

I'm not a particularly stupid megacorp, nor am I British.

... Been a while since this was updated here on fanfic, I know, and after I said it was my priority. UGH. But I didn't want to post it on here without [Observanc3](#)'s editing it first. He's a lot better than me and [morde24](#) are at spotting small mistakes, even when I use Grammarly. But RL ambushed him in a major way for months, which slowed it down. And my other works also pushed it out of my head a lot, so I only updated it once on Patreon.

But here it is, months late, but better for it.

Chapter 52: Cats and Rats

The merry chatter of laughing children resounded throughout the small jungle at the heart of the former Asteroid X, now the center of the Hanging Gardens of Babylon. It was here where Harry, through use of expanded space and time dilation arrays, grew enough ingredients for the potions he sold via Magical Minds. This space station also housed the now semi-defunct Orichalcum forge, set aside due to taking too much time and energy on Harry's part considering all the various other demands he had on his waking hours. Pinoptes' physical core was located in the main control room, as this allowed Douglas, Melody, and others who had befriended the AI to come and speak to him in person as it were. If Camelot was the brain of Harry's Avalon Empire, then Babylon could perhaps be called its lungs, working hard to make everything run smoothly. Not heart, though, as that was most decidedly the people Harry had gathered to him, and their locations at any given time was up in the air.

Not that any of that mattered at the moment. Instead, what really mattered was that Babylon was currently functioning as the site of a birthday party. Several hundred children, many of whom Harry had never met personally, were running around the large jungle below, shrieking, laughing and having fun away from the wintry conditions that prevailed over Camelot this time of year. Earlier, the horde of children had been given a tour of the asteroid, and in small groups had even been allowed into the control room. There, they had looked at Earth from on high, a treat they all enjoyed.

Now, as Harry watched, it appeared as if a supersized game of tag of some kind had developed. And if I'm not mistaken, it looks like someone is cheating.

"Illyana, what have I told you about using magic in games like this?" Harry called out from above as Hedwig left his shoulder to hover in the air over his apprentice. The young girl had just used a spell to trip a boy her age who'd been running away from her too fast for her to catch fairly. "If the others can't use their powers, then you can't use magic either. Help Jacob up, and you are still 'It,' young lady."

Illyana pouted at this declaration by her master, but with Hedwig glaring down at her from where she was flying in a circle above her, Illyana quickly decided to take her reprimand

with good grace. When the two kids had run off again, Hedwig returned to Harry's shoulder, ruffling her feathers for a moment before cocking her head to one side, listening to the music of her people.

Turning his gaze in that direction, Harry smiled faintly as he caught sight of Melody holding court with a number of birds all around her. His elvish daughter sang along with them cheerfully, much to the delight of some of the other kids who were sitting with her. Seeing Melody so joyful reminded Harry of when he'd first kidnapped her from the Vault and brought her to live in Babylon for a time before he'd moved to claim this dimension's Hogwarts as his own.

As if feeling his gaze on her, Melody looked up, spotting Harry watching her, but didn't break off her song even as she waved at him, somehow not dislodging the two birds that had come to rest upon the young rainbow-haired girl's shoulders. Harry waved back just as happily before turning away, satisfied his daughter was clearly enjoying herself and certain that Illyana wouldn't need any further warnings. *In fact, she'll probably enforce the no powers rule now if anything.* Illyana can be quite a commanding little so-and-so at times.

Instead, Harry's attention turned to his ladies, all of whom were up here in the master's suite of the space station at present. Hela was resting on the bed, having only recently returned from having gone back to Asgard that morning to argue with Odin about some of the souls he'd 'requested' she relinquish to him. The argument had annoyed her greatly, and Harry had promised her a date later that night to lift her mood. In a sign of how much closer his ladies had become over time, Emma had chosen to sit with the Asgardian, giving the goddess a pedicure of all things. Hela appeared to be enjoying the experience from the looks of it. The two had been arguing quietly and without heat over colors when Harry had turned to look out over the party below and now seemed to be arguing about... dances?

Girls are still confusing, sometimes. I get the impression it's somehow a flirty topic, but I can't tell how...

Nearby, Ororo and Jean shared a sofa, leaning against one another as they each held one of the twins in their arms. Looking at them, Harry's smile melted into something even softer, and he moved over to crouch in front of them, a feeling of awed delight and joy filling him.

Sirius and Rachel were only a month old, but already, Harry had begun to notice differences between the two babies. Not that those differences mattered at all to him, he loved them both equally, but it was surprising to see both of them developing distinct personalities so soon.

Rachel was a babbly, happy babe, but also kind of sedentary. She would play with anything that came into her hands, but she wouldn't go moving said hands around to look for entertainment herself. This, he knew was the normal way for babies this young.

Sirius, on the other hand, was a regular dynamo, always moving his arms and legs around without rest. Such was the case now while Ororo was holding him, the baby boy gripping at her hair and trying to pull on it, his chubby legs kicking fruitlessly. Too bad for him, he didn't yet have strength enough to do much but grab at the white strands of hair. He also seemed attracted to bright lights for some reason, and while he had wailed a time or two, usually before mealtime, he'd never been anywhere near as loud as his sister.

Reaching out, Harry laid a gentle hand on Sirius's head, causing the baby boy to look up at him. Sirius instantly forgot Ororo's hair existed in favor of reaching up to try and bat at the hand that was on top of his head. He couldn't do much to actually remove the hand, of course, but Harry obligingly waved a finger in front of Sirius' face, allowing the baby to grab at it.

"They're a little advanced for babies, aren't they?" Harry asked whimsically, "Physically and mentally, I mean."

"They are," Jean agreed, smiling like a living Mona Lisa as she held Rachel against her breast. The younger twin had started her 'hungry' fidgeting moments ago, and Jean had quickly moved to give her access to her meal.

Thanks to her telepathic interaction with her children in her womb, Jean had a sense of them that went far beyond what normal mothers could achieve. Several times she'd woken and had gone to take care of them before even the house elves assigned to watch over the twins could respond, and she was by far the best when it came to deducing what was bothering the twins or what mood either of them was in.

"I can still feel some measure of mental connection between them, like the one you'd told us you suspected those twins from your home dimension had. And of course, you remember that Rachel did try to use telekinesis yesterday?" Jean smiled lovingly down at her daughter, rubbing a finger down her cheek. "The little prima donna thought I was being too slow opening my shirt..." She gently teased, knowing that Harry well remembered the incident, having been somewhat poleaxed at the unexpected sight of Jean's breasts at the time.

The redhead had opened her shirt to let Rachel have access to her meal while they had been having a serious discussion at lunchtime. The surprise of it had knocked Harry's brain for a loop. And done quite a bit to puncture any lingering doubts about Jean's body image she might have had.

"And Sirius was able to somehow track where a house-elf was going to pop in the day before that," Ororo added, shaking her head as she gently bounced Sirius in her lap. "And have I mentioned today Harry just how thankful I am that house-elves can change diapers and clean baby bottoms with a single snap of their fingers? It makes parenting, especially taking care of babies, far easier. Even if we haven't been getting much sleep of late."

Harry chuckled at that, while Jean simply smiled, looking down at her body in some pride. Thanks to using the time dilation zones in the Hanging Gardens occasionally and a lot of

effort, Jean had finally gotten her regular shape back, bar her breasts, which were now almost equal with Ororo's. *Hopefully once the kids are good and weaned, that will change. They don't really match the rest of my figure. Thankfully, such a change is considered an expected abnormality post-partum and I'm otherwise cleared for duty, thank every god in existence.*

"That, and, although I know I've said it before, but Amelia really should be declared a national treasure. In fact, if I hadn't said that Ororo and Hela would be their godparents, I would have elevated Amelia to fill one of those positions." There was a not a hint of hyperbole in Jean's tone as she spoke of the medic's importance, and Harry cheerfully agreed with her view on the subject. "I can put that into law if you'd like, my lady?"

"I have to admit that I'm much more enthusiastic about the whole process knowing that the pain of birth will not be such a problem," Ororo said, smiling down at Sirius, whose mouth widened into a toothless, cherubic grin in return before he went back to nibbling on Harry's finger.

"Well I for one am still planning to wait for uterine replicators or something before I go down that route mister, so don't you even dare consider it," Emma drawled from between Hela's feet, still doing the goddess's nails. "That Blueballs spell of yours is going to remain a necessary part of our lovemaking for the foreseeable future."

For her part, Hela merely hummed thoughtfully, refraining from saying anything one way or the other. This probably had something to do with the fact that goddesses giving birth was not as simple, or as merely a physical process, as it was for human women.

"Alas, unless Reed, Tony deign to come up with something within the next two months, I do not believe that will be any time soon love," Ororo joked to collective chuckling around the room. She looked up from Sirius to Harry, her light blue eyes effusive with a new kind of joy the inter-dimensional traveler had never seen in them before. But he did know it was a joy that he had put there, and he fully shared in it as he leaned down to kiss his newest wife for a second before pulling back, pressing his forehead against his African queen.

Una had reported that morning that Ororo was now pregnant, a diagnostic that hadn't been at all surprising. Given the timing, the two newly expecting parents had a pretty good idea that she'd probably conceived that night within the ruins in Africa.

Mind you, calling them ruins is no longer accurate, Harry thought ruefully, his mind going down a rabbit hole for a second, leaving the present happy thoughts of his growing family for speculation of what kind of world his children might inherit.

The management of the ruins of Ororo's ancestors had been taken over by various African nations as per the agreements made during the wedding. Each had supplied archaeologists, groundskeepers, technicians, linguists, and ambassadors to study and maintain the lost city. Wakanda and other more advanced nations would also soon be bringing modern

electricity, and handle creating flowing water, plumbing, and so forth to the ruins, while also working under orders to keep the majority of the structures intact as much as possible.

Surprisingly, Mary Jane was now part of this burgeoning project, she and Wyatt both. The two had requested the transfer almost as soon as they'd returned from the wedding's afterparty. And Ororo, of course, had joined as well. Several times already the three had been called upon to sooth ruffled feathers and mediate between various African governments that were not on the friendliest of terms.

The former model-turned-secretary had grown a lot during the time that Harry had been away from Earth dealing with the Shi'ar, and instead of simply being his go-to girl for soft-style public relations issues and the second in command of their overall PR department, Mary Jane had now become a highly experienced troubleshooter for Harry, Ororo, Sage, and even Emma occasionally.

More importantly, if not as personally, all of the work being done on the ancient city was doing a lot to solidify the African Defense Organization as an multinational-governmental body. The ADO might've still had a lot of issues, but so long as a neutral meeting place existed where issues could be hammered out on African soil —and so long as Wakanda and several other countries were willing to bring the Big Hammer down on any hint of inter-country violence—those issues were slowly decreasing. There were still vestiges of colonialism and cronyism obviously, and inequality would still be a problem for as long as the continent as a whole struggled with its land-based infrastructure issues, but projections from Sage and other dependable sources projected that eventually Africa would become as strong as Europe. Such a goal was a ways in the future, obviously, but it was a goal that was much more in sight now than even a year ago thanks to Ororo, Harry and the work they had done.

"I must admit that the idea of technology that would allow one to have children without the need to give birth physically is a fascinating one, if only because of the issues I faced trying to stay in the field. I don't think the Phoenix Force basically ignoring all contraceptives was a onetime thing, Harry," Jean said, snorting lightly. "And while it was sweet of you Harry to load me up with so many defensive magics and everything, I still say it's a massive relief that I don't need them any longer."

She smiled over at Ororo, bumping her shoulder lightly against her sister wife's. "It's your turn to be coddled."

"I do not have a problem with that whatsoever. In fact, I will probably bow out entirely from combat missions when my second trimester begins. Unlike you my fiery red-haired love," Ororo countered, before leaning over and kissing Jean on the lips to take any sting out of her words. "I get just as much joy working in the classroom or conference room."

Jean hummed happily, both at the kiss and feeling Harry's desire for both of them rising as he watched them. Feeling a little naughty she deepened the kiss, and then, as Harry's desires

rose again, she pulled back and waved a telekinetic finger at him, the telekinetic construct looking like a large foam hand made of reddish energy. “Hmm... that’s nice Ororo, and it revs my and Harry’s engines nicely. But don’t you have a little get together to go to, husband dearest?”

“Oof, getting rid of me after putting on that little show, that’s harsh love,” Harry mock whined. Then, before his fiery-haired wife could react, he swooped in to kiss Jean ardently on the lips.

Not at all surprised, Jean returned the kiss with equal passion, letting out a breathy little sigh when they eventually broke for air. The last few months of her pregnancy had seen the two of them no longer able to make love as they once had, and Jean was very eager to get back to that particular type of exercise. *“But seriously, no more kids for a while, Harry. Four years from now, five, maybe.”*

Harry ruefully agreed through the telepathic link. *“You’re right. And honestly, we might be best served to check the box marked ALL OF THE ABOVE in terms of contraception just to be safe regardless. given how the Phoenix basically negated my magic **and** the chemicals in your morning after pill.”*

At that point Cory popped into being nearby. The house elf instantly drew Sirius’ attention, and he immediately turned away from where he’d still been nibbling at Harry’s finger to stare at the little creature. Corey waved to the little master with a wide, ecstatic smile on his face, then bowed to the big master. “Master Harry, you wanted to know when it was time to get ready. Your first meeting for the day is within an hour.”

Harry nodded at his personal manservant, before leaning down and kissing both of the twins on the cheeks. “No rest for the wicked, I suppose.”

Rachel opened her eyes from where she had been about to nod off after her meal, as Sirius looked up at Harry as well. Their twin pairs of emerald eyes stared back at him, laser focused, and he winked at them. Taking a step back, Harry reached out to Corey, the house elf taking his hand, and the two popped down to Camelot.

OOOOOO

That first meeting was with Sage and the various scientists on the biological side at Magical Minds. It turned out that they had been making some interesting breakthroughs lately, ever since Reed Richards had sent them a few packets of information on some experiments he’d run in the past. Now that he and Susan had basically retired from the superhero business with their second child, a little girl named Susanna being born, Harry hoped that the super genius would officially join his company’s various think tanks. While Emma might’ve managed to develop the telepathic power to manipulate her own cells, Harry still hoped to see progress on the anti-aging research. And that wasn’t even the tip of the iceberg of projects he hoped to get Reed involved with.

After he'd been apprised of the scientists' advances, Harry left to meet up with Ororo, who'd since helped Jean put the twins down for a nap before starting her own workday. The two of them then spent the rest of that night at a mutant rights rally in the US before bouncing to another in the Balkans, where it was only just early morning. Ororo had actually helped to organize this particular rally, with Harry helping wherever and whenever he could.

While the US had put mutant rights into federal law, some states still fought against enforcing them, necessitating the rallies. In contrast, in the Balkans, it was very much a mixed bag at the national level. Yet even there, much like in Asia, the governments were basically being forced to bow to social and economic pressures. It would still take many years to truly stamp out anti-mutant hatred and its inverse entirely, maybe even decades in many places in the world. But just like Africa's eventual rise to equal prominence with Europe, Harry could see the goal line in the distance a little more with each passing week.

The following days were entirely taken up with a military review on Fortress Mars, which Harry, Jean, and Hela attended. There, they were treated to the Orbital Drop Marines performing first a choreographed march before then putting on a show of combat one evening that impressed Harry greatly. Another impressive feat was that The Oh Damns had grown exponentially since the successful campaign in Asgard. They'd advertised themselves through the grapevines and had brought in more retired veterans, men who'd been forced into early retirement due to injury or who'd left the service for one reason or another from various countries around the world (barring China and several Third World countries anyway), as well as greenhorns who'd never seen more than basic training. But those with injuries or even missing limbs brought with them both experience and buckets of eagerness after gaining access to Magical Minds' technology alongside his and Ororo's healing magic.

A few new tools had also been added to the arsenal of the ODMs since the war in Asgard. First, the 'bolter' rounds from before had been slightly modified; a greater gyroscopic jet function being added, making them almost fire and forget bullets that could home in on their targets regardless of the angle they were fired from in relation to that target. The Orbital Drop Marine's two types of powered armor had been upgraded to now include tiny drones. These were small robotic flying devices could spread out over any battlefield and give any nearby Orbital Drop Marine an extra set of eyes, eyes that were highly mobile at that.

"This is what happens when you put several geniuses together and you say 'money is no object' with a straight face Harry," Jean sent over their connection as she watched the review below going on below, the twins temporarily being looked after by the house elves. She'd been the one to champion the original idea that had led to the drones, although Tony had been the one to ultimately design both them and the jet-assisted ammunition. While Jean was excellent at reverse-engineering already existing technology and coming up with new ideas built on that foundation, even she admitted she didn't have the engineering and designing brain power of Stark or Reed to actually bring those ideas into reality.

“The only issue I have with the drones is that they’ve added another requirement for more circuitry and fiddly bits. Still, with e our agreement with the Inhumans even that isn’t creating a significant bottleneck any longer. Although, that reminds me... I’m growing even more concerned about the issue with China and Taiwan. I’m afraid it’s going to be our next flare-up, unless the issues in Yugoslavia rear their heads again worse than before,” Harry replied.

Jean answered with an affirmative hum, although she didn’t really have as good a grasp on that issue as Harry and Hela currently did. Hela however chimed in verbally, repeating a position that she had said several times over the past few months: that the People’s Party was playing to its own people rather than any external viewership with its saber-rattling. No matter their bluster, the upper echelons well understood how outclassed they were ever since Jean had shown how little nukes mattered during the Eurasian War. And now that Harry had taken a position on the issue of Taiwanese independence, they wouldn’t—couldn’t—push things militarily. Not really, not unless Harry showed weakness or was fully engaged elsewhere. *“Which will only happen if the issues in Yugoslavia, Argentina, Venezuela, or any of the other Third World problems that the United Nations has been keeping an eye on flare up Harry.”*

Harry held back a snort at that, knowing it was true. At the moment, from the reports he’d been getting from Dennis and his network, only the issues in Yugoslavia would truly call for an intervention by the Avalon Empire. Many of the ethnic groups that lived in that federal republic not only hated one another, but most of them hated mutants as well. At least one family whose members included a mutant had been directly targeted by a car bomb in Serbia, and many others had received countless death threats.

When the military review finished it segued into a meeting with Murphy and the other military higher-ups. For this conference Emma joined Harry and Hela, stepping in so that Jean could return to Camelot and a pair of hungry babies.

There, Murphy and Sam, introduced the trio to a stranger, a former Italian officer by his dress. *“The ODMs have grown to the point where we really need to start treating them as a full division rather than just a special forces unit. With that in mind, we’d then need someone with more experience at leading larger units,”* Sam started with after getting the introductions out of the way. *“While General Murphy can still handle the logistical side of things, that’s going to change soon, and the manpower issues is already getting ahead of me. So we need to have someone who can help us on the logistics side and the manpower side, organizing the ongoing training and everything else to someone. Julio here has that experience from his time as a Brigadier General in the Italian military. Before that, he served with the Folgore, their paratroopers units, which gives him some experience in the as well.”*

“And you? Would you still be the field commander?” Hela asked.

“Well, one of them, yes. Like I said, we’re well beyond even the brigade level now. And I’m more than happy to keep wearing my Head Trainer hat too. But we... well, we basically need

someone else to do the paperwork, organize and manage the logistics, and form up the Orbital Drop Marines into larger units than simple company-sized combat teams.”

“It’s similar to the problem we were running into with the RavenSpires months ago, Lord Potter,” Murphy interjected, “We ended up needing to create command teams for each of them to keep things running smoothly rather than have me trying to direct everything from here. Combined with my work here in Fortress Mars it was just too much paperwork and personnel for one man to keep track of.”

“Which is where I come in,” Julio Cesaro said, speaking up for the first time since greeting Harry. The man’s Italian accent almost reminding him of Blaise Zabini. “I may not be known for my combat skills, but I like to think I have made a name for myself in the world of logistics,”

“I see... Well, I will admit I did see this coming. Murphy, if you and Sam vouch for him, then I’m game giving him a chance. I look forward to getting to know you more Julio,” Harry said, raising a hand for the Italian to shake. “As your first order, I’d like to see some effort on your and Sam’s part to incorporate mixed-unit tactics with local forces. Get with the Oh Damn officers and start writing up a rulebook on how they’re to organize aiding native militaries in conflicts on their own soil rather than simply acting on our own. Stemming from that, I want the ODM’s to be ready to work with the Custodes at a much closer capacity than we did in Asgard.”

“Forsooth, for while all reports agreed and my very own eyes did see that both forces worked together acceptably, that had more to do the fact that Harry, Steve and you were there in person Falcon, able to give orders and keep things running smoothly,” Hela added. “Further, one of the greatest measures of a leader is whether or not their subordinates are able to take function without their presence.”

Julio nodded. “Give me a day or two, and I’ll write up a few scenarios for us to run through after getting an idea on our logistical needs. However, I will admit that I don’t have as much experience working with other militaries as I’d like. That being said, I believe Captain America does have said experience, along with his work with the Custodes Mundi. Beyond that, we could probably even bring in trusted observers from various militaries” Julio said, smiled wryly at being thrown such a scenario on his first day on the job. “People who are actually still serving in their local militaries rather than those who have been seconded or retired to join us, anyway.”

With the main talking points covered by that point Harry bowed out of the meeting, for he had yet another event scheduled that day. This time, it was a PR stunt. Or rather, Jean had a PR stunt, but one Harry most distinctly wanted to be there for in person.

One issue that had continued to fester in the background since well before the war in Asgard had been the growing cult-like response to Jean as the Phoenix across the globe. From the time she’d appeared in the skies over Florida to when fiery talons had reached down to pluck atomic missiles out of the air during the Eurasian War, the idea that Jean was some kind of deity had taken root and grown. Despite any and all attempts by Mary Jane and the numerous PR staff

from Magical Minds and Avalon itself to downplay such an idea as ludicrous and misplaced, it had remained all the same.

In fact, if not curbed soon, the nascent religion was projected to overtake a few of its more traditional peers in the world within months. This wasn't helped at all by the fact that four largest world religions were already being challenged by older faiths thanks to the knowledge that at least one pantheon of gods had been real.

But now that Jean was no longer pregnant, she could be out in public without Harry hovering around, MJ had decided that the 'goddess' could be put to work fighting this issue herself. "Just be yourself Jean, trust me. That, your powers, and the venue itself will do the rest," MJ had said when she pitched her idea to her fellow redhead.

At first, Jean hadn't wanted anything to do with a PR stunt, but that only lasted until Mary Jane told her what this particular venue was. Then both she and Harry had jumped at the chance. Even Emma was somewhat jealous, as she too fought the need for speed...

Less than an hour after leaving his last meeting on Fortress Mars Harry was in London in an airplane hangar-turned-set, watching from within a crowded audience as a very tall, very curly-haired middle-aged man announced, "But now it's time to put a star in our Reasonably Priced Car! And let me tell you folks, this star isn't like the rest, famous for being in the movies or TV show, oh no! Instead, she's famous for being a literal star at times—a fiery star in the sky. Ladies and gentlemen, may I present the only woman who can legally say that she is hotter than the very sun itself, the Phoenix!"

Harry was pleased to note that most of the crowd cheered at the reveal, although a few looked a little wary as Jean stepped forward from stage left, raising her hand to wave at the crowd. Instead of her actual gear, his redheaded wife was dressed in a normal set of jeans and a t-shirt, her identity hidden behind only a half-mask inspired by Hela's and a spell that would make it very hard to connect Jean Grey to the Phoenix.

As she stepped out onto the main stage, Jean let her Phoenix Aura flare for a brief moment. Between one second and the next, a visible haze in the air took the form of a large, fiery bird of prey. In contrast, Jean was all smiles as she looked out at the crowd.

The show of mutant power did cause a few within the crowd to backpedal, but once again, Harry was pleased as most of those who did recovered quickly enough. People still looked wary, but Jean reported none of them were feeling terrified or outright furious at her presence. That was excellent progress in normalizing mutant presence in his opinion.

With a thought, Jean turned off her aura and held out an open hand, which Jeremy Clarkson, the presenter of Top Gear, shook before gesturing her onto the sofa across from him. Sitting down himself, the man waved the shaken hand about. "Wow-wee look! It didn't burn to a crisp ladies and gents! And even though she's a ginger, I do believe I still have my soul."

That won a laugh from the crowd and Clarkson went on quickly. “Well, I have so many questions Ms. Phoenix. Or do I just address you as The Phoenix? Or—”

“Phoenix will do. Unfortunately, like many of those who have chosen to use the powers we’ve been given to fight for those who don’t have them, by necessity I have to keep my real identity is secret. Not everyone can be Harry Potter after all,” the disguised Jean said with a laugh.

Honestly speaking, Jean could probably have maintained a civilian persona, barring two troublesome points. First and foremost, her former high school acquaintances would obviously know who she was, and would recall that she used to live at the Xavier mansion. At the moment, Charles still wished to keep the fact that his Institute catered exclusively to mutants a secret. New York was, unfortunately, one of the states still putting up a fight against mutant rights. The fact that the state’s titular city had been the site of numerous battles between mutant superheroes and supervillains did not help the mutant rights cause at all.

Secondly, while Jean no longer really wasted any thoughts on her parents, she doubted that any villains looking to make a name for themselves would realize that. Outing herself would make the dull man and woman who had raised her defenseless targets, and she really didn’t feel like having that on her conscience.

“True. While you do work with him, no one can get away with quite the same sorts of things that the greatest man of our age can, I suppose. I do believe we can safely call him that, can’t we? And I’m not just saying that just because he’s British. Not only was he borne driving on the right side of the road—and by that I mean left—but he’s done a great many things for veterans and mutants the world over. And he owns a Huayra, correct? That’s all that’s really important, isn’t it folks?” Clarkson asked the crowd at large. The man looked around at the audience, and the men and women cheered. “But what kind of car do you drive Phoenix?”

Jean smiled, scratching at her half-covered cheek in mild embarrassment. “I actually have a few Jeremy. My first was a Bugatti Veyron, which I bought with my first big paycheck from the Custodes. There’ve been a few others since, but that was the first. I have to admit though that I don’t really like driving the Veyron as much as I thought I would. It’s too good at removing the sensation of driving except at high speeds. That being said, I do occasionally break it out now and then just to beat some of my friends in races.”

“Good lass!” Clarkson cheered over a chorus of oohs from the crowd. “And what do your friends have that take such a well-deserved beating?”

“Typical rich girl cars Jeremy, Lamborghinis and Ferraris for the most part. You know the type.” Actually, it was only the one friend, but considering that Emma did count both a Lamborghini and a Ferrari among her toys Jean thought it was fair. *And Mary Jane had said she’d been thinking about getting a sports car too right? So who knows?*

“My word! Heroism does seem to pay doesn’t it? Or do heroics just let you rub elbows with the filthy stinking rich?”

“Both, really,” Jean laughed. “Harry—we all call him Harry—was very particular about that at the very beginning. He said just because we are fighting for a cause that we believed in was no reason for us to not be making money while doing so. And the work **is** insanely hazardous so he pays us very well. All of the Custodes have nearly died at least two or three times in our short careers so far.” She then shrugged. “At this point though, I basically donate most of my money to charity. The Custodes take care of most of my needs since I live at Headquarters along with most of the team.”

“And is it true what I’ve heard that you had something to do with those hover ambulances that rescued Saab from needing another bailout?”

When Jean answered with a nod and a shy smile, Clarkson began to clap—and was quickly joined by the rest of the crowd—while shaking his head and saying, “Well damn! Excuse my language, but Ms. Phoenix here is not only a superhero, but an engineer as well.”

“I can’t take all the credit for them though, I only reverse-engineered it from some alien technology that we ran into when they started kidnapping humans to their world,” Jean admitted. “For more information on that particular incident, I would suggest anyone interested go online and read some of the Fantastic Four’s official After Action Reports. It was kind of a minor event, but that technology, well... let’s just say the original owners weren’t using it very well, and I had no hesitation whatsoever in stealing it.”

She shrugged. “As to being an engineer; well, at the beginning that was very important to me. I wanted to be known for more than just my powers. I wanted to make a difference with my mind outside of combat. Too often we mutants are defined by our mutations, both by the outside world and by ourselves. I didn’t want that to be all I was, and I didn’t want my Phoenix persona to be all anyone ever saw of me. Now, I like to think I have done that, even if my role as a Custodes still overshadows my engineering skills in the wider world.”

“I think if you asked any of the soldiers those hover-ambulances delivered to hospitals during the Eurasian War which was more important, you’d find they disagree with you about that. But since you mentioned it, what is being a hero, a real life superhero, like exactly?”

From there Jean readily admitted that at first, she’d been a little overwhelmed. “My powers are tremendous, but they didn’t come in all at once, thankfully. If they had, well... I would’ve been a disaster. I mean literally, a disaster. Can you imagine a pre-teen girl going through puberty with all the powers I wield? Ugh.”

Jean paused a moment, letting people imagine such a thought while laughing awkwardly, and when more than one person present shuddered she went on. “That being said, as I grew into them, I realized that being a spandex wearing superhero is just like any other calling; you have to take joy in it, or else it will just wear you down. And so I do take joy in my powers. The places I’ve seen...I mean, I’ve walked on the surface of Mars, traveled to other solar systems, helped

so many people in so many ways. I have a lot to be thankful for, and I hope to continue to use my abilities to give back to other people going forward.”

From there, Clarkson asked a few more questions about the adventures of Phoenix. Through it all, Jean came off as quite down to earth despite being incredibly rich and superhumanly powerful, highlighting that she liked to tinker with cars and that she had a soft spot for a few French models in particular. The fact that she liked spending time with kids, also came up, which led into her describing how Camelot was organized, an organization that was quite strange to most: part elementary school, part apartment complex, and part headquarters for the Custodes.

The idea that one location was serving so many differing roles seemed to take Clarkson and a lot of his audience aback, and Jean then fielded numerous questions about the castle and its goings on for a time, causing many to laugh at how much chaos occurred every week almost like clockwork. “But we wouldn’t have it any other way.”

From there, Clarkson moved along and asked about how Phoenix spent her time on a daily basis, and Jean answered that when she wasn’t training, she still spent most of her time with the rest of her team if she wasn’t puttering around the workshop she’d designed for herself within Camelot. “That or watching the kids. There is nothing like spending a few hours working on old cars or trying to wrangle kids to bring you down to earth.”

“Oh my, I can hear James May going ‘hello’ from here. So let me do us all a favor and get it out of the way before he can embarrass us all and ask, are you single?” Clarkson asked, clearly joking in a manner.

“I’m afraid I’m not,” Jean responded, laughing at the audience’s gasp of shock and some dismay from both genders.

“Truly?! My my, who’s the lucky bloke then? I have fifty quid on it being one of the Custodes, specifically Colossus,” Clarkson announced with a grin. He made a waving off motion with his hand. “Hamster always says he thinks there’s something going on between the big guy and that girl who can turn into lava, but honestly, from what little I’ve seen recorded of your team outside of combat, how can he say that?”

The audience’s enthusiastic response wasn’t so much in agreement as it was purely being excited about learning some gossip about such a prominent superhero straight from the horse’s mouth. Clarkson, feeding on and into the energy stood up from his seat and gestured to various people in the audience repeatedly saying, “Right? Aren’t I right?!”

“No it’s not Colossus. In fact, when did I ever say I was with a bloke?” Jean eventually threw back teasingly once the noise had died down. Such a simple question caused Clarkson to fall back into his chair and stare up at the ceiling for a moment, a blank, dazed look on his face. Jean had to snap her fingers in front of the presenter’s face a few times before regained control and looked at her again.

“Ooh, I think I went somewhere there,” Clarkson muttered, his amplified mumbling pulling much laughter from both the audience and Jean. Although the revelation of a facet of her relationship made her feel surprisingly embarrassed, she found that she was enjoying this quite a bit, just as much as she had enjoyed racing around in the Reasonably Priced Car the day before.

Looking around, Clarkson decided that it was time to change the subject. Such bombshells were best left for the mind to chew on later rather than follow down a rabbit hole. “Well, on that high note ladies and gentlemen, let’s drag our minds out of the gutter, and ask the lovely Phoenix how you felt about your time out there on the track with the Stig?”

Meanwhile, back in Camelot, the children who’d been rescued and enrolled in the school had been allowed to stay up to watch Jean’s performance. Indeed, a large portion of the castle’s population had come together to watch. Many of those who were present in the team’s TV room were given additional entertainment, as they discovered they could both watch the show and Mary Jane make a fool of herself as she whooped and hollered about, staring not at Jean, but at the crowd around her and Clarkson. “Yes!! I can feel the memes growing from here! Take that you anti-mutant asshats! And take that you religious nut jobs! All of y’all can go suck on a—”

“Language, Ms. Watson,” Ororo said, cutting off the younger woman’s celebration with a mild reprimand. She reached over to ruffle the younger woman’s hair for a moment, taking any sting from her words, knowing that the girl had been trying to combat the growing online influence of the Church of the Phoenix for months now, mostly on her own. Even Sage could only concentrate on so many things at once, and the PR department was the one area of the Avalon Empire that was still too small for its importance, specifically when it came to the online sphere. Ororo had also looked over some of the ‘tenants’ of the Church in question, and found them far too violent and militaristic for her peace of mind. Something that Mary Jane would also have been trying to combat with scant success.

Turning away from MJ, Ororo watched her redhaired lover zoom around Top Gear’s racetrack. *I must admit I was against this at first, but Mary Jane seems to have been correct. Judging from the very small sample size of the audience at least, I think we can safely say that the idea of the Phoenix as a high and mighty deity who we should all start worshiping has been well and truly put to bed... A bed, I am seeing, already occupied by several dozen salacious theories on who the entirely relatable Phoenix is going out with. But I can’t exactly complain. And this is just one of three similar shows airing today.* The other two were the Tonight Show and a Polish talk show of a similar bent.

Within a few days of Jean’s first appearance on Top Gear, these public outings had a marked effect. The Church of the Phoenix which had previously only been growing in strength and numbers ever since Jean had first burst into the spotlight over the skies of Florida very publicly began to fall apart. A large portion of the church walked away, returning to their old religions

and lives. Construction on churches and other places of worship to the Phoenix stopped, while many of the more zealous followers outright refused to believe that the Phoenix who had been broadcasted having fun and spilling tea on Top Gear was the same Phoenix that they revered. The true believers and those with a working brain had several dozen clashes the world over as people began to demand their money back from so-called priests and rectors who had been gathering money to pay for them and their still existing flocks defending them.

Others had turned to anger, loudly proclaiming their once-god a false prophet. Calling themselves the Church of the True Fire, these idiots started calling for her death and the death of all mutants.

This just proved to Harry that a basic part of being human was being just a tiny bit insane. That didn't stop him from sending Jean down to deal with the newly formed hate group personally, however.

She did so by flying down in her full uniform and picking up the entire gathered crowd in their own separate little telekinetic bubbles, then twirling them around until their stomach's collectively rebelled and they were sick. Then, she handed them over to the authorities. After such a public display, the fledgling church didn't just stop growing, but began to noticeably shrink. There would always be nutters out there, but not nearly as many any longer.

With that issue being taken care of handedly, Harry was well pleased with how everything was going. In particular, he was very happy to receive a missive, from Asgard that told him Odin wanted to speak to him. That could only mean one thing. The Sky Father had finished his pondering and research into what kind of magical runes he'd have to design for the missing runic portion of the Titan Transformation ritual.

OOOOOOO

After traveling for so long through hyperspace that he had begun to question his own sanity, Loki finally arrived within the Sol System.

His arrival went completely unnoticed thanks to the cloaking technology installed into the small yet extremely expensive ship that he had been given for this mission. As advertised, the ship had no hyperspace footprint, and thanks to a series of devices called gravitic degraders, there wasn't even a noticeable shift in the local gravity to be picked up on any potential long-range scans.

"And now comes my favorite part... the slow approach. What joy," Loki murmured to himself as he lay back in the cockpit. As he spoke, most of the remaining lights still blinking away in the cockpit dimmed out, indicating that the ship had automatically powered down once it recognized it had re-entered real space. Even the viewing port in front of him had gone opaque so as to not potentially reflect light. Within a few scant minutes, everything but the very basic level of life support had powered down. Technologically speaking from the perspective of most any scanning equipment, the ship was now a patch of nothing in the middle of space. Only a

close physical examination of the space the ship was passing through, via telescope or flyby, would have a chance at spotting it.

To keep even that from being a possibility, Loki had also done his part in making the ship impossible to find magically and invisible to the naked eye. He had covered in glyphs that acted as a ward which gave off a feeling of utter boredom and normality to anyone who somehow managed to look in the ship's direction. And the magical means of detection was even more impressive.

Loki rummaged through one of his many pockets and pulled out a small, enchanted ball, which appeared to be made of various colored and sized eyes mashed together. This little artifact, the Many-Faceted Eye-Binder, was a long-term project. He'd worked on it for months since finding himself in the service of the Mad Titan, layering enchantments into it carefully, redoing it all from scratch several times over when the different enchantments began to fight one another.

It was an achievement he was quite proud of, one that relied on a single truth; that at base, all magic designed to scry the location of an individual had to be cast by someone interested in said individual, something in his presence, or his doings. The Many-Faceted Eye-Binder was designed to block any magic, regardless of the specific spell, of anyone looking for the person who held it. It was a very subtle, very theoretical concept to Loki, but he hoped it would block or blind the attempts of anyone trying to use magic to defend Earth from intergalactic intrusion.

Ironically, this spellcraft had created a type of Notice Me Not, one that was admittedly many times more powerful than the spell that Harry Potter and his fellow wizards from back in his own dimension could have cast. Not to mention it worked on magical means of perception as well as the normal senses. Even Mad Eye Moony would not have been able to see the user of such an item, and even Voodoo or Blood Magic would be blocked from discerning the location of the user.

With the Eye-Binder in one hand, Loki's free hand created a spell to push the ship towards Earth.

"It would never do for the Trickster God to be caught so easily," Loki mused to himself as he tied off the spell. "So insurance is always better for one such as I to have. Yet even so, given the number of different schools of magical out there I can't help but find myself a bit anxious regarding this aspect of my mission..."

Shaking his head, Loki laid the enchanted sphere in his lap and pulled out a datapad that he had requested from the Skrull. The device ran on almost no power while still lasting days on a single charge, and had therefore at his demand been crammed full with as many games as the green-skinned idiots could find to put on it. "One can learn a lot from a species from playing their games," he murmured, flipping through a series of interconnected nodes marked with the headings of different game genres. "And the more I know, the more I'll be able to protect myself when Thanos and I inevitably part ways, regardless of how that parting of ways actually occurs."

Loki then blinked and laughed ruefully, the sound rebounding throughout the cockpit. “And now I’m talking to myself, and in a most dramatic manner at that. Oh dear. I think I might need to break myself of that habit before I arrive on Earth.”

As expected, Loki’s journey through the Sol system was by no means a fast one. Indeed, it took him several weeks. All of it cramped in a ship smaller than those that the humans had designed to fly around in, a fact he discovered when he saw several Earthling ships throughout his journey, sometimes at javelin range. Thankfully, Loki was a god and did have magic, no matter how self-restricted, to keep himself entertained when the games on the datapad became boring. Else he might well have gone insane as a human would have under similar circumstances.

Thanos had told him much regarding what the humans had been doing since his last...visit... to Midgard. And watching the comings and goings through space, Loki found that the Mad Titan’s descriptions were somewhat accurate, if only in terms of the sheer industry the humans had begun to build up in space. However, as he drew closer to where Earth should have been according to the ship’s starmap, he became aware of the final protection the humans had created against space-borne threats: an illusion of their planet surrounded by real defenses. “For humans that’s quite clever. Luckily such phantasms hardly distract one such as myself, but I do wonder how such a defense will affect Thanos’ plans? It’s such a pity that I find myself unable to send out any information due to the risk of discovery. All I am able to do is to build the secondary beacons from local resources and turn the primary one the Chitauri need on. Which isn’t a very detailed communication, is it?”

Shaking his head again and mentally reminding himself that he needed to stop verbalizing his thoughts, Loki searched along the projected orbit of Earth around its sun for the real planet. In that manner he found a few more fixed defenses elsewhere, seemingly situated around a series of non-descript asteroids. However, the asteroids were clearly not real, and in the center of the globe-like formation was an odd blankness in space.

No, it was another illusion, this one of nothingness. *My word, that is quite the **excellent** illusion, even more so than the previous one. Humans truly have taken the idea of using magic to defend their planet farther than I ever expected them to. And for my own purposes, that is all to the good.*

To say that Loki was reluctantly subservient to Thanos would’ve been an understatement. That was why he’d made sure his oath to the Titan had been so very carefully worded. So while all of these advancements to the local magical and physical defenses were annoying in the here and now, Loki was still quite pleased to see them. *All the better to weaken and block Thanos from victory. And if there is but a chance he may fail...*

Slowly entering the atmosphere of the invisible planet, Loki soon passed through the illusion. Now able to see the real thing and his presence once more obscured by technology, in this case super advanced heat sinks that soaked in the heat of his reentry on top of his craft itself, he

descended toward the ground far below. Soon Loki came down in an uninhabited portion of what was, unknown to his limited knowledge of Earth outside the areas of the old Norse explorers reached, the continent of Asia.

Running a low-powered scan of local communications traffic allowed him to discover that the mountain nearest him was set in the deepest part of a country called Nepal.

Once certain that no one could stumble over his vessel, Loki set off overland, still not using any of his magic for fear of being discovered. Thanos' information regarding Earth itself was sparse in comparison to what the Mad Titan knew of the doings of the humans in space. Because of such lacking intel, neither his current master nor Loki had any idea where exactly Harry Potter and the other magic users who defended the planet were based. *And as the universe just loves irony at my expense, my stumbling around using magic would inevitably land me right over them. It would be just hilarious.*

It took Loki several days to move from the near uninhabited areas of Nepal to a city where he could begin gathering information. From there, it took another handful of days using locally procured resources—read stolen—to continue on from there. Secrecy had demanded that he land his ship in an area of Earth that wasn't very connected to the rest of the population, one where access to the worldwide media apparatus, or the Internet, as the humans called their growing web of sharable information, which he needed to plan out his mission from now on, was sparse.

Two weeks after his initial arrival, Loki sat in a shop the humans referred to as a café in a bustling city called Lisbon, Portugal. Sipping at a drink that had to be some sort of mortal ambrosia the menu had named an espresso, he read over a sheaf of printed news as he considered his options. He'd long since completed the task of obtaining clothing from the local population so as to not stand out; a good set of short pants made from a material he thought had been called khaki and a rather dapper shirt. He'd also trimmed his hair much shorter than he normally would, assuming that the mortals now were by and large still of lower intelligence than himself, as they'd been ages ago, and therefore a simple change in hair style would additionally throw off any possible pursuers.

Normally, Loki would've simply used his magic to conceal himself. However, given the number and quality of magic users on the opposing side—the Sorcerer Supreme, Harry Potter, and of course any other Asgardians currently in Midgard such as the Enchantress—meant that he needed to do things the mundane way as much as he possibly could before beginning his real activities. In the pocket of his short pants, the Eye-Binder thrummed as it did its job.

He'd actually prepared another as well, hopeful that layering two over each other would continue to stop anyone from being able to magically detect him even if he did cast spells. So long as he kept his magic on the lower scale of things of course.

Seeing images and recordings of Thor and Sif, and even Balder was something of a shock, Loki admitted to himself. The first two had been sighted at an Althing in the country of Norway. Odin's Golden Boy had been filmed speaking to Midgard's council of nations, which, from his previous interactions with human culture, Loki knew was the extremely loose confederation of sovereignties that attempted to keep the various human governments from annihilating each other.

In his opinion the council hadn't been doing a particularly good job. But since he'd left the whole thing had seemingly been nearly replaced entirely by several smaller polities. If the stories I have read from the continents of South America and Africa are to be believed, then they apparently do a much better job of upholding their charters. Still, there do remain cross-cultural issues and egos galore to keep things interesting.

Yet from everything he'd been reading, Midgard was more united than it had ever been before, and it was all purportedly due to the various external threats that had apparently reared their heads since he'd last visited. The so-called Eurasian War having been started by curiously Skrull-like infiltrators, the number of attempted space invasions by Kree and even Badoon. All of these had then allowed Harry Potter to rise as a worldwide figure and create a unified front that included the majority of humanity.

Which made it a problem for his mission. And then there is the fact that I have felt... somewhat off... since my arrival. It is not as if some exterior force was in play, or the creeping feeling of being watched, praise be, but... It is as if something within me has somehow... changed perhaps? As if a weight has been added upon my shoulders?

Magically speaking, the last tether to the Shadows was still there. Even though the Shadows no longer had any consciousness to use it any longer, a small amount of Loki's magical power was thus still being syphoned away. And unknown to him, Loki's sacrificed memories were also still gone, and the mental and physical reconfigurations forced upon him by the Shadows wrought were still within Loki's mind.

Thanos ordered me to cause trouble on the ground, to sow discord while readying at least twelve beacons so as to allow the Chitauri to invade through their dimension-jumping technology. And while I spent weeks being trained on how to construct those blasted things, and I still recall the parts I'll need, that is still a tall order. I suppose I could use the one pre-made beacon my ship came with and leak its designs on the Internet so that fools the world over unable to contain their curiosity would build them for me...

Loki smiled at that thought for a moment before shaking his head. No, that would not be the best plan, hoping for the idiocy of my opponents to do my work for me. Nor would causing any trouble on my own be advisable. As much as it pains me to admit it, the Custodes could handle me with ease. No, if I am to cause trouble, I think that I will need a few catspaws to assist me. All war is deception after all, and the humans will soon rediscover that Loki is the best deceiver of them all.

Smiling cheerfully at the thought of causing chaos, Loki stood up, winking at the young wench behind the counter as he returned his cup, causing her to blush, and walked out of the shop. A few very judicious uses of magic later, and he was driving a small, nondescript car out of the country of Portugal and into Spain. His brain felt somewhat buzzy the whole way, the knowledge of how to drive having been freshly ripped from the salesman's mind and still settling within Loki's brain.

Once in Spain, Loki set to causing a few incidents between mutants and non-mutants, the two groups his information gathering had allowed him to divine would undoubtedly pull Harry Potter's, or at least his Custodes', attention. Using subtle mind magics, he dominated one group that had as of yet stayed in one area of Spain to become a little more violent than their norm. Then, he matched that with agitating the other group from another area of the country. It was almost too easy.

Unfortunately, he did run into the issue that most mutants didn't have much in the way of combat application for their mutations. Truly, how helpful was it for one's survival to have three extra eyes, or just scales on your hands instead of flesh? Still, ultimately trouble was trouble, and Loki knew that there were news agencies out there that would jump at any chance to demonstrate that there was still trouble brewing between humans and mutants.

And so it went.

Traveling through Europe and the Mediterranean and elsewhere, Loki caused small issues here and there, always randomly, always moving on quickly. Most of his efforts were usually dealt with by a country's local authorities to be sure, but occasionally, the sparks he lit led to bigger issues. The tiny slice of land called Yugoslavia was one such example.

Here, Loki had instigated what would cascade into basically a pogrom across the country. Although, admittedly, Loki had to concede he'd only pushed up the timing of things there. The land's bigoted president had intended to launch his own coordinated assaults in the near future regardless of outside influence.

Other instances flared up specifically because of his attentions. A particularly bloody riot in Egypt. An unexpected food crisis in Bengal. Reignited tensions between extremists in Iran. And masterfully even for him, the manipulation of the People's Party in China into convincing them that testing a new series of missiles by firing them near Taiwanese waters was a good idea.

While he spent of his time traversing the globe and causing incidents or heightening local tensions, Loki also prepared for the future. Since he had yet to be found, Loki knew his Eye-Binder was working, at least as long as he kept his magic usage to a low, basic level anyway. Based on the Eye-Binder's complexity, and the fact it even existing hadn't led to discovery yet, it was implied to Loki that enchanted items were the way to go for larger uses of magic as well. To that end and knowing that in the future his ability to avoid capture would be paramount, the Trickster began to prepare a series of bracelets and necklaces composed of varicolored beads.

Each bead was imbued with specific enchantments over a series of days, so as to keep his overall magical output at any one moment low enough to avoid detection.

The magic involved in the beads was Loki's equivalent of teleportation spells. Originally, such spells were used to send Asatru home to Midgard once they had fulfilled a contract or deed for the gods. Their potency was such that the enchantments in question would destroy the beads, but that was all to the good in his mind. Less evidence of his existence for any enemies to discover. Given the sheer number of magicals the other side could call on – just by looking at video recordings of their activities he had seen at least five - Loki eventually organized the beads in an interesting manner. Any gray beads used were enchanted to send the user to someplace else randomly. Other beads, the reds, greens, blues and so forth, would teleport to specific places he had been to on his journey and had not caused trouble in. And there were only a few non-grey beads.

Once he was satisfied with his preparations on that score, Loki decided to cut short his prep time and get on with things. Now that he knew most of the world's eyes had turned towards the troubled waters he'd stirred up, Loki set out, traveling from Japan to America to hunt down a series of specific persons of interest he had worked with before. As their powers depended on an enchanted item he'd ensorcelled himself, Loki was easily able to triangulate their location.

The group in question went by the moniker The Wrecking Crew. Previously, Loki had empowered the simple crowbar of an ambitious but smalltime thief with the help of The Enchantress, in exchange for helping her against one of her rivals back on Asgard. That joint venture had admittedly backfired, and it had eventually led to the woman being sent to Midgard semi-permanently in order to pursue Thor. Although judging by the fact that Amora had not been seen in the recordings with Thor, who had shown up in the news several times since Loki's arrival, her pursuit of him didn't seem to have continued. *I wonder if she is still around. Regardless, I'm certainly not going to look for the wench. I have no need for a tool that would inevitably turn in my hands.*

T In contrast, the Wrecking Crew,, might yet prove to be useful tools. Very blunt ones admittedly, despite the fact that some of them were quite intelligent, but ones Loki was sure he knew could control.

Wrecker, or Dirk Garthwaite as was the name the man had been born with, was still their leader by all accounts, and the strongest of the group given that it had been his crowbar that Loki and the Enchantress had initially empowered. Garthwaite was also the most ruthless, which would make him an even better tool for Loki's present needs.

Bulldozer had been the tallest of the rabble from what Loki remembered and had looked like one of the mechanical monstrosities given human shape, with metal covering his head and arms. Like the others of his crew, his powers were linked to the magic cast on Wrecker's crowbar.

The one who went by Thunderball had been something of the brains of the group, for what that was worth, having been a former doctor in gamma radiation. He'd also wielded a huge wrecking ball as a weapon for some reason, which in Loki's opinion just went to prove that in every male lay the urge to break things in an overblown manner.

The final member of the quartet was also the strongest member save for Wrecker, who'd gone by the alias Piledriver. Loki could not remember much about the man except that he'd been a blond with skin that had looked as if the sun had only rarely made his acquaintance. He'd also spoken with an uneducated drawl, a sharp contrast to the dark-skinned Thunderball's sharp, enunciated crispness.

Five days later, Loki began his journey across the sprawling country of America to where his magical senses told him the enchanted crowbar was currently located. As the item hadn't moved since his arrival, he correctly assumed the four men empowered by it must've been detained for some crime since he'd last been on Midgard. Which meant to be able to use them, Loki would first have to break them out.

Loki didn't want to draw attention to his movements, especially now that he had gone to all the trouble to make certain that Harry Potter's eyes would be elsewhere. But it couldn't be helped if his prospective tools were being locked up in someone else's shed.

Eventually, he arrived outside the jail, as the Midgardians sometimes called their prisons. This specific one had been named, amusingly enough, Final Destination.

Loki spent most of that night and half the next day examining the area around the jail and the prison itself, making absolutely certain that there were no magical defenses in place, seen or unseen. When he was as sure as he could be that there were no surprises waiting for him, Loki set off a collection of small electronic devices he had been given by Ebony Maw that were designed to dampen all outgoing signals from the area surrounding their activation. Just to be sure, he used all of them at once instead of just one, believing that if one worked as advertised then several would work even better at a single moment.

With the Final Destination Penitentiary cut off from calling for help from the outside world, Loki used a trickle of magic to cover himself with the illusion of a demon, an image of Lucifer he had seen in a commercial recently of the devil dressed in a decent suit, but with spindly tail and a conjured trident in one hand to go with his habitual red skin and horns. "Now to indulge in my own urge to break things in an overblown manner," Loki chortled to himself, remembering his thoughts when he had initially decided to recruit the Wrecking Crew several days ago.

With that, Loki bellowed an animalistic battle cry and charged forward, racing out of the woods that surrounded the prison and smashing into the outer wall before any of the guards on watch could react, let alone target him. The wall shattered at the point of impact as if the obstacle was made of thin wooden plates rather than thick concrete and steel.

“Holy shit! What the hell?! Kill that fucker!” came the discordant shouts. The guards on duty, all apparently military men rather than normal prison guards, quickly rallied and opened fire without any attempt to tell him to stand down.

A magical bolt from one hand hit various men on the wall, blasting through each one in turn, causing them to slump in place even as their compatriots continued to open fire. Unfortunately, their bullets did nothing to Loki who kept his illusion up with ease. Another blast of magic, this time thrown at a wide angle, hurled many of those remaining off the wall to break bones as they fell and hit the ground. This was a mercy however, as several others less fortunate went up in flames as another magical spell lashed out just as quickly at those who’d come charging from the prison itself.

Then Loki was moving on, smashing his trident into the side of the prison’s main building. The wall shattered and Loki hopped in through the resultant hole. Finding himself in the center of a random multi-story hallway lined with jail cells Loki shouted out, “Freedom for all, freedom for all, say I! Fly, fly free! I, Asmodeus, declare this! Free, fly free and cause chaos and carnage!”

Several security guards rushed down the and began to fire him once more. Or rather most fired from a distance, while a few charged forward, large shock batons in hand. These would have worked on most of the prisoners to keep them under control, and had in the past, but Loki was not the average assaulter. In short order he’d slain the arrogant mortals who’d thought they could take him at close range, each falling to nary but a negligent flick of his trident as they split in two on its tines with ease.

A short spell chain later created a series of magic bolts which immediately launched forward, catching those remaining guards that were firing from above on the second floor and at the far end of the hall in their faces, leaving naught but headless corpses. With that, Loki moved on, slicing open cell doors as he passed them by.

Several superpowered criminals burst out of their cells behind him, quickly racing away with whoops and hollers. The majority of these shouts highlighted precisely what sort of horrible scum had been sent to this prison so far, and why they’d been separated from the general population of Midgard.

“Hell yeah, freedom! Death to the Man, man!”

“First thing I’m gonna do when I get outta this fucking shithole is find a pig on the street and fucking slice his throat!”

“Bang, bang baby! Wait for me ladies of the world, your man is coming! And soon you will be too!”

“Hail Asmodeus! Don’t know who the fuck you is, but you got my vote!”

Snickering internally at the sheer variety of shouts, Loki only paused once throughout his entire journey through the prison. On the second floor three halls over from where he’d first began,

an elderly man with a bald head and a rather patrician nose remained where he sat despite Loki having sliced apart the door of his cell. When Loki looked in at him, the older man nodded respectfully but waved him off just the same. "No thank you, oh, original sinner. This old man only has a few more months on his jail time before he'll be able to walk out of here a free, if monitored man. And he is far too old and far too tired to care about going wild like those youngsters seem to. Better to wait and leave legally rather than in this manner and have the supers coming down on me."

Respecting that somewhat, Loki, nodded back, and continued on, slicing and smashing still more doors, slaughtering more than a dozen soldiers and guards as he went. This number might've been higher, but by that point most of the surviving staff of the prison were fighting it out with the prisoners he'd already freed. And like in most prisons, the prisoners outnumbered the guards severely.

Turning a corner on the second floor several sizable guns came down from the ceiling and began to automatically fire at him. At first, Loki had thought to just withstanding the hail of bullets like he had been doing, but after feeling the first few Loki dodged back around the corner, wincing a little at the impacts of high velocity bullets. *My, those sting.*

While Loki wasn't as physically powerful as Thor, nor as durable, he was still an Asgardian, and no handheld mortal weaponry was going to harm him overmuch. That didn't mean he wanted to feel the bite of those rare arms that **could** match up to his godly physicality if he didn't have to.

Instead, he tossed a cell door out towards one of the ceiling guns, smashing it in its pintle mount. Then sticking one arm around the side of the corner, he let loose a series of small magical blasts from the end of his trident that destroyed several more of the guns.

Two more were taken out by other prisoners, although thirteen of their number lay dead scattered across the floor of the prison. Final Destination was not just the name of the prison, but an apt description of its intention towards anyone trying to escape.

Still more prisoners and guards died as Loki made his way around the second floor but after about five more minutes of wading through the combat Loki finally ascended to the upper-most floor, where he was forced to use a little more magic than he'd wanted just to slice through a series of solid steel doors that blocked his way forward.

Once past those obstacles, he ran into true opposition for the very first time since instigating this prison break.

Two large mechanical figures of some kind, operated by people riding high up on their backs, were stationed in this area. As he entered, they zeroed in on him and fired large plasma pulse cannons in his direction, their ammunition far larger than even the ceiling guns on the previous floor.

Loki hastily conjured up a shield, but one of the shots got through before it fully formed, smacking his leg out from under him and dumping him ass over teakettle to the floor. For a moment, Loki's illusion flickered, but he quickly gathered himself and rolled into cover behind the doorway he'd just blown open. , recasting the illusion as he did before rolling back out of cover and returning fire.

The human-piloted machines proved to possess quite a bit of speed, leaping around quickly despite their size and the awkward position of their drivers, and they continuously fired back instantly. Another hastily cast protective shield flashed up and Loki took a moment to examine the area he now found himself in. The upper-most floor appeared to be laid out differently than the others.

First, it was circular in nature, the cells set around a single, wide open area at its center. This was where the mechanical guards and their drivers stood, moving around quickly. Second, judging from the number of security doors, each cell was separated by far thicker walls between them than the floors below. The doors to the cells were also solid here rather than barred. This was both solitary confinement and heavy security it seemed, and it was commensurately protected as such as well.

However, that being said, there weren't any cells directly across from the stairs leading up to the floor, and realizing this, Loki let loose a bit more in terms of magic. Throwing out a cutting spell sent a buzzsaw of ravaging energy across the floor, slicing into and through the feet of the droids and causing them to tumble to the ground. The buzzsaw continued on its way until it hit the outer wall, finally dissipating. Another spell, directed at the ceiling, sent fire down upon the droids, burning their operators alive and destroying the various video cameras on the floor in one fell swoop.

Within the jail cells, shocked exclamations could be heard as the small glass panes set into the otherwise solid metal doors melted under the blast of heat. The defenders taken care of, Loki made his way forward, smirking viciously as he tore one particular door off its hinges with his bare hands. Inside the cell, he found Wrecker standing with his fists clenched, and smiled. "Tell me Wrecker, if I were to offer to get you out of here, would you be willing to make a deal with the devil again."

Loki couldn't have stopped his theatrics even if he'd tried. Impulse control had never been his strong suit.

"Get me and my crew outta here devil man, and we'll make any deals you need," Wrecker said after a moment's hesitation. Pushing off the wall, he quickly stepped forward and out of his cell for the first time in more than two years. "Although, I can't say our souls would be worth much to you devil man, knowing me and the boys."

"Then we have an agreement. Just remember the other side of making a deal with the devil, Wrecker," Loki warned, moving over to the other jail cells and ripping all of them open. Still

covered in his glamor, Loki made the same speech he had down below on the first and second floors before sending most of the inmates off. As the small group of high-level criminals walked away, Wrecker called Bulldozer, Thunderball, and Piledriver to him.

Once the four had formed up, Loki gestured for them to follow him as he kept pace after the other freed prisoners. "Come, we need to retrieve your items of power. I presume that they are still soul-bound to you and thus cannot be removed far from your person?" *If any of these fools have any inherent magic they could've summoned the items to them, but they don't. Which frankly is to the good in my mind. Such magic would've made them a little too dangerous to be useful.*

Wrecker's eyes narrowed at that, wondering how 'Asmodeus' knew about things, but a loud noise outside the main prison block drew the attention of all present. Loki quickly moved in the direction of the sound, looking out through the gouge in the outer wall that his magic had made earlier. He scowled as he saw that some clearly superpowered individuals had arrived already, much earlier than he'd expected.

By their clothing, the newcomers looked like X-Men. *And while they don't have any magic users with them now per say, they are known to be associates of Potter and his Custodes Mundi. I have no doubt that the instant they realize magic is being used here, they'll call either him or Strange for reinforcement.*

Loki turned and hastily made his way back to the prison's interior, gesturing the Wrecking Crew towards the stairs. "Quickly! X-Men have arrived and fighting them now would serve us no purpose."

"Hey now!" Bulldozer ground out, his voice akin to gravel on stone. "Don't know who you are ugly, and don't really care, but you're selling us short if you think a band of newbies to the hero scene would be a match for us. We've thrown down with some real heavy hitters, like Thor! Even went a round or three with the Fantastic Four!"

"Hmph, of course. Your incarceration has left you quite out of the loop. Suffice to say that the X-Men are only a part of a much larger problem. One that we cannot handle, now move!" Loki barked.

Thunderball looked at the devil man thoughtfully, glanced out toward the cleaved wall, then raced towards the doorway, shouting, "Devil or whatever the hell, Asmodeus has gotten us this far guys, Let's just take his word for now and get out of here."

He was beaten there by Piledriver, who was already racing down the stairs, shouting over his shoulder, "Maybe y'all should've tried listenin' to the pigs gossip like I did. The whole world's changed while we rotted away in here. And I for one don't have any plans tah piss off somebody who can throw down with the Hulk or an alien who can mind control that fucker."

While the other three wondered what Piledriver was talking about, Thunderball still raced down the stairs on his heels, a more reluctant Bulldozer and Wrecker following soon after. Loki took one last look out toward the damaged wall before he raced after his new pawns.

He arrived at the "Hazardous Items" room just in time to witness Wrecker tear open a set of special lockers. Reaching inside, Loki could only grin wickedly as the crook pulled out his crews' items of power.

The effect was quite gratifying. The instant Wrecker grabbed his crowbar, he grew by at least two feet, and expanded across the shoulders by at least a whole foot. Once the supernatural growth finished, the man stood taller than Loki's glamor and was clearly far more powerfully built. His clothing had also changed, part of the magic imbued in the crowbar, into a purple and green outfit that stretched to always fit. Wrecker smiled, holding his crowbar in hand like a long lost friend. "Still think we can't take on these X-Men scrubs?"

"You might be able to put up a fight. But, by the time you would've been done with them, another team would've arrived, and that one would've no doubt come with several telekinetics and magic users," Loki explained coolly. "Fighting this hypothetical group is not something I wish to do. Now, if you have any brains, you would realize that discretion is the better part of glory and not wish to so quickly wager your newfound freedom on a losing bet."

Wrecker glared down at the devil man. but when he made to step forward anyway, Piledriver and Thunderball scrambled over and grabbed his arms. The two braced themselves in case they had to hold him back. "Come on man! Think! I know yer looking for some payback, I am too after two years in the hole, but now ain't the time. Let's just get outta here first. Then we'll listen to what this Asmodeus guy wants from us. After that, we'll get the lay of the land, figure things out. As much as I wanna get my pound of flesh, I wanna be free to enjoy it too," Piledriver said, reasoning as best he could.

Wrecker's scowl deepened, but ultimately he agreed when he realized Bulldozer wasn't going to back him up. Instead, the bastard was too busy reaching into the locker himself to grab up his own weapon, the massively armored helmet and shoulder pads that would make him a human battering ram. Thunderball was next, grabbing up a large wrecking ball, followed by Piledriver. All he had to do though was touch Wrecker's crowbar, and the original enhancement blazed through his body once more.

He and the others went through similar changes to Wrecker, Loki saw, as each of them grew a considerable degree as their clothing changed to match their regained abilities. Bulldozer became covered in orange material and now had riveted armor covering his forearms, chest and legs. Thunderball wore light green and yellow bodysuit. Piledriver, last but not least, now sported a white and red suit, while his hands had enlarged to at least twice their original size.

“Excellent. Now gather ‘round. I will get us out of here.” With that, Loki motioned for the four to grab onto him. Loki began to speak in ancient Norse. “//Away, away, fly us hither from this place. Return me and my companions to a place of safety, to a dwelling where I laid my head.//”

A moment later, all five disappeared from the prison just as the doors were slammed open by the tumbling body of one of the other escaped prisoners. Following the now unconscious escapee, Warpath charged in, Cyclops covering him. “Nightcrawler! Bounce around. See if you can find any guards that survived... and if they’re willing to talk to us,” the X-Men’s field commander ordered, taking in the open doorway into a strange locker room, and the lack of anything within. “I think they’re going to discover they’re missing some prisoners.”

Simultaneously, Loki and his four tagalongs appeared in the hotel suite that he’d rented several days back, a full two states away from Final Destination. After a brief mental check to see if any magical alarms had been tripped since he’d left, Loki allowed his glamour to fade as he slightly relaxed. Wordlessly, he moved over to a cushiony chair, gesturing for the four men to sit down wherever they wanted. “Gentlemen, I must say it is fascinating to see you again.”

Almost as instantly as their transportation to the hotel suite, Wrecker’s expression changed from dazed awe to clouded wrath.

“Loki!” Wrecker growled, shaking his crowbar in Loki’s face. “You fucking bastard! Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t cave your skull in you backstabbing asshole!”

In response, Loki could only sigh. With the tip of a finger, the Asgardian pushed the enchanted crowbar out of his face, before replying. “Because I just pulled you all out of prison? A prison, if you recall, you were set to rot in until the day you died? Or how about because I am the one that gave you that nifty crowbar in the first place? Honestly, as far as I remember, we parted ways as amicably as possible. You and your crew had your own ambitions, and they no longer coincided with mine,” Loki answered, leaning back in his chair and putting his feet up on the tea table in front of him .

The Asgardian was under no illusions as to the precariousness of his position though. Since he still needed to keep his presence as hidden from Potter as possible, his use of magic was still severely limited. And without his most powerful abilities, he knew Wrecker actually stood a chance at demolishing him in a fair fight.

Of course, why would ever fight fair, even when restrained?

“You set us up you fuck! You told us we were strong enough to take on Thor! That blond pretty boy handed us our heads!”

“I told you that you were strong enough, I never said you were intelligent enough. Why ever would someone ever wish to fight the Thunderer if they could help it? And even if they did, why choose to fight him on an even footing? He may be an oaf, but he’s still one of Asgard’s best warriors. I’m genuinely curious as to what you thought you would accomplish.

Wrecker growled, raising his crowbar to smash the arrogant prick's smug face in. He hesitated, however, when he realized none of his crew had moved to join him. Turning his head, seeing Bulldozer pick up the suite's desk phone and call for room service distracted him. Grunting, he waved a hand through the air in a clear 'what the fuck?' gesture. Unfazed, Bulldozer held up a menu, wagging it at him as he spoke into the receiver. "Yes, I'd like a large pizza; pepperoni, olives, with extra tomato sauce. Drop it off at room..."

Loki, ever help, supplied the room number, and Bulldozer went on to ask what kind of beers they had, while also adding whatever Thunderball and Piledriver asked for. Seeing Wrecker stare at his crew, stunned at their strange priorities, Loki chuckled quietly. "You let ego get the better of you in the past, Wrecker. Pray don't do so this time. There are far greater threats to men like you on Earth these days than just Thor, and killing me now would leave you bereft of a valuable ally against them."

"Huh, so that's why you need us in the first place, isn't it?" Thunderball stated more than asked, crossing his arms and staring at Loki coldly. "Even you can't deal with the superheroes out there now. So what's stopping us from just splitting now and going our own way?"

Loki had to tightly control the boisterous laugh that threatened to explode from his belly at the crook's attempt at gaining leverage in this... relationship of theirs. It was adorable.

"Other than the fact that Bulldozer just ordered food?" Loki quipped. The twitch of one of Thunderball's eyes was sweet. "Probably that I know the lay of the land right now, and you don't. No matter how good you think you are, there are many things you won't be able to learn just by looking them up on the Internet or watching the news."

"You mean the World Wide Web?" Piledriver asked. "That shit's still around?"

"...You could say that. It's grown quite a lot since you were all put away," Loki said, again gesturing Wrecker to sit. "So what will it be Wrecker? Will you try to go your own way, doubtlessly get in over your head, and be returned to Final Destination or worse... or will you listen to what I want from you?"

Wrecker scowled, and for a moment the hotel suite was heavy with the tension of the moment. Then, after snorting and shaking his head at the bullshit he found himself in, Wrecker moved over and roughly pushed Piledriver off of the sofa. Easing down on the piece of furniture, which squeaked in protest at his weight, he lazed out on it while staring across the table at Loki. "Fine then. Talk. Just remember that you're not the only one with power in this discussion Loki."

"I wouldn't dream of it," the Trickster God of Asgard answered, very easily hiding a smile within. Whatever Wrecker insinuated, or thought, or even might be planning in that little head of his, Loki knew he now had his catspaws. All that remained to be decided was for how long they would try to fight his line before he inevitably landed them.

OOOOOOO

“... And do you think there might be a connection between this breakout and the Church of Humanity that you were dealing with the other day, Scott?” Harry asked, frowning thoughtfully as he and Hela listened to the X-Men leader, along with Warpath, describe the prison breakout. While the two men spoke, the group continued their trip through the prison, led by Scott and a few of the surviving guards.

When Scott had requested he stop in, Harry had immediately reached out through diplomatic channels so that he and the X-men were given as much aid as the locals could give. The president calling you directly from the Oval Office had that effect on people. Unfortunately, most of the soldiers that had already been stationed at the prison had died fighting the breakout in all the fighting, the casualties even including the chief warden. To make matters worse, all internal systems, every computer and server alike, had also been destroyed. Whatever had caused the EMP that had been used to destroy the prison’s ability to contact outside help had hit everything else too.

If Cerebro wasn’t watching all of the various prisons across the continent for possible mutant activity, even the X-men wouldn’t have been able to show up in time to help. We’d be dealing with several hundred escaped prisoners here instead of less than a dozen. Not to mention the massacre of the prison’s staff.

Scott answered in the negative, saying that none of the prisoners who had attempted to escape were in any way connected to anti-mutant groups. “Admittedly, a few of them might join up with that kind of group now that they’re out, but that’s not the same thing as the breakout being staged by them. But to be safe, Professor X and his two aides are already on the lookout for any moves in that direction.”

“The one prisoner who didn’t try to escape, Adrian Toomes, the Vulture? He told us that the individual who attacked the prison appeared to look like a humanoid devil. Actually, he said the culprit looked almost exactly like Nightcrawler, except he was taller with red skin instead of blue and, in the old man’s opinion, ‘a rather droll trident,’” Warpath stated, trying to sound like a crotchety old man for a moment.

“Hmm.. Spymaster, make a note. I think that Mr. Toomes staying behind when he could’ve flown the coop with the rest of the escapees is a major point in his favor and a sign that he can be released early, so long as he agrees to a tracking device. Hell, we might have a job or two for him,” Harry murmured, speaking into the communicator that was part of his crisis suit’s neckline. Once his note was confirmed, he turned to address the nearest guard. “As to the actual being who did this, officer... I have to say that the various means of attack you described earlier all point to some sort of magic user. However, it can’t be an actual devil.”

“Feh, I ain’t exactly a religious sort myself, sir, so that ain’t surprisin’ to me. I’ve seen far too much of what humans can do to each other to think that Hell could spit out something any worse. But why are you so certain?”

“Let’s just say that a while ago myself and others took certain—and absolute—measures against ‘lower’ dimensional planar beings from being able to show up here on Earth,” Harry answered, shaking his head, seeing no point in going into details on the massive ritual he and his fellow magic users had created and performed to accomplish that feat. *And unless there’s an interruption in the ritual’s power, like the ley lines of Earth dying out or being blocked, there’s no chance of any devil or demon crossing that barrier. And I’m certain that Lady Gaea would pass on any such concerns on that score.* “Tell me more about the missing prisoners.”

The guard nodded, although he didn’t have much information besides their names, civilian and criminal alias both. That was enough for Sir Dennis though, who was also being kept in the loop on the developing situation. When the guard was finished with what little he knew, Spymaster chimed in and further explained to Harry and the two local officers about the prisoners.

“First, and perhaps the most troubling is the escapee Feral, born Maria Callasantos. She’s a mutant with semi-feline features with a healing factor, claws, fangs, and so forth. She is a known killer, although if she hadn’t killed two policemen while being apprehended and a security guard at her first incarceration site she might’ve been redeemable. The original charges against her were... two counts of murder; her stepfather after being abused, and then her mother after she attacked her for the first murder. Ah—oh. Never mind on the possibly redeemable option.”

Harry made a get on with it noise, and Dennis went on. Possibly also the cause of death of both her siblings, one by suicide-baiting him, and the other by setting the house on fire with her unconscious inside. The circumstances of those two deaths are still being debated, and the others might have been called self-defense, but if she hadn’t been from a state that outlawed the death penalty...”

“Cock. Next?”

“Fever Pitch, no other name on record. Mutant norganic flames pyromaniac who likes to burn people and animals to death.

grim Typhoid Mary Fisk. . Ex-wife of the Kingpin, renowned martial artist, sharpshooter, limited psionic powers, can lift things under ten pounds, and a pyrokinetic”

“Those two left together, Sir,” the security guard announced. “We have them on camera running off together.”

“Joy.” Harry grit his teeth, shaking his head. “Next?”

“One member of the Serpent Squad, we’ve dealt with other ex-members of that group before but this one, Puff Adder was apparently being held here still due to terrorist activities.”

“That’s... a minor threat for him to be here...”

Understanding the question in Harry's voice Dennis supplied the answer quickly. "Apparently he was highly connected to several Middle Eastern terrorist groups, particularly in Afghanistan. He's being kept here and pumped for information occasionally."

"Ah. I will talk to the president and see if he has a preference for how to deal with him then," Harry murmured. "Go on."

"Guido Carosella, a mutant strongman the X-men have dealt with before. He was sent to Final Destination after being talked into attempting a break out at another prison by his cellmate, unfortunately. According to his records, he's not the type to go around murdering people, but certainly the sort to fall into bad company easily. Mutant power is kinetic absorption much like Sebastian Shaw, only he's far less experienced and his come with a visible component; his muscles visibly grow and distend with the amount of energy he takes in."

"I remember him," Cyclops nodded. "Yeah, Spymaster describes him pretty well, I think. Still, we should be able to handle him easily enough since Cerebro should be able to pick out his mutant power's signature given we dealt with him before. The rest worry me a lot more."

"Me too, but what about the group the guard called the Wrecking Crew? I've never heard of them before," Warpath stated.

At that, Sir Dennis spoke up once more, explaining all that was known about the crew of formerly small-time criminals turned magically-enhanced super villains. This turned out to be quite substantial thanks to the President's standing orders that the various intelligence apparatuses of the United States were to help Harry and his people find the former prisoners.

Spymaster went on to explain how the quartet had gone up against Thor at one point, had even fought the Hulk, and thrown down with the Fantastic Four in the past, more than a year before Harry had shown up. In the end it had been a rematch against the Hulk, who eventually separated the four from the Wrecker's Crowbar of Power long enough for them to lose their abilities, which had led to the crew to being incarcerated. Since, astonishingly enough, no one had died during their rampages and at the time Stephen Strange hadn't been known to give his magical perspective on cases such as theirs, imprisoning the crew in maximum security had seemed like a good idea at the time.

"Despite the lack of bodies in their wake, in comparison to the other prisoners these four are on a whole other level. Unless any locals unfortunate enough to cross their path bring in RPGs or tanks, they'll be plum out of luck. Regular arms don't harm them, at all, and they're all far stronger than baseline humans. They've each got magical offensive capabilities of various sorts as well," Dennis finished.

For a moment Harry was silent, taking it all in. He looked over at Hela, who had scowled, turning away from them all and staring out the initial hole in the outer wall. as she thought about her father. "Let's remove the worst case scenario first. What are the odds that all of these escapees left together with the... individual... who broke in?"

“Slim to none,” Spymaster answered instantly, going through the list quickly pointing out that most were very much not the joining types, ending with the Wrecker. “Garthwaite’s got a major chip on his shoulders and wouldn’t be willing to work with many of the others. The flaming serial killer for certain would grate on the whole crew’s nerves, and the Wrecker would probably take his head off in less than a day. He and the rest are criminals certainly, but even criminals have some code of contact.”

“Good. In that case, let’s assume that we will need to split our attention here. If you could step through to the Savage Land, Spymaster, and ask if Logan and Laura are available? I think we’ll want those two on this along with Ghigau and her little coterie as fast as possible. Also ask Mystique and Morph to join them. We might discover a need for their ability to blend in when it comes to hunting this particular prey.” When Dennis answered in the affirmative, Harry looked over at Hela, who was still lost in her own mind, and reached out to touch his lady’s arm gently. “Hela?”

The raven-locked Asgardian Goddess of Death turned to him and behind her half-mask her stormy eyes betraying a level of emotional turmoil that was quite unlike her normal self-controlled mien. But after a moment more, she nodded, and Harry gestured for Scott and the local guard to join them as he led the way towards the prison’s main building. “Let’s see if we can find anything that can tell us where this ‘Asmodeus’ and the Wrecking Crew made their escape.”

Forty minutes later, Ghigau, Logan in his full Wolverine garb, Laura, Garm, Fenrir, and Skadi were moving through the former prison. The Goddess of the Hunt and Dani were in charge at that moment, with Dani keeping one hand on Fenrir’s flank at all times as the magically shrunken wolf prowled. The group sifted through the various scents, followed tracks, and uncovered other clues, all trying to determine where the missing prisoners had all gone. Once again, Dani’s power of psychometry proved just as useful as the noses of her wolfish companions as they scouted out several disparate trails thanks to the phantasms she could call upon.

Meanwhile, Harry was on the phone with the president and the local governor. He helped to convince them to keep the news of the assault on Final Destination on the downlow for the time being. In return he gave a verbal agreement that he and his people would follow up on all the escaped prisoners, although he insisted that they not be required to return the escapees alive if the resultant confrontations became dire. He also agreed to speak with Reed Richards about aiding the federal government of the United States with building a better prison for those with superpowers in the future. The genius had refused to be involved in such things previously for some reason, but Harry knew that if he couldn’t convince Reed to get involved, he still had access to several other people who could do the job.

Eventually he rejoined the others, finding the hunting party had gathered in the same room he and Hela had examined nearly an hour before. "Is there anything you can tell us about this 'Asmodeus'?"

The single quotation marks around the name read loud and clear in Harry's tone, and Hela snorted at her Seidr Man's antics. She stilled Fenrir for a moment before he could growl out something no doubt abrasive, she gestured to Skadi to speak up first. "The magical signature you found is definitely Asgardian as is the scent," Skadi announced. "Who in particular it could be, I cannot tell. It is not a scent I recognize."

"Nor I, but there is a certain power to it, a scent of snow that always accompanies an Asgardian, as well as a bit of burnt flesh," Garm answered. "As for the magical signature..."

Garm fell silent, looking at the growling Fenrir and the glare on his Mistress's face. "The magical signature is somewhat like on to my own, my Seidr Man. And I think we both know what that could mean, coupled with who gave the Wrecking Crew their powers originally. What little hope I had is now gone. You need not step around me as if you are walking on eggshells, I have made my peace with it."

"Loki is back then," Harry answered, a frown appearing on his own face to match that of his lady. "Do you or Fenrir have any idea what he could be after? Most of the time when he was active on Earth it was centered around one plot or another against Thor."

"So I should know what my father could think up in his changed state? With my own memories of the man resembling the consistency of that Swissed cheese rather than something concrete, how am I or my brother anything but the farthest from the most reliable?" Hela demanded archly, before sighing and reaching out to gently touch Harry's hand in silent apology for her sharp words and tone. "Forgive me, Harry, I am allowing my frustration and concern to boil over."

"Nothing to forgive love," Harry answered, shrugging his shoulders, taking her hand in his. "But you don't think he's still single-mindedly going after Thor?"

"Nay," Hela confirmed, shaking her head and giving Harry's hand a quick squeeze. "At the time it did make sense, his resentment against Thor, the rivalry with Thor, his warped desire to rule Asgard. But while I know next to nothing true about the man, Loki is no fool. He would realize quickly enough that Thor is no longer on Midgard as often as he once was, and he would further have taken the lay of the land as well. It would not take him any time at all to understand that he would be faced with insurmountable odd upon the moment he appeared to cause trouble. To add to that, why would he saddle himself with these four? They are strong, certainly, but against the might of Asgard or even the Custodes, they utterly pale in comparison."

Nodding thoughtfully, Harry resolved to look through the various recordings and information the CIA and the rest of the intelligence community had on Loki's activities before this. He'd also

need to send a message to Odin and Thor through the Bifrost to get some first hand information. “I think we should work under the assumption that Loki is working on some long-term plan here, not just frivolous mayhem. What that plan is, or if it’s even possible considering he might not be acting with all pertinent the information—like say about what the Asgardians have been up to and the current lack of homegrown enemies for them—we don’t know. But we need to take this seriously.”

He looked at the two wolves, amused at how uncomfortable Fenrir looked, above and beyond the fact they were talking about his father. *It looks like he also doesn’t take well to being shrunken down, unlike Garm. Still, Dani seems to have a decent control of him, or understanding or whatever.* “Fenrir, Garm, do either of you think you can follow the magical signature somehow?”

“Nay,” both wolves answered, a strange-to-hear harmony that Skadi expanded on quickly. “Teleportation magic is hard to trace even with our expanded senses, and with Loki going out of his way to make it harder, we will not be able to follow it at all. We can tell if he has used his magic in an area for certain, and if he tries to retreat in a physical manner, we would be able to hunt him. but so long as he teleports, we will be scant help in discovering Loki.”

Harry nodded and once more looked over at Hela who shook her head. That didn’t surprise him as much, as like Odin, Loki was a known practitioner of the seidr arts, one capable of using a myriad of spells of the Asgardian magical system.

What did surprise him, however, was when he then tried all the scrying spells he knew, only for all of them to fail in ascertaining Loki’s location with his own various brands of magic a moment later. “Well shite. He’s somehow concealed himself from magical divining, even from my kind of magic. That is both Impressive and annoying.”

Understanding the underlying implication, Hela’s scowled deepened. Much like anti-teleportation wards, most anti-scrying protections required one to know the sort of spell that was being blocked. Odin’s wards around Asgard were an exception to this rule, but truly only worked thanks to the old god’s ownership of the space as part of his role as the Asgardian Sky Father. Said role gave him certain deific-based control over any space recognized as belonging to Asgard, which included who could see it, those within it, and what those within could see. But for Loki to have the means to block all of Harry’s attempts meant that the crafty bastard must have discerned some sort of fundamental, underlying rule all divination relied on, or bypassed his lack of knowledge in some other fashion. Either or both being true was a worrisome concept.

Shaking his head, Harry opened up his comms and gathered the people he’d ordered be brought in on the hunt. After sending Cyclops and Warpath back to the mansion for the moment, he asked the remaining guards to provide some unwashed laundry or other items that would have the scent of the escaped prisoners on them. Once these were provided to him,

Harry looked out at the gathered folk. “Mystique, Wolverine, can you two work together on this? I know you have some past history, above and beyond the stuff in Bayville.”

Both seemingly middle-aged mutants snorted and looked away from one another, Mystique answering when it was clear Logan was dead set on remaining silent. “Our history of being on opposite sides goes back far longer than the whole mutant question Potter. I do not think it wise to tempt fate.”

Shrugging at that, Harry gestured for Mystique to join Ghigau instead. “Garm, Coyote, Mystique, you’re Team One. I’ll want you to track down Feral and Puff Adder. Mystique, you’re in charge.”

“What are the Rules of Engagement?” Mystique questioned immediately, one hand falling to the magic pouch she had been given as a member of the Custodes.

“I have spoken to the president, and in not so many words he made it clear to me that this prison is called the Final Destination for a reason. If you find that you can’t capture the fugitives alive without endangering yourself or civilians, don’t bother,” Harry announced bluntly, getting nods of approval from all of the assembled, even Coyote, who had come in with Mystique and the others when he had run into Dennis in Camelot.

“Skadi, Fenrir and Ghigau, you’re Team Two. I would like for you to first spend a little time here with Hela, see if you can find out whether or not Loki arrived by magic means as well. If he came in by mundane means, he might’ve left a trail back to where he was hiding out before the attack. If you don’t find anything, I want the three of you to switch to the scents of Fever Pitch and Typhoid Mary,” Harry ordered, knowing that Dani’s empathic memory-based mutant powers would be a major help in following trails that would otherwise go cold.

Ghigau nodded, smirking internally at how Harry hadn’t even bothered clarifying which of them was in charge, which was undoubtedly a good thing for her. “Permission to bring in the Valkyrie Brunhilde on this as well? I think she could be helpful, and she’s been asking to be part of a real mission while she’s staying with us..”

This brought a glare to Skadi’s face, the Goddess of the Hunt recalling her no-doubt accurate suspicions as to why the more mature-seeming Valkyrie had been ordered to help train Dani Moonstar by Queen Freya. The fact that the warrior maiden had her duty so well over the past few months was fine, her semi-constant attempts to sedu—convince—Dani that she should pray to Freya was not.

“Fine by me. Wolverine; you, Laura and Morph are Team Three. Guido Carosella. Same rules apply to all of them folks. If you bring back live prisoners, great job. If it’s dead bodies or even just heads, well that’s just as good to me. And don’t be afraid to reach out to any local police if you need to, the Americans **asked** us to help here,” Harry ordered bluntly. “Since we can’t seem to track Loki and the Wrecking Crew, let’s focus on cleaning up the riffraff first. If you need backup, call it in. The X-Men and the Custodes Mundi will both be fully mobilized and ready to be called on at a moments’ notice, so don’t hesitate to ask for help if it turns out these other

fugitives are somehow still in contact with Loki and have gotten power ups. Or even if they've just linked up with local organized crime or what-have-you. I want these hunts wrapped up as quickly and efficiently as possible. With everything else that's going on elsewhere, I don't think any of us want to find out what a Trickster God can get up to if left to his own devices for too long."

So divided into their three teams, the infiltration and tracking experts split off without another word. After parting ways with the prison's guards, Harry and Hela returned to Camelot, where the Asgardian Goddess of Death also split off, this time to inform the rest of the Custodes Mundi of what was going on and to rally the team to be on standby. At the same time, Cyclops would be doing much the same with the rest of the X-Men back in the States. Meanwhile, Harry headed back up to Babylon. There, he found Jean in their bedroom with Rachel and Sirius.

Since giving birth, Jean had spent every third day up in space, claiming that she could tell even without her telepathic powers that both of the babies enjoyed the experience. Harry wasn't quite certain about that, but since he knew that Jean enjoyed being in space, he wasn't about to call her on the habit. It was honestly harmless.

Crossing the distance between himself and his wife, Harry slid in behind Jean's spot in her seat and explained what was going on. As he spoke Jean nodded in understanding, realizing how troublesome this situation could prove in the future. Loki's new ability to hide his presence from Harry's various scrying type spells was not a good sign.

But before her husband could start spiraling into catastrophism, she calmed him down a bit by saying, "You've already assigned the best people we have to the job, Harry. Maybe calling in Stephen would've been good idea too, but I'm certain Scott will think of it if he hasn't already. Between him, Clea, and Wanda, there will be enough magic users on hand to deal with anything Loki gets up to before you and Hela can be called in. You don't have to be the one to hunt Loki down yourself, no matter how much Hela wants to. And you've got other things on your plate that only you can be doing."

"I suppose you're right, Jean," Harry answered with a sigh.

"And I also know that you've been putting off something else Harry, that Titan Transformation Array that you asked Odin's help with. Storm told me he sent it back to you." The redhead made a point of looking Harry up and down, allowing a faint smile to appear on her face as she held up Rachel so that she could see her father. "Does Daddy look any different to you Rae-Rae? I don't think so."

Rachel made happy baby gurgling noises, waving her little hands around for a moment, and Harry felt a subtle tug as his daughter subconsciously used her telekinetic powers to draw his hand up towards her face. He allowed the tugging to take hold and booped Rachel on the nose before letting her grab his finger with a happy coo. Sirius, finally unhappy that he wasn't getting

the same attention, then made a noise, and Harry let his son play with his other hand. For a few moments, he lost himself in just spending time with the babies.

But after Rachel had decided to take a nap, and Sirius seemed to decide that he was done playing with his father's fingers and drift off as well, Harry and Jean became serious once more. "I am very nervous about the array. I'm not so concerned about how much pain it's going to put me through, that's a given, but what it will do to **me** afterward," Harry admitted. "Not so much on the physical level, but on the emotional."

"Then perhaps you should have someone else look it over for you? Someone who knows what they're doing?" Emma asked from the doorway, startling both Harry and Jean.

The pair turned in that direction, and Emma strode towards them, rolling her eyes at their surprised expressions. "Both of you were so blissed out on baby time that you didn't even notice me arriving. Between the two of you I'd be offended if it wasn't so pathetic." She mock-scowled at the babies the both of them were holding, but Harry and Jean could tell their wife and lover was simply putting on an act. Her emotions were far from being even slightly upset. "As to your reservations about the Titan Transformation Array, didn't Stephen and Clea help you start that project? Why don't you ask them for a second opinion? Surely the Sorcerer Supreme and... whatever title Clea's using now would know how to spot anything untoward?"

Snorting, Harry nodded, resolved to speak to the two preeminent magic users before he made a decision on the array. As Jean and Emma rekindled their playfully bickering on the issue of babies, and Sirius nuzzled further into his chest while mouthing at his shirt, Harry pulled out the array again. Flicking it up into the air in front of him and enlarging the parchment it had been drawn onto so he could examine it, a feeling of both interest and revulsion shot through him. *Honestly I pray I never have to go down this road, but... but I get the feeling Loki's arrival after all of this calm is the heralding the next storm. I have too much to protect now, I refuse to be caught unawares or underequipped ever again.*

OOOOOO

Over the next few days, the hunters had far better luck than the magicals on tracking down their various targets. Loki and the Wrecking Crew had seemingly disappeared from the face of the Earth. No cameras, spy agencies or anything else had spotted the group of five through mundane means. On the magical front, none of Strange's, Clea's, or Harry's scrying spells were able to find any trace of the fivesome. Not even Hela's blood-based version of a Point Me spell, which used the Law of Familial Blood, could point her towards her father. Which was truly annoying, and worrying, as that kind of magical defense spoke of a level of preparation that hinted at a large, ongoing plan.

In contrast, only two of the other five fugitives survived past four days of ill-gotten freedom. Those two, Guido Carosella and Puff Adder, were identified by locals almost within a day of being on the run. Puff Adder was actually arrested after a foiled bank robbery before the

pursuing members of the Custodes even got near him. His mutant power gave him the same strength and durability that Nightcrawler had, but that wasn't enough on its own to stop a SWAT team armed with tear gas and Cold Steel advanced weapons. The rest of the gang he'd joined in order to earn enough money to recreate his snake-based skinsuit, were not anywhere near as competent as he had thought. The police were able to run them to ground easily, and after that, the former prisoner was taken into custody quickly, if not easily.

Guido, on the other hand, surrendered himself to police after hearing he had been put under a 'dead or alive' order on the news. He had, apparently, only wanted to go to a few concerts anyway, and had thought his cellmate's words of encouragement and reassurance were authentic. He was, as always, a bit of an odd case, but no one could really bring themselves to care overmuch when he made their lives easier.

The other three were hunted down like the rabid dogs they had acted like to get them sent to Final Destination in the first place. The hunter teams did not bother with taking prisoners, and even Morph decided that the world would be a better place without these animals in it.

Returning to Camelot after hunting down the one called Feral in the Appalachian Mountains, Skadi smiled at Dani, bumping shoulders her as they walked into the entrance hall. "Well now, that was an interesting adventure fit for a skald's song! Is it always like this; a new hunt every day, soulless bastards slain, and a world explored? I must confess I am very much enjoying life on Midgard so far."

"Hah, you almost sound like Amora, when you say that. Are you going to go into the modeling business like the Enchantress too?" Dani teased, nudging back. "You have the looks for it for certain. People are always interested in the exotic, and you definitely fit that bill."

The Goddess of the Hunt blushed but rolled her eyes at the cheerful barb. "So, the day is yet still young. Shall we speak with Jarl Potter and his magical corps, or go find more adventure to be had?"

"More adventure, I would think. Reports can wait for now. Have you ever been white water rafting? I know this one place in the States, and um, we... w-we could go out for dinner afterward?" Dani asked, hesitating as she made the offer, her heart trying to pound its way out of her chest.

Skadi didn't notice her stutter, working over the term white water rafting in her head. "Hmmm. No, I cannot say I have ever heard of this manner of rafting. Though, if it done in water that is raging til it is frothing white, verily does it sound like a challenge to be sure!. although I would probably need to buy a swimming suit or whatever they are called. And I have no idea what kind would be appropriate."

"Oh! I, um, I can help with that too," Dani answered with a smile, trying and failing to hide a blush. As they passed him by, Garm, who'd been warming himself before a crackling fireplace,

looked at her and the goddess of the hunt and let loose a loud snort, causing Dani to round on him, glaring the old wolf into silence.

“Females,” Garm grumbled, shaking his head as he lay back down. All the same, he made very certain to keep his voice down as he did so.

Later that night, Kitty knocked on Dani’s door before immediately opening it and entering, a teasing pout on her face. “Dani, girl! I heard you and Skadi went white water rafting today? Why didn’t you think of inviting me, or the others, that sounds...”

Kitty’s voice trailed off, and her pout quickly disappeared under a furious blush as she took in the sight she’d walked in on, that being Skadi and Dani making out furiously. The two were so lost in one another that neither noticed Kitty’s entrance at all. The two were lying on Dani’s bed, and the Cheyenne girl had pressed Skadi into the mattress with her slim form. Even with the room’s low lighting, Kitty could easily tell both women were naked as the day they were born, the dark reddish hue of Dani’s skin a sharp contrast to the snow-white of Skadi’s. As she tried and failed to look away, Kitty could even see between their legs, which were slowly humping against one another.

“Eep! I, um, I’ll er...” Kitty stammered, then turned, quickly escaping before either woman could take note of her presence. “I, I guess I’ll tease Dani about her leaving the rest us out of her fun later. After she stops having more fun, I guess...”

OOOOOOO

Unfortunately for Harry and his people, while Dani and others had shifted back to enjoying their downtime, Loki and the Wrecking Crew prepared to start acting. The five had gone to ground for a time to throw off pursuit, but now, as the Eye-Binder’s eyes ceased to open, indicating that the attempts to find them magically were petering out, Loki and his four tools were currently having an argument. Unfortunately for Loki’s plans, there were still issues to be solved before they could truly begin.

“I’m sorry, how much time did you say constructing the twelve beacons would take?” Loki asked, stunned and frustrated.

“At least two weeks if I’m doing it myself with only you, Garth and the others as uneducated labor,” Thunderball, a former scholar of gamma radiation, repeated, seemingly amused by Loki’s tone as he used Wrecker’s nickname. “The parts for these beacons of yours aren’t easy to come by, like at all. For example, we’re going to have to steal the Energy Pulse Scanners from NASA and the equivalents around the world or from various militaries. And that’s hoping there are even as many as we need worldwide. The Gamma Adapters I know personally are extremely finicky to construct, and their materials expensive. A Hyalic Dispersal System isn’t really supposed to be used for something like this, but after examining the primary beacon, I can see how it could work, sort of. Yet that still doesn’t take away from how rare those fuckers are. Frankly, building our own from scratch would probably be easier than finding a place outside of

NASA, its equivalents or Stark Industries that might one in storage. Might. And if we're going to do that, we'd need a laundry list of high-end tech, beginning with a—"

"Enough! Thank you, I get the idea," Loki muttered, for once cursing the fact that he didn't truly understand the technology behind the Chitauri beacons. Primary or secondary, how they worked was a mystery to him despite the fact that he had been trained on how to set them up. The fact that Thunderball, as a former professor in gamma radiation, did was something of a mixed blessing. "Still, it isn't the construction time that will be an issue is it? Merely gathering the absurdly rare parts?"

"Oh, it will be. We're looking at stealing some of the parts whatever we do, or building it ourselves, which will be time consuming. But on top of that, I've got no clue how long building these beacons will take. I've never built any similar devices before, not without access to a full engineering lab and a dozen aides," Thunderball admitted. "And that's not considering that all our heists will undoubtedly bring down on us the s overwhelming response we've been hoping to avoid."

"Which is why you need to spill, and tell us more about the Chitauri and what they're offering us to help them invade Earth, Loki," Garth demanded. The group of four super-powered villains had spent the majority of the last four days either gorging on food that wasn't cooked by the lowest bidder or getting up to speed on what had changed in the world since they had been imprisoned.

For each of them this meant something slightly different. Wrecker was most interested in what had been going on with Thor and the superhero scene in general, ultimately coming away with a real understanding of just what they would've had to face if they had tried to stay and fight the X-men. Piledriver had focused on the political side of things... for some reason... while Thunderball had done the same for the tech world. Both had come away awed, impressed by the opportunities available, and worried about their chances in this new world in equal measure.

Meanwhile, Bulldozer had slowly but surely learned how to use the Internet and looked up his longtime girlfriend from before he became a criminal. He'd ended up discovering that she'd had a child since they had last seen one another, one whose hair color and eyes was exactly like his own. To say he was interested in meeting his daughter was an understatement, but only after he'd made it big enough to move her and her mother to a third world country with no extradition treaties where the trio could then live like kings.

Thus Garth's attitude had mellowed considerably. He and the others had agreed that they were all willing to go along with Loki's plans... up to a certain point. But working with Loki to cause some mayhem and agreeing to help aliens invade the Earth was too very different things.

So when he spoke, Bulldozer put all four criminals' thoughts into words. "Yeah, we ain't gonna help ya screw over the rest of h humanity without some assurances as to what we'll be getting out of it."

"Right! Garth might be willin' ta fight Thor again and try ta get revenge for our past beat down, but show me the money baby!" Piledriver announced, with Thunderball voicing a firm agreement with that idea.

"Ah, well then my friends, what is it you all want?" Loki said, smiling internally. "Besides the monetary rewards and Thor's head on a platter of course."

"Tell us more about these aliens' plans for Earth first and then we'll tell you our price," Garth countered.

Still trying to hide a smile, Loki did just that, his words flowing out quite persuasively. As long as they allowed him to speak, he could always turn his words on the dimwitted four. The more they let him fill their ears with honey the less chance they'd ever have of even considering not agreeing. He would promise them the world and they would believe him. After all, Loki was a Trickster God, misdirection and loopholes were in his very nature. *And if they are foolish enough to argue the point with Thanos or his lieutenants when the time comes, then more fools they be.*

Assured that they would all be given high positions in the new alien-led world order as well as getting their revenge on Thor—something of a sticking point for Wrecker more than the others—the conversation then turned back to Thunderball's technical understanding of the parts they needed for the secondary beacons. After all, just one dimensional doorway would not do. To do their part in full, the Chitauri required multiple avenues of invasion. Otherwise, far too many of the Earth's superheroes would still be available to fight the second wave, the Skrull invasion fleet.

Thunderball worked on a list for several minutes, muttering to himself. "Alright, so... this is actually going to be even tougher than I thought. A lot of the circuitry we're going to need is now at a premium on the civilian market. If you could somehow magic up a fortune we might be able to buy the parts and build the necessary control systems, but that would take a while. I can build the Gamma Adapters too, but it'll take time and it's fiddly work. With access to computers and the Internet, it's possible though. The Energy Pulse scanners however, they rely on parts that aren't going to be found on the open market. And unless you let me take apart the primary beacon, I won't know how to build them or the Hyalic Dispersal Systems."

Loki and his pawns turned their attention to other pursuits for a time as leaving the ex-doctor to work things out. Soon Thunderball pulled out an atlas of the United States, then one of the world, muttering and marking down seemingly random locations. A city in France, dots in the states of Florida and Nevada were first. Then, after a few hours of research and discussion with

Loki on the locations of various people in the gamma radiation field, various military bases China, Wakanda, and India were also marked out.

Hours later, a final was placed near the Canadian and US border and Thunderball sighed, finished. "Okay. These places are the only labs playing with energy-pulse transmission. We hit them first, then figure out where to lift the circuitry and other parts we need."

"We'll need ta spread out the heists," Piledriver announced suddenly, shaking his head. "We can't be obvious 'bout what we're lookin' ta steal, otherwise those Custodes bastards and this Potter fucker will figure out where to up the guard."

Everyone else there stared at him, then nodded, as that made sense despite coming from the one they all acknowledged as the least intelligent man in the room. "Hell, even stealing the tech junk alone will be dangerous. That ain't shit we've ever hit before, barring the heist that had Thunderball signing on," Wrecker grumbled. "We're gonna stand out no matter what."

"Hmmm... yes. Spreading out our thefts is a good idea. I think that we can definitely muddy the waters. Indeed, I know precisely how to do so on my end," Loki mused. "As for you all, stealing money and only occasionally going for other pricey items will help for a time. First, let me create a means for us to communicate, and teleportation-enchanted artifacts for us all. Verily, my friends, let us all take today and tomorrow to plan out everything we can about our various tasks. It is better to do this right rather than quickly and poorly."

OOOOOO

Several days later, the Wrecking Crew announced their return to the scene as larger than life criminals in no uncertain terms.

"X-men, we have a situation. Xian and I have been using Cerebro to look for information on the Wrecking crew, and we just picked up police chatter indicating that Wrecker and Bulldozer are reportedly attacking Cape Canaveral," Charles Xavier's voice blasted through the minds of all active X-Men in the mansion, causing most of them to drop what they were doing and race to the ready room. *"Their intentions are unknown, but as per Mr. Potter's instructions, we need to respond to this promptly."*

"Right team, let's get going," Scott ordered. "We'll suit up on the way. Here are the team break downs."

Nightcrawler, Boom Boom, Iceman, and Angel immediately split off as soon as Scott listed their names. Of the second group of teens Charles had accepted into the institute, Bobby Drake and Warren Worthington were the two who were most combat ready. Boom Boom wasn't, but she had good instincts, and had seemingly begun to take the training more seriously. Which was the complete opposite of Jubilee, who Scott and Charles had essentially removed from the team entirely. Unlike Evan, who had officially given notice that he was retiring from the good fight,

Jubilee simply refused to follow orders or work with any other potential teammates, firmly locked in her teenage rebellion phase.

They were joined by temporary member Wanda, who had been seconded to them through an agreement with Strange, and their newest official member Blink as she normally went by. Scott had welcomed her into the team soon after the expeditionary forces had returned to Earth with Charles's backing. While she hadn't had enough time to get nearly as good at hand to hand combat as Scott could have wanted, her powers were deadly enough, and her teamwork was excellent.

Of the expected combatants, the only two missing was Warpath. He was actually out of communication at present, out on an Apache reservation. He and Thunderbird both were there, giving speeches to impoverished Native American youths.

This left Scott, Rogue, and Charles in Cerebro's control room. Almost immediately, Charles bowed out, saying as he wheeled away that he would both call Stephen and contact Harry. In but a moment's time, the the two estranged lovers were alone.

Scott hesitated, unsure of how to proceed, then hesitantly asked, "Are... are you um... up to this? Do you think?" Since her return with her new, monstrous form, Rogue had been noticeably distant, and the young leader of the X-Men still wasn't certain where she stood on being out in public. *Or our relationship, if I'm honest. I know I apologized for my initial reaction to her new looks, but I can still see the hurt I caused her if I look into her eyes,* Scott thought, castigating himself once again for that unthinking reaction from back then.

"Ah suppose A'hm alright with being seen, sugah. Kinda lookin' forward to throwin' down with jailbirds who fought big ol' Thor on an even footin'," Rogue answered, her Southern twang coming out strongly, as she looked down at Cyclops.

When it was all said and done, the effects of absorbing Jörmungandr's vitality had changed Rogue's physical body on a seemingly permanent basis far more than doing so had when she'd absorbed the Juggernaut's powers. Her new height of eight and three quarters feet was eye-catching enough, but her skin having been replaced by scales sensitive enough to act like flesh while at the same time also able to perform like armor even sturdier than the Juggernaut's was startling in its incredibility. Rogue's fingers had also morphed into retractable claws, her mouth now full of small fangs. Her hips had expanded slightly more than would've been proportional to her old body type, her bust as well, although again, both enhanced features were now covered in scales. All in all the Southern belle now appeared like more of a dragonoid from fantasy tales rather than a rebellious goth.

"Ah suppose the main question is, do y'all want a monster bein' on the X-men tah be public knowledge?"

Scott sighed, and then reached forwards, grasping one of Rogue's large, clawed hands with his own. "Rogue, I—I can't apologize enough for how I reacted to your new looks. I know what I did

hurt you, and I should have handled it better, all around. It, heh... it isn't the first time that could be said of me huh?"

Rogue snorted at that, recalling the numerous times Scott had screwed the pooch when Harry Potter had initially arrived at the school.

Seeing that he'd gotten a reaction, Scott went on. "So I know what the taste of my foot is like. But our relationship, you and me? It's still—I know we've been taking the 'feelings and shit' side of things as you call it a lot slower than Piotr and Amara, but that doesn't mean it's all not still very important to me. I... I don't want that one mistake of mine to be what breaks us up. Looking back, I realize I should've come to talk to you the moment you got back, but I—I made excuses, convinced myself you'd need space more than me bugging you. It was cowardly and stupid and a mistake and... and I'm sorry."

"Yer not wrong sugah, it hurt tah see yah look at me like that, and keep yer distance aftah. But Ah will admit Ah was sulkin' when I got back, even before. Hell, Ah wouldn'tah been in a listenin' mood if yah'd tried back then. Prolly would'ah punched yah through a wall 'er somethin'," Rogue answered, her voice slowly softening as she went on. "But Ah'll listen tah yer pretty words now handsome. I know in this form I ain't exactly pretty tah look at, and you'll have tah make it up tah me, but fer now, apology accepted."

"Honestly, if it wasn't for the lack of hair and your fangs, you would be kind of exotic, like a dragon-lady from fantasy minus the wings. Or maybe that one he called, what was it, an Echidna? An Echidna-human hybrid," Scott admitted, flushing a bit. "Er, I mean, I haven't seen everything yet—I mean—"

"Down sugah," Rogue muttered, thankful that the heat she felt in her cheeks was now hidden behind scales. She wordlessly watched Scott's visored eyes trailed down to her breasts, which were now larger than the man's head, then down to her hips, which were equally larger and more filled out than before. "Remember Ah can still break you in half without meaning tah."

"I'd wager we could get Harry to come up with a spell for that, among other issues along those lines," Scott smiled happily, a weight in his chest lightening as he saw Rogue's reaction to his gaze, a splash of red under the lime green scales covering her face, which he knew his lover probably thought was hidden from him.

Rolling her eyes, but grinning right back, Rogue pulled her hand out of Scott's and, feeling playful, lifted him up to tuck him under one arm like a sack of potatoes. "Come on, lover boy, now's not the time fer this. But keep playin' yer cards right, an' maybe we c'n talk about needing those spells another time."

Not thirty minutes later, all thoughts of joking and flirtation were gone from the pair as they and the rest of the X-men flew over Cape Canaveral Space Force Station in the Blackbird. Below them a lot of smoke and fire rose from several buildings within the base, and even from their height Bulldozer could be seen charging into, and through, a group of infantrymen. A heavy

anti-air gun tilted down to point at him, but the empowered criminal just charged through it as well, tearing the gun and its two operators to pieces.

“Nightcrawler, set the autopilot and start evacuating people,” Cyclops ordered, leaving the cockpit after flipping the switch that opened the bay doors. “Blink, transportation and then join Nightcrawler. Angel, Scarlet, scout around the area, find Wrecker.”

With that, Cyclops opened up full power, the kinetic energy beams blasting from his visored eyes into Bulldozer, hammering him from on high and driving him to his knees. “The rest of us, engage at will!”

“Yehaw!” Rogue shouted, leading the way down as Blink created a portal and popped down with Boom Boom. The explosive mutant instantly started to add to Bulldozer’s problems, launching a series of plasma explosives at the large man. These smashed into him like so many mortars, but the villain seemingly shook off the attack as if it hadn’t meant a thing. Snorting, Bulldozer pushed himself to his feet just in time for Rogue to smash into him like a green meteor.

As strong and durable as Bulldozer was with his magical empowerment, Rogue had absorbed the strength and vitality of Jörmungandr, a monster capable of overcoming even Thor, physically strongest of the Asgardians. He cried out in pain as her double-fist blow hammered him into the ground. But surprisingly he came back up, ramming his specially protected helmet into Rogue, who grunted in surprise as she found herself lifted off the ground and hurled away.

Bulldozer made to charge after her, certain in his invulnerability when charging forward. But Iceman had landed by then, aided by Blink. While Blink now turned her attention on evacuating the soldiers who were out of their depth here, Iceman covered the ground around Bulldozer. When he charged forward, Bulldozer instead lost his footing, tumbling into a slide towards his target. “Crap!”

“Yah, not a good look for ya there,” Rogue remarked, before kicking out hard with one of her large clawed feet. The strike struck Bulldozer’s shoulder sending him skidding across the ground with a cry of annoyance, although his shoulders were just as heavily armored as his head. His slide also seemed to be enough to activate the special enchantment on his Juggernaut-knockoff armor, causing him to take no real damage.

Coming to a halt in the side of a building set near the section of the base named the Trident, Bulldozer smashed back into the building, eliciting cries of shock from the people within. “Come and get me, muties!”

“Because ah course the guy who gets his powers from ah magical handout would be a bigot,” Rogue grumbled, eyeing the building with scant favor.

“With me Liebchen,” Nightcrawler ordered, bamfing into existence beside Blink. “Let us remove the rat from his hole.”

Blink nodded and the two of them disappeared, Nightcrawler's teleportation taking them both into the building. The interior of the building was an utter mess, already showing the damage Bulldozer had done by smashing into and through it. Sizeable, and growing, cracks in the wall also indicated to the two teleporters that the villain was in the process of tearing out any support structures he could find, clearly intent on collapsing the building. "Remove the problem, then help the people," the more experienced Nightcrawler ordered, bamfing away from Blink once more.

A second later, Blink heard the sound of metal striking metal, along with a cry of "What the fuck?! What're your swords made out of you shitty fuck?!" from below.

Following the noise of combat coming from the floor beneath her, Blink apologized to a man whose office she soon found herself in. "Er, excuse us please, heroes coming through," she said bashfully before using a portal to remove a hole in the floor.

A moment later, she hurled one of her portal-javelins through the hole, aiming at the top of Bulldozer's head. The portal took Bulldozer, and deposited him outside. "Drat, I had hoped to take him apart."

"Don't mind Liebchen," Nightcrawler called up to her, a grim smile on his face. "My own powers couldn't pull off that helmet either."

Once the two made their way back outside, they found Boom Boom, Iceman, and Rogue working with Cyclops to isolate Bulldozer away from any buildings. Once Cyclops and Boom Boom knocked him away from any potential victims with kinetic blasts, Iceman used his frost powers on the villain and the ground around him, slowing Bulldozer's movements. Between that and his inability to build up any speed thanks to the ice, Bulldozer was forced to rely on his army training to fight the far stronger Rogue, which was a losing proposition. Even after only a few minutes, the beating he was taking began cracking his armor,, and as the two teleporters appeared, Rogue got in a lucky punch, breaking one of his arms and causing him to stumble back with a cry of pain.

However, another cry of pain echoed it from nearby as Angel was blasted out of the sky by a beam of magic. A second later, Angel crashed to the ground, only his armor of yellow Orichalcum protecting him from severe injury, though one of his unprotected wings was definitely broken.

From out of the fire and smoke obscuring much of the base came Wrecker, his crowbar glowing menacingly. His magical weapon aimed towards them and bolts of purple energy, looking somewhat between one of Cyclops' beams and a lightning bolt, but hitting with all the force of an electrified tank round. . As more bolts were flung their way, Boom Boom was forced into cover while Cyclops dove to the ground to avoid another beam.

Above Wrecker, Scarlet Witch decided to make her anger at this treatment of her friends known in no uncertain terms. Innumerable hex bolts lanced down, causing Wrecker to shout in

pain as he quickly became a pincushion. He waved his crowbar around in a poor attempt at defense, though the enchanted item did seem to absorb any magical bolts it came into contact with.

Such a thing did nothing, however, for the spell which impacted the ground around Wrecker, transforming the asphalt into so many spikes, all of which lanced towards Wrecker as one. He shattered them easily, yet by the time he did so, Rogue had crossed the intervening distance between them. The larger and far stronger Rogue barreled into Wrecker, picking him up and piledriving him into the asphalt beneath them.

But Wrecker lashed out just as his head impacted the ground, smashing into Rogue's chest with his crowbar. The blow packed enough punch to send even her stumbling and the next second his crowbar flashed around to scythe Rogue's legs out from under her. Still off-balance from the unexpectedly heavy hit to her armored chest, Rogue couldn't correct her balance, and fell sideways to collapse to the ground. Immediately, she rolled away before coming back up into a shoulder charge. Wrecker held still until the last possible fraction of a second before dodging by a hair's breadth, only to eat an explosion to the face courtesy of Boom Boom. "GAH, damn it!"

A part of Wrecker had hoped that between the two of them, he and Bulldozer would've been able to handle any X-men freaks quickly, without needing any additional help, if any would've even been given considering the fact that Loki and the others were off doing their own things. But at this point, he knew that the two of them alone were going to probably lose. "Bulldozer, time to vanish!"

With that, and still blinded by the explosive strike to the face, Wrecker grabbed at a beaded necklace that had been tucked inside his suit. The necklace was already missing a couple beads, used earlier to arrive and then send off the bit of tech they'd come to retrieve, but still had plenty to spare. Crushing one bead between his fingers, Wrecker activated the enchantment within, and disappeared.

Almost hissing in fury, Scarlet Witch watched as a battered Bulldozer moved to do the same. Her hands moved on impulse, creating a tracking spell, but the man was gone before she could finish. "Oh, you goddamn ass! Grah!"

"Scarlet, calm down. See what you can do to figure out where they went. Boom Boom, stay with her, keep any authorities from interrupting her work. Politely. The rest of us will spread out to do what we can for the soldiers and civilians," Cyclops ordered, sighing as he took in the destruction around them. "If you could even just tell me how they teleported away like that, Wanda, I would still be a very happy camper."

With that, Cyclops turned and led the way to fighting the fires spreading from the various labs and rescuing casualties of the battle, even as he opened his mind to Charles' telepathic touch. *"Professor, if you're in contact with Dr. Strange or Harry, we could a couple more magic-users down here. And some emergency medical and rescue teams too."*

It took Cyclops about twenty minutes to find the individual who had landed the unenviable position of being the highest rank currently available to give out orders. Said individual was a captain, the commander of the Naval Ordnance Test Unit, and had taken command of the disaster. The base's officer quarters had been an early target of Bulldozer's rampage, and that had set the tone for the fight before the X-Men's arrival.

The death toll from the surprise attack had already risen into the hundreds by the time more aid arrived courtesy of the Custodes. Thankfully, when Harry, Jean, and Ororo arrived, and the latter two instantly went to work, that number never raised any further. Between them, rescue teams from the Kennedy Space Center, and the X-men, the fires were soon brought under control and the wounded organized and evacuated.

As this happened, Harry and the officer in charge debriefed on what had happened, from beginning to end, and what he heard caused Harry to scowl. "So they just appeared over the Bennet Causeway? And the rest of the Space Center didn't report seeing them at all? Not from any direction?" *Well, whatever they were here for it's clear the WC are working with Loki. That's a lot of enchanted items they were using. Items, not direct magic, means tracking them will be much harder. Damn it.*

"Bulldozer appeared over there, Wrecker by the other bridge. They bypassed most of the Center's security, and then demolished the bridges behind them. The X-men arrived before any reinforcements could be diverted to come over from the beaches." The middle-aged man reported. The captain had huge sideburns, almost mutton chops, and a glare fit to frighten the dead as he stared out over the wreckage. "I have no idea how they did that or why they were here, but they've cost hundreds of lives, millions of dollars in damages and set back a hundred, if not several hundred experiments. This is a disaster."

Since Harry held the monopoly on space travel in and out of the gravity well, NASA's insanely slow bureaucracy had finally been forced to change direction. Instead of space travel, they'd rededicated themselves to other endeavors: experiments in zero-g, the effects of space on metallurgy, and other various industries revolving around travel or combat **in** space instead of getting there. The experiments that occurred at the Space Control Center now were among the most secret and dangerous the US government conducted.

"Could they have stolen something? Or kidnapped someone? Was all this just a feint for something else in the Kennedy Center portion?" Harry asked, staring at a building a very overpowered Reparo spell had pulled back together from the rubble.

Shaking his head, the captain huffed, looking even more upset. "I have no idea. Give me a day and maybe I'll be able to come up with something. But before that, I heard earlier from a petty officer you'd been on the lookout for these bastards?"

"Not just them, others too. The other two members of the Wrecking Crew, Thunderball and Piledriver, set off on a crime spree at the same time this attack happened, unfortunately. Theirs,

however, happened on the other side of the country though, up in Seattle, Washington. They were able to get away before the Custodes could respond,” Harry scowled angrily. “Trust me when I say that this will not happen again.”

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Harry’s growled vow was broken the very next day twice over, though the Wrecking Crew didn’t stick around for long either time. Piledriver’s hit and run attacks on banks and random electronics stores were over too quickly for even the few local heroes available—Spiderman in New York, and a man and woman pair in Chicago who went by the aliases Power Man and Jewel—to react in time.

Wrecker and Bulldozer did not take part in these smash and grab sprees, likely recovering from the beating they’d taken at the Space Center. Likewise, Thunderball never showed up either. Unknown to the wider world he was too busy constructing the Chitauri beacons to waste time on such things.

Of course, Loki was also doing his part, though his actions obfuscated what he and the Wrecking Crew were really after more than Piledriver’s ever had a hope of doing.

Instead of stealing money or tech, Loki went on a string of small break-ins across America and Canada, targeting museums and religious sites, knowing that would throw off the pursuit and whatever they were thinking he might be after. Each time he did so, he would first use his own teleportation spell inward, or a series of illusions and such other magics to cover his presence, above and beyond the enchanted item that he had prepared, which would allow him to use his magic more freely.

However, the Trickster God soon realized that the Custodes’ fast reaction time was not limited to just their mutant teams. Within minutes of his first break-in, Stephen Strange had appeared, and Loki barely got away before being spotted.

The second time, the Scarlet Witch had responded, a woman who he’d yet to see on the news since arriving on Earth. That time, Loki hadn’t retreated immediately, determined to scout out these magic users who were hunting him. Covering himself with a series of illusions and remaining in the area, he watched as the pair helped the local church he’d broken into repair the damage and ask questions. Neither had seemed aware that he was watching them from nearby, but he’d still clutched the Eye-Blinder to him tightly, just in case, and had left as quickly as he’d felt comfortable.

Loki felt that his luck was fading each time he made a move and realized, quite quickly, that the Wrecking Crew was even more out of their weight class against the Custodes Mundi than he had thought. Indeed, as it turned out, his luck was off from the very start.

Entering the latest museum he’d targeted for a nonsensical break in through a hole he’d just made in its outer wall, Loki set the section of the wall he’d cut out back into its place with a

flick, dusting off his fingers fastidiously of the dust and ash he had created. Before he could take two steps, a light came out of nowhere and shown on him, and a voice shouted, "Freeze!"

Loki's response was instantaneous, and a little bit too overpowered for the situation. A blasting spell raced out from his hand, crashing into the individual who had discovered him. The unfortunate security guard had barely recognized a flash of purple was heading his way before the spell struck, causing his body to burst like an overripe melon hit by a warhammer.

Blood and guts went everywhere, and Loki sighed faintly, and some even splashed back towards him over the intervening fifteen feet, getting on his boots. "Well," he muttered as he used a cleaning spell. "Well, even I must get unlucky at some point."

Loki held up his Eye-Binder for a moment and frowned seeing one of the eyes upon it had opened. Shaking off his misgivings, he set it back underneath his shirt and made his way forward. *I believe it would be prudent to hurry. Now then, religious iconography would be where in this hovel?*

Barely out of the first wing of the museum a sound above caused Loki to instinctually dive to the side, dodging a sudden spell of some kind. Glaring upward, he saw the so-called Sorcerer Supreme there, his legs crossed under him as if he was meditating in midair, before he stood, his red cloak flapping in an unseen breeze. "Loki Lauffeyson, blood-brother of Odin Borson, you will be coming with me."

Loki hissed at the sheer arrogance of the human man, although a part of him was wondering how the fool had gotten his history wrong. A smaller part of him, however, wondered why that name and title had sounded... oddly correct to his ears.

It was a strange mental dichotomy, but Loki set such distraction aside and without saying a word began to launch spells up at the man. The Sorcerer Supreme responded in kind, the magical energies meeting midair and exploding upon impact, unchecked power lashing out in every direction.

"I think not," Loki drawled now, holding back the other man's energies back with one hand, while gesturing with the other.

Stephen Strange dodged the resulting explosion from underneath him, shifted to the side, and set to building his own attack spells around him. As he did so, a protective shield formed that held back Loki's attacks.

The two began to duel, several spells flashing between them seemingly without pause. For the most part, both sides stuck to raw magic, molding and controlling the elemental energy by will alone, although over the din of battle Loki could make out the sorcerer was simultaneously using a verbal incantation.

Perhaps it was thanks to concentrating on that spell more than he should've, but Stephen soon made a mistake, moving towards one of the outer walls of the museum instead of staying in the

middle of the high-roofed hall. Before he could get his next enchantment off, a spell sent towards the foot of that wall had the entire thing transform into spikes, which shot towards him.

Those spikes were shattered under a blast of purple and black magic, as another individual arrived, her form hidden at the moment by the shadows in the hall. "Strange, you must get better at reporting these things in the future. 'Break in at the museum' is not at all helpful when there are many such museums in this blasted city."

Loki turned in the direction of the newcomer as Strange answered. "I'm sorry, I thought that speed was of the essence here. Forgive me for not taking the time to write out a full memo."

"Well, we're here now," a new voice said, revealing the arrival of a third interloper, and Loki hastily dove forward to cover as a binding spell flew through the space where he'd just been standing.

Faced with three magic users, each of them equal to his own power if not higher, Loki barely had time to notice that the latest arrival was actually Harry Potter himself before he had to throw up a series of shields. "Defend me, defend me, oh shield of the heavens!" He shouted in ancient Norse.

A second after he finished his incantation, there was a BOOM as Potter's spell ricocheted off a cloud of white energy that had burst from him. Luckily, the stronger the attack, the better that particular shield worked. It wouldn't last very long, but it would last long enough.

"Three of Earth's mightiest magic users for little old me?" Loki quipped, putting a hand on the necklace of beads, along with the Eye-Binder, he had around his neck. "I am truly flattered."

"Since when have I only been a power on Earth, dear patriarch? That is a rather insulting claim for one such as I, even if your mind and memories are not your own," the woman drawled, taking several steps forwards out of the shadows, finally allowing Loki to see who she was.

She stood there, resplendent in red and black armor with a long skirt of some kind, a mixed weave of metal and fiber that fell to her ankles with slits to either side. In one hand she held a sword, while in the other, eldritch magic began to flare from her fingertips. Raven-black hair cascaded down her shoulders and from behind her half mask, eyes of violet flashed as she sent a spell towards Loki. "But worry not. Soon that issue will at least be amended. What happens after shall be up to what your true personality reveals itself to be."

"My dearest daughter, Lady Hela!" Loki intoned, bowing theatrically. The showman in him urged him to put on a display, possibly gain information on his enemies as long as his absorbing shield lasted. He ignored the words his estranged daughter sent his way, they were most likely empty anyway, a strange tactic for getting under his skin. *She might have instincts born from her heritage in that area, but she knows not anything of value to truly use against me. Or mayhap she is operating under the assumption I am being controlled for some reason?*

Regardless, the thoughts of my enemies are none of my concern. And I am a past master at getting under the skin of my enemies...

With that thought in mind, and knowing he couldn't project magic through his own shield, Loki began to trash talk, enjoying having a captive audience once more. "I had seen you a time or two in the news since I arrived back on Earth. And now, seeing you here, with present company in consideration, I have to wonder if some rumors about you being involved in an affair with Potter is based on more than just gossiping magpies. How scandalous, daughter mine, a human and a goddess. For shame, my dear, for shame. Although... given how animalistic your siblings turned out, perhaps I should not be so surprised you gave into your baser desires and began lusting after these lesser beings. However, even accepting that, why you then allowed your object of lust to marry that black-skinned woman is beyond me. Have you no pride in yourself? No pride as an Asgardian? As a goddess?"

"Your words would hold more weight Trickster, if you had ever actually acted like a father. As you are now, you never have, so I believe I am fully within in my rights to tell you to get stuffed," Hela drawled in response, but Loki could hear her teeth grinding all the same.

Seeing that for all her calm appearance his teasing had hit a mark, Loki grinned to himself as he continued to taunt his adversaries, proceeding to plot with the understanding that Hela was the weak link. "And you truly believe that all three of you are needed to deal with me? Are none of you so brave as to face me one on one? Would that not be the honorable thing? Or do you believe that you need to rely on one another to match up to me? I am certain one of your brothers would wish to prove themselves against me one on one."

With that, a very subtle mental spell flashed out unseen from one of Loki's many enchanted items, a spell designed to awaken the baser instincts of an individual, to make them easier to anger quicker to respond to provocation. The spell instantly fizzled out before it could affect either of the men present. Strange's robe seemed to come alive, flowing up to cover his head to absorb the spell before it could hit the Sorcerer Supreme's head. Worryingly, Harry Potter didn't even seem to notice the spell as it washed against him and broke over his skin.

Hela, however, was affected and her response was somewhat gratifying. "He's mine! For all the wrongs he has done my family, I must be the one to bring him down—in! GAH!"

The Goddess of Death shot forward, spellfire flashing from her one hand as her other hand raised her sword. This resulted in her getting in the way of Stephen Strange's line of fire. Realizing that something had happened, Harry shouted, "Wait, Hela!"

As she charged, the absorption shield finally faded. Now free to escape with his magic, Loki grabbed at one of his teleportation beads, crushing it just as his enraged daughter reached him. He disappeared in a flicker of existence, right as a blast of lightning from Harry looped around Hela and seared the wall behind where he had been standing.

OOOOOO

Hela stared at the spot where her father had been standing, feeling a wave of revulsion wash over her. No, no that man was not her father. Indeed, that twisted thing had barely any connection to her at all. But still, but then.... Hela shook her head, self-loathing filling her as she finally realized something had manipulated her emotions. "How did... that was..."

"That was an emotional manipulation spell of some kind, love," Harry said, confirming her thought while Stephen moved to where Loki had been, letting the two of them have their private moment. "We knew going in you would be more susceptible to magic of that nature, like most Asgardians. We should have thought that through before confronting Loki, who among all of the Asgardians would most likely be capable of using that kind of magic. That, and well, despite knowing his memories are still the ones the Shadows replaced or twisted, we didn't think how your knowing the truth would make his falsehoods seem so much more horrible."

"True. I did not think seeing him would be so difficult. I, I was off balance from the beginning at the mere sight of him. And the, the lack of... of recognition, of familial feeling? Any bond at all?! Despite knowing that his mind would not be his own, I had thought that Loki would at least acknowledge me in some manner? And... and I find that I yearned for it, as if I were a little girl again. And then his words on my brothers cut me to the quick, in a way I had not anticipated, and primed me for that blasted spell. Bah!" Hela shook her head fiercely, trying to push her momentary weakness aside.

"Easy, milady," Harry whispered, enfolding her in a hug ignoring her murmur of 'not in public' for the moment. "There is no shame in what you're feeling. Seeing someone you have recently unearthed fond memories of, someone who you well, loved, looking back at you without any such thing. I remember how it hit when Emma and I barged in to speak to you in Hel after the Shadows had gotten their hands on you. We were only friends then, and it was still jarring."

He snorted. "And you didn't take advantage of my being off-balance because, Emma was Emma and that threw you off balance in turn. Honestly, I don't think I've ever thought flyting was your strong suit my lady. Your thoughts are too direct for it."

Harry's tone made it clear he thought such a thing was a very good thing, and Hela just barely stopped herself from preening as her Seidr-man went on. "As for his words on your brothers,, you've only recently become acquainted with Fenris, the real Fenris, so it's understandable that any attack on that connection strikes at both your pride and feelings."

"Aye, I suppose you speak true. I will just need to keep control of myself in future. Until we can begin tearing away at the changes the Shadows wrought to his mind and body, and mayhap even return Loki's memories to him, he will remain our enemy." For a moment more, Hela leaned her head into Harry's shoulder before leaning up and giving him a quick, chaste kiss on the lips.

That was all she would allow herself with any others beyond her sister wives present to observe. *Future sister wives rather, as he and I have yet to wed.* Then Hela began to chuckle as a thought belatedly occurred to her. “You do realize that if we do capture my father and turn him back to his original self, or as good as, you will have to ask him for my hand? When you do, we will have fulfilled Old One Eye’s prerequisite on allowing me to wed you?”

Harry paused at that, and a wry twist came to his lips. “Now on the one hand, that’s mildly terrifying on several levels, both as a man asking a father for his daughter’s hand in marriage, and with regards as to who Loki should be. On the other, I cannot deny I can’t wait to do so. And considering I’ve gotten lucky about the whole in-laws thing so far, I suppose having the Trickster God of Asgard as my father-in-law is simply karma coming due.”

Unfortunately, while Stephen was able to trace Loki’s initial spell, once more, it ultimately led them nowhere. The location seemed randomly chosen, a mountain in Greenland of all places. While Harry was somewhat tangentially interested in the massive island given the resources Reed had once mentioned it might contain, there was nothing within easy reach that would interest Loki or any other magicals he knew of.

From that dead end, there were no more traces, and after several minutes of fruitless searching, Stephen and Harry were again somewhat annoyed. “He crushed a bead, which acted like a portkey, except the item needed to be destroyed to activate it rather than there being a verbal trigger,” Harry murmured, scowling as he ran through the known facts. “But those can be traced like the one we traced here. Why can’t we trace the next one?”

“The arriving splash, as it were, of the first washes out the magical jumping point of the second,” Stephen murmured, staring around them. He and Harry had hit themselves with heating charms when they’d arrived, while Hela had not, and the goddess seemed to be reveling in the cold just as she did back in Camelot. “Do you think he planned that?”

“Almost certainly,” Hela asserted, sounding almost proud that even as twisted as he was her father was still capable of such devioiusness, yet at the same time such an achievement vexed her. “Remember, unlike most Asgardians my father is like Odin, Freya, and myself. He’s a well known seidr user, with centuries of experience, and very guileful above all that.”

“True. I suppose we should’ve gone in with the understanding that we might not get lucky so quickly,” Harry said with a nod. He sighed as Cory appeared once more.

“Master, you—” Cory choked to a stop, shivering in the cold before Harry interrupted, laying a hand on the short house elf’s head.

“Yes Cory, I know.” He shook his head, looking over at Stephen. “Keep me apprised of anything you and the others discover. That is, I trust that you will continue to help with this matter?”

“As this situation directly impacts the use of magic upon non-magical beings here on Earth, for once your business falls directly under my purview,” Strange answered with a nod and a bit of

snark. "My domain might have been lessened since your arrival Harry, but this sort of thing is still my calling."

"Thank you Stephen," Harry sighed. "For now, I need to get to a meeting... unfortunately. I don't know why, but no one ever mentioned the unending meetings when they talk about attaining great political or social power. Responsibility? More like with great power comes a great deal less free time, and a great deal more meetings."

"It doesn't scan well does it?" Stephen answered, chuckling as he gestured Harry off. "And more power to you, my friend. I doubt I'd ever wish try and juggle everything you have going on. But if you could, kindly send a message to your hunting team? I'd like to know if there is anything here they might be able to discover along the physical aspect of things."

There wouldn't be, but despite that, the search for the rogue Asgardian and his quartet of minions continued.

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On the other side of the line, speed continued to be the key to the fivesome's success, the only thing that saved the small group from being overwhelmed. However, when the Wrecking Crew went after their next few high tech parts needed, this time in teams of two, that same speed turned against them. The first to realize this were the pair of Thunderball and Piledriver as they attacked the Higher Energy Technological Institute for the Betterment of the People's Party in Tianjin, China.

"I have to wonder just how these criminals have been breaking in so quickly before their magical signatures register to Strange. Don't you? He's not that busy is he?" Magma muttered. She was leading this team, as all of the higher ups were busy with various things, and they'd been pinged to make haste to the Institute as quickly as possible. *And Harry's day is going to be getting a lot busier after this.*

"No, he is not. It's possible that their means have nothing to do with magic however. Elseway I cannot image how they arrived here in China without setting off some alarm. I do not believe they would be able to blend in. Perhaps they were able to find a location inside this institute to teleport to? I am still uncertain as to how much magic the Asgardian Trickster can use without triggering the Eye of Agamoto's wards," Clea suggested. Since Harry and Ororo were both busy, she'd been seconded to the team for the day. Wanda, likewise, had been sent to back up the X-men. "That he can hide at all from the All-Seeing Eye at all is worrisome enough though."

"The amount of planning that implies worries and annoys me," Magma murmured, unknowingly repeating Harry's words from days past as she turned to the sorceress. "Try and see if you can figure out how. If you cannot, pull back and set up all the wards you can. I know those are hit or miss, but if we can block them our quarry from escaping we can take them." *And I doubt we need a magical powerhouse to deal with only two of the Wreckers.*

Clea nodded and with that, the team arrived above the sprawling institute, where fires and smoke could be seen running rampant. The popping cracks of small arms fire in the distance, and periodic explosions, told them that the two Wrecking Crew members were still around. While maintaining their invisibility, the magic carpet flew low, and then Magma saw their targets, the two racing out of a building that burst into flames behind them. "Cannonball, now. Husk, Colossus, split and follow."

Instantly, Cannonball blasted off the carpet, launching himself downwards and catching both of the present Wrecking Crew members one after another. Of the pair, Piledriver turned at just the right split second to take only a glancing blow while Thunderball was sent flying.

But a second later Piledriver was driven to his knees by Husk, who hammered out several hard blows into his upper body, having shifted into her metal form. However, unlike Thunderball, Piledriver had previously had some training in combat. All it took was Husk being a little too slow to pull an arm back, and the far larger man saw his chance to grab her. Picking Husk up, he flung her into the wall of the nearest building, tearing a gasp from her as her back shattered concrete. The hand grasping her steel arm then began to twist. "Ya think yer hot stuff, bitch, but Piledriver's gonna pound you into the ground! Shit, maybe ya'll even like iiiiiiiiiITTTAAGGHHH!"

The criminal's words warp into a yowl of pain as a bolt of tectonic energy crashed into his back, searing through his enforced uniform and leaving a large second-degree burn despite his above-normal Asgardian disposition. Piledriver reached back with both hands in a futile attempt to assuage the searing agony, releasing Husk, who dropped to her feet. Instantly, her leg struck out against his own legs, taking them out from under him. At the same time, several shots rang out, and high velocity rounds slammed into Thunderball with such power that the very ground shook under the man. The shock of this assault was enough to send him backwards, and his wrecking ball missed Colossus by a wide margin.

Since all four of the Wrecking Crew were pretty much bulletproof, Coyote, Uzume, and Ghigau had planned accordingly. They hadn't bothered with their rail guns, having learned that such weapons had to be very carefully aimed to affect high durability targets like stone or fire Jotun, and figured that the same would be true for the four pseudo-Asgardians. Instead, after the breakout from Final Destination, the trio had gone to Jean with requests for a different type of ammunition.

The result was now blinding Thunderball, who was really having a very bad day. The exotic rounds from the sharpshooters had taken him in the face, covering it entirely with what looked like... well, to many of the younger members of the Custodes it looked almost like the sentient substance Flubber, from a movie that had come out in theaters a few months back. Or perhaps its evil twin, given that the substance was grey and dark brown in color, and seemed intent on sticking like concrete to its new home.

Blind and slowly suffocating, Thunderball grabbed at his necklace, his fingers scrambling but ultimately pinching one of the beads there. Destroying it with frantic haste, the magic activated and a moment later, he disappeared.

Colossus, bereft of the target he'd been about to finish off, instead, charged into battle against the semi-recovered Piledriver. The Russian slammed hard blow after a hard blow into the criminal's face, never once letting up. Taking the opportunity presented, Magma launched her own bolts into the mix. As they teamed up on Piledriver, louder booming sounds from above told both that Cannonball was coming back.

However, while Piledriver was stubborn beyond a fault, he wasn't a complete idiot. Instead of continuing a fight he wasn't sure he'd be able to win, he leapt upwards, jumping to the rooftop of a nearby apartment complex to escape. By complete accident, this allowed him to dodge evil-Flubber bullets from Coyote and Uzume.

With the Custodes after him, he climbed up the side of the building like a monkey, evading Colossus and Husk for a moment before the large Russian took off after him. Showcasing his gymnast background, Colossus bounded up the side of the building even faster than Piledriver had.

Ultimately, it would prove for naught, as while he climbed, Piledriver also grabbed at the necklace under his shirt. Not even looking at what he was doing, he pinched one of the beads between two fingers and crushed it, disappearing and reappearing an instant later in a desert somewhere. Alone. "Well, fuck. Goddamn it, what color did the others say we were using as our base now? Shit!"

Back at the Institute, Colossus could only glare at where Piledriver had been before cursing under his breath in Russian. Gritting his teeth, he dropped back to the ground, and took stock of the rest of his team. Calls for status reports came back mostly positive, one of the only good things that had come out of the encounter.

The only one who even reported being battered around the edges was Husk, whose arm had been wrenched badly. But even as she revealed her injury, the country girl peeled out of her steel form, a grimace of pain on her face the only trace of the wound's existence as underneath warped steel was revealed to be pristine flesh and bones.

However, Magma barely paid attention to the rest of the team, as she turned away from her team and instead walked towards one of the nearby surviving soldiers, who just so happened to be shouting something into his battered walkie-talkie. In the distance, the Neo-Grecian could hear the rumble of nearing tanks, and so Magma decided to try and nip a possible incident in the bud before it got worse. In Chinese, she announced, "We are the Custodes Mundi. We responded to a supernatural threat we detected going on here. The situation is over. We will be leaving now."

“You will not be going anywhere, enemy of the State! You will all surrender now! You and your men will pay for your part in this madness!” The officer shouted back, eyes bloodshot and wide. Waving a hand at her, he gestured towards a group of nearby soldiers who’d been cowering nearby while the battle had been going on. “Get them!”

Sighing, Magma raised a wall in front of the soldiers. Turning back to the rest of her team, she jacked a thumb over her shoulder at the obscured soldiers. “Time we left crew.”

Without a word, Coyote deftly brought the magic carpet down toward the rest of the team. Once they were all aboard, the various enchantments on the magic carpet went to work, turning away the attention of nearby people even as they shimmered into invisibility and ascended into the air.

Despite the fact they’d left without issue, distant cannon fire still erupted as a mortar team and several tanks opened fire at where the battle had been going on a moment ago.

“All in favor of not responding to any more incidents in China raise yer hand?” Paige snarked, as Cannonball zoomed through the air, alighting on the magic carpet next to the others, heavy machine gun fire tracing up into the air behind him before falling away as he was enveloped by the carpet’s magics. “You’d think they didn’t like us or something.”

“Clea, tell me you have something?” Amara asked, ignoring Paige’s attempt at humor, looking over to see the sorceress was doing something... sorcery... with her hands. There was a promising spark in her eyes—

“I do,” Clea announced eagerly. “We can go after them now.”

“Call it in. And Paige, that sounds like a fantastic idea,” Amara growled.

OOOOOOO

At the same time that Piledriver and Thunderball were teleporting out of China, the other two Wrecking Crew members were also hastily retreating from a brawl with Alpha Flight and the X-men in which they had likewise been doing quite poorly in. Although Wrecker could create illusions with his crowbar, they couldn’t hope to fool Scarlet Witch or Hela, who had decided to join the team on that particular mission. And although he was super-strong, enough to fight Thor on a near-even footing, so could Warpath, who hadn’t been part of the Wrecking Crew’s first battle with the X-men. His force field, as durable as it was, could be overcome, not to mention it was slow to expand. Worse, the heroes outnumbered him and Bulldozer again, just as they had at Cape Canaveral.

The only saving grace for the Wrecking Crew was that Storm and Phoenix hadn’t shown up as they had prior engagements.

Jean had a meeting with Reed and Forge regarding finalizing the first human-designed spacefaring capital ship . Ororo had a meeting with the board of education for the Savage Land,

soothing some concerns from parents who were leery of Pinoptes' central position in the Savage Land and Fortress Mars' educational systems.

Loki too was having issues, although much worse than his patsies. He had run into Harry Potter. Again. Fortunately, this had occurred at the height of the local tourist time, and Loki's quick thinking and numerous hostages had allowed him to get away, despite being mildly crisped around the edges. Still, he came to realize that Potter was now biting at his heels with even more tenacity than the other teams were after the Wrecking Crew.

OOOOOOO

When the next set of smash and grabs occurred, Harry and the other magical members of his various teams arrived on the heels of their disparate opponents teleporting away, which caused something of a scrum as bodies slammed into or piled onto one another.

"OW!"

"Get your elbow out of my face!"

"Get your face off my ass!"

"Whoever just touched my tit better own up!"

This is most undignifIIEEDDD!"

"Oops, sorry teach, didn't mean to headbutt yah there."

"GRRRR!!! If whoever doesn't stop rubbing my fur the wrong way I will start biting!"

For a few moments chaos reigned until Stephen managed to cast a spell and the various bodies all tangled together began to separate and hover in the air. A few moments of apology and reports followed, and Harry and Stephen began to trace for more teleportation spells.

Unfortunately, their search came up with multiple spells, all going off in different directions.

Quickly taking charge, Harry ordered Wanda and the rest of the Custodes Mundi who had fought Thunderball and Piledriver previously to follow one lead. He directed Clea and Stephen to follow a second. Phoenix, Storm took the Proudstar brothers to follow a third trail.

Meanwhile, Harry claimed the last with Hela and Garm.

"Wait!" Ghigau shouted a split second before everyone set off, getting their attention. Harry and the rest of the admittedly large group turned to where she was crouching by the door to the large wedding suite, along with a shrunken Fenrir. "There's a trail here too. Wrecker at least split off and came this way."

"The scent matches that of one of the ones from the prison. There are others here, but they are so overlapped, I cannot tell them apart," the young wolf added, scowling with annoyance, an extremely frightening expression on his lupine face.

“Good catch you two. Garm, join Danielle and Fenrir.” Harry ordered hastily, changing his plan. “You three together would be a better mix of tracking and power against whoever you end up tracking.”

The older wolfed scowled at the idea of not hunting beside his mistress. The pup and the baby Valkyrie didn’t need him. He made to object, but Hela lightly cuffed him on the back of the head with a snort. “Do it, my wolf. Now is not the time to argue. Let us all quickly follow our trails as best we can. Hopefully one of us will get lucky.”

Such hope was dashed as when Harry and Hela soon followed the trail of the portkey-like enchantment Harry had chosen, all they found on the other end was an empty warehouse somewhere with the note ‘Better lUck neXt Time’ sitting in the middle of the floor. Glaring at the taunt, Hela raised a finger and set the crate it was attached to ablaze. “Such an irritating man!”

Ignoring the flickering flames, Harry attempted to use his tracing spell again, hoping that he could just keep on the trail long enough for Loki, or whoever they were after currently, to run out of enchanted beads.

Unfortunately, that would not be the case. That first teleportation away from the suite they had arrived in turned out to be a red herring and ended there. Harry took a brief moment to step outside the warehouse to discover where they were, an industrial district somewhere filled with similar-looking warehouses, before teleporting back to the suite using Ororo’s method with Hela in tow.

When they arrived back, the two discovered that they were not the first to return. Wanda and her group had also returned, and were completely drenched to the bone, save for the redhead herself who was only half wet. As soon as her feet hit the ground, Wanda hastily conjured up some towels, but after chattering teeth caused her creations to fall apart upon forming she called for several of the house elves to pop to her with towels from Camelot.

“A dead end, I take it?” Harry asked, his own frustration at having chosen the wrong trace to follow lessening as he took in how bedraggled the rest of the Custodes seemed.

“Very much a dead end. It dumped us about a foot over a body of water. Hells, even Cannonball didn’t have time to activate his powers before we splashed down! And the water was so freaking freezing! If it wasn’t for Colossus grabbing me at the last second and tossing me up before I went under, I might’ve been too cold to concentrate on any spellwork to get us out of there,” Wanda grumbled. “I didn’t even know that it was possible to do that with a teleportation spell; appearing midair over someplace without any discerning features or anything like that.”

“Loki’s ability to enchant items with teleportation spells seem to be almost a perfect cross between my own portkey spell, and Ororo’s, longitude and latitude based spells,” Harry mused, calming down still further as he contemplated the magic involved. Hela exchanged a nod of

greeting with the Colossus, who among all of those who'd taken a dip in the drink didn't seem to be bothered by the cold. The goddess also noticed that Ms. Guthrie appeared to be in some sort of rocky form, although what type of rock would have been appropriate to turn into while plummeting into the ocean, she couldn't fathom.

A moment later, Jean and Ororo appeared, the two leaning on one another, shaking snow and ice off of themselves as they looked around. "Near the top of the Tibetan mountains," Ororo reported, shaking her head. "It was quite a beautiful spot, but horrendously cold and low on oxygen. And Wreckers."

Stephen and Clea took the longest to return, and by the time they did, Dennis had already reported in on an interesting piece of breaking news that explained exactly where they'd ended up. "The personal bedroom of North Korea's dictator, was it? How tempted were you to just overthrow their whole sham of a government when the little fool ordered you to be detained?" Hela asked with a snicker.

Stephen, slightly more professional, than Clea, who was grining, snorted at Hela's question, though Jean and Ororo looked quite annoyed. North Korea was one of the few places that remained on Earth that was very staunchly anti-progress, anti-Potter, and anti-mutant. Stinger's retrieval teams had been called to the isolated country a number of times over the past few months, although thankfully that seemed to be less and less the case as time went on. New mutants just weren't showing up there as much, not in comparison to North Korea's very large neighbor to the north, west, and southwest.

That being said, both women still looked as if the idea of overthrowing the pathetic bully boy greatly appealed to both of them now that Hela had brought it up. Regardless of what issues doing so would undoubtedly cause.

Harry, wise to his ladies' minds, looked at the two and winked, all but agreeing that he too would have been incredibly tempted in their friend's shoes.

But Stephen replied in the negative, and further explained that he and Clea had been able to talk the pajama-wearing dictator down. "This was after, it has to be admitted, we threatened to 'beam' him up into space," Clea added, snorting a little as well.

Yet despite the moment of levity, the general consensus was a feeling of resigned annoyance. "Loki might be a Trickster God, but even so this is most annoying," Ororo announced, looking over at Hela. "I am sorry love, but your father is making me very frustrated with how easily he can give us the slip."

"Actually, I doubt it's that easy for him. I think what we're looking at here is the fruit of a **lot** of preparation. That and detailed knowledge of what he might face..." Harry murmured, not noticing that Stephen was nodding along with him due to a thought sparking up into an epiphany. Suddenly, his eyes began to gleam with mirth, and he held up an arm.

A moment later as those gathered looked at him like he'd lost his mind, Hedwig appeared in the air above him. Blink, and most of those others who knew the ins and outs of teleportation, stared at the beautiful snowy owl with wide eyes, all of them curious as to how her ability differed from their own and what Harry was doing.

Ororo, however, had already gotten the idea. "You think that Loki wouldn't have thought to block whatever ability Hedwig employs to find people? That would be a magnificent joke if so."

"It's not so much he might not have thought of it, as it is he has no idea how it works. Anti-screaming or warding spells, and even runic arrays, against being found or against teleportation all depend on having knowledge of the type of act you wish to block. Loki might have worked out how I could go about finding him, but Hedwig is extremely unique, one-of-a-kind, even. There's no way he'd be able to understand her skill set, if he even knew about it in the first place. So what do you think girl, do you think you can find this trickster for us?"

Hedwig puffed up proudly on Harry's forearm, precking loudly. Without further discussion, Harry began to write out a note. It was common knowledge, at least in his original world, that to find someone else, a messenger bird like Hedwig had to be given a message for that individual to deliver. As he worked, Ororo stood by, preparing her own means of teleportation, waiting for the coordinates she would hopefully soon receive to discover their enemy. Simultaneously, Stephen and Wanda set about casting a spell that would give them the coordinates of where Hedwig had gone once she returned. While Harry could have undoubtedly been able to teleport the hunting party to her position using Hedwig's sight and memory, that would've take a few moments to complete. Given the runaround that Loki had already set his pursuers through twice now, none were sanguine with the idea of giving him any more time to prepare or escape again than absolutely necessary.

Moments later, Hedwig had a message to Loki held tightly within her talons. With one last preck, she leapt into the air, disappearing an instant later.

OOOOOOO

While the Custodes were pursuing them, the Wrecking Crew plus one Asgardian trickster had come together once again in a villa in Mexico City. However, no sooner had they all arrived before Loki ordered them all to flee once more using more beads while he fled on foot with Wrecker. After hurried and angry grumblings, the other three villains disappeared.

Alone, the two scrambled to leave the suite and duck into the next building over, under a series of illusions courtesy of Loki of course. Then, the two took a trip into the sewers culminating in the release of several odor bombs and another teleportation bead.

The bead took the two of them to another suite in Nice, France, where Loki immediately sprawled onto a sofa. Rolling over, he stared at the battered faces of Thunderball and Piledriver before looking over at Bulldozer who seemed a little fresher, if just as haggard. "I hope that none of you will argue further regarding our need to avoid challenging the Custodes directly?"

“Yeah, no shit. And what the hell happened to you?” Bulldozer snorted, looking at the somewhat flash-fried appearance of the so-called God.

“Let us just say that I too ran into ... issues... and that I am very glad that I took the time to prepare so many different teleportation beads. Otherwise, a number of us would have been caught in that nuptial suite earlier today, given it appears as if we all were forced to flee rather hastily. A pity, I quite liked that city, it had elegance,” Loki groused somewhat mournfully, scowling as he made to sit up. He stared grimly at the four muscle-bound morons he’d stuck himself with. “We will need to wait a bit while I make more of them, or else...”

Loki’s words died as the Eye-Binder that he kept around his neck began to warm against his skin. He reached into his shirt, pulling it out only to stare as the object’s many eyes began to open, one after another. *Wha—How? This is supposed to stop people from finding me at all. Full stop. Scrying, divination, summoning, all of it! But if those eyes are opening, then someone has discovered a means to locate me it cannot block! The enchantment is collapsing!* Standing up abruptly, Loki shouted, “We must flee! Somehow they have been able to track us. Red!”

At once, all of the Wreckers grabbed at a red bead from their necklaces as ordered, crushing them and teleporting to the same position. Said location was the same city in Portugal where Loki had first begun his journey across the European continent. For a moment, Loki allowed himself hope to enter his heart, that his fast thinking would be enough to throw off the trail of whoever or whatever had found him.

It was not to be. Not even three minutes later, the same heat came to him again, the Eye-binder growing warm in his pocket. He pulled out the object and watched as still more of its eyes began to open. “Green!”

The moment the world stabilized around them again, Thunderball shouted the group’s growing frustration. “We can’t just keep running! Fuck! We only got two of the colored beads left, so unless we want to split up again—”

Hissing, Loki snapped into action. Reaching up to his head, he pulled out several strands of hair with one hand while reaching into an expanded bag for what looked like a doll of himself. He stuffed the hairs into the doll, then marched over to Wrecker and tugged out a piece of his air, ignoring the man’s furious look and loud cursing. Hunching over, Loki did something to the taken hair that wound it around itself in a dizzying display, ultimately culminating in a ring of hair on his finger.

“Because that’s not disturbing at all,” Bulldozer muttered, shaking his head. Loki then barked out a command to break the Yellow beads. As the four Wreckers fumbled for another of their dwindling beads, Loki stuffed one of the random beads into the mouth of the doll of himself.

This time, the group appeared in the city of Milan. As soon as they landed, Loki began to cast spells on the ring of hair on his finger. Other dolls, looking much like the Wrecking Crew, shimmered into existence. “This might not hold them off for long if whoever is attempted to

discover me simply switches targets. You all, de-power, head out, and see if you can find some random hairs somewhere. They need to be human, but other than that...”

The four men looked at one another, more than one carrying a mutinous look, before Wrecker’s scowl deepened and with an effort, his power flowed back into his crowbar. Reluctantly, the others touched the tool as well, willing their own power away. Thunderball and Bulldozer both grunted when the full weight of their enchanted items hit them without the added strength the crowbar had provided them. Groaning, they set their enchanted items on the bed and stepped back. Moving quickly, Loki transfigured the four’s clothing, which had reverted to prison garb once more, into simple jeans and blank T-shirts.

In the end, even magically cleaned up, Piledriver still looked a little too much like a criminal thanks to a permanent sneer on his mug that only a mother could love. So he stayed behind, while the other three headed out quickly.

By the time the trio came back with several dozen hairs, Loki had finished creating more dolls, using a modified trick that warriors routinely employed to keep curses and foul things at bay while at war in Asgard, each taking the appearance of one of the Wreckers. *They won’t last forever, but they should last long eno—or perhaps not!*

Even as he prepared the dolls that very second, his once magnificent working, his Eye Binder, began to act up once more. “We are out of time! Three random this time, then the green.”

Several hours later, the group of five would meet up once more in an expensive mansion, this time on the outskirts of the Canadian city of Edmonton. All of them looked bedraggled, and the four Wreckers did not relax until Loki announced that they could not be followed any further.

At that, a palpable feeling of relief swept through all of them, and the four supervillains looked at one another as they began to laugh, slightly hysterically. They had been defeated by Thor and the Fantastic Four before, sure, and knew they weren’t the top of the food chain. But being hunted like this, especially after being so overwhelmed as they had been in their battles against the superheroes?

It was humbling, and these were not men who appreciated being humbled.

“What the fuck are we gonna to do now? We can’t even knock a place over cause we’re afraid of being jumped on so quickly! There’s no way we can go through with your plan Loki! Hell, I don’t think we can even keep living like we had been; taking what we wanted when we wanted,” “Or at least, not for long. Fucking capes,” Garth grumbled, leaning back in one of several large soft chairs scattered around the sitting room.

Nearby, his three fellows were going over the bottles of hard liquor and wine stacked along a rack bolted into one of the walls. Watching them, he idly wondered just whose mansion they were in at the moment. But then, he really didn’t give a fuck unless it added to their troubles.

“I believe that we will need to continue to use sleight-of-hand to our advantage my friends,” Loki finally said grandiosely, waving a large stein of something in one hand. Where he might have gotten it, none had noticed, nor cared. Unlike the four Wreckers, the Trickster seemed almost cheerful, his eyes alight with a fiendish sort of delight at how he’d been forced to think so quickly on his feet. It had been quite a long while since he had felt so challenged. “Tell me gentlemen, do you know the first rule of being a stage magician?”

When all he received from the Wreckers was looks of confusion, he sighed theatrically. “You get a crowd’s attention focused on one hand. Meanwhile, the other is the one doing the actual magic. Thunderball, how many beacons could you create from what we have now?”

“The term you’re looking for is ‘build’ and four. But we could raise that to six if we could get our hands on a bit more circuitry parts like motherboards and such. And we’d need one more Hyalic Dispersal system,” Thunderball answered, dumbing down the needs to fit his audience.

Loki bit his thumb, thinking over his options. While the chases they had all been forced to lead the local defenders on were worrisome, the battering the four Wrecking Crew members had taken were brutal, and his own confrontations with the heroic magic users proved that they were well out of their depth, such would not do as an excuse to Thanos. And the last thing Loki wanted was for Thanos to be displeased with him when he arrived.

I want them to have a very hard time of it, obviously, but there is a vast difference between the subtle art of masterful sabotage and Thanos deciding to point the finger at me for any perceived failures.

“In that case, you four will need to do a bit of non-superpowered thievery. I do not think that my using any sort of large-scale or high caliber magic would be a good idea right now. I can still aid you in with illusions and conjurations though, but only those. Then... well, our enemy has seemed somewhat fixated on me compared to you four. Their response to any of my activities has been... overwhelming... regardless as to their level of violence. So, while you four make with the magic, as they say, I will be our stage hand, using their fixation against them.”

you four can retrieve one more whatever system all together, I think we will have to use that against them...”

OOOOOO

Looking at where Hedwig had drooped on her perch, Harry stroked his owl’s plumage for a moment, calling for a house-elf to prepare a plate of bacon for her. “Well shite. Almost had him. Ah well, you tried your best girl. We’ll just have to play the defensive game some more until they make a mistake.”

“I hate it, but unless we want to waste time and effort to enhance Strange’s Eye of Agamoto, which might not even work, we don’t have any options left,” Ororo said with a grimace. Harry could only nod in grim acceptance.

“Still, I think at this point we can all assume that our quarry is after something more than just fast money or causing mayhem, correct?” At Harry’s question, Ororo, Hela, and Jean all nodded. Emma wasn’t there at the moment; busy with one of two managerial meetings she had that day. “In that case, let’s get everyone together and see if we can figure out what is going on.”

That evening, Harry organized a meeting of his advisors, which was not easy given their various duties. Eventually his trio of military commanders, Murphy, Powers, and now Cesaro, agreed to join him via a video call, their faces appearing along one wall of the meeting hall. Sam joined Cesaro on his screen, Steve was there in person, along with Cyclops and Amara, to speak for the Custodes and X-Men, and Dani for the hunting experts.

This group had, given the inclusion of Fenrir and Skadi, naturally enough become something of a semi-unofficial secondary scouting and tracking team. With Logan and Laura only willing to leave the Savage Land for specific missions, and Morph and Mystique were best kept as special operatives. It just made sense that a new team would form to fill in the gaps. And that was before considering Wyatt and his proven abilities.

The fact that Skadi and Dani were practically joined at the hip at this point was not something Harry felt the need to comment on. Internally, he thought the blushing twosome were easily in the top five cutest things he’d ever seen since coming to this dimension. Although, he did wonder what Odin and the rest of the Asgardians thought about Skadi basically leaving Asgard behind just to be with her new beau, rather than chasing after a powerful believer as she’d originally declared.

Also present in person was Reed Richards. The FF had dealt with the Wrecking Crew before, although Harry had not brought them in on this latest series of attacks save for asking Reed if he had some scientific means of tracking them. He hadn’t, unless they were actively using the magic the WV had been given by the enchanted crowbar. The magic that had enhanced their bodies was untraceable through scientific means.

After giving a brief overview of the breakout from Final Destination as a preamble, Harry then reminded them all about the type of mental changes that had been wrought upon Loki by the Shadows; that instead of being a troublemaker and foil, a mixture of ally and annoyance for the Asgardians, he had been warped into a true enemy to Thor and the others, an active antagonist for the various plays that the Shadows had so enjoyed. “And through interacting with Loki we know the one time we nearly caught him that those mental changes remain. And we also know from experience that, it’s going to take a lot of effort on either Charles, Emma, or Jean’s part to undo them. Jean?”

Grimacing, Jean shook her head. “While my efforts to clear Heimdall’s mind of the Shadows’ influence didn’t quite match up to Emma’s freeing Hela, it was still **easily** the hardest thing I’ve ever done. The Shadows’ touch was insidious, their changes building up over time, layers upon layers. Yet, in comparison to what they had done to Hela, who was only supposed to be a minor antagonist in the Shadows’ plays, Heimdall had been a rush job. It was quick, brutal, and

thorough, but the changes were easily visible, if hard to repair. That's not what we're dealing with here. Emma?"

That was putting it mildly. Even now, Heimdall was not altogether recovered mentally, his memories and perceptions still creating moments of mental dissonance. But Asgard's own healers were more than up to the task of helping him along.

Emma took over then, describing how much effort it had taken to remove the Shadows' influence from Hela's mind and blood. "And that was all while she was being somewhat protected from being completely dominated by the Shadows thanks to her connection to Lady Death. Loki doesn't have any such protection, and we know the changes done to him are even worse in terms of his memory and his place in the Asgardian Pantheon. To wit, he is historically and mythologically supposed to be Odin's brother, not his adopted son. He is also supposed to have bred with a giant named Angbroda thrice but later marry Sigyn, also known as the Victorious Wife. But Sigyn was erased from the Asgardians' minds entirely. And in the Shadow's tales, he hates Thor and Odin, instead of..."

There, Emma paused, unable to come up with a way to describe the mythological Loki's relationship with the rest of Asgard in a succinct manner. Luckily, Harry had thought about it previously, and smirked slightly, interjecting quickly. "You all know how in some histories about the Roman triumphs where a triumphant Emperor would return to Rome and have a parade in his own chariot? But he would be accompanied by a jester or dwarf or slave, whose job was to tell him he too was mortal? That seemed to be the kind of person Loki was for all the Asgardians."

"It is still strange to me to hear of the differences between what we know to be true, yet was false, and what was written about us but is true," Skadi admitted. "That said, given which came to light in the Shadow War, we cannot but admit to the truth. As for your thoughts on Loki, it seems to me a right thought, though Lord Odin's pride would sit poorly with such... which, admittedly, perhaps does match some of the stories Dani has told me of their supposed interactions better; of two wily opponents trying to one up one another in painful, embarrassing, but never deadly ways for they are brothers, and thus family."

From there, Harry asked Dani to debrief the rest about the Hunters' endeavors for a moment, covering the fates of the other criminals that had been killed or recaptured again before asking Reed to speak about the personalities of the Wrecking Crew. This was an aspect of their prey none of the Custodes had gotten a handle on in their brief battles with the group. Fortunately, after fighting them, Reed had made a thorough study of the quartet in an effort to come up with a scientific means to completely cut Wrecker off from the enchanted crowbar that was the source of his powers. A full break obviously hadn't worked although he had managed to develop a serviceable dampening device which the Final Destination Penitentiary had made use of.

“Essentially, the four are... well, normal criminal types. Bulldozer, born Henry Camp, is a bit more complex, as he was a soldier at one point and has an intense loyalty to Wrecker, also known as Dirk Garthwaite, or Garth. The two are both in it for money and fame, plain and simple. They are bitter, angry individuals for whom violence is second nature, and the answer to all problems. They don't get along well with others, although Bulldozer does have a suspected connection to a longtime girlfriend. I doubt we could use her against him, however.”

Eyebrows rose around the room at that, but Harry just shook his head at the normally peaceful scientist's sudden spurt of ruthlessness. Knowing the man as he did, he put it down to the fact this meeting was taking away from family time, not something Reed would actually think to do.

Not noticing the looks he was getting, Reed went on. “Piledriver, Brian Calusky, takes it to another level. Records show he's always enjoyed violence, and there have been a few instances of specific acts perpetrated against teenagers, male and female. I could not find the reasons for them, but there it is. Thunderball, formerly Dr. Eliot Franklin, is a bit different from his compatriots. While a criminal, he is also a scientist, a researcher in gamma radiation, and a decent engineer. Psychological evaluations flag him as having a problematic and inflated ego, and in the past his desire to smash anyone who hypothetically impinged upon 'his' research fueled most of the Wrecking Crew's initial clashes with myself and the rest of the FF.”

“Are any of them the type to think long term?” Steve questioned.

“Dr. Franklin, Thunderball is,” Reed answered concisely. “He's the only one who thinks in terms of the next heist or what the group's overall goals should be. I don't think he's the one doing the planning at this point, but it is possible. I could go into greater detail on their various psyche profiles if anyone is interested, but those are the highlights.”

From there Cyclops and Amara spoke about the various clashes they and their teams had had with the Wrecking Crew, including the three that had lasted the longest to date. The general consensus resulting from this was that the Wrecking Crew could present actual danger to most of the Custodes on account of Wrecker's supernatural strength coupled with his ability to freely switch between short, mid, and long-range strikes. It made him the hardest to get a handle on, but the Custodes, and a majority of the X-men, were used to fighting similar enemies by this point, and experience had proven that if they could just pin the Wrecking Crew down, they would be able to handle them with relative ease.

“We've got the training, gear, and weapons designed to combat enemies of equal or higher weight class. The Wrecking Crew would be out of their league in a small unit combat scenario,” Amara finished.

From there, Harry stood and spoke on the brief confrontation he, Hela, and Stephen had had with Loki, and his personal tiff with Loki that afternoon in Greece. “So it's obvious that the fivesome are working together, but are they working towards one goal, or several? I feel that

we can discount the bank robberies, despite how widely spaced they've been. What are they after?"

"I actually have a partial answer to that one," Dennis answered suddenly, using the room's hard light controls for a moment. A video popped up after a second, showing a recorded security video. In it, Bulldozer and Piledriver could be seen through the crush of the location's bustling locals, moving through the street looking almost normal except for the orange jumpsuits they still wore, of course. The video, Spymaster revealed, was from a security camera of a building across from the bank in India that the twosome had attacked. This was proven a moment later as, caught on camera, the duo transformed and charged forward.

"They can depower and hide themselves as normal civilians, huh? And with Loki involved I wouldn't put it past them to have an illusion that covers their prison garb too," Harry mused, scowling. "Great, just great. I thought they could only get their power straight from Wrecker's crowbar? Doesn't seem that way any longer if that was ever the case to begin with. That annoys me just about as much as Loki's ability to hide his trail so well."

"Let us move on," Ororo suggested, keen to keep her husband from going down that rabbit hole once more. "We need to be asking a few other things on top of all of all of that, unfortunately. First and foremost, has there been any public fallout due to these sporadic battles?, If so, how bad? Also important is the nature of some of their targets. Why that institute in China? Why Cape Canaveral? Were they destroying something specific at those locations, or stealing something equally as rare?"

At that, Sage raised a hand and shook her head. "MJ and the rest of our PR folk are on top of the publicity issue, so there hasn't been any extreme blowback on the Custodes or the X-men. Our sticking around after the Cape Canaveral assault, as well as cleaning up after the one you dealt with today Harry, has especially won us a sizeable piece of goodwill in the U.S. and Greece."

The woman, who like the military men was taking part in the meeting via a video call, paused then looking to Dennis. In the silence,

Taking his cue, Spymaster chipped in. "As for China, we were at least able to convince the Chinese government that our presence and intervention was in no way a move against them, although it's doubtful that the current president and his council will ever look favorably upon us. However, that's more to do with our stance on Taiwan than anything else. That's about as good as we're going to get."

That president was actually the ex-criminal the Mandarin, who had, through political chicanery and social aggrandizement—and a good deal of personal firepower—become an upstanding citizen of the Chinese Communist Party. From there, he'd moved up the bureaucratic ranks at astronomical speeds, and then during the last National Congress he had been nominated to the

presidential position, primarily on the basis of how much of the country's high-tech gear was supplied by the Mandarin via his various shell companies.

This was an outcome that Harry was somewhat incensed by. "We severely underestimated the Mandarin's ambitions, and the incompetence of the Chinese government. The only saving graces is that he is reversing the communist's push to destroy China's history and is a hardline industrialist. Hopefully that means we can at least see some moves towards their society becoming a little more democratic in terms of their infrastructure, at the very least. And you're right, Dennis, I doubt he'll push for Taiwan or anything to do with it, though he'll probably rattle his saber every so often. The last thing the Mandarin will want to do is to come into conflict with us. He knows we'd crush him like a bug."

"Mmm... Crushing that arrogant bastard does sound like an excellent idea... but not right now," Emma mused, though her words belayed the considering look in her eyes. Like Harry, she'd taken the Mandarin failing to hold to his end of the bargains they'd made personally. But now was not the time to deal with him.

"Right. Let's concentrate on the supervillains for now rather than the criminal mastermind turned political powerhouse. Reed, you've had time to process the various avenues of research going on at each of these locations. Can you see any connection?" Ororo questioned, once more bringing the conversation back on task.

"There are indeed a few subjects which the Advanced Institute of the People's Republic were working on that the scientists at Cape Kennedy were also working on, although of course they were not sharing their research with one another," Reed began slowly, looking up from where he had been examining pictures of the two battlefields and lists of the scientists who had died in the attacks. The one from China was incomplete, compiled from intelligence reports rather than official police or federal records. All the same, Reed recognized many of the names he read through. "Specifically, both of them are involved in attempting to create communication methods that will operate in real time over interspatial distances. I spoke to the late doctors Liang and Dr. Fredericks in particular at various points in the past about such work. They will be missed."

Everyone at the table remained silent for a moment in respect for those who had died in the various attacks. In the quiet, Harry wondered if the loss of his peers was another reason why Reed had vocalized using Bulldozer's girlfriend against him in some fashion before tabling the thought as unimportant. What was important was that since the Wrecking Crew had been broken out of prison, they and Loki had been involved in the deaths of at least eight-hundred people, with an undisclosed number more still being pulled out of the rubble in China as they sat in Camelot.

After a moment, Jean broke the silence and asked, "Interspatial means across large distances in space, correct? Are we talking intra-solar or extra-solar?"

“Both. However... Dr. Liang in particular was also studying gamma radiation in terms of utilizing it as an energy source to rival the arc reactors you and Tony developed.” Jean snickered a bit at that, as that was an oversimplification of that topic, but didn’t otherwise interrupt as Reed continued. “The Wrecking Crew’s interest in such tests makes some sense considering Thunderball’s previous occupation.”

Harry nodded and looked over at the image of Bruce Banner, who had been brought in specifically for this purpose. That worthy sighed faintly, pushing his glasses up his nose as he shook his head. “I looked over Dr. Franklin’s notes, and honestly they’re not anything special. He parroted some of my own findings back in new ways, came up with a method of detecting gamma radiation that was really just a miniaturization of my pre-existing design, and was in constant patent battles for his research. Honestly, the attacks on Cape Canaveral and the Institute in China could have just been him lashing out at them using some of his purported research, ignoring the fact that said research was mine in the first place. I will admit that he is a good engineer, but as an honest researcher? He was a hack.”

While Reed nodded in commiseration at that, Jean with an eyeroll of the big brains, took control of the hard-light system within the room, enlarging the list of known experiments going on in both places. The two big brains present went through them one after another, scouring for anything that stood out. Beyond the two areas already discussed however, there didn’t appear to be any specific connection. Coupled with the Wrecking Crew’s earlier spree of smash and grabs, it really did almost look like the criminal group had merely resumed their previous mission of destroying anything even remotely based on Thunderball’s research.

That, however, was not something any of the people sitting around table actually believed for a moment.

“So we don’t know what they might have been after based on the research going on at their targets. Fine. Reed, Bruce, what else could be in these two places that the Wrecking Crew couldn’t have stolen elsewhere?”

“Well, there is the Hyalic Dispersal System,” Reed answered immediately. He reached out and directed the hard-light system to create an image of the device. “The HDS is a piece of hardware that’s time consuming and expensive to create from scratch, and one that hasn’t been even close to mass produced either. There are several applications for an HDS in the realms of energy transferal and output as well as signal communication. Oh. Ah. If we were to use Occam’s razor, then the Wrecking Crew at the least might be after something that centers on one of those applications. I’m afraid I can’t narrow it down further than that with the information on hand, however.”

“Dennis, contact the folks at Cape Canaveral. If this Hyalic Dispersal System was one of the bits of tech Wrecker and Bulldozer stole then they should know about it by now,” Harry ordered. “After all, repair spells can’t repair something that is missing. Given the nature of those beads Loki seems to have enchanted, sending it away would have been easy.”

“What about the other thefts? The ones that Loki has been doing specifically?” Steve questioned, gesturing to the holographic map in front of them. “He hasn’t left as much of a trail of destruction and bodies behind as the Wrecking Crew, but he has been nearly as active.”

“Historical texts and religious iconography mostly, and a very eclectic collection of iconography at that,” Hela murmured, frowning as she ran one finger along her chin thoughtfully.

“I believe I have an idea on that.” Everyone turned to look at Spymaster, and Sir Dennis shrugged his shoulders. “Consider this. If we assume that Loki actually has a point behind his actions, above and beyond muddying the waters for what he and the Wrecking Crew are really after, then he might be looking for some sort of religious item like the one MODOK used against you on the helicarrier, Harry.”

Harry grimaced, as did Hela and Steve, each remembering the Hulkbuster Army incident that had been SHIELD’s final death knell. Specifically, Harry remembered how much trouble he ran into when battling AIM’s hyper-intelligent leader. MODOK had tracked down an item of the Catholic faith that had created a nullification field against all types of magic.

“I remember Stephen and I talking about that kind of thing after the incident ended. Those types of items are supposed to be extremely rare. There might be one in Germany at an ancient history Museum that was stolen from someplace in the Ukraine during World War Two by the Nazis, and of course there might be a few held by the Vatican. Although, if any of you think that we’re going to get any kind of answer from Rome about anything anytime soon well... think again.”

It was unfortunate, but much like with the hardcore Islamists, the Catholic Church and indeed most denominations of Christianity continued to look askance at how integrated magic was in Harry’s dealings, specifically Magical Minds and the potions he sold through the company. They refused point blank to speak with Harry personally, although they still deigned to work with him through intermediaries occasionally. Most important though, was that even as at odds as they were, the Pope had still taken a pro-mutant stance. For that, Harry would put up with a lot of sideways glances and preachers shouting about magic coming from the devil.

Still, there was a limit to how cooperative they were willing to be officially given their religious dogma. Inquiring after the existence of any items that could shut Harry—or any other magic user—down would either give them ideas or be firmly rebuffed. Or worse, the mere act of asking could be seen as a sign that Harry was considering somehow physically moving against the Vatican and its vaults. They were a very paranoid lot, alas.

“MODOK got lucky honestly, becoming both aware of its properties and somehow getting his hands on the thing somehow while I was blindsided entirely. If I’d known such things existed, I would’ve attacked him in a very different manner. Further, I don’t think that Loki would be willing to put up with something like that anyway, being a magical deity himself.”

“Indeed, I do not believe the scoundrel could even touch an item like that. And for certain, the Wrecking Crew would lose their abilities just as Harry did,” Hela spoke up now, adding her opinion to Harry’s.

“What about tracing them via magical output?” Emma asked, her holographic image wavering slightly as she moved, addressing something Harry had mentioned earlier. The blonde hadn’t been able to make it to the assembly physically as she had a meeting in New York in fifteen minutes, and this meeting would no doubt be going far longer than that. “I’m not talking about tracking their teleportation beads, I’m asking about tracking their basic use of magic.”

Every magical present grimaced at Emma’s question, each frustrated at their past failures, but it was Stephen who answered. “In terms of tracking Loki magically, I can sense Loki’s use of magic in the world if the spells he uses go beyond a certain power threshold. Whatever Loki crafted to keep us from discovering his location isn’t perfect. It does slip up if he’s too active.”

As Sorcerer Supreme, it was part of Stephen’s task to monitor magic being used around the world. Using the Eye of Agamotto, he could detect various types and practices of magic, although his gaze could be overcome by sufficiently strong wards or anti-scrying enchantments. He had been completely unaware of Camelot however and remained blind to events within its environs even now. It was by no means a perfect solution either, as the Eye could only function in this capacity if it was embedded in a large scrying array in his lab. If he were using the Eye for anything else, which he did routinely, its ability to warn him of the misuse of magic was likewise limited.

“If we arrive on location quickly enough, we’d be able to track his enchanted teleportation beads. But Loki and the Frustrating Foursome use two or more at a time, making it almost impossible to distinguish the outgoing teleportation from the... splash, as it were, of the incoming one,” Harry said, simplifying an aspect of what made tracking Loki down so difficult. He shook his head. “As for the actual teleportation, we are certain that whatever Loki’s using is not the same as my own apparition, or Storm’s ability.”

Harry went on, a note of intrigue breaking up the annoyance. “However, the beads might be somewhat like a portkey. If that holds true, and we can figure out where they’re going to strike next, I might be able to put down wards that could stop them from getting away once they’re inside the area.”

With that, Jean obligingly began to search for any remaining labs using a Hyalic Dispersal System in their experiments. Official and suspected targets were soon marked on the holographic globe at the center of the table, and Reed and Dr. Banner began to speak over one another for a moment before calming down. “That one in Wakanda just became operational, so no one has much idea what kind of experiments they are running with the system. The one in France though is a military research lab, with equally military grade defenses.”

Nodding, Harry said, "I'll pass on the warnings of potential break ins and attacks through our official channels, though I think I'll deliver the message to T'Challa personally. If he agrees to it, it will only be the work of a few moments for me to set up those wards there just in case."

"So we still don't know what their overall plan is, or how to preemptively track them. We do know where they're likely to show up, so we can at least start laying traps," Steve summarized. "And we've proven that if we can force them into a fight, even the full team of the Wrecking Crew isn't really a match for the Custodes or the X-men."

"Yeah, I have to say they've been kind of underwhelming compared to fighting off armies of Fire Jotun," Scott snarked.

"When you put it like that, it does sound like we can just rest easy. But..." Harry trailed off, and Steve gave him a very jaundiced look, as a chuckle ran across the room. None of those present believed for a moment that that was a good idea.

As they began tossing around ideas of what the fivesome could be planning in the long term, Emma waved farewell from her end, cutting the connection from her end. Just then, one of the house elves popped in. "Master, a lady from the special doorway to the place with the kangaroos has come!"

"Did this lady give you her name?" Harry asked, looking over at Hela and Skadi, who'd been sitting next to Dani. Both goddesses had been silent so far during this meeting as even their abilities being flummoxed by Loki's multiple teleportation technique. "I sent Hedwig through with a message to Thor, but I didn't expect someone to come and answer in person."

"The lady says her name is Freya," the female house elf answered.

Harry's eyes widened at that revelation, and he hastily asked for the house elf to show his visitor up to the meeting room, while Skadi looked a little smug as she curled an arm around Danielle's waist. It was clear the Goddess of the Hunt was more than willing to have the chance to rub her victory into Freya's face, if not simply delighting in touching her lover.

That smug look faded, however, when Freya actually entered the room. The Queen of Asgard took one look at the two of the goddess and mortal pair and began to guffaw loudly, shaking her head in merriment. "Dear child, if thou art trying to rub thy victory in my face, you have failed. For one thing, you forget that I am a goddess of love. So you, a virgin goddess of the hunt finding love in any form is pleasing to me. The fact I saw it coming far before you yourself is also icing on that cake, as they say. Secondly, there is being **worshiped**, as you and our dearest Dani do to one another, and then there is being **prayed to**."

Freya smirked at the younger, now somewhat embarrassed and flustered, goddess with a light smirk on her face. "Danielle Moonstar will be one of my Valkyries, whatever you do, huntress. She can worship you all either of you like, but she will pray to me."

Skadi's lingering embarrassment faded into an angry scowl at that, while Danielle buried her face into her lover's shoulder, muttering under her breath, "Goddess! I'm not listening to this. I'm not listening!"

"You see, she already knows how to pray well enough already," Freya joked, causing a round of laughter from around the table as Skadi ground her teeth.

"Lady Freya, is twitting Skadi the only reason you came personally, or did you have a message you or Old One Eye wished for you to pass on?" Hela asked, her tone dry, if polite, even as her lips twitched upward. She liked Freya and Skadi both, but seeing them at odds, if such a display could be such, was quite amusing.

Freya nodded, sobering instantly as she took a seat next to her niece. She looked over at Jean Grey as she did so, smiling faintly as she gave her congratulations to the young woman for the birth of her twins. Once settled, Freya went on to explain how Loki had been lost within the dimensional rift that had existed between Asgard and Utland, torn away from the interconnected dimensions of Yggdrasil. "Through magic or technology, there are few who would be able or willing to retrieve him from that void. We in Asgard and those in this room are among those who could pull him from that nothingness magically, though I doubt any here would have found cause to do so."

She hesitated a brief moment before going on. "That then leaves a technologically based method. And according to my husband and King, there is a race known to make extensive use of the void between dimensions to come to and fro."

"And here we go," Harry murmured, tapping his fingers together as he leaned back in his chair, staring at Lady Freya unblinkingly. His tone might've almost been whimsical as he went on, but his eyes were sharp. Those around the table exchanged glances and the military officers on the screens cursed in obscene harmony. "Let me guess, they're an aggressive species, right? Who use the dimensional gap to launch invasions against other civilizations?"

"Indeed, it is as you say. According to Lord Odin, who is the only one who remembers, these travelers once somewhat accidentally arrived in Utland, long ago. As is their wont, they immediately set to invade, only to discover their strengths mattered little against the might of Asgard. I know not how their technologies work, but the Chitauri are apparently an extremely aggressive species. Why they would work with Loki is certainly a question, although perhaps that ties into why they rescued him at all?" The Queen of Asgard shrugged her shoulders. "Whatever else he may or may not be, Loki has always been a silver tongued rogue."

"Still, that's enough to narrow certain things down I think," Harry said grimly. "The tech parts are the thing to focus on everyone, not the religious paraphernalia."

"Impossible," Reed spoke up instantly, Dr. Banner backing him up a moment later. "If we're talking about opening a dimensional doorway of some kind, any kind even, the items the Wrecking Crew could have stolen won't do that. Indeed, they would need an insanely powerful

energy source just to send a signal through, let alone open a dimensional doorway. and Franklin isn't smart enough to come up with something like that without resources to build on."

"Which means they probably have both an energy source already lined up. Occam's Razor remember? And anyway, what if all they need to do is send a signal to the other side? Maybe someone on that other side is able to open a door, but just needs to know from and to where? Then the goal becomes merely building a beacon, rather than a whole doorway," Jean disagreed.

Both geniuses winced at having overlooked that, but acknowledged her point.

"Dennis, send out messages to the militaries we have ties with at this point. Sage, talk to Mary Jane; the two of you go through official governmental channels, warn anyone who'll listen that the Wrecking Crew might be working with a belligerent alien power that might be looking to invade the planet directly, in a way that will bypass the Earth Defense Fleet," Harry ordered. "I'll contact Dr. Doom personally. He always requires a... special touch."

As Dennis and Sage nodded, Harry turned to the various screens on the wall. "Generals, Admiral, Sam; put the Orbital Drop Marines on Alert Level Two. All leave is canceled, all personnel recalled, and all training is to be put on hold for now. Start preparing our supplies for a large scale deployment. I want the entirety of the division ready to act when needed. Admiral, General, that goes for you and Fortress Mars as well. I want the fleet ready to leave port at a moment's notice. Keep the Raven Wings ready too, just in case."

"Stephen, are you and yours willing to continue to help?" Ororo asked as the meeting ended and people began to leave.

"Wanda has announced her willingness to stay with the X-Men for now, and so long as she is still taking lessons from Clea and myself for at least half the time we used to dedicate to said lessons, I'm willing to allow that. For Clea and me, we will work to minimize civilian casualties if this invasion comes to pass, and yes, we will also continue to help in hunting Loki and the Wrecking Crew down."

Those who remained all smiled in gratitude at that, and finally Harry stood, politely asking Freya if she wished for a tour before heading back to Asgard. They knew the nature of the threat now, and could prepare accordingly as much as possible, although the original problems of hunting down Loki and his helpers remained.

Immediately after Freya's polite decline and departure, Harry headed down to the Room of Requirement. Using a set of floating gloves, he picked up the large, gray crystal-gem-jewel- whatever it was that he had stored there. Regardless of what material it actually was, the crystalline object belonged to Krakkan, the last god of the Octessence pantheon.

A similar gem, that of Balthakk, had already fed Harry's magical core once before. The withering god had cut off access to himself and his dimension before Harry could drain too much of his

energy though. Similarly, Strange had later reported that he'd felt five other gods of the same pantheon cutting off their connections to similar gems scattered around the world, none wishing to remain open to such an assault themselves and wind up like their lessened peer.

However, Krakkan was apparently too stupid to understand what happened to his fellows. Not that it mattered. Stupid or not, the power of the deity housed in the crystal would serve to throw Harry over the final barrier between himself and deification once again. *Or, if this ritual works, the line between mortal and Titan.* Harry wasn't ready just yet to chance taking part in the ritual, but he wanted everything set up just in case.

Harry worked on the ritual site the rest of that day, postponing several meetings with various politicians to make time for it. Much like the array that had drained Odin, the runes he ended up carving into the ground were set into the image of a star, although the points of said star were rounded instead of sharp, its lines following strict Arithmantic algorithms. However, unlike the Shadow's leaching array, which had only been placed on the ground where Odin had been laid, the Titan ritual called for the array to encapsulate Harry from every direction.

To facilitate that need, the runes thus flowed up off the ground and up into the walls in thin beams made of different kinds of metal. No gold was involved, instead bronze and silver were present in abundance, as they were both magically powerful metals. A few other types of ore were mixed in as well, likewise for their various properties.

Every rune within the array was repeated three or seven times, intrinsically heightening the power both created and contained. On top of that, many runes were filled with different matter, elements that represented parts of the human body; rubies crushed to a fine dust for blood, diamond shavings for skin, emeralds for eyes, wood from numerous trees turned to ash and dusted throughout the array for . The oddest was perhaps the black onyx shards to represent his hair. Harry felt the symbolism began to fray more than a bit with that.

Still, that was what he and Stephen had come up with when they'd collaborated on the array. This, backed by Odin's agreement during their brief conversation, had convinced him he was on the right track.

Other runes had to be filled with his blood. The blood would be kept liquid during the ritual by a natural anti-coagulant—not magic—so that nothing could cross-contaminate it. That bit Harry would do right before performing the ritual, as he had no desire to bleed himself dry just to set everything up.

Finally, there were the three entirely new runes that Odin had created for the ritual. One would be inscribed onto his body directly, the others would be placed where he would be placing his palms. Funnily enough, various magical cultures saw the palms as windows to the soul, almost as important as the eyes.

When he was finally finished, the whole thing almost looked like some kind of eldritch cage, the various runes glittering in the light of the laboratory. Not satisfied, he went over everything,

several times. Call him overly prepared, but Harry knew that if it came down to it, he might not have the time to do so if he were pressed to use the ritual. That being said, when he was finished, Harry knew everything was right. It didn't make him any happier about actually using the ritual though, and he bit back a sigh of relief when he finally exited the Room of Requirement.

To his luck, he found Hela and Jean waiting for him in the hall. Ororo and Emma would've probably been there as well, but he knew that both had previous engagements. Once more, Harry ruefully thought that with great power, came a great need for time management skills.

Jean wordlessly moved into his arms, hugging him tightly. Hela reached out to grasp a shoulder with one hand, somewhat unwilling to be as effusive as the redhead while in a public part of the castle. Even then, many of the Custodes could be found around the place exercising or training in the other rooms on the seventh floor.

"Am I doing the right thing?" Harry asked lowly, unsure. "We've known for a while now that we might need the power I can call upon as a Titan, but now that it might really come to it, just the idea of leaving behind my humanity, even a little bit, scares me now just as much as it did in the moment I could feel it happening after I drained the Dire Wraiths through their crystal thing. What if we're wrong? What if this process isn't any better in regards to allowing me keep my emotions and human connections?"

"That is just fear speaking through your lips Harry Potter, and you know it. Both yourself, Strange, Clea, and even Lady Gaia and Lord Odin—in so many words—have said this way has the largest chance of allowing you to retain your core aspects and attributes even as a Titan," Hela responded, shaking her head. "You are my Seidr Man, and even if you become a Titan, that will not change. I will not let it."

"I fully agree with Hela on this one, Harry. You are the love of my life, the father of my children, and I'm looking forward to decades, centuries even, of adventures alongside you and the others. Titan or not, that is not going to change. Like Hela said; I won't let it! If you get too big for your britches and need a smack upside the head, or if you start thinking humans are beneath you or something stupid like that, you have four ladies here that can do just that."

Hela snorted, making a joke that she was not in any position to do such a thing in terms of keeping one's humanity, but her words fell on deaf ears. Asgardian or not, she had proven herself long before now. Smiling at the show of support, Harry nodded, feeling better for their reassurance. For now, he'd throw away his doubts. Placing his arms around Jean's shoulders, he walked with his ladies down the hallway, hoping that his preparations would not be needed, but ready to rise to the challenge if they were.

OOOOOO

Johannes Stigler's legs hurt. His back hurt. Breathing hurt. The elderly gentleman, he was pushing ninety-two, had an uncontrollable urge to piss at least 85% of the time. But as

Johannes dressed himself to go out and meet with his grandson and his new great granddaughter, he reckoned that he should be grateful he was still alive at all. Far too many couldn't say the same. And every year, every month and every week it seemed like more and more veterans were passing away, the lessons they'd learned forgotten.

And these days they're all being replaced by Goddamn Neo-Nazi shizer or Neo-Prussian fantasists. Ugh. Johannes didn't know a single veteran who'd truly served that could stand either. The first was self-explanatory. *As if we don't know enough about Hitler's sins, as if there wasn't enough evidence as to what madness he'd dragged us to.* Johannes would be very hard-pressed to say which was worse, people who denied the Holocaust and other such war crimes, or those people who still espoused beliefs that such actions were justified and in need of repeating.

Either way, tossing both groups into the dustbin of history, along with Hitler and fascism in its totality, would get a loud cheer from him more than anything besides seeing his family. *It might kill me to do that huzzah, but I'd still do it.*

As for the second, bah! Pride in being German is one thing, but blind pride in our military coupled with the desire to see an old empire revived? To what end? It is that pride which led us into both world wars. Damn Guderian and his 'clean Wehrmacht' lies.

Since the end of the Eurasian War and the role the Bundeswehr had played in it, there had been a sharp uptick in the popularity of the military. With that new focus had come a creeping social movement that espoused it was time to reclaim the 'lost pride of the Germanic peoples,' and time to 'rise again as a military power'. These preachers pointed to the Eurasian War and Rommel's actions in Africa and after as examples of their veracity, along with how honorably the Wehrmacht had shown it could wage war when it was out from underneath Hitler and his attack dogs, the Red Skull and Von Strucker.

Johannes Stigler, retired Hauptmann (captain), recipient and bearer of the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross with Oak Leaves, Swords and Diamonds, knew such talk was utter shizer, and found his mind drifting back to those days now, as he dressed. *From the start, none of us were as clean as we wished to think. And as the war went on, more and more we became just as filthy as the SS we so silently despised. We could feel it, I know it, at least until Rommel and the allies turned the tide against us and ended it all. And even before he was assassinated, Rommel would have said the Wehrmacht was not clean.*

Looking back on it all, Johannes felt prouder of his treasonous moments of rebellion during the later years of the war more than anything else from that time period of his life, finding and marrying his Elena. *And it's best I get going to meet our legacy, my love,* the old man mused, pausing by his door for a moment as he stared at a black and white photograph on the wall. Solemnly, he brushed the aging picture with his fingers before, with a sigh, turning back to the door.

About an hour later found Johannes sitting at a table outside of an upscale restaurant, smiling and laughing along with them as his many children and grandchildren caught him up in regards to their lives. His youngest boy, Walter, wasn't present, still on duty with the Bundeswehr today and unable to get away, but he had sent a phone message to Johannes that morning, so that was all right. And bouncing on her mother's knee and smiling at everyone she could see was the newest member of the family, a cheerful little girl, named after her grandmother. The hustle and bustle of the busy street nearby and the crowd of mostly unknown faces hardly seemed to bother the little tike, as opposed to how some babes Johannes had seen in his time.

Even a day out at the museum hadn't phased young Elena, something Johannes's middle daughter Emilia was quite proud of. Indeed, the little one seemed fascinated by the throngs of people as they came and went along the streets, laughing and burbling all the while. *My Elena was always so effervescent around people. It's good to see her namesake is the same.*

But the evening turned traumatic quickly as shouts and screams erupted, shrill voices quickly punctured the idyllic city atmosphere. Johannes might have been old, but he still had excellent hearing, and he frowned as he stared hard in the direction of the growing disturbance, as did his eldest son, Albert.

Together, the two watched in growing shock as more and more people seemed to practically boil out of the museum. Louder screams and shouts followed, along with the cause of such terror; four truly massive men dressed in extremely outlandish outfits. One, a man dressed in dark green with purple gloves and wielding a large crowbar, abruptly lashed out at some of the crowd, sending several people flying.

"What is..." Albert began to ask, but Johannes was already moving, barking orders. Old voice as loud as it had been in decades, he demanded that his family get under the tables and hide, doing the same himself. The fleeing crowd of people from the museum and those also now running down the street meant if they tried to run away now they would just join the multitude and get trapped in place.

Behind the crowd, the museum suddenly began to collapse inward, as if parts of it were being sucked away by something within. With an almighty clamor and wail, the alarms within gave one last cry before abruptly cutting off, the museum fell inward, trapping or killing anyone inside. From out of the dust that billowed from this sudden collapse came a tall, thin man with long brown hair, also dressed in a costume. The design of this latest threat made Johannes recall the strange aliens who claimed to be Norse gods of all things. The man held a large stone cross in one hand, and with a gesture, his other hand was suddenly filled with a long staff, which he raised over his head.

With a swish from that staff, several dozen nearby cars lifted into the air then smashed down, sending bits of debris and rubble flying everywhere. Cries, screams, and shouts abounded as people fell, fled, or died from flying shrapnel. Johannes glanced over and watched as Albert grabbed Emilia and young Elena and pulled them against his body, shielding them further

underneath the table. From where the old man crouched on his horribly abused knees, he turned back and watched as the strange man strode forward.

Another wave of that staff soon flung people around, even as copies of the man seemed to appear elsewhere, doing the same to others. Instead of dispersing the crowd, the copies concentrated them to one spot, aided by the four large supervillains. “Father, those four are the Wrecking Crew!” JohannesAlbert hissed, his normally strong voice cracking with fear. “They’ve been in the international news lately. What are they doing here?!”

Johannes had no answer. Still, he watched from the other side of the fence separating the street from the restaurant’s outside patio as the original man with cross and staff stalked forward, his staff slamming into the ground repeatedly. Each strike sounded like a deep bell, eventually browbeating the crowd into silence. Eventually, it was only the cries of the wounded that remained, unheeded as the man shaped being finally spoke.

“Humanity. There are so many of you these days. I’m honestly shocked. So many tiny, fragile lives. No sooner do I blink, and you have aged, so quickly do you wither. You live your lives at a furious pace, trying to make something of your lives. You mostly fail, with your works either dying with you, or destroyed by your fellows. Ah, so quickly do you turn on one another, your emotions and thoughts so easily swayed.”

The scorn in the man—no, the alien’s voice, the sheer contempt he spoke with and the searing glare he gazed with caused many of the silenced crowd to back away in fear, but the alien went on as if he didn’t notice. Gesturing around him with his staff as if it were a king’s scepter. “But at least humanity has always had one thing going for it. You have always known when to bend the knee to those above you.”

The words were cultured, almost hypnotizing, and they made Johannes shudder as an unseen force pressed against him. Before he felt like he would snap in two, the power seemingly cut out, and seeing those in the crowd go reeling made the old man realize it hadn’t all been in his head.

One such fellow who’d fallen over had the bad luck of being right in front of the alien with the odd dress. The being smiled. “You see, this individual here has the right idea.” The alien looked out at the now muttering, reeling crowd, his words cutting through the turmoil. “Now kneel. Kneel to your new god, humanity.”

No one moved. The alien grew visible incensed. Smashing his staff onto the pavement, his four large bruisers likewise stomping the ground with their feet, the alien roared, “**KNEEEELL!!**”

Hesitantly, one after another, those in the crowd, including the people in the restaurant. But Johannes did not. Even as his son tried to pull at his arm, Johannes stood creakily, staring back at the alien. And when Johannes spoke, his voice reverberated in the shuffling silence of the crowd, cutting through the continued cries of the wounded and dying. “Not to you. Not to someone like you.”

“...You have never met someone like me old man,” the self-professed god stated, snorting as he moved through the crowd towards Johannes. “I am as far above you humans as you are from ants. You stand at the bottom of a well, believing you know what the sky looks like, when you know nothing!”

Johannes smiled sadly, shaking his head. He continued to stare at the alien, but saw another, one whose fiery rhetoric and dark charisma had haunted his dreams for decades. “There are always men like you. You stand in Germany and say we know nothing? We know tyranny. We know evil. We know self-delusion. It is you, whoever you are, who knows nothing. But I know... I know that I will not kneel to such. Never again.”

“Then you will be the perfect example as to what happens to those who do not obey their new god, Loki. Look to your elder, humanity, and learn from his mistake,” Loki answered, with a sneer, pointing his staff at the old human.

Johannes Stigler, Retired Hauptmann of the Wehrmacht and later the Bundeswehr, closed his eyes and pushed away his son’s hands as he waited for the end. *I will see you soon, my love, my Elena.*

The air charged as a mysterious energy began to build. There were screams. The energy reached a fevered pitch. The sound of an ignition—

Yet Johannes did not die. At the last possible moment, a red, white, and blue shield interposed itself between Loki and the old man. The man wielding that shield stood strong as the bolt of magic ricocheted up and off into the sk., A second later, an opposing blast of power struck Loki, picking him up and hurling him out of the crowd to crash back into the rubble of the museum.

Johannes opened his eyes and stared as Captain America, as young as the day he’d watched him battle in Normandy, strode through the crowd. Between one moment and the next, more of the Custodes Mundi arrived at the scene in the form of the one named Cannonball, a giant wolf the size of a pickup truck and, even more recognizable, the Phoenix and Harry Potter himself. As the new arrivals marched towards where Loki had fallen, Johannes felt his old bones finally give out.

“Or perhaps not today...” he murmured, finally allowing Albert to pull him to cover.

OOOOOOO

As he moved to stand in front of the crowd and Phoenix began to evacuate the wounded, Harry sent a respectful nod towards the brave old man who had stood his ground. Meanwhile, his free hand prepared a shield spell. “You know Loki, while I know this isn’t the real you, I’ve never really understood the kind of people who look down on others for things outside their control. Your petty demands, your all-consuming desire to dominate, I’ve heard it all before. And I’ll say this to you, and any who follow you in trying to conquer humanity, to try and force us to kneel. We will never do as we’re told, and we will always defend ourselves!”

Loki might have tried to say something witty then, but by that point, the wounded in the crowd and the rubble of the shattered cars had either been evacuated or, more unfortunately, died from their wounds before Harry and his team arrived. Now free from other concerns, Jean revealed something interesting via their telepathic link. *“Harry, those four aren’t the Wrecking Crew. They’re some kind of animated mannequins. I doubt they could even move without orders, like your golems.”*

“Hmm. Good. Tell the rest of the Custodes to remain on standby. If the past is any indication, the real Wrecking Crew will be attacking someplace else soon, if not already. Hopefully, it’ll be one of the places on our list.”

With that, Harry silently lashed out with a spell chain, changing the direction of the second spell to behind him before pointing his hand forward once more. The first spell slashed outward towards the two mannequins of Thunderball and Piledriver, both standing to one side of the area Loki had cleared in front of the wrecked museum. The cutting spell, of middling power, sliced through the two easily. The second spell created a protective shield over the remaining crowd, allowing them more time to safely escape. The third blasted a wave of nearly raw magic towards Loki himself.

Eyes widening, the Asgardian hastily erected his own shield, caught off guard by the sudden shift of Harry’s spellwork.

By the time the spell chain was complete, Fenrir had crushed the mannequins impersonating Wrecker and Bulldozer, the dread wolf fighting the instinct to go for his sperm-donor’s throat with difficulty. Meanwhile Captain America had crossed the intervening distance to the last man standing. His shield flew out just as Loki’s magical barrier popped out of existence, hammering the Trickster in the chest and doubling him over. The Asgardian outcast used that moment to blast at the ground underneath him, sending rubble flying in every direction. The shockwave and resulting debris warded off Captain America and the Falcon, who had just arrived and been approaching Loki from behind.

The Falcon pulled up, cursing, just as Captain America snatched his shield out of the air on the rebound and deflected the bits of rubble coming at him. Simultaneously, the bits of debris that had exploded to Loki’s right were transfigured into birds, which Harry then sent right back at him

And now, the Asgardian was being attacked from all sides, turning his attention to deal with the birds and blocking the next magical assault. Captain America closed, his shield’s edge punching out and smashing Loki’s staff out of his hand. *“Colossus, now.”*

Before Loki could realize why Harry had only transfigured the bits of rubble on that one particular side; Colossus appeared out from under a Disillusion spell. Loki barely had a second to realize he was there before the Russian’s fist slammed into his head, sending the Asgardian

to his knees. Reaching out, Colossus pulled the stone cross from his grip with ease. The symbol hadn't felt like anything special to Harry, but why take chances?

As Loki rolled away from Colossus and tried to ready another series of spells, a fiery talon grabbed him. Helpless and with his clothing now starting to smolder, the Trickster was lifted into the air before a furious Phoenix in all of her avatar splendor.

Quickly, Harry moved to hover next to the bound Loki, his hands flashing. Chains appeared, binding Loki further as Phoenix hissed, "Go on, make my day, Loki. I swear I'll start repairing your mind right here and now, minus even the thought of anesthetic." A

ll of this wrath towards Loki stemmed from the fact that several people had died in this pointless display from the trickster god, among them several children. It had been the first time since giving birth that Jean had seen such and she had not been prepared for the raw fury and grief that seeing those small, still bodies had woken in her.

While he was uncertain what the avatar of the Phoenix Force meant by 'repairing' his mind, Loki understood the without anesthetic part easily enough, as well as how badly he had been overmatched here. *Damn me, but Potter is even more dangerous, and duplicitous, than I had expected. He kept me off balance from the start of things, a marked contrast to the way our first or brief second encounter had gone, and had allies I had not thought to look for along for the battle. And this redheaded avatar of the Phoenix... is she the one that Thanos is after over all else? Well, he is welcome to beard that particular dragon as much as he wants. Her power alone is well out of my league.* "I surrender."

With a snort, Harry raised a fist, from which flashed the familiar red of a stunning spell just as it connected with Loki's jaw. The Asgardian was knocked unconscious with barely a whimper. Harry snorted, shaking his head. "Puny god, isn't he?"

Jean laughed, her anger slowly simmering down to manageable levels, and she dumped Loki towards where the Scarlet Witch and Clea had just flown in. She trusted the pair to keep even a trickster such as him under wraps while she and her husband began to help the local populace with the aftermath of this battle.

OOOOOOO

"That's it. Time!" Bulldozer announced, looking down at a Rolex barely fitting around his wrist. The watch had been one of the many items the Crew had stolen during their sideline shopping sprees.

"The payoff for all the times we've gotten our asses whooped better be fuckin' worth it man," Piledriver grumbled, stepping out of the destroyed armory. "Ah don' like how often we've hadda turn yeller and run with our tails 'tween our legs."

Thunderball shrugged his shoulders, looking over to Wrecker, who only smirked as he reached into the overstuffed bag to one side of him. "It will be. Remember what Loki said. After the

invasion, they'll need local overseers, you know, to control the remaining population. That's gonna be us..." Wrecker trailed off as he grabbed his crowbar out of the bag, almost groaning in ecstasy as its power seared through him once more.

Now fully in his powered form, Wrecker surged to his feet, pointing towards the open area around the tank lot. "Let's get to it!"

The other two quickly reached for their items of power. Or in Piledriver's grabbing onto the crowbar for a moment, and soon all three were in their super powered forms as well.

Bulldozer took the lead, charging forward. The other three formed a triangle behind him, rushing across the open space surrounding the military base's laboratory as alarms began to sound within. A tank, a newer models armed with a plasma cannon, fired in their direction, but Wrecker merely interposed his crowbar between himself and the oncoming beam. Once the energy bolt was spent, he fired back, the burst of orange magic slagging the tank even as it tried to hide behind an artificial dune. Another tank tried to run Bulldozer over after nailing him with an AP round, but the bulky villain just shrugged off both impacts, instead smashing his way entirely through the tank, pulping metal and men alike.

By the time they reached the gates of the laboratory proper, several companies of troopers had readied for them. At once, the men began to fire at the Crew with small arms and even crewed weapons, never even attempting to call for a surrender. Wrecker only laughed as he returned fire with his crowbar. A single blast of power melted through the defensive barriers that the soldiers had used for cover, and the soldiers themselves. All that remained were piles of blackened ash in the wind.

Piledriver leapt in amongst the remaining men, grabbing and crushing limbs and then tossing away the bodies attached to them in every direction. He howled in laughter as he mowed through the pitiful defenders. All of them reveled in using their powers like this, and after the past few weeks of needing to run away from the Custodes Mundi at every turn, it felt so good to let loose.

Bulldozer, meanwhile, continued on, completely ignoring the attacks directed at him, including even an RPG round that crashed into his side. Much like the tank had previously, this only served to knock him slightly off course before he barreled into the complex. In no time he was in one side and out the other, next crashing into a security administration building before tearing out the other side. The whole building began to collapse almost immediately. As the others spread out and moved to massacre the soldiers and the scientists both, Thunderball made his way towards their real target.

OOOOOOO

At the same time that Loki fought Harry and his team in Germany, the rest of the Custodes Mundi had been on standby. Once it became clear that Loki had appeared on his own,

regardless of initial reports, those who remained stayed in Babylon, hoping that the Wrecking Crew would finally make a mistake.

This patience finally paid off while Harry and the rest were still busy detaining Loki and helping the locals. Pinoptes' voice boomed out into the gardens, where nearly the full team of the remaining Custodes Mundi waited, snapping all present to attention. The AI had been helping Sir Dennis watching for any activity worldwide and had spread out his feelers throughout the Internet and thousands of local networks. "Ladies and gentlemen, we have another hit! This time it is undoubtedly the true Wrecking Crew, given that the powers they are throwing around would otherwise be incredibly difficult to replicate. They are attacking a military base near Metz, France, known to house some of the country's high tech weapons laboratories. It is perhaps of little surprise that their target would be a nation which never allowed Lord Potter to come in and put down wards."

With Harry gone, Storm naturally took charge of the team, and with barely a glance, set off towards, the rest of the Custodes dutifully following. Moments later they were exiting the space station, diving down into the atmosphere on magic carpets. As they descended, they used the carpets disappeared from normal sight.

Reaching the French Institute, the the first supervillain they caught sight of was Thunderball, standing outside a building with several bodies lying around him. One of the others, probably Bulldozer, had clearly smashed entirely through one building through another and then continued on. The destruction wrought a straight line from just outside the military complex into its interior. The sound of gunfire drew their sights to the base's barracks, where Piledriver was smashing his way through a company of troopers. They were still firing at the super powered villain, but Piledriver was immune to most of their weapons. Realizing they were no threat, he moved to smashing through what appeared to be the base's main armory. All the while, Wrecker stood nearby over the wreckage of a tank that had been pushed out of a nearby hanger.

Storm was the first to announce her presence, a heavy thundercloud swirling into existence above Thunderball and a spell taken from Harry's book sent towards Bulldozer even as she began to give out orders crisply. "Standard operating procedure, ladies and gentlemen. Sharpshooters stay on overwatch and support, everyone else, we'll close and engage as necessary. I will open up the party."

The Reductor curse crashed into Bulldozer as he stood in the center of a group of defenders charging towards them. The blast hurled him away, and Storm coolly ordered Colossus in, keeping him away from his would-be victims before turning her attention on Thunderball. "Husk, with Ghigau. Magma, head down and get some walls between the Crew and the survivors. Cannonball, keep Thunderball locked down before he can pilfer from any other buildings."

Having made to shout that he'd found the part they needed and that he'd already teleported it out via the small teleport beads they'd been using to send the ill-gotten gains away, Thunderball instead could only let out a loud cry of agony as he was struck by what amounted to enough lightning to power a small city. "ARRGGGHHHHHHH!!!!" The strike sent him stumbling to his knees, his body helpless but to spasm as he snarled between pain-clenched teeth. "FUCK! The Custodes are here!"

And that was when Thunderball found himself bodied from the side by Cannonball, who almost picked him up and hurled him over some of the remaining buildings. "Round two, ya jackoffs!"

Wrecker and Piledriver, who'd been closer together as they destroyed another random building in order cover their tracks, in terms of what they had really been after when they were attacked by the Custodes. Under cover courtesy of Coyote and Uzume, Husk and Ghigau closed, coming down from their magic carpet and appearing in midair above the supervillains.

Unfortunately at the last second, Wrecker caught a glint of metal in the broken reflection of the window he'd just smashed. Instantly, he turned, blasting out with his crowbar. The wave of power caught Husk midflight, hurling her away.

However, he completely missed Garm with his next strike as shots from Ghigau took him high in the face and shoulder. He stumbled back, but she quickly closed in turn. A kick from the power-armor-wearing woman nearly ripped his crowbar from his hands, and Wrecker yelped as a short, stabbing dagger nearly took him in the eye. "Fucking hell!"

His boss occupied, Piledriver was left on his own for a moment until Garm barreled right into him. Knife-like fangs tore into supernatural cloth, and fangs bit at his throat. "GaaHah! Fuckin' Jeezus Christ, where'd this beastie come from?!" He yelped, feeling the large wolf's claws raking at him, drawing blood as they carved through his empowered costume.

A following bite barely missed his throat, but did succeed in tearing free his necklace of beads, scattering them everywhere. Incensed, Piledriver grabbed Garm around the neck, slamming the large wolf into the ground and then around into a wall. "Fuckin' die, beastie!"

Through it all Garm snarled in turn, clawing and snapping, seemingly unaffected by the brutal treatment. This was, in fact, the case. Although stronger than the average Asgardian, Piledriver was by no means any real threat to the Guardian of Niflheim. Indeed, it was only by virtue of the strength and positioning of Piledriver's grip around Garm's neck that was keeping the wolf's fangs from his own.

"Magma, Coyote, Uzume, keep Thunderbird under cover. Colossus seems to be handling Bulldozer well enough for now, but Husk, support him just to be sure." The blast from Wrecker had hurled the Southern girl towards where Bulldozer was fighting it out with Colossus, which Storm, still flying above the battle, had seen. "Warpath. Thunderbird, pile on Piledriver and Wrecker. I will pull back for now and throw up the anti-teleport wards we've been working on. Hopefully they will work to keep these monsters from running again."

No sooner had Storm finished speaking than Warpath crashed into Wrecker, his dual hatchets nearly knocking the supervillain's crowbar out of his hand for a second time. Wrecker growled at realizing this, whirling around to bring his crowbar crashing into Warpath's side. Instead, the Native American warrior blocked the strike with one of his hatchets, his other seeking his opponent's neck.

Wrecker barely dodged the blow and bull-rushed forward, blocking a follow up double-ended blow from the twin hatchets with his crowbar. But the strength of the other man surprised supervillain, the blow nearly sending him to his knees. Before he could collect himself, a fist flashed out and into his stomach, doubling him over with a groan of pain. A second later Warpath's knee snapped up into Wrecker's face with enough force to shatter his nose, hurling him backward.

Elsewhere, Thunderbird joined the fight against Piledriver just as he'd hurled Garm into another wall, collapsing it onto the wolf as Piledriver leaped clear. Running on instinct alone, the blonde man barely turned in time to block a punch from Thunderbird before he pulled the other man into a punch of his own, sending the Custodes reeling. A Garm pushed himself out of the rubble and bit into Piledriver's kneecap from the side. The force of the otherworldly wolf's bite easily snapped bone and tore through skin, nearly severing Piledriver's leg clean off.

Piledriver went sprawling with a shriek of agony. Taking his chance, Thunderbird's clapped his hands against the sides of Piledriver's head, deafening the supervillain and nearly shattering his skull. Before Piledriver could even hope to recover, Garm released his leg and launched himself airborne. Slightly reinforced faux-Asgardian neck quickly found itself under assault by the wolf of the Goddess of Death, and it was found wanting. Without a qualm, Garm snapped his head to the right, tearing out Piledriver's throat in a burst of red ruin.

Blood up, Thunderbird turned to take in the battlefield, bellowing a warcry and launch himself away towards where Wrecker had turned the tables on his brother.

Thunderball, meanwhile, had found himself on a nearby rooftop after two more bruising passes by Cannonball. Although the Custodes' strikes could hurl the supervillain around—his weight hadn't changed overmuch in his magical form, so they hurled him around more than the strikes actually hurt, just like Thunderbird or Husk's blows. The difference was, Cannonball couldn't land consecutive hits quickly enough for his attacks' overall damage to build up.

So it was that Thunderball, while rattled, was still somewhat cognizant of his surroundings when he witnessed Piledriver get his throat torn out. That gory sight shook the man badly and he screamed out, "Oh fuck this!" Grabbing at one of the beads on his necklace, he crushed it, disappearing again, this time without even caring where he was going.

Bulldozer looked up blearily from where a punch from Colossus had hurled him. One of his arms was broken, a lucky grapple from the metal-skinned bitch, and his supposedly impervious upper body armor was smoking and sizzling from the lava the glowing cunt kept throwing at him. Bits

of it had even melted off due to her sustained assault. Seeing none of his crew, and feeling another of those evil Flubber bullets smack into his armored head, leaving him blinded, panic overwhelmed any remaining feelings of loyalty to Wrecker. Desperately, Bulldozer grabbed at one of his last beads between two fingers. Shattering it, he disappeared in turn.

Nearby came a cry of pain as Storm , writhed from the magical feedback of her ward breaking twice over under whatever powers Loki had enchanted the transportation beads with. She barely kept herself in midair, her mind thrumming in agony.

While Thunderball and Bulldozer fled, a screaming redskin had caught Wrecker by surprise, smashing him off of his feet before he could finish off the the other savage he'd gotten the better of, having swept the younger man's feet out from under him. Instead of bringing his crowbar down on a head, Wrecker had found his own head smashed into a wall, followed by the rest of his body. Groaning, Wrecker slumped forward, his lips and teeth just able to reach a bead on his necklace. Maneuvering it into his mouth, he chomped on it, disappearing.

Glaring at where Wrecker had laid, Thunderbird ground his teeth. It took a considerable amount of self-control to push down his anger at allowing three of their four opponents to escape. Eventually, he was able to regain himself, and turned to his duties. "Custodes, sound off!" *If Harry's able to take Loki in custody, that means those three can only do this so many more times before we get them all.*

"I will try to follow them." Ororo's voice came over the communicators a second later as she recovered from the blinding pain the breaking wards had caused her. "Garm, Ghigau, with me. The rest of you, start helping the locals with rescue efforts. Magma, Thunderbird, you're both in charge."

From where Wrecker had knocked her for a loop earlier, Ghigau turned and saluted the other two leader types, reflecting that the number of leader-types they had made for a very flexible structure at need. A moment later, she joined Garm, who was muttering about needing, "Either a good steak or a large peppermint to get the taste out of my mouth" before Ororo raised them both into the air before they disappeared.

Unfortunately, once more, the Wrecking Crew—or at least its surviving members—had used multiple teleportations to cover their tracks from any pursuit. Two out of the three had left decent amounts of blood at their first destinations, but both had been able to move on quickly enough to not be caught.

Realizing pursuit was once again impossible, Storm quickly returned to France. The rescue and triage efforts welcomed her aid with gratitude, her magic the only thing at hand that could possibly save the most severely wounded among them.

One out of four would have to do for now.

OOOOOOO

It took several hours, but Emma and Charles were eventually forced to admit defeat as they stared at the unconscious form of Loki with looks of frustration on their faces. “To say his mind is protected would be too great an understatement. There are so many different layers occluding the inner Loki it is like looking at a matryoshka doll. One is artificial though, oddly out of place and reminiscent of the defenses Reed and Tony have created to block telepaths.”

“Well at least we can remove that one,” Amelia announced from where she’d stood during the diagnostic, nodding to Una. “But it’ll take days to make sure we find all the bits.”

Nodding in agreement, the Kree nurse flicked her fingers and a computer screen enlarged and flashed up onto a larger screen to one side. Those present had gathered within the asteroid prison complex that had originally held the Hulk for this meeting slash examination. No one wanted Loki anywhere near Camelot—or anywhere else in the Empire to be frank—until his mind was completely clear of Shadow Gunk, as Jean put it. Unfortunately, what appeared on Una’s screen showed how difficult such a goal would be to achieve.

To put it simply, Reed and Tony’s psychic defensive measures came in two forms: either as a single chip installed at the base of the brain or as a helmet. What had been done to Loki was entirely different even though the result had felt the same to the telepaths. Instead of a single piece of hardware, hundreds of tiny nanite-sized chips had been scattered throughout the Asgardian’s brain, creating a network of anti-telepathic signals that defended Loki’s mind from outside intrusion.

“And what you’re seeing is just the top layer, and that’s part of the problem,” Amelia murmured. “Even if my mutant ability lets me figure out where they are, I would still have trouble removing them all because they’re so damn small and layered. Phasing takes endurance, more than I’ve got for something like this all in one go. Right now I could maybe remove half before needing a break. Give me eighteen hours or so though, and I can promise to do the whole thing.”

“And then I could begin to remove the magical protections,” Stephen added, raising a glowing hand. Harry had never gone into the mental disciplines of magic, so he’d called the Sorcerer Supreme, and surprisingly Madame Harkness, in just in case, a precaution that proved all too necessary. “My scans revealed there is a deep enchantment on Loki’s mind to defend it from intrusion. Given our experience with them, I can tell without a doubt half of it originated from the Shadows, but... half is... well, I think that whatever was originally there had come from Loki himself. It’s odd to see, but since it’s powered by Loki’s own soul, it had to have been consensual to a certain degree to be placed there and remain so deeply entrenched for so long. I think those memories that young Dani reported Sigyn’s soul to be guarding are far more than we originally thought...”

“Huh... okay then. Good to know. That being said, let’s see if we can get anything more out of him before we go the Dani route.”

Hearing Dani hiss at that, but shook his head at her, pointing at Fenrir where he lay beside her in his minor form, and then jerking a thumb towards where Hela stood leaned against the wall. "I presume that if we let your blood mingle with Loki's, Sigyn's soul will do the rest. However, we don't know what that will do to **you** or how long it'll take, or what that will do to the memories Loki has made since he first came under the thrall of the Shadows. While they'd already been ripped from her, Hela permanently lost the memories between when she first met me and when we met once more in her realm. I won't take that chance here. We need information, Dani, far more than anything else right now."

"Tsk," Dani grumbled, eager to free Sigyn from her bondage within Dani's blood. But ultimately she understood Harry's wisdom, and bowed formally to her jarl to indicate such.

"Good," Harry said, smiling faintly at Dani's over the top action, knowing it was a way to poke fun at him. He looked to the others. "Shall we wake him up then?"

"Ooh, allow me," Hela chortled, striding forward.

Seeing the wicked grin upon the goddess' lips, the others backed away quickly. Unopposed, an arc of magical lightning formed around Hela's hand. The next second, she touched Loki lightly upon the chest.

"GYAAHHHHHHAAA!!!!" Loki howled, jerking upright, eyes blowing wide. Hela guffawed, twitching away from her patriarch as he flinched and writhed in pain. Thankfully, the god was durable, and quicker than expected he recovered his wits. Once more in control of himself, Loki stared at the people around him. He tried bringing his hands together but failed to do so due to the chains around his wrists. He might've thought to try magic as well, but he somehow knew the cuffs on him would stop that from happening.

If this bothered Loki, he didn't allow it to show upon his face or body language. Instead he smirked at them all congenially. He waved one hand deliberately, causing his chains to clink.

"Ah, well now, that was a most unpleasant way to wake up and I've suffered through Thor's ideas before. So is this the part where you torture me in an attempt to discover what I have been up to or why I'm here? That would be annoying, and somewhat out of character I suppose. But given that wake-up call I can no longer ignore the possibility. Or will you try to force answers out of me through passive aggressiveness? If so, I would like to request a pillow of some kind. I prefer to sleep through such stupidity," Loki addressed, his voice directed towards Harry. For the moment, he decided to ignore Hela entirely and deliberately.

"We already know what you're after. We already know that you're not working alone. We even have an idea of your overall goal," Harry said, dismissing each possibility in turn, his arms crossed as he stared back at Loki. "Details would be nice, I won't lie, but not necessary. Though, we are wondering if the Chitauri are the only ones you're working with,"

Stephen held up the Eye-Binder, the strange, many-eyed ball on its chain, tilting his head toward Loki in a small a bow of professional respect. "And I wished to say that this piece is magnificent," the sorcerer said, gesturing to the artifact. "I can feel the enchantments woven into it, and yet only vaguely understand the underlying principle. If you could create something like this, it makes me wonder what else you could do if you turned your attentions to advancing the understanding of magic instead of self-aggrandizement."

Loki bowed as much as he could, but said nothing. The smirk on his face was composed of equal parts pride and hauteur. "Flattery doth fall nicely upon mine ears but will gain you nothing in the end sorcerer."

"Hah!" Hela snorted in response while Stephen shook his head.

"Why are you working with the Chitauri?" Harry questioned, tone demanding. "I can force feed you a potion that will get me my answers, but it's a last resort kind of thing given its side effects." This was a lie, obviously. Harry didn't know if Veritaserum would actually work on an Asgardian, or if there would be any side effects at all. But such a lie would

"So unless you want to deal with wearing an adult diaper for a week or puking soprano while your skin goes through all colors of the rainbow, I suggest you start talking. I will take pictures and send them to the Asgardians ahead of extraditing you to them. And just so you know, you will find your fellows much changed since you were last home."

Gulping at the gravely delivered lines, Loki stared back at Harry, almost taking the wizard seriously. Then, he smiled wryly. "Never try to trick a trickster, Potter. I have no reason to believe you. And I do not answer to you. For all your power, you are but a mortal, a human. I. Am. A. God! I answer to no one and nothing, my own whims the exception."

"What utter ravings is this? Answer to your family, you lout!" Hela barked, moving forward with a deadly glare, Fenrir beside her. Both had lost their tempers for a moment at that last statement. "Do you have nothing at all to say to us? Or can you not even remember that you had children at all?"

"You are the daughter of a political marriage, dearest Hela," Loki sneered, not giving either child the respect of even looking at them. "I'll admit you turned out as much less of a mistake as anything I sired through Angbroda, but surely it should not come as any shock to you that I do not consider us truly kin? Or has this mortal and your ridiculous relationship with him turned your mind to mush with his blatherings? As for that beast beside you, who would acknowledge something like that as their get? Only another beast surely."

Next to Hela, Fenrir snarled viciously, but Harry managed to hold them both back with some difficulty and liberal use of his weighty aura. After a moment, Hela subsided, stiffly stepping away. "So that is it then, is it? You have none of the true Loki's memories, only twisted creations of the Shadows to drive their playacting. I do not know whether to pity you or hate you further for your harsh words."

"I speak merely the truth my dear," Loki answered, smirking even as his mind skittered at the repeated assertion that there was something manipulating his being. Nothing controlled him!

"That you do. You say you do not answer to **mortal** powers?" Harry asked, his emphasizing that one particular word finally causing Fenrir to stop trying to pull out of his grip as everyone else there started, staring at Harry in surprise. "So then, who do you answer to?"

Loki instantly clammed up, glaring heatedly at Harry. That was answer enough, and Fenrir snorted amusement at the revelation. "Someone more powerful clearly, someone so strong it scares him. I can smell his sudden fear, it reeks!"

"Well its not a Demon Lord, obviously," Stephen mused." Those fell creatures can no longer enter our realm, nor would they think to work with the Chitauri."

"Hmmm. So... either a god of some kind or... or a Titan," Harry murmured, his eyes widening before becoming hard as stone. "Thanos. FUCK!"

Harry's cursing went on for moment more, with quite a lot of feeling. Eventually he calmed down enough to ask, "But is he coming with only the Chitauri, or does he have more forces this time?"

Again Loki refused to answer. Harry, no longer willing to play around now that the stakes had become clear, got straight to the point. "Veritaserum it is then."

Harry gestured, and Fenrir was on Loki before anyone else could move, bearing the Asgardian to ground despite only being the size of a grizzly at the moment. His jaws gnashed at the air right in front of the suddenly horrified and terrified Loki. "You look mighty tasty father! My hunger might not control me any longer, but I can make an exception for it with you!"

"You—you would let this beast eat me?! After taking me prisoner? This is insanity! A blasphemy! I thought you all were heroes," Loki shouted, his fear peeling back any sense of the suave, confident mask he'd been wearing.

"We are, but we're also realistic and effective ones. And I'm not going to actually let Fenrir eat you Loki, I shudder to think what that would do to his digestion." *Or his mental state, or Hela's,* Harry added internally. "No, like I said, we're going to do this with Veritaserum."

Unfortunately, this would not go the way Harry had hoped. While Loki didn't show any negative reactions and the truth potoin did seem to take hold judging by the Asgardian's glassy eyed and blank expression, trouble began when they actually started asking questions.

"I—I—Aaarrgggh!!!" Loki shrieked, arcs of magic flowing up and down his body as he convulsed. Blood burst out of his mouth and eyes, and Loki slumped to the floor and groaned as if someone had stabbed him.

“Shit!” Harry cursed, he and the others pulling back. “He’s under some kind of geas, a contract to keep Thanos’s secrets or something. Damn it!”

A purging potion was quickly poured down Loki’s throat, in case just having the Veritaserum in his system was enough to keep the geas active, and Una and Amelia went to work to keep the tortured Asgardian alive.

While they began their work, Harry turned to the others. “That was a nearly complete wash. We learned very little, but it’ll have to be enough. I think it would be prudent to assume Thanos will be coming for us from more than one avenue of attack at least, even if the Chitauri provide the bulk of his forces. While they are working on Loki, let’s get out some messages, orders too. I want the EDF fleet to be away within an hour, the Ravens and the few Verdun satellites we have up and running as soon as possible. We’re going on full wartime footing people. Unless... does anyone have any ideas on how to find the three remaining members of the Wrecking Crew?”

There were no answers to this, and as Stephen and the still silent Madame Harkness watched over Loki, the others soon broke off to give out their new orders.

OOOOOO

EWrecker and Bulldozer stared at Thunderball in anticipation,; the disgraced scientist nearly finished putting together the primary beacon. “Well, will it work?”

“There was never any question of this one working. It was the ones that we had to build from scratch that were the issue!” Thunderball grunted, heaving up the radio dish and pointing it directly above their heads. “But, according to the blueprints, those should work the moment this one comes online and starts beaming them power.”

Moments of tinkering later, Thunderball looked over at the other two, a frown crossing his ace. “It’s done. But you do realize that once we do this, there’s no going back. We’ll have to be on the winning side to get out of this with our hides intact, and we’ll have pretty much betrayed all of humanity.”

“Oh cry me a fucking river,” Wrecker snorted, shaking his head and gesturing for the man to continue. “It’s either death or life in prison, or a life of power and wealth. That’s no choice at all. Do it.”

Smirking at the completely expected answer, Thunderball shrugged his shoulders and turned back to the controls of the main beacon that Loki had brought along in his ship for just this purpose. “It just had to be said, that’s all.”

With that, he pressed a few buttons, and power rose through the man-sized device in front of him. A moment later, that power appeared to boil over, lancing up from the antenna to the radio dish then into the air. The solid beam of energy disappeared midair, entering the space between dimensions, a small signal flaring out to those who were watching, waiting.

For several seconds there was no response, and just as the remaining Wrecking Crew began to wonder if they'd been duped by the ever duplicitous Loki once again, along the same line that the beam had created as it carved through the air, a jagged gash appeared. It was as if someone had created a snapshot of the sky, and then jabbed a hole through it into the darkness beyond before ripping the hole into a tear. A blast of some kind of energy reverberated back through that jagged gash down towards the main beacon, impacting it and then shattering into shards that zoomed out towards the secondary beacons that the Wrecking Crew and Loki had created over the past few weeks. Those beacons too began to open as they received power, portals tearing open above them.

The sky over Washington DC darkened, clouds broiling. The sky over the capital of Paris cracked open, causing horror among the populace. A city in Russia, a city in Hungary, another in China. And out of these holes in reality poured the Chitauri, each contingent accompanied by one of Thanos' lieutenants.

The force that through the main beacon's tear was far larger than the others, however, and was led by Ebony who rode a strange giant monster-fish-thing. Once through, Ebony used his vast telekinetic powers to lower himself towards the main beacon. His ever-present frown deepened at the presence of the three Wrecking Crew members, his head listing to one side in annoyed confusion. "You three are not Loki. I take it the fool recruited local aid in his endeavor then?"

"That's right. He promised us positions in your government after you all take over," Wrecker responded with a growl, Thunderball and Bulldozer stared up at the forces amassing above the very out-of-the-way mountainside that the primary beacon had been moved to.

"..." For a moment, Ebony was silent, and then a wave of telekinetic force crashed into all three criminals, bearing them to the ground as if they were no more than normal humans, and weaklings at that. The sheer pressure was crushing enough that it drew gasps of agony from all three, and for once Wrecker's crowbar did nothing to the energy pressing down at them.

"You do not demand such things of me, or my Lord Thanos, you insignificant insect. You showed a good grasp of the reality of what is facing your planet by aiding Loki yes, and for that you will be rewarded by being on the winning side. Serve well during this invasion, and you will live to be given further rewards. But do not speak like that to me or any other direct disciples of Lord Thanos again. Understood?" Ebony announced calmly, as if this were an everyday chat.

Wrecker grimaced but nodded his head as much as he could, as the others. The pressure let up, and the telekinetic gestured, all three of them rising into the air. Helpless, the now floating criminals followed Ebony as he rose upwards, where the forces of the Chitauri were still spreading out, half of them putting down portions of what looked like a pre-prepared installation of some kind. "Excellent. Come with me then, and we will rid this world of the enemies of Lord Thanos!"

OOOOOOO

Aboard the Skrull Great Armada sitting a few lightyears away from the Sol System's Oort Cloud, others were reacting to these events as well. A sensor specialist on the flag bridge announced, "Sir, the signal has been given!"

"Excellent. Signal the fleet, go to combat footing," Fleet Overlord Len'dok ordered. "Five minutes from now we will jump in system and engage the human defenders. Is Lord Thanos planning to go with the fleet, or has he decided to go ahead with the Chitauri?"

"His last indication was that he would be joining the Chitauri's second wave, sir."

"Good. This will be much easier without him breathing down our necks. I hope. For the glory of the Skrull Empire!"

OOOOOOO

An hour had passed since Loki's own magic had tried to kill him, and he was now sitting up in bed, most of his wounds healed bar one of his eyes, which was still bleeding a small amount. "I... I take it the side effects were worse than anticipated? I suppose I should be thankful you saved me, although I doubt you did it out of the goodness of your heart."

"Hah. No. Not at all. We just don't think you can actually answer our questions at all," Harry shook his head before smiling wryly. "So we have decided to go another route entirely. We're going to remove you from the board, so to speak. Trust me Loki, if what we've learned about the real you is accurate in any way, you will thank us for this later."

Loki's eyes widened as he tried to parse out once again the assertion that he was not himself. Mind instantly rebelling, he began to thrash in place, but Harry ignored that. Instead, he turned to Hela. "Blood to blood, yes, Hela?"

"Indeed. If memory, soul, and self are to meet, twained blood must mingle," Hela announced, before smirking at her father. "I would say this would hurt us more than it will you, Loki Laufeyson, but I would prefer not to perjure myself."

"Wait! What—what are you talking about!?" Loki squawked but before he could do anything more than wiggle in place, Fenrir had bitten down on Loki's hand before ripping back, tearing open the back of the appendage and backing away.

Touching Fenrir's back gently, Danielle, hitherto hidden, moved forward. Silently, she raised the dagger Skadi had given her, the one which had replaced Sigyn's Gift. From behind the budding Valkyrie, Skadi herself watched with interest. With no sign of pain, Dani sliced open her palm, clamping her now bleeding hand onto Loki's, mixing her blood with his. "Someone very much wishes to speak to you, Loki, and I think you are going to want to hear what she has to say..."

That was as far as Dani got before alarms suddenly began to blare throughout the prison asteroid, Pinoptes' voice coming with the klaxon. "Sir, you'd better return post haste. Earth is under attack, and it's as you feared. It isn't just the Chitauri. The Skrull are here too, a full Battle Fleet. And worse, there seem to be super-powered individuals leading the Chitauri."

Harry looked around, locking worried gazes with the women around him. The invasion they had all feared was here.

End Chapter