hadn't already had prior experience, Thanos would've been able to see that humans were very warlike. While lacking in advanced weaponry, their militaries made up for it through sheer numbers... relative to their population size of course. And that didn't even take into account those humans with powers beyond the norm. His own followers would have had issues conquering the planet alone given the sheer number of super-powered individuals Earth seemed to boast, especially if they had a proper space-faring fleet to back them. In the end he'd decided it would've taken more time and effort and resources than he'd been willing to waste. Death would surely look unkindly upon him if he'd struggled against such a primitive species.

But with the Skrull in hand to function as the bulk of his forces, Thanos knew he would be able to wipe out all life on Earth with ease. Only then would he be able to do it slowly, savoring the killing, making the whole act a show for his Lady. Oh no. There would be no quick, nearly painless death of an orbital bombardment for Potter and his ilk.

"Of course your Majesty. I would ask only two questions. One, what is the target? Two, what is to stop the Brood from returning after we have left? We were only able to follow them this far, and no farther, due to the density of Nebula 426 interfering with our tracking technology. There could be more of them out there within the nebula, or beyond, and we would not be prepared for their counterattack."

"We have time before the true assault against the Brood Fleet Overlord. But, I will leave behind plans for a series of scanners and weaponry that will be able to target living ships as the Brood use," Thanos answered, smiling wickedly at the male Skrull sense of duty and bravery. "It will be up to your civilian sectors to build such things. As for our target? Our target is the

homeworld of the Fantastic Four, which I know your people have dealt with before. The target, Fleet Overlord, is Earth.”

Alas, for the ever watching Loki, he silently bemoaned the fact that he wouldn't be allowed the time to follow up on to the curious discovery that one of Thanos' daughters might actually have a soul. Such an intriguing find might've perhaps given Loki a wedge to bring against Thanos in the future when the two inevitably clashed. Instead, as Corvus and Maw took the Fleet Overlord aside for further discussion, Loki found himself being escorted by Black Dwarf to his specialized cloaking ships with orders to leave immediately.

Such ships were highly expensive, even for the Skrull, costing them about as much as four of their equivalent to a Kree Planet Crusher or Doom Bringer. But in return each was completely invisible coming in and out of hyperspace as well as when traveling in real space. They were slow in real space, but that didn't matter to Loki overmuch. Nor did the fact that they weren't equipped with any artillery or weapons systems seeing as Skull military technology was too energy intensive when in use to be hidden even under the cloaking technology.

Sitting in the command chair, Loki memorized the controls of the ship he'd been assigned as he had done previously, marveling anew at how far the sentient species beyond Asgard had come. *Truly, ships like these are amazing to behold. Now if I can only get to Earth unseen, then I will be in a very good position to follow my role in this scheme.*

Moments later Loki's ship exited the dock of *Sanctuary II* and jettisoned out into space, where it was almost instantly hailed. Opening the communications channel, which was only usable when he wasn't actively using the cloaking device, the Trickster smiled thinly at the Thanos in the ship's screen. “And now here I go, your good little scout, out into the dark, to pave the way for your mighty army. What final words of wisdom do you have to share with me, my Lord?”

“No wisdom for you Loki, for well do I know you would look at such askance,” Thanos answered coldly, all traces of his earlier humor utterly gone. “No. Instead, I will remind you of the oath you swore when I saved you from the void.”

Loki's whimsical air disappeared, and he raised a single brow as he stared through the screen at Thanos. “I need no reminder my Lord.”

“Even so. You **will** serve me, Loki, and in return, you will ascend to the throne of Asgard. However, if you prove yourself an oathbreaker, then you will die. Remember that,” Thanos intoned, ignoring Loki's words. “You swore on your very life, and I know that means something to you godling. You have magically bound yourself to me on pain of being returned to the endless void. I hold your life in my hand until we claim victory on Earth.”

“Of that there can be no doubt my Lord,” Loki answered, bowing his head. “You have my life, and my loyalty.” *I will be loyal to you as my oath demands, for as long as you have a*

*chance at victory Thanos, as my oath demands. But once a single victory is yours, who's to know how long you will be able to stand victorious?*

With that, Thanos cut the connection, and Loki turned his ship towards the outer edge of the system and his eventual destination, the planet Earth far beyond.

### **End Chapter**

I had thought to write a lemon here, as it's been a while, and this is such an important occasion. But when I thought about it more clearly, I realized I hadn't written up lemons for Emma or Jean on their weddings. And frankly, this story has moved past the lemon stage. Sorry if it looks like I teased you all, folks.