

I ain't British nor can I draw.

Hey all. This is the *Observanc3* edited chapter – halfway, anyway. He hasn't finished the entire thing. I wanted it out finished by the end of May but he didn't get it back to me until yesterday and I decided to Grammarly the hell out of my *Stallion of the Line* chapter.

... And then forgot to check if Fanfic was being a bitch about letting me upload the chapter. Grah. I feel so dumb now.

Chapter 49: A Crooked Mind Makes Good Strategy

As they finished teleporting Surtur away from the ruins of his invading army, Those Who Watch Above In Shadow were furious. Furious and scared. The loss of their tether within Níðhögg had been bad. The arrival of the humans from Earth was **much** worse. Never had they considered that the items of power that they had spirited away from Thor before the first Ragnarök, items linked to Gaea and thus incorruptible by them, could or would ever be returned to him. They had known that the mortal known as Harry Potter was magically puissant, but they hadn't considered the idea that he could field an actual army and thus actively influence events scattered across Asgard. Now they found their latest Ragnarök utterly stalled.

Worse yet, even when they could ensnare a target from this new army before its magic-users could disrupt the spell, the illusions rarely took. Vision-based illusions never seemed to stick while sound-based ones only had a marginally better chance.

Scent-based deceptions seemed to work well, but this was countered by the fact that the Shadows didn't have much talent in that area after millennia without the necessary physical forms to make use of the sense themselves. Not to mention most humans had an extremely limited senses of smell. Even when their smell-based illusions worked, the humans tended to ignore them or see the illusions as low priority.

The Shadows had watched with interest when Malekith had used one sound-based trick to kill one of the powered Earth humans. Having seen him succeed in using illusions to mask his presence and then disastrously distract the foe, the Shadows turned a portion of their thoughts to ways they could utilize the same tactics on a larger scale.

However, the peak of the Shadow's mountain of worries was still the immediate impact the more uniform, seemingly basic Earth human troopers had on the main physical battle: Balder's avoided fate and Thor breaking free. While Potter's troops could perhaps be contained, maintained, or overrun through sheer weight of numbers, Thor's strength was such that only their two remaining tethers could even attempt to match him. Surtur could potentially overcome Thor with the help of Gungnir, even if the Thunderer wielded the real Mjolnir, as could Jörmungandr. But even so, it would be a near-run thing, and the rest of the Asgardians and humans would tip the scales in any kind of accompanying conflict.

Balder surviving was also **unacceptable**. His death would have given them an edge as well as formally starting the Ragnarök cycle. His death would have filled the rest of the Asgardians with fear and grief, making them much easier to harvest while locking many of the other Asgardians into their assigned roles. On the magical side, Balder's death would have also given their powers an immediate boost, his lifeforce a heady balm to their strained nerves.

But, it hadn't happened. Balder lived. And now the Bright One was slowly pulling the Asgardian Army back together, becoming the rallying point he had been during the first Ragnarök.

But really, all of that was merely on the tactical level, one of the Shadows pointed out to the others. It was on the strategic level where everything was becoming most concerning. This was because, truth be told, Those Who Watch Above In Shadow had put forth their strength to see Balder die, and much of that reserve had been expended with no real returns. It was not so much in terms of their physical forces that had been depleted, although that was also true, but in their magical reserves.

From the moment of their deal with Odin, the Shadows had been constantly fed by what amounted to a river of power. This inexhaustible energy came from their control of the Asgardians, the realms connected to Yggdrasil, and the great tree itself. That river of power became a vast tsunami when they enacted a Ragnarök, however. The deaths of the Asgardians acted much like when someone pulped fruit, allowing them to leech out more juice than slowly draining it.

However, the amount of power that river could actually allow them to take in and store was based on their tethers.

One tether was already completely unusable. Loki was well and gone, so far outside the boundaries of Earth that the Shadows couldn't even detect his presence. His loss in this manner hadn't weakened the Shadows or their reserves per say, as the tether still existed, but it had basically frozen it, stilling the flow of magic it had fed them. The tether Níðhögggr had been destroyed upon his death. This left only two tethers active, meaning the amount of power feeding into the Shadows had effectively been cut in half.

They were being fed though, and the amount flowing into them should've been enough given the deaths of the Asgardians and their followers so far. But the Shadows had miscalculated. The constant magical attacks on the Earth humans took power. Teleporting troops across the realms, particularly between dimensions, took power, as did keeping Odin from awakening and keeping the madness-hunger paramount in Fenrir's mind.

The vast oceanic reserve of magical energy that they had been existing off of was now noticeably depleted by the effort that they had put forth, without any true impact to show for it. Teleporting troops around was the only tactic they had used which had truly showed any

benefit to them, allowing their pawns to kill off several of the Earthborn humans. And it was the most energy intensive.

Thankfully, the Earth humans didn't seem to be able to hinder or stop their ability to teleport their physical troops around. Also, it appeared as if none of the humans could stop them from contacting their pawns either, or from influencing the minds of those outside the telepaths' defensive umbrella. An umbrella that the Shadows were constantly pressuring.

For now, the Shadows bent their efforts to rebuilding a portion of what had been lost, using still more of their vast magical powers to rebuild a portion of Surtur's army. Creating life in such a way would cause the Phoenix Force to scream in fury, but there was little the Eternal Forces could do to interfere here in the Yggdrasil pocket dimensions... or so the Shadows hoped. These creations would have less than a fragment of the Flame Imperishable, conceived by magic condensed to a degree that few in all known creation could accomplish, but even so they would still not be as alive as the separated Asgardian aspects such as the Enchantress or the now defunct Volstagg. These jotun, created in Muspellheim where they could feed and grow without interference, would be essentially drones, unable to act or think on their own as those aspects seemed to have done against all designs.

Which was all to the good in the Shadow's great over-mind. They had no desire to see more creations acting in ways they could not predict. Such had already cost them dearly.

The Shadows also sent out mental nudges to the Stone Jotun elsewhere within Asgard to gather together. The Stone Jotun were not as deadly in combat as the smarter, more powerful, and more adaptable Fire Jotun, but the devolved version of the race that had in ancient times given rise to the Fire Jotun, the Aesir, the Vanir, and the Stone Lords could be used in even larger numbers. Numbers that could, the Shadows hoped, offset the numbers of the Einherjar and their Earth-born allies.

Yet even while that work was ongoing, one within the Shadows spoke up. This was somewhat startling. It had been centuries since the Shadows had done anything without moving in lockstep. Separate voices were unnecessary when all spoke, all moved, with one goal.

Yet the singular voice's observation was quite pointed and impossible to ignore. Beyond reinforcing Jörmungandr and Fenrir and setting some kind of trap for Potter, who they knew was heading towards Asgard the city, what were they to do?

For several moments, the Shadow Host was at a loss. Never before in their existence had the control of their playthings ever been challenged. Never before had they truly had to fight an enemy who could even inconvenience them.

Then, a thought occurred to another one of their number.

It was a thought that horrified many in the Shadow collective. That perhaps, just perhaps, the Shadows could do something that would have never occurred to any of them to do before. They could consult with their pawns and heard someone else's idea of what to do.

The debate raged for several minutes, another startling irregularity. But in the end, the exigencies of the situation demanded that Those Who Watch Above In Shadow had to change to match the new reality, or face the very real threat of ceasing.

A moment later, Surtur and Malekith found themselves freezing in space, their minds tugged into the Astral Plane. While both instantly understood what was going on, Surtur, the second willing servant of the Shadows, scowled angrily down at the dark elf who was looking around with unabashed interest. ***“What is this one doing here? He has not earned the right to speak with you, Masters.”*** Surtur growled, his voice very much like molten stones being ground together even on the Astral Plane.

“I rather imagine that since your brute force method has failed, our lords and masters wanted a new perspective. And as my folk have died to help yours in that battle, oh mighty conqueror, I would say I have earned that right,” Malekith answered, sneering up at the taller giant. He knew that Surtur could crush him without even trying back in the real world, but here, on the Astral Plane? He doubted it would be nearly as easy as the giant thought it would be.

“Correct,” came a voice {}, and Malekith held back a shiver for a moment. It wasn't a single voice. It was a multitude, as if a flock of creatures had spoken as one. The tone was utterly alien to him, and it was accompanied by pressure on Malekith's mind and body, forcing him to submit.

Malekith was not one who would submit to anyone. If he had been, he wouldn't be king of Svartalfheim, nor would he have kept his hold on the throne for so long in the world of duplicitous backstabbing, double-dealing, and violence that defined his folk.

Yet Malekith could not stop himself. The power of that chorus was too much. He bowed his head and stayed silent as the Shadow chorus went on.

“The arrival of the humans from Midgard was unexpected. They bring numbers, tactics, weapons, and power that we are struggling to not only fight against but comprehend. You both have seen this in action on the war front, but it is much the same in other realms of combat. You are here to offer your... advice to us.”

For all his anger at Malekith being present, Surtur was no fool. While he ruled his folk through strength, he knew war was just as much about preparation and the mind as power. He was also smart enough not to comment on the note of real worry he heard in the voices of his masters, something he would have thought was an impossibility given their nature.

“We have lost all ability to take the offensive in this war,” he announced bluntly. ***“Even if you could re-create my entire army, my people are not suitable for fighting long-rang***

opponents who can move so quickly.” The king of Muspellheim ground his teeth so hard that he might have hurt himself if he was in his physical body, but the Shadows compelled Surtur to tell the truth and so eventually he went on. ***“I also found myself... outmatched by one of their number when we fought for control of the ground beneath the battlefield. I know not how this happened, but it is important and will remain so for as long as the war continues in Utland.”***

Utland, or Outland, was the ancient name of the main dimension of Asgard. It was historically neutral ground where the

“Even my own folk failed to fight the armored humans at anywhere near an equal level,” Malekith admitted, chiming in without prompting. While he felt no loyalty to the Shadows, Malekith knew he had cast his lot in with them, and it would be best to do all he could to make certain he was on the winning side. And unlike Surtur, Malekith could brownnose with the best of them if he saw the need.

“The odd weapons of the humans seem to be orders of magnitude better than our bows. And while I would wager our magic could do something, they seem well protected in that realm as well. Still, it might be our best bet on the direct combat side of things even so. However, more information about them and your own abilities would help in us giving you suggestions.”

“They have several extremely powerful magic users. Two at least are far beyond yourself, equal in raw power at the very least to Odin if not an unfettered Freya. And unlike him, they have knowledge of our presence and can fight on the Astral Plane just as easily. As for more information...” The Shadows hesitated. But the threat to their existence was such that they bowed to the needs of the moment once more.

Malekith scowled at the idea of a human magic-user being beyond his own skill. But, as the Shadows explained further, he began to understand that reality as well as how they were all in the Shadow’s net and for how long they had been so. Not that it mattered much to dark elf king in the end.

While Malekith was thinking, Surtur had moved on, staring at a map of Asgard and the surrounding dimensions that had appeared as he had requested it. ***“Your idea of bringing the stone giants to form another army is good. I think we should start to build a defensive force in depth here, at the crevice my army had to march around. It is a rocky, immensely difficult terrain. If we can create some kind of weapon against the humans and those magical carpets and—”***

Having finished his own planning, Malekith interjected now. *“I think the humans use some means of magic in their suits that allows them to leap and jump around. The carpets are probably just a means to cross significant distances without using up said magic. Those suits were also hard to get through, at least for blades or arrows.”*

“Yes, those. We need some means of striking at aerial targets better than my people’s spears. And we are not natural archers. Even if you brought back those among my army who tried to train with bows, we would at best be only middling at ranged combat. A few magic users and I could offset that, but at the same time, we would be painting large targets on our backs.”

“He’s right. We need some means of fighting the enemy’s air power. In that vein, I feel further illusions could help, specifically airborne enemies of some kind. Hiding our arrows under multiple illusions to look just like the real ones. Space them out accurately, and the enemy magic users will be forced to use multiple spells on any zone of impact,” Malekith agreed, causing Surtur to look at him in surprise.

However, Surtur’s surprise subsumed into rage as Malekith went on. *“However, do not bring back too many of Surtur’s or my own folk. I would imagine that act comes at a steep cost magically. Instead, use that power to concentrate on moving our troops around as you attempted to in the previous battle. Such a tactic will keep the troops you do bring back alive. Also, of those you do bring back, focus more on my folk, as we are used to using bows.”*

“You insufferable...!” Surtur raged, reaching ethereal hands towards Malekith’s equally astral body, intending to crush the upstart who had openly discarded the worth of Surtur’s people in favor of his own.

Surtur’s rage snuffed out instantly as the Shadows spoke. ***“Stop. We have no more time for petty egos. Malekith is correct.”*** Indeed, listening to the elven king, the Shadows were forced to rethink the ancient decision that had them approach Surtur instead of Malekith in the time before the first Ragnarök. At the time, it had been decided that the endurance of a tether was more important than its intelligence. Now, however, they were seriously beginning to wonder if they’d made an error.

Surtur grumbled still, but nodded. ***“I... agree. But it will take time, days perhaps, to gather the stone giants, force them into working together, and prepare a defense that can stop the Asgardians and the new interlopers.”***

“I think further that we need to no longer think of our own objectives, but rather the enemy’s as well. If we are no longer strong enough to sweep the board, we have to be aware of what targets our enemies will go for,” Malekith warned. *“What is the human leader after? This Harry Potter fellow that you speak. Is he here just to throw his weight against Ragnarök? What does he know? What has he planned with that knowledge?”*

The Shadows hesitated again, then the collective voice subsided, only one speaking up. ***“Too much. Potter knows of our tethers. We have sensed the humans moving towards the great ocean along with another team. Potter himself is headed to Asgard the city.”***

Remembering this caused a shiver to go down the nonexistent spines of Those Who Watch Above In Shadow. This campaign was already going very badly, and that was without

Harry Potter and those magicals with him being able to strike at the Shadows directly. And if there was anyone amongst the Asgardians who knew enough about the Shadows to give Harry Potter some magical means to make that leap, that ability, it would be Odin.

Yet, they couldn't simply kill the Asgardian Sky Father off. Just as the Asgardians were locked into fulfilling their roles in the play that was Ragnarök by the power of prophecy and their Agreement with the Shadows, so too were the Shadows bound to not change the most important events of that calamity without abrogating their agreement. Odin had to live through most of Ragnarök and then die at the fangs of Fenrir. Just as he had the first time.

Just as importantly and more pragmatically, one amongst the Shadows pointed out, Surtur and Malekith also lacked the weapons to do so. After all, Gungnir had been made for Odin. The magic imbued within the spear, nay, the spear itself, could not be wielded against its master.

Except by that master himself of course. There was an odd story there relating to Odin's search for wisdom, but that was unimportant at present.

Perhaps Surtur's blows would harm the Sky Father, but they didn't have weeks to waste as he pummeled Odin's skull. And even asleep, Malekith's strikes, magical or otherwise, would bounce off Odin's flesh much like they would have bounced off Balder if not for the dark elf king's use of mistletoe.

Similarly, they couldn't simply control Odin as they had Freya. Odin's mind was so convoluted and powerful that the Shadows had found any successful attempt to input memories had to be done at the moment he died or was resurrected, when his mind was at its most vulnerable. Anything else would be doomed to fail, and worse, might even overcome the enchantment keeping Odin locked in sleep.

The Shadows briefly described this in their chorus voice, explaining away their inability to kill Odin without giving any hint of their own weaknesses, ending with, ["We have prepared several traps within Asgard. Heimdall is our tool now, as are many of the noncombatants left within the city. They will fight Potter and his people as if they were an invading foe."](#)

That sounded good to Surtur and the Shadows, but Malekith was in no way willing to put all his trust into any one type of solution. *"I realize why you cannot kill Odin, but that is not the only thing we can do about him. We could remove him from play in other ways. Use him as a hostage perhaps, move him to Muspellheim?"*

Surtur had been snarling to himself before that idea was spoken, forced to acknowledge for the first time in hundreds of years that his favored spear had been stolen from Odin and could not be used on its true master. the idea of having Odin under his power was a compelling image. ***"Once more, I am forced to acknowledge Malekith's crooked way of looking at things. If you cannot kill Odin where he is, then remove him elsewhere. Keep him out of play until the time is right."***

The Shadows were of two minds at this point. They had very reluctantly asked these two tools for their opinions but had not anticipated getting any actual ideas out of them. How could such limited beings match the intellect of their collective wisdom? But this was proof that the creatures who served them were better at rolling with the punches than the Shadows themselves were, an annoying and worrisome thought to be sure. Both Surtur and Malekith had surprised the Shadows up to this point. But the Shadows could not follow this bit of advice. It was, *“Impossible. We cannot teleport Odin from out of Asgard the city.”*

“Do you know what the problem is specifically? Is it something he wears, something within the walls of Valhalla, or built into the city’s defenses?” Malekith persisted.

“We believe it could be all of the above. We do not know for certain. We do not know enough about Asgardian-style magic, only how to get around most of it. But teleportation is one of the few powers we have that the Asgardians can block given enough time to prepare.” the Shadows answered reluctantly, pushed into it by one of their number.

This last bit was also concerning to the majority. Under the pressure of the Earthborn humans’ arrival and the sudden reversal of their fortunes, Those Who Watch Above In Shadow were seemingly becoming more disparate, more individualistic, even during this single conversation. They were decidedly not used to this, and it bothered more than a few of them. But at the moment, they couldn’t do anything about it. They had to win this war. For war it now was. Not a play, not an act they controlled, but an honest war.

“Then the problem can be overcome. Teleport a force to Asgard, get them through the outer defenses. Then have them keep moving Odin around until he can be teleported away,” Malekith said simply.

“I can send word back to my realm and prepare a place to house the prisoner,” Surtur acknowledged. ***“For now, I would like to contact the clan chieftains of the various Stone Jotun tribes you have compelled to join us. I need to know what I have to work with and how long it will take them to arrive at the chosen battlefield.”***

“And I will put myself in charge of retrieving Odin,” Malekith said, tickled by the idea. *“Further, we should not allow the Asgardians to become too complacent. I’m certain we can find some means of discomfiting them.”*

The Shadows thought, then reluctantly agreed with their tools’ suggestions. Surtur soon found himself speaking mind to mind with several hundred jotun chieftains. The Shadows would teleport them to the meeting point tribe by tribe over the next few hours.

Meanwhile, Malekith found himself back in his physical body, where he looked down at his severed hand, grimacing at a sudden itching sensation that spread quickly. “GAH....” A second later, blood began to pour out of the wound he had only just cauterized. This was accompanied by immense pain, causing the dark elf to scream and fall to his knees in agony.

The itching sensation increased, and he continued to scream, before a new hand burst out of the stump, regenerated like a tail on a lizard.

Before Malekith could really process this, he was teleported away, appearing on the Bifrost Bridge. After recovering from the dual surprises of his hand being returned to him and sudden change of location, Malekith stared across the bridge to Asgard the city. At the far end of the expanse he could just make out Heimdall, the All-Seeing One, standing in what the dark elf king assumed was his usual guard stance.

The ever-watchful guardian of Asgard was blind to Malekith's presence, staring up at the sky. That sight alone caused Malekith to bellow in laughter as he waltzed forward, smirking as his feet clattered on the glowing stone of the bridge. "My, my, I never would have imagined that even the eyes of you, Heimdall, could become so clouded. Then again, the eyes are connected to the mind. And, as it has been proven, that is where the Shadows are strongest. Magnificent!"

Behind him, several stone giants appeared, then more and more. The appearance of his reinforcements was accompanied by the telepathic whisper, *"Potter and Hela are on their way. As we don't know how long it will take you to move Odin, we will be expanding our trap here to hold them out of the city completely for a time."*

Malekith nodded, watching as the stone giants spread out. Two of them who, like their fellows, had roared and screamed at their abrupt arrival in primitive bellicosity, now subsided, standing still while their fellows moved off, creating ambush points. Staring up at them, Malekith saw no glimmer of even the tiny intelligence such creatures usually could call upon in their squinty eyes. Their wills had been utterly crushed by the Shadows. As he moved forward, a number followed him across the bridge.

Yet despite his insouciance, Malekith slowed as they reached the end of the Bifrost Bridge, wary of Heimdall somehow becoming aware of him. Few among the Asgardians would be deadlier to Malekith than this bastard, especially in close combat.

But whatever the Shadows were showing Heimdall in his mind, he seemed fully engrossed in the illusion. And seeing it up close, Malekith's amusement at the idea faded a bit. That kind of mental domination was horrifying to contemplate. *Still, they are on my side, at least. And for now, my being free to act and think seems to serve them better than any attempt to turn me into a mindless puppet. And truly, do I care what happens later if I can see the Asgardians suffer now?*

With that, Malekith was behind Heimdall's post and heading deeper into Asgard. Entering the city, he looked around with a smile, seeing the Asgardian's noncombatants moving about their business, seemingly blind to his presence and those of his large helpers. *Amazing. Truly amazing.* He couldn't stop himself and occasionally paused, stopping to grab a piece of

fruit or meat from the few stalls, feeling up several ladies as he passed them, chortling to himself.

But as he spotted Valhalla, the massive –Malekith thought of it as overcompensating– hall of Odin, Malekith concentrated on what was most important. He had to follow the Shadow’s orders and thus ensure his own survival. He stared at the large golden doors, then gestured at the stone giants, falling back as he looked at the area with his magical senses on high alert. “Open it.”

He nodded sagely as several spell wards activated upon the jotun’s approach. The giants screamed, their rocky skin freezing into actual stone before shattering. “Ah. Of course this is going to be more difficult than I could have hoped for. Ah well. To work.”

Malekith leaned forward, summoning a large staff of unicorn horn and iron into his hand from his personal room back in Svartalfheim, and bent to examine the floor. Behind him, two more stone jotun appeared, looked around, and roared before falling silent, their wills instantly crushed by the Shadows and now simply awaiting orders.

OOOOOO

Dani sighed, staring at the wreckage of the farmstead ahead of them. “Well, that didn’t take very long.”

“Is that good or bad?” Betsy quipped, grimacing in her helmet as another attempt from the Shadows to bore into their minds came crashing down. Closing her eyes and clenching her fists, Psylocke thrust them up into the air shouting, “Bugger off!” as she used a telekinetic telepathic bolt of power to dissipate the latest assault.

The attack, only partially dissipated, hammered down, creeping, crawling, invading their minds. Thankfully, Betsy had the home-field advantage. Much like Clea, who was still circling above the ruined farmhouse on the team’s magic carpet alongside the Human Torch, she eventually beat the attack back. Charles and Emma, even from so far away, were also still able to help as well.

Still, the attack had come closer than any previous, and Dani, who was psychically aware if not truly telepathic, shook her head to clear away whatever visions had begun to creep into her sight. She narrowed her eyes as she nodded her thanks to the British telepath. “That’s going to get really annoying.”

“Just imagine it from my perspective luv. These probes are coming like bloody clockwork. They attack every few minutes, entirely predictable, but I can’t figure out what kind of attack it will be, probing or full-bore, until it lands.”

“I’m honestly more interested in how the bastards can concentrate on so many different fronts at once,” Dani muttered, shaking her head. “I know that would be hard even for Harry

and Charles, in their respective fields, especially at such a long range. I mean heck, where are they even situated?"

Right as she finished speaking, Dani held up a hand for silence. She reached up to her helmet, pressing a small button right underneath her jaw. With a mechanical whir, her helmet's faceplate receded, exposing her nose and allowing her to sniff the air for a moment. Taking a deep breath with every step, she moved around the remains of the farmstead, grimacing a bit at the remains of an ox and a few goats. Nearby, the humans they'd found lay where they'd fallen, slain but not eaten.

That could be a good sign, couldn't it? Dani wondered to herself, pulling her helmet back in place, shaking her head as the wave of dizziness from Jörmungandr's miasma struck her a bit. *Fenrir's not so far gone to his hunger that he's willing to eat humans yet. And we know that the whole 'eating Tyr's hand' thing hasn't happened, right? But... ah shit, does Fenrir know that? Ugh, fucking Shadows and their goddamn cheating mental control.*

Kneeling down, Dani called forth her mutant powers, taking in the remnants of the emotions still hanging in the area.

"The brat was certainly here, but I cannot tell which direction he has gone. He somehow covered his scent while here and the scent of death here is so strong it is drowning it out. Tis like following someone through a slaughterhouse after they have erased their own scent." Garm grunted as he joined her, his massive nose pressing down onto her shoulder. Unlike the humans of Asgard and Midgard, the giant wolf didn't seem bothered by the poison Jörmungandr had released into the atmosphere. "What of you?"

"Wait for it..." Dani answered, dragging out the last word as she felt her power reach a crescendo. A second later the images coalesced, reconstructing the scene of destruction as it happened in a mirage that covered the area.

Fenrir stood amid the field. At his feet lay several of the animals. Behind the wolf and to the side were two men, one younger and one far older, who raced forward. The younger boy shot an arrow at Fenrir, but the arrow bounced off his thick fur. Fenrir snorted tossed the mule he'd been chewing on over the old farmer's head where it crashed with body-crushing weight onto the young boy.

The old farmer's cry of fury turned into one of anguish, but he didn't have any time to mourn. A single one of Fenrir's back paws lashed back, swiping into the farmer and sending him flying back in a welter of blood.

The memory of the farmer flew straight through Betsy, who shrieked and leaped aside, thoroughly spooked. "Bloody hell, Dani! Some warning would've been nice! Especially given the whole bloody fucking Shadows illusion bonanza we've been dealing with on and off."

The image of the farmer lay dead on the ground, overlapping its actual physical self, as Dani ignored the other woman's grumblings. Instead, she watched intently as Fenrir turned back to his meal, chewing on the goat until almost nothing was left, not even bone save for its hooves. After he was done, he spat a few bone shards out and turned so Dani was able to finally look into his eyes, wincing at what she saw there. Those eyes were not the eyes of an animal. Those were the eyes of a tortured being, one slowly being driven mad by something they could not control.

"Dammit," She whispered, "This is not going to be good."

Garm snorted, stalking his way around the image of Fenrir. A Fenrir that was far larger than he had been, now standing at least as tall as a two-story house at his shoulders and far longer than that, nose to tail. The younger wolf was still lean and well-formed, but the youth had come into what should be his full size.

"He has grown," the ancient wolf growled, sounding almost approving as he stared in the direction Fenrir had left. "His paws and body now match. And yet, his eyes...those eyes worry me."

"Worry you?" Dani grunted, shaking her head as she let her powers fade "They fucking terrify me." They almost reminded Dani of a time she'd gone with a veterinarian she was helping out to pick up a mistreated animal, a ferret whose owner had fled the state ahead of the law and, as a result, had been left behind in its cage for days on end with no one to look after him.

That ferret had the same look. A maddened by starvation look. Even after we'd given the poor thing food, we'd ended up having to put it down. It just kept biting everything. It was just too far gone; its mind couldn't comprehend anything but being hungry.

With a shake of her head, Dani banished that unpleasant memory to concentrate on her present mission. It wasn't going to happen this time. She wouldn't let it.

Dani waved down Clea, grateful that Harry had allowed them to take one of the mid-sized carpets with them. If they were going to have any chance of catching up to Fenrir, it would have to be on the carpet with Clea protecting and directing them. "Garm, I'll be relying on you to pick up the trail, I can't see enough from the air to make out anything but the most obvious signs."

There was, after all, more to tracking than just scent. There were pawprints, broken branches, torn bark and many smaller signs. Things that even an animal with the intelligence of Fenrir would not cover up all the time. And there was also the possibility that Fenrir's supposed bath – or whatever trick he had used to mask his scent – would fade.

Garm grunted in affirmative and took off through the woods. While the others hovered above him, he weaved this way along the direction Fenrir had left the farm. Not thirty minutes

later, he huffed, gesturing with a paw that the others should come down to speak with him for a moment. "I've found the trail. It's almost arrogantly straight, heading directly southeast. He hasn't deviated or changed direction for the last few sniffs."

'Is that the same direction as Asgard the city?' Betsy asked, looking over at Dani for confirmation. She was grateful for the temporary lull in the probing attacks sent her way. The Shadows hadn't sent anything her way since they'd left the farm.

Garm, who'd spent most if not all of his existence in Niflheim after bonding with his lady Hela, had no way of knowing the answer to that question. It took asking Emma, who was currently in charge of backing up Betsy, to contact Freya and Steven before the group of wolf-hunters could figure that one out. Eventually, through a series of questions and a compass, the hunters deduced that Fenrir wasn't heading towards Asgard at all. Instead, he was slowly circling back, heading towards the crags and hills that would eventually be interrupted by the gorge where Balder had first made a small stand against Surtur's invasion.

"Huh, so maybe Fenrir still has some self-control left," Dani mused. "That's not an area with many farms or anything else, right?"

"Queen Freya says there's not," Emma answered, having pulled the words from Dani's mind even as she said that to facilitate faster communication. *"There are a few stubborn folk still out there to the far northwest, but not many. The Fire Jotun army's invasion might have led to the south, but even so, everyone was aware of it as fast as the scryers could carry the news."*

"That's good then. Maybe we have a chance at this not becoming a fight," Betsy mused. As the words left her mouth, Betsy felt Clea, Dani, and even Johnny staring at her incredulously from where he flew alongside the carpet. Under the pressure of their combined gazes, Betsy sighed. "Yeah, I didn't believe it even as I bloody said it. Still, remember we can always break off, yeah? Fenrir can't fly. So whatever happens, we should be able to keep the initiative, right?"

"...Just stop, Bets. Please?" Dani pleaded. "You've already tempted fate enough as it is." After Betsy ruefully agreed to that, Dani went on. "And ask Emma what's been going on with the main battle. The not knowing is killing me."

The news they received sobered the small group quickly, and they sped on, following Garm through the woods in silence.

OOOOOOO

Nikolai's death shocked Harry when he first learned of it. While he hadn't been as close to the former Winter Soldier candidate as he was to Piotr, Harry had known him long enough to know he'd been a good man, who rarely balked at whatever manner of combat that came his way. He'd been a good man to have a drink with too, and he'd been truly devoted to his sister and friends.

He was also the first Custodes that Harry had lost under his command, and that hit him just as much as the loss of a friend. Harry had lost troops before, but this hit him harder.

Harry and Hela continued to fly towards Asgard in silence for a time before Harry decided to bite the bullet rather than let the unspoken idea fester any longer. Reaching out to Jean through her link with him, he made sure everyone connected could hear him speak before clearing his throat. Hopefully this would be able to put the idea to rest. *Sometimes false hope is worse than none, after all.*

Looking over at Hela, he asked hesitantly, “Do you think there’s any chance of bringing Nikolai back to life? I mean, the Einherjar is composed of the spirits of dead warriors brought to Valhalla and given a second life, so...?”

“Hmm... I am afraid not,” Hela answered after thinking about it. “After all, Nikolai was not an Asatru. He was also not an atheist. Indeed, I know for a fact Nikolai was staunchly Russian Orthodox. As such, his soul is not fair game. I’m sorry, my love. If Odin had been awake and watching for moments like this, we could’ve perhaps gotten in touch with Nikolai’s spirit before it passed on to the Christian version of Heaven. But even that is doubtful.”

Harry scowled, fists clenching, but nodded in understanding. “Understood, Hela. It bothers me, of course, but this is war. In war, people die. Good or bad, doesn’t matter. Thinking otherwise would be foolish.” Harry’s eyes hardened. “Although that doesn’t mean that I’m not going to hunt this Malekith down and crucify him.”

Hela snorted. “And do you expect me of all people to stop you?”

“No, although, if I do go haring off after him, I do expect you to pull me up short if, in doing so, I begin to ignore something more important,” Harry answered seriously.

Hela became serious as well, reaching out and touching Harry’s shoulder as the two of them flew side by side towards the distant Bifrost Ridge and Asgard the city behind it. “That, I will do with vigor. Just remember that young Nikolai died as a warrior. What else can one ask for?”

“To die of old age, surrounded by your grandchildren, having expired of a heart attack after a vigorous night’s romp,” Harry shot back, trying to use humor to push through the pain of losing one of his own.

As they finally started to leave the flatter (in comparison only) portions of Asgard behind and begin flying over a mountain range, Harry asked Jean to pass on any other news going on elsewhere. She answered back with a summary that boiled down to the telepathic attacks were ongoing, but the main battle had died down. *“Steve and Balder are regrouping our forces and the remaining Einherjar. The Einherjar want to march back to camp instead of being ferried on the magic carpets, a sign of their anti-magic feelings, I suppose. On a somewhat bittersweet*

note, Freya and Amelia feel that they are close to finding an antidote to Jörmungandr's miasma... thanks in part to the poison they collected from Nikolai's wound."

It wasn't enough that Nikolai had been stabbed in the throat so hard that the strike had nearly decapitated him, The blade that had done the deed had been soaked in poison as well. That poison had fought Una and Amelia's every effort as they'd tried desperately to save the Russian Custodes despite the massive trauma to his neck, but in the end they'd failed. Nikolai had been brain dead within seconds of his arrival, his heart had stopped soon after.

"Well... I think perhaps Nikolai might have approved of that," Harry murmured. "How many other men did we lose?"

"Six Heavy Gunners and ten regular ODMs were ported back to us here at base camp. According to Scott, two more Heavies and four other ODMs died before they could be as well. Did you know that Steve left Scott in charge of the ODMs as he headed down to the ground?" Jean's telepathic voice sounded somewhat bemused yet also proud for her old team leader and friend. *"He really stepped up to the plate."*

"He can surprise you like that, yeah," Harry answered, also proud of how far the young man had come since they'd first met. Harry would still name Steve or Amara his second in command any day, but Scott was easily the next best, and had more experience than Amara too. *"What about the rest of the Custodes?"*

"Banshee took an arrow to the knee, so no more adventuring for him for awhile, and Nightcrawler picked up a few cuts and bruises. Piotr is... well, pissed is a nice way of putting it. But Amara's watching him. We've sent also sent Polaris out with a shipment of ammo for the ODMs. So far, it seems like we've got everything under control here."

"Good. But tell Steven to keep you informed of any changes on the magical side of things. I don't want any of us blindsided. Now that the Shadows have lost the main battle, there's a definite chance they'll shift their attention to Team Fishermen, Hela and myself. They might even lash out at Dani and her team if they figure out what they're up to."

"Then you better watch out, mister. I've got your back on the Astral Plane side of things, but you have to watch out for all the magic and physical stuff. Ororo's a big girl, and she's got a full team watching out for her. If that wasn't enough for me, I can also follow them just like I can you two. But in the real world, you and Hela are on your own," Jean warned, her concern and love coming through their link easily. Emma added in her own admonishments, although she was busy helping Charles beat off the latest attempt from the Shadows to get through to the minds of the Einherjar at the front.

"True, Firebird, but we are mighty!" Hela shot back with a laugh.

That was a message Harry was fully in favor of.

“Yes, we are mighty. And while our strategy might have sidelined Hela and me before this, I am very much looking forward to proving that point to the Shadows as soon as possible. Not as directly as I might wish, but blasting through whatever traps they have around Asgard the city and freeing Odin should get the point across just as well.”

Harry let the conversation fade with that bloodthirsty thought as Jean turned her attention more fully to Ororo and protecting Team Fisherman. As she did, Emma directed her own energies to adding Thor to her protective psychic umbrella.

Enraged beyond all reason, the now fully empowered Thunder God had taken off towards the where Muspellheim was closest to Asgard immediately after the main battle had ended. Emma was trying to get through to him, but that was an uphill battle, as Thor was noticeably paranoid about voices in his head. Worse, the Shadows had already begun to use illusions to cloud his senses. Now Thor and his chariot were just wondering around, straining Emma’s telepathic powers to keep him safe, let alone steer him in the right direction. *“Maybe we can send Strange out there once you or Clea get back, but we need to wait until then or else leave the base camp without magical protection. And Freya and the others have already proven to be far too susceptible to the Shadows’ brand of magic, be it on the Astral Plane or in the real world.”*

Frowning, Harry and Hela flew on, racing across the realm of Asgard as they pondered what to do about the wayward Thunderer.

OOOOOO

Unfortunately for Balder, Steve, and their troops, their day’s work wasn’t quite done.

The Shadows had decided that Malekith had been right: they needed to annoy and pressure their enemies any way they could. This meant, among other things, pulling spells from the Asgardian’s own playbook, particularly one that would have made Hela, Freya, and even Odin enraged beyond all reason if they were at the front lines to witness it; the awakening of the dead into draugr.

As Emma reported to Harry about Thor, Steve was talking with Scott and Balder. The two humans were trying to convince the Asgardian prince about the existence of the Shadows, the overarching enemy orchestrating events here in Asgard. Balder wasn’t convinced by their arguments, and neither were many of the other Asgardians. Each and every one believed that Odin and Heimdall, at the very least, could never be so influenced, so dominated by some unknown foe.

However, not all were deaf to the warnings. Sif and Tyr remembered their own concerns regarding some outside force trying to bar their path to and from Yggdrasil’s roots and worked on their fellows to see the human’s position. Thor’s bellowing about there being a true enemy out there, as the Thunderer had flown away after somehow changing from the blonde Balder had always known him to be into a flamehair, was also undeniable.

Ever so slowly, Steve could tell Balder and the others were beginning to waver when there came a series of loud, unsettling groans. These sudden groans were soon followed by bellows of fury. Most of that bellow was wordless anger given voice, but within the rising uproar could be heard certain distinct grievances such as, "What foul magic is this!" and "How dare someone in this land of Lord Odin use magic so vile!" and "How dare the jotun defile our honored dead!"

Twisting around, Balder's eyes widened in horror as he watched the numerous corpses of the dead rising from where they had fallen all across the blasted, scarred battlefield. No attempt to bury the dead had yet begun, nor had there been any attempt to collect their broken weaponry. Many of those weapons were riven, shattered, the magic upon them like their armor, the spells cast on the armor and blades of the defenders of Asgard overcome during the battle. However, in the hands of these empowered undead, even broken weapons would still be deadly.

This was proven true quickly enough as one of the karls, having been moving among a group of the dead searching for a friend, found himself stabbed through the stomach. Cracked and half broken, the blade punched through the man's armor, the enchantment of which had likewise faded during the battle. And alas, un-enchanted armor could not hope to stand against a draugr's unnatural strength. The karl had time to screech, and then the undead was upon him, leaping forward to tear chunks of his face-off and stuff the raw flesh down its now ravenous maw.

Elsewhere, other warriors moving amongst the dead were likewise quickly overcome. This included several of the Orbital Drop Marines who had been helping the wounded or simply mingling in with the Asgardians. Those without any specific duties had been, by and large, just trying to get an idea of what the overall battle had been like before they had arrived.

Caught unaware and in close combat, the ODM armor was no defense against the newly risen draugr. The undead latched onto the Earthborn humans even as they fired wildly into the reanimated bodies, trying to put them down again. While some draugr lost arms or bits of their torsos, the armored troopers were quickly being overcome. First one man went down, his heart torn from his chest so quickly and brutally the emergency evacuation runic array didn't have time to react. Another screamed as his faceplate was crushed under a blow from another walking corpse, only to disappear in a rush of magic. Luckily, he ended up back at the base camp, saved by his emergency teleportation array.

Fortunately, there were those still in the combat zone who could fight the draugr. Laura and Logan had been more or less sidelined up to this point, having been dumped outside the original battle in order to try and cut off Surtur's retreat in conjunction with the Huntress, Skadi. That hadn't panned out, but all three had returned to the camp at this point and now the claw-wielding duo howled in unison before launching themselves into the fray. Behind them, Skadi too attacked, a long spear in hand, her eyes grim.

The combined response from the father-daughter pair and the Goddess of the Hunt was so fierce to the undead that it lured several more draugr to them, allowing a few of the scattered ODMs to retreat in relative peace. Banshee and Cannonball also launched themselves into the air, although both soon found themselves stymied. Banshee's sonic booms could barely stagger the undead, and caused them no real harm, while those still living and draugr were too intermingled for Cannonball to help much in the main battle.

A second later, Cannonball bolted away at a barked command from Cyclops through their radio, racing off to make sure the still-distant Heavy Gunners weren't also being attacked. As Nightcrawler took in the rising chaos and bamfed, Colossus and Captain America charged forward, one to help a group of struggling Einherjar, the other to put his shield between the draugr and a few of the ODM troopers who had been using first aid on the locals.

Several ODM troopers were teleported away, either by Nightcrawler or their emergency arrays, until their comrades still up on the magic carpets could start giving the remainder cover fire. The company captain and sergeants, only one of whom had been lost so far, quickly began to organize a withdrawal upwards, while their fellows tried to give those on the ground time to regroup from the sudden surprise attack with the aide of Falcon.

Cyclops bellowed something, the words lost at first in the tumult of the renewed battle. His eye beams flashed out in a circle pattern following the twisting of his neck, blasting dozens of undead back, some of them even coming apart under the sheer kinetic impact. It was only a few seconds later when his words could finally reach those around him. "Fall back! All troops fall back to the north. Oh Damns, get into the air and stay on the heavy carpets. Heavy Gunners, remain at long range or get there. Lay down suppressive fire! We can't fight these things in close combat!"

"We're nearly out of ammo, sir!" Sean called back through the coms.

"Keep firing, damn it, we can't let the Asgardians fight their own dead on their own!"

Meanwhile, the Asgardians fought back desperately. But the Einherjar were utterly exhausted before the first axe was swung. And while the Asgardians still had strength to spare, they were scattered across the battlefield, with only a few close enough to support one another. Men began to die in droves as the battlefield was once more rocked by shouts and screams of the dead and dying.

Balder stared, his teeth grit, as he unsheathed his blade from his side and sliced one draugr in half before kicking the creature's head off its shoulders. Stepping back, his eyes literally blazed with power and fury as The Bright One held his blade above his head. The sword began to glow so brightly that none could look upon it directly, even the undead. A second later, he brought it down as if trying to cleave the ground in twain. "**I say nay!**" he roared. "The light will not allow this affront!"

While the Norse version of the undead couldn't simply be banished by light magic like so many stories on Earth said they should be, that didn't mean they weren't weakened by it. As a new sun appeared in the heart of the new battlefield, the Earthmen and locals alike felt themselves become empowered once more by Balder's aura. That same light shone harshly upon the undead, debilitating them even as they stirred in their thousands.

On the heels of this second dawn Polaris entered the fray, zooming down out of the higher atmosphere. "Hello boys, I come bearing gifts!" From behind her a long line of collapsible stretchers and boxes of ammunition followed. The supplies dropped down one to each of the large flying carpets, where the sergeants quickly began to organize the troopers. One ODM would open the backpack of another, loading in their ammunition, before switching.

As this was going on, Cyclops and the others used their communication gear to try and organize a defense on the ground. Piotr, Steve, Logan and Laura began to gather the beleaguered defenders to them. Cyclops directed his own blasts and Cannonball into areas of the battlefield where no living soul remained in order to cut down on the number of undead that could assail the still reassembling defenders.

Polaris was also using her powers of magnetism to great effect. Unlike against the jotun, she was able to haul draugr up into the air in various areas of the battlefield thanks to the armor they all wore. The draugr then came under attack from the ODMs.

Nightcrawler, a close-quarters combatant, was had more luck teleporting wounded or those Asgardians still fighting towards their fellows to safety than directly facing the draugr. Yet this didn't mean his efforts were any less important, as soon, the defenders had formed squares across the battlefield, holding off the undead.

The efforts to regain some measure of control on the battlefield was helped along by the fact that the curse to revive the undead didn't work on the dead who had been dismembered or simply mutilated. Considering that when a jotun struck a human whose defensive enchantments had faded out, said jotun usually didn't leave their victim in one piece, this cut down on the number of dead that could be forced into battle again.

On the other hand, what bolstered those limited numbers was the fact that there were dead Asgardians becoming draugr as well. Normally, even dead Asgardians would have had enough magical resistance to not be effected by any type of necromantic magic. But this was not normal times. Their bodies weakened by the poison of Jörmungandr, dozens of dead Asgardians arose as super-strong draugr, able to battle their former comrades on an even footing. An example of this was an unlucky Heavy Gunner, his jets damaged, who was swiftly grabbed and torn in half before he could be teleported to safety.

To make matters even worse for the combined army, Steven Strange was in no position to help break the new enchantment bringing the dead of the battlefield to life because the base

camp was also under attack. Illusions arose everywhere, pressing hard, covering the rise of the draugr. In this, the Shadows were already following Malekith's advice.

But unlike Doctor Druid, who was still exhausted from the battle, Doctor Strange and Freya were awake and had prepared for a renewed magical assault. Better yet, Freya's position as one of the Asgardian choosers of the slain gave her some power over the souls of those who died while in Asgard, regardless of race.

While this didn't give Freya direct power over these particular dead, since most of them were night elves - who most certainly did not fall under her purview - it did give her some insight into how to stop that reanimation process. As the battle slowly started to turn against the Einherjar, Freya had finally learned enough. Creating a spell on the fly, Freya's voice was almost a croon as she spoke in the tongue of the gods. "%Quiet, quiet, ye dead and gone. Fall back to earth, at peace, no one's pawn.%"

The undead within Freya's range collapsed where they shambled all around the camp. As they did, Coyote and Uzume, on guard against attempts by any night elves who'd take the chaos as an opportunity to assault the camp once more, helped to make certain those put back at peace were able to remain that way with judiciously placed head shots.

With Steven's assistance, once he'd wiped out a new wave of illusions, Freya slowly expanded her anti-undead enchantment until it reached the distant battlefield. It was a bittersweet victory however. While the latest affront had been beaten back, once more both the humans and their local allies had lost people, several hundred in the Einherjar's case, with ten dead and more than a dozen wounded among the ODM troopers.

It was also a terrifying reminder of just how far the Shadows and their allies were willing to go to maintain their hold over the Asgardians. But it also convinced Balder and the other remaining skeptics that the humans were indeed telling the truth about there being a hidden enemy at work behind this war. No jotun would have had the ability to use their inherent magic in such a way as to turn the honored dead into draugr. These Shadows were real, and they were deadly.

OOOOOO

The news of Nikolai's death was sobering to those among Team Fishermen. The loss stung those who had known the young Russian, but Ororo most of all, the conversation she'd been having with Xian in her native Vietnamese stumbling to a halt as she looked off into the distance as Jean relayed the information. Of those present, she and Ben Grimm were the most experienced, true, but while Ororo had dealt with death before, she'd never lost someone who was, technically, under her command.

The Custodes had been battered. Many of them had been close to death several times in previous missions and battles. But never had they lost someone before now, and it stung, a

bitter and boiling pain that even at that very moment began to bubble up low inside her stomach, and Ororo wasn't the only one to feel it.

Regardless, Asgard, or as Ororo had come to learn, Utland (outland), as it had once been called before the Asgardians conquered it, was huge, a landmass around the size of continental Asia back on Earth. With the fire jotun's avenue of invasion coming from the west then heading north before coming back southeast, by the time they saw the ocean, the team had had time to compartmentalize their feelings of loss as best they could, replacing it for the moment with grim determination.

Much like the Assault Force and the Hunters, as Ororo and the rest of Team Fishermen tread ever closer to their destination, they were attacked by the Shadows off and on. This actually helped force Ororo to focus on something beyond her existential grief while she and the Scarlet Witch dealt with the magical assaults.

Meanwhile, Emma Steed and Xian Co Manh dealt with the telepathic side of things. This they were forced to do mostly on their own, given the strength of the ongoing onslaught on the main camp. The Shadows seemed to be determined to break the more powerful telepaths keeping them from controlling Freya, the Asgardians, and the Einherjar, and were in comparison giving Team Fisherman only a pittance of attention.

But despite seeming to be only a supplementary target, the two still struggled. Both ladies lacked the raw power of the three main telepaths and, unlike Betsy, they didn't have experience or subtlety to fall back on to cover their weaknesses.

Xian grimaced as she pushed her telepathic powers out for what seemed the hundredth time, blocking another unseen assault on the team. That one had been a light probe, but there had been... something like anticipation behind it? *I'm gaining some experience in feeling out emotions behind mental attacks. That's... annoying.* Xian did not like the fact that she was getting so used to combat on this level that she could pick out such things, no matter how helpful.

"Are you all right, Miss?"

Turning on her broom, Xian nodded to Bruce Banner who had spoken, his tone polite. Despite his quite civilized tone, and generally more put together appearance, the Vietnamese-born girl still sometimes had trouble forgetting to not address him as the Hulk. *Should that be Mister Hulk now, I wonder?*

Several of the first newsreels she had ever watched in America, after Charles had finished helping her through her mental trauma, had been about the Hulk's rampage in Canada, with excerpts of previous rampages. And yet, even though he was almost the same size as the original Hulk, the Doctor Banner next to her now looked completely different from that monstrosity. For one, he was dressed in a decent if somewhat loose combat suit. He also had a

pair of small glasses perched on his nose that looked almost scholarly. Most jarring from the Hulk she'd first seen, though, was the concerned, somewhat bemused look on his green face as he looked back at her. *Maybe it is the green? I just can't get past it.*

Xian was also jealous that Banner, like The Thing and Thunderbird, could go without masks. None of the others could and unlike Ororo, who was using a magically crafted mask, Xian was stuck wearing a fully mechanical helmet. Speaking through the helmet's intercom was really annoying. *But then again, all you need to see the point behind our masks is to look down. My God, it looks like this place has been struck by a plague.*

Shaking her head at that thought, Xian nodded her head to Dr. Banner, her voice, muffled through her mask. "I'm doing alright, I suppose. A bit depressed by the view. Also, the mental aspect of this war is wearing on me more than I could wish, even if the attacks are not as harsh as they were."

"She's right. They're not full on attacking us as consistently since we left the others behind. They're probing, waiting, and then probing again. It is bloody worrisome, like waiting for the other shoe to drop with all the gravity of a mountain," Emma Steed chipped in, her sharp, upper-class British brogue sounding almost jarring after the more lilting accent of Xian. The richly-born Brit shook her equally mask-clad head, looking down at her waist where an expanded pouch sat. "I somewhat disdained the idea of these Pepper Up potions that Potter gave us when I first heard about them, yet I do believe that we will need them in time."

"Truly," Xian grunted as another mental probe lanced in from nowhere straight towards Thundra and The Thing.

Another, sent Storm's way, sloughed away. Much like when others had tried to probe her mind back on Earth, simple telepathic tricks like that were unable to penetrate the lightning-like cloud that surrounded the exterior of her mentalscape at all times. This had proven to be a defense against the Shadows' power far more complete than even Harry's invisibility cloak. This was good news, as Xian barely managed to intercept the probe sent at The Thing in time, her mental-self appearing on the Astral Plane and slicing through the battering ram of darkness right before it could hit him. Emma, a second after, joined the defense with her chains.

As the attack was beaten off, Xian continued speaking. "I understand why the telepaths were all broken up, but we are dealing with an enemy whose strength and psychic reach are astronomical in scale. And yet, here we are, out here on a limb that is getting more precarious the further we leave Charles and the others behind."

Since this was the first time Xian had been out in the field, the Vietnamese-born telepath still had trouble remembering to use codenames. Of course, this wasn't particularly important on this mission.

Hearing this, Storm slowed her own flight, letting the various carpets and brooms catch up to her. She snorted as Thundra raced past before doing a barrel roll to come back even with them. "Can you not reach out to Charles and Emma, Xian? Or Jean? She seemed to be able to pass on the information about Nikolai easily enough. I don't want to jog their elbows, but if you're feeling like you're exposed..."

"Oh we can, it's just that when we're on the Astral Plane the both of us can feel our own scuffles with the Shadow pricks as well as the main battle going on back with the others. It's like being stuck in a violent pond and feeling a massive hurricane still in the distance by the movement of the air around you," Emma answered for the two women. "Xavier and Snow White are being hard-pressed, and that's with Phoenix helping them **and** Psylocke. The great trio of overpowered fucks are also having to cover more territory that we are at the same time: the base camp and the main battle zone."

Ororo frowned. She had noticed that Ms. Steed never called her fellow Emma by surname or callsign, instead always choosing something derogatory. She didn't understand why, but apparently it had something to do with a time they had met long before she, Harry, and Jean had dealt with Selene Gallio's mad scheme in London. *That, and I think she just gets some sort of pleasure from speaking like a 'lowborn commoner' at times.*

"Harry and Hela are also nearly at the city of Asgard, Ororo. And if there's anything that's going to demand an apocalyptic response, it's Harry trying to free Odin from this Odinsleep thing that the Shadows have forced on Odin," Jean sent, connecting both to Storm via their mental connection, and the two telepaths with her own telepathic power once more. *"We need to be ready to protect them both, since Harry's typical mental defenses don't work against the TWATS."*

"Be safe, Hela! And keep our man safe too," Ororo practically demanded, scowling under her mask as she heard the report. This elicited a twice-removed response of amusement from both the goddess and man in question, sheer emotional responses that contained no words.

Jean drew Ororo and the other women's attention back with a warning. *"Just remember that Charles, Emma, and I won't be able to help all the time. We only have so much concentration to spread around, and the Shadows aren't letting up on the pressure here. Even so, I'll take whatever shit they throw at us until Harry and Hela run into serious opposition in Asgard, or the Shadows somehow make their attacks on our troops even worse. They just tried to use their magic to bring the dead back to life again and we don't know how many other surprises like that they have left. Thankfully, it seems that their mental attacks are, while powerful, limited in scope if they attempt to target so many minds at once."*

Then the redhead's tone turned almost jocular, the tone of a woman who was once more annoyed to be relegated to a backup role. *"Honestly though, why the hell would you name the capital city the same thing as the dimension itself? Would it have killed Odin to call his*

big city something different? You don't see Americans calling any of our cities America do you? God of Wisdom by ass..."

Of course, Jean really wasn't too upset about being sidelined again. Her gripping now had more to do with the fact that she wanted to try and keep everyone's spirits up in any way she could. The recent draugr assault had shaken everyone. And no one wanted to think too long about Nikolai yet.

"Considering the hatred most fans have for the Cowboys, who label themselves America's Team, I could see that as a major bone of contention," Xian murmured, closing her eyes and leaning back on the carpet, thankful for the reprieve and the moment of humor, no matter how forced. During her time in America, she'd strangely become a major American football fan and liked to sprinkle in little tidbits of information about the sport in everyday conversation. It helped that speaking about such topics also took her mind off the frankly depressing view below.

Xian was not a city girl by any means. Originally from a tiny village in the Vietnamese countryside, she had lived in the vibrant, green, and admittedly dangerous jungles of her home nation for much of her life. That simple living had been all she'd known before the local warlord, her uncle, had decided to try and sweep up her village and force her and her neighbors to work on his drug plantations. Xian had managed to escape from that life by the skin of her teeth, only to then run into the pirates who had taken advantage of her until that mistreatment had eventually led to her being taken under Charles' care. But she had never lost her enjoyment of green growing things.

To see such massive forests, so different than those that she was used to, but so diseased... it was honestly scary. To see whole swaths of cleared farmland dead and brown, to see entire grass plains withered, to see mountains once bursting with vegetation all brown and dying? It was all so depressing in the extreme.

"You'll have to talk to my nephew Evan if you wish to talk about sports," Storm returned, shaking her head. While she would never understand the almost obsession others had with sports, she did not object as Ben and James struck up a conversation with Xian about their favorites, which eventually drew in Thundra and everyone else.

The next few instances that the Shadows struck out at Team Fishermen, Jean was there, mentally, instead of only the two relatively less powerful telepaths. Illusions appeared, trying to grab at their minds, but could not reach them on the Astral Plane before fading away. Fears tried to batter against their resolve, only to be burned away by Jean before they could latch on.

On the Astral Plane, Jean and her powers resembled nothing so much as unending walls of flame and fire roaring into eternity. Those flames didn't stretch the distances between Team Fishermen and the base camp, however, physically or psychically. Rather they almost teleported the distance between to encompass the minds of the team. The walls of living fire,

that they would by and large never be cognizant of, flashed over them, but never into them, dissipating the Shadows' attacks but leaving them entirely whole.

To both Emma Steed and Xian, though, feeling the Phoenix's power was still humbling. During their recuperation under his direction, both young women had gotten used to the idea that Charles was far and away more powerful than they were. It was simple fact. And though she would never admitted it, Emma had at least accepted the fact that Frost was just as equally beyond her. She didn't like it, but she understood.

That being said, for some reason, the imagery that came to both women's minds when interacting with the telepathic plane while Jean was on the assault was far more powerful, far more in your face. Charles' telepathic presence, and attacks, were subtle, his power barely visible beyond his nigh-godlike projection on the Astral Plane. Emma was composed of endless daggers of diamond force, the glistening blades popping or blocking incoming assaults depending on her desires. Phoenix's astral fire wasn't any more effective than either, but the feeling of it, of being defended or near her counterstrikes, was just... different.

Regardless, Jean was able to protect them until they saw the first glimmer of water on the horizon. Twice more she had to intervene after that, as they put more of their focus into preparing to hunt and roust Jörmungandr from the ocean's depths. Meanwhile, Ororo and Wanda had to deal with five separate magical attacks in rapid succession. The Shadows were clearly now aware of what Team Fishermen might be doing, but after being rebuffed so often, they must've turned their attention back to the main battle, as the various assaults lessened just as quickly.

After all, seeking out Jörmungandr was one thing. Finding him was another, especially when the Shadows could simply order him not to surface. And so long as he remained hidden, one of the Shadow's tethers on the Yggdrasil collection of pocket dimensions would remain in place.

Abandoning their efforts against the Earthers hunting Jörmungandr would also allow the Shadows to concentrate on breaking the main trio of telepaths. By this point, all three had been forced to rest occasionally before coming back to the battle. Which was not a battle really. From their perspective, it was more trying to fight the tide endlessly.

Having had time to regroup from the shock of Surtur's army being practically wiped out and their own attacks constantly beaten back, the Shadows had finally managed to recognize the fact that there were only three truly powerful telepaths among the humans from Earth and that this was a weakness that could be exploited. If they could take the trio of telepaths out, a majority of the humans and Asgardians would once more be open to their complete mental suggestion. Between trying to attack Potter or the other immensely powerful magic-user or three measly telepaths, attacking on the Astral Plane front seemed both easier and ultimately more profitable.

However, even with their newfound wariness of continuing to pour out their strength like water, the Shadows had still miscalculated. When Harry and Storm had first thought about the need to rouse Jörmungandr from the depths, they'd gone to Reed Richards for some scientific help. And as her team moved away from the shore, Ororo reached into the large magic pouch at her side.

Rogue noticed what Storm was doing and cocked an eyebrow. "Whatever are you up to over there, Miss Storm?" The southern belle asked, rolling on her broom so that she was upside down and eye level with her old mentor. Like Thundra, who had yet to stop swooping around, Rogue had discovered she loved flying. And while she felt Nikolai's death like any other loss of a team member, she hadn't known him nearly enough for his murder to impact her fun too much.

Ororo took a brief moment to smile underneath her mask at Rogue's antics before replying. "While I could perhaps use my control of the weather to attempt to freeze the water, it would be a very long process given the nature of the Asgardian ocean. However, Reed was accommodating enough to have come up with this instead. He called it a Heat-based Iso-thermic Reaction Device, which apparently will heat the ocean something fierce. As in, the entire ocean is going to start **boiling** as we spread these around."

So saying, Ororo pulled out a device from her pouch and held it up. The little machine was about the size of her fist and looked as if it was supposed to release something from a series of apertures spread around its sphere-like body. Storm then indicated the bag at her waist. "I have several hundred of these stuffed into this expanded bag. I will be dropping them at intervals as we fly over the ocean. Reed was certain that enough of these will force anything living to try and leave the heated waters if they can."

The others all nodded, and soon, Team Fishermen began to fly over the shoreline. Or rather, the new shoreline. Thanks to Jörmungandr, the water level had risen by quite a margin, wiping out the land and now lapping at the peaks of what had been tall hills but now only looked like a series of islands. Ororo wasn't surprised to see the top of a few yellow-colored trees submerged in a little inlet to one side between a series of rocky outcroppings. The rest of the team was more struck by the amount of flotsam also gently bobbing in the waves, the remains of a village of some considerable size completely washed away.

And there were bodies. More than a dozen corpses bobbed here and there in the water, their features bloated and green. Many were clearly once elderly, with only a few younglings. Only one or two of the floating dead were male and of fighting age. It was obvious the destroyed settlement had been small and unimportant. They had simply been wiped out as part of Jörmungandr's role in Ragnarök, not through any intrinsic importance.

"Well, at least that Freya lady was telling the truth about what was going on here," Ben muttered. "I'm still not happy with the idea that we split our forces like this, but if the water keeps on traveling inland and wiping out more settlements like this..."

“Even without the loss of human life in this world, we’d have to go after Jörmungandr anyway to stop the toxic assault he has launched against the local ecology. And when you get down to it, while turning back the jotun army is a tactical goal, killing this great serpent creature is a strategic one, given we know it is a tether for these ephemeral Shadow creatures,” Bruce opined.

Ben snorted good-naturedly, rolling his eyes at the green doctor’s highbrow way of speaking. At first, Ben had been kind of leery about bringing along the new, reformed Hulk, remembering the three times they had fought in the past. But Bruce at least acted contrite about it all, and the Thing could begrudgingly agree that at least one of those fights had been more due to his own belligerent self rather than the Hulk looking for trouble. “I get that. I just still think splitting our party like this is just askin’ for trouble.”

Nikolai’s fate hovered in the air for a moment, unspoken, but then Thunderbird interjected, dispelling the momentary depression. “Enough. We are here, and the die are being cast as we speak. So while Storm is doing her thing, the rest of us should get as high into the air as possible so we can see Jörmungandr when he surfaces.”

“And it’s not as if we don’t have our own role to play in reeling in this eel.” The older Proudstar brother nodded his head over to the rocky member of the Fantastic Four, patting his bag. Harry and the rest of the magicals had prepared for this fight, or as much as they could, and the bags each of the larger members of the strike team carried on their carpets held a series of weapons made just for this occasion.

Of course, actually seeing Jörmungandr when it's on the surface isn't exactly a problem. Being able to strike when he is and at anything even remotely vulnerable will be the issue. Regardless of their preparations, Thunderbird wasn't all that sanguine about their chances of hurting the great serpent. Keep it on the surface, maybe drag it up onto the shore, possibly. But the damn thing is just too big!

Then again, maybe the weapons Harry and the others supplied will do some good. And we only really need to hold the bastard here until Thor can arrive. Hopefully the literal God of Thunder, with all his equipment returned, will be up to killing the fucker. Without dying, of course, as he's supposed to in the Ragnarök saga.

Shaking his head, Thunderbird took a moment to glance around, feeling the wind in his long hair fluttering the feathers woven into the braided locks. The Apache warrior had never been one for the ocean, more at home in the desert or plains, but now, out past the flotsam, he could admit it was one hell of a view despite the slightly greenish tinge to the air. As he took it all in, Thunderbird’s face firmed up. *Look at me, getting all worried about something that’s not even our job. All we need to do is our part; keep him occupied, keep him from interfering with the miasma he’s supposed to be emitting, and keep him from retreating until Harry and the others who can kill him arrive.*

As the rest of the team joined him, Thunderbird and the other carpet-bound members ascended higher into the air over the ocean. Storm skimmed along its surface, counting down under her breath to fifty before dropping the first fist-sized HBITR device into the ocean. She did so while keeping to a zigzag pattern, spreading the following devices out as much as possible, and hoping that Reed had been able to build enough of them to create a significant enough change in the ocean.

Thankfully, the Asgardian ocean isn't nearly as large as the oceans of Earth, but even so... Storm knew this fact because at one point during their initial mission against Jörmungandr, she'd flown so high that she'd been able to see where the seawater began to drop off the edge of the faux-dimensional plane of Asgard into the abyss below. She didn't know where the water went and how it got back up into the ocean so that it didn't dry up, but Ororo supposed that between Yggdrasil and the monstrous amount of background magic the dimension had, there were more than a few impossible ways for it to happen.

And now you are thinking about magic water because you do not wish to think about the battle to come, Ororo. Or the fact that neither Jean nor Emma have contacted you for the last ten minutes. Calm down and focus on the here and now.

The oxygen bombs, or whatever they were that Reed had created, started to go off behind her. After a few dozen, Storm started to see steam coming up from the ocean around where she had dropped the things. After fifty more, the steam had spread significantly. After a hundred more, the water was noticeably starting to boil. After a hundred and fifty more, Storm was flying through walls of steam and perspiring so much that she had to wipe her mask's goggles with one hand before rising higher into the air.

A hundred more HBITRs dropped and finally, it happened. Jörmungandr shot to the surface, bellowing in rage. The pain of the boiling water had finally overridden the Shadows' nigh unbreakable order for him to remain hidden.

Steam noticeably rose from his scales and Jörmungandr's lips were vaguely reddish as he hissed, each booming word joined by a cascade of water sluicing off yards of scales. "What is this! What foul magic has been worked upon my ocean? I will eat you, whoever you are. You will spend eternity being digested, screaming in agony in the bowels of my stomachHHHH!!!!!"

However, the serpent's words quickly ended in a shriek because as he rose out of the ocean, his eyes instinctively opened. This had the unfortunate result of the steam from Storm's assault on the ocean immediately hitting his eyes. Howling in pain, Jörmungandr clenched his eyes shut tight once more while thrashing like a mad beast, twisting to douse his head in the ocean once more. This did little to sooth his agony, as the waters were hotter still than the steam that had nearly blinded him.

"Go!" Thunderbird barked while Storm banked higher up into the air, joining Rogue and the other broomstick-users. As she rose, Thundra and Rogue dove. Like Thunderbird, the Hulk,

and the Thing, both women were armed with a Juggernaut-metal weapon. In Rogue's case, it was a massive club, a Japanese kanabo of all things, the kind routinely wielded by oni/ogres.

The first attack slammed down with all her the speed and strength Rogue behind it. But for all her power, her blunt weapon simply let out a loud "CKRAAAANG!!!!" sounds like it had hit metal-sheathed stone. Rogue clenched her teeth as the force reverberated through her arms into her chest. "Jesus, Mary, and Joseeeeeeepeeeee!!!"

Twisting around on a dime, Jörmungandr bit down where he heard the ineffective attacker's Rogue's voice came come from, forcing her the fool to dodge and interrupting her the meaningless words as the pain of his eyes had the serpent's a moment ago it had been spouting.

Thundra took her turn next, and she went for a kind of protrusion to one side of Jörmungandr's head, thinking it might be an ear. She held a mace in one hand that looked more like a long-shafted knight's mace than anything else, although it was wound around one of her arms by a chain. Swinging her weapon into the protrusion, Thundra grimaced as the impact nearly tore it out of her grip as she raced past. "Blast it!"

"Why do I think we should've looked into lances or something? Oh wait, we did," Rogue quipped as the two women circled above the beast's head. Thundra laughed, then the two of them hastily ascended as Jörmungandr lunged up at them, more of its unending bulk coming out of the bubbling ocean as it did so.

This was what the trio on the carpets had been waiting for. Armed with massive harpoons, their edges jagged with spikes, the trio raced forward, their harpoons couched like the lances Rogue had joked about a second ago. Aiming at the last instant at junctures between the creature's large scales, the harpoons stabbed into the massive serpent as Hulk roared, "Hulk smash!"

Even as the harpoon dug into the serpent's sinuous neck, the Thing shook his head. "Yeah, that doesn't quite have the same timbre to it as it did before."

But that didn't matter. Where Rogue's Kanabo and Thundra's mace had failed to do anything even when striking at supposed weak points, the harpoons had stabbed deep under some of the outer layer of scales, catching there. Now, giant ropes tied to the harpoons began rolling out of the magical bags the trio of super-strong combatants had on their carpets as they raced away, holding the bags in place as they did, aided by the sticking charm on the bags.

High above them, Storm began to gesture with both hands around her, gathering wind to her, eyes going white as she used her mutant powers to cool the air considerably, creating an even bigger difference between the heat of the ocean and the surface. Even so, the steam began to dissipate as the heated waters slowly drained away, disappearing over the sides of the strange, plate-like dimension of Asgard.

By the time Jörmungandr could see, the heavy trio on the magic carpet were zooming away, heading back to the shoreline. Jörmungandr saw the trio of attackers go and saw the ropes in the water but hadn't actually felt the harpoons sinking into his extremely thick hide. Still, he knew the carpet flyers were part of what had happened to his ocean, and he breathed in, releasing a jet of water that was so powerful it would have carved through a mountain face. "Die!"

But Storm blocked it, an equally wide wall of wind moving between them. The water struck that wind and was flung everywhere in droplets, creating hundreds of tiny rainbows, although the droplets were still moving fast enough to sting. "If you wish to kill me, beast, you will have to do better than that! You will not find us as easy prey as those children and old people you drowned with your mad writhing!"

Jörmungandr snarled, but then, Rogue, Thundra and Wanda struck. Hex bolts flashed out, crashing into Jörmungandr's eyes and around them, blinding him, although even the direct hits Wanda's magical bolts didn't do any damage. They caused pain certainly, but they didn't explode the massive orbs in his head, which had been Wanda's intention.

And once more, Thundra's strike did nothing beyond nearly catapulting her off her broom. She grabbed at it wildly as she spiraled down, her mace now flailing alongside her thanks to the chain holding it to her arm. "That did not work, blast it!"

On the other hand, Rogue's attack smashed into the beast's nostril, causing him to squeal in pain. Instead of going after Thundra, it twisted around biting at her, But Rogue used one hand and her hips to fling herself down and then up once more above the creature. "Eyoop, close but no cigar, big an' scaly," Rogue drawled.

Before the serpent could try and bite her again, Storm struck. Wanda followed up for a second too, before pulling back to deal with a series of illusions as the Shadows decided to get involved. A magical assault crashed down, trying to obscure their minds, trying to lead their senses astray, and this time the Shadows had taken a page from Malekith's experience. The sound-based illusions were contrived to make it seem as if one member of the team was hearing another in danger or falling off her broom or the flying carpets.

But the Scarlet Witch was ready, and was able to block, cancel or simply tear away these veils. And she had rested up to this point under Ororo's protective envelope. "I've got this, Miss Munroe! You keep up the pressure."

Since this was the agreed-upon move Storm did so while Rogue continued to dash around on her broomstick. Once more, her club flashed out to smash into the serpent's snout as she flew past like a buzzing fly around his head. And between the two of them, the African woman and the southern belle kept Jörmungandr busy, snapping at one or the other, howling death threats at them until the heavy portion of Team Fishermen was back ashore, and the Shadow's dual assault was beaten off for now.

But it was only for now. The Shadows had pulled back from the main theatre of the telepathic war for now and were now concentrating on this point of conflict. Jörmungandr was the most important battlefield at present. That would change when Harry and Hela reached Asgard the city, but even then, most of their traps there didn't require much in the way of the Shadows' attention.

However, much of their concentration settled on Thor instead of the humans. The Shadows kept the Thunderer stumbling from one illusion and mental attack to another, forcing Emma to devote almost her entire power to defending him at range.

The Shadows knew Jörmungandr was far tougher and stronger than even Níðhöggr. He wasn't as good at attacking, but his scales were many layers thick, and it would take something tremendous to get through them. And he was also simply huge. Few indeed could even make them notice his attacks, much less do Jörmungandr real harm. And eventually whatever the humans did to the seas would fade, and he could then just... dive away, leaving them to stew impotently in the air above.

"You know, I didn't honestly have a good appreciation for this creature's size until now. Are these ropes really going to work?" Bruce muttered, staring out at sea. From where they stood on the peaks of rather tall hills, the giant serpent was thrashing and splashing around so much as to throw up huge waves, each of them the size of a twenty-story tower, while trying to bite or bring his claws to bear on the flying gnats all around him.

"They were made by Strange and enchanted by him, so if they do break, at least we'll know who to blame," Thunderbird said, looking up as Thundra joined them. With Thunderbird joining the Hulk on one rope and the Thing and his girlfriend on the other, they put some distance between them and began to tug on the ropes. "Ready? Heave!"

Jörmungandr twitched in surprise as he felt himself being pulled sideways, so much so that he was pulled further out of the water and then crashed side-on onto the surface. Again the tug came, and the massive serpent found himself pulled sideways through the water until he twisted his massive body around, his sinuous form thrashing, his claws flailing as he stared towards where the tugging was coming from.

But again, Storm and the Scarlet Witch interrupted him, lightning blasts coming down. He twisted his head this way and that, so their attacks on his eye missed, but Rogue sailed closer to his head, and a second later, her Kanabo took him right in the eye. "I don't think so, sugar! When ya gots an eel on the hook, you don't be letting it go!"

"Foolish bitch! I am no eel. I am the Ouroboros, the eternal serpent! I will devour the world, but first I will eat you!" Jörmungandr howled, feeling no pain from the strike but struck by the indignity of this strategy. And the fact it was working was worse. He jerked his body back, and the four super-strong members onshore found themselves being dragged back for a few moments before they set their feet again and heaved.

For several moments, the two forces fought, the four super-strong members heaving as they pulled Jörmungandr closer and closer to shore. With Roque, Wanda and Storm working to distract Jörmungandr every chance they got, and the other two telepaths on defensive duty, nearly an hour went by, then another, and finally a third before Jörmungandr crashed into the shore, and the two teams of strongmen spread out, still heaving.

All the while that she had been using lightning against Jörmungandr, Storm had been preparing a cold front above them, watching as the water had cooled considerably, Asgard's normal temperature reasserting itself. This kind of dual-attention was something that would have been impossible for most, but to Ororo, this was almost easy, at least at first. It became harder as the weather front built up just above them, but now, as Jörmungandr's head and a large portion of his body was pulled onto the shore, she allowed the front to drop, adding more of her power to it.

The temperature across the breadth of Asgard rose dramatically as she pulled all of the cold air away from it, messing up the weather of the dimension something fierce, which Storm acknowledged ruefully. She'd have to do something about that at some point as she doubted Thor would have the subtlety necessary to properly fix it without causing further problems. But for now, Storm had quite literally a bigger serpent to fry.

Or in this case, freeze. Because that was what the ocean proceeded to do. What had been boiling water four hours ago began to chill rapidly, so rapidly that the ocean began to freeze. It started to form into large icebergs, the ice spreading both around and down further into the ocean. *First, we make certain he can't flee. Then we kill him. If we can. But at least we have already stopped him from sending further poison into the air, for now.*

That had stopped quickly, as if it was something that Jörmungandr couldn't do while in combat. Although Ororo had noticed some kind of green gas escaping from the massive serpent's mouth occasionally.

Jörmungandr's upper body twisted back along his length, staring at the ocean behind it as it felt its body starts to be encased in ice hundreds of meters thick. Growling in fury, he twitched forward, one claw coming out of the ocean to slam down, causing a tremendous tremor in the ground as the claw dug in. Then, before more of his body could be encased in ice, Jörmungandr pulled more of his vast bulk out of the ocean, freeing his other forepaw, the ice cracking and sloughing away from it as he did.

By the time she was done, Storm was gasping and now slowly flew over until she landed behind Xian on her broomstick. The younger woman blushed a bit as she felt the older woman's chest pressing into her as Storm reached into the pouch that Xian carried, pulling out one of the Pepper-Up potions and downing it quickly. "Keep your distance Xian. Concentrate on keeping away and on any telepathic attacks."

"The Shadows are concentrating on keeping Thor away. I can feel that fight through the Astral Plane, way closer than the ongoing assault on the main camp. I think they are succeeding, but I can't reach Charles or the others. They are too busy to bother replying," Xian reported.

"Understood. Still, if the Shadows aren't getting involved here, then that's enough for now." Feeling the rush of energy, Storm flipped herself sideways and fell off the broom, using her powers to fly downwards towards where the serpent was now squaring off with the four stronger members of Team Fishermen, slowly stretching itself higher and higher into the air, ignoring the fact most of its body was encased in ice now.

"Hell! I cannot believe that worked!" The Thing whooped, dropping the massive rope and thrusting his hands up into the air before letting them drop. A second later, he pulled out a large hammer from the same bag out of which the rope had been spooling for so long.

"Congratulations," the serpent hissed, rearing up so high that his head disappeared into the clouds above. To Ben, Jörmungandr's huge frame looked like a series of Baxter Buildings all rolled into one, made to move and coated in meters of steel-like scale plate, tall as a mountain and so thick as to make any tree he had seen bar Yggdrasil itself look small. "But now that you have me on shore, how exactly do you think that is going to change the outcome of this battle, little creatures?"

"You never know until you try!" Thunderbird shouted as he charged upward on his magic carpet. *May the diyi of fire, water, moon and sun be with us now.*

"Hey Banner, listen to this. This is how a warcry is done. It's Clobbering Time!" The Thing shouted, racing forward and leaping up, his hammer flying towards the serpent's side. It caused the serpent to grunt and a few of his scales to buckle, but that was all.

Still, that didn't matter to the Thing. "The bigger they are, the harder ya gotta swing till they fall!" He caroled as he dodged a forepaw, the backswing of his hammer catching one of Jörmungandr's nails. The blow landed right where the nail began and snapped it clean off, causing Jörmungandr some real pain, something he did not deal with well, screaming and lashing out at the Thing even as he dodged away.

"I want a snake-skin suit!" Thundra bellowed as she followed her lover's tactics in striking at the beast's paws.

Doctor Banner simply shook his head, pulled out his own sword, which looked more like a massive cleaver, and sighed while Roque and Storm attacked from above, a massive lightning strike the serpent's head back down towards the others for a moment followed by hex bolts and a series of magical spells splashing over his . "Yes, yes, Hulk smash, raaah. This really is no place for an intellectual."

So saying, he too bounded forward, leaping up into the air to bring his cleaver around towards the snout of the giant serpent as he dove down toward Thundra and the Thing. They might not be able to beat the massive serpent, but they didn't have to. All they could do was survive until Thor arrived.

OOOOOOO

As Team Hunter continued on, Garm's nose began to twitch, and his lips peeled back from his fangs. Above them, Dani, watching him closely, shouted down a question, with Clea letting the magic carpet drop down to just above Garm's head. "What's wrong, Garm?"

"GRRRh. The pup has stopped any attempt to cover his tracks. His scent is almost overpowering, like following an entire pack. One that has recently shed, and one which every member has begun to rub off their scents on everything they've passed."

"Is that bad?" Betsy questioned. "I'm a Londoner. If you wanted someone who knows anything about hunting, you would've done better to bring along my brother."

"It is simply unusual. But perhaps not," Garm murmured. "Fenrir is young for all his size, and he could easily simply be this arrogant to not care if anyone can pick up his trail."

Dani thought about it for a few moments, then shrugged, and with Garm leading the way once more, they started off again.

As the carpet rose into the air, Betsy looked over at the Cheyenne girl. her face, such as was visible through her visor, was twisted into a grimace. "Hey, um, you, you want to talk about Nikolai? I, I gotta admit that hurts, you know?"

"It does. But I really don't want to talk about it right now. Just take it as a given that I'm going to feel fucking horrible and want to drink my weight in liqueur after all this. Hopefully, lots of different types. The expensive, fruity kind with the kick of an elephant hidden under the good taste," Dani shot back.

Snorting in agreement, Betsy fell silent, the two of them staring out over the forest.

Several hours of quick stalking later, he paused, looking around them. "Something is off..." he growled.

Instantly Dani rolled off the magic carpet, using her hover boots to slow her descent, landing to one side of Garm while Sigyn's Gift turned into a bow in her hand. *Magic armor versus modern gauss rifle or old fashioned but magical bow, choices choices.*

"What is it?" Betsy asked, grimacing as she fought through another assault by the Shadows. She was beginning to get tired, and she wondered if her Pepper-up potions and home-field advantage would be enough to pull through. *If the telepath corps get tired and the Shadows don't...*

"I feel it too. We are being watched," Clea announced, hopping off the magic carpet and hovering in the air under her own power. She was normally quiet, letting her actions speak for her, oddly uncomfortable talking about nonmagical topics with people besides Wanda and Stephen. "And I mean beyond the mental assault you are dealing with."

"Spread out then," Johnny suggested. "and send the magic carpet higher into the air. We can't bunch up in the air, and we don't want your ride harmed."

Clea understood that was simply a good idea and did so. The carpet flew straight up until it was a pinprick in the air above them and then Clea flew down under her own power, joining Johnny in circling above the area. Meanwhile, Betsy turned, watching behind the group, forming a pentagram almost as they looked out into the area around them.

After that, they waited. And waited some more. Finally, after what felt like nearly half an hour, the group started to untense and Garm moved around the area, sniffing the air, but he couldn't detect anything new. "The smell of unwashed young wolf blinds my nose to everything else, blast it!"

Still feeling like they were being watched, Dani decided to have the group move forward as they were for a bit, with Betsy and Dani joining Garm on the ground. Clea moved higher into the air, while Johnny moved around them in a lazy circle.

It was well they had been wary for within minutes of moving on, the attack began.

Illusions struck first, the Shadows shifting their full attention to the small group. Each illusion was small, a separate spell, and thus easy to renew when they were canceled. This would have been a mentally tiring and not very workable, but for the Shadows, who could not tire mentally, this allowed them to put continual pressure on the enemy magic users, forcing them to focus on dispelling waves of illusions less they be caught out by them.

Clea instantly began to lash out, dissipating illusion after illusion as Betsy snarled, dealing with the mental attacks crashing down simultaneously, ducking under and hiding herself behind a bush just in case.

Some of the small illusions still impacted the group, and these were not the types to just mess with their senses. Rather, the Shadows used their illusions to cover the main attack. They had learned quite a bit from their discussions with Surtur and Malekith, and this small warzone seemed the perfect place to try out what they had learned.

All around the area, groups of dark elves and jotun attacked. The stone jotun charged forward silently, their approach completely covered by illusion until Dani's mutant power allowed her to sense their minds under the illusions. "Ambush close!"

"And far!" Johnny shouted while hales of arrows flashed up towards him. They burned to ash well before they struck, and his return blasts seared segments of the forest away.

Dani and Betsy also had to deal with arrows coming out of nowhere all around them while Garm roared and crashed into the jotun. He kept them from closing while Johnny's sent attacks down towards a few of the stone jotun as the illusions covering them failed under Clea's magic.

Meanwhile, Dani and Betsy fired back, the British girl armed with a custodes model plasma rifle, and Dani switching to her gauss rifle. Both modern weapons, while not very useful for jotun, were more than capable of slaying dark elves, and the battle seemed even for a moment.

Then night elf magic-users began to become involved. Still hidden under the illusions that kept on being rebuilt even as Clea shattered them and away from the close combat, more than a dozen dark elf magic users lashed out toward Clea and Johnny, the two biggest threats.

Another group, four working in concert, attempting to turn Garm against the humans using a spell similar to the one Malekith had used on Nikolai. The spell struck, and for a second, it was as if Garm heard the voice of his mistress telling him, "Attack the humans, my wolf, free us from this chain of forced obeisance!"

But while the dark elves had the same spells their king had used, they lacked his skill with them. Nikolai had been tricked by a simple, wordless shriek of pain from the one person in the world he loved the most. He had been completely thrown off, horrified by that simple message and open for Malekith's attack.

In contrast Garm was both a wolf and knew his mistress. He would know her smell even with the smell of Fenrir still covering the area, and there was no smell accompanying that shout. Moreover, those words were ones that Hela would never use.

So he simply guffawed in pure amusement, ignoring the attack and tearing the side of a jotun out with his fangs. "Fools, you think to fool me with such a pathetic display?"

The same could not be said of the other magical attacks. While Clea was extremely powerful and experienced in direct magical conflict so that she could even fight Steven on an even footing, indirect combat was not her forte. Her timing to recognize the magical pattern of illusion-type spells was slower than Ororo, Steven or Harry's. The Shadows bore down on her, continually bamboozling her with small illusions and dealing with them took her attention away from backing up the Human Torch, let alone flinging her own attack spells around.

This kept her from noticing the attack spells following the first few waves of arrows up toward the youngest member of the FF. While magically infused or poisoned arrows simply burned up before they could get close to him, the spells weren't aimed directly at him but towards his general vicinity, creating a bubble around him.

The bubble followed Johnny as he zoomed around, holding in his shouts for assistance. Unlike the Custodes, Johnny hadn't been given a radio, not believing he needed one since the

FF didn't have one as part of their usual combat gear. So he could not call for help and needed to get through this on his own.

Swiftly, Johnny had to cancel his fire. His feet hit the bubble's outer edge a second later, which burst. The next moment he had turned on his flame powers once more.

But it was too late for Fenrir was indeed there having been hiding his vast bulk under a nearby snowbank, watching. . The Shadows had been using a spell to enhance his scent all along since Garm had picked up the trail so that Hela's faithful guard had not been able to pick up the difference.

Now Fenrir burst out of the snow to one side of the ground-based portion of the battle. As he did, he smashed several dark elves aside, showing that he certainly was not working with the Shadow servants, before leaping high into the air, so fast and high that Johnny could not dodge.

Realizing this almost instantly, Johnny lashed out with a burst of fire, pouring his energy into the assault. "FLAME ON, doggie!"

Any normal animal, even one Fenrir's size, would have been incinerated by that attack, larger and hotter than any of the previous attacks Johnny had used. But Fenrir was not a normal beast. He was so magically enhanced that nearly no weapon, spell, attack, or anything else could get through his natural defenses. The flames seared his mouth dry and burnt his tongue and gums, causing him to yowl in pain, but the impact of the spell did not redirect his leap or force him to twitch away.

"ARGGH!!!" Johnny screamed as the monstrous wolf caught him in his jaws, intent on chopping Johnny in half. But luckily, while Johnny wasn't wearing a radio, he was wearing an emergency teleport array.

Even as his stomach, side and back were pierced by Fenrir's fangs and the crushing jaw began to close on ruined flesh and snapped bones, Johnny was teleported out of the giant wolf's mouth. He arrived safely back at the emergency base camp, where Stephen Strange was pulled from his work on the magical defenses to help stabilize him until Harry or Ororo could return. Johnny would live, but he was out of this campaign for now.

The arrival of the great wolf caused a massive shift in the battlefield. Clea attempted to attack him magically, and her spells, more raw magical blasts than the constructed spells Harry and Ororo favored, crashed into Fenrir. This made Fenrir snarl in fury and mess up his landing, but that was all. Fenrir was almost as magically resistant as Odin or some of the other more powerful Asgardians.

A second later, Clea was forced to shield Betsy from a group of dark elves who had snuck behind her under another Shadow illusion. "Curse it!" the other-dimensional half-

demoness snarled before focusing all her attention on defending the area from further Shadow bastard illusions.

Fenrir snarled in annoyance as he rolled where he landed, but after a single baleful glance up at the magic-user flying above, Fenrir turned his attention to those on the ground, charging towards them with a howl made of equal measures of fury and hunger.

Seeing him coming, Garm hurled himself towards the younger wolf, going fang to fang with the other canine, the two of them tumbling over and over, clawing and biting. But as powerfully built and experienced as Garm was, Fenrir was at least three times his size.

This quickly began to tell, and after rolling over one another several times, Fenrir was able to gain the advantage. He tossed the older wolf to the side, tearing a chunk out of his side as he did, and blood began dripping from his maw as he made to finish the other wolf off quickly.

Then Betsy was there lashing out with a kick as Dani also attacked. An arrow flashed towards Fenrir's eye even as she shouted out, "Fenrir, stop! Don't you recognize Garm! Don't you recognize me? We met before. Hela vouched for me, your sister. She vouched for me! We're not your enemies!"

"I do not know you, little creature! And even if I did, I would not care. I hunger, and I must feed!" Fenrir nearly shrieked in his madness. With that, he charged towards Betsy and Garm snarled, pushed back to his feet and moved to meet Fenrir once more.

Above them, Clea howled and lashed out with spell after spell. But given the new tactics of the Shadows, she was completely sidelined even as the telepathic assault had let up, allowing Betsy to concentrate on the physical world for now.

For her part, Dani had retreated for a second, and with her hands outstretched tried to use her empathic psi powers. First she just tried to reach Fenrir, but that didn't work and she was forced to cut out the attempt as several Dark elves appeared from the woods around her.

Meanwhile, Betsy's plasma rifle proved unable to harm Fenrir, although this didn't stop her from firing at Fenrir as fast as possible, trying to aim for his head. *Gonna have to get close to the fucker and use my TK blades to do any real damage, blast it.* "I thought we were supposed to bleedin' retreat instead of fighting the giant plonker!?"

"No plan survives contact with the enemy," Dani shot back, ducking under a sword blow and stabbing the dark elf who had attacked her with Sigyn's Gift, which had shifted into a dagger. "And watch out. There are still a few dark elves around."

The two brawling wolves had also crushed several dark elves. They had tried to get close, only to realize that Fenrir had no care for their lives and had gotten run over like a series of pygmies meeting two elephants.

Besides the choice of targeting Johnny first, the Shadows had given Fenrir his head, letting him attack however he wished. Given how feral he was, the hunger-madness and false memories was enough to goad him into violence, and they could not afford the attention needed to direct his actions.

As Dani and Betsy dealt with more of the dark elves, Clea too turned her attention to them, breaking through the continually renewing haze of illusions. But this proved too slow, as Garm found himself once more hurled through the air to crash into a nearby boulder, shattering the boulder.

With Garm down, Fenrir turned to the nearest human, and Dani was forced to dodge away from a back paw and then under a paw slashing at her. Dani's quick reflexes and hover boots allowed her to keep dodging for some time, as she concentrated once more on reaching Fenrir with her empathic powers.

This time, instead of reaching out to him directly, She tried to pull out a memory and project it around them. "Damn it Fenrir, will you listen! Look this is your sister when she came to get me! I was pulled into Utland from Earth by a dream-weaving, and, and for some reason, my spirit landed near you! We have a connection, you and I!"

But even as the psionic image appeared, Fenrir barreled through it, acting more like a boar than a wolf for a moment. "You think on this field of illusions I could not smell the true from the false! Little morsel just for that I will enjoy gulping you down!"

Despite his words, the wolf had felt something as he saw the image of his sister, Hela, affection perhaps? But thanks to the implanted memories and, more powerfully, the madness-creating hunger, the feelings could not remain in his head. Images alone would not work to get through to him.

Dodging wildly, Dani kicked up off a boulder using her hover boots to blast close, trying to get above and behind the giant wolf, grabbing at one of his ears. "Will you listen, blast it!"

"Grrr!" Fenrir twitched his head aside, taking his head out of her range while continual impacts, like stinging gnats, registered at last. Sending the oddly maneuverable human away with a forepaw, Fenrir whirled around and, in a move that showed he was no mere beast, smashed a nearby tree down before hurling it in the direction of the human with the enchanted fire staff.

At the same time, Fenrir's tail came up to smack into Dani as she tried to close again. As big as he was, the fluffy appendage still struck with all the force of a blow, hurling Dani sideways through the air.

Dani quickly righted herself, but found Fenrir launching himself towards her, fangs gaping. With no time to do anything else Dani dodged at the last instant, trying to think of how to make her psionic visions more real to the wolf without touching him. *FUCK, I'm a human,*

what do I know about smell!? Maybe a different memory? Once from when he attacked me the first till!!!”

Her thoughts broke off as she had to dodge backward again, before ducking under a paw strike only for Fenrir to lunge in, jaws gaping and no chance to dodge.

Then Garm barreled into the larger wolf's shoulder, redirecting his bite so that it clamped down just on Dani's arm. The armor she wore buckled, and Dani cried out as the limb underneath broke.

As the Cheyenne woman crashed to earth, Fenrir turned, snarling and clawing at Garm, who did the same. He tried to get in underneath the younger wolf, biting at the soft, comparatively unprotected underbelly. There, his brute strength finally allowed him to claw through Fenrir's fur, and blood began to spill from shallow cuts.

Even as his own blood dribbled down into the snow, Fenrir was undaunted, and his own fangs eventually closed down on Garm his shoulder and neck. Shifting his legs back, Fenrir pulled the older wolf off his feet, then shook his head from side to side.

“AAAARRGH!!!” Garm howled in agony.

A second later Fenrir twisted and tossed him aside. There was a rending noise, and a large, bloody, chunk of Garm's upper shoulder was torn out as Garm flew through the air leaving a trail of blood behind.

Fenrir threw his head back, gulping the meat down as if he was truly starving, while Garm rolled around on the ground in agony. But to the surprise of Dani, who was on her feet once more, Garm slowly rose to his feet, bloody teeth bared at the younger wolf. “I'll not yield welp!”

“Hah!” Fenrir guffawed, only to yowl in surprised pain, twisting around to glare at Betsy, who had just cut into his back foot with her telekinetic blades. While the physical side of that attack failed, the telepathic side didn't, and Fenrir felt real pain for the first time in this fight.

But Betsy could retreat Fenrir had leaped forward, impossibly fast, clawing at her armor. The magical armor held, buckling instead of being torn apart, but Betsy gasped in agony as her ribs broke. The visor on her helmet also shattered, letting the slobber drip down onto Betsy's face as he tried to chew on her upper body, like an otter trying to open a clam.

This should have let in Jörmungandr's miasma, but by that point, Ororo had begun her attempt to boil the sea around the dread serpent, and her control of the weather had dragged much of the miasma up higher into the air. This meant that while the miasma was still in the air, it had lost the potency it once did.

Forgetting for a moment the emergency portkeys, Dani forwent her psionic abilities and charged forwards desperately. Her spear hammered into Fenrir's neck powered by all the

impetus Dani could contrive with her hover boots. The servos of her armor whined as she pushed them to the limits trying to drive the spearpoint home. But when Fenrir shifted, the spear simply sliced a narrow trench into Fenrir's fur, doing nothing.

This move caused the momentum of Dani's thrust to take her along one side and Fenrir bit at her once more. But Dani was too quick, and ducked away, zooming backward, Sigyn's Gift flicking out across Fenrir's nose in whip form. "Fenrir, stop!"

The strike didn't even cause Fenrir to blink, and this time Dani was just a second too slow. The wolf's lunge caught her in his jaws, shaking her like a ragdoll.

"AHHH!!!" Dani's armor began to buckle as she was swung around, many of the systems shorting out from the waist upward, including many in her helmet. This wasn't only the servomotors and other electrical parts, though. Across her suit's surface, the runic arrays also fizzled out. Something in Fenrir's saliva acted deadly to the magic within, dissolving it.

The small electrical discharges going through his teeth startled the young wolf, and he hurled Dani to the side, pawing at his mouth with one massive paw.

Pushing herself to her knees, Dani tried to reach young Fenrir once more, her psionic powers reaching forward. "Fenrir, don't you remember me, you hunted me once before, and I made a deal with you. I helped you down a cougar when you were still getting used to your new size and didn't know how to hunt. It fed you for some time, didn't it?"

Dani tried to push her empathic powers out towards Garm, which went unnoticed by the Shadows. They would not have understood an emotion-based mental power like that, but they were also extremely busy keeping Clea under wraps.

Once more, images sprang up around them, but instead of being just of Hela showing up to talk to Dani, this was from Dani's perspective of how Fenrir had attempted to hunt her. This was a much stronger memory, fueled by Dani's confusion and fear, and that impacted how real it seemed to Fenrir, who stopped and gaped as an image of himself attacked and then was fought back, before hunting and sharing a meal of a cougar with Dani.

For just a second, the hunger-madness receded, and false memory and real fought in Fenrir's mind. "I... I remember being taught how to hunt, but it was not you, was it? No, no it was Tyr, the cursed bastard, who tried to cage me to chain me! But I will have my vengeance, come the final dawn! I will feast upon Odin!" Fenrir howled, the hunger-madness coming back and reinforcing the false memories, the manic expression on his face becoming even more so as he spoke and bared his fangs at the confusing little human. "I hunger, and I wonder how sweet your flesh will taste once I shuck you out of your armor!"

But then he suddenly turned away, moving toward Garm, who was slowly moving towards them. "But wait your turn. Though he is old and stringy, at least he is ready to eat."

Groaning in pain, Dani pushed herself to her feet. Betsy was gone by this point thankfully, teleported away by her emergency array. What that would mean if the Shadows attacked on the Astral Plane once more, Dani did not want to think about.

Not that we don't have enough problems as it is. Garm might be standing but he's in no shape to fight given his wounds. Fenrir's going to kill him, and my power isn't getting through to him. Dammit, what else can I do to heighten the impact of my empathic powers!? They had severely underestimated how powerful Fenrir had become and how manic the Shadows were willing to make him.

Suddenly Fenrir was blasted aside by a bolt of magic as Clea finally broke through the remaining illusions attempting to keep her contained and attacked with all the fury of the half-demoness she was, her words long, guttural, and in a language no human tongue should have ever been able to form. “%--%Let Phantom spirits keep you contained! Let your body be chained to the very earth by my power! %--%”

Clea was more Sorceress than Witch as her magic was closer to Stephen's than Harry's. She used longer enchantments to create formed magical spells while also using unformed magic directed by her will for much of her offensive and defensive power. But she didn't call upon the magic deities that Stephen did. Instead, Clea shaped the magic with her words to a greater degree than the human-born Steven. Being the natural-born daughter of Umar and niece of Dormammu, she could hardly call upon opposing deities for their aid.

This was shown now as literal phantom beasts appeared around the massive wolf assaulting Dani, grabbing at Fenrir from every angle. Although they looked like ghosts, they were solid where they grabbed him, pulling him back away from the young Cheyenne. At the same time, chains of blue and silver magic rose all around him, shooting out of the air like harpoons crisscrossing over his body and slamming into the ground, pulling taut.

For just a moment, it seemed as if the mighty Fenrir couldn't fight magic like this. But then he bit through one of the phantasms, and it instantly dissipated. With that, he howled, lashing out every direction with paw and claw, and whenever he bit through the magic, be it a ghostlike monster or a chain, the magic dissipated instantly.

Meanwhile, the Shadows had summoned up more illusions while also sending two telepathic probes at Clea and Dani. From the far-away base camp, Jean blocked these, reporting on Johnny and Betsy, having taken over for Emma as she was busy defending Thor. *“They'll be alright with some rest. Their wounds have been healed, but Betsy is being kept under observation due to a head injury, and Johnny is out of action until Ororo or Harry return. But Tony and E are nearly finished setting up the camp. Retreat and...”*

“Can't!” Dani shot back, dashing forward, sliding under Fenrir's stomach, lashing out and upwards, Sigyn's Gift becoming a long whip with metal-coated endings. She targeted the wounds Garm had already sliced there, causing Fenrir some pain but not doing any further real

damage. *"We retreat, Fenrir will too, and we'll never find his trail until he shows up again fighting for the Shadows. If Clea can hit him with some kind of tracking spell, fine, but otherwise, we need to keep fighting to get through to the young fool!"*

In reality, Dani might not have retreated even if Clea could take the time to craft such a spell and if it could then latch onto Fenrir. This was her mission, more than anyone else's, and she was not used to failing. More than that, her ability to feel the emotions of animals worked both ways, and she refused to let Fenrir continue to suffer if she could do anything about it.

"...Fine, but if you get hurt again, girl, I will order Clea to grab you and fly you both out of there," Jean barked mentally. She might have said more but was forced to break off as the telepathic pressure on the trio of telepaths guarding the base camp and the main army redoubled. Luckily, the assault on Clea and Dani had subsequently subsided.

But thanks to the Shadow's illusion-based attacks, Fenrir was able to break free. With that, he searched for Clea, seeing her in the air above him, magic flashing out from her in small, barely-discernable crescent-shaped bolts of magic as she disrupted the myriad tiny illusions trying to blind her to reality.

Seeing her flying above him like an over-large bird, Fenrir leaped up impossibly high, his maw open wide as he tried to do to Clea what he had previously done to the Human Torch.

But Clea saw him coming and simply flew out of the way. An unformed blast of magic caught Fenrir in the side, hurling him away to crash to the ground, shattering trees and stones alike as the impact created a furrow through the forest.

He then rolled, seemingly without injury, and Clea grimaced. "Well now, you are rather a tough one, are you not?" She laid into the beast, blast after magical blast crashing into him, hurling him sideways and then backward, creating crater after furrow as she batted him around the landscape. "But durability and brute strength alone is no match for the power arcane!"

"I will eat you whole, seidr-using bitch!" Fenrir howled. It was evident that whatever damage the magic was doing if the strikes were doing more than tossing him around, it wouldn't put him down quickly.

Seeing this, Clea paused above Fenrir and began to craft another enchantment. But then she blinked as the sun above was blotted out, and she found herself in deep shadow.

Gleeful at having almost swept the field in this skirmish and eager to complete their victory, the Shadows had decided to double down. Even as Clea had dealt with the various illusions still trying to cloud her perception, and the Shadows had launched a massive telepathic assault on the main camp, they had teleported Surtur into this battle.

While his work with the various stone jotun chieftains was important, Surtur and Malekith were the only tools that the Shadows had left who could fight a true magical battle. And even if Malekith had not been busy trying to figure out what was blocking their ability to

teleport Odin away from Asgard, he lacked the raw power and durability to stand against the human magic users.

As Clea whirled around to see what had caused the shadow a massive fist came down towards her. Clea dodged to one side, and Surtur moved his arm after her, forcing Clea to fly higher and backward away from the limb. The next second she sent a bolt of magic towards the jotun's face. The assault crashed into his head, causing him to snarl in anger, but did not even stagger the now-hill-sized fire jotun king.

Surtur had previously been only a few feet larger than a human or Asgardian. But he had been gorging himself on stones since the Shadows had teleported him away from Sif and Hogun's pursuit and now he stood almost as tall as a large hill.

Still, Clea was undaunted, and her words barked out in her native tongue. “%-%Flay and tear, break and sear, cut raw my enemies!%-%” Cutting curses which made Sectumsempra seem like a spell to cut one's nails lashed out, pale green and yellow, slamming into Surtur. But they could not do more than sting even when they struck his face.

Surtur snarled in fury, his voice a bellow. **“I will end you and all who stand with Asgard! Utgard will be mine!”** Surtur stamped on the ground as he bellowed, thrusting his magic into the land beneath him.

There was no Magma here to contest with, and a second later, his magic inundated the ground all around the battlefield. Fissures opened, spewing up lava in every direction, and large spikes of earth shot upwards, heading towards not only Clea but Danielle, Fenrir and Garm.

As Garm rolled desperately causing himself even more pain, Danielle used her hover-skates to bounce around several while Fenrir simply ignored them. The lava struck and splattered away like so much rain, and the stone spikes doing absolutely nothing to harm the giant although they had cut him off from Garm for a moment, and Fenrir turned back towards Dani. “If I cannot eat one of those two, I will at least snack on you!”

Dani danced backwards, putting the spikes, lava fissures, and trees between them. At the same time, she switched from using Sigyn's Gift to her rifle, loading up a series of specialized rounds she had asked Jean to prepare for her for this mission. Blinding flashes, shocking jolts of released energy, and other things of that nature. She hadn't had time to load them before, but did so now.

None of them stopped the giant wolf, although the one designed to release a high-pitched noise like a dog whistle certainly slowed him down. Fenrir whined and clawed at his ears, rolling on the ground in some amount of pain. “Awesome, now I just need to do that oh, enough times to knock him out or... yeah, best not to think that will be enough,” Dani mused, zooming away at an angle, forcing Fenrir to turn to follow the movement.

Above the two land-locked combatants, Clea dodged and ducked around the various attacks sent her way from Surtur. *His advantage, durability and endurance. Mine, speed and adaptation. Look for an opening, find a weakness, exploit it.* With that, she tried an unformed blast of magic, following it up with a spell launched at Surtur from behind.

Surtur bellowed in fury as the first attack crashed into his chest, the impact sending him staggering back slightly. But his armor held easily against that and the next strike, and from his mouth came several small fireballs. **“BURN!”**

These fireballs homed in on Clea, and she was forced to dodge the first few before defending herself from the next few. “%-The waters of the world guard me!%-” She shouted, and all around her, a sphere of water appeared. It burst outwards as she ordered it to, impacting the incoming fireballs with a loud, “FSSSH!!!!” noise.

The steam that occurred as the fireballs crashed into this odd defense covered Clea as she rose higher into the air, lashing down with a spell. “%-Bind and constrict by my might!%-”

Yellow and violet energy hoops appeared all around, but when they tried to constrict the fire jotun king, he simply flexed his arms to either side. The energy discs shattered into hundreds of tiny shards of magical energy.

But Clea now shifted to pure assault spells, spears of magical power, tentacles that grabbed, lightning spears, enchantments meant to assault Surtur’s mind and innards. At the same time, Surtur struck back, more fireballs, more stone spears flashing up towards Clea, forcing her to zoom around, dodging the attacks as best she could. Only a few times was Clea forced to use her equivalent of a Protego, which dealt with fireball and stone spear easily enough.

Seeing this, Surtur snarled and was about to pull out Gungnir, but Clea realized her own attacks weren’t doing anything to the fire giant first. She switched entirely to elemental spells, specifically, ice spells. “%-Ice and snow, cold and chill, be frozen under my will!%-”

From around Clea, man-sized cones of blue energy appeared, flashing forward to crash into Surtur. At first, these attacks acted almost like pinpricks, causing twinges of pain but not doing any real damage. Surtur simply ignored them, launching fireball after fireball. He also used his self-transformation powers to enlarge his fist, hurling it towards Clea while still using earth-based spells occasionally to send up spears of stone from below and behind Clea, trying to force her to split her attention.

For her part, Clea zoomed around the area, using her ability to fly as her chief defense so she could concentrate more on offense, continuing the ice-based assault for a few moments. Occasionally she used a water-based spell on one of Surtur’s fireballs to create more steam to hide her decision. But Surtur caught on quickly to this trick and simply inundated the entire area around him with fireballs and stone spikes.

Soon, the cold spells began to deal telling damage, and one of them struck at his feet, causing a loud grinding noise of stone on stone. Seeing the attacks on his legs starting to form hoarfrost on Surtur's Skin, Clea zoomed in close, targeting the fire jotun's legs. "%-%Grip and chill, hands of raw winter!%-%"

From all around Surtur, hands of cold blue energy appeared, grabbing and, as the spell said, freezing. And since the blood within Surtur remained just as hot, the dichotomy between his now rapidly cooling outer shell and inner body caused Surtur to cry out in pure agony. **"GRAAAAHHH!!!!"**

Nearby Dani's luck had run out. A headbutt had caught her, slamming her into a stone, which shattered, but one of her legs was caught between bits of the stone. "Damn it!"

"Nowhere to run, little mouthful," Fenrir snarled, stalking forward.

Dani licked her lips inside her helmet, thinking quickly. *Come on, girl, think! He has no physical weakness, but he's still a young creature, still arrogant. And he is also a demigod. All godlike beings are... arrogant and enjoy playing with their targets... fuck. I hope this works.* Before she could try and talk herself out of it, she shouted, "I challenge you!"

A howl of pain from Surtur caused Garm to turn away momentarily watching the battle above. But even as he staggered from the agony that the ice spells were causing him, Surtur struck back. He slammed his hands together, creating a sonic boom that hammered into all three of the other combatants.

Now it was Fenrir's turn to howl in agony, sticking his head into a nearby snowdrift for a moment. This gave Danielle a breather, although even her head was ringing right now, and one of her hover boots was no longer responding.

Clea also screamed in pain, tumbling through the air momentarily out of control, not being prepared for the aural assault. She still dodged the next few spells sent her way, but her own attacks stopped for a moment.

And she didn't see Surtur pulling Gungnir from his belt. Holding it in his massive hand almost like a dagger, Surtur thrust it towards Clea instead of launching it as he had done against Balder. The spear siphoned off a portion of his magical reserves and turned it into a blast of power much like Clea had been trying on him, except more condensed and pure white in color.

Opening her eyes, Clea saw this attack coming and quickly enchanted, "%-%Protect me against all magic!%-%"

The shield, a series of consecutive magical shields set between her and the assault, shattered on impact, each ovoid creating tiny particles of energy flashing everywhere. This gave Clea enough time to dodge to one side, and the energy bolt only seared her arm from the shoulder down, turning it into a mass of blasted, ruined flesh.

“AGGHHH!” Now it was Clea who cried out in agony. But like Surtur, she struck back all the same. “%--%Let the energy flow, let it become a hammer blow!%--%”

A ravaging blast of energy appeared from out of the sky above Surtur, crashing down into him, sending his upper body slamming into the ground with bone punishing force. He groaned in pain as several teeth shattered, and he felt something in his upper back go ***POP***, but even so, his body was able to take the strike. And his magic still inundated the ground below.

From the fissures all around, balls of magma shot out, then exploded in midair like flak rounds, causing Clea to defend herself with a magical shield once more. But she wasn't fast enough to do that and fly away from her former position. An instant later, another blast from the spear caught her, causing her to cry out in pain, although she was able to dodge more of this one's arc of energy.

Another cold spell struck the ground, fighting against Surtur's control of it, while giant ghostly hands formed around him, grabbing and trying to crush him. These Surtur broke with some difficulty as Clea's shield, tilted this time, reflected much of Gungnir's next assault up into the sky.

The shield had held this time, but the bright flash of energy against it had completely blinded Clea for a second. And from the ground underneath her, a fist around the same size as her own shot out at the top of a long stone column. This stone fist slammed into Clea's lower leg, breaking it with a crack.

“Ghhh!” Clea instantly lost control of her flight spell, falling toward the ground. And the next second, Clea's view was eclipsed by Surtur's fist elongating and coming towards her, its shape transforming as it came, wider than her body now in every direction. A last-minute Protego, a quick spell she had learned from Harry, slowed the punch, but it still slammed her to the ground.

Surtur instantly took advantage of this even as Clea tried to roll to her feet. At his command, the ground all around Clea opened into a large fissure with magma bursting up towards her.

The touch of that magma on her back and side proved to be too much. Clea's emergency teleportation array activated, and an instant later, Clea disappeared, reappearing in the base camp during a lull in the flow of wounded. Amelia and Una instantly raced to her, kneeling down on either side of Clea's body as they went to work.

“Hahaha! At last, I have some measure of victory this day!” Surtur bellowed, shrinking down to his normal size for a moment, as he hefted the spear into the air, delighted.

He looked towards where the human girl was being threatened by Fenrir. The wolf had stuck his head into the nearby snow, but had now pulled it out and was licking his chops as he stalked the human, who was rapidly backing away.

At that sight, Surtur smirked, but he didn't have time to interfere further. An instant passed, and then Surtur was back where he had been originally, where he found the stone jotun clan chief he had been talking to waiting for him.

The Shadows were not interested in this battle any further. They had seemingly swept the board, and Harry Potter had just arrived at the outer edge of the defensive area they had set up around Asgard. Whatever the lone human did from now on, they had bigger concerns, as Malekith had yet to discover why they could not teleport Odin out of Asgard the city.

Back with Dani, the Cheyenne girl had realized she could not get away with only one boot. Now she paused, holding her arms in the air. *Damn it, I will have to play this all the way through.* "R, remember, I challenged you!"

Fenrir stalked forward, and Dani could see the hunger madness in Fenrir's gaze as he leaned towards her, his tongue lolling out. "You have already proven you have not the strength to fight me, and now you challenge me? Did I hit your head so hard you lost your senses? Is some madness upon your brain that you would think I would accept your challenge rather than shuck you out of that armor and taste your flesh at last?"

"Y, you are the son of the trickster, Loki! You are as much a god as any, and there are certain rules gods must follow. If they are challenged, they must answer!" Dani asserted, releasing all constraints on her empathic powers, trying to build an understanding between them as she had in their first meeting. Now was not the time to use a vision, but her empathy could still have an impact. "To do otherwise would not be justice, just as it was not just for Tyr to try and chain you!"

The whole challenge rule wasn't technically true. Only Thor and a few of the other, more combative or tricky gods like Loki followed that guideline. But the mention of Tyr and how it would not be just pricked Fenrir's anger, using some of the implanted memories against him.

"What do you know about justice, about right and wrong! For only the fact of my birth, I was reviled. I was hated. Is that justice, is that right!?" Fenrir bellowed, turning aside and howling to the world. "You hear me, Odin! I will have your flesh as my forfeit for how you and yours treated me!"

Dani waited until Fenrir looked back at her, her voice as steady and calm as possible. "No, it isn't. But two injustices do not make a right. I know I cannot fight you. That leaves only my words and my wits. Let me use them, and if I die, I will go to my death at least knowing I fought in as best I could in the manner available to me."

Fenrir growled the madness of his hunger and the madness of the Shadows warring with his understanding of the rules gods had to abide by, aided by Dani's empathic powers. You had to give humans a chance. Whatever else, they **had** to have a chance. You could stack the deck against them however you wished, but humans needed to be free to play as they will to a certain degree.

"Hrrr....very well, I agree. What is the game? And know that I will veto anything to do with thumbs or word games or anything similar," Fenrir growled.

That line gave Dani some hope that some portion of the original Fenrir she had met all those months ago was still in there somewhere. *But to bring it out, it's going to take some doing. I've already tried anything but direct touch.* Dani had long known that her empathy worked best through direct touch. *Oh. I have just had a horrible, horrible, dangerous idea. But it might just work.* "I challenge you to a game of riding."

"What?" the wolf barked blinking in surprise. "I am not my brother Sleipnir. How dare..."

"I challenge you to a riding!" Dani shouted, pushing herself to take two steps forward, despite her body crying out in pain. *I've got a few broken ribs for sure and my arm is only useful thanks to the armor making for a decent splint.*

In fact, Dani was surprised she hadn't been teleported away. She had no magical sense and thus no ability to see how the runes in her suit had been dissolved somehow by Fenrir's acid.

Fenrir had strangely backed away from Dani's approach, her sudden shout and show of strength surprising him and Dani capitalized on his surprise, pursuing her mad scheme. *Direct touch, direct touch and time...* "I challenge you to a riding. You will allow me on your back. Once there, and once I'm situated using this," she said, holding up Sigyn's Gift, which had transformed into a rope, "You can do anything you want to throw me off. Throw me off, and you win. I win if you cannot, or I can convince you not to."

Fenrir snorted. Staring at her thoughtfully. "That is a gross dishonor to me as a wolf, to have someone on my back! I am no beast of burden."

"And yet, I am but mortal. You demand my life from me, the greatest thing you can ask of one, to feed your hung..."

"I do not ask for your life!" Fenrir snarled, slathering Dani with his mucus. "I will just take it."

"And yet one so powerful as you will not bend to this one request? This one game. Are you so cowardly?" Dani shouted back, not giving an inch.

Fenrir howled but called out like that, there was little Fenrir could do. While simply eating the strange human in the iron suit would not cost him anything, in doing so, Fenrir would

acknowledge that the mere mortal's idea game scared him. No god, whatever his or her shape, would be willing to put up with that concept. And Fenrir was no different.

"Very well," Fenrir growled. "For your courage, I will allow this indignity."

He glared at Garm, who had taken a few steps forward, his teeth bared, his eyes flashing maniacally. "Know old one that though gamy, your meat will serve fine, and you too will be bound by this one's vow. One ride to decide the fate of two. Now, hurry up! I hunger!"

Nodding, Dani asked for some time to speak to Garm. "Dani, girl, this is not..." Garm began as she moved close.

At the same time, Jean's voice roared into her head. *"What the fuck are you up to, Dani!? Run, girl! Betsy, and Clea are already healed and Tony's ready to take to the air. Buy time and..."*

"We can't call in help. None of the Custodes or our allies can get here fast enough," Dani murmured back, answering them at once. *"And I can't get away, Jean. My hover boot's broken, and if the emergency portkey isn't working yet... well it might not be at all. And whatever else, Fenrir will be gone by the time they get here. But that's okay, Jean. I have a plan. And... and whatever else, this is my fight. So, as the Brits would say, bugger off and leave me to it."*

As Jean sputtered in response, Dani turned her attention to Garm. "Neither of us is in any fit state to keep fighting, and power isn't getting through to him, not yet. But enhanced by my physical touch..." she shrugged. "It's possible. And regardless, it will be a ride for the ages."

Still linked to the younger woman, Jean shook her head, feeling the truth in her mind. Dani had never had any intention of retreating. Sigyn's Gift, her very soul hidden inside Dani's blood. The first time she met with Fenrir, the talk she'd had with him. There was a connection here, a debt perhaps, although that might not be the right word. Whatever the term was for what lay between them, Jean could feel Dani refused to let Fenrir under the Shadow's influence if she could do anything about it.

"Feh, well, you are right about that. One way or the other, it will make for a good tale," Garm grumbled, then shook his head. "I'll not wish you luck; instead, I will wish you skill on your test."

Grinning cheerily under her helmet, Dani nodded at him, moving over to where Fenrir was now lashing his tail impatiently, his ears flat to his skull. "Garm will not interfere and will await here as agreed," she said to Fenrir.

With that, she reached up to grab a handful of his fur, preparing to heft herself up onto his back. That would not be easy, given that most of her armor was now dead weight. Although the giant wolf hadn't been able to tear through the armor thanks to his attempts to do so being interrupted, her armor was now simply that, lacking much of its power.

“Take off the helmet,” Fenrir growled. Dani hesitated, and he turned his head around to glare at her with one eye. “Take it off. Or are you the one that is now scared?”

“That’s quite petty, considering I’m mortal, and you are a god killer. Still, if my helmet frightens you, I can take it off. Although I might have to have some kind of mouth and nose covering.”

Fenrir growled the insult, but Dani reached up to her, staring at the wolf as she tossed it aside. Her long black hair came free and ran down her back loosely. Dani took a deep breath and smiled as the miasma didn’t hit her. It still wasn’t pleasant to breathe in, like the smog of a city almost, but it wouldn’t kill her. *Heh, and I wonder what Fenrir will think if his brother’s poison gas is what kills me, rather than Fenrir’s actions.*

Pulling out a leather hair tie from a pouch, Dani tied her hair back in a long ponytail, staring up at Fenrir challengingly. “Do you recognize me now, Fenrir, or is the Shadow madness still controlling your mind?”

Fenrir stared, and for just a second, Dani’s face and her powers, which had been working subconsciously on him all this time began to make a difference. But then, the mad look bled into his eyes once more, and he snarled at her. “Take your place upon my back, human girl. And let us see if your skills can back the wager your mouth has made.”

Dani nodded and slowly pulled herself onto his back, getting a feel for the fur under her hands. For all that it had turned aside spear, Garm’s fangs and the telekinetic blades of Betsy, Fenrir’s pelt still felt like regular hair.

And as Dani wound Sigyn’s Gift around Fenrir’s stomach, a surge of excitement went through her. She’d gone riding many a time in her youth and even helped break in a few young colts and fillies. But never had she felt such a beast as this under her, and Dani felt her spirit rise at the challenge to come.

Finally, she was ready and said so. “Do your worst, wolfy!”

In response, Fenrir howled, the sound hammering back into Dani so much that she nearly cried out. But instead, she gritted her teeth, knowing the contest had already begun. A second later, the howl cut off, and Fenrir jeered. “I certainly will!”

With that, he was off, bounding away with the fleetfooted speed of his kind. Whatever his size, Fenrir was a wolf, and he owned the woods. Between one second and the next, they were dozens of yards away from Betsy and Garm, gaining still further speed as they went, leaving the battleground well behind them.

After about forty minutes Fenrir snarled irritably, still feeling Dani on his back. It was time to get clever.

He leaped forward, rolling in midair, trying to bring his back into contact with the ground. With his weight, the human girl would be crushed for certain. But Dani saw this and let go with one hand and a leg, twisting herself to the side and holding onto his side instead of his back.

Fenrir crashed into the ground and rolled to one side, but by the time he righted himself, she was back aboard her on his back, laughter and an insane urge bubbling out of her. An urge, strangely, to sing.

Now, this wasn't entirely insane. Many of the experiments Dani had done on her psionic powers proved that things that could evoke strong emotions made her empathic powers stronger, made it easier to bring out visions or befriend animals.

So after a few more tries to throw her off failed, Dani began to sing. While she didn't really have a good voice in terms of the classical sense, she could certainly belt out a heavy metal song with the best of them. "Stronger than the mountains and as sharp as steel, limitless, out on a quest for the glory of the heroes! Greater than the tales of the greatest gods of all. I will take my rightful place in Odin's hall!"

{Play – youtube To the Skies and Beyond – [https // www dot youtube dot com / watch? v=z-kl6zsBeXM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z-kl6zsBeXM)}

While Fenrir growled at the lyrics, he still cocked his ears, astonished, impressed and interested in turns at the crazy human on his back.

Seeing this, Dani continued to sing. "How far does the sky reach? I will strive to be greater than man! Grow, I'll become the warrior Rising above, sword in my hand..."

OOOOOO

Much like the Shadows, there was a finite number of things that the three telepaths could concentrate on, under attack as they were. But Jean, despite by this point concentrating more on Harry and Hela, who had just run into the first opposition on their end, still felt this, and her eyes widened. *What the... Dani, when we get back to earth I am turning you over to Charles, girl. Your sanity seems to have jumped ship somewhere.*

Then she was busy countering a telepathic assault on Hela, and all she could hope was that Tony and Clea could find Dani before she got herself killed. Jean had been able to point them in the right direction, but Fenrir and Dani were moving further and further away all the time.

Others too, oddly, felt what Dani was doing now. Perhaps because of Sigyn's soul in her blood creating a connection between Dani and the Asgardians. Or maybe because of her own Asatru faith, a faith she had taken up after meeting Hela and Fenrir, after knowing the Asgardians were not perfect. Or maybe because of her current crazy action.

Regardless, Freya, goddess of war and leader of the Valkyrie looked up, feeling as if a kindred spirit, was doing something heroic. "Such a spirit should have some help..." With that she closed her eyes, and sang a spell, sending a pulse of deific magic towards whoever was out there, proving worthy of joining her servants.

OOOOOOO

Dani grinned as Fenrir's attempts caused her to stop singing for a bit, the wolf bucking rolling and smashing his back against rocks and trees, something filling her for a moment, washing away her tiredness, if not her pain. She flipped to the side, then back onto Fenrir's back, laughing. "Well, you made me stop singing, but if you're trying to get me off your back, you're gonna have to do better than that, Wolfy."

That term seemed to infuriate Fenrir, and he snarled, turning in a different direction and heading towards a tree. This he crashed into and through, splintering the massive oak tree as if it was deadwood.

Branches and pieces of wood lashed at Dani's face and body. But most of her body was still covered by her power armor, and even as a piece cut her cheek and the side of her neck, Dani moved her hands in such a way that they were covered by Fenrir's fur, digging her thighs into his side and crouching down further. "Better, but still not enough... hmm, now... where was I?"

Fenrir howled again and sped up still further, his pace devouring the miles. This time, he simply sped up, hoping the cold of their passage would force Dani to lose control of her grip. This went on for another hour, interspersed by further bucks, heaves and rolls, and for a time, Dani could not tease or sing.

But as time passed, Dani's power finally began to work on Fenrir. While her other psionic abilities could not get through, her empathic ability to befriend animals was coming into its own, now aided by direct contact as she had hoped. Soon, he felt some of his fury, his hunger-fueled rage against Tyr and Odin and all the rest slowly dissipating.

Yet that was a slow process and as time passed, the ride taking its toll on Dani, her earlier burst of energy fading, still there, but not helping as much as it had originally. Then one time Fenrir whipped around, crashing his back into a boulder and Dani wasn't quite fast enough. Half of the boulder's length crashed into her shoulders and back.

"UGH," Dani grunted, something inside her cracking even as the armor, already quite battered, buckled further.

A second later a tree flashed by, and a branch thick as her own waist smashed against Dani's shoulder, numbing her arm despite her armor. But even as she clung on and they moved further and further away from any aid, Dani's psionic powers started to make serious headway at pushing through the Shadow madness within Fenrir.

This was aided by simple admiration at how well Dani was doing and the fact that the Shadows could spare no attention to this sideshow, busy as they were trying to slow Harry and Hela down. While the Shadows' ability to concentrate on many things was godly, their ability to influence events was finite. And they were learning as this war went on, so too was their power finite. And now, it began to tell even as Fenrir's course brought them into far denser woodlands.

Finally, Dani's body began to give out. The cold of their passage, the impacts she'd taken and her earlier wounds began to overcome the Cheyenne warrior.

Fenrir sensed it and looked back over his shoulder to eye her. "You're at the end of your rope, human. I can feel it in your legs, in your hands." Where it would have come out as a taunt several hours ago, now it came out almost respectful. Respectful and concerned. "You have proven yourself, warrior, and I hope your strength aides my own when I eat you."

Dani shook her head. Her hair tie had been torn away, along with quite a chunk of hair at some point in the mad ride, giving her an even wilder, if exhausted look. Yet still, she clung on. "...Won't let go," she grunted. "Won't stop. Not until you have had enough." she then grinned, her voice no longer up to belting out lyrics but falling into a cadence as she finished her earlier, oft interrupted song. "Do your worst, wolfy. I will be greater than all, fierce as a fireball, burning free, my destiny! I will be fearless and strong, into the sky... and beyond!"

Admiration, concern, shocked respect. Those were the emotions going through Fenrir as he wordlessly obeyed. Time and time again he flung his back into boulders or rolled. And this time, Dani could not dodge. she just clung, as Fenrir's full weight crashed down time and time again. But every time he looked back, Dani was still there, still holding on, murmuring, "Not gonna give up. Not until you've had enough."

Finally, on the very lip of the world, the mountains that bordered Utland where you could leap out into nothing, Fenrir's hunger-driven madness broke completely. The memories the Shadows implanted were still there, but Fenrir had control of himself once more.

Once more, he started to slow, looking behind him, one eye staring into the eyes of the huntress, who stared back unflinchingly, even as blood poured down her mouth into his fur from where she clenched her teeth. Even now, with one of her legs no longer responding, flopping uselessly against his side, even when her body was mangled within her armor from head to toe. Still the mortal woman refused to give in.

Seeing that glare at him, Fenrir slowed a stop, bowing his head in defeat. "You have beaten me, human. Your life is still your own. Nor will I eat the old one. What would you have me do instead?"

"I, I would have you turn your hunger on those deserving of it," she whispered, her voice weak, but still discernable. "Take the battle to the dark elves, into Svartalfheim itself. I k, I know you can't eat the fire Giants, but surely you can eat them."

“You know what,” Fenrir said with a wide, wolfish grin. “Suddenly, I do have a hankering for elf flesh.”

Dani nodded, and then as Fenrir slowly began to pick up speed once more, she watched as he changed direction, seemingly heading south around the edge of Utland toward where Svartalfheim was closest to Asgard. Seeing this, Dani smiled even as she finally lost the battle with unconsciousness, Sigyn’s gift tied around her arms to keep her from falling off, her head slumping forward into Fenrir’s fur. *I, I’ve done my bit, my Jarl, Jean, everyone. The, the rest, the rest is up to you...*

OOOOOOO

Harry and Hela were still more than a hundred miles from the Bifrost Bridge when they came under attack.

At first, Harry thought that the stones hurled up at them were illusions. Surely the Shadows knew by this point that Giants wouldn’t weren’t going to stop them. No matter how strong they were individually, He and Hela could easily overwhelm them with either magic or skill.

But to his surprise, when he smashed one aside with a Magia Erebea-enhanced blow, the stones proved real enough. “Huh.”

“I do believe the first layer of the shadow’s defense of Odin is upon us, as anemic as it might seem.”

“Then let us respond in kind,” Harry answered, smashing another bolder aside as he flew over a spear. “After you?”

“Thank you, my Seidr Man,” Hela answered graciously. Then she reared one hand back, a sphere of black and green lightning coalescing there which she hurled down towards the ground. The ball lightning flashed into the side of the mountain, blasting out in every direction. The illusion hiding the jotun there faded instantly, as several of them spasmed.

Other illusions attempted to assail their minds, trying to hide the truth under so much dross, but true to her word Jean was there. Her fire raged all around Harry and Hela’s minds on the Astral Plane and none of the mental attacks could get through.

But there was a more dangerous enemy here, and a moment later, a simple but expertly wrought arrow lashed through the air to one side of Hela. Another nearly took her in the eye and she gasped, seeing it pass her head by a hairsbreadth as she jerked out of the way. Another arrow quickly followed, passing through the air like an artillery shot from a battleship.

“I don’t think that is coming from any giant in existence,” Harry stated as he experimentally put up a shield while dodging to one side, only for two arrows to be shot in quick succession at him. The first pierced the shield like it didn’t even exist, blasting through

and continuing its trajectory away from him. The second nearly took them in the new position, forcing him to batter it aside with one hand, which deadened that hand up to the elbow. "Grah, flipping heck that hurt like being punched by Ben! That would be Heimdall wouldn't it?"

"Indeed. It often confused me when I was researching what humans knew of us Aesir that none of the depictions I found of Heimdall showed him using a bow.," Hela answered as she began to dodge in midair, a series of arrows bracketing her position which she dodged by the skin of her teeth. Only being able to see them coming from so far away allowed her to do so at all, so fast and accurate were the shots. "It is always the horn of Gjallarhorn, which admittedly is a particular weapon, or a sword. But Heimdall's powers make him perhaps the greatest sniper in existence."

"Down to the ground, we'll fly nape of the earth from now on," Harry ordered, and the two of them flew almost directly above the terrain for a few moments, zipping through crevices and over crags. This moved them out of direct line of sight, or at least direct line of 'hit'. Heimdall could probably still see them given his deific powers, but even he couldn't fire through several hundred meters of stone with any accuracy.

Heimdall didn't even try. Instead, arcing fire came down, from above. Each arrow exploded above them via some enchantment placed upon them, with each arrow becoming several dozen. This forced them to keep an eye on the sky even as they came under attack from more stone jotun.

When a spear smashed into his hip, and another one impacted Hela's head, causing her to flip in midair and start cursing violently, Harry decided it was time to stop playing passive. Twirling around in midair so that he was looking straight up, Harry concentrated for a brief moment, then summoned into being hundreds of thousands of birds via the Avis spell, sending them upward almost as if they were a living rooftop above himself and Hela.

The birds absorbed the arrows, exploding in huge welters of gore, which was quite disgusting. But the spell was quick and expanded quickly, which allowed Harry time to touch down on the ground for a brief moment and use one of his old standby spells. "Shi Jundai!"

From out of the stone of the mountains all around him for nearly three miles in every direction, several thousand golems began to shift and stir out of the mountain side, with Harry's simple order of "kill the jotun," ringing through their heads along the enchantment.

Dozens, then hundreds of tiny battles began all around Harry and Hela as they zoomed forward, lashing out with spells and swords occasionally. The golems were quick, easy, and effective in numbers against the larger, stronger jotun. But Harry did not want to get bogged down here. He wanted to free Odin from the Shadow enforced sleep as fast as possible. That meant closing with the Bifrost Bridge and its eagle-eyed sentinel.

But then, the Shadows attention shifted to this battlefield from the battle for Fenrir. Telepathic assaults were completely beaten aside by a now furious Jean, who reported on

events in that battle, causing Harry to become even more furious than he was before. As the shield of hundreds of thousands of birds dissipated, Harry flexed his magical muscles once more, shouting out, "Protego Maxima!"

A simple shield spell that depended on the power you put in it, the shield rose above him and Hela, moving with them, protecting them from the arcing fire coming from Heimdall. This allowed Hela and Harry to concentrate on moving forward and dealing with any jotun that got in their way.

Harry let Hela deal with that for a few moments as he checked in with Jean on the health of everyone involved with team Hunter, very, very unhappy that Dani had decided to keep the mission going. That was, until Clea passed on a report about Fenrir. *"Wait, are you saying that his saliva or something was able to completely negate magic?"*

"Clea says yes," Jean reported. *"She says Fenrir was able to bite he even negated some attacks spells that way."*

"Well, I suppose we should have perhaps seen that coming. He is supposed to eat Odin during Ragnarök, and Odin wouldn't just be protected physically from such attacks but magically," Harry mused, trying to keep his concern for Dani under control as he watched Hela slice a jotun in half, banishing the pieces into two other jotun. One half smashed into its target so hard he fell off the ridgeline, tumbling down the side of the mountain.

But all around them more jotun were appearing, some of them in illusion, some of them not. And Harry shouted out a spell once more, spreading his hands to either side as he bellowed the spell to the sky. *"Vide modo verum (see only the truth)!"*

This was an illusion specific finite Incantatum that Harry had, somewhat ironically, learned from Dumbledore back in his old world. Many times magnified in strength, of course.

As the spell ended however, Harry grimaced a bit, as more illusions instantly appeared again, covering the jotun assault and even Heimdall's ongoing artillery attacks. Thanks to the shield spell following them, that at least didn't matter much, but the jotun were an annoyance. Harry was forced to use another Shi Jundai spell while Hela merely slaughtered any who got in their way, but this still slowed them down.

Annoyed, Harry decided to try something slightly new. He cast the same spell again, before mentally grasping the shape of the spell, and instead of casting it like someone tossing a spell, he tied it to himself. Instead of being a one-shot spell therefore, the anti-illusion magic was sustained around him and Hela and traveled with them going forward.

Feeling this, Hela looked at Harry in shock. *"How did you do that? I know that spell was in your repertoire, but you just shifted it from a spell to in enchantment."* As she spoke she idly lashed out to one side, green and purple blasts of cutting magic slicing into several jotun as they charged out of the cave to one side of where the two of them were flying. Few of them were

able to escape, and those died as a piercing spell was launched towards them like a snake, stabbing into each one in turn.

“It’s not just our enemies that have a lot to learn,” Harry admitted with a shrug. “It’s hard to do, to make the jump between spell in enchantment, but it is doable.”

With Hela protecting Harry once more from physical assault, not that the attacks of the jotun to really mattered much given his Magia Erebea but they could at least knock them off course, Harry turned his attention back to the conversation with Jean, finding both her and Emma waiting. Emma was only there briefly to report on the ongoing mental attacks on Thor. *“I’ve been beating them off, but the magical illusion assault on him is picking up Harry, we need to get a magic user out to him Damn it, he’s been flying over the same damn area for the last hour!”*

Harry scowled thinking about that, asking if the magical illusion assault on the base camp and the main army had died down. Emma reported that it had somewhat, again showing that the Shadows were coming up to a hard limit on the number of battlefields they could concentrate on equally. The telepathic side of the campaign however was still going strong, as it was clear that the Shadows had realized that was the weakest link.

“Stephen reports that he is almost finished putting up anti-teleportation arrays, at least, and he has several of the local goddesses helping him now. It’s not a type of magic they are used to, but all of them can carve runes at least. Were also practically done re-arming the ODMs and most of the wounded have been seen to,” Jean took over from Emma.

Harry took a brief moment to lash out with a piercing spell at a jotun high above them on a cliff face, who had been sending boulders down their way. The piercing spell smashed the boulders and slew the jotun even as he flew on through a break in the mountains and finally saw the first glimpse of the Bifrost Bridge ahead of them. As he did an arrow flew from that direction, causing him to jerk aside watching as it slammed into the stone of the mountain face, creating a large impact crater as it did.

“Were nearing Asgard now, so I’m not going to have much time to communicate, but can you still sense Dani?”

“Yes. One of the good aspects of Asgard being so sparse in terms of people is that it’s easy to keep track of everyone’s minds. She still alive, but she isn’t responding. She’s concentrating all she can on well, riding Fenrir. I still can’t believe she’s trying that!”

“I can,” Harry and Hela answered at the same time, with Harry going on as Hela took the lead between them, using a sound-based tone of magic to shatter incoming arrows coming from Heimdall, who could once more both see them and take them under direct fire. *“For now, track her. I think we need to put some trust in Dani to know what she’s doing. But be prepared to back her up. Besides that, have Clea take over for Doctor Strange. Send him out to meet with Thor. That’ll combine one of our biggest magical hitters with one of our biggest physical type*

hitters. That will either force the Shadows to concentrate completely on that, and let the rest of us steal a few marches on them, so to speak, or will bring the fight to Jörmungandr that much quicker."

"Which magic user should be sent with the group to follow Dani?"

"Doctor Druid. Let him rest for a few hours, and then send him on with them, until Team Fishermen is relieved by Thor and Strange" Harry sent as they finally broke out from the mountain passes and to the entrance of the Bifrost Bridge. Feeling this, Jean pulled back, still watching for telepathic assault on the two and beating off several but relaying his orders without further discussion.

In terms of design, the Bifrost Bridge looked simple. It had no rails, or structure below the bridge to support it. But that was because the bridge was magic given physical form, and once you took in that fact, simplicity went out the door. It was if someone had taken a rainbow and shape it into stone, with the color changing as you looked at the bridge. There were no cobblestones or any other kind of joint, the whole bridge was a single piece, connecting Asgard the city to the rest of the dimension.

Asgard the city itself was set into what looked for all the world like a floating island, connected to the rest of the dimension by the Bifrost bridge and massive hawsers. These were not made of rope, but steel and stone intertwined, connecting the lower workings of the island, which looked like the lower portion of a glacier, to something far below. But where they crossed the gap between Asgard and Asgard the city, they disappeared from sight, like someone had just folded a piece of paper. Nothing could cross the Between Asgard the city and the rest of the dimension without crossing the Bifrost Bridge.

And at the far end, was the home of Heimdall, Himinbjörg and the entrance to Asgard. This was a large, rocky fortress set into the outer wall protecting Asgard like a blister set to one side of the Bifrost bridge. Why the city needed an outer wall all around it like that when no enemy could fly over the dimensional gap, Harry didn't know, but it was there.

And also there, standing athwart the end of the bridge, was Heimdall himself.

He was a tall man, as powerfully built as Thor with a shaggy beard, and long dirty blonde hair falling straight down to his shoulders, visible as tufts of hair on his shoulders underneath a full face helmet. thankfully for Harry's sensibilities that helmet did not have long forward thrusting horns like that of an ox ,unlike in one or two pictures Harry had seen of him. He wore well-made chain mail armor, with simple hauberk over it.

A spear stood upright beside him, a sword was tied at his waist, and Heimdall held a bow in hand. That bow was larger than even he was, made of wood Harry had no doubt came from Yggdrasil, and he held it sideways. On Heimdall's back was a quiver of arrows, which didn't seem to decrease as he continually fired at the two 'invaders'.

That was an obvious magical item, but to Harry's magically enhanced senses, the horn at his side blazed with even more magic. Physically it looked from this far away like a regular horn, the kind any century could be given to sound a warning. But on the magical level, that thing gleamed in Harry's eyes with as much magic as Hela's sword or Mjolnir. This was the legendary Gjallarhorn, which Heimdall was supposed to blow when the jotun appeared to invade Asgard during Ragnarök.

Why he wasn't blowing it now was a question, although Harry supposed the man might just have realized there was really no point. Asgard's main host after all was thousands of leagues behind Harry and Hela, not within the city. Or perhaps whatever mental commands or control the Shadows had over him were showing him not a full invasion, but just to enemies that he could therefore engage without warning the rest of the city?

This quickly proved to be the case as Heimdall's bellow reached them. "Loki, you and your foul get will not enter Asgard so long as I draw breath!"

"So he sees me for myself, but believes me in league with you, my father," Hela mused redirecting several arrows coming towards her with blasts of tornado forced air. Her words were interrupted by a grunt as two of them one after the other punched through and nearly struck her, crashing into the stone beneath as she leaped away. "I suppose that makes sense considering the enmity between Loki and Heimdall, but still is somewhat disturbing given our actual relationship."

The next instant, whatever quip she might have followed that one up with ended in a cry of pain as a hasty shield was shattered by the next arrow coming towards them.

While Heimdall was not the most powerful physically of the gods, he was another son of Odin like Balder and Thor, although the legend wasn't quite clear who his mother was. Most mythologies stated that he had nine of them. Regardless of his maternal heritage however, he was a formidable opponent, his mind completely overtaken by the Shadows like Freya and the base camp had been when they arrived.

"Do you think there's any chance of reaching him?" Harry asked as Heimdall's hands seems to disappear as he fired an arrow after arrow, almost as fast as a machine gun could fire bullets. To Harry and Hela, however they were still moving at a pace they could respond to and the two of them were able to batter them aside or block them entirely, although the impacts routinely shattered magical shields. This close even Harry's strongest anti-physical attack type shield broke after a few strikes.

"If by that you mean using words to get through whatever enchantment is on his mind, no," Hela answered brusquely, as she started to race forward, on her feet now rather than flying forward. From this point on, they wouldn't be able to fly at all, not without significant risk and overcoming the ancient enchantment all around Asgard designed to halt such flight and cast flyers out into the eternal void between dimensions. "Words alone would never have

reached me, and that was with Garm and my own emotions somehow signaling to me that you were someone I should trust.”

Scowling Harry followed behind her, expanding the anti-illusion enchantment, the edges flashing Heimdall across the Bifrost Bridge. The outer bubble hit Heimdall and kept on going doing nothing unfortunately. Whatever mind-control the Shadows were using on him, it wasn't purely illusion based magic.

A moment later as they were halfway across the bridge taking fire even worse than before and jotun tried to attack them from behind, Jean reported that this was the case. *“It's like what Emma reported Hela was like Harry. This is a very specific kind of mental control, with memories implanted instead of any short-term illusion on his mind. He sees you as you, but believes you physically are Loki, with Hela as your ally and daughter. I can't get through to him from this distance, not with the Shadows pressing is hard here at the base camp. You're going to have to knock him out!”*

Grimacing Harry acknowledged that point as he launched a spell forward. “Piercing fang!” This was followed by a lightning spell, as Harry decided to put Heimdall down hard and pick up the pieces after. Something inside him was telling him that every second counted, and they couldn't just pussyfoot around any longer.

He conveyed this to Hela, who grimaced, but acknowledged the point, and waved her hands forward shouting out her own enchantments. Snakes and wolves of fire and ice flashed out towards their enemy.

Across from them Heimdall took a sharp step backwards, stepping into the entrance to his dwelling, using the sides of it as a defensive bulwark. He popped back out to shoot an arrow at Hela, but Harry deflected the arrow upwards into the nothingness between, and the two of them charged forwards.

At the same time, several more jotun appeared from all around Heimdall, roaring and charging towards Harry and Hela. The Shadows had teleported them in just to help slow Harry and Hela down, the speed of their advance through the mountains having taken them by surprise.

Harry cut them down with a single “Drill of Light!” and Hela leaped up over their bodies, bringing her sword down before Heimdall could fire his next arrow. She cut through his bow with a metallic sounding clang, despite the fact that the bow was wood. Her return stroke was blocked as Heimdall with court quick, grabbed at his blade and blocked it.

“You! I should have known, Lord Odin should have known not to trust you! Your father has joined Surtur and so have you! The blood of the parents will always will out!”

My father is rather too intelligent to be brought to heel as the Shadows have been, nor would he be so easy to trick to see or hear what is not there as you are, oh straight-laced one,”

She taunted, shaking her head lightly even as she ducked under another blow from his sword, blocking a third with her own riposting and then lashing out with a magic spell, which was absorbed by his armor.

She then ducked out of the way, letting Harry hit Heimdall with a spell of fire that fizzled out, absorbed by his armor. He in turn grabbed his spear from the ground, rolling under Hela's attempt to brain him with the side of her sword launching his spear toward Harry at near-point blank range. Harry grunted as the spear hit nearly hurling him off his feet despite his Magia Erebea. Thankfully the sticking spell, grossly overpowered and cast threw his feet, kept him where he was, the spear shattering as it struck him, doubling Harry over in pain.

A single-handed blow from his sword took Hela's legs out from under her, dumping her to her rear on the stone of the bridge, although Heimdall looked surprised that the blow hadn't taken her legs off. She leaped up, and the two exchanged several blows each crashing blade causing a sonic boom sending sparks of magic cascading out like a firework going off. One strike from Hela caused her to overextend, and Heimdall dodged to one side, viper quick, his sword coming up to stab her in the chest.

But then Harry there, his sword blocking the blow for Hela, then he ducked aside, letting Hela lash out with a magical blast that caught Heimdall in the chest, sending him crashing backwards into the doors leading into the city. Harry followed up, with a lightning blast right into Heimdall's chest. The Piercing Fang overcame his magical defenses, and the chain mail heated up quickly, ringlets melting and snapping off like popcorn in a microwave.

Harry slid underneath the return blow, getting behind Heimdall, who twisted around, lashing out at Hela, battering her to her knees with an overhand strike before lashing out backwards with a punch that Harry had to duck under. Dodging it, Harry leaped up, using a spell to push Heimdall's sword backwards, as he grabbed the helmet off of Heimdall's head, tearing it free while kicking out hard.

With a noticeable percentage of his magic reinforcing the Magia Erebea enchantment on his suit, the mule kick sent Heimdall tumbling end over end across the Bifrost Bridge with a cry of pain. "GUUH!!"

Before he could right himself, Hela landed on top of him, her hands on either side of his head as she lashed out with a curse right into his skull. "FAALLL!!" The spell went on for several minutes as he struggled trying to buck her off, but eventually, his fighting subsided, and Heimdall's eyes rolled back in his head as he collapsed into unconsciousness.

Hela stood up, looking over at Harry, who was Harry, who was touching his chest gingerly. That spear had hurt, blast it. *I definitely need to set aside a few months to look into that Titan evolution. I can't redirect my magic into the Magia Erebea quickly enough sometimes, and it could have cost me.* "Well, that was bleeding annoying."

Hela thought much the same about the battle in general, having been hit several times when they closed with Heimdall. "I believe our plan to not kill him hamstrung us a bit more than I would normally condone," she growled. "If he awakens, I will not be so constrained."

"Best get used to it," Jean reported remorselessly. *"I'm sensing a lot more minds within the city. And if they were messing with Heimdall's mind, there's no doubt that they'll have done the same to the civilians within."*

At that, Jean's mental voice abruptly cut off. The telepathic assault being launched against the main army and base needed all of her attention as my and Charles called for help.

This left Hela and Harry looking at one another speculatively. "Mass incarceration and stupefy spell?"

"Most assuredly," Hela answered with a nod. "I will protect you in close, while you concentrate on blasting out those spells as wide an area as possible."

With that, Harry looked at the doors, then Hela, and as one they pushed on them, throwing them open.

Asgard was not what Harry expected, nor was it like a human city, even setting aside the types of construction material used. For one thing, there were not nearly as many buildings as there would've been in a human city. And each building was set apart from another, spread out. Each natural building was massive, each the hall or home of the different Asgardian. Those worshiped by humans, Odin, Thor, and so forth, had even larger homes, larger by far than any similar construct Harry had ever seen.

And despite the size of the city and its houses, there didn't seem to be any people around, at first. The two of them had several moments to make their way forward, racing along by foot through the city before they started to see actual people. Temporary habitats had been thrown up between several of the larger permanent buildings, seemingly to house the refugees from out in the rest of the dimension, getting people away from both Surtur's army, and, Harry noticed, Jörmungandr's poison. There was no miasma here.

But as they passed these dwellings, hundreds suddenly started pouring out shouting, "Death to the traitors!" for some reason. Civilians, children, the elderly, and hundreds of women young and old were following some script of the Shadows.

Harry wondered what they were seeing, but also didn't particularly care. "Incarcerous! STUPEFY!"

The simple, but once more grossly overpowered spells flashed out downing hundreds, binding them in place. But the spells were thus absorbed, allowing the next batch of maddened civilians to charge forward. many got close enough to attack with weapons that were not the makeshift variety they should have been and Hela stepped forward to deal with them.

Again and again the same spells flashed out from Harry as Hela protected him from the crowd, using a conjured staff with the ends contained in soft padding to batter aside those elderly or women who came close, using simple telekinetic-based spells to push back on the children before they too succumbed to Harry's stupefy or incarceration spells. Then Harry had to use levitation spells to move the people ahead of them out of their way, so clogged did the street become.

Several of the goddesses of God's had to be put down with point-blank spell work. And at one point, a screaming woman, some Vanir that Hela had never seen before leaped out from a second story window to land on Harry's back.

He grunted under the impact, stumbling, but thanks to his Magia Erebea the impact didn't throw him to his knees. Instead, Harry reached behind him, grabbed her shoulders in both hands and hurled her over his head to crash back first into the road in front of them. Hela cheerfully smacked the woman upside the head with her staff, so hard that even the padding couldn't contain the force of the blow, sending her into unconsciousness the old-fashioned way.

But still there were more people coming, more people from the side streets and from various Asgardian dwellings, most particularly the dwelling of Thor. As the defender of the common man, his house was the favorite dwelling place for those who had fled Ragnarök.

All this, and the lack of any side streets that didn't dead end at another hall, served to slow down their progress tremendously, along with the continued attempts by the Shadows to conjure up illusions. But eventually, they came within sight of Valhalla, and both of them stared up the stairs leading to it, just as Hela became a victim of a sudden pounce by a Vanir goddess. She went down, but for the moment, Harry ignored her plight staring upward at Malekith.

For at his feet was Odin, sprawled unceremoniously on the stairs. There was no wound on him, but he had been divested of most of his clothing by a somewhat manic-looking Malekith.

With a bellow of fury and rage, Harry lashed out with several attacks spells, uncaring of collateral damage or even if he hit Odin. None of the spells he could use so quickly would overcome an Asgardian's magical defenses without a direct hit.

Malekith, on the other hand, Harry hoped to overwhelm, shattering the magical defenses on his armor. Like Heimdall's armor, there was a limit to what enchantments like that could absorb even if intended to do so rather than reflect.

But before the spells struck, Malekith raised a shield spell around himself, pressing it out to either side. He ground his teeth under the strikes from Harry's magic but kept the shield up as he finished his work. The last bit of armor, a vambrace, was pulled off of Odin, leaving him in his undershirt and leggings.

As he finished, Malekith shouted out mentally and physically, "We're done! Teleport him now or..."

A moment later, this proved to be enough. Malekith and Odin disappeared.

Odin Allfather, the strongest of the Asgardians, was gone, spirited away, still under the Shadow's fell influence.

End Chapter

The Shadows have somewhat followed the plan the allies did with Napoleon in how they are dealing with Harry and, more easily, Thor. Don't fight them directly. Unfortunately for them, while they might have won some skirmishes here, that policy isn't going to last very much longer.