

I am not Rowling nor Stan Lee... or whoever he sold Marvel to.

Hey all, here is the next chapter of [ATP](#)! I am continuing my efforts to push this story to completion, although it has to be said, my muses have not liked being so shackled LOL. Thank goodness for my other fics.

Before we get to the chapter though, I want to give a shout out to the readers who pointed out several mistakes I'd made in the last chapter. Most of them were minor, but one big one was that I had **forgotten that Odin was forced into the Odin-Sleep by the Shadows!!** This has been corrected, along with a lot of minor mistakes and immersion issues, and I also went back and changed how everyone interacted with Wander-Odin. In the original, I let Gaea and the Enchantress's attitude towards him color everyone else's interactions with him, and that was not right. I also went into further detail on the expanded team roster. Harry and the Custodes are going full hog on this mission folks!

I strongly suggest rereading the changes made to the chapter!!! The important ones start in the segment of the chapter where you will find the name 'Freya' being used! Search the page for it, and you should be able to jump to it. If you don't then a large segment of this chapter might not make sense.

Summary of the last chapter: While Harry continues to enjoy some down time training his apprentice and having some soul-repairing family time, War begins in Asgard as the Shadows decide they need to use the big reset button marked Ragnarök. Balder the Bright One is in the fore of the fighting, slowing them down as elsewhere, his brother leads his reduced party back up Yggdrasil, still dealing with mirage-based attacks slowing them down.

Elsewhere on Earth, Wander-Odin is active, having saved a young girl with an intriguing power named Blink. Having received orders from his original self, Wander-Odin seeks out another banished Asgardian, the Enchantress. Reluctant to leave her immensely pleasurable life, Amora is forced to help Wander-Odin connect with Harry in a way that will grab his attention. The trio do this by using Blink to teleport into the Savage Land as Harry is there looking over the physical changes of the place with his lady-loves.

With their downtime interrupted, Harry and his officers begin to plan out what to do and how big a hammer they need to bring to the campaign. Meanwhile, Thor and company arrive back in time to find all is not well in Asgard. After a lengthy journey, the group meet with Queen Freya, who is commanding the muster in lieu of her husband, who has fallen into the Odin-sleep. Thor is instantly sent to the front to do what he does best.

Back on Earth, preparations take time but eventually, the Avalon Empire Expeditionary Force is ready to go. This included a few new faces in the Hulk, Xian co Manh, Emma Steed, and Charles Xavier. The four of them join almost the entirety of the X-men, Strange's household, the Custodes, and the first four companies of quasi-trained Orbital Drop Marines. The small army uses Blink's power, Harry and the Asgardians' connections to Yggdrasil to teleport, leaving Earth behind more than a week after Wander-Odin made contact with Harry.

Edit 5/22/2022: [Morde24](#) had finished going through this chapter when I initially posted it, but [Observanc3](#) had not. He has now, and you will find the majority of the chapter is far better written. In particular, I am clearer on where all the Custodes are in the fights, the dialogue is cleaner/more character specific, and the settings are better described.

Chapter 48: War of the Gods

While Harry and his assault force had been preparing for their sojourn to Asgard, the war against Surtur and his people had continued. Nearly a month since the first clashes on the border had passed, and now the enemy army had pushed from the hinterlands and into the heart of Asgard. For any human army that would have been impossible given the size of Odin's realm, but Surtur's army could move far faster in a day than most human armies could, simply because jotun didn't need to eat or rest. Like the Asgardians, they could ignore being tired to an amazing degree and recovered far faster.

As for eating, while they had taste buds and enjoyed eating meat (human meat being a delicacy), Fire Jotun, like their lesser stony cousins, could gorge on rocks and recover energy that way if need be. And being shapeshifters, the jotun of Muspellheim could do more than simply recover energy by taking in that mass. They could also use it to add bulk to their forms, which most had been doing as the army moved ever deeper into Asgard, despoiling the land as they went.

None of that meant that their advance went unopposed. Indeed, every day saw hundreds of skirmishes and a few that were not so small. All of this was in keeping with a larger plan, Balder and Freya working to buy time so that their men could create a battleground that would shatter the Jotun army.

Yet to Thor, God of Thunder and the common man, none of that mattered. All that did was that he had an enemy in front of him, and it was one he could hit. Hit very hard.

"HAAHAHAHHAA!!!" With a bellowing laugh, Thor brought his hammer around, slamming it into the side of jotun's waist. Not only did the hip muscle explode on impact, to such a degree that the jotun's leg fell off, but the power of his strike was such that his target was smashed off of his remaining foot and hurled into several of his fellows. Before any of the six jotun could have a chance to recover, a dozen karls raced forward, spears thrusting down.

These spears were not magical like Mjollnir, and even as they penetrated unarmored portions of the jotun they melted, the magma of the jotun's internals searing them away in a manner they had not at the start of this war. Even in this little way, the jotun had begun to adapt like the shapeshifters they were. The spearmen had to quickly let go of their weapons and retreat as blood spurted, molten hot, but even so, one of them was burned quite badly in the escape.

"Eaor!" Cursing, Thor raced over to the man, battering aside two other jotun in the melee to reach his fallen comrade. Around him, Tyr and his men continued to fight, striking from their hiding places on either side of the narrow defile through the woods that a portion of

the jotun army had entered. True, it might've only been a small force of the whole, but that was all to the good, in Tyr's opinion.

The wounded warrior waved Thor off, his voice thick with agony. Bits of bone and intestines were visible through the holes the droplets of searing blood had seared, and it was clear the man didn't have much time left. "Leave me, Lord Thor, I be done for."

"Now, what kind of defender of the common man would I be if I did that, Eaor?" Thor bellowed with a laugh, lifting the man into his arms with one hand like he was a baby and twirling his hammer in his other hand. He whirled it over his head, and then the two were in the air, pulled along by the hammer, in a leap that covered the whole of the battlefield, landing by Thor's chariot.

Nearby, several dead jotun could be seen having been gored by Teeth-grinder and Teeth-barer, although they too were looking a bit worse for wear at this point. Placing the wounded man in the chariot, Thor took up the driver's position, using one hand to wield the reins and get his worthy steeds moving.

Enchanted by Freya and Odin centuries ago, they instantly began to move, each step taking them higher and higher into the air. Using that same hand, Thor directed the goats into a slow circle over the battlefield, his hammer spinning to one side of the chariot. Looking down, he lashed out with bolts of lightning that crashed down into formations of jotun moving around the defile where the ambush had occurred. Each bolt of lightning tossed a dozen or more jotun in every direction, as well as caused trees to burst into miniature explosions from simply being near the jagged bolts of lightning.

Many of the jotun survived such attacks, smoking and twitching from the impact of the magical lightning, but alive, a sight that caused Thor to scowl. Still, his intervention had allowed Tyr to slay several more and begin to turn the battle in the defile against their enemy once more.

Several spears flashed up towards Thor, but he batted them aside with ease as he continued to survey the battle. A moment later, he came down in one segment of the battlefield after another to grab up wounded warriors, three humans and one Asgardian, the warrior Baard.

When next he was in the air, Thor saw the battle had changed. Tyr had begun to pull back from his position in the defile, moving up the slope at the back of it. As Tyr did so, a group of karls had moved forward from where they had been hidden nearby to support his left flank against any attempt by the jotun to simply circumvent the defile. The woods there were not as thick as on the other side, and to Thor's surprise, the karls had managed to form a shield wall. As he watched, a group of seven jotun moved to confront the twenty defending karls, each of them out-massing the men by five to one at the least.

Given the strength and reach of the average jotun, a common shield wall would be useless, but as Thor prepared to intervene the Jarl in charge seemed to come to his senses. The men hastily retreated in front of the group of jotun, who followed them across the ground the warriors had been standing on.

As they did so, the weight of the jotun proved their downfall. Thin wooden planks, which had been set over a covered ditch, shattered, dumping the jotun into said ditch. This trap put their heads and shoulders at eye level with the humans and didn't give them enough room to bring their weapons up easily.

"RAAAH!!" With a wordless cry, the retreating men whipped around and charged forward, hacking and cutting into the heads and shoulders of the stuck jotun. While many of those heads were helmeted, they were the kind of open-faced helmets that only really protected the back and sides of the wearer's head. Soon, several of the jotun were dead, only two having been quick enough to use their powers of shapeshifting to grow taller and thinner so they could bring their arms above the edge of the ditch and strike back.

Five of the humans lost their lives to the two quick-thinking jotun before the rest pulled back. Another group of karls nearby who'd been backing Tyr's initial ambush fired into the two still trapped jotun, slaying them with arrows.

Leaving that area of the spread out battlefield to Tyr's leadership, Thor ascended higher into the sky, moving over the area in a wider sweep. This portion of the realm was marked by scattered segments of heavy forest and scrub brush intermixed, all leading out into a small plain leading south. It was often covered by snow and wintergreen, the smell of pine everywhere, as winter lasted overlong in Asgard compared to Midgard.

Yet that had changed, and not just because of Surtur's invasion. Poison now also permeated both land and air, pouring in from the shores of Asgard as the waves did, battering against the earth and misting the sky. Hundreds had died from the raised sea level caused by Thor's most-hated nephew, Jörmungandr when he'd decided to join the war against the Asgardians. Still more had fallen ill from the miasma he had released into the air and the very earth, the trees and grass of Asgard had begun to wither and die.

This was never more obvious than when Thor was in the air. Instead of green and white, he saw what snow there was almost black from the poison, pine trees withered, and any remaining grass brown and dying. *Would that I had been given leave to hunt the beast down! Jörmungandr should have been slain ages past!*

Of course, Thor had been forbidden to do so. While Jörmungandr did not have the same ferocious reputation as Níðhöggr, he was actually harder to deal with in reality thanks to both his size and ability to hide deep under the waves. That, and Freya and Odin were well aware that Thor might have been destined to die in such a contest as part of Ragnarök.

Scowling, Thor shook his head, concentrating on the here and now, staring past the start of the deeper woodlands to the small plain which the invaders had already crossed. Out there, only Thor and a few of the strongest Asgardians had been allowed to attack the enemy army. Thor himself had delivered devastating damage only a few days before, but Surtur had eventually driven him off, as much as it galled Thor to admit it. *That blasted spear of his strikes like, like...*

Once more, Thor shook his head, the thought not staying in his head. Instead, he stared down into the forest, where the humans among their forces had come into their own. Though weakened from the poison that infected the land, the terrain broke up the barely organized columns of jotun and allowed the karls and Jarls to get back into the war.

From high in the sky, Thor saw other humans using cunning and traps to fight against the invaders as best they could. Here, warriors retreated, only for other warriors to come out of hidden foxholes, stabbing upward with spears towards their giant enemies. The retreating warriors quickly reversed course and closed while the stabbed Jotun tried to turn on their attackers. Over there, a group of warriors worked with several Asgardians. The Asgardians rushed forward to hold the attention of the Jotun while the humans turned them into pincushions with arrows.

Everywhere Thor looked, traps, ambushes, and small-scale battles slowed the advancing army. But it still came on, as inexorable as an avalanche of fire and brimstone.

Thor could see that as well from his current position. Surtur's horde was a dark red and black stone band across the land, pushing ever onward. And behind them, the land was changed. No longer a land of pine trees and stone, or vast plains of snow. Where the jotun marched, the land itself boiled, gouts of magma and jets of heated water erupting as the very earth beneath shifted and quaked. This wasn't caused just from the mass of the army from Muspellheim, but also from the magics of the jotun themselves. For in Ragnarök, not only the gods but the land too would die to fire, ice, and wave.

Yet the closer sight, the band of black and red marching across the land, grabbed Thor's attention more. "Tis like an open wound, one scabbing over in places yet still sore. On already poisoned flesh, curse Jörmungandr!"

That line and the whimpers of pain from his fellows audible even from as high up as he was reminded Thor of his current duty, and he shook his head. "Gah, woolgathering is for after the war is won and you have an ale in your hand, Thor. Back to work!"

Sending a final blast of lightning down, Thor turned away from the battlefield, retreating towards where Balder now led the main army of Asgard to prepare the fortifications for the coming battle. Well beyond that, dozens of leagues distant, just in case, laid the main camp. There, Thor stopped, unloaded the wounded he had saved, and within seconds was in the air once more.

Alas, Thor did not realize two of his human charges had already died. The poison in the air was not strong enough yet to fell a healthy warrior, but the wounded succumbed to such at horrible speed. Indeed, it was all Freya and Eir, goddess of healing and childbirth, could do to save one human in four. With the Asgardians, they had been having more luck, thankfully.

Back near the ongoing skirmishes, situated at the top of a hilly ridge, more than sixty thousand warriors were frantically putting up defenses as the jotun host marched ever toward their position. These men represented most of the Asgardians and the Einherjar, those ancient men of common and noble birth brought to Asgard in ancient times, their deaths having proven them worthy of living among their gods.

Below that ridge, still more teams of humans worked feverishly on setting up ditches and other traps throughout the forest. It was hoped the forest and these limited fieldworks would break up the jotun's columns, limiting the number of that could reach the ridge at any one time.

But Balder, whose plan this had been, could already see that was perhaps wishful thinking. In the distance, he could see the jotun were simply smashing through any trees before them, coming on like a wall of fire and death, the front of which simply absorbed the various ambushes while still continuing even now. *Is this truly the Ragnarök come for us, then? Is my death on this battlefield?*

As he peered at one portion of the diseased woodland, Balder noted that the trees were just another kind of weapon. When the jotun smashed through them, few human warriors could remain on their feet if they were struck by the bits of flying debris that resulted.

This supposition was proven a moment later as Tyr and Hogun joined Balder, their weary men still trudging up the ridge behind them even as fresher men moved down to help their comrades. "We're not going to be able to slow them for long out there. I hope you and yours are ready, Bright One."

"And I am still a little concerned about this battle plan," Tyr grumbled, shifting his shoulder in annoyance. He had taken a hard blow there and upper arm during the last clash, and another to his knee. Although that one, thankfully, had been a glancing blow and hardly ached at the moment.

Balder simply nodded, not turning to look at them, simply staring out into the distance, trying to force his thoughts away from the morbid tone they had started to settle in. "I know, but if we do not try to hold here, we will be fighting on the plains in a few days. In among the farmsteads of the warriors, open terrain with not a single feature we could use as natural defense."

Powerful hands clad in thick leather gauntlets slammed down on Hogun and Balder's shoulders, a booming voice nearly deafening all three. "I know not why you are talking about this as if there be any chance we are going to lose! After all, I am here!"

Balder rolled his eyes at his brother's attitude, and yet, as he turned to clasp forearms with Thor, he still found himself taking heart in the Thunder God's boisterous nature.

For his part, while he too was pleased to see his friend, Hogun took more heart in the sight of the lightning clouds that Thor had summoned into being continuing to pummel their enemies. Not rain, thankfully. With how cold it was rain would be miserable for the defenders. But lightning streaked out from the sky, pummeling the jotun horde in various places seemingly at random. *Better, the winds that he summoned up will keep the miasma away, halting its sapping influence for the nonce.*

Tyr, however, was a little more thoughtful, and when he looked out into the distance, he remained concerned. Numerous times the warriors of Asgard had attempted to hold the enemy, stopping them here and there, only to be overwhelmed by the sheer strength and numbers of the jotun. They had lost several thousand dead by this point, but this would be the largest battle to date. It would make the skirmishers that Thor and Tyr had been taking part in a moment ago seem tiny in comparison.

There had been barely three thousand warriors involved in those short, sharp engagements this day. There were several times that gathered here. *And regardless of Balder's concerns about the terrain no longer favoring the humans soon, I have to worry that all we are going to be doing is just providing a giant target. Pun intended.*

For his part, while Balder shared some of Tyr's concerns, he knew they were ready for this battle. And they had surprises that he hoped would turn the tide regardless of Jörmungandr's miasma or Surtur's magics. If they could not, Balder would probably not even have been there, such was Freya's worry for him.

"What about the catapults?" He asked, looking over at the engineer even as the ground beneath them trembled once more. Earthquakes too had been moving north with the jotun, and Balder had seen reports of massive waves crashing into the shoreline, tearing away whole fishing hamlets.

"They too are ready, my Lord. We even have the special munitions that Queen Freya sent us. We could fire those three catapults all day without going through it."

"Good," Balder nodded, willfully ignoring how many of the Asgardians and jarls that were around looked on a little bemused. Magic had its place in Asgard, something that few men were truly happy about, yet it would be a very foolish warrior who put any real trust in such personally. Let alone assume it could turn the course of a battle.

But looking around the defensive position, Tyr could see hints of magic everywhere. Freya and several of the other goddesses had come forward over the past few days to help as best they could to make this line even more defensible. The low wall of trees over which the human warriors would strike down at the jotun coming up the ridge were calcified, turned almost into stone and magicked to remain whole against any strike. Shields and spears and swords alike all had been blessed with greater durability or striking power, and numerous traps had been laid in front of the line as well, hidden via glamours.

To say nothing about the spells that Eir and Freya had woven into the actual men. The warriors would still not have the endurance they normally would thanks to the miasma in the air, but it would not impact their bodies beyond that. They would keep their skill and strength until their bodies gave out.

Tyr knew he should've felt confident about their chances of victory here. Their ability to finally smash this invading host, stop its forward momentum, cost the jotun enough they would fall back and allow the defenders to push them back across the border would never be higher. But he didn't. Instead, the god of justice and war felt uneasy. As if he was simply waiting for the other shoe to drop.

He looked over at Balder who, despite Thor's presence, also looked worried for a moment as the two of them exchanged glances before Balder shook his head. "Watch the line, dour one, Tyr. I'm going to go get my armor on."

"Aye," Hogun answered before his lips twitched into a wry smile. "One must be pretty for one's guests, after all." Balder snorted at that, then headed away, back down their side of the ridge toward where his tent rested among those of the majority of the army. Only Freya, the healers, injured, and alfar and dvergar had been left at the base camp.

Soon, the remaining members of the skirmishing parties began to filter back through the woods and up the hill to the fortifications, where they were hauled up the walls by their fellows. There weren't many survivors, though, and realizing such left only Thor looking at all upbeat.

The jarl in charge of the retreating men moved to where Balder now waited on the wall at the center position. Gone was his everyday apparel. In its place, he was clasped in lamellar armor, the steel shining almost like silver. Marked on the armor over his chest shone a symbol of the sun, glistening with all the light of the real thing. Upon his head rested a helm of silver steel, unadorned yet clearly masterfully made. At his side rested a large round shield and his sword, longer and heavier than the blade he had been using up to this point, gleaming in the day's light like the rest of his armor.

There would be no retreat this time, no planned withdrawal. Balder intended to hold this field until the Fire Jotun were broken, or they broke him.

"The fire bastards're coming, my Lord. But they are using their transformation powers more freely now. Tell him, Arnold."

Arnold was a scout who had been with Balder ever since their first skirmish. He knew what he was talking about and currently looked very worried as well as exhausted. "My Lord, the jotun are growing. They were barely a few feet taller than a normal Asgardian when we first fought with them. Now, most of those we saw were as tall as a longboat set on its tail. And some of them be even larger."

Balder nodded and waved the man off, ordering him to head to the main camp miles distant. If things began to go poorly, Balder fully intended his mother and the others with her to be able to flee back to Asgard the city. The Bifrost Bridge would create a good defensive point for the survivors, a unavoidable bottleneck.

Stop that Balder, he thought to himself, turning away to look out over the battlements again. Do not plan to lose, or you will create a self-fulfilling prophecy. We will win here. We'll break this army and then push them out of our realm!

Moments later, the outer scouts quickly began to filter back towards the battle line as well, shouting out, "The jotun're coming! They just hit the second to last line of traps!"

One of the scouts stopped to report to Thor and Balder, gesturing with the end of his bow, twisting it around, so it waved from one end of the ridge to the other. "They have spread out as they have come, my Lords, and don't seem to be in any rush to form any kind of true battle line thanks to the trees. But they are spreading," the scout emphasized. "They might be looking to try and forge around the ridge."

"I have stationed the majority of our Asgardians on the tops of the ridges at our flanks for if they tried such a tactic. Thor, you will lead the charge down into them on whichever's flank seems most needed," Balder said, tapping his brother on the chest with a finger.

"Aye! I'll not let you down, nor our people! These jotun will rue the day they challenged Þór!" Thor bellowed boisterously.

For just a moment, the way Thor spoke his own name felt as if it had shifted. However, such a thought didn't stay in Balder's head, slipping away like smoke, and he simply nodded, turning back to the front as the first of the jotun came into view. Massive figures forged up the ridge towards them, smashing anything in their way as they came. "Archers fire when they reach the markers."

With that order passed along the line in either direction, Balder turned to a runner, a young boy born here in Asgard to a warrior spirit and his wife after they had passed on from Midgard. Six such youngsters were waiting for Balder to give them orders.

"Run to the catapults. They are to begin firing into the woods now." Even as that runner raced off, Balder turned to Thor, gesturing up into the sky. "A cold wind, brother, add some chill to your wind. But no snow. Just a bit more of a chill would be nice."

Thor looked confused for a moment, then began to laugh. "You think to douse the flames of the Fire Jotun? I rather doubt it will work, brother."

"Not on its own Thor, but with the special ammunition that Mother and her ladies have created, we will be able to give them a truly chilly reception," Balder smiled.

Thor laughed heartily and then stepped forward, twirling his hammer idly as he meandered to where Lady Sif stood with her own command. Even as he did, the wind began to pick up all around them, helping the men's arrows along and chilling the air. Within seconds it was cold enough to be uncomfortable even to men dressed in winter apparel. The Fire Jotun didn't appreciate the change one bit and roared as one their fury at the cold. But they were about to get a much harsher example of what being cold truly meant.

The jotun continued on, making their way up the ridge, each of those in the front targeted by dozens of arrows each. The arrows, enchanted as they were, hit like the bolts of ballistae. Despite their armor and their own enchantments, hundreds fell. Still, thousands more came on, and this time, they too were armed with arrows.

Simple looking in comparison to the arrows of the Valkyries, these arrows were in barely curves lengths of wood with sharpened volcanic stone as tips. Balder wondered what genius among the Jotun had thought them up, but the jotun didn't seem to be very good with them, although there were a lot of bows within their army somehow. Such a advancement in their long-range skills had not been reported before this.

Still, even as arrows shattered upon the enchanted walls at the top of the ridge, the jotun showed that this weapon was not one they were at home with at all. Most Jotun took a single shot and then tossed their bow and quivers aside. And despite the number of arrows fired, few got over the battlements.

But when a lucky arrow from the jotun managed to strike an Asgardian Near Balder, he cried out in pain, falling back off of the battlements to curse and tumble down the friendly side of the hill. One lucky human was able to raise his shield in time, the arrow smashing into it with enough force to cause him to stumble off the battlement similarly, although his landing was far less amusing given the sickening sound of his back snapping. Another karl wasn't fast enough, and the arrow punched straight through his armor, despite Freya's enchantment on him and all of those around him.

The human warriors began to take losses. Pinpricks for now, but despite how horrible the jotun were at it, the use of arrows and archery was something that the defenders had not seen the jotun use before. Previously the only long-range weaponry the jotun had used had

been throwing spears. They still used those now as well, but they didn't have the range of the arrows, clattering short of the battlements to a one.

There was also the miasma to consider. Warriors who took wounds beyond the scope of small scratches and bruises soon found themselves falling victim to the poisonous air, falling out of line and going to their knees in suddenly crippling exhaustion, or simply dying where they stood.

Minutes into the battle, many of the larger jotun started to grab the trees they had smashed down arriving, hurling the trunks like they were tossing sticks against the defenders. Several of these impromptu missiles smashed into the battlements here and there, wiping out Einherjar by the handful.

But the defenders were not idle. Balder sliced one such tree in half before it could land, sending the pieces hurtling over the heads of his warriors to crash harmlessly on an empty patch of land on the friendly side of the hill. Thor also smashed several such missiles out in the air, his laughter booming out.

"To war, to war! And after, the drinks will be on me, for my thirst is never-ending, as is my lust for battle furious! Woe to Thee who bringeth down the lightning upon you, for I am the defender of gods and men alike!" Thor bellowed, his voice heard from one end of the battle line to the other.

As one, the Asgardians, karls, jarls, even the few Valkyrie's serving as scattered snipers all roared, buoyed by Thor's words. And as they did, Balder could feel it as well. Thor's aura of divinity, specifically his boisterous battle lust, reached out for all of them, giving them courage and strength as Balder's own did. *A double helping, as it were. Excellent!*

Ahead of them, a large wedge of the jotun had pushed out of the woods and was actually keeping formation, using massive slabs of granite as shields to protect themselves from attacks from on high as they tried to get up the ridge. Seeing this, Balder also bellowed, raising his sword to the sky and thrusting it downward. "For Odin and Asgard!!"

A blaze of light erupted from Balder, a searing beam of magical power that carved into several of the approaching jotun and broke their formation. Following up on this attack, Balder leaped down into their midst just as they reached the top of the ridge and had began to batter away at the wooden palisade. His sword flashed this way, then that, laying the Jotun low even though many towered above him like an adult would over a young child. It took barely a moment to bring them down to his level, and none of them could match his strength or even come close to his speed.

With Balder thus engaged in front of the battlements, it normally would have fallen to Sif, Hogun, Tyr, or one of the other Asgardian commanders to watch the overall battle. However, they were all in direct combat at this point, leading their men at distinct points along

the wall. All the Asgardian commanders were among the best warriors of their folk as well, unfortunately.

This left it to the Jarls, human leaders who had died in such a manner to attract Odin's favor and had been brought to Asgard in ages past. Spread out along with their men across the battlefield, these spirits stepped for war now. It fell on them to command the reinforcements forward in small amounts to help at disparate points along the battlements, send runners back for more arrows if need be, or even pull men from the line if they became wounded, replacing them with men from the reserve.

Meanwhile, the catapults well behind the battle line began to fire, each of them sending dozens of stones the size of a man's head over the battle line to crash into the forest. They weren't targeting any one particular area. Rather, they were spreading their pain across the entire battlefield, breaking further what cohesion the Fire Jotun might have attempted. And these rocks had been enchanted to be even deadlier to this particular foe as well.

When they crashed down, bursts of cold spread from them, the entire area around the strike point quickly being covered in frost. This included any jotun unlucky enough to be in said area. The Fire Jotun affected area found their outer skin frozen, even as the magma within continued to boil. Others, those who had been wounded already, found out what happened when extreme heat and extreme cold met directly, exploding with screams of agony. Steam rose like fog throughout the forest as these enchanted boulders crashed down, and the cold spell within them went to war against the heat of the Fire Jotun.

Behind the fight, Surtur seethed at the sight and sent forth his power into the earth. Heat bloomed as lava burst from the ground to combat the cold, new stone formations growing from the blistering wounds, slamming into the power of Freya and the goddesses of the Earth, Brea and Irpa.

The battle furiously seesawed, magic, mortals, and godly might fought against the primeval power of the jotun, with neither side gaining an advantage. Elsewhere, others watched on...

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Viewing the battlefield from more than fifty leagues away via a spell that allowed him to see through the eyes of birds, Malekith, king of the dark elves and Svartalfheim, smiled while breathing in the air of Asgard in delight. While the miasma of Jörmungandr was slow anathema to all but the hardest among humans and Asgardians, to the Dark Elves that same poison only added a certain extra flavor to the air.

But that was neither here nor there, and the blue-skinned white-haired elven man, clad in form-fitting black leather and plate mail armor, looked around at his commanders. "And now

my followers, it is time. Relay my commands to the Brethren. We attack. It is the time of Ragnarök, and we will have our share of the spoils.”

Nor were the Dark Elves the only other forces in play, as at that moment, far removed from the battle, aid had arrived in the boughs of Yggdrasil.

OOOOOOO

But the Dark Elves were not the only other forces in play. For that moment, far removed from the battle, aid had arrived in the boughs of Yggdrasil.

The moment they felt outsiders arriving in the boughs of the World Tree, the Shadows knew that the same enemy who had broken Hela free from their control, who had stolen away Sigyn’s body, was upon them. When they gazed down in confused, worried fury at the intrusion and found the Wanderer aspect of Asgard’s King among Harry and his followers, they instantly knew that Odin had somehow found a way to call for aid.

With that understanding, the Shadows reacted swiftly, attacking the interlopers on several different fronts at once, as was their way.

The first was magical, covering the area in illusions designed to interact with the physical senses rather than the mind. These phantasms mostly took the form of giant leaping Ratatoskr, attacking Dark elves, and other rabid beasts. Other trickeries were more subtle, though no less aggressive; the odors of burning wood and flesh, a taste of rotten meat in the air, or simply tree limbs where no limbs were.

But Harry, Hela, Kitty, Dr. Druid, Dr. Strange, Wanda, Clea, and Ororo were ready. They went to work dispelling the Shadows’ assaults with wide-area Finite Incantatum spells or other defensive spells meant to dispel illusions. At the same time, the runes embedded in the helmets or headsets of all present went to work, allowing the wearers to see the reality underneath those illusions when they did get through.

The scent-based illusions still threw many of the Earthers off unfortunately, with two of the Oh Damn’s even crashing in midair, one of them shouting out, “Gah, what’s with the rancid meat sme—oh fuck!” before slamming into his compatriot.

Meanwhile on the Astral Plane, the Shadows’ will crashed down, hammering into the minds of the humans who had come to aid the Asgardians, seeking to break, blind, or control. If their mental assault hit, the humans would each find themselves stuck in their own personal hells, their minds trapped as the Shadows pulled their deepest fears out from the depths of their minds.

On the Astral Plane this attack took the forms of hundreds of millions of Shadowy tentacles, each reaching for the minds of the embattled Earthers, visible only to the telepaths who could discern the Astral Plane.

But when the attack began, Charles was there instantly, reacting to the telepathic assault faster than any rattlesnake. *"I think not!"* he boomed, thrusting out his hands in every direction, pushing back at the enveloping shadows with an eruption of pure presence.

When the other telepaths appeared on the Astral Plane, they each had a different type of avatar, shaped and molded by their personalities. Jean's almost looked completely normal, if not for the fact her hair was on fire, and she had wings that looked vaguely draconic sprouting from her back. Her attacks burned away the Shadows with blinding fire, a scream erupting from her astral self's lips that sounded animalistic as she struck.

In stark contrast to his admittedly fit, if elderly and crippled physical frame, Charles Xavier's astral self was big, larger than even Warpath or the Thing, heavily muscled, with a stern, scowling countenance. It almost looked as if someone had created a statue of a bald Greek God. And Emma Steed and the other telepaths all had to pause for a second when they first formed on the Plane as they stared at it.

"Goddammit, I knew that deal I made with you lot was too good to be true!" Emma shouted. More specifically, Emma Steed shouted, even as she joined the others on the Astral Plane.

Within the mental realm, Emma (Frost) looked like a woman made of diamond, with strings of golden filament in her hair. From her body, she flung out precise, diamond-shaped telepathic bolts of agony, barely visible on the Astral Plane until they exploded, dissipating the attacks around them but finding no purchase in whatever mind was behind the ongoing assault. *"Bah. You know nothing, Steed. If you want to flee, do so, it will be no big loss."*

Rolling her eyes, Xian took a moment between blocking telepathic attacks to look down at herself and take in the others.

The young Vietnamese girl appeared much like her normal self, except a bit bigger, more than a bit taller, and with longer hair. Her mental attacks came in the form of spheres that looked aquatic in nature, which she could shift and transform in various ways. Similarly, Betsy looked much like herself in the real world, but instead of purple, Betsy's astral projection had hair that was almost like that of a pearl, changing color depending on what angle you looked at it.

Steed's form was very different. She appeared like a woman made of multi-sized chains, all interlocking and tangled to form her body. This theme continued into her mental attacks when she struck against the Shadows all around them. Her telepathic assaults took the form of long chains with dagger-like protrusions at the end, much like her main telekinetic attack.

With Charles directing them, the telepaths created an impenetrable defense. While each of their attacks appeared different, all of them could disperse the Shadows' assaults in the Astral Realm before they could hit their marks. It was tough, and none of them had any concentration to waste on what was going on in the physical world while they fought but

combined and able to defend a single semi-concentrated area, the telepaths had the advantage, though not an overwhelming one.

As the battle on the Astral Plane roiled continuously, the magical assault had been dealt with in a far more overwhelming fashion. Harry had requested aid on this mission from the start from Dr. Strange and his household, and combined with Harry and Ororo, they could easily deal with the illusions as soon as they appeared. It took a few seconds to recognize them occasionally against the immense background magic of Yggdrasil, but that was all. The earthers had simply brought too much magical power to bear, and the Shadows could not overwhelm them, weakened as they were by Níðhöggr's death and the destruction of the tether within.

But within seconds, these illusions were replaced by actual Fire Jotun. Several hundred of the fiery giants appeared amongst Harry's folk quite suddenly, teleported there by the Shadows from the ongoing battle elsewhere.

So quickly were they pulled from their previous fight that for a moment, the jotun were disoriented just as much as their foes. But this only lasted for a second, and then the jotun, not a one of which was smaller than three stories at this point, roared and began to attack. "GRAAAHAH!!!"

"Ghigau, Coyote, Uzume, get high and provide cover fire. Blink, Nightcrawler, Strange, remove the noncombatants, get them away from the enemy however you can. Don't forget to get the supplies out of danger!" Harry ordered. Already on the move, even as Dr. Strange piloted the magic carpet containing all the telepaths up and away from the jotun, a protective barrier snapping into place.

Nearby, Scott did much the same thing, taking command of the group nearest him, a mix of the flying carpets on which the ODMs were riding, Husk, and the participating trio from the Fantastic Four. "ODMs spread out! Husk, pull back Johnny, into the air, try not to use any wide-area attacks. We don't want to start a forest fire here. Thing, Thundra, sic'em."

"Woot, now that's the way ta give orders!" The Thing bellowed a laugh, charging forward and crashing into the nearest jotun, grunting at the impact. He quickly found that jotun were almost as strong as he was, if nowhere near as coordinated. The jotun's footwork, in particular, was pretty bad, and that let Ben use more of his strength overall than the enemy could.

Steve also started to bring order to the chaos of the assault at speed, although he discovered that he was too late for at least a few of the ODMs, caught completely flatfooted by the suddenly appearing jotun while also being in close range of the massive, red-skinned monsters.

Quickly, the rest of the Oh Damns used their jump jets, putting distance between themselves and the multitude of jotun. As they did, one of the company commanders announced calmly, "Fire by squad boys, let's see how our new toys work."

The answer was very well indeed.

With a loud retort like a World War II tank cannon, several Boomsticks fired as one, the troops aiming at several jotun to one side and just above of Harry's position. He was busy creating protective shields and lashing out with attack spells as he covered several of the troopers who hadn't been quite as quick on the mark as the rest. Blink too, had frozen in shock of the sudden violence around her.

The jotun struck by the trooper's fire screamed in agony. The small gyro-rockets exploded against them destroying armor and some flesh beneath. It took several such strikes to put the monsters down, but eventually, the giants fell to loud whoops of delight from the troopers. "Oh my gods, I love these things!"

"Boom, baby, boom!" Several of the troopers shouted in awe at seeing their guns just tear apart a far larger inhuman creatures which had only moments ago crushed or speared their fellows.

E, Uzume, and the other long-range fighters had also gotten enough distance now. E hovered in the air as Falcon flew around him, laying down fire on the nearest jotun. Somewhat limited in how many gyroscopic rockets he could constitute without materials, E instead transformed his arms into their normal plasma guns and began to fire, to little impact, much to the AI's annoyance. Similarly, Magma's tectonic-energy bolts didn't have much effect on the jotun, so far removed from the ground as they were in the boughs of Yggdrasil. The Neo-Roman didn't have any other type of attack available to her either as cut off as she was, and decided to fall back with the noncombatants for the time being, for once using her oft-ignored rifle as she did.

Fortunately, Uzume, Coyote, Vanguard, and Ghigau had better luck. If their gauss rifle rounds took the jotun in the eyes or mouth they could punch through. But if they missed those vulnerable areas, the shots wouldn't put the jotun down. Shots to the skull still seemed to hurt like blazes judging by the whimpers and roars of pain from their targets, but even the giants' bare flesh was up to stopping the penetrating power of the gauss shots.

Similarly, the Gatling guns that were the main line of sight weapon for the Heavy Gunners couldn't penetrate at first either. They certainly caused the jotun anguish, and they fell back under the unending assault, but the rounds just couldn't penetrate. It was like hitting a living tank with a machine gun. The tank felt the shots but couldn't be killed by them.

One Heavy Gunner's attempt to get away from a jotun in his face put him right in the way of another's spear. He managed to block it but would have been overcome if not for Coyote putting a railgun round through one of the jotun's eyes.

Both men stared in shock as lava burst out of the gaping hole, searing the Heavy Gunner, who retreated quickly. "What the hell?!"

Elsewhere, the fight wasn't going nearly as well for the invaders. One squad of ODMs had been pinned in a kind of wooden culvert by three jotun, with too many branches around them to get away with their jet packs. Two men died to a single jotun's blow, which cut through armor and individual within alike.

Another jotun attacked one of the remaining troopers, who jumped up. The man flipped in midair using his jet pack, coming back down onto the giant's back.

A specially made ceramic knife stabbed forward from the trooper's off-arm, slamming into the back of the jotun's neck before breaking off as the trooper jetted away into the open air, leaving his knife embedded in the jotun. The monster slumped instantly, a howl of agony coming from the jotun's mouth even as nothing below the neck responded to its frantic commands.

"Whatever their insides look like, they 're still built like humans! They've got spines, they've got necks and eyes," the trooper, a Frenchman, reported.

"And balls," a Heavy Gunner said, having just slammed his fist up and into the fork of the jotun pinning him in place. Uzume and Ghigau's sniper shots had already dealt with the third, and this attack caused the remaining jotun to scream in agony, dropping his sword. Shaking, it moved to attack the Heavy Gunner with a double-handed blow. The trooper's other hand, which had been chopped off right before where his human hand began within the suit, was useless, but he rolled away just in time, opening up the giant to the bolts of fire from his fellow troopers.

Nearby, another jotun fell, hurled off his feet by a double kick from Colossus. The young Russian effortlessly flipped himself in midair like a world-class gymnast, landing between two other jotun, fists and feet flashing out.

Above the area where most of the attackers had appeared, Cannonball blasted across a tree limb that stretched across the upper area of the battlefield clearing it of jotun. This allowed many of the regular troopers to set down there, whereupon they began to fire in every direction, far more accurately than they had in midair. The kick of the Boomsticks was still new to the ODMs, and they seemed to have trouble compensating for it when not able to properly brace.

Meanwhile, like E, Tony had discovered that his main weapons weren't very useful against the immensely heat-resistant jotun. The best he could do was blast them off the branches like Cannonball and the others were doing.

Thunderbird, Husk, and Rogue were also able to go toe to toe with the jotun, who came out the losers of these engagements. With the trio was a new face to the combined Custodes Mundi order of battle: Bruce Banner. Hulked out, the scientist roared and leaped from one tree branch to another, smashing into the jotun like Cannonball but without the need to go in a

straight line. His greater strength and durability allowed him to knock them down by the dozens with ease.

Truthfully, as massively powerful as the jotun were, they just weren't quite as good at hand to hand as Thunderbird or Colossus were, let alone the more experienced Thing. Although they didn't take the time to pull out their specially prepared weapons, and both Thunderbird and Thing took hits, they delivered far more. And the juggernaut-type armor Colossus and Thunderbird wore easily handled the blows of the jotun, as did Thing's stone frame.

Thundra, Rogue and Husk were but they were much faster. Though they lacked the strength to just leap around the branches like the Hulk or others, they danced around their huge opponents, striking at legs and feet, which quickly brought the jotun down to their level. And with the noncombatants taken care of at this point, Nightcrawler and the recovered Blink were started teleporting the trio around to areas where the troopers were having trouble for one reason or another.

On the other hand, Polaris was not having as much fun. She had risen into the air and now was trying to find something within the jotun to use her powers on, but whatever kind of molten elements constituted their blood, they didn't contain enough ferrous substances to allow her to manipulate them. Their weapons were likewise a no-go. "That's not metal, or at least not a ferrous metal," she reported, lifting herself up off of the ground and away from one of the jotun's attempts to stab her. Sneering at the giant, she flew out into a more open area between the massive boughs.

"Don't worry, sugar," Rogue said, intercepting a punch from a jotun then twisting, watching as the Fire Jotun's savage grin turned into astonishment as the tiny human woman with the frizzy hair pulled then whirled around him, kicking him in the side and sending him up into the air. The strength that she had permanently drained from Juggernaut was more than a match for these beasties, and the jotun didn't even realize he had been outmaneuvered until he was in midair and falling. "We got this."

Polaris snorted but had to agree that at least on the physical side of things, they were winning this fight now. The jotun didn't seem to have much in the way of long-range weaponry beyond a few scattered bows and hurling their spears. And since they didn't seem to have many such spears, those who wielded them refrained from using them in such a manner.

Busy as he was launching attack spells and making certain that he spotted any of his people going down, Harry had to chuckle when he spotted a jotun spear Colossus in the face, only causing him to stumble back. The expression on the jotun's face as his obsidian-tipped spear shattered without injuring Colossus at all was made even more hilarious as the metal-clad Russian then charged under the jotun's guard and crashed into its knees, shattering one of them, before grabbing and hurling the broken enemy away.

While the majority of the X-Men and Custodes stayed and defended themselves where they were, the troopers, Tony Stark, and the other flyers slowly spread out throughout the strange combat zone among the boughs and leaves of Yggdrasil. The effect was devastating, and worse, the jotun seemed to have a mental block on what enemies they thought were truly dangerous. They seemed to believe that only the Hulk, the Thing, and the other physically stronger members of the Custodes were the main threats. This allowed the troopers to have a field day after those first few chaotic moments, where they had seemingly been targets of opportunity.

Scott also proved to be very deadly. His kinetic eye blasts either shattered jotun on impact or hurled them off tree branches altogether. And despite how strong they were, none of the jotun were dexterous enough to try and save themselves once they were blown out into the space away from the rest of the tree. The Shadows did their best, grabbing any whole jotun they could and teleporting them back into the fight, but even that didn't save them as such were quickly became rarer.

With no weapons to match that of guns, all the jotun could hope do was try to close, which was a losing game against groups of people who had jump jets and knew how to use them. Even if the current battle was the first time the humans had fought in such a strange environment, their mobility was telling. With Harry's orders to spread out and with the organization and superior firing power of the ODMs and Custodes, the physical battle was slowly ending, even as the telepathic and magical side of the conflict showed no sign of abating.

But Harry knew that for all the jotun posed a threat, the most dangerous part of the Shadows' attack came on the Astral Plane. Stealing a glance upward, Harry grimaced as he saw the strain bleeding through onto the faces of the two telepaths he could see from his current position, Xian and Jean.

Much like when they had attempted to reclaim possession of Hela and assault Harry in the halls of Niflheim, the Shadow's unending telepathic assault came from all around them, crashing down on the minds of the humans and their allies. An all-encompassing fear attempts to fill the Earthers' minds with illusions to try and control them and sensory attacks. All of these and more were represented on the Astral Plane as roiling clouds of blackness or tentacle-like probes of brown and grey.

But none of it was getting through, feeding the the unfamiliar emotions of shock and horror that Those Who Watch Above In Shadow were currently feeling. Some of their toys, their sources of fun and fuel, had stopped acting like they should and had even killed one of their tethers on the realm of Asgard. And now, when it was time to sweep their toys away and remake them, who came into this realm but the original chaos causer, the human who broken Hela free, the one who had sent a team capable of bringing back the dead body of the soulless one, Sigyn.

Had it just been Harry Potter, their response would've been apocalyptic. But he had brought what amounted to a small army. Even worse than that, the Shadows could sense an aspect of Odin standing among the people from Midgard, laughing and shouting encouragement. The presence of the runaway, Amora barely registered as the Shadows realized all of this had been caused by Odin, who they thought they had been keeping under control for millennia.

Only now did they realize that the destruction of Níðhöggr had not been a chance event. It had been planned to weaken their hold over Odin, and now an aspect of Odin had brought back a strike force led by the being who had broken Hela free of their control.

The Shadows still didn't think that the humans could hurt them, but ultimately, what 'them' would be left without their tethers tying them to Asgard and their source of power? Those Who Watch Above In Shadow had long left behind any physical shells in their quest to remain beyond death's reach. But in so doing, they had also left beyond any means of existing that wasn't dependent on the power they took from their control of the Yggdrasil pocket dimensions. Without said power, Those Who Watch Above In Shadow would be simple, immaterial souls, shrieking their grief and pain into the void

Regardless, Odin's betrayal, this show of rebellion, had to be dealt with above anything else. In less than a blink, the Shadows acted. As the telepathic assault was parried away, a final magical strike lanced out toward Amora and Wander-Odin. After all, to the Shadows, the bodies of those like Amora or Fat Volstagg were just extremely high-level simulacrum, fake bodies made by the magic of the Shadows. Even the very souls within those forms were likewise creations of the Shadows as well, bits and pieces of personality and power carved from the original Asgardians.

And as they had created such life, so too could the Shadows snuff it out if they so wished.

For Wander-Odin, this would be easy. He was but an aspect of a greater self, a portion of Odin's power and personality purposefully broken off to act independently as only a true God could have done. He was not a complete soul or mind, and thus he was vulnerable.

The surprise assault crashed into the Wanderer and he screamed, body and soul disintegrating as the Shadows literally ate of his power, as they would when Odin inevitably died during Ragnarök. If the Wanderer aspect had been the original, he might've been able to fight the attack off, such was the strain the Shadows were under at that moment thanks to the surrounding magic users. But Wander-Odin had only a very limited understanding of any magic that did not directly affect his mission, As such, not even a second later, Wander-Odin simply blinked out of existence.

Nearby, Blink, who had been running several jotun ragged on the same tree branch that Wander-Odin had been stading on, making them chase her from place to place and thus,

making them easy targets for the surrounding troops, stared. "I, I what, what just happened? That didn't look like any teleportation I've ever seen... Oh..."

She looked to nearly collapse, as the realization of what had happened hit her, but Thundra saw this and leaped down from the branch she had been fighting on. The extra-dimensional traveler grabbed Blink up, retreating quickly as Uzume and Coyote laid down cover with several squads of ODMS.

Fortunately, or unfortunately depending on the side one was on for this battle, the attack on Amora missed. The Enchantress dodged to one side, evading a blow from a jotun even as the attack struck where she'd been only an instant previously. And then, warned by the assault on Wander-Odin, Ororo lashed out with her own powers, creating a powerful shield around Amora. An instant later, the Enchantress gasped as the barrier was immediately splashed with a heavy fire of green bolts of energy coming out of nowhere.

To one who knew it, the attack almost appeared like a long-distance killing curse, and Harry shivered at the sight of it. To use spells of that nature, you had to hate, to want to utterly snuff out the life of another person. It wasn't just about killing, the caster had to fervently desire to erase the target from existence, a level of raw hatred and loathing for other's that Harry had never been able to convince himself to feel, even in his darkest of moments. But it was evident by the number of sickly green bolts striking Ororo's shield around Amora that the Shadows could do so easily. And as the rest of their magical assault began to lose power, they put even more strength into the spell targeting Amora.

Ororo's quick thinking protected Amora for just long enough, and in the next second, Kitty phased through the ground behind her, wrapping an arm around the blonde's shoulders. "Take a deep breath!" Quickly the two of them became immaterial, dropping down into and hiding within the massive tree limb below them.

Amora would have panicked at this point if the people that Kitty used her power on like this could do so. This was not the case, and Kitty stuck her head out of the branch watching the action around while keeping Amora hidden within Yggdrasil's magical essence, blinding the Shadow's ability to find her.

It soon became clear that those twin assaults were the last gasp of the Shadows for this battle. Their presence soon withdrew from the area around the Earthers leaving only the remaining jotun. The last jotun was soon dealt with by a strike from Thunderbird, which removed its head.

"Company commanders, team leaders, sound off," Harry snapped out, staring over at where he could see Blink slumping down on her knees, staring at where Wander-Odin had been, Thundra standing over the young girl like a protective mountain.

He watched as Cyclops gently took Blink's arm, guiding her away as he explained to the distraught girl what had happened. "The enemy was waiting for us or reacted almost as soon as

we arrived. They were able to attack him somehow, him and Amora both. The attack, whatever it was it... it disintegrated Wander-Odin.”

From where he was standing, Harry could only barely make out Blink’s response, watching as Cyclops pulled the sobbing Blink into his arms, gently stroking her hair as she began to sob into his shoulder as she cried about how “the old curmudgeon grew on me like a weed, and I didn’t even like him most of the time. S-so why am I so sad he’s gone?!”

Watching the two of them, Harry decided that he had never been prouder of the man that Cyclops had become than at that moment. The stiff, straightlaced, by the books Scott Summers that Harry had initially met would have been awkwardness personified in a moment like this or he would’ve left it up to someone else. But, ever since Blink had announced she would like to join the X-Men in America, Cyclops had taken it upon himself to watch over her when he could.

Nearby, Kitty pulled Amora out from the wood of Yggdrasil, the Enchantress shivering slightly at how close she had come to dying just like Wander-Odin. *No, it was worse than death, it was as if his entire being had been snuffed out like a candle. But, but if they were using the same spell on both of us, then, then am I an aspect of someone else? Or...*

While Kitty and Wanda tried to make certain Amora didn’t collapse into an existential crisis, Harry turned his attention to the rest of the expeditionary force. “Get me numbers, people. How many did we lose? How many are hurt?”

“Twelve dead among the ODM,” Falcon reported, alighting nearby shaking his head. “You weren’t kidding. Those giants were some nasty mothers. Some of our men were literally torn apart.”

“Agreed,” Sean announced as he and the other ODM company commanders landed behind Sam, although without as much aplomb as their trainer. The most senior of the company commanders had worked throughout the battle with Logan and his daughter, having gotten used working with Wolverine during the assault on the Weapon X facility. “But those deaths were in the first few minutes. Once we got the range open... well, that and our guns—”

“Bolters!” Marcus Greentree, Sean’s senior NCO shouted, holding his gun to him like it was a baby. “These guns are bolters, and this one is mine. I will name him George and pet him and oil him and keep him safe and working forever.”

“Ookkay... ignoring that...” Harry said, shaking his head while many of the other troopers looked like they were close to doing the same thing. He also noticed that the act seemed to be bringing the men out of whatever limited shock they had all been experiencing. Veterans all, even the jotun held no real fear for these men. *Hell, I wonder if their shock is more due to the illusions and such than the jotun in all honesty.*

Leaving the ODMs to their commanders and the other units to Steve and his officers, Harry looked around for the bodies, but only two of the bodies had been recovered so far. They now lay among the supply boxes on one of the large magic carpets.

“Accio bodies...” he murmured, hoping to recover the bodies of his other troopers, only to sigh as the spell failed. Those bodies were gone, lost in the void beyond the pocket dimensions of Yggdrasil.

And looking over at the telepaths, Harry saw that while the magical and physical battle had ended, the telepathic side of things had yet to abate. They could not stay here and try to recover their dead, even if it was possible. There would be no recovery for them and he shook his head once more, before gesturing down towards the dimensional bubble of Asgard resolutely. “Let’s get moving folks. We want to keep up the momentum here.”

“I agree, although we should take this as a warning. We were able to overcome nearly every assault Those Who Watch Above In Shadow sent our way this time, when at full strength, and even then, they still snuck attacks through,” Steven warned. “They’re a tough foe to pin down, and the more exhausted we get, the harder it’ll be for everyone.”

“Agreed, but hopefully we’ll be able to find allies here of the magical persuasion and teach them how to spot the Shadow’s illusions. On the Astral Plane, though...” Harry trailed off with a wince.

“Standing around and talking is not making that strain any easier,” Emma drawled, her eyes flashing with annoyance at the continued mental assaults. *They are easy to dissipate so diffuse are they, but even so there is a certain power behind them.* “You have now spoken of moving, put action to word!”

Chuckling at that, Harry began to organize the trip from Yggdrasil down to the dimension of Asgard. That turned out to be quite a sight for most of the earthers, while actually getting across the dimensional gap into Asgard turned out to be far simpler than Harry had feared. It was much like jumping from a tree down to the ground, only both the tree and ground were inside different soap bubbles, and you had to pass through the intervening distance and there was a bit of sheer nothingness between them. Of course, the ground was also, in this case, a massive pocket dimension, that hung within the boughs of an even larger tree-shaped pocket dimension.

Analogies did often fall short when it came to reality.

The experience was very disconcerting for several of the men, particularly among the Orbital Drop Marines. But all of them made it across safely, covered by spell work and riding on equally large carpets.

“Point me, Odin,” Harry said, holding out a vaguely pointed rock he’d picked up from the ground. The spell, however, failed utterly. The stone didn’t even twitch, and casting for a few

more names of other Asgardians Harry knew amounted to the same thing. “The Shadows must be blocking magical means of finding people. I’d hoped a Point Me was too unknown to this universe to be blocked like that, but I’m not exactly surprised it didn’t work. Obfuscating spells are a lot easier than blocking teleportation.”

Likewise, Steven and Clea’s attempt at scrying proved fruitless, leading Harry to turn to Emma, Jean, and the other telepaths. “What about you all?”

“We can sense several large population centers, but when we try to get a read of what is going on out there via the minds of the individuals involved, the Shadows block us from discovering more,” Charles announced calmly, sitting in his wheelchair on the telepaths’ flying carpet as if he were simply sitting at home in his mansion. He was as poised and controlled in that moment as he had been during the earlier battle earlier.

Emma agreed, although she knew she was far less poised, much to her annoyance. “We can give you a direction, but that’s about it. The Shadows are pressing in hard.”

“What’s the matter, Frosty, can’t hack it?” Emma Steed taunted, smirking. But despite her barb towards her fellow telepath the strain on her own face was very visible.

“Chains, my dear girl, if you wish to take over this particular bastion, pretty please be so kind as to do so. But it’s just like the attack on Hela, Harry,” Emma reported, turning away from her self-proclaimed rival without another thought. “I can feel the attacks coming through the Astral Plane, and we can all get between them and their targets, but we can’t sense where the attacks are coming from to launch my own offense. It’s quite bloody annoying, to use a British idiom.”

“Then a direction will have to do,” Harry interjected before the two Emmas could continue to snipe at each other, looking over to Jean.

She obliged by thrusting out a hand. “Luckily for us, two of the larger population centers are both in the same general direction from here.”

“Let’s get a move on troops,” Harry ordered, looking over at the Falcon, the ODMs and the other flyers. “You all, Load up on the magic carpets. They’ll get us there faster and without burning through your stamina and fuel.”

“That is one line I never expected to hear outside of some alcohol-induced bender,” Tony murmured, watching as everyone who didn’t have the ability to fly or, like Tony, have an inexhaustible source of power to do so, re-boarded the magic carpets.

With Ororo, Harry, Tony and Johnny leading the way, the magic carpets set out across the landscape. Almost as soon as they moved beyond the mountains that marked the ‘border’ of Asgard in relation to Yggdrasil, Dani, Amora, and Hela all gaped or cursed in shock. “Wh-what has happened to the land?!” Amora exclaimed.

Their collective shock was understandable. Asgard was a land perennially locked in winter, a land of mountains, dales, plains, and above all, lush evergreen forests. But now the land appeared diseased. The verdant forests had wilted to brown. The grass of the plains and the crops of the scattered farms the Earthers flew over were gray and poisoned. Even the air carried an off-green tinge.

"I... I don't know," Hela said, staring around her in no less shock than her fellow Asgardian. "Whatever malady this is, it wasn't affecting my realm when I was there but an hour before joining you all at the teleportation point."

"Do you think you can get there now to double-check?" Jean asked.

"Nay," Hela shook her head. "I dare not chance to teleport out and back in such a manner. Not with the Shadows knowing we are here."

"Whatever this is, it could be toxic. I recommend that those of us who don't have masks or helmets built into our outfits get some, now," Steven advised, his mouth covered by a bit of his living cape.

Agreeing with a nod, Harry and Ororo went around, conjuring masks for those who needed them. Bruce Banner, Ben Grimm, Piotr, and Paige need them. Similarly, Harry was feeling fine. But Wanda, Kurt, Scott, and the telepaths were already showing signs of illness before they took the provided masks. Luckily it didn't seem to remain in their systems afterwards.

Making certain the masks kept out whatever the poison in the air was and yet still allowed the wearer to breathe easily took about thirty minutes. At the same time, Harry made certain Tony, Dani, Carol, Wyatt, and most worryingly, the ODMs' suits kept out whatever the hell was around them.

As the rest of the expeditionary force being prepared for anti-gas warfare, Ororo, her own half-mask in place, spoke up, already deciding she didn't like the thing but willing to put up with the annoyance in the name of safety. "Do you think we should go on ahead, check out the lay of the land?"

Scratching his faded forehead scar thoughtfully at his lover's suggestion, Harry nodded. "Polaris, Storm, Hela, Torch, Cannonball, Banshee, with me. The rest of you, stay here. If you could keep overwatch on us, Jean?"

Jean grumbled about being called out specifically like that but made no move to join them, lying back in her bed of cushions beside Emma (Frost) and Charles on their magic carpet. The redheaded prospective mother intellectually knew that she had no place in fighting the upcoming battle, not with as far along as her pregnancy was. Indeed, she'd already fought an uphill battle even convincing Harry and the others to bring her along at all, only succeeding

when Emma joined in on her side, rationalizing that they needed all the powerful telepaths they could get to face the Shadows.

And although she might've prevailed, once more Jean found herself behind so many magical protections that Harry estimated she could walk through a field of nukes and come out the other side smelling like daisies. "Right. Fine. I'll keep watch."

Nodding with relief at the easy agreement, Harry left Steve and Emma in charge before joining Storm to speed ahead of the rest of the earth force.

scene break

With Balder at the center, Sif and the others at hard points here and there, the battle line on top of the ridge held. The Fire Jotun had come up against a defense that they could not break through with sheer strength or numbers. The enemy army didn't recoil, didn't retreat, but the jotuns' roars of battle and rage were soon joined by frustration and dismay.

Behind the front lines, many jotun continued eating any stone they could find, growing larger. Some of them started towering above most of the trees in the forest. Yet the defense continued to hold, and those that did stick out like this were quickly targeted by arrow fire, often blinded as several arrows pierced their eyes. Or they were struck by Thor's lightning from a distance, crashing down among the forest below, sending their magma-like blood exploding everywhere to hiss and steam in the ever-growing cold being caused by the catapults' special munitions and the Thunder God's magic.

As the fighting dragged on, the ground started to rumble and shudder underneath the hill, but the magic in the defensive line meant the wooden palisade stayed inviolate. The ridge in front of the hilltop shifted and moved almost like mud, the touch of Surtur's magic allowing his forces to get up to the battlements easier, but that magic faded as soon as it came to the top of the ridge. And many of those that reached the hilltop were pulled into the melee swirling around Balder, losing much of their scant numbers before they even managed to attack the palisade.

So stout was the defense that for the first time, Surtur had to actually think his way through what to do. As he stared into the distance at the Bright One, Surtur fought down his fury, the magma-hot rage and hate within him, so that he could try and think about the best way to break the enemy which had suddenly become a wall his army could not pass. "Hmm... No... perhaps not through. But around..."

With that, even as more of his forces pressed up the hill, the King of Muspellheim ordered other troops to shift to the sides. Instead of pushing directly against the ridgeline, they were directed to congregate to the right of it. There, they pushed through the forest, staying away from the deceptive incline and instead moving to flank the Asgardians' position.

To do so, the jotun shrank back down to their original sizes so that they could move through the trees without smashing them down and being discovered. It truly was an inspiring idea for the jotun to concoct so that they could sneak forward... as best as twelve feet tall mountains of muscle made of magma and volcanic rock could.

At the same time, Surtur pulled back several hundred of his biggest, toughest fighters . "Go back. Eat. Grow. We will break them one way or the other." Orders given, Surtur turned and placed his hands back on the ground, closing his eyes as he pressed his will forward, trying to shatter the enchantments on the land under the ridge. The lava deep in the ground beneath the battlefield roiled at his command and began to rise, but slowly, too slowly. The touch of the two earth goddesses was holding. But it could not hold forever.

Despite the jotun's attempts to sneak by, Balder and the Jarls had planned for such a tactic. While they had used scouts throughout the forest in front of the ridgeline to warn of the enemy's advance, the sides of the ridge were where they had arrayed the most number of traps. Not many, and few of them were of the painful variety. After all, despite the size of the defensive army, they had been ridiculously busy preparing the main battlefield.

But they didn't need to be. Instead, all the traps were connected to bells, bits of iron, and other things that could make noise, all to draw the defenders' attention to their flanks.

Soon word that not just one or two of the noise traps had been sprung, but that all of them had been activated reached Thor, and he guffawed loudly. Thrusting his hammer into the air and smashing aside another hurled log, he looked over at where Sif was fighting nearby, her own blade flashing out in a series of cuts to slice another log into pieces before it could crash down on top of the battlements. Chunks no larger than a human skull still crashed down here and there, but they were taken on the shields of the defenders or simply dodged completely. "Sif, I go to our right flank to smash these fools who believe that they can get around us. Can you hold here?"

"I will try not to take that as an insult, Boisterous One," Sif shot back, defending a man to one side as he stumbled from blocking a spear longer than he was tall. "And if you are quick, I may be inclined to withhold slaughtering all of our enemies and leaving you without chance for glory!"

"HAHAHAHA!" Thor laughed loudly, fighting the urge to reach over and pull Sif into a kiss for some reason, the completely alien urge both utterly unthinkable and yet strangely captivating. He shook that thought off, leaping down from the battlements to where his chariot waited on the reverse slope and once more the goats bore him into the air. The men of the battle line cheered seeing Thor pass by overhead. While he was no war leader, no tactician or strategist, every fighting man revered him as their true defender, and took heart at seeing him above them.

Within seconds, Thor was above the area where the noise traps had been set up. "For Odin and Valhalla!" Lightning crashed down into the forest, turning trees into so much shrapnel and burning, charred cinders. Visible now, the jotun snarled in fury and fear as they stared up against their most implacable foe. Spears flew, but the goats twisted this way and that, reminding Thor almost of one of the human's fighter jets he'd seen during his time on Earth as they dodged all the incoming projectiles.

When a few came too close, Thor whirled his hammer, creating a buttress of air around his chariot. So protected, Thor continued his attack, lashing down at the jotun with more lightning. This scattered the jotun attempting to turn the flank of the battle line, killing many and sending the others into momentary retreat.

A moment later, having created a bit of a runway through the forest, Thor ordered his chariot down into their midst. With a final flick of the reins, Thor sent the chariot back up into the air, still protected by the bubble of furious gale of wind. As he stood there taking in the sight before him, Thor cheerfully grinned at the surviving giants. "Well?"

"GRAAA!!" ThUsing their body's inherent magic, the jotun each grew several feet in seconds and then bellowed before charging.

Thor's laughter boomed out once more as he charged forward, his hammer flicking this way and that, ending or crippling a jotun's life with every strike. "Yes! Come to me, jotun, come to your doom!"

The overall battle became a tense, bloody stalemate. The boulders from the catapults continued to land, weakening the jotun, costing them dearly in numbers and energy by the time they reached the barricade at the top of the ridge. Said barricade had been hammered here and there, but it hadn't broken, and with the added benefit of height and their better weapons and organization, the warriors, human and Asgardians together, held the line even as the humans slowly began to weaken due to the poison in the air slowly eating away at their strength.

More jotun continued to pile onto Balder right where he fought in front of the battlements, but he danced among them easily, sword flicking, shield taking shifting expertly to redirect blow after blow. A beacon of hope, the Bright One drew the jotun to him despite Surtur's attempts to order his pawns not to attack him.

And behind him, the defenders took full advantage of this. Sif, Fandral, Hogun, Tyr and the other commanders made certain the karls and Asgardian archers kept a steady rate of fire while holding the top of the wall against the jotun. By this point, most of the jotun were large enough to reach up to the defenders without climbing, but with the numbers advantage the Asgardians managed to hold at the top of the wall despite that.

As the direct assault was stymied, so too was the attempt to flank the human and Asgardian defenders held in place around Thor. The Thunder God's taunting shouts and bellows of laughter as he dealt with the failed sneak attack galvanized the warriors from one end of the battle line to the other, heard despite the sounds of battle drowning out every other sound.

Slicing a towering jotun's leg out from under it, Balder stabbed the creature in the side as it fell to its knees, punching through armor and flesh alike. Pulling his blade out, Balder dodged around a strike from another jotun's club. Slaying that enemy, Balder was beginning to feel an inkling of hope that they could actually win this battle, all his earlier concerns pushed away.

However, those concerns came roaring back several minutes later as he noticed that the catapults had stopped firing. More and more of the jotun were now making it through the forest to try and scale the ridge. There weren't enough to endanger the defensive line yet, but there were many more of them now and their numbers, as always, seemed to continue to grow.

Across the battlefield, Surtur felt the change as well; the lack of new cold spells striking his army making him smile a wicked grin. Instantly he began to push his will out into the ground even more firmly, and at that touch, steam and heat began to rise from the earth. The Jotun King's magic also collided with Thor's, breaking its impact on the battlefield creating fog throughout the forest.

Balder and Surtur weren't the only two who noticed the sudden lack of catapult fire. Unfortunately, Balder couldn't pull back, tied down as he was before the wall. Likewise, Tyr, Hogun, even Sif soon found themselves in the thick of things thanks to the heightened pressure on the line thanks to the increase in jotun reaching the wall.

But one of the human jarls also understood and was in a position to try and discover what was going on. The man raced over to the center-most portion of the line, where Balder had been stationed. There, he found all of the runners that had been assigned to Balder and bellowed them into motion. "Run back to the catapults and report back! We need to know why they have stopped firing!"

At that, the runners raced off, each of them taking a slightly different route through the heavy forest as they'd been trained to. But despite this precaution, none of those young men could have been prepared for what they discovered as they raced down the hill and past the tree line.

From out of the forest around the rear of the battlefield, dark elves moved. Silent and deadly, the dark elves were clad in dark green and dark blue armor that somehow blended into the forest like magic. They moved through trees and underbrush alike as if they were wraiths, readying themselves to attack the Asgardians from behind.

Other dark elves had already struck the catapults and their guards where they had rested in a small dell more than a mile behind the ridge. The catapults were now destroyed, their operators dead. Now, when the runners entered the forest, the dark elves acted quickly, moving behind them, their weapons ready to stab.

Two of the runners died instantly, their throats slit. Two more were speared from behind. Another was garroted, having paused at the sounds of the former gasping for air through the blood drowning their lungs pulled behind a tree and choked to death.

One turned on a whim, miraculously dodging a spear strike meant for his back, and raced back the way he'd come shrieking in horror. "Dark elves, Dark elves!!"

An arrow took him in the back of the neck, sending him sprawling forward, his eyes dulling as his head hit the ground.

With the element of surprise lost, hundreds of dark elves came up out of the forest all at once. Their arrows flashed through the air before they retreated back into the woods. The men and women of the strategic reserve, a force of over three thousand, howled in rage as they came under this surprise attack. Thankfully, warned by the runner, their losses were minimal and instead of being frozen in shock they turned and charged after their harassers.

There, the dark elves waited. Each dark elf was armed with a small buckler shield and long, slightly thin swords adorned with basket hilts to protect their hands. As the humans charged forward, the elves moved as one, dancing around their strikes, their swords flicking out like serpents' tongues.

Few human warriors could respond quickly enough to survive the speed of an elf, and time and again dark elven blades sank into unarmored portions of human bodies, be it thigh, lower leg, shoulder, neck, or face. Wherever an opening could be found, the elves swords sought them out. Thankfully, the enchantments cast upon the armor of the defenders was proof against any other blows that struck, or else the battle may well have ended then; the restriction of only being able to target weak points keeping the battle from turning into a rout. Yet still, men began to fall while more dark elves moved out of the woods, the denizens of Svartálfheim slowly surrounding the reserve, cutting it off from the main battle line.

The Jarls were quickly informed of what was happening and on their orders, Sif and Hogun were pulled out of the battle line and sent to combat the dark elves with a heavy force of archers, despite the weakening effect this had on the defenders on the ridge. None complained. All of them knew that if this force of dark elves wasn't beaten off quickly enough, the battle would be lost as they'd be crushed between the unrelenting jotun and these new enemies.

But Sif and Hogun quickly found that the dark elves had indeed come out in force. Their men smashed into the swirling melee under the trees and found for every five people they ran

across, three were dark elves. Even the fire from the Asgardian archers was quickly suppressed, forcing them to lay their bows aside and close.

“Damn it, where is Skadi!?” Sif shouted as her sword sliced a dark elf’s head from his shoulders. She twisted, and a severed leg flew through the air before her shield crashed into the face of another dark elf. It appeared some things hadn’t changed during the end of the world; if you could hit the bastards, they were still quite fragile. But dark elves were so fast and accurate that human warriors were not able to fight them on an even footing. “It was her job, and that of the Valkyries assigned to her, to keep this sort of ambush from happening.

“So sorry...” a voice hissed from nearby, On instinct, Sif whipped around just in time to block a slash that would have taken her in the side of her neck. Instead, her sword shrieked as it skittered along that of the Dark Elf King, Malekith. “But I prefer to choose my own dance partners.”

Hogun bellowed and lashed out with a lightning-fast strike from his mace, but Malekith flowed around it, a single spell lashing out as he did so. Green energy blinded the mace-wielder as Sif’s sword was deflected. A instant later she felt the king’s blade slicing through her hair as she ducked under a return stroke. Magic or blade, Malekith was a well-known a master of both, and Sif knew she was overmatched.

Then Tyr was there, his own sword dancing with Malekith’s as he pressed the dark elf back. The blinding spell didn’t hold on Hogun for long thankfully, his sight returning as he smashed several dark elves to pulp before barreling in to strike at Malekith once more. The three Asgardians fought on together, although Sif still wondered where her Skadi had gone.

“Your huntress was easily caught oh Fairest of the Fair,” Malekith taunted as the battle went on, “Ah, and the things I have planned for her... and you as well, my dear. Oh yes, I have often wanted to break you to the saddle...”

That tore it. With a wordless shriek, Sif attacked furiously, disdaining her defense for complete offense. Tyr attempted to rein his raging friend in, but Malekith simply laughed, adding fuel to the fire. The elven king retreated from Sif’s wrath, pulling the trio further away from the men they had been commanding.

Once more it fell to the human Jarls to try and make sense of the chaos of battle. It was quickly apparent that the skirmish in the woods was turning against them.

Worse, the ground of the hill itself was rumbling and shaking now, and more jotun were coming against the palisade now. Worse, they weren’t really targeting the men on the wall. Rather, they targeted the wood of the wall itself, smashing at it or melting it. The protective spells woven into the fabric of the wall were slowly fading. Before their eyes, the wall was starting to take damage where it hadn’t been before.

The Asgardian army was now caught in a vice, assaulted on three sides, with the only bright spot being that Thor held the right flank almost entirely alone. The left flank also held solid for now, but who knew how long that would last? All it would take for it to fall would be if the jotun remembered there were two flanks they could attack or for the dark elves to prove they had more reserves.

"Damn it!" One of the Jarls growled angrily. His name was Fangir Snowglare, and he and several of his fellows had pulled away from the battle on the ridge to try and decide what to do. "Let's face it, with the dark elves crawling up our asses, it might just be time to die standing, boys."

"Nay." One of the other jarls demurred, pointing to the right flank, where Thor's bellowing could still be heard. "We retreat that way. Pull back in segments, and head down the hill in that direction. Send word to Lord Thor, have him smash a road through the forest for us so that we can retreat all the quicker."

"We will come under heavy assault from either side. More and more jotun are coming at us even as the elves close in," one of the other Jarls warned.

As if to prove his words, there came a furious bellow, so loud that it silenced all the war cries across the entire sprawling battlefield. Across the mass of the enemy army, two jotun appeared through the haze, so large they could've been hills given life. The rest of their brethren made way for them, and the monsters, so huge they could eat a normal man without even chewing, lumbered forward.

But before either gigantic jotun could reach the ridge, which they could've simply reached directly across, there was a flash from the right flank. A second later a "BOOOOM!!!" tore through the air as Thor's hammer smashed into the chest of one of the giants, punching straight through the first into the other and hurling it off its feet as well.

"HAHAhaha! The bigger you are, the better a target, fools!" Thor's bellow resounded, equal in volume to the earlier roar from the giants.

Every man on the line raised their weapons and roared, "THOOOORRR!!!" Such was the response the defender of the common men engendered.

Even as his people applauded, Thor caught Mjollnir out of the air on its return, frowning. The hammer looked almost as if it were starting to melt. But that was impossible... wasn't it? Shaking his head at that and the odd thought that his hammer should've been stone instead of metal, Thor charged into the next group of jotun.

Back with the jarls, they all nodded as one with Fangir agreeing with his fellow's earlier words verbally. "Lord Thor will hold, as will Lord Balder. If Lady Sif and the other gods pulled off the wall continue to hold the dark elves, we can pull our warriors out before we're fully

enveloped. Any losses we take in the doing will be much less than if we were forced to fight where we stand."

With a plan made the Jarls retreated to their positions. Soon, horns cut through the tumult of battle, and the Jarl commanding the leftmost position pulled away, reinforcing his next most peer with half his men while sending most of the Asgardians under his command to fight with Tyr and the others against the dark elves.

Not that the elves were having it all their own way in the woods, because Malekith's words to Sif were indeed very false. Skadi **was** there, and the Valkyries with her. While the dark elves had bypassed them before this, Freya had sensed the catapults' destruction and sent Skadi a message. The Huntress had previously been skirting the battlefield, planning to find and attack Surtur in a surprise assault. At Freya's command, she abandoned her scheme and rushed to her people's aid.

Now they came in from every angle, the Valkyries shooting from above and Skadi and a few human hunters attacking from wherever they could. The tide of battle slowly shifted as the skirmish behind the ridge became as bloody and drawn out as the combat on the ridge.

Yet still, it continued to be the jotun who were the main threat. The rumbling of the ground throughout the battlefield was now almost constant. Geysers of steam shot from the earth or streams of lava appeared from cracks in the ridge and elsewhere as more jotun, all of them now four stories tall or more, reached the line.

More men began pulling back, retreating towards Thor's present position. Those already wounded or too weakened fell where they stood and were left behind.

Word reached the Thunderer quickly of what was needed of him and between strikes against jotun still foolishly attempting to surround him, he laid down a furious barrage of lightning and wind strikes, smashing trees to pieces and clearing a road several miles long for the retreating warriors and Asgardians to race along. This miracle came at a cost, however. In his mighty grip, Mjollnir began to emit strange sounds, cracks appearing in its metal.

Thanks to the presence of the jarls, the retreat was a controlled process even as more and more men died as they fled, wounds and poison building up in the men faster than ever. The overall fighting against the dark elves was proving more deadly to the human warriors than the battle at the ridge had been up to this point, as they lacked the speed necessary to keep up with the denizens of Svartalfheim. The dark elves were also far more experienced than even the oldest warrior spirit.

Thankfully, while Hogun, Sif, and Tyr were being taunted and led on a merry chase by Malekith, other Asgardians stepped up and took a heavy toll on the dark elves alongside the Valkyries, their blades and arrows flashing through the foliage. Skadi in particular became a horror, hunting through the woods, turning the dark elves tactics against them.

Soon, half of the defenders from on top of the ridge had pulled away, and Balder's position was no longer tenable. One of the jarls even shouted down at him to retreat along the ridge with him and his men.

Agreeing, Boulder protected the men on the ridge further still, allowing them to better disengage without having to split their focus entirely between retreat and staying alive. However, with their absence, more and more jotun gained access to the ridge behind the retreating warriors and toward their former left flank. Soon, the retreat was so threatened from that side that it was in danger of turning into a rout.

Realizing this, more of the Asgardians fighting against the dark elves were forced to redirect their efforts than were able to stay and continue to slaughter the malevolent opportunists. Almost able to feel the pressure lightening on them, the dark elves started to strike at the human warriors who made up the majority of the Einherjar with renewed cruelty.

"Blast it Thor, use your lightning, not just your hammer! Lay down a storm upon the Jotun!" Balder ordered, bellowing to be heard over the tumult of battle. Men were falling as more jotun gained the ridge and pushed into the army on an even footing, Asgardian and human both. If this continued, the entire army would be rolled up from that flank even as they tried to disengage from the other two attacks.

"Right!" Thor shouted, backing away from the battle line, letting several dozen humans charge forward to take his place. He raised his hammer to the clouds above. The cold front he'd brought down earlier to battle Surtur's influence had been broken by this point, but Thor's power over the weather was such that even without any prep time, he could summon up a storm of lightning bolts at need.

Lightning rained down in sheets from of the sky at Thor's command, crashing down into the jotun on the hill. The jotun who were struck died instantly or were flung about, while the remnants of the battlements were shattered or set ablaze. This new bit of chaos allowed the humans and the few remaining Asgardians facing the jotun there to break contact for the most part. Men still died, most slowly succumbing to wounds that would not normally have bothered them, the miasma of Jörmungandr working on their battered bodies.

But the rest were able to escape down the hill before the main force of jotun could attempt to follow through with their previous flanking assault where Thor had previously been fighting. With barely any room to breathe, they began to march down the road Thor had created, retreating from the battlefield.

As the men formed up into ragtag teams, one of the jarls suddenly bellowed, waving a single-bladed axe with a berserker-like fury, forcing the men approaching him into a shield wall—or rather a shield wedge—holding there as Balder continued his dance behind them to one side. "May Hugin and Mugin take yer eyes, yeh pox-cursed cowards, get in line! Shields up! On my word, we will spread, and then close!"

Balder made to speak, but the human Jarl, Egnar Fainaxe, glared back at the Bright One, thrusting his axe out towards where the rest of the army was still under attack from the dark elves. With Thor's lightning cutting off access from the ridge and somewhat to both sides, the jotun were now too slow and out of position to catch up with most of the army. Surtur's power still caused the ground to quake though, steam and magma boiling out of it in places. It truly looked like a scene from the end times.

This all still left the forerunners who had come too close to the retreating mass of troops before Thor's lightning struck and some of the quicker jotun who'd been trying to get around the ridge earlier. "Go! We can at least hold them off a few moments, my Lord, get the rest of our people out!"

Balder hesitated momentarily before nodding solemnly. He raised his sword in a salute even as he raced past the makeshift shield line. "Your sacrifice will be remembered, Egnar."

The human smiled wryly, shaking his head slightly. "If any of us survive, my Lord," he whispered, "if any of us survive."

Then the jotun were on him, and his bellowed order broke up the shield wall. Against jotun, such a formation would've been next to useless. Instead, the humans dodged all around, only two of them proving too slow as the jotun seemingly tried to charge through the original position. Confused at the lack of impact, the jotun halted their attack, allowing the men to press in from all sides. Not one of these brave warriors survived, but they stayed true to Egnar's word and held the first of the jotun pursuing the retreating forces in place for a few moments.

Unfortunately, their sacrifice didn't matter. The dark elves increased their pressure on the army's rear, now making a concerted effort to get around the Asgardians holding them in place. With them preoccupied, the eight jotun Surtur had pulled from his army earlier now came upon the humans.

And they were huge. Each stood larger than the hill that the pitched battle had been happening on, arising out of the distance like living towers of molten rock and stone. They stomped towards the fleeing army, which could not retreat fast enough from their advance.

Even under normal conditions, a human army would never have been able to get away from jotun that huge, such was the length of their strides. Now, with the very ground cracking and shifting under them, spikes of earth jutting into the air at random, and miniature volcanoes erupting everywhere around the army including occasionally within their retreating ranks? There was no chance of escape.

Another toll of the bell sounded as Surtur had finally broke through the earth goddesses' powers that had been defending the area from his influence.

Well behind his army, Surtur smirked slightly to himself, clenching and unclenching his massive hands as he imagined the slaughter to come. *I will gorge on Asgardian flesh and long shall be the feast!*

However, a moment later, he frowned as he saw one of his overly large jotun collapsing. Glaring, Surtur saw that had been cleaved in two by a strike from Balder, a wave of power with all the radiance of the sun flashing out from the Asgardian prince's position. Clearly, even though the battle was lost to them, the fight had yet to leave some of the defenders.

Surtur watched on as yet another massive jotun fell, only to scowl as he felt an abrupt disturbance in the earth. It was as if some new entity was trying to calm it down. Turning his attention away from the physical battle, Surtur knelt down, pressing his hands back into the dirt beneath his feet. As he did, he was utterly shocked to find his first impression had been correct; another mind thrummed within the earth below, fighting him, pushing away his influence.

The remaining massive giant jotun continued their march, reaching down with hands three times the size of a man to grab up scores of warriors each. Asgardian and human alike were scooped up and tossed into the gaping maws of the monsters. Another died to Balder during this, and a fourth to Thor while a fifth lost its leg below the knee to a strike from Tyr, who, though unable to project his power very well, was able to cut through the stone-like skin of the massive giant, such was his strength.

As his hammer returned to him once more, Thor twisted around, bringing it up to slam into another jotun's face right as it had been about to finish off the warrior standing next to him. But as he struck, Mjollnir, the second greatest weapon ever crafted by dverggar skill and magic, Mjollnir, the symbol of Thor's place as a defender of man and god, shattered.

The jotun was hurled off of its feet, but the steel of the hammer's head exploded in every direction, including back into Thor. The pieces moved so fast and with so much of the Thunderer's own magic bound up into them that the bits of shrapnel were able to mark Thor's face and upper arms, slicing through his clothing here and there, and even tore through the chain mail armor he wore. One even nearly took out his eye, though Thor might not have noticed such was his shocked dismay at the impossibility that had just happened. "What... what?"

But Thor had no time to question what had happened to his hammer, as a giant barreled into him, the much larger being knocking the Asgardian off of his feet momentarily so stunned was Thor at the destruction of his hammer. The impact knocked Thor from his stupor, and he reached up even as they fell, grappling the giant. He ignored the heat of the jotun's body to grasp around its face and with a roar, twisted its neck sharply to the right. There was a sickening crack, and the giant fell dead.

Grunting, Thor lifted the giant corpse above his head and hurled it away, smashing down several other jotun. "Mjollnir or no, I am still Thor!" He bellowed, charging forward once more.

Such were the vagaries of the battlefield that Thor soon found himself beside Balder, who looked at his brother's empty hands in shock. He couldn't spend the time to question why Thor was without his hammer, however, as they were still being pressed hard on all sides. The humans had reformed somewhat, but there were still two overly large giants attacking them, and now, the main enemy forces were close to reaching them once more, thanks to the attacks of their larger brethren and the dark elves slowing their escape. The only thing Balder could internally remark upon as being good luck up to this point was that Surtur and his dratted spear had yet to show themselves.

But alas for Balder, someone else did, coming out of the steam from some underground vent to appear beside him on his left just as he cut down another dark elf and turned his attention to one of the two remaining hill-sized jotun.

"Oh, good show, Bright One, truly. It is almost admirable how you Asgardians never know when to stop fighting. Why, it almost makes you like my people, doesn't it?" Malekith taunted, and Balder turned, barely blocking a thrust from the dark elven king's spear. His block brought the spear to one side, and Malekith whirled, bringing the butt of the shaft around into Balder's leg.

His shield blocked that, but Malekith leaped upward before Balder could right himself, and a kick caught the Asgardian prince in the face. It didn't hurt much, but it did momentarily block Balder's view as Malekith twirled, bringing his spear down onto the outside of his shield arm.

Balder was wearing armor on his forearm, and that armor, like the rest of him, had been enchanted by the Blessing of Freya. No stone, steel, alloy, or magic could harm him without fully overpowering that Blessing, something that Malekith could never have hoped to do. Armed with a seemingly magical spear of some kind, Surtur had succeeded in drawing the Bright One's blood, but that was a special case.

Alas, so too was this. For there was one plant whose spirit had not agreed to refrain from harming Balder when his mother had cast her Blessing: Mistletoe. And it just so happened, that the spear that Malekith currently wielded was tipped with that very plant, carved, polished, and worked to appear as dark as any steel.

As if passing through paper, the mistletoe-tipped spear sliced cleanly through Balder's vambrace, cutting a long, deep line down his arm.

Balder instantly lost all feeling in his hand, and his circular shield dropped from his grip. Rather than step back in appalled shock or horror at his being wounded so, Balder simply brought his sword around, forcing Malekith back. A series of thrusts and stabs were exchanged,

and the dark elven king was now pushed on the back foot for a moment, Balder's greater strength and skill negating his own greater speed.

Yet even so, several times his mistletoe-tipped spear scored slight scratches, slicing into Balder's lamellar armor like it was made of paper. And on Balder's arm, the skin around the wound was starting to turn green and blue with the poison of the mistletoe.

Seeing his brother in such dire straits, Thor hurled his opponent, a regular-sized jotun, into several dark elves who had been encircling a nearby group of humans. He then turned and bellowed, charging towards Malekith. "Malekith, I will break you over my knee, you bastard!"

"Ahh, and here comes the dullard, no hammer this time, though. But tell me, Foolish Thor, what is all your strength worth if you can never hit what you aim at?" Malekith taunted. With a gesture, he created two simulacrum while disappearing from his opponents' senses for a moment as the two brothers fought his constructs.

While the two brothers were bamboozled, Malekith stood back for a moment, smirking silently as he enjoyed how the battle was going.

One last massive jotun remained, smashing into and through the Asgardian forces, scattering human and godling alike. Yet still, the warriors would not break. Still they fought on, even as more jotun caught up with them, even as his dark elves started to envelop them for the final time.

Snearing, Malekith tripped Thor, sending him tumbling into a nearby steam vent. His hand flashed out, a gleaming gold chain slipping around Thor's head down to his neck as the blonde Asgardian turned, roaring. Thor didn't even seem to notice his new accessory as he hurled himself after Malekith.

"You never learn do you Fool?" Malekith taunted, laughing wildly as he dodged around Thor's charge once more. "Your power and strength are worthless against those you cannot hit!"

When Balder moved to attack in turn, Malekith pivoted, batting aside the weakening Bright One's strike, returning it with his mistletoe tipped spear which carved through the god's armor once more. This time he left behind a thin cut across Balder's stomach and a second later Malekith dodged another punch from Thor with almost laughable ease, tossing up another illusion spell in front of him, causing him to cry and thrash out, lashing out to every side.

As Thor tried to lunge at Malekith, hands outstretched, the dark elven king danced out of the way and Thor's hand smacked Balder in the shoulder. Unlike the mistletoe the blow did no harm, but the impact still sent him stumbling. "Ball the gods, Thor regain control of yourself!"

"He can't hear you," Malekith guffawed, gesturing to the chain he'd looped around Thor's throat. "While I can't kill Thor, unlike you he doesn't have any exploitable weaknesses, I

was able to enchant that pretty bauble long ago. His ears are being filled with the roar of battle and his eyes fooled by my magics to see nothing but an enemy all around. And Thor is not nearly bright enough to see through such illusions.”

This was proven a moment later as Malekith once more created an illusion. To Thor, it was as if the foe appeared out of the battlefield to one side before darting away, taunting the Thunderer. In response, Thor’s rage spiked and he lashed out with a mighty blow. The illusion, indifferent to the effort, darted away and Thor smashed into several jotun and human warriors as he raced away from Balder.

“You see?” The dark elf king sneered, raising his spear and pointing its tip towards Balder. “Now, where were we oh Bright One?”

Balder stumbled back, grim-faced, before he was forced to duck under the swipe of a nearby jotun. The blow still caught him on the side of his helmet, tearing it away from his head.

Twirling around the jotun, Balder’s sword cut deep into the monster’s thigh. Ducking under another blow from a new dark elf, he punched out, shattering bone and depositing the dark elf on the ground, unmoving. As that foe fell, Balder once more lunged blade to spear with Malekith, only to stumble as another jotun Thor had knocked aside a moment ago grabbed at his leg. Balder fell, and Malekith smashed his sword out of his hand with a back sweep of his spear.

“You are good,” Malekith said with a laugh. “But not good enough to overcome your sole weakness. Die Bright One, and know that your death will be the final toll signaling Ragnarök.”

And then, there was a series of sharp explosions.

Several unseen... somethings... crashed into the last giant jotun, exploding upon impact and sending bits of giant flesh and magma-like blood everywhere. Several men died from being struck by the lava-like blood, but everyone, elf, jotun, and beleaguered man and god alike, froze in utter shock, wondering what had happened as they stared at the collapsing giant.

A second later, more explosions erupted throughout the jotun horde, halting their attempts to catch the Asgardian army. A round shield of some kind came spinning through the air, crashing into Malekith’s armored back, sending him flying off of the downed but not yet dead Balder.

From seemingly nowhere, music began to blast over the battlefield and as unlooked-for arrived with a roar of, **“Then the Winged Hussars arrived!”**

scene break

As the battle on the ridge truly began to shift against the Asgardians, Jean was contacting Harry mind to mind. *“Harry, you’re coming to where you should see one of the population centers. It’s by far the smaller of the two, but Emma, Charles and I think that the people there might be under some kind of mental domination.”*

“Roger,” Harry intoned, holding up his hand to signal that the Flyers should all slow down. He then switched to his communication gear so the others could hear Jean’s words without her having to strain herself to create a telepathic communication on top of everything else. “What kind of mental domination is it, can you tell?”

“The Shadows are still hammering into us here, but Charles sensed some kind of telepathic attack that way,” Jean supplied, grateful that Harry had reminded her they had the regular radio-type communications.

As she spoke, Harry could definitely hear the strain in her voice far more and grimaced. In fact, the trio of more powerful telepaths were under an immense strain. Much more so than Emma and Charles had faced in Genosha during the campaign against Sinister after Jean’s clone sprang her trap. Fighting her had been, well, fighting another person. From their description, however, Harry likened fighting the Shadows to fighting back someone else’s Fiendfyre spell. Only it’s spellcaster kept on feeding it power, and you were in the center of the Fiendfyre.

Charles joined the discussion, giving a bit more detail, his own voice steady and firm, showing less strain than Jean’s. “I could barely follow its trail before my probe was disrupted, and I couldn’t figure out what it was before it was gone. I would estimate however it was a brute-force type of magical assault, a wide angle kind of attack.”

“if the Shadows do what they did to us when we arrived, we might also run into further magical assault,” Ororo warned.

Harry nodded, reflecting that long-range telepathic combat like this was intrinsically weird. “Thanks for the heads up, you two. We’ll be ready.” With that, he ordered the flyers to spread out. Ororo moved to fly slightly higher than the others while Harry and Hela spread out and kept low, almost directly above the tree line. This way the two of them could hopefully see and intercept any magical-type attack before it got to Polaris, Cannonball, Banshee or the Human Torch, who spread out in a diamond format between them.

It was well they had because a few moments later, just as Harry spotted what looked like a large military camp, complete with a small inner palisade, the flyers came under assault. Arrows fired from a far greater distance than any human could’ve ever attempted were joined by a few spells cast from within the inner palisade, and spikes of rock and dirt rose up from below flash towards the Earthers suddenly.

“Spread out and defend yourselves, but don’t retaliate just yet!” Harry stated calmly into the communicator device built into his helmet. “We don’t know what kind of illusions or

mental control the Shadows are exerting here, and we can't afford to make enemies of the Asgardians."

Oro and the other flyers all responded in the affirmative, although Banshee grumbled that "A bit o' me personal song would do the locals a wee bit of good." One of the attacks had come close to nipping him despite his wild dodging, and that kind of thing was enough to put anyone in a bad mood.

As they spread out, Harry issued specific orders. "Polaris, be ready to pull weapons out of hands but remain in the air. Cannonball, be ready to dive into that palisade area on my signal, I might need you to snipe someone for me. Just grab them and carry them up to us. Beyond that, you and Torch should keep an eye on the forest around the camp for any more surprises. Oro, Hela, with me."

"Calling that a forest at this point is just wrong, Guardian," Johnny muttered, looking a little sick as their erstwhile formation shifted. *I've heard of the effects of pollution, but this is like that multiplied by a thousand... and then sped up!*

The flyers continued forward with Harry at one point using a Protego when Polaris was too busy dodging a volley of arrows to notice she was going to clip the top of a tree. Hela and Oro also used magic to deal with several of the incoming attacks, while Cannonball and Johnny flew around wildly above and head of the magic users, making themselves targets almost, which made it easier for them to deal with the incoming attacks.

After another five minutes of wild evasions, they came close enough to make out more details about the camp.

The encampment appeared to consist outer camp, which consisted of rows of tents and log houses, and the central area protected by the inner palisade. Here and there, dwarves, or rather dvergar, along with a few dozen short, long-limbed elves could be seen, although there were far more humans and Asgardians present. And among the humans and Asgardians there was a trend visible even as they closed: There weren't many menfolk.

Most of the humans, elves and dvergar were dressed in what Harry mentally categorized as semi-medieval farmer's garb. Those not dressed in such a manner seemed to wear either clothing that looked to be of extremely good quality from the same general era or, in the case of a number of womenfolk, armor, complete with winged helmets. *Ah, those have to be Valkyrie. And the others...*

Harry's thoughts froze as he spotted a woman standing in an open area near the center of the camp, its focal point being what looked to be an artificial pool of frozen water. She was a middle-aged, woman who even from this far away seemed to exude both beauty and danger in equal measure somehow. Most importantly to Harry, however, was that currently, said woman was wielding a long broadsword to direct spells upward towards Harry and his people, the

spells far better aimed and more powerful than the rest of the, admittedly somewhat sad attack spells coming their way.

The others had also seen the woman, and between dodging the pink and dark red spells she was sending his way, Johnny just had to make a comment. "Let me guess! That must be Freya, right? Because damn if she doesn't look like those warrior queens the nerds used to draw in art class," Johnny was also wondering what Crystal would look like dressed up like that... for however long it took him to get her out of it.

"Do you expect me to give you points for that, Fire Man? It is rather obvious that she is a goddess, is it not?" Hela sneered as she darted to one side, dodging blasts of power from the woman who, physically speaking, could almost be said to be her exact opposite now that they were close enough to make a real comparison possible. Where Hela's skin was pale white, her hair as black as night and her body lithe with youthful vigor, Freya was a middle-aged beauty; her skin was a ruddy pink that spoke of robust health and outdoor living, her blonde hair a stark contrast to Hela's own. On top of these physical differences, Hela wore her mask and a faceless helmet, while Freya wore no headgear, not even a helmet, simply a band of gold and silver around her forehead, a symbol of her position as Queen rather than a piece of armor.

Shaking his head at Johnny's joke and Hela's retort, Harry flew forward faster than before. He dodged through a few of Freya's spells, only to run into a whole wall of arrows as one of the Valkyries shouted, "Fire!" and another nearby goddess cast a spell that multiplied the arrows the Valkyries fired in midflight.

Several arrows struck Harry, not penetrating his Crisis Suit but still knocking him sideways in the air. Harry moved with the momentum of the strikes using them to hasten his descent into the camp, rolling as he struck the ground. Once on the ground, he flung his hands up in either direction, creating a shield around himself which stopped the next few attacks that were instantly cast in his direction.

With a thought, Harry thrust his shield outward, exploding in a coruscating blast of light, noise, and magic. In practice, this acted like an extra-large flashbang, stunning the defenders nearby. "Banshee, you make some noise now. Cannonball, change of plans, disrupt the magic-users, they've bunched up enough no. Polaris, do your thing. Torch, keep the Valkyries from getting into the air."

"Cease-FIIIIIIIIIIIIIRE!" Banshee bellowed, the words carrying along with his shriek. The auditory assault caused many of the defenders, including several dwarves who had raced forward with hammers to engage Harry, to fall to their knees, clapping their hands over their now bleeding ears. Freya and the other Asgardians merely stumbled back, not bothered overly much by either the blast of light or noise. Instead, they readied for another assault.

But Harry had already created another shield around himself. And then Cannonball struck, blasting through the camp from one side to another before coming around and charging

back though. Each time he ended up sending women flying, apologizing as he did. "Sorry, miss, missus, but orders're orders, and you all did start this little fracas."

Meanwhile, Polaris also struck. Thankfully, unlike with the jotun, her power over magnetism worked quite well on the weapons of the Asgardians and their followers. Soon, hundreds of weapons flew out of their user's hands and up into the air, although to Lorna's amusement, several of the dverggar refused to let their hammers go. More stubborn than mules, they clung on with both hands, rising into the air with their precious weapons, flailing and cursing.

At the same time, Jean and the others had come close enough now to make out more of what had been done to the locals to turn them so instantly violent towards the earthers, and Emma spoke up, taking a moment away from parrying the Shadow's mental assaults on the humans to do it. "Harry, the Shadows have attacked them in what looks like two ways. They are pushing down their credulity while also upping their aggression."

"It's a kind of fast mental attack that can work on large numbers of people swiftly. I can break it easily enough, but I sense that isn't the only thing that has been done to them," Charles added.

Harry took a step back for a moment, with Hela moving to protect him from a blow from Freya, grinning tightly as she went sword to sword against the goddess of war and love. While Hela was having fun, Harry cast a spell on his eyes, letting him see magic around him. Doing so let him see the fact the whole area seemed to be covered in a several spells, most benign, others not. Those others were in the form of illusions, making the 'attacking' Earthers look like some kind of strange humanoid-wyvern things. "Well, I can deal with the magical side if you all can negate the telepathic side."

"Done. Call it Harry," Jean responded, and Harry could sense she and the others were within direct line of sight now.

As Banshee joined in again and the Human Torch fired down at the Valkyries, causing them to scatter further, Ororo and Harry gathered their magic. A second later Harry ordered "NOW!" and thrust out his hands as Ororo did the same toward the sky, the two of them shouting out in unison, "Finite Incantatum!"

Whatever strength the Shadows held in magical power, and that strength was considerable, Harry and Ororo were at least equally as powerful. Better, the Shadows were limited in what they could do with that magic, while the Earthers were decidedly not. With Hela still protecting them from Freya's blade, the two were easily able to override the illusions that had covered the eyes of Freya and the other defenders.

For Freya, it was as if the world suddenly shifted underneath her feet. Reality changed, realigned almost. Her mind cleared of what she now knew was an abnormal level of aggression at the same time what she had seen as a horde of flying lizards of some wyvern variety shifted

into a group of men and women wearing armor of outlandish designs. Most were strangers to her but one amongst them she knew, if only in passing. “W-What... what was... Hela! If this is some kind of jape on your part or if you have thrown in your lot with your fell brothers I—”

Ironically, if the Shadows had not instantly moved to retaliate once their illusion and mental control over the Asgardian camp had been broken, Hela and Freya might very well continued to fight regardless of the dire situation. While she might’ve loathed Jörmungandr, Hela held strong views on how Fenrir, and to a lesser extent herself, had been treated by the Asgardians. She might well have screamed those thoughts into the Queen’s face for her remark.

But they did, and a massive telepathic assault slammed down on the camp even as the same illusionary magic from before attempted to reassert itself. Not a second later, two dozen jotun and a hundred dark elves were pulled from the main battle and dumped into the camp. The Fire Jotun, the chief tools for such moves, appeared spread throughout the camp while the dark elves, for some reason, were left outside the camp’s walls.

This hardly mattered overmuch as, after a brief moment of confusion, the misplaced dark elves instantly began to pour in through the gaping openings in the palisade made moments ago by Cannonball. While the denizens of Svartalfheim were not knowing tools of the Shadows like the Fire Jotun, they still hated Asgard and would never turn away from such a serendipitous occurrence as the one they’d been provided.

Even as Harry and Ororo shattered the illusions once more, Jean, Charles, and Emma instantly began working overtime to keep the telepathic assault from taking hold in the minds of the beleaguered Asgardians. Congruently, they continued to bear the brunt of mental and magical assaults, although there, they had help from Betsy, Xian, and Emma Steed. Thankfully, being in the air, they did not also have to deal with jotun or dark elves attacking them.

The same could not be said for the camp’s original defenders.

Several dwarves were smashed flat before they could blink, their bodies literally compressed as their bones and innards were crushed by the power of the jotun who were wielding massive clubs. An elf and one of the Valkyries were also slain before the others could react to the true enemies among them.

Luckily, the Earthers responded just as quickly now as they had when they’d been attacked in the boughs of Yggdrasil. As Cannonball and Johnny Torch moved to to strafe the dark elves still outside the camp, Hela launched herself at one unlucky jotun, shrieking out, “For what you have done to my family, I will have vengeance!”

Although they were mere pawns to Those Who Watch Above In Shadow, the fire jotun were still willing ones, and Hela knew it thanks to the time they had attacked her in her very hall. Thus Hela felt her cry of vengeance was fully justified. That, and shouting in the face of her enemies was just much more satisfying than yelling into the ether.

Hela's sword sliced cleanly through the jotun's torso, completely ignoring its obsidian armor, then flashed into the face of another. This one she cut across its face destroying the jotun's eyes, causing it to stumble backward, dropping its club. Two of the nearby dwarves jumped up and slammed their hammers into its knees, sending it collapsing to the ground where one of the faster Valkyries stabbed it through the neck before it could rise. Both she and the dwarves quickly backed away as its molten blood spurted. But despite her speed, the Valkyrie's weapon began to dissolve from the scant amount of lava-like blood that got on her blade.

Alas, time had been an issue even when it came to enchanting the army's weapons. Many of the Valkyries and other scouts or rear-type troops hadn't been issued melee weapons so blessed by the powers of the goddesses of Asgard.

Reminded of this fact by the sight of an elf lose his blade in a similar manner nearby, Freya shouted out orders. "Valkyries spread out, humans, let them into the air. Dwarves and Asgardians to me. Elves, to the walls!"

Her orders given, Freya charged forward, shrieking a cry that sounded almost like a hawk on the hunt. Wielding her broadsword with both hands, the queen chopped one jotun in half with ease. Leaping up over a strike, she brought her sword down and bisecting the jotun who'd just swung at her. *Hmm, neither of them have armor, nor are their weapons the expected swords or spears, but clubs. Good to know we are not the only ones facing logistical issues.*

Even as she pondered on that point, Freya channeled her magic into her blade. It might not have been a dverggar-master crafted weapon like her husband's spear or Mjollnir, but the blade could still take magic enhancements well and once more it began to glow with her power. Freya wielded the empowered sword almost as if it were as light as a cutlass for a few seconds, slicing several other jotun into pieces, although she wasn't quite as careful as she should have been. The blood of her victims splashed everywhere, and several of the human women nearby cried out in agony as droplets of lava splattered on them even as they tried to flee.

And any wound, no matter how small, let in the miasma of Jörmungandr. Many of the woman who had only taken a few drops of lava blood to their arms or legs succumbed within seconds, their skin turning green then black around the wounds. From there, the rot spread quickly.

Grimacing as she realized her folly, Freya raised a hand to use her seidr powers before one of the human men whom she did not know gestured. In the blink of an eye, a spell solidified, creating shields around several of the womenfolk. Another woman, this one with skin as brown as the odd cocoa substance her sons had brought back from Midgard, appeared around one of the healer's huts. Her eyes glowed white, as pure as snow, and matched her long mane of hair. More importantly, she radiated a kind of power that Freya had not seen before.

An instant later, gusts of extreme cold and wind began to strike the jotun. Those close to the woman's targets slowed to a crawl, their lava-like blood starting to chill within their very bodies. These slowly dying jotun could only move their eyes, widening in almost macabrely comical horror to the watching Freya. But this was still perhaps kinder than what happened to the darkly skinned woman's actual targets, as her wind blasts took their heads off their shoulders as easily as a child would pluck an apple from a tree, freezing the resulting spurts of lava blood into grotesque rock formations.

While Harry concentrated on the defense of the noncombatants, he'd let Ororo, Hela, and the locals take the fight to the giants. Now, he focused on the Shadows, stopping them from using more magical illusions to muddy the waters further. In a melee like this sudden brawling battle, especially with all the camp material and everything else around them, illusions could prove deadly. This was especially true because he could tell that the Shadows kept on trying to use their powers to force the Asgardians into seeing the Earthers as enemies.

As he worked, the light elves and the noncombatants started to gather around him, realizing he was the source of the magical shields protecting them. Occasionally, his magical shield grew as he pumped more power into it, and more individuals moved to shelter under it.

Above the camp, Banshee and Polaris worked together. Banshee launched his sonic screams at any jotun he could target without striking any defenders. Polaris, after returning most of the blades she'd previously stolen, now used her powers to grab up every discarded sword, hammer, axe, and spear she could, sending the gathered weapons at jotun causing trouble at various places throughout the camp.

Witnessing what happened when several hammers were hurled into a jotun with all the power of a hurricane, Freya had to admit, *Whatever these humans are, they are powerful indeed! Although, I must wonder where they came from and, more worrying, why they are here now.*

The battle within the camp was frenetic. Thanks to the number of tents, temporary longhouses, and other obstructions it was impossible for Harry or Freya to follow in its entirety from their positions on the ground. However, Ororo realized this and pulled back into the air, where she directed the other flyers into enemy concentrations.

In particular, The Human Torch was proving to be a true terror to the dark elves. Their arrows melted into non-aerodynamic blobs long before they reached him, such was the heat he generated just by being in his powered form. And his return blasts turned the dark elves into torches in bunches, killing the dark elves within seconds just as it would a normal human.

But for all of the of the battle in the camp, it was even worse on the Astral Plane. There, blackness roiled, seeping in from all sides both around the Asgardians' camp and the expeditionary force, which had slowed their advance toward the camp, waiting for an all clear

everyone in the tumult was too busy to give. Tentacles of fear and power lashed out from that mass of writhing darkness, trying again and again to get past the defenses of the six telepaths.

The magical assault striking the main human formation also pushed the magic users hard. Even Dr. Strange felt the pressure of fighting off the Shadow assault. He wasn't used to near-constant medium-scale use of magic; his battles were short, explosive uses of high-end magic for the most part.

But Strange, Clea, Amora and the Scarlet Witch were handling it. The Scarlet Witch's Hex bolts seemed to be able to disrupt illusions with ease, even the act of firing them could disrupt nearby illusions. Amora was less useful, being slow to notice what was illusion and what wasn't. Clea, also somewhat unused to this manner of combat, was learning quickly.

This was good because Harry, Ororo, and Hela were having trouble given Harry's need to split his attention. The trio were soon joined by Clea, who flew forward to aid their efforts on Strange's orders. When she arrived and added her might to theirs, the Shadows' constant attempts to use illusions broke for a few precious seconds.

Harry had waited for just such a moment. Now he thrust his hands out to either side, staring at the ground past his shields before bringing both hands down onto the ground. "Shi Jundai!"

Throughout the camp, men and women alike yelled in surprise as large clay men rose up out of the ground. They were simply made but wielding massive clay blades and moved to attack instantly as Harry barked out, "Armed golems target the blue-skinned ones with long hair and the giant men with no necks who are wielding clubs."

Almost instantly, any jotun who saw the golems roared as one, even more furious than normal. It almost appeared as if they somehow took the golems as an insult. But clay or no, when the golems struck, both dark elves and jotun felt it. Meanwhile, other golems who didn't have weapons picked up the noncombatants who had been unable to find hiding places. Cradling them in their arms they began to carry them towards Harry's defensive area, protecting them as they did so.

The Shadows responded by bringing in still more troops from the other battle and doubling down on their attempts to use illusions to mess with the minds of Asgardian and earther alike. This tactic pulled Hela away from the physical fight to help Clea solely on the magical front. But with Harry's golems in play, the Asgardians and humans were still holding their own.

Thankfully, the magical defenders didn't need to protect the rest of the Earthers from the illusions and aura of fear the Shadows were sending after them for much longer because not more than twenty minutes later, Captain America and the rest of the expeditionary force arrived. "By squads, Oh Damns! Heavies, remain in place once in range, lay down suppressive fire. Husband your mortar and rocket ammo for now. The rest, weapons free! Weapons free!"

“You heard the man, move!” Sean and the other company commanders roared in response. The order was passed down to the squad level quickly, and a second later the ODMs erupted out from the flying carpets, using their jet packs to spread out like a garden in bloom.

The ODMs fell upon the jotun and the dark elves outside the palisade like a rain of death, accompanied by shouts over their radios.

“Woo, get some!”

“Say hello to my little friend!”

“Conscript reporting!”

The dark elf formations, if they could be called that at this point, completely wilted under this new assault. Boomsticks or Bolters, whichever you called the rifles of the regular Orbital Drop Marines, could not even be slowed by the dark elves’ armor. Once they struck a target, the small gyro-rockets exploded, turning the dark elves into so much offal.

However, the ODMs didn’t have it all their own way against the dark elves. While the majority of the night elf forces were breaking, a few weren’t. Instead, they fired back at the ODMs, their hands blurring as they sent volley after volley towards the armored soldiers far faster than any human could see.

Only once did one of the troopers apparently decide not to bother dodging the incoming arrows. A moment later, the man was smashed out of the air as if he’d been hit by a cannonball.

The man’s Corporal cursed the man out volubly even as he moved to assist the battered trooper back into the air. “Private Warner! If you are still alive after this son, you won’t be for long once I get my hands on you! What kind of damn fool takes a blow when he can dodge!?”

“Sorry sir,” the younger man grunted. “Those arrows must have some kind of black magic fuckery to them. I think I’ve got a broken rib at least, and that was just a grazing shot!”

now the squad’s sergeant now got into the act. “What part of dodge do you fools not understand?” “Dodge is the name of the game! You will be on KP duty for the rest of your pathetic little life for that stunt, Warner!”

As proven in the initial battle, the effects of the Bolters on the jotun weren’t as dramatic, but the armor of the few jotun wearing any still couldn’t stop the Bolter rounds. The armor would explode, taking large chunks of the jotun donning it along with it. It took an average of three rounds to down a single jotun, while only one round was needed for a dark elf, but that was all.

Snipers like Vanguard, Uzume, Coyote and Ghigau stayed in the air, freely firing down at the masses of jotun within the camp, completely ignoring the now fleeing dark elves. Shots

through the eyes or mouth killed jotun throughout the camp, although again, such railgun rounds didn't do much damage otherwise. In contrast, Cyclops' optic blasts shattered any jotun they struck, hurling their broken bodies backward like broken toys.

Minutes later, Colossus led the rest of the Custodes and X-men down to the ground, taking the fight to the remaining dark elves and jotun within the camp. With these reinforcements, Freya and her fellow goddesses fell back, adding their powers to protecting the camp from the illusion magic they could now feel surrounding them, although with great difficulty. None of the women had any real experience dealing with indirect, unaimed magic, and the raw power of the attacks put even Freya to shame, plus actually spotting the illusion was worryingly difficult.

Yet, now that the two battlefields had merged, the magic users from Earth were able to beat off the Shadows assault with surprising ease.

Twenty minutes after the ODMs and Custodes had arrived, Charles reported that the telepathic assault too had begun to wane, much to the relief of the other telepaths. Only Charles and Emma had experienced this kind of long-term telepathic warfare before. But unlike Steed, Xian or even Betsy, Jean still had power to spare and quickly began to recover despite her pregnant state.

"My thanks for your help strangers," Freya said once the last of the jotun were put down and the dark elves dead or fled. She stared at Harry, discerning with ease who led this group that had rescued them from certain doom.

Her attention turned away for a second as Tony Stark landed nearby, along with several others. Tony had taken part in the battle out in the woodland beyond the camp with Colossus and many of the others, making sure no dark elf or stray jotun escaped. Now finished with that task, he had rocketed over the palisade to make an entrance and now on the ground he shook his head as he looked around, his visor retracting over his eyes, leaving the rest of his helmet to act as a respirator around his nose and mouth. "Really? Dwarves, elves, and a wooden palisade. How quaint."

The playboy genius caught sight of Freya and blinked before regaining himself and bowing grandly before beginning to flirt, the action as automatic and natural as breathing. "Do forgive me, dear lady, but we on Earth are a bit past the stone and wood construction phase. Although, I would say true loveliness such as yours would never be out of place. But that vision has yet to be seen in its full import where I come from. Would you like to return to Earth with me to correct that? I could have artists by the dozen knocking at my door to paint or sculpt your form."

"A well-turned line from a silver tongue does not mean ought to me metal clad one. Especially since I can see that you are already in love with someone else," Freya countered dryly, waving Tony off, causing to stumble in shock. Although if that was because Freya used

the word love to describe the relationship between him and Pepper, or her uncaring, dull expression at what he thought were some good lines Harry didn't know. "I am the goddess of love, not just war and magic. Think you I know not the hearts of men? You would do best to embrace your heart's desire rather than remain circumspect out of fear."

Each word Freya spoke struck like a tiny dagger, Tony winced, the truth of them spreading through his mind, just as the goddess had wished. It was true after all. He and Pepper weren't perfect, but she got him on a level none of his fuck-and-forget buddies ever had, and in many ways she was the kind of girl he could see himself marrying. But at the same time, that whole idea still terrified him, and occasionally that and his old habits reared their heads.

Chuckling, Steve laid a hand on Tony's shoulder. "She really is the goddess of love in Norse mythology Tony. Just be glad she didn't take your flirting with a married woman as something to get angry about. She could just as easily have made you fall in love with a toad."

"Nay. As I said, I can sense the love between him and his woman, and I would never muddle with such," Freya demurred. "Well do I know that habits can be hard to break. Still, I also know it can be most rewarding to you if you take the leap, much like it was for me."

Leaving a now introspective seeming Tony, Freya turned back to Harry, addressing him as others began to move through the camp nearby, helping the locals recover from the chaos. "While your assistance is much appreciated, unlooked-for aid often carries a price one is unwilling to pay. Pray tell me good sir, what brought you and your army forth from Midgard? And indeed, how did you arrive here at all? I know my lord husband's order that all contact with the Middle Realm be broken has not been rescinded."

Staring back at her from behind his visor, Harry debated with Hela via the mental link Jean sustained between them on whether they should come clean about the Shadows. After thinking on it, Hela decided against revealing the puppeteers for now.

Like most gods and goddesses, Freya was prideful. If she had no knowledge of the Shadows before this encounter, then attempting to convince her that she and the rest of Asgard as a whole, Odin in particular, were ensnared in the thrall of another would not go over well. It would be best to lead up to that idea slowly.

"Lord Odin released one of his aspects to Earth in preparation for the Ragnarök, my lady. He helped us in the past to find and release Hela from durance vile. Since then Hela has become one of my—"

Freya interrupted then, clapping her hands together and for a moment, the goddess looking almost like a teenage girl instead of the middle-aged queen she was as she gazed between Harry and Hela, then to the nearby Ororo, Jean, and Emma. "My word! A pyramid! How fascinating to see the bonds of affection and love span between you all. It's magnificent, in fact!"

Freya seem to fight with herself, pushing the aspect of her nature that dealt with love which had temporarily flared to the surface. Once more controlled, she returned to the semi-grim-faced war leader that the Queen of the Asgardians needed to be at present.

As she did, Freya caught sight of Amora, and her eyes widened, at the same time the sorceress's did. For a few fulminating seconds, the two blondes stared at one another, and then Amora turned away hastily, shuddering as Freya swallowed thickly, also shivering.

It was clear something had passed between the two just then, but Harry, despite having his magical senses on full blast, wasn't quite certain what.

"Perhaps, my heart, we have just witnessed a meeting between an aspect and its main existence?" Ororo guessed, communicating through Jean's telepathic powers. *"Amora is not mentioned anywhere in Norse Mythology, and by the same token, Freya's magical prowess is supposed to be as good as Lord Odin's, which I do not feel is the case now. At least, not in knowledge, anyway."*

Having read up on Norse mythology since meeting Hela, Emma quickly agreed. Hela did as well, although she added the caveat, *"If that is the case, then I believe that at this point in time Amora has diverged so much from Freya that the two reconnecting is aught but impossible. Whether that is for good or ill depends entirely on Amora's deeds, and Freya's response when we reveal the full truth to her."*

By the time their private conversation had completed, Freya had fully regained control of herself once again and looked back at Harry in a wordless request for more information. Harry spent the next few minutes explaining how they had arrived, the destruction of Wander-Odin, and the various strengths and abilities that they would bring to the battle for Asgard.

"Although I am concerned about the miasma in the air. We weren't prepared for that, and I have no idea what could be causing it. We were able to provide defenses against it quickly enough, but I saw its effect on your wounded. It is... concerning," Harry grimaced.

"The poison in the air? That would be the breath of the great serpent," Freya answered, her face pensive as she went over all the humans had faced so far. "This is the Ragnarök, Jarl Potter, and all our enemies have come to tear us down while monsters we had banished long ago now come for our blood once more."

"Or, you know, for the first time," Dani grumbled from nearby as she settled her rifle on her back, Sigyn's gift at her side. "Harry, I've been looking around with Logan and Laura. There's no signs of Fenrir around here at all. Or if there were, the battle's covered them up to the point I can't see it."

"You search for the Dread Wolf?" Freya asked, nearly scoffing while shaking her head. "Believe me child, if it had been upon this battlefield, the battle would not have gone nearly as well for us. Naught can stand against the Beast of Doom when it—"

Freya found herself interrupted quite rudely as Dani snapped around to glare at her through her helmet's visor. "And why would you expect anything different? You banished Fenrir. You treated him like a monster because of the prophecy, not because he was born a wolf of tremendous size that kept growing, or because you could tell that he would become a danger. Oh no, you banished him because of a prophecy," Dani spat the word, venom dripping from her tongue. "How dumb is that? All you accomplish when you do something like that is make the prophecy come true."

Freya sighed shaking her head. Normally she would be incensed after being spoken to like that, but on this topic, she actually agreed. "So I thought as well. We should have done more to befriend Fenrir, to be proactive regarding his future in a positive manner, just as I had done when I ensured my son Balder's defense against aught that could harm him and thus begin the Ragnarök. But I was overruled. My king and husband, Odin. He, and indeed others, including Loki, Fenrir's own father, believed exiling him, as we had the great serpent who had already proven a terrible danger, was the smarter play."

The queen looked over apologetically at Hela, who simply shrugged in response. "I agree with the treatment of the serpent. He was always mean-spirited and hungry. But Fenrir could indeed have been treated far better. He and I kept in contact over the millennia, and I did my best to help him deal with his anger. Though, I cannot say I had much luck."

Not with the Shadows playing their games, Hela added mentally. "But that is neither here nor there. Tell us of the war."

The war council was interrupted just then as one of the dwarves leaned over and smacked his hand against the thigh of Tony's suit. The short being listened for a moment before shaking his head at whatever he'd heard. "You don't have the mixture here quite right human. Not enough aglrea. Not for the mobility and strength I witnessed you using during the battle at the very least."

"Excuse me!? I went through hundreds of experiments to figure out what kind of metallurgical alloy was best for my armor. I don't care what magic you have, little man, my armor is perfect," Tony scoffed

"Bah! Nothing is ever perfect boyo, nothing! Perfection is what you strive for, to drive you to always improve. And I say that this leg at the very least is of poor quality to what it could be in terms of the materials involved," the dvergar retorted.

"Gentlemen, we are all on the same side. Perhaps putting smithing and metallurgical matters to one side would serve us best for now? Tony, get set up somewhere with the repair, resupply, and assembly stations we need." Harry waited until Tony moved away still arguing with the dwarf before looking back Freya. "Sorry for the interruption, Lady Freya, but you were saying? What exactly is going on with this Ragnarök?"

While the two leaders spoke, the rest of the camp was put right and the expeditionary force set up their own base camp. Moira and the other doctors set up the aid station as Tony went to work with the dvergar and set up the necessary machinery to repair or rearm the troops. This last was a major issue already two fights into the campaign. Emma, Charles, and Jean moved to the camp's center, where the professor was made comfortable in his wheelchair and the two women gathered around him in chairs of their own just in time to see off another psychic assault with the aid of the other three telepaths. Betsy and the other two didn't make themselves comfortable though, as they would be moving on with the assault team.

Freya explained what had been happening since Surtur's invasion. She covered everything, ending with the plan to force a large-scale battle of the Einherjar's choosing. Freya finished with the sad news of the dark elves attack from the rear, which had destroyed the enchanted catapults and which was no doubt causing havoc for the defenders.

As if to emphasize the queen's words, the ground underneath them started to shiver and quake, although the news of the Odinsleep was disturbing to Harry and the others who knew anything about Odin, or indeed magic at all. Steven Strange was called in at that point, and even he was deeply concerned by the idea of a Sky Father being so ensorcelled.

"We need to free him from that slumber. The longer Odin is so deposed, the more of his power the Shadows can leech. And worse, they might be able to twist his mind against us as he did Lady Freya," Steven nearly demanded.

Harry had gently suggested the existence of the Shadows before this, and Freya had not reacted as badly as if they had just stated it bluntly from the first. Still she made to protest the idea that the Odinsleep was the work of enemy contrivance. But Harry simply asked her, "Even if this Odinsleep is as natural as you say, madam, this is Ragnarök. Something could happen to Odin when he's defenseless, so we should check on him at the very least. And we have already proven that we have magic and abilities that you do not possess."

The Queen of Asgard could not gainsay that, and soon Harry and Steve were going over a map, arguing quietly with Freya about their priorities with this new information in mind. Both men wanted to concentrate on eradicating the army of jotun as well as setting Odin free, but Freya was just as concerned about Jörmungandr's role in ending the world. "His poison has killed more of my people, especially women and children, than the jotun invaders have so far. He is not the in-your-face problem, but he is the greater one, for certain."

Harry had to agree to that at least. Any damage that penetrated the ODM's armor or indeed most of the rest of the team's, could prove fatal despite their medical aid thanks to the world serpent.

Eventually, after another half hour of discussion, Harry reluctantly agreed to break off more than just the one team that had already been set to search for Fenrir, which Freya in turn had felt was not a priority. "Ororo, you'll take the strongest members of the team with you to

deal with Jörmungandr now. You don't have to kill him. Just stop him from releasing his miasma into the atmosphere. We've thought about how to go about fighting him before this, so just follow the plan and hold his attention until Thor or I can assist."

"Be warned, where Jörmungandr breathes out his special toxin, it spreads quickly. He has also set about creating an unending cycle of massive waves, which have destroyed numerous hamlets near or on the shorelines," Freya said, taking a moment to think about all of the lives lost due to the great serpent's actions. "And of our people, naught but my husband or Thor could deal with him, and even the Thunderer is prophesized to die in the doing. Needling him, taking his attention away from breathing his foul gas could be doable, but is very much like poking a bear the size of a mountain with a needle."

The team members who had been on the mission to retrieve Sigyn's body could well believe that. There was nothing on Earth that even came close to matching Jörmungandr. In fact, Yggdrasil notwithstanding, the only thing any of them had come into contact with that would be even close to the same scale was Galactus.

"And you're positive that we need to free Odin as fast as possible?" Jean asked telepathically, worried about that facet of the discussion, which had also led to changes in their plans moving forward. She'd been listening in on the conversation through Harry's senses until now and was becoming deeply concerned. Yes, they'd brought a shit ton of firepower. But still, diluting said firepower into smaller teams? *"You couldn't go with the group dealing with Jörmungandr and then free Odin?"*

Instead of answering Jean's concerns directly, Harry looked to Freya. "Tell me, did you have **any** hint that all of you were acting under the grip of an illusion or mental manipulation when you were attacking us?"

"None at all," Freya answered instantly, a scowl on her pretty features. "Indeed, the transition from reality to falsehood was so smooth that I did not even detect a buildup in magic around us. Sensing such spells being cast during the battle was also difficult. As for the mental aspect, nay, I could feel the difference after the fact, but not when the mental domination was in place within me."

Freya allowed a faint smile to wipe away her scowl as she said this. Despite the seriousness of the discussion, she was still somewhat amused at a man beyond her husband and Loki—whose gender had always been quite... fluid—willfully using magic spells. Every Asgardian used magic to a certain extent, either to enhance their bodies or their weapons or interact with their purview, such as Thor did with the weather or Balder the sun. But that was vastly different from using actual spells and manipulating magic beyond the limited, instinctual scope. Such work had always been seen as the domain of women.

“And if the... individuals... who were able to cast those spells attempted to do so on Odin, and were also able to wake him up, would he be able to see through that magic?” Harry asked slowly, building up to his question.

“...I wish I could say with confidence that Odin would see through such trickery. Part of his sphere is to discern truth from fiction, after all. And yet, when it comes to magic, he and I are closer in terms of how we can manipulate it than otherwise.” Freya admitted. “I do not think that he would be able to see through these invisible spells quickly enough. Nor would he have any defense against the mental aspect caught in his Odinsleep.”

“We need to free Odin as soon as possible then,” Harry said with a sigh. “Which means Hela and I need to break off here. And that means it will be on Ororo and the others to bait the serpent from the sea.”

“None of the Asgardians don’t have any natural defenses against telepathic assaults. Especially from the Shadows. Or are you saying that the three of you would be able to figure out and stop an assault against Odin wherever he is in Asgard while also being attacked here?” Silence answered Harry’s rhetorical question, and he sighed while going on aloud. “This Odinsleep has complicated things tremendously, as has the fact that Jörmungandr is having such an impact already. We need to wake Odin to stop their mental manipulation and help him deal with the other before he can be somehow turned against us.”

Freya snorted, but Ororo just nodded, having heard both sides of the conversation. “Indeed. Luckily, we have tools available to combat Jörmungandr. Whether or not we will win is a question, but if you’re certain that you need to be the one to wake Odin, Harry?”

“I’d like to send Wanda and Amora. But I doubt they’d be strong enough,” Harry admitted. “Amora doesn’t have any natural defenses on the Astral Plane either, and I don’t know if even combined they’d be powerful enough face a raging Skyfather even if they did manage to break whatever enchantment Odin is under. And Steven needs to be here to defend the camp and the assault team if I’m not. Between us all, I’ve got the better chance of freeing Odin and then surviving whatever happens next.”

“Verily. I can feel your power, seidr man, and I know it is immense. In truth, you could be more powerful than even I, in terms of raw magic at any rate,” Freya admitted with becoming grace. “But if there is indeed a spell on my husband as you say, it would require someone of not only your strength but one with superior skill to remove it. That is, of course, if such a thing is in truth there at all. Do recall that I have said several times now that the Odinsleep is a natural event. It is just its timing at this moment that is most distressing.”

“I understand that you believe that Lady Freya, but we do not. Nowhere in the tales and histories of the Aesir or Vanir is such a cyclical event ever mentioned.” *Hell, I’m just glad that the Shadows didn’t have time to place any greater mental-controlling frameworks inside Freya*

or the other Asgardians. It would've been very bad indeed if they'd pushed it to the point we couldn't even argue about this with them.

"We took them by surprise Harry, both arriving as we did and in such strength. They have been scrambling ever since, and I don't think that the Shadows are good scramblers," Emma said even as she, Jean, and Charles sent out a pulse of their power into the Astral Plane once again to ward off yet another attempted assault from that angle. 'You're right though, we need to strike at Odin and get him freed from this Odinsleep thing before using him against us occurs to them. I don't think any of us want to see that happen.'"

Eventually, it was decided that only Harry and Hela would head to Asgard the city. Even with Team Fishermen breaking off along with the quintet of Team Huntsmen—Garm, Dani, Betsy, Clea and Johnny—the main force would still be left with enough firepower, both mundane and not, to aid the Asgardians against Surtur's hordes.

Leaving Freya for the moment, Harry and Ororo put their heads together to decide on who would go with her to attack Jörmungandr. This turned out to be relatively easy, as the side mission simply built on the plan they'd already had. But the reality of the pressures they'd discovered in the realm meant that the original plan did have to change slightly. That change came in three women: Wanda, Xian, and Emma Steed. Having two telepaths with the team would add to the protection they could call upon against mental attacks, and Ororo could balance that by helping on the magical side of things.

Of course, this demanded that Emma and Xian, along with Rogue and Thundra from the original plan, needed to be given a means of transportation. There weren't enough magic carpets to go around, not when they discussed providing for drawn-out aerial combat. But Harry and Kitty had prepared for such a too, and Harry had decided to take a page from his old world to solve the problem.

Emma and Xian stared ruefully at the broomsticks in Kitty's hands, then at one another, an odd moment of camaraderie passing between the two young women whose backgrounds could not be any more different. "I realize that we have practiced with these things... but, even with my forced association with that bitch Selene, I can barely fathom that we will actually be using broomsticks of all things to fly into battle. 'Cauldron burn, and cauldron bubble' indeed."

Xian snorted. "At least you come from a culture where magic and broomsticks like this came together. Witches and broomsticks have never been part of Vietnamese culture."

"Stop complaining. At least you two can ride those things without them creaking every time you try to shift position," the Thing muttered, shaking his head from where he was pouting as he looked at the broomstick in Thundra's hands. "Damn, but I bet I could perform some mad turns on that, you know, if I wasn't stuck looking like this."

“Face it, ya big lug, someone as heavy as you could never fly like me,” Johnny chortled as Ben’s girlfriend whooped, flying straight up into the air after mounting her broomstick.

The rest of Team Fisherman soon followed on their own broomstick and smaller flying carpets. Clea and Ororo, the only natural flyers among them, stayed behind a minute more to bid farewell to Steven and Harry respectively before racing after their fellows.

Freya wrote out a note, a formal missive to the Fenrir was the last time he was spotted? That would give me a clue to start with.”

“He was spotted to the northeast of here, gorging on a herd of reindeer. Wait a moment, I can give you something that will help you find Fenrir.” Freya turned aside, whispering a few words to one of the other goddesses, who hurried off. She came back quickly, and Freya took the item she’d brought, a wolf’s fang. “This was smashed out of Fenrir’s mouth several years ago, but it is still his, and I can still use the signature within it to connect to the whole.”

Dani nodded, having seen Harry do similar things before. After a few moments in Freya’s hand, the fang began to glow. Then, it jerked hard, so much so that it almost fell out of Freya’s hand. She caught it, thankfully, and Harry conjured up a bit of rope to tie around it. So leashed, he handed the end of the rope out to Dani.

“Remember, your mission is not to engage Fenrir in a fight,” Harry warned. “If you must fight to escape him, do so. But all of you have emergency teleport arrays for a reason. They will return you to right here.” Wanda and Kitty had seen to the anchoring of the arrays as part of their preparations while Freya and Harry had spoken earlier. “Do not try to fight that wolf on your own.”

Dani nodded, but Harry and Hela both saw a certain look in her eyes that she betrayed how much the huntress didn’t like the order. But that was fine by Harry. She didn’t have to like it. She just had to not get herself killed trying something stupid.

“*Oh, that is so rich coming from you, Harry!*” Jean howled telepathically, having to bite her lip to keep from breaking out into laughter as she heard Harry’s thoughts.

Harry winced internally, admitting that, but shot back with the fact that Jean was in no position to point it out either. Ororo stepped in and ended the argument by pointing out that all of them “*Lack in self-preservation instincts. It is part in parcel of becoming heroes, is it not?*”

“I would rather that we had Skadi here to aid thee. But she is busy trying to break up a force bent on flanking our main army,” Freya said worriedly, staring at Dani and interrupting the mental communication.

There was something about the girl that bothered the queen. That something, whatever it was, both called to Freya and demanded that she mother the girl, while also whispering to her of hidden strength. Yet for the life of her, Freya, for all her magical abilities, could not see why. It was similar to the recent issue with the illusions, but also very much not. *Something deep, something powerful is in this young woman. But what it could be, I cannot say.*

In this, Loki's skill in obfuscation and trickery beat out Freya's ability with general magic. Of course, it had **had** to. The enchantment to pass his wife's soul into the blood of a specific believer had been designed to not only beat out Freya and Odin's senses, but also Those Who Watch Above In Shadow. If his abilities hadn't been up to snuff, many things would've happened differently.

Dani shrugged. "I have a way with animals and people occasionally. And if nothing else, I can also use my mutant power to scare him off." *I wouldn't want to though, last resort only. Fenrir has been treated poorly all his life for something he had no control over. But I will if we need to get away.*

The young huntress shifted her attention back to the world around her and moved over to where Betsy, Clea, and Garm were waiting. The four of them boarded one of the smaller, faster carpets that had been brought along, and with the fang already tugging them in the proper direction, set off with Johnny flying alongside them.

"We're all set up," Amelia Voight reported, walking out of the general hustle and bustle of the camp and moving over to Harry. She nodded politely to Freya as she came to a stop. "I'm very pleased by the amount of help we've received. All the locals seem to understand that we have a much better understanding of medicine than they do and are willing to follow our suggestions in how to deal with the wounded, especially those who have been infected by this poison in the air."

"We use healing magic for most things, but there aren't many of us who can use it. This has led to occurrences where, after large scale battles, there are always warriors who cannot be healed before they pass on. The poison has made this fact all the worse. If you can help us with that, then what you have done is a greater service on top of the great service you have already done by breaking whatever spell we have all been under," Freya answered.

"Good. James, Ororo, everyone ready to go?" Harry asked, toggling his helmet's microphone so that he could be heard by all the unit commanders at once. He was answered by a series of affirmatives and looked over to Piotr, who would be backing up Scott and Steve in the main battle. He and Paige were the only super-strong members of the X-Men or Custodes who hadn't gone with Ororo.

Harry's face became deadly serious, and he reached forward to tap the innocent-looking box that Piotr was carrying at his side. "Get that to Thor. That is your main priority, Piotr. Everything else is secondary."

Freya frowned at that, staring at the box strapped at the tall human's side. Full of curiosity, she ignored for a moment the fact that the young man looked as if he were an example of a living metal golem. Stretching out her magical senses, Freya's frown deepened. She couldn't feel anything from the box. It looked like a simple wooden box from all she could tell, and while a part of her wanted to ask about it, ultimately she decided against doing so.

That box was anything but simple of course, for within the plain container laid two items. First was the belt they had found in Thor's old domicile on Earth, where they had fought the enhanced Draugr and gotten to know Hela and Garm. The second was the real Mjollnir, which had been hidden within the Tesseract. Thankfully, while none but Thor would ever be able to lift the mythical hammer, Harry had been able to magically put it inside the runic-expanded box. Various enchantments absorbed the properties of both magical items and kept anyone from realizing what was within.

Piotr nodded firmly, reaching out and grasping Harry's hand. "You can trust me, tovarish. I will deliver it to Thor, no matter what."

Frowning, as no one seemed in any particular hurry to inform her about what was in the box, Freya shrugged as the human in an odd red, white, and blue outfit shouted for the assault companies to muster. Within seconds the armored soldiers rose into the air on the enchanted carpets the humans had arrived in. Once a quick headcount had been reached, they headed towards the front.

Harry and Hela left shortly after, racing through the air towards Asgard the city under their own power. Behind them, Tony and his new helpers continued to create the needed materials to repair and rearm the troopers, arguing all the while.

The last thing Harry heard on the intercom from the main combat companies before he left the channel was Sean saying, "No dammit, we're not going to go into battle with some kind of freaking medley going on from all corners! Each of the captains will pick one song, and all of you are going to listen and like it, dammit! And the first person listening to his own music when he should be listening to his superior's orders isn't going to get written up. He's going to get my boot up their ass!"

"Ah, young men. They truly are the same the world over," Hela quipped, having heard the whole thing.

"The world would be a far different place without such men in it," Harry chuckled. But soon, the two of them were silent, zooming towards their destination, and whatever was waiting for them there.

Scene break

But of course, long before Harry and Hela would arrive at their destination, the Assault Force would make itself known....

As the Asgardians and other combatants paused to stare up at the contrails of the rockets crashing into the mountain-sized jotun, Cyclops tuned his facemask's communications system to speak to the ODMs. As he did, he watched with a bit of envy as Steve, Vanguard, Colossus, Husk, and Nightcrawler dropped to the ground below. Amara already down, with Polaris stationed above her near the ruins of the catapults. Falcon was already making strafing dives, his guns blazing. Soon enough the rest of the team began to unleash hell alongside him and Cyclops.

"This is Cyclops, assuming tactical command. First company, disperse," Scott ordered as he stared down at the battlefield. He took in the sight of their rockets hitting home calmly, hardly blinking as the explosions lit up the world. *While I wish Falcon was willing to step up to the plate here, I suppose I could just call this on the job training for larger unit tactics...*

Shaking that thought, and the realization it was needed, away, Cyclops vowed to do the best he could and started to radio further orders to the troops. "Rocket Gunners, you are bang on target, fire for effect. Mortars, adjust distance slightly, no more than twelve degrees elevation."

The Heavy gunners had all been given a choice of weapons loadout before this mission. This made for an eclectic mix of weapons, and the company commanders had made the decision to break the Heavy Gunners up by weapon type during the brief break back at the Asgardian camp. Now the Mortar teams were stationed well away from the main battlefield, near Amara, while the Rocket users and the others were stationed on various magic carpets, spreading out even now across the battlefield, acting almost like helicopters to give the people aboard them a stable firing platform.

Now the rocket and mortar-using Heavy Gunners responded, the first company of the ODMs peeled off, moving squad by squad off of the carpets, and down into the forest with Sean commanding them as they hit and moved, using advanced skirmish tactics. Bouncing across the landscape their bolters barked in a continuous rhythm, and the experience from the previous two battles served them well here. The marines' aim had gotten far better, despite the fact that there was still a lot of foliage in the way, to say nothing about the erupting steam clouds and the ragged terrain.

As he turned his attention to the jotun horde, Scott could hear the marines' voices as their music cut off and they became serious... or as serious as marines with new toys could be in a target rich environment. "Hell yes! Screw the normal guns, I want to keep these the First Sergeant is right!"

"Yeah, keep the rail guns as backup, and these as primary. Look at those little blue bastards go boom!"

"That's right you little blue bitches, you better run!"

“This is what you get when you bring swords to a gunfight boys. Eat five hundred plus years of military technological innovation ya bastards!”

“Now that just makes me depressed,” another voice muttered as more bolt rounds began to pepper through the forest. Cyclops almost absentmindedly ordered second company to head in, too amused to stop listening in on the local channels. “Sad to think about exactly how long we’ve all been fighting one another.”

There was a very distinctly Slavic snicker at that comment from second company. Scott understood some kind of rivalry had arisen between the various troopers along international lines, but despite the recent Eurasian War, it had managed to remain a friendly one. *Odd to think about how little the common fighting men blame one another for that shit.*

“Do not worry about that friend and instead be proud. It is only because humanity is so good at war that we have any chance of surviving in this strange, ever-expanding universe of ours. Or do I need to remind you of recent history?” The Russian asked, his words mirroring Scott’s thoughts.

“Third company, by platoons flank the allied force, provide cover fire,” Cyclops announced, blasting down into the battlefield, creating a furrow in the ground around a group of human and Asgardian defenders who had been about to be cut off by a detachment of jotun. The kinetic blast forcefully turned his attention away from the byplay between the troopers as the music of the March of Cambreadth cut out across all the channels.

I still think Ride Of The Valkyries would’ve been better, but I’m a classical sort of person, Cyclops thought as he turned his beams onto several of the other jotun, two of whom were noticeably trying to bulk themselves up by gorging on nearby rocks. Meanwhile, the mortars and rockets continued to crash down amongst the invading army, destroying any hint of forward momentum, causing many to cry out and scatter. *But even with all this, they aren’t running, damn it!*

Looking over at Dr. Druid, he gestured to his throat, and the man obligingly cast a sonar spell. “Asgardians! Help has arrived. Continue falling back for now. We’ve got this.” Another gesture and the Sonorous was canceled, allowing Cyclops to shift to the com net once more. “Falcon?”

“Wanted t warn ya, Cyclops, these dark elves ain’t running like the ones back at the camp. Turns out it was the Torch and his flames they were afraid of. Morons,” Falcon muttered, his handguns blazing as he maneuvered around shattered trees then up over the canopy again. All around him, the ODMs were bouncing through and around the forest, introducing the dark elves to the devastation of modern squad tactics, jump packs, and guns.

“Any sign that the Shadows are bringing in reinforcements?”

“Negative. But those damn arrows of theirs still pack a helluva punch if they hit. And these night elves are fast mothers!” Falcon growled, his current targets all ducking behind cover as he opened up on them. His guns didn’t have the piercing power of the Bolters or the snipers’ rifles, but against foes such as the dark elves, that wasn’t as really necessary. The dark elves though were still too damn quick for his preference.

“Roger,” Cyclops winced as two of the ODMs were hit by those self-same arrows. One was ported back to the base camp by his emergency medical portkey. The other kept fighting but soon reported that his leg was broken despite his suit. He also stated his armor was badly crumpled at the impact site and he couldn’t use his jump jets any longer, badly limiting his range and coordination. “At least they’re our only real long-range concern.”

Turning his attention back to the rest of the battle Cyclops saw several clumps of jotun hurling spears towards various ODMs. Every ODM thus targeted managed to dodge out of the way using their jet packs, the spears hitting nothing. One group of jotun was then punished as a Heavy Gunner took them all under fire. From above like this, there was no way he could miss.

“Keep up the pressure on the dark elves, Falcon. I think we’re pushing them hard, but the last thing Cap said to me was to keep our reserves out of this until right before they broke, and we’re not seeing that yet. Say what you will about our enemies, they aren’t cowards,” Cyclops sent back, his voice trailing off as he fired his optic blasts once more. “Snipers spread out, fourth company, hold position for now.”

Just then, however, Dr. Druid shouted a warning, “The Shadows! They’re doing something!”

Illusion-based attacks struck the battlefield like a rising tide, washing over the entire area indiscriminately to try and make it impossible for the humans and Asgardians to tell friend from foe coupled with feelings of fear and despair. The same illusionary assault was occurring back at the base camp but there Dr. Strange handled the attack with aplomb, breaking the illusions within seconds no matter how layered or skillfully woven.

Unfortunately, the Shadows had only used these illusions as cover while they teleported their pawns/troops around the battlefield. The Heavy Gunners armed with mortars who were well away from the main line battle suddenly came under direct assault from several hundred jotun. Seven of them fell to the attackers before the rest could spread out using their jump jets to gain distance and start to fire back.

This maneuvering, while effective in preventing any more deaths for the Gunners, cut off much of the artillery support that had been keeping the main jotun forces from pressing the attack on the Asgardians. This left only the Heavy Gunners aboard the carpets.

Thankfully, the regular troopers were in position now, and their gunfire took over, taking over the efforts to keep the jotun from attempting to close with the Asgardians. Who,

Cyclops was surprised to note, were also starting to reform, not retreat, but reform and come back into the fight.

That impressed Cyclops immensely. *But then again, all of these folk are ancient warriors chosen to enter Valhalla because of their courage, aren't they?* "Heavy Gunners, do you need reinforcements?"

"That would be affirmative Sir, these damned walking-magma fuckers came out of nowhere and are all over us!" shouted one of the Heavy Gunners on the ground. "Those Shadowy fucks are porting them around the place occasionally, and that's screwing with our long-range advantage."

Cyclops nodded over to the other carpets and ordered Nightcrawler in to help offset the teleportation powers while Dr. Druid finished dispelling the various illusions attacking their people. In spite of his efforts however, the magical side of things had a major impact. Several troopers were already pulling back, almost on the verge of collapse. Their built in defensive arrays had allowed them to see through the illusions, but the drain on their bodies to power them had pushed them nearly to exhaustion.

Within minutes of the Shadows' intervention, the battle had become far more even, and Cyclops scowled in anger. "Banshee, keep up the pressure on the jotun trying to reform on the ridge. Cannonball, pull back from the front and help the Heavy Gunners. Wolverine, Laura pull back to guard Magma just in case. Polaris, I know you can't do much about the jotun but be ready in case the dark elves are teleported over there too. Fourth company, third platoon, in to help your heavier brothers."

A second, Cyclops eyes filled with a crimson gleam. He blasted down towards a small group of jotun who'd managed to surround a single ODM, who leaped away at his command. All three of the jotun were crushed by his kinetic beam like ants under a swatter. Only pausing his beam so he wouldn't hit his own troops, he then turned his attention elsewhere, lashing out again.

Meanwhile, Falcon tried again to push hard against the clump of dark elves that had seemingly retained their organizations so far.

Below him, Colossus hit the ground running, darting forward along with Captain America who grabbed his rebounding shield out of the air. Whirling, the original Super Soldier blocked a swipe from a dark elf's sword before lashing out with a kick that doubled the elf over. He hammered his shield into the elf's face before he could recover, surely breaking bones and hurling the dark elf backward.

Nearby, another dark elf with white hair and slightly more ornate armor who had been about to finish off Balder shook his head, grimacing at the impact of the hurled shield to his back. Looking at him, Steve recognized him from the intelligence they had been given by Freya. This was Malekith, the king of the dark elves! *Tougher, faster, and stronger than any of his*

people. A good hand-to-hand fighter and magic user. Egotistical, vain, and prone to monologuing, Captain America listed off in his head.

As if to prove these last three points, Malekith spoke, his voice a deliberate drawl as he wiped at his chest armor ostentatiously while looking at the strange human who'd used his shield of all things to attack him. "And who are you supposed to be? Human to be sure, there is no disgusting aura of divinity about you like there is around the pestilential Asgardians. And yet, your raiment and stance do not match one of their followers."

Not responding, Cap shifted to one side, putting himself between Malekith and Balder. Once in position, he addressed the downed Asgardian without taking his eyes from the elven king. "You must be Balder. Don't worry; Thor and Harry, I mean, Harry Potter, gave me a description of you.

Balder opened his mouth, desperately trying to force out even a few words to these strange humans, to warn them away. Malekith was one of the most dangerous warriors in the combined realms. But the mistletoe poison seeping through his veins, from the various cuts he had taken from Malekith's specially tipped weapons, were bringing him to the brink. And with every open wound, Jörmungandr's miasma compounded his suffering. "I, I..."

"Don't worry, we've got this." Steve reassured as he smiled down at Balder. Without even looking back, he launched his shield towards Malekith the instant the dark elf tried to take advantage of his inattention and charge forward. Malekith ducked and the shield whirled on, crashing instead into a jotun with enough force to cause the creature to stumble. The hit caused the shield to rebound up into the air, where Steve easily caught it having leaped up over Malekith's spear thrust, kicking the dark elf king in the shoulder as he came down, sending him stumbling to one side of the wounded Balder.

Malekith twisted around quickly, but Steve batted his spear to one side, its tip breaking on his shield even as its shaft was carried to one side. Snarling, Malekith brought his spear back around towards Steve's legs, actually succeeding in catching him before Cap could dodge. But then another shield came crashing down into the dark elf's face, hurling him away. A split second later, Vanguard landed, his mask moving visibly into a smirk. "I don't think so."

Vanguard raised his hand and caught his shield on its return, the same one he'd essentially stolen from the Russian Winter Guard Program. Although it wasn't made of vibranium like Steve's, it had several magical enchantments on it courtesy of Harry and was a great tool to help Nikolai use his mutant power. In his other hand he wielded a rifle, currently short-barreled, which he promptly fired at Malekith, rounds thundering out fast and accurate.

"Human cretins!" Malekith shouted, thrusting his hands forward. Some kind of dark blue magic swirled into existence in front of the elven king, creating a magical barrier of dark blue magic which halted the impact of the various bullets as if they'd smacked into a rubber wall. Oddly enough, the sound was more like someone had just run into an electrical field.

With their immediate enemy pushed onto the defensive, Steve took a moment to look for Colossus, who he'd leaped down into battle with only a moment before. He found him nearby, embroiled with another dark elf and two Jotun as a group of human warriors retreated nearby, most of them wounded and quickly losing a battle with Jörmungandr's poison.

While Cap could understand that his Russian friend had stepped in to protect the Asgardians from being overrun, they had bigger issues to deal with. "Colossus! Find Thor! Get those items to him!"

Unfortunately, even with the clamor the other human was making as he fired into his shield, Malekith heard that order. And like any good commander, he knew that keeping an enemy from achieving an objective was always a good thing.

As he kept his magic shield up to absorb the fire from the red colored human, Malekith cast a second spell. Tilting his head back Malekith shrieked out in his own language, a jumble of snarls and rumbling tones, each word running into the next, inhumanely loud and piercing. "#To all of my people who can hear my words! Target the strange human with steel plated skin! Keep him from the Thunderer! Jotun, you must do the same!#"

Although the defending humans couldn't understand this command, it became obvious swiftly as the nearby jotun turned to obey. Several of the giants even broke off from chasing the Asgardians to exclusively target Colossus, further confusing the nearby combat zone.

Seeing this, Vanguard turned his attention that way, single shots from his gauss rifle taking down a jotun here and there. At the same time, Cap sent his shield flying, smashing dark elf and Jotun alike and sending them sprawling.

Despite his teammates' best efforts though, Colossus still soon found himself surrounded. The former Russian farm boy was undaunted however, and as he ducked through various blows he punched back just as hard. "Come then, large ones! Let us see if your fire or my metal is stronger."

His return punches pulverized jotun armor, shattering obsidian armor and the ribs beneath before he tossed the now crippled enemy aside. In the case of the numerous dark elves who attempted to waylay him, a simple punch would practically cause them to implode. Hammers, clubs, and swords of rock, stone and steel slammed into Colossus, but for as big and strong as he was, Colossus was also quite nimble. That having been a primary goal of his training under Shiang Chi. More blows missed him than struck as he danced through the battlefield, all the while protecting the box tied to his side.

It didn't all go Colossus' way of course. Despite the steel-clad Russian's best efforts, a few blows did catch him square, and when they did the blows of the jotun who'd targeted him, larger and stronger than the ones they'd faced upon their arrival in Yggdrasil's verdant boughs, dented his steel frame. Worse, their collective battering managed to keep him from Thor, the

Thunderer still rampaging around wildly while smashing anything in his way, friend and foe alike.

Just barely seeing Malekith cover himself with another spell to hide his presence from enemy eyes, Balder grunted, grabbing at Cap's arm. The human turned and looked at him in concern, but Balder shook his head, gesturing instead towards the ever-distancing Thor, his voice raspy with pain as he spoke. "You must know... my brother is... ensorcelled. Malekith, he placed a necklace... around Thor's throat. Remove it, else he will not... not know friend from foe."

Nodding, Steve raised a hand to his ear and activated his communication gear even as he tried to flank Malekith. The anti-illusion runic arrays in his helmet had managed to keep the dark elf king visible, but he could feel the drain taxing him even with his amazing stamina.

From his position above the battlefield, Cyclops heard Steve's report and cursed. Looking around, he ordered another platoon in from his reserves to that section of the fight. Instantly, the men, a mixture of French and Australian if the accents were anything to go by, began to lay down covering fire around Colossus, slaying many of the jotun that had been surrounding him.

With Colossus being seen to, Cyclops searched around for Thor. He found him easily enough, finding him under similar attack as his metal friend, although his own attacks were not nearly as well .

Using his visor to zoom in, Cyclops saw that Thor's right arm, from fist to elbow, was black and blue from repeated strikes. Worse, Thor's face was twisted in a rictus of blind rage and fury, his mouth ceaselessly moving, practically gnashing as a gibbering babble came from his mouth. He still punched out as hard as before, his blows smashing jotun away like toys, yet it was obvious the God of Thunder wasn't actually targeting them.

Seeing this, Cyclops turned his attention to their resident magical expert. "Dr. Druid!"

"I'm busy!" the British man shouted back. "I can't... we're losing people!"

Cyclops moved over to the man, treading carefully on the carpet which, even stationary, wasn't exactly a completely stable surface to walk on. He clapped a hand on Dr. Druid's shoulder, noting the man was trembling. *I guess that's the difference between a middling-strong magic user, and a truly powerful one like Strange or Harry.* "I want you to wait for my signal, but when I give it, you need to focus on canceling whatever spell is on Thor, understood? No matter what else is happening."

Wincing, Dr. Druid grit his teeth and nodded, sweat pouring down his face. He reached one hand down to his waist, blindly grasping around as he kept his eyes focused on something the other man couldn't see.

Seeing that, Cyclops pulled out a Pepper Up potion from the man's pouch. He put the small bottle in the man's hands even as he whipped his head around and lashed out with a kinetic blast that caught a jotun down below about to take Vanguard from behind. He then recalled Nightcrawler, who bamfed into existence to one side of him a second later. Cyclops briefly explained what he wanted to his friend, noticing even as he spoke that the battle as a whole was slowly becoming ever more chaotic. This wasn't helped at all by the Asgardians and humans as they decided right then was the perfect time to come charging back in to re-engage the dark elves and jotun once more.

Realizing he could no longer concentrate on everything all at once, Cyclops decided he needed to do something. *Without Sam or Mister Rogers here with me, that leaves me little options*

With that thought, Cyclops turned his coms back to the company commander's frequency. "Company commanders, I'm losing the bubble here. I'm turning tactical control of your companies entirely over to you and releasing the last company to engage at their discretion. The Custodes will concentrate on helping the Heavy Gunners and the locals. As for you all, you know what to, and you know how to do it. Wreck their shit."

In his helmet, the Australian company commander smirked slightly as he sent a message to Sean and their other two peers. "I knew I liked that bloke for a reason."

With that, the last company bounded off their carpets, descending downward as the ODMs shifted tactics, breaking down into smaller groups as they continued to bounce around the battlefield. Working in fire teams instead of squads or platoons, the Marines reveled still further in the sheer amount of mobility their jump jets gave them as they picked the jotun and dark elves apart. They didn't have it all their own way, but even the dark elves couldn't match the ODMs at rifle-range. And the dark elves were having their own problems as they came under attack from the Einherjar, Wolverine, his daughter and Coyote and Uzume.

Below, Captain America and Vanguard found themselves faced with their own personal battle. They had followed Malekith through the battlefield as he'd tried to get to Colossus but luckily for them, the blue-skinned king had been hampered by the tumult his own order had created along with the heaving, bucking ground beneath them

Somehow able to sense Vanguard's shots coming, Malekith turned, a smaller magical shield flicking into existence right in front of his chest to block the gauss rounds. He then seemed to fracture, an illusion causing six versions of the elven king to appear, each of them racing off in different directions.

Meanwhile the real one darted forward, pulling out long short swords as he moved to engage the red themed human. Similar to the swords his people traditionally used they protected his hands with basket hilts but were shorter, about only a foot long rather than the length of a dark elf's arm.

Previously ignorant to the existence of the anti-illusion array, Malekith froze in shock as the red-wearing human brought his ranged weapon around once more and, shot unerring. Malekith dodged to one side with some difficulty, only to catch a blow from the other human's shield. Malekith was able to absorb the brunt of the attack with one of his swords, but the blade was smacked out of his hand as a result. Even so, he still caught the human's follow-up blow, upending the man with a toss. Kneeling, the dark elven king tried to go for a stab to the human's heart.

Cap rolled away, twisting to break the grip on his arm. Kicking off the ground, he caught his rebounding shield and lashed out with the edge of it. Malekith blocked with the buckler tied to his off arm, the impact sending him rolling backward though doing little real damage. As he slid to a stop, Malekith barked out a single command in his guttural tongue. As he spoke, the runes lining his armor began to glow.

Vanguard took the opportunity to fire at Malekith again but this time the dark elf didn't even bother blocking his shots, the accelerated bullets pinging off Malekith's armor. Seeing his rifle wasn't going to be of any use, he charged forward, shield raised—only to halt as Malekith launched a spell his way. It was a kind of green and red energy which, quixotically, made Nikolai think of Christmas.

The blast struck just as Vanguard raised his shield, calling on his mutant power. While Vanguard rarely used it as his primary combat skill these days, his mutant power created a shield around Nikolai's body that reflected any energy that struck him. So long as an attack had a physical element to it, even magic could be reflected. So long as he saw it coming and his power was activated, anyway.

Malekith barely had time to blink before his own magic rebounded back, hurling him through one particularly lucky tree that had survived thus far in the middle of the battle. The impact shattered the tree as its luck ran out, sending splinters radiating around Malekith. But the blast hadn't really hurt him, as the spell had been almost instantly absorbed by Malekith's now-activated armor.

But concussive force is concussive force, and while whole, the dark elven king came away from the returned attack with his senses knocked a little loose, which was just the opening Cap had been waiting for to close again. The blow from his shield this time doubled Malekith over, right into an uppercut to the chin. Another few blows landed, breaking teeth loose and causing Malekith's head to start ringing when a side swipe caught him in the ear.

Even with the world spinning and his head ringing, Malekith managed to move with each of Cap's blows, taking only half as much damage as he should have, before finally managing to redirect a punch and launch an elbow into his opponent's face, sending him reeling back. A quick magical blast went off at pointblank range knocking the breath out of the shield user, and another magical blast was only barely blocked by that shield.

Another magical blast sent Cap backward through the air, but before Malekith could follow up and skewer him, Vanguard was there. He had tossed his rifle aside and instead pulled out a short dagger and now launched a strike at Malekith's stomach which the dark elf barely blocked. A blow from the basket hilt of Malekith's short sword to the side of Vanguard's wrist sent the dagger tumbling to the ground. but instead of pausing, the young Russian immediately moved to throw a punch before a blast from Malekith's magic forced Vanguard to shield himself with his mutant power.

The spell, which had been a curse that would have set Vanguard on fire, was redirected back toward Malekith, who snarled as the energy of curse was absorbed by his armor, a scowl on his lips. "That is annoying! What kind of sorcery—"

Seeing no need to speak to an enemy, Nikolai was already rolling away, snatching up his rifle from where he had left it. A second later the gun came up to point at Malekith, and Vanguard pulled the trigger rapidly. The railgun rounds hammered into the dark elf king, causing him to double over in agony from their sheer force alone. Unfortunately, once again the magical properties of the armor he wore worked to deaden the impact of the strikes.

Still one of his ears was hit, ripped off the side of the dark elf's head in a welter of blood. The dark elven king stumbled and seeing this, Vanguard shifted his fire. His next shot flashed towards Malekith's head.

The Shadows once more intervened. Malekith had proven to be a useful pawn thus far and thus would not be allowed to die so easily to outside interference. Between one second and the next, Malekith vanished, the kill shot ripping through nothing but empty air until it took an unlucky jotun in the thigh.

Vanguard whirled, eyes sweeping all around as he hunted for where the target had gone. Instead of his quarry, he saw several other dark elves and a jotun who charged towards him.

Malekith reappeared elsewhere, but unlike most of his folk, the dark elf king was learned enough to instantly understand the full implications of the sudden change in his fortunes. And so crooked was his mind that the Shadows didn't even see a need to try and obfuscate things. There would've been no point.

In this they were correct, and had they bodies, the Shadows would have smiled as they read his thoughts. *So... we are being used here. Very well, I care not. So long as I can kill Asgardians, it matters not a whit if I serve a hidden master in doing so.*

Nearby, Steve dodged around a jotun's attacks, his shield smacking edge-on into the back of the jotun's knee. As the jotun stumbled, Cap took the moment to look around, trying to spot their slippery opponent. Before he could, an arrow taken from a dead elf along with his bow, seared through the air and caught Cap in the side before he could block, hurling him off his feet with a cry of pain. The strike didn't penetrate his suit, but the force of the impact was

still like being hit by a cannonball shrunk to the size of an arrowhead, and Steve knew he'd just cracked a rib.

After finishing the attackers that had tried to surround him, Vanguard saw this and immediately opened fire at Malekith again. However, with more distance between them than previously, the dark elf king simply threw up another magical shield and waited until the bullets ceased. Unseen behind the coruscating shield, he also pulled out a dagger.

Although he now knew the idea was not entirely his own, finishing one task before going on to the next was still a good idea to Malekith's mind, and this was his last mistletoe-tipped dagger, making it useless for anyone but Balder. Alas for Malekith, the Bright One was nowhere to be found. The tumult around them was blocking his line of sight in every direction.

Whatever the dark elf was doing, Vanguard didn't care, and he charged forward, covering the intervening distance at a full sprint. He crashed shield first into Malekith's magical shield, his mutant power activated. The impact between magic and mutant shields created a small explosion as Vanguard stumbled forward the last few feet between him and Malekith. Malekith barely had time to switch to a regular steel dagger instead of the mistletoe one, as Vanguard fired at him point blank.

Malekith lunged, only taking one of the several rounds the Russian fired. That one shot pushed Malekith's desperate lunge off-center, but his dagger still sliced into the human's weapon.

His gun now useless, Vanguard dropped it to the roiling ground beneath them and lashed out with a punch that Malekith dodged adroitly. The Russian-trained Super Soldier grimly kept up the attack, using shield, fist, and feet. Malekith was slippery and Vanguard's blows slid around him. But when the dark elf king took a chance and stabbed forward, Vanguard allowed the blade to hit, having already activated his shield power once again. The dagger shattered, and Vanguard went on to the offensive once more.

Unfortunately, Malekith had suspected he'd lose the dagger from the previous times the red-themed human had used his odd power. As he dropped the ruined blade, the spell he'd prepared in that same hand went off. The hex was simply a blinding spell, a flashbang in magical form so to speak, but his opponent hadn't expected it at all. The human stumbled back, eyes clenched shut, right into a jotun's blow from behind that sent him flying over Malekith's head.

Nikolai grunted in agony as he smacked into the ground full force, but like Steve's, his outfit was reinforced with Orichalcum scale mail. Rolling along the ground, a pistol appeared in one hand from his connected magic pouch and Vanguard snarled as he lashed out with his shield at a nearby dark elf. He emptied the fresh pistol into several other elves, ignoring the jotun, which exploded under rocket fire from above.

As the jotun crumbled, Vanguard found himself staring at Balder, the Asgardian prince kneeling behind where the giant had stood. He'd taken several more hits since the fight against Malekith had moved away from where he'd first fallen. None were serious though, and Balder's eyes were clearing as stared looked up at the red-themed human, and in his hand he held his sword, the tip pressing into the ground, he tried to push to his feet. The two men nodded at one another and Vanguard turned, firing his pistol at several more dark elves who'd thought to sneak up on the pair.

These elves weren't the only ones. Thinking quickly, Malekith, who had been weaving through the battlefield unseen after Vanguard, cast a spell on himself as he reached down to grab a discarded sword from a bullet-ridden corpse. Two more spells flashed out in quick succession.

The first created a fog, which quickly spread. And Dr. Druid was too busy seeing off another series of illusion and fear based magical assaults to notice this more subtle spellwork. Soon, the entire area around Malekith, Vanguard, and Balder was covered in mist, although it was also rapidly dissipating since Thor's earlier work with the weather was still in effect.

The second spell was a sound-based charm, a little trick Malekith's people had long used to lure people into their traps. When he spoke next, his voice sounded like the listeners' loved one.

Unknown to him, it was only because the spell was sound-based, and not an actual illusion, that it worked at all. But work it did.

"Help me!"

Startled and horrified, Nikolai whipped around, searching for his sister. His mind couldn't comprehend how she'd somehow been transported to this realm, but the voice, it was the same he'd heard when they were younger, when Laynia had been attacked by a gang of toughs looking for a good time and had screamed for his help. His rational mind tried to fight through the magic, but that voice...

The sword came out of the mist faster than an eye could blink. And Vanguard had allowed his mutant power to fade, thinking to conserve his energy.

The blade punched straight through Vanguard's neck where there was little armor to allow for easier movement. Nikolai died before he even knew he'd been struck, far too quickly for even his emergency portkey to activate in time, although it did activate a second later, sending his body back to the camp.

Seeing the human's lifeblood gush out from around his sword's blade, Malekith's visage twisted into a sneer of victory. The derisive smirk disappeared under confusion when his kill disappeared, leaving only his blood behind, having even taken the portion of his blade that had still been stabbed into the human's throat.

Malekith blinked, staring at where his kill had been. “What in all the worlds...? That was sudden. I...”

He didn’t have any time to ponder what had just happened as, before he could pull his outstretched arm back, Balder lunged upwards, swinging his own blade in a vertical arc. The blow wasn’t aimed at Malekith’s body. Instead, Balder had aimed at Malekith’s wrist, infusing his blade with all the power the Bright One had remaining in his body. His blade sliced right through the leather armor covering Malekith’s wrist, sending hand and sword flying.

“AGGGGHHHH!” Malekith screamed, falling back, staring wide-eyed at where his sword was soaring through the air, his hand still attached to it. Blood spurted from his wrist and he turned, glaring at the now collapsed form of Balder. He screamed invectives in his mother tongue as he tried to find his last mistletoe dagger. But he had none left, having lost them all at various points since the oddly dressed humans had interrupted his assault on Balder.

Snarling even more viciously, Malekith used his magic to slowly close his wound. Concentrating through the mental fugue of sudden blood loss was more difficult than any task he’d accomplished of late, yet he succeeded.

But before the dark elf king could try and attack Balder once more, Captain America was there, standing over Malekith on the back of a dead jotun. Face torn into a rictus of rage, Cap brought his shield swinging around, edge on. Malekith tried to move, to dodge, to evade, but the edge still caught him across the eyes, smashing his nose and pulping one of his eyes, causing Malekith to scream in agony as he fell sideways.

Steve moved to finish the white-haired bastard off, but between one eyeblink and the next, Malekith disappeared.

The Shadows had intervened once more. The dark king of Svartalfheim had proven a decent pawn, too good to be lost in what was clearly a losing battle. Indeed, he was not the only resource that the Shadows was scrambling to collect by this point.

Far from the front where Nikolai had died, Magma had subsumed herself into a duel with Surtur for control of the tectonic energies within the ground beneath the battlefield, long since having shifted into her mutant form and merging with the ground. Pushing back the Jotun King’s influence was a difficult task, but in the end she was able to prevail. As she pushed his mind away, the shaking, steam vents and everything else wracking the battlefield lessened. The field advantage, so to speak, let Magma manipulate the powers of the earth beneath them better than Surtur could in this foreign land.

Roaring in anger, Surtur pulled himself out of the mental battle, and stumbling backward, he looked around as mortar rounds and rockets crashed into the air, hurling his people about like broken dolls. It seemed the bigger the jotun was, the larger a target they were for these new humans and their otherworldly weaponry, with many of them targeting

every extra-large jotun they could. And with air superiority the humans could call down such powerful arms on whatever position they wanted.

his was quickly proving to be the deciding factor in the battle, as he could see more and more of his army die before they could close with the new humans, let alone the Einherjar who were now fighting it out with his remaining men and any surviving dark elves.

It was infuriating! They were so close! But while his own men were still fighting well, from his vantage point, Surtur saw the dark elves were now fleeing, their fleeting courage when faced with strong opposition breaking like glass without their king to terrify them.

As he noticed this, his lords and masters informed him the battle was lost. The battle was irreparably against them, and not even Surtur could hope to change the outcome.

the King of Muspellheim railed at that, raging that he was more than powerful enough, but that was only his anger and pride talking. Even then, that rage, that fury within him, which burned as hot as the flames at the core of a star, could not sustain itself under the implacable touch of the Shadows.

“Pull back,” his masters ordered. “Pull back, retreat to rebuild. Sacrifice what remains of your army and leave. Quickly. We can rebuild your forces if you but survive.”

But for the Shadows, the news was about to turn far worse.

As Malekith had begun to move in on Vanguard, Colossus had finally won through the tumult of battle coming close to a still raging Thor. Grabbing up a downed tree, the metal-skinned man hurled it forward, taking the Thunderer’s feet out from under him before leaping forward.

This was what Cyclops, had been waiting for. “Now, Dr. Druid!”

At his command Dr. Druid turned, raising a weary hand to send out a Finite Incantatum spell that he had learned from Harry toward Thor. At the same time, Nightcrawler bamfed in and grabbed at the necklace, from behind, pulling it up and off of Thor’s head before the Asgardian prince even realized what was going on.

Dr. Druid’s spell struck, and with its power and the loss of the necklace, Thor’s senses instantly returned to normal. He gasped, looking about with wide eyes. Almost absentmindedly, he smacked a jotun aside, reaching for the larger creature’s arm before hurling it through the air. “What, what happened? What vile sorcery was covering my senses?!”

“The most violent sort,” Colossus answered from nearby, blocking another jotun who had moved to strike the still befuddled Thunder God in the back as he’d knelt on the ground. The two titans grappled for a few seconds before Colossus pushed the jotun backward just enough to gain enough leverage to twist around and hurl the giant over his head, sending it through the air to crash down in a heap where several ODMs targeted it.

For just a moment, there was a lull in the fighting around the two men as no other jotun were close enough to engage. The troopers above them continuing to lay down a withering hail of gunfire. "I believe that these belong to you, Thor." Colossus said, turning to the Asgardian prince.

Thor looked at Colossus quizzically, remembering the metal-clad man from Midgard, having met him during the events in the country called Canada. He took a look at what was being offered before saying ruefully, "This is hardly the time for presents my friend I..."

Without a word, Colossus tore off the top of the box. Thor froze, staring at what was within.

It was his hammer, though not quite the same Mjollnir that he'd been wielding earlier. For one thing, unlike the hammer that had shattered, which had been made of metal, the head of the hammer in the box was stone, a simple cylinder about the same length as the shaft rather than a square-shaped box on the end of a handle. Where the shaft and the head connected there were intricately etched runes and there were other runes carved around the head of the hammer. It certainly did not look as impressive as the hammer that Thor had been using previously, especially since its handle was even shorter than the other. But just looking at it made Thor realize that the one he'd been using had been but a pale imitation.

The thick belt also in the box, on the other hand, was even less compelling in appearance. Yet, as Thor hesitantly reached into the box, his hands grabbed first for the belt, almost with a mind of their own, and brought it to his waist. Under some forgotten memory, Thor's muscles automatically strapped the belt into place, as if he'd done it a hundred, no, a thousand times before.

Instantly, the God of Thunder felt new strength rush through him. The power increase wasn't as much as when he'd first put on his Gauntlets of Power, but still there was a distinct rush in power.

The Shadows noticed too. As hastily as they could, they gathered jotun from all over and teleported them directly to Thor and Colossus's location and launched a magical assault on Thor.

Colossus instantly dropped the box and hurled himself forward, crashing into several jotun. And at the same time, Dr. Druid had been ready, newly invigorated by another Pepper-up potion. His magic caught and dispelled their own, while Emma and Charles beat back any mental attack aimed at Thor from their position back at camp.

For his part, Thor stayed frozen in place, ignoring the blows that smashed into him at the hands of other jotun. Such was the strength the belt gave him that the blows couldn't even cause him bruises any longer. In a daze, Thor reached down and grabbed up the box. Reaching in, he wrapped his hand around the handle of the hammer within.

Power is too small a word to describe what surged through Thor, making what the gauntlets he'd claimed from Volstagg's body and the belt that he had just placed around his waist seem like nothing in comparison. It was as if a circuit had finally been completed between Thor and this Mjollnir the surging power flowing between them exponentially increasing with each loop, the energy flowing through him madly.

With a bellow, Thor whirled his hammer, the true Mjollnir, above his head, the mere wind of its passage picking up the nearby jotun, and Colossus as well, and hurling them away. Lightning flashed through the air, slamming into Thor and Mjollnir.

From his knees Colossus watched as Thor's blonde hair shifted color slowly to red. The last vestiges of the Shadow's control, their mental commands and shallow personality changes that they'd emplaced in Thor to contain his true personality were gone, shattered by the power of Mjollnir being in his hands once more.

Thor was free, and he now remembered. He remembered his marriage to Sif, his love. He remembered his children. He remembered being helpless but to watch as his precious little ones were slain during the first Ragnarök as the Shadows betrayed the Allfather and Asgard. He remembered his uncle, not his brother but his **uncle**, Loki shouting at him, screaming at him they had been betrayed.

And with his memories, Thor knew his true enemies.

"RAAAAAAAAAAHHHHH!!!" Thor howled, a wordless roar of agony and fury that resounded across not just the battlefield, but all the way back to the base camp and beyond. "I will have my revenge on you! You foul bastards, you slinking cowards, you stalking craven! No army shall stand in my way, no creature you put in place will stop me! I WILL END YOU ALL!!!!"

Taking in the words of their lord, a renewed roar of battle lust and defiance rose up from the Einherjar. They attacked with greater vigor than before, as if it was the start of a battle rather than the end of a long, tortuous day.

In contrast, the Shadows became frantic. "*Retreat,*" they shouted into Surtur's mind. "*With Gungnir you may have a chance, but only a chance, and we have lost too much already.*"

From the base camp to the battlefield, more illusion spells and telepathic assaults immediately followed, causing the three main telepaths to grimace under the effort of keeping the Shadows from the minds of all concerned. Meanwhile, Dr. Druid collapsed like a leaf, exhausted and barely able to do anything, leaving the full defense of the magical side to Strange.

And while Dr. Strange could dispel the curses and hexes and jinxes that the Shadows were using against the Asgardian defenders and the expeditionary force, he could not do so while also trying to find Surtur. The jotun king thus retreated quickly, abandoning what

remained of his army, fleeing the battlefield that had barely two hours ago been the sight of what should've been Surtur's greatest triumph for this turning of the cycle.

As the battle began to wind down, Cap and Cyclops worked with the other officers, linking up and being introduced to the jarls and the Asgardian officers trying to create some order from the chaos. The first campaign of the Ragnarök War had ended in a victory for the Asgardians and their allies from Earth. But the war would continue.

And indeed, even as this battle came to an end, battle lines elsewhere were already being drawn...

end chapter