The next chapter in the ... life... of Alixzandrya Barnes continues. So what do you do when you've died heroically in action against an alien invading force? Alex finds herself in Valhalla and discovers that the afterlife isn't what she expected.

Book Three, following Legend's Apprentice and Legend.

Originally published 2017-2018 on Wattpad
Becoming

I shoved the helm back a bit as I surveyed the field. Valhalla kind of sucked. This was my third scrimmage, and so far it wasn't much of a challenge. I half expected to run across my budding nemesis, but hadn't seen him yet. Hard to miss him, broad shoulders, the tiniest butt, really cool-looking armor. He seemed to be fairly modern, or at least he sounded fairly recent, and American. We hadn't spoken much, he seemed to think he was pretty special, but I hadn't even broken much of a sweat putting him down. I trudged over the landscape taking care to look for booby traps as I sought the main battle. There were always clever, sometimes fiendishly clever, booby traps. It was easy to split from the host during these things due to the topography and the individual nature of combat, which was more like a series of one-on-one battles than an organized charge. Wayland had given me a helm that was only a little too big and a breastplate, and I had the two swords that I'd bought after Hogun had taught me how to use them. My stock with the smith rose considerably when I'd shown him what I could do, and he promised me better armor and put me on a list. Since anybody who was killed in the battles here in the afterlife never stayed dead, the armor wasn't really necessary but these guys wouldn't go out unless they were properly arrayed for battle, and that included armor. Besides, it still hurt to get wounded.

"I was wondering if I'd see you today," a familiar voice said, and I stopped walking at the hail from my special opponent. I wanted to roll my eyes; he'd warned me of his approach rather than taking advantage of the element of surprise. I had to be more alert; most of the warriors wouldn't have relinquished that advantage. And he might get smart and bring a friend one of these days. He used a shield, sword, and armor and sounded mostly friendly, but there was an edge to his voice.

"Here I'd thought somebody had beaten me to you," I said with resignation, turning to face the man and bringing my swords up. It would look cooler if I spun them as I talked, like in a movie, but that was just showing off. You'd be in a world of hurt if you fumbled one, even though my hand to hand was good. The man slashed at me, and it would have really hurt if it had connected. Then there was the usual feinting, thrust/parry stuff, but then the man added some taunting, and it kind of worked. He irritated me, and this time when I skewered him, he didn't 'die' on my swords to fall to the ground but disappeared with a pop of blue light. Weird. I walked on after a brief surveillance of the area, which revealed nothing out of the ordinary. One big advantage of combat here was that nobody bled. It was nice; much less mess. You didn't feel guilty or deal with bloodstains. I rejoined our main force and fought on for some time before finding myself isolated again. I left my latest opponent on the grass and turned back toward the sound of battle. A striking Asgardian woman appeared out of nowhere and demanded to know what happened to her general.

"That guy?" I asked, puzzled, gesturing to the body on the grass.

"No," she bit off. She held up a shield that I recognized. "This belongs to him yet he is not among my troops or the slain." Whoops. Looks like I'd run afoul of the goddess Frigga, who owned the other afterlife that we in Valhalla scrimmaged with.

"I don't know," I admitted. "He got my temper up, and when I struck him, there was a flash of light and a popping noise, and the man was gone."

My explanation didn't improve her temper any, apparently. She scowled at me and slashed with a sword that just appeared in her hand, bisecting my abdomen below the breastplate. I gasped a little at the searing pain and cut back angrily. She also disappeared in the pop of blue light. I clamped my arms over the cut to keep my intestines inside and fell to my knees, then onto my back. I stared up at the bright blue sky, panting against the pain, waiting to 'die.' On my back, everything stayed
pretty much in place, and I kept my swords in my hands. If I didn't release them, when the war
game was over and the slain were revived, I wouldn't have to go hunting for them or reclaim them
from the pile that would be collected.

Time passed, and I started to wonder when the battle would be over. Wounds would heal at the
conclusion, and I was hurting an awful lot. A shadow fell over my face and I opened my eyes,
looking up to see Thor of all people, checking the fallen. I wheezed a greeting and he frowned,
bending to remove my helmet. "Alex!" he exclaimed, dropping down beside me and glancing at
the great slash that just about cut me in half. "I was unaware that Father had brought you to
Valhalla. What has happened here?"

"I pissed off your mom somehow," I managed to say. "How are Sif and Magni?"

"Sif misses you," he said absentmindedly. "You were the closest friend she had on Midgard, so when you
fell, she took Magni back to Asgard. He cried for days after the battle and has not yet regained his
enthusiasm for practice."

"Tell him I said it's not an excuse to slack off. And tell Sif hi for me."

He smiled. "I shall." The smile faded. "Tell me what passed between you and Frigga." So in short
sentences, I told him what had happened.

"And she just vanished?" he asked, perplexed. I nodded.

"I don't know what happened."

"This is not good." He shouted something and waved as I dealt with another wave of pain. He
looked at me. "I have summoned a friend to guard you while I address this matter." Another
shadow fell over me as I twisted with brutal cramping.

"Alex?" I heard a voice I'd thought gone forever. I opened my watering eyes with difficulty and
saw Tony Stark, my former boss, mentor, and friend, confused, stricken, and grossed out by my
wound, even though it wasn't bloody, just oozing the translucent, pearlized fluid that substituted.
He knelt beside me but didn't know how to help and settled from flicking the hair away from
my eyes. I heard Thor recapping today's events and adding a request to watch over me until he
returned.

"Didn't know you were here," I managed to say as I writhed in pain.

"Yeah, I was brought here after my stroke," he said, capturing my hand, prying the sword out, and
clasping it with both of his. "I've been building booby traps for these war games since then for
Odin." I lost track of what he was saying as my vision dimmed and I lost consciousness.

When I woke up again, the sun was considerably lower in the sky and I sat up --or tried to. The
wound hadn't healed. I gritted my teeth and refused to scream. "I don't know why that hasn't
healed," Tony said, grabbing my hand again. "Don't do that again." Tears started to leak out of my
eyes and I focused on the sound of approaching people. Thor's face was grim as he looked at me.

"Father," he said abruptly. "The battle is over yet she has not healed." Odin's face swam into view
and he frowned.

"This must be Frigga's doing," he said sharply. "And she cannot be found." He asked me to clarify
a few points, but there wasn't much I could say since I didn't know what had happened. And it was
difficult to speak without sobbing or screaming or begging, none of which I wanted to do in public.
He took my sword from Tony and examined it, but couldn't find anything odd; they were
apparently just the formed steel they appeared to be. Despite my best efforts, I started to keen with the agony of the wound. After a moment, Odin touched the area with his spear and I screamed at the searing fire, but the pain faded away until it was just throbbing gently.

"Thank you," I managed to say, and he nodded before turning back to Thor. Tony's face was white, and he unclipped his cape to spread over me. "Afterlife agrees with you," I added. It did; he looked a lot younger than I'd ever seen him, younger than he had been when he became Iron Man. His vitality practically sizzled, even when he was at a loss as to what to do. But then I looked younger too, restored to looking late 20's, early thirties. It was nice. I liked having long dark hair again and a strong, skilled body at the peak of my abilities. I'd forgotten how good it felt. I saw Tony look up and jerk his chin at a new arrival. Loki looked down at me, then he frowned and waved. I heard a shout, and pretty soon I heard a couple other people arrive. What was this, a circus? I didn't want to have more people gawking at me.

"Alex? Sweetie?" somebody gasped, and I turned my head wearily to see Uncle Bucky crouch down beside me, dropping his sword but not his shield and positioning himself in such a way as to defend me against an attacker. If they could get through the crowd. I appreciated the gesture, though.

"Cool arm, uncle," I managed to say, admiring the way it shifted between metal and flesh. He patted my cheek and flicked Tony's cloak away. He got the meanest look on his face when he saw the damage.

"Why isn't she healed?" he asked in a not-quite-a-shout. "The battle is over!"

"What on earth is going on here, Odin?" I heard Emma but didn't see her. "When did Alex get here, and why didn't you tell us?"

"That is what we are trying to ascertain," the god said impatiently. "She was brought not long ago. I thought to surprise you." Whatever Odin had done was starting to wear off; I clenched my fists against the returning pain. One hand still held a sword, but I'd forgotten that Tony had the other one and squeezed too hard. He meeped but didn't let go. Credit where it's due. Bucky folded his cape and put it under my head as more people arrived. "Frigga, my dear," Odin said, sounding relieved. "Where have you been?"

"Forget that," Tony said impatiently. "You've got to fix Alex."

Frigga cast a withering look at me, then ignored me altogether as she told her husband what I had done. Apparently I'd managed somehow to send her to somebody named Hela. That didn't sound good. Odin explained that I hadn't meant to do it or even knew how it was done, but she refused to listen. It took the intervention of both her sons and Bucky's threat to switch sides to Valhalla's team before the goddess snappishly relented and healed the wound she'd caused. She might have done it just to shut me up. By that time I was in convulsions again and screaming, tears running out of my eyes.

"I don't understand this, Buck," the familiar voice of the thorn in my side said. Great. Just what I wanted. I saw Tony roll his eyes and wanted to grin, but I was trying to get my breathing under control again and stop sobbing. Frigga healed me, but she didn't do it nicely or gently, and it was taking my brain time to catch up to the fact that the wound was gone. I rolled my head to see a blond man frowning at my uncle and me. "Tony. Might have guessed you'd be mixed up in this."

"This is my niece, Stevie," Bucky said sternly. "Georgie was her great grandpa." The man--Steve Rogers?--looked surprised.
As I struggled to sit up--my nerves were still protesting--Tony assisted me and quickly wrapped me in his cape. I was cold and the wool felt nice and warm. "You're Captain America?" I asked, and coughed. Bucky patted my shoulder anxiously. "Why aren't you using your shield more? That's your best weapon. I'd have thought you'd be more of a challenge." Wait, that sounded a lot bitchier than I'd intended. Bucky patted my hair and smothered a laugh. Mr Rogers looked angry for a moment, then smiled a little.

"I'm as surprised as you are," he told me."As to the shield, well, I need to learn to fight with all the weapons available to me." I hadn't recognized his famous shield since the color on it was gone; it was just a silver piece of metal, the star and concentric circles much harder to see without the red, white, and blue.

"Uncle Bucky, he needs work with the sword. Speed and skill both."

"Sweetie, not is not the best time to discuss his defects in training," my uncle said, stressed. "You've just been gutted."

I managed a smile. "Evil never sleeps," He laughed reluctantly, then two big dog-type creatures shouldered both him and Tony aside and frisked around me. It was Sigurd and Torburn. I gave kisses and the best ear skritches I could manage as thoughts of excitement, love, and welcome made themselves felt.

Odin, who'd been... discussing the situation energetically with Frigga, broke in, looking askance at the dogs. "Tonight, the two armies will feast together," he declared. "Before that, we will speak again on this matter to resolve it." His eye fell on me. "Rest," he told me, and nodded to Tony. He and Bucky helped me to my feet, and Tony turned me toward Valhalla, keeping an arm around me since I was still unsteady. I had rooms in the new annex, which was built to accommodate a slowly growing population of female Midgard warriors. I was dragging by the time we got there and having to lean heavily on Tony, who clucked at the stark light stone room I'd been assigned.

"What a dump," he said critically as I collapsed on my bed. I looked at him reprovingly. "Alright, it's not a dump, per se, it's just so plain. How do you not freeze at night? You've only got a couple of blankets. Why are you so under equipped?"

"Fireplace," I said, doggedly picking at the laces of my boots. It was a lot harder than it should have been. "And you know the population has been having a growth spurt as a result of the alien invasion attempts. Everybody needs stuff. I haven't been here long enough to collect anything."

Tony shook his head and batted my hands away, doing it more quickly and efficiently than I was capable of just then, dropping my boots on the floor by the bed. He nudged me down and covered me with his cape again before turning toward the fireplace. I was out like a light. When I woke up, Tony was patting my cheek fairly gently. I didn't want to get up, I was nice and warm, light from the fire washing the walls.

"Up and at 'em," he said briskly, and I reluctantly sat up. "Brought you a few things. You've got a down comforter so you won't freeze at night. I boosted you up the list with that guy who's in charge of supply by saying that Odin was taking a personal interest in you. Frigga sent you a nice outfit for this evening, it just arrived."

"Are you sure it's not poisoned or anything?" I asked warily. "Cause she does not like me." He scoffed and said that I had enough time for a bath and that he'd be back to collect me before the meeting. I handed him his cape and thanked him for letting me use it.

"I didn't know you were here," he said quietly. "I'd have come found you if I'd known." He slipped out. I heaved myself up and padded to the bathroom. That was the nicest thing about the annex,
each room had a private bathroom. Valhalla was so masculine in nature, and the guys over in the main hall did not keep the bathrooms nice. The annex was a building of stone that had a mica content so it sparkled softly, the rooms spacious, but it was chilly and clammy in the winter, which is what Valhalla was experiencing now. Obviously they didn't have any trouble with global warming. We'd had the latest battle over at Frigga's afterlife, where it was spring. It was odd that weather and passage of time in the two places didn't sync.

I still was a little tired and sore even after the nap and bath; "death" in battle provided a reset and I hadn't gotten that benefit. But I did feel better, anyway, and investigated the outfit Frigga had sent. It was a beautiful green velvet dress in a medieval-ish style, with long dagged sleeves, smooth lines, and some kind of pretty black and white fur trim around the neckline, hem, and sleeve hems. The Asgardian pendant that I'd been wearing at my death looked beautiful with it. The dress went over a shift of very fine, soft wool for warmth, fine wool stockings with ribbon garters, and there were pretty dress booties made from leather with an embroidered pattern on the toes. Over this went a thick cloak of the same fur that trimmed my dress, lined in soft white wool, and it had a hood. There was a pair of mittens, knit and felted, white with a patterned cuff. The annex was a distance from the main hall of Valhalla and it was snowing. It came with a black snood, unobtrusive, so I quickly braided my hair attractively and coiled the braid inside the netting. When the knock came at my door, I swung the cloak on, picked up the swords, and opened the door.

Tony was dressed as a Norse man in supple leathers, soft wool, and fur, although his clothing shaded between a copper color and rich brown. It was a huge difference between the bespoke suits and band t-shirts he'd favored in life, but it looked really good on him, and I told him so. "You always look lovely," he complimented me, shrugging off my comment and offering me his arm. "I meant what I said earlier. If I'd known you'd been brought here I'd have been on your doorstep a lot sooner. The only time I see anybody I know is during the combat, or a special session that Odin takes me to."

Tony must be lonely. He always was, but here it was probably more acute. The Norsemen in Valhalla were a cliquish bunch, and the outsiders we had also tended to form small, tightly knit groups that were hard to break into. "Thank you. I'm glad to see a familiar face here. Who is over in Frigga's camp, beside Bucky, Emma, and Captain America?" I asked, releasing his arm as he held the door for me. The air outside was bitter and sharp, and I was grateful for the warmth of the cloak, putting the hood up.

"Those three, Pete's over there too," he said. We walked along toward the main hall in silence. I enjoyed the gently falling snow. We reached the main hall and he held that door for me as well. Inside, he hung our cloaks and escorted me to Odin's throne in the great hall. The queen sat at his right hand and Emma, Bucky, and Mr Rogers sat on some of the stools that were placed in front of her and to her right side.

"Pull up a chair, Stark," Rogers said, genially enough, but it made me bristle. There was an empty seat by them, and besides, this was Odin's hall and it seemed presumptive for somebody else to be giving orders. Tony's face was blank, I couldn't tell what he was thinking. I brought over a stool quickly, set it down with a thump at Odin's left hand, and nudged Tony toward it before getting one for myself. Bucky frowned. The west door banged open, and Thor and Loki strode in, greeting their parents and the rest of us. As Loki settled in on his mother's side, Thor drew up a bench beside me and was pleased to say that Magni had been happy to hear that I was in Valhalla and had vowed to pick up his hand to hand again. I smiled and asked Thor to tell him to be sure to put in some effort or I'd find a way to do something about it.

"And Sif has authorized me to share the glad tidings that she is with child again," he said proudly,
and the three of us discussed this. Somewhat to my surprise, he was hoping for a daughter, vowing that if he got his wish, he'd bring her to me for training. Then he touched my pendant. "I remember giving you this, before you went away for additional education. A happy day. It powers have strengthened with your use of it." I'd worn it pretty constantly after the Joker had attacked me, taking it off rarely, going through a couple of chains and several clasps before Emma had made a chain for it out of one of her special alloys. He quieted when a severe-looking woman in a dress of black and green appeared out of nowhere and strode toward his parents. Loki turned blue, usually a response to strong emotions, and based on a certain similarity of facial features, it looked like this was his mother. She greeted the king and queen brusquely, and they asked her questions about the intrusion into her halls by Mr Rogers and Frigga. As she was speaking, I saw Peter Parker slip in and take the empty seat by Mr Rogers. I barely suppressed an eye roll. I respected his work as Spiderman and CEO of Stark Industries, but we'd never gotten along particularly well; personalities that just didn't mesh. When he was running Stark's company, he was content that I spent so much time in the labs and I was happier to be there. He'd done a competent enough job and I hadn't kicked up a fuss.

Then Odin asked me to explain what I'd done. I stood and addressed him as I stated that I'd been irritated by Captain Rogers and angered by Frigga's outburst of temper as manifested by the cheap shot she'd taken, that I'd never manifested any abilities for magic, and that the swords were not enchanted as far as I knew. Odin bade me fetch them for a closer examination, and I went to my cloak to retrieve the sword belt I'd brought over in anticipation. I handed the swords in their scabbard to Odin respectfully and stepped back, waiting, trying not to fiddle with my Brass Rat. As he drew the swords, his ravens looking at them as well, Frigga asked me where I'd obtained that necklace.

"Hogun taught me," I said, smiling slightly at the memories.

"Why would he do that?" she asked, sounding baffled.

"I taught him hand-to-hand," I said, not taking the implied slight to heart.

"You should have seen them fight, Mother," Thor said reminiscently. "It was a joy to behold."

"They were quite well-matched," Loki agreed, smiling at me. Frigga looked surprised. "Had she the time to devote to the study of the swords, I believe she easily could have become his master."

Then she frowned. "Where did you obtain that necklace?"

"Calm down, Mother, Thor and Sif and I gave it to her when achieved a significant educational milestone with distinction," Loki soothed. "She earned the right to wear such a precious gem." I was going to have to get the story behind that. I'd thought they were fairly common from the casual way they had always referred to it. She still looked at me suspiciously and I had a feeling that she'd be interrogating Loki later too.

"Where did you obtain the swords?" Odin asked, turning them over, the light fading under his hand.

"They're called dao, a type of Chinese sword," I said, looking at them with satisfaction. They were gracefully curved along the length of the blade and had a gentle curve to the handle, prettier than the ones Hogun had used. When they were placed together, the half-circle guards formed a perfect circle and the blades stood a little apart. You could fight with with the swords placed together like that, although it was difficult to keep the hilts together without slipping and there was more utility to using one sword in each hand. They fit nicely together in one special scabbard. "After working with Hogun for awhile, I bought my own set at auction rather than continuing to borrow his spare
set. I like them, they're well-made. I was using them when I was killed, which is how I have them here, I guess." Odin nodded absently, then returned them to me.

"They are no more than what they seem," he agreed. Hela materialized by my side--it was creepy how she could do that--and seized my face between her palms. Her eyes unfocused, and I felt a probing sensation.

She made a chattering T sound that reminded me of Damian, who'd made a similar sound when he'd been irritated. "You humans and your gods," she sighed. "Where do your people come from?"

"Mostly from Scandinavia, the Celtic part of Great Britain, and Germany," I said in confusion. Out of the corner of my eye I could see that Odin leaned forward. "That's the family lore." My kids were much more genetically diverse, thanks to their father. She nodded, then her eyes snapped back into focus and she smirked at Odin.

"Long ago, someone of her family was distinguished by a god's blessing for great skill in battle. It is interesting that the blessing did not fade in time as most such do with the dilution of the bloodline. The blessing persisted, strengthening again, and appears to have culminated in this one." She gestured at me. I felt my eyebrows lift in surprise.

"And who blessed her thus?" Odin asked.

"Why, you did, Odin Borson," she said silkily. "How indiscriminate were you with your... blessings?" Frigga regarded her husband with suspicion and he patted her hand.

"Only a few worthy were so distinguished by me," he said acerbically. "And that was only when we reigned over our followers on Midgard."

"I have aided both you and Frigga this day," Hela said sharply, uninterested in his attempt to placate his wife. "It is time now for my reward."

Odin looked at her severely and nodded. "Your service has been substantial," he acknowledged, and thought for a moment. "So long as you do not cause mischief or trouble or intend to do so, for releasing my wife and her general from your halls, the promise to do so in the future if this happens again, and testing the blood of one of the Einherjar, I grant you a substantial boon. You may wander the Nine Realms at your leisure; if you cause trouble, the boon will be revoked and you will be once more bound to the halls of the dead." Wow. That was indeed a considerable gift. Hela thought so too; without a further word, she bowed slightly to Odin, nodded at her son, and withdrew. That seemed to be a signal; the hall was immediately set up for dining.

Odin and Frigga sat at the head table with those heroes who had most distinguished themselves in battle, including everybody I knew. I sat at the lower tables, feeling a little disgraced for zapping people away, and the valkyries began to serve the mead. There were the usual toasts and jests, but these happened during dinner so it didn't add a lot of time. I was exhausted from the day's events--disembowelment really saps your energy--and wanted to sleep, but you can't just shovel your food down and slip out, you have to wait til the meal is over and the music starts. I helped move most of the tables away and the stools to the wall just like everybody else, holding up the wall in a shadowy space between torches until the musicians warmed up and struck their first tune, which is when I made my escape. Odin intercepted me near the door. "Now, what to do with you?" he mused. His eye brightened after a moment.

And that, my friends, is how I became a valkyrie.
As you might expect, I didn't just magically become a valkyrie then and there. Odin proposed it, let me adjust to the idea, and then we had a conversation about what that would entail. "It is not a thing easily undone," he said warningly. I was attracted to the idea because it meant that I could return to Midgard periodically and it would give me something to do. The science I'd done in life wasn't used here, and my skills as a trainer were not in demand. The daily battle was boring, the occasional scrimmages with Frigga's team not much more challenging. And it also meant that I'd have varied duties and opportunities, which I found appealing. One of Odin's musicians recited sagas after dinner during the time I was deciding, and all the sagas had something to say about the valkyries, referencing them as shield-maidens, battle-maidens, wish-maidens (because they executed Odin's wishes) and mead-maidens (they served the Einherjar and poured the first round at dinner). Although their principle function was to select the newly dead heroes who had earned a place in Valhalla, often they could do what they wanted, including interacting with mortals and taking lovers, although Odin specifically prohibited his valkyries from contacting those they'd known in life.

Odin mentioned that as a valkyrie I could visit Sif and take up training Magni again, as well as any other children Sif and Thor might have, and he introduced me to one of the newer valkyries, Bodil (which meant 'battle will cure'). She and I talked by ourselves; she was friendly and easy-going. She said that the valkyries tended to specialize in their duties; the oldest, most traditional ones (they were all former Asgardians) performing the duties as mead-maidens and wish-maidens, the newer ones (who included Midgardians and the few from other parts of the Nine Realms) were the ones going out to reap the battlefields. "My name's actually Carol," she said, leaning back against a tree. We'd been walking through the woods and took a break by a pretty little lake. "Odin gives us a valkyrie name for official business, but when we're not in our guise, we can use our mortal names if we want; we newer ones do, the older ones don't. But then, the oldest ones are from Asgard or the time that the gods were on Midgard, and their names are the same for both aspects. It's just us with non-Norse names who get a valkyrie name. You'll get one too if you decide to accept his offer."

"One thing that's been bothering me," I said, frowning. "When I was killed and was trying to get a handle on what had just happened" Carol nodded understandingly "it seemed like there was a bunch of other people who were doing the same thing as the valkyries."

"They were," she said immediately. "They were avatars for other gods in other pantheons. Everybody seems to be seeking different qualities in their dead." I snorted a laugh at that, and she smiled. "Most religions have some conception of the end of the world and they also want to stockpile people for their side. If you decide to accept Odin's offer, you'll get to know some of them. Some are more friendly than others, and you'll keep bumping into them." Then we talked about practicalities; valkyries have quarters in the woods away from Valhalla, but not all of them live there. Some of them have relationships with others in Valhalla and others just like other quarters more, so I could stay in my room if I wanted, and I would; it's a nice place, spacious and private. "If you're on battlefield patrol, you have a choice between riding a winged horse or flying the Einherjar back yourself. Most of us use the horses because if it's a big battle, you tire quickly if it's just you doing the transport and all. We all get the cloak of swan feathers, though; it's emblematic of the office and much easier to deal with in the mortal world than a horse. There's no daily uniform, but if you're being official, you have a narrow range of options. There's kind of a baggy white dress and you can wear it with armor. And the cloak, if you're not on horseback. Otherwise, you get to wear what you want, and Odin will assign your duties, which might include acting as his messenger or bodyguard, if he's feeling the need to be impressive. We also have our
contributions to make to the community in the form of weaving. It's good practice, and it also allows us to have items for barter. And when Ragnarok comes, we'll fight by his side, the first of his host." We talked for several hours, and that night, after dinner, Odin summoned me for a chat.

He asked if I had questions, and I did, about the specific duties he had in mind for me. "You would be tasked with selecting the slain on the battlefield. Frigga uses the valkyries for that purpose as well" (he smiled slightly as I hastily tried to smooth away my scowl. I hadn't forgiven her yet for making me suffer when she'd gutted me on the battlefield). "I have a mind to assign you to train the descendants of my son Thor, that they become mighty warriors and eligible to be raised to Valhalla in their time. The valkyries also have their own labor for the residents of Valhalla; they produce the cloth we use. Aside from these tasks, your time would be your own and you could spend it as you choose."

I said yes, of course. Odin smiled austerely and gave me the name Thyra, "like thunder." Then he dismissed me, saying that I could start learning my duties the next day.

The next day I skipped lunch in the hall and took a tray over to Tony's workshop instead. I slipped in and watched a moment; he was raising a metal hemisphere on a series of stakes. "What do you need?" he asked without turning around.

"Nothing, actually," I said, coming forward with the tray. He turned and smiled. "Didn't see you when I went in for lunch, so I thought I'd bring some over. You did promise me a tour at some point."

He sauntered over, wiping his hands on a rag, and took the tray from me. "This is new," he said, running a finger lightly over the swan feather cloak, turning it back to see the red wool lining.

"Just got it this morning," I said, shrugging it off and hanging it up carefully. It was nice and toasty in the workshop. "And since serving the Einherjar is one of the duties of the valkyries, I thought I'd give it a shot."

"I like it," he said, smirking, setting a stool at the table for me and pulling the covers off the dishes. As we ate, he asked me questions about why I had decided to take Odin up on his offer and what it was like so far.

"Well, it gives me something to do here. Battle is boring and I'm not very challenged, not contributing. He's assigned me to raise worthy warriors to Valhalla and also to train Thor's kids." Tony nodded. "You've probably noted that time doesn't run in parallel with mortal time." He nodded again, not interrupting me. "There's no direct relationship, it's not like a day here is worth five hours there or anything. They run independently of each other, and I'm learning the trick of inserting myself in the timestream on Earth at the right time and returning here without meeting myself. It's a lot of work."

"Can you go back in time on Earth and spend time with people again? Or go forward from where you're supposed to be? Would you do it if you could, maybe see your husband again?" he asked, serving me seconds.

"I think I'm supposed to be serving you," I said mildly, and he shook his head.

"My workshop, my hospitality."

"Ok," I said amiably. "I asked about that," I said, returning to his question. "It's possible, but prohibited, since if I went back, to be in a time with Damian again, just as an example, it's possible that I might cause things to turn out differently. I might not end up in Valhalla, and then there'd be
some weird paradox. But apparently we can't stay in the mortal realm indefinitely anyway, so
doing something like that would probably just hurt." I poked a potato with my fork. "When Damian
was killed, I mourned, then got on with my life. There was never anybody else; no one I met after
him could match his intelligence and vitality, and I simply refused to settle for somebody who was
so much less." I shrugged, looking at him. "Now I'm in a new life, or the afterlife, whatever, and
it's looking like it'll be a long time until the end of the world. The other Valkyries told me that
everybody goes somewhere, unless they actively decide not to go on, so the vast majority of
everyone who's ever lived is somewhere, under the aegis of some god or force, which means that
Damian is out there too. So are my folks, and J, and your parents, too. Nobody knows where they
are, it's not like we have a database or anything. The prevailing theory is that the end of the world
means the end of everybody's world, and everyone chosen for the duty will do whatever it is that
they're supposed to do-like we're supposed to fight. Nobody knows what will happen after, and it's
possible that the separations in the afterlife will vanish and we'll mingle. So it's possible that I'll see
everybody again, but not predictable. It's enough for me to know that he's most likely out there
somewhere, and I hope he's happy. I don't want to be all doom and gloom through eternity,
however that will pass, and I want to be happy too. So side trips into the past will just be
counterproductive." He nodded.

"I like the idea of my parents existing somewhere, even if I never see them again," he said simply.

I nodded and changed the subject. "It's not an easy job, though. Before a battle, a team of valkyries
warp a loom and weave, deciding who will die. They do it with a crap ton of magic and the entrails
and bones of the fallen, but this happens before they've actually fallen, so: more weirdness." Tony's
lip curled and I nodded. "It's apparently hard work, and then they have to
go get all the worthy. But
apparently then they don't have to do it for people who don't die in battle or for small skirmishes or
whatever." I shook my head. "It's so weird."

"I'll say," Tony said, pouring small glasses of mead to conclude the meal.

"I can either fly myself around with my nifty new cape or I can take a flying horse. They told me
that the horse is a lot easier, especially if you've had to participate in the weaving. So there's that.
I'm not supposed to take part in the battles anymore until we find out more about how I can make
people go elsewhere, so I have even less to do now. I mainly accepted so that I can do training
again, and I look forward to spending some time with Sif."

"I was going to ask if you wanted to work here," Tony said. "But I can see why you'd want to do
valkyrie things." He fiddled with his brass rat.

"I thought about asking if you needed any help," I said, touching his wrist. "But I'm not very
good with old-school fabrication and I'm certainly not as creative as you are."

"You think you could give me a hand sometimes, though?" he asked, and I smiled.

"I'd like that," I said promptly. "It can be... kind of lonely here. And we worked pretty well
together, before." His expression lightened.

"That we did," he said, and when I was done with my glass, put everything back on the tray.

"Can I ask why you're here and everybody else is in Folkvangr?" I asked a little tentatively.

"Not much of a secret," he said. "Over there is Emma and Rogers and Barnes, and around them I'm
just a spare wheel. I loved Emma for a long time," he said, as if waiting for a reaction, but I waved
him on. "She's smart and capable, lovely, funny and engaging and she never wanted my money or
social position, but we never clicked like that. A lot of it was my fault, I'm not a very lovable
person. Once I finally realized it would never happen, I let that go and moved on. Just didn't find anyone who fit what I needed, let alone wanted. Pepper, I wanted, but she couldn't accept Iron Man, and Con... we just weren't meant for the long haul." He huffed an unamused laugh. "So what's the point of being over there? I'd just be on the outside. They're...a very tightly knit trio, and nobody wants to feel that excluded on a regular basis. Pete's there, although he seems to spend most of his time alone. Over here I have a clean start. Sure, it's pretty much primitive tech, but I've always enjoyed a challenge."

"Your abilities are well-regarded here," I said to give him a boost. It was true, most of the Einherjar were in awe of the exceedingly clever creations he produced in his workshop. In the running count of the skirmishes between the two afterlives, Tony was now slightly ahead in wins. Those who weren't impressed either thought that our side didn't need that sort of trickery or they were a little jealous of his abilities and the respect that Odin accorded him. "I got a lot of questions about you from the valkyries when I said I'd worked with you before. You're kind of a man of mystery around Valhalla." He preened some and I was glad to be able to raise his spirits a little.

"So how did you die?" he asked finally, leaning back and looking at me. "How were things when you left?"

"It's kind of a long story, and you won't like some of it," I warned him. He flicked his hand in the old gesture he used to clear data from his computer screens back on Earth.

"Go on," he said. So I told him what had happened. Not long after Tony'd died, Peter had been killed as Spiderman, defending a family from some Skrull opportunists. His daughter took over as head of Stark Industries and the Avengers in her persona of Iron Paladin. It had gone along fairly well for awhile, but then there was some changes on the board of directors, with the new ones not as skilled as the older ones had been; they had managed to restrain May Parker before, but free of their restraint, she started a rather remarkable effort that drove the company into the ground quite efficiently. We'd fought a lot, she was so convinced that she knew what she was doing and refused any advice or help. And despite my lack of a formal MBA, I'd learned a ton about the realities of running a massive corporation from Tony, my father-in-law, and my husband. My daughter too. The terms of my position that Tony had drawn up all those years ago restricted my authority to the labs; success had depended, it turned out, on cooperation of me and the CEO working together with a common goal. It had worked during her father's tenure, but May had refused to take responsibility for her failures; she blamed others for them, usually me.

"Then the Mandarin teamed up with Ghost, and Iron Paladin led the Avengers against them." I shook my head. I still couldn't believe what had happened. "They roared right into a trap. Almost everybody was killed." I bit my lip and blinked a lot, making sure my voice was stable before I went on. "Only May and the current version of Captain America made it out, and Cap was still doing physical therapy when I died. You'd like Cap," I said, diverted. "She is the first woman to make it onto a Delta team, always got a joke in a crisis, led her team, earned the rank of Captain. She quit the military when her leg was blown off; obviously nobody can make prosthetics like Emma anymore, but we used the 3D tissue printer to make a bone scaffolding reinforced with metal ions and attached synthetic muscles and skin, so it's a very different approach. It was J's work," I said, still proud of him, then sobered again. "Serena was the field leader but May just bulldozed right over everybody when Serena got hit. They had a really good plan, but May fucked it up and..." I had to scrub away some tears. They weren't all from sorrow; no few of them were still pure rage. May had gotten all but one of my students killed, and many of my students had been my friends, including Kate Bishop, the Hawkeye who'd taken over for Clint, and Wanda. "So when Stark Tech became a lot less productive, there weren't funds to spare for the Avengers, and the US government footed the bill instead. They moved fast on that, held a court martial, found May culpable, kicked her off the team. Pietro sued her successfully for the wrongful death of his sister,
who'd been on her last mission before retirement, was awarded a hefty settlement. The board of directors canned her too, but then they were up a creek. They put the company up for sale shortly thereafter." Tony growled. "It was to Wayne Enterprises. I urged my daughter to buy it, and she did. Put the two best directors on a new board, got rid of the rest, and she found a new CEO for the company, an MIT alumna. We've got another MIT alumus running the labs." I looked at him, hoping he'd understand. "It was the best I could do, Tony. I used my status as majority shareholder to force the sale to Wayne because I knew if that happened, my daughter would pump money and resources back into Stark Industries and it would remain a going concern and retain its name. Roxxon and Hammer were also interested, but they'd have dismantled the company after plundering the intellectual property. I did the best I could, but I didn't have the authority. It wasn't enough. Martha was looking into transferring J's division, the enhanced/superhuman medical lab into Avenger Tech, so it kind of makes sense. It's not as horrible as it could have been."

I sighed. "One day when I was training Matt, the new hire, in how the labs were run because I was winding down to retirement, the sirens began to blare. There was a sneak attack by the Kree. Somehow they'd established a secret base the last time their armada was here," I looked down at my hands. "There were a lot of civilians in the streets. And this time we didn't have the Avengers. But the arsenal was still down in the basement; the government hadn't taken it out because they were trying to decide whether to recruit another Avenger team under Cap's leadership. There'd been basic training for everyone who wanted it, so I knew how to operate the antiaircraft battery, at least the fundamentals. So I went downstairs, loaded up, and went outside. There were permanent defensive fortifications, so I used one of them. I fired one of the big guns in the emplacement in the front of the building at the aircraft, and shot at the Kree I could see on the streets, using my swords on the ones that got too close. Until one of their fighters hit my position, I guess." I shrugged. Tony was still, and I knew he was processing the story, running it over in his mind.

I got up and left him to it. I took the tray with me; I had to go find Wayland.

The armor of a valkyrie apparently takes precedence over almost everything else, I found when I went to find the blacksmith. Wayland took precise measurements, very professionally, for the helmet and breastplate. None of the valkyries liked the idea of being at the mercy of men, even the Einherjer, so if you so much as touched a valkyrie in a way she didn't like, you have to deal with all of us piling on. It was an incredibly effective deterrent. Each valkyrie got a helmet, breastplate, shield, and a spear at the minimum, plus anything else they wanted. I was keeping my swords. The spear, the shield, and the cape were the emblems of the valkyries, although we didn't usually use the spears. When we went to harvest the glorious dead, we always carried at least the spear. They were mostly ceremonial for the time being, although we'd use them at Ragnarok. You could also ask for more pieces, like greaves or gauntlets, although most did not. Reginn had me choose the wood for the shaft of the spear from a huge variety they had on hand--they had the most beautiful piece of curly cherry that attracted me instantly and was a good size for my hand.

"This tree is associated with the element of fire," he said, and moved the spear shaft so the curly pattern caught the light. "It is sacred to women of the hunt and battle, and is imbued with the the power of making and doing, achievement, triumph over obstacles and critics. It conducts the forces of will and desire. The fruit is associated with sex and birth, life force, attraction. The flowers evoke eroticism and the power of love in all forms as well as springtime's renewal." He looked at me sideways. "It is a powerful and potent choice for one of the All-Father's valkyries. Its powers manifest themselves subtly and will strengthen the longer you use it." If we'd been on earth, I'd have taken that information as kind of woo-woo stuff, but here magic actually worked, and Reginn had been here long enough to know what he was talking about. He determined how long the shaft of my spear should be and cut it to length right there; he gave me the cut off and suggested that I have it carved into something or find a use for it since it was associated with my weapon. I asked about using it to replace the hilts of my swords, and he agreed to do that work too. He showed me
several varieties of spearheads and wanted me to pick a style. I pointed out several styles I liked and asked if he'd make me one using those elements, and he puffed up a bit. Apparently I'd just added to his prestige by allowing him to make the design choice. He also measured for the dimensions of the shield. Almost everybody in Valhalla and Folkvangr used a round shield, although the details of their appearance varied widely.

I told Tony about that at dinner, and he was interested when I said that there were a lot of different styles that the smiths worked with. "We're accustomed to thinking of the Vikings, that particular style," I said, sipping water with my meal. "But they continued to explore different variations here in Valhalla, so there's more breadth to their designs beyond the knotwork and stylized animals we're accustomed to associating with them. And over time, the Einherjar brought whatever design aesthetic they favored in life, which is why you see a lot of Gothic elements on the swords, for example. Not much Baroque or Rococo, although Art Deco has a devoted following too."

Conversation stuttered a bit. He toyed with his glass before thanking me for telling him what had happened, to his company, the Avengers, and myself. "It couldn't have been easy," he said. "I know you couldn't have prevented any of it." He shook his head. "I thought May would grow out of her impulsiveness once she saw how heavy the responsibilities of leadership were, become a more mature leader. Obviously, I was wrong. I appreciate what you did to save it. And it must have been devastating to lose your students and friends like that." I didn't know what to say to that, so I just patted his arm and refilled his glass. "Now I know why you're here, a valkyrie," he said. "It was brave of you to man the gun, especially since you never trained much with the firearms. It wasn't your job, but you stepped up anyway and made a difference."

"Don't know how much of a difference I made," I said, sighing. "I really regret not having more training, but we always thought the Avengers would be around. And nobody thought that the aliens could make a secret base."

"Every ship you shot down was one less that could continue destroying the city and killing people. Same for the Kree you shot. You made a difference," he said firmly, squeezing my hand. It helped a little to hear that. Then he started to ask about his godchildren, and I was happy to tell him stories.

I slipped into a new routine easily; the valkyries usually didn't take part in the battles or skirmishes unless Odin directed us to. I was specifically forbidden to fight among the general populations in the afterlife until it was learned how I'd banished Frigga and Captain America to Hela's domain, but the valkyries battled each other to keep their skill sharp, and THAT was pitched fighting. It was awesome. I had to learn the use of the spear to the valkyries' standards, and I could use my swords too. It didn't matter if I popped one of them elsewhere, since they had the skill, knowledge, and ability to find themselves anywhere Heimdall could see and return through space and time. "Kind of like Doctor Who," Irene, a new valkyrie like myself, muttered during one practice. I grinned. Reginn had created a graceful, fluted spear for me in steel, with accents of the gold metal that the Asgardians favored, and reinforced the cherry shaft at intervals with pierced metal bands that let the pattern of the wood be visible while increasing its resistance to damage and splitting. The spear, shield, and armor were additionally engraved with flowers, vines, and leaves. The shield was also lined with cherry to provide a vibration-muffling layer and to diffuse the heat when it warmed up under the sun. The valkyries assured me that summer would come in time; seasons seemed to last longer in Valhalla than on Earth or in Folkvangr. I caught on quickly, and it was satisfying to be able to fight full-out, not having to hold back. We had a nice training ground in the center of a grove of trees, currently swept bare of snow.

Along with the fighting techniques--I had to learn to fight with a coordinated unit, too--I learned the ins and outs of valkyrie-ing on the battlefield, how to find the point in time where I was needed
to claim a soul, how to open a window at that time, how to close it when I was done, and how to return to Valhalla. The special weaving could only be learned before a battle, so I was taught how to weave cloth in preparation. The valkyries had their own workshop where we produced the cloth for Valhalla, weaving wool, linen, and silk yardage, coarse and fine. We set up vast looms and took turns passing shuttles through the warp threads. There were smaller looms too, for the production of specialty fabrics or individual commissions or items for trade. I also learned to spin thread for the looms and yarn, although not many people knitted for some reason, mostly those of us who were recruited after, say, the Renaissance. It was faster to make my own clothes than to wait for one of the seamstresses to do it, so I picked up sewing again, although I hated doing the long seams by hand. It took a long time to do the seams with tight stitches, and longer stitches tore out easily.

I complained about that to Tony at dinner one night. Something had gone awry in his workshop that day, cutting great rents in the clothes he'd been wearing. I offered to fix those (I'd just learned how to reweave cuts in cloth) and he asked why there were no sewing machines. "I don't know, actually," I said, shrugging. "Maybe it's not traditional enough?" When I returned the mended clothing the next week, he had something for me. A treadle sewing machine. Beautiful. It was similar in size to one of the old Singers, but a completely different aesthetic, all carved and flowing metal, as if the set designers from Lord of the Rings had done a sewing machine.

"It needs needles, though," Tony said with a frown. "I can't make them fine enough with this equipment." I wore a new sweater to the next battle with Folkvangr under my swan cloak. This was the first skirmish we'd had with them since my promotion, and I needed to get everybody on both sides accustomed to my new status. If I didn't, I'd be attacked, and I couldn't fight back yet. Cowardice was probably the worst thing you could be accused of here. The valkyries always went to these battles to watch, and there was always the slim possibility that Odin'd have somebody step in if it looked like a feud was brewing or the fighting was getting too personal. We might be in two different afterlives, but ultimately we were all on the same side, and we all needed to more or less get along. I kept my eye out, and when it was wrapping up, I found my uncle with Emma. They were both surprised at my promotion; Emma was pleased for me, and Bucky couldn't be prouder. After I'd answered their questions, I produced a piece of yarn I'd spun and dyed, a wool/silk blend in a leaf green, and handed it to Emma.

"I need some needles, finer than what the smiths produce in Valhalla," I told her. "I'd be willing to trade yarn if you made me some." I produced the drawing with the dimensions that Tony had made for me, explaining my new sewing machine.

Emma laughed, fingering the yarn. "For this, I'll make pins for you too," she said immediately. She liked the green, and when I'd spun and dyed the yarn, I traipsed over to Folkvangr to deliver it. I didn't know if Emma had had the time to make the needles yet, but I wanted to hold up my side of the bargain, and besides, I wanted to see her reaction.

I found her and Bucky at her forge. She was thrilled; the yarn was soft and had a beautiful sheen. Emma handed over a little packet that contained twenty needles for the sewing machine, a hundred long, fine pins, and twenty hand-sewing needles of different sizes, all using her own alloys so they were thin, had good-sized eyes, and were highly resistant to breakage or bending. "That's a real bargain," she said, smoothing her hand over the skeins of yarn. "If you'd be willing to spin enough finer wool for a shawl, I'll triple those numbers." Ooh. With that many needles and pins, I'd be set. I agreed, and Bucky and I bargained for a chunky wool yarn in a different blue for a sweater for him. I wasn't sure what he was bargaining with, but he was my uncle so I trusted him. At that point, Captain America came in and sat by Emma. They were all cuddly and affectionate and very definitely a unit. I instantly understood why Tony preferred Valhalla. I immediately felt like an outsider myself.
I think Captain America felt a little left out when he saw the yarn and heard about the bargains. "Call me Steve," he said, but it felt a little awkward to me since I didn't know him at all and most of the time since I'd met him I'd been irritated with him. He asked what I'd like for enough yarn for a sweater for him. I'd have done it for free as a favor for my uncle, but he insisted on bargaining. He was mostly a general, but when he wasn't doing that, he was learning woodworking. He agreed to make some knitting needles for me, and I specified birch wood, having learned some of the lore of the trees from Reginn. Birch was associated with new beginnings, creativity, and renewal, all good qualities for a knitter. I took measurements while I was there; he too was restored to his prime, which meant that he was enormously muscled, and I wanted there to be enough yarn.

Spinning was easy and I did it after dinners; my spindle was highly portable and it didn't take a lot of concentration. It was easy to do when talking with Tony, although sometimes I found I'd stopped after listening to him describe a problem he'd encountered or something clever he'd done. I enjoyed his sharp wit. We usually stayed in the hall to enjoy the music after dinner and sometimes we joined in the dancing too. Occasionally we went to his workshop if there was something I could do to help. It didn't take long before the yarn was spun for all the projects I'd committed to. Emma had told me to surprise her with the color of her yarn, so I dyed it a rich dark red, and the yarn for Bucky was in a lighter blue that almost matched his eyes. Captain Rogers' was in a marled navy blue and white.

The next battle was at Folkvangr, so I took everything with me then. Emma loved the color of her yarn, and Bucky was pleased by his as well. He'd also taken up metalworking, but while Emma made alloys for him, they weren't the kinds only she could use, he worked them himself and had created for me a large pair of fabric shears and a smaller pair that I could use for fine work or embroidery. They were much better than what I could get in Valhalla, and I gave him a big hug. Emma had added an extra hundred pins to what we'd agreed on because she'd liked her yarn so much, being about halfway through her sweater. Captain Rogers was very pleased with his too, and handed over three sets of knitting needles, perfectly matched in diameter, and with nicely carved heads. He said immediately that the yarn was worth more, and pledged more sets. We negotiated a bit and I ended up with a promise to make a couple of sets of double pointed needles in sizes I'd use a lot.

A couple nights later, I went with Tony to his workshop to do some sewing while he worked; he had me keep the sewing machine there because there were a few kinks that had to be worked out, and then it was pleasant to work there with him doing his own thing too. When I got up to go, before the customary good night hugs, I handed him a sweater I'd made for him in a natural charcoal made from black wool. He seemed to like it.
Retrieval

It took until the spring had firmly supplanted winter in Valhalla for me to be able to control my power to puff people to Hela's domain. It was finally determined that I had some rogue power similar to what the valkyries used to move themselves and retrieve souls. After that discovery, control of this projective aspect of power became a lot easier and finally allowed me to become skilled enough to take up my duties as a valkyrie. One morning, Odin summoned me and gave me my first task. It was a soul retrieval job and he said it would be tricky. I paraphrase, of course. The soul was on a planet I'd never even heard of, and I had to go talk to Heimdall to be shown where it was. I also had to take a horse, as the travel would be too difficult and draining for me to return with the soul on my own.

So I attired myself in the classic white dress of the valkyries (gotta keep up appearances), grabbed my spear, checked out a flying horse from the herd, and summoned my will and the power to slip into time and space, and after a long and hard-fought journey, the horse and I popped out into the atmosphere of a warm green planet. The horse glided, playing with the thermals, until we found the plateau that Heimdall had identified for me, and there at the base was the remains of a large man. It looked like he was going to explode at any moment from the buildup of gas in the corpse. Standing by the body, looking forlorn, was a smaller, scruffy-looking man. Yep, time to vacate. We landed and I turned the man away. The horse and I walked him a fair distance away before we stopped and I got a good look at him. He was human sized and looked vaguely familiar, although for the life of me (so to speak) I couldn't place him. I didn't really know how to say it, but the guy looked helpless and lost, so I just blurted it out. "I am Thyra, a valkyrie. I have been sent by Odin to bring you to Valhalla." Ok, my patter needed work. Lots and lots of work, but it caught his attention.

"You sound American," he observed.

"I am. I'm new at this," I confessed. "My name is actually Alex. You get a valkyrie name when you sign on."

"Do you know Thor?" he asked.

"I do," I confirmed, happy to be able to say something that might make me look more competent, even just by association. "He's King of Asgard now."

"That's very interesting," he said, looking like he actually did find it interesting. "Do you see him much?"

"He comes to Valhalla every so often," I told him. "Now, will you come with me?" Jeeze. What if he didn't want to come? I'd hate to go back to Valhalla without my soul. The soul I'd been sent to fetch. Does it have to be a free will thing or could I tie him up?

The man looked back the way we'd come. He seemed like a nice guy, mild, dark curly hair, kind face. "Well, there's nothing left for me here. Might as well," he said, so I mounted the horse and gave him a hand up behind me. The horse gathered herself and launched into the sky, wings beating strongly, and when she was ready I sort of shifted us back. The air was cold as we glided in, circling the great hall. The shields that made the roof glittered in the light, and I wondered what this man would think of the hall, with its rafters made of spears and the seats made of breastplates. He didn't seem to be the type to buy into warrior culture. The horse dodged one of the eagles that hung out in the airspace above the hall, and began her descent. When we landed, the man looked a little blue.
"Spring just arrived," I said. I was chilly too. "This way, please. After Odin greets you, we'll get you all set up, including getting you warmed up again." I pointed the way to the main hall with my spear, glad to use it somehow.

"I don't know why I'm here, actually," the man confessed. "I'm not a fighter, personally."

"Odin didn't tell me what you'd done to earn your place here," I said. "But he'll have his reasons."

"I was a scientist," he said ruefully. I wondered how he ended up so far away from Earth, but there are just huge bucketsful of weird in the universe.

"Well, you aren't the only scientist here," I told him, grateful to have some good news for him. We hit the front lawn and as we strolled up to the main doors, the huge carved wooden doors opened out, the wolves that prowled the hall as guards hustled over, and Odin strode out. He does love an impressive entrance. He nodded to me.

"Well done, Thyra," he said. Behind him, Tony strolled out, eating an apple and looking curious. I thought he'd like to meet a fellow scientist and nodded toward the new man. Tony took one look at the new guy and dropped his apple, shooting over to hug him. My mouth gaped, and even Odin looked taken aback. The men knew each other, that was evident from the happy greetings on both sides and the back slapping. Odin raised his eyebrows, made a short welcome speech, and directed Tony to get the guy settled in.

"Come on, Bruce," I heard him say encouragingly as they turned away. That finally got my stupified brain back in motion.

"Bruce...is that Bruce Banner?" I asked Odin, my brain finally making the connection, and he nodded.

"He helped to free my son from a captivity engineered by Hela," he said, then dismissed me. I went to my room to change, putting on some old work clothes. I was back in time to help the valkyries with the shearing of the sheep and lambs. Oh, yay.

Later that afternoon, I crawled back to my rooms, muddy and exhausted. Shearing is trickier than it looks, and I'd been tired already from retrieval. I rinsed off the mud and drew a hot bath for my muscles and also because the mud had been cold, getting out just in time to make it to dinner. I didn't know if Tony would be there or want my company if he was; Avengers history was that the two had been good friends as well as colleagues, and they sure had a lot to catch up on. A look around the hall didn't reveal either of them, so I sat down with my best valkyrie friends, Irene, Dagny, and Carol.

"Where's your devoted companion?" Irene asked teasingly.

"I brought in a soul today that turned out to be his best friend from Earth," I said.

"Was this your first retrieval?" Dagny asked, and when I confirmed that, they toasted my success with the mead that Hildr poured for our table and asked me about it, shaking their heads at the difficulty of travel and laughing as I told them about trying to convince Bruce to come along. And yes, it did have to be an exercise of free will. After the others told the stories about their first soul, Carol looked at me knowingly.

"You're afraid that Tony will minimize your friendship now that he's got his buddy," she said accurately, and I had to nod.

Irene snorted. "Not unless they were sleeping together," she said.
"Tony and I aren't bedmates," I pointed out, a little sharply.

"But you'd liiiiiiiiiiiiiike to be," Carol said slyly. "I've seen the way you look at him."

'And Tony watches you when you're doing something else," Irene said matter-of-factly. "You ought to just jump him, nothing wrong with sex, and it's good for you. And no pregnancy or disease here, so it's all for a good time." I didn't have to say anything then because our dinner was served. It was true that here, our friendship had evolved into a richer friendship now that he wasn't my boss, a beloved and admired mentor, and the age difference had been voided. I still valued his good qualities--his sharp and agile intelligence, his kindness and generosity--and accepted his faults, and he seemed to do the same in his estimation of my own qualities.

"But Tony values you," Carol said briskly after the meal. "You don't give yourself enough credit. Or him." Then we pushed back the tables and benches and the dancing started.

Usually I danced mostly with Tony; the beats and music enabled dances from many different cultures and times, so there was usually an odd mix of dancing going on, but that evening, my partners were traditional Norsemen and they taught me steps to a couple of traditional dances. I had to concentrate on learning the steps. There were a lot of different kinds of traditional dancing, including for festivals and sacred days; there were also sword dances and ones for the berserkers.

The next day it was back to shearing. We had breakfast and lunch brought out to the pastures, so it was pretty much non-stop work, and I've never dealt with herds of animals before. Lots of learning going on.

None of us were particularly lively at dinner. After I ate, I wondered if I could get in a little nap before the tables were cleared away (yeah), and if Odin would notice (yes) and if he'd let me get away with it (probably not.) The decision was taken out of my hands when Tony plopped down across the table and pushed a glass of mead toward me. Bruce sat more cautiously. "I'm too tired to hold my liquor," I said, and pushed the glass back toward Tony, wincing as somebody (Carol) kicked me.

"What are you doing?" he asked. "You smell like sheep." I narrowed my eyes at him and noticed the rest of the valkyries in my group were starting to look mean too.

"Shearing," I said succinctly. "Without the fleeces, there's no wool cloth or yarn. There's only three, four dozen valkyries and about three thousand sheep and lambs." And they were huge beasts, larger than Sigurd, stupid and wild and inclined to spook. They looked like cartoons with their ridiculously fluffy bodies and spindly little legs, but they could move deceptively fast. They produced beautiful fleeces, though, very long, soft fibers in incredible abundance.

"We're going to have to increase the flocks in order to meet demand next year. And after the shearing, we'll have to harvest the first crop of flax," Irene said drearily. "We'll have to increase the plantings there, too."

"Then process the flax," Bryn said, looking like she was going to start crying.

"I can't wait til winter," Heidi muttered.

"I feel that I should have gotten out of the lab more," I sighed. I was pretty fit, but this was a whole different level than the exertion I was used to. It was sustained and unrelenting, unlike teaching self-defense.

"Well, after we get the first flax crop done, we'll get a break," Carol said, trying to be positive.
"Washing the wool is hard because of the volume, but after that, we get to card it and make rovings for the spinners. That's both social and easier."

"Then there's the second flax crop, and then after all the linen's processed, we start the weaving," Heidi said. "I hate setting up the looms, but the weaving is fun."

"Then we get the silk cocoons in the fall, so we have to reel those," Carol sighed. "Most of the plain weaving is done in the summer, fall, and early in the winter. The specialty weaving and what we each do for ourselves is done from the time we finish with the silk and before the shearing starts again. It's the only time we have for it."

"Where do you get the silkworm cocoons?" Bruce asked.

"There's a group of valkyries who do sericulture rather than weaving," Heidi said. "The shepherds for the sheep are some of the male Einherjar, and the ones who work in agriculture actually plant the flax for us. They also grow a different type of flax for the seeds and oil. They get a good price for the oil in Folkvangr; they've got a lot of artisans over there."

"Frigga is pressuring Odin to have us do the work for Folkvangr as well," Dagny said darkly. "I heard him promise to think about it, which means he'll ask the older Valkyries." We all turned to look at her.

"That's ridiculous," Heidi said after a moment. "We can supply the needs of Valhalla, but no more. Everything would have to be at least doubled, including the numbers of the valkyrie. Possibly more than doubled, as those in Folkvangr do like their luxuries." I had to suppress my smile. We all liked our little luxuries, but those in Valhalla also liked to think they were tougher than anybody else.

"Let them do their own work," Irene said firmly. "We have our hands full here. That would mean increasing the herds and the plantings far beyond our current ability."

"Let's not be too hasty," I said slowly. The looks my fellow valkyries gave me were horrified. "Hear me out. If they're looking for cloth, the finished products, there are ways that perhaps we can arrange it. An exchange. If the plan is presented to Frigga, she has the option of accepting it to get what she wants, or turning it down and looking...dare I say...a little ridiculous."

Carol caught on first. "You mean to shift the raw production of materials." I smiled at her.

"If they did the shearing and took care of the flax, we could increase our output. Maybe do more specialty work," she said, getting more enthusiastic.

"Why don't I take this to Hildr, Randgrid, Sigrun, Brynhildr, and Eir," Dagny said brightly. If we had a plan, these valkyries, who had served the longest, would be necessary for implementation. Odin would listen to them. And Dagny had joined the valkyries at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution and got along with them the best of the modern valkyries. There was a big gap in understanding between pre- and post- Industrial Revolution, especially those of us who had joined in the past fifty or so Earth years. Asgard wasn't nearly as technological, but even there, there was a difference in outlook about the role of women and societal order.

Dagny pushed up and went to the group of the oldest valkyries, all tall, beautiful blondes. Then it was time to move the tables and benches. "I'm dead dog tired," I said to the other valkyries, who nodded. Several of us hadn't been around long enough to learn shearing, and we were stuck with rounding up the sheep and delivering them to the shearers, occasionally picking up the fleeces and putting them into the cart that would take them to a storage building. Sheep often broke away from the flocks, those swift bastards. I spent a lot of time running after them. I smiled at Tony and
Bruce. "This new person is Bruce," I said to the valkryies. "I brought him in today." Irene immediately offered Bruce the seat next to her. Tony got up when I did and offered to walk me home.

"I'm glad I picked up Bruce for you," I said once we were outside, yawning. "You need a friend."

"I need another friend," he corrected me. "Aren't we friends?"

"Well, yeah," I agreed. "But you know, a guy friend." He shot me a grin.

"Apparently you didn't recognize him."

"Nope," I said, abashed. "I thought that the corpse had just been there awhile and my timing sucked. I felt that an explosion was imminent."

"Big and green?" he asked, laughing. I smiled slightly. "Well, Banner said that he'd just gotten up and was looking at what was left of the other guy, so your timing really couldn't be better." We reached the outer door to the annex, which he held for me. "But yeah, thanks for bringing him. It was clever of you to propose dumping the hard work on the Folkvangr people," he said, changing the topic. I smirked at him.

"It's not that we're getting rid of all the hard parts. Setting up those big looms and weaving them is hard work too. We're just proposing to get rid of the less skilled part. The smellier, muddier part." I smiled beatifically. From what the others had told me, the retting phase of linen production was very odiferous and deeply unpleasant, something I'd just as soon skip. "I imagine the strongest people over there will be taking part." Both my uncle and Captain Rogers were pretty strong. Tony burst out laughing.

"When will you be done with the sheep?"

"Hildr says a day or two before Walpurgis. We'll get a break to rest up before the festivities," I said.

"The next skirmish with Folkvangr takes place the day before the festival," he said, stopping at my door. I meant to give him a little hug, but somehow I got caught in a cuddle.

"It's a big deal, Odin's big festival. Nine days and nights, a May pole, decorating in flowers and fresh boughs. Feasting and revelry, according to the gals."

"Can't wait," he said without a trace of sarcasm. Reluctantly, I pulled away and grinned at him.

"I might just fall asleep standing up. And it's not like you can stand there all night."

"Nothing better to do," he quipped, but then he blushed. I was uncertain how to take that.

"Well, thanks for walking me back," I said.

"My pleasure." He winked at me and strode down the hall. I watched him for a moment, then went inside my room.

The days passed and I got better with the sheep and developed more stamina. Nevertheless, it was still hard work and we were all relieved when Hildr said that she and the others had proposed our plan and the reasons behind it to Odin. He'd looked thoughtful, and had disappeared shortly thereafter.
The last ewe had just been sheared and released, the last fleeces put in the cart, and we were cleaning up when Odin showed up, praised our efforts, and said that Frigga had accepted our proposal and that when the flax harvest began, people from Folkvangr would come over to learn how to do it. We could expect work parties to come in at all stages of the flax treatments and the shearing next year. We cheered. After Odin had gone, Randgrid said, "I feel that it is likely that the All-Father did not explain exactly how long it takes for the wool to be shorn or the flax to be processed." There was silence, then we all burst out laughing. They probably wouldn't have agreed to do it if they'd known.

The next day I slept in and took it easy. All of us did. Later in the morning, the other valkyries showed me a volcanically active area where there were hot pools. As expected, the area stank of sulfur, but the afternoon was cooling off and it was fun to relax and socialize, get to know the other valkyries besides my friends. The Einherjer were able to understand each other due to magic, some kind of translating spell; otherwise we'd never get anything done, with tongues ranging from old Norse to Asgardian, modern English, Swedish, Finnish, Arabic, German, Russian, Chinese, Japanese. And those were the only languages I was told about; there were undoubtedly more. Odin had widened his recruitment over the centuries all over the Nine Realms. The older valkyries told us new ones about the significance of Walpurgis (a festival to honor the sacrifice of Odin, who hanged himself on the world tree Yggdrasil for nine nights in order to understand the wisdom of the runes. On the ninth night, he understood, and for an instant died. All light went out of the world and chaos reigned in that moment. At the final stroke of midnight, he revived. The history had been conflated on Earth with a Christian saint in accordance with the official goal of the church to absorb pagan festivals, so it was called Walpurgis even here now.)

"We celebrate with feasting and dancing and veneration of Odin for eight of the nights," Eir told us. "But the ninth night... that's all together more serious and sacred."

"The celebration begins at dusk, with the kindling of a great bonfire by striking flints together," Sigrun took over. "We all light a small piece of kindling once the bonfire gets going and kindle the fires upon our own hearths, for luck and success, then we keep vigil. The barrier between living and dead is stretched thinly that night, and some may find ways to return to the living if they greatly desire it and find a means. We offer a blot, a ritual sacrifice in the form of a feast which all women serve. Thor usually comes to be honored as the bringer of lightning, thunder, and rain, as does Freyr and his sister Freyja for their fertility aspects. The bonfire is snuffed as midnight approaches and at the last stroke, it is rekindled. After the moment, we celebrate the beginning of summer, a celebration known as Thrimilcy. Mead is served by all the valkyries, and the stirring of the blood and fertility is the object of the rest of the celebration. We hold to the old ways, and it is necessary to make offerings so that the earth will return abundance to us in turn. Wild desires awaken in our hearts that life has not fulfilled as the party takes to the forests. We celebrate together, though also in secret."

"It's good luck to burn anything that's worn out in the past year, and being kissed under a cherry tree in bloom means good things for your sex life," Irene added cheerfully, and others talked about leaping through the bonfire for luck, dancing around the bonfire, other traditions. The next morning at dawn, the men bring in fresh branches to decorate the hall and erect the Maypole, the women gather flowers to make a wreath for the top of the May pole. Men and women dance and sing, and couples wind ribbons around the May pole in a dance. I knew of the custom but had never seen it done.

"The May pole is a phallic symbol, of course," Heidi said. She'd been an anthropologist, so she provided context on some more obscure things for us more modern valkyries, but this seemed pretty evident. She chortled. "The wreath symbolizes the vagina, and as the ribbons are twined on the May pole, the wreath slides down the shaft of the pole. The wreath drops down to the earth
after the ribbons have been completely plaited around the pole, then the ribbons are unwound with the direction of the original dance reversed to conclude the rite. Then we have a big breakfast and celebrate the rest of the day."

We had to get out and hustle to get dressed in our white dresses; there was a scrimmage with Frigga's team that afternoon, and with Walpurgis imminent, there was hope that he'd let us fight too as a special boon.

"Is Frigga going to be here for Walpurgis?" I asked Irene as we walked over to the battle field, clothed in white, with our swan cloaks, shields, helmets, and spears gleaming in the sun and she snorted.

"Yeah, she's not going to leave him unattended during fertility rites," she said. "He went over for their ceremony; they're ahead of us in terms of the season, you might remember." I did. They were well into summer now. "Look, it's not a requirement to have sex if you don't want to once the bonfire is relit," she said. "Participation is strongly encouraged, though, as fertility rites are magic, and magic works here, of course. If you don't want to add to the magic, you'll want to slip away soon after that. You should, though. It's amazing." And she nudged me.

When we arrived at the scrimmage en masse, Odin took one look at us and smiled, granting permission but reserving us until battle had been joined. We watched with anticipation, but we had a wait. There was an initial clash, which gradually resolved into individual battles, then Tony used gently pressurized water and nettles to really distract a bunch of people, but finally we got in the game. It was a bit disappointing, really. Our swan's feather cloaks became actual wings, enabling us to attack from on high, and we made short work of the visiting team. There were a lot of complaints since we significantly shortened the scrimmage, but we blew them off and Odin said that it was good for people to remember that we were skilled warriors ourselves. Afterward, Odin summoned me and had me set up a time with Thor when I could start training Magni again. I would be going there every third day, and it was agreed that I'd start after the celebration was over.

Captain Rogers caught up with me after the slain were reanimated. "Pretty impressive," he said, gesturing to my fellow valkyries. He invited me to run his obstacle course with him, and I accepted eagerly. From what my uncle said, it was even better than the ones he'd had as an Avenger. I got to chat with my uncle and aunt a bit too, then it was time to go back home. Dinner would be somewhat makeshift since the effort was going towards the holiday feasts, but the plan was to eat at Tony's workshop. The plan went awry when Cap saw Bruce; there was a big reunion with Tony, Bruce, Cap, Bucky, Emma, and Peter, which was completely understandable. It looked like it would last awhile. I faded away and went back home.

After eating, the customary entertainment was not available due to preparations, so we hung out in the great hall and I worked on my chess game with Dagny. I was beginning to suspect that I'd never master it. She smirked and the other remaining valkyries hooted when she had me pretty well boxed in. I stared glumly at the board and started when someone thumped down beside me, straddling the bench. It was Tony. He studied the board, directed some moves, and in six moves Dagny was in check. She shook her head and tipped her king over before she and the others drifted away. Tony helped me put the pieces back in their case.

"Thought you'd still be reminiscing," I said, smiling.

"They are," he said, leaning toward me. "But I got a new task from Odin that I need to start on in the morning. And I wanted to say goodnight." He brushed a lock of my hair back and I realized he was drunk. Did a good job of concealing it, though. "You could have stayed with us," he said. "Barnes was disappointed you left."
"It seemed like an Avengers reunion," I said, shrugging. "And since we're pretty much off the clock until the festival is over, I just thought I'd relax."

"You don't feel like you belong," he corrected me. Then yawned suddenly. "We'll talk about that another time, though. I need to go to bed now." He patted my hand. "Probably won't see you til tomorrow night."

"Ok, then. Night, Tony." We stood up together and he wavered slightly. "Need some help?"

"Naw, I'm fine." But he wobbled again and I just took his arm and steered him toward the door. We didn't talk on the way back to his workshop, which had his quarters built off to the side. I'd never seen them before, we'd always stayed in the workshop; it was familiar after working so long with him. Fittingly, the dark stone chambers were dramatic; the usual high ceilings added grandeur to the furnishings. There were deep red curtains at the large, long windows and the canopied bed, and elegant walnut furniture, thick wool rugs that I recognized as having been created by Gretchen, one of the oldest and most artistic valkyries. Some rather mysterious, abstract tapestries that had to have been made by Birget warmed the walls. The touches of metal were the Asgardian golden stuff. In the air was the spicy scent of the tonic he used as an aftershave lotion, both crisp and seductive. Tony stumbled as I turned back the bed, the white linen sheets a shocking contrast to the rest of the room.

"Do you miss being Iron Man?" I asked as I lowered him to the bed, taking off the belt with pouches for his tools and removing his surcoat before gently pushing him over and unlacing his boots.

"I don't miss having to deal with the fallout of trying to protect people," he muttered. "But helping, yeah. The flying... that I miss." I swung his legs into the bed and covered him, lightly touching his jaw as he went right to sleep. Although one of the benefits of being dead is that there's no hangovers the next day, I felt that he'd probably be thirsty when he woke up, so I got him a glass of water from the bathroom, folded his tunic and set it on a chair with the belt. I drew the curtains and left.
The first few days of Walpurgis passed quietly. I slept in and we were mostly all at our ease, except for the kitchen staff. We did some team training, but that was about it. Tony refused to tell me what he was working on for Odin. Bruce was working with him and just said that Tony wanted it to be a surprise so I'd have to wait. Drat. There were toasts to Odin before the feasts (with the very good mead) and the oldest skalds, like Braggi Boddison and Snorri Sturluson, recited epic poetry about the god. Later, musicians played. We were encouraged to talk, not just to our accustomed companions but to everyone, play games, and dance in order to strengthen our community and remind us that we were there for a purpose, however long it might take for Ragnarok. The valkyries were very popular companions, and not just because there wasn't an excess of women in Valhalla. We were treated with the utmost respect and courtesy during this time.

On the fifth day, however, there was a change in the game plan and we were informed by Odin of a coming battle. He charged us to weave and decide the fates of men.

Ok, no pressure. Twelve of us dressed in our white dresses, collected our armor and spears, and went to a building behind the huge one we used to weave cloth. It was set apart with trees and abutted a stream. The building was windowless, high-ceilinged, and had only one door, a massive ancient iron-bound oak panel. It was hard to open and discouraged trespass. We left our arms and armor at the door. Once we were inside, a faint tang of copper was in the air and the lights were lit. In the room was a large loom, ready to be warped. We gathered around the loom and started chanting. I'd never been instructed in any sort of chanting, but the words sprang to my lips nevertheless. We swayed as we chanted, and over time a weird energy charged the room. We all stopped chanting when the peak of the energy was reached although no signal was given. I was dazed when I came out of a trance-like state I'd fallen into. In a large tub behind us were intestines, covered in that translucent, pearly ichor. The others moved toward the tub and reached in. Carol turned toward me. "They aren't real," she said reassuringly. "They're representations, not reality. Any time we choose, it means that there's a battle and we need to know who among the slain will be brought to Valhalla. It is an augury, divination." I reluctantly approached the tub and pulled out a handful. They didn't feel like I imagine real intestines would, and, heartened by this, joined the others warping the loom. Then the weaving began. There were more chants, each of us with a different part to form a complex, intertwined whole. We began the weaving, using spears and arrows to beat the weaving flat and skulls for weights. The work went swiftly and smoothly, and just as the last thread was complete, the door opened and Odin stepped in. The chanting stopped at a perfect moment, the notes hanging in the air for a portentous second. We split, six to a side, and Odin walked between us in silence. He studied the weaving and spoke a few words. The energy of the air changed; it was charged and electric.

"It is time to ride, my valkyries," he said, and led us from the building. The door closed behind us and we put on our armor and took up our spears. We walked to the meadow where the winged horses congregated and we each chose a mount. A quick twist of reality, and we were on Asgard, where a battle with a race I'd never seen before was raging. I went forward and claimed my first warrior. I don't know how it happened, but I knew just who to raise. All twelve of us moved around the battlefield, making the choices, riding for Valhalla or Folkvangr and back.

"It was late evening at Valhalla. We'd been at this for over twelve hours, local.
I trudged to my room, aching with weariness now that it was over. When I pushed open my door, I saw Tony sitting in the chair, which was positioned by the hearth where a warm fire burned. It made me realize how cold I was and shivered. He put down his book and stood as he looked at me, then he took my spear and shield, loosened the breastplate and removed my helmet. He put his arm around me and guided me toward the bathroom, where he turned on the shower, made sure there were towels, and closed the door behind him. It took a moment to summon the energy to pull off my dress and step into the shower. I washed quickly and thoroughly before stepping out, glad I kept my nightgown in the bathroom. I didn't have a robe yet, but I was too tired to care. When I got out, Tony drew me to the table where there was a meal waiting. I was famished and ate quickly. While I ate, he gently combed my hair to help it dry faster, and when I'd laid waste to everything, turned down the bed and tucked me in.

I slept almost until the noon meal the next day and was still fatigued. "Yeah, it's hard work. We're the conduits for the magic that selects the fallen. I mean, people like to say that we choose, but it's not like that," Heidi said, and I nodded, still quiet.

"Does that happen for everybody?" Tony asked. "It can't, though."

Irene nodded. "It's just for battles. When there's a lot of casualties, we need a way to quickly and easily separate the worthy, and there are a lot of variables on the battlefield. Strong men may break, the weak find their worth." She shrugged. "When individuals fall, Odin has the knowledge. That's a lot easier." I grimaced at the thought of my representative guts being woven as the battle with the aliens raged. Runa nodded.

"It happened to you too," she told me, smiling at my expression.

I rubbed the back of my head. "I don't know why I'm still so tired. I slept like a log when I got back and far past the time I usually get up."

"It was your first time weaving," Carol said matter-of-factly. "That really drains the energy out of you. Plus you chose more souls than the rest of us."

"Overachiever much?" Bruce quipped, and even I chuckled.

Dagny shrugged. "She is strong and gifted, which the magic recognized. Rest this afternoon, we are not excused from the festival celebrations just for fatigue," she said to me. "Besides, the really good food is served at night and you need to regain your strength." She picked at the cold lunch in a bit of dismay. We were spoiled.

After lunch, I accompanied Tony and Bruce back to the workshop; they needed an extra pair of hands. But not right away, it turned out, and I took a little nap until they were ready for me. They had long, narrow birchbark containers to be filled with a dark, granular substance that they didn't let me investigate.

"You'll find out if you're just patient," Tony said, grinning, patting my hand away. I rolled my eyes and held the containers steady as they quickly packed the tubes and then it was my turn; it was easier for my smaller hands to place clay seals near the top of the tubes. I wasn't really paying a lot of attention until I saw the string coming out, and it hit me what they'd made. But Tony wanted to surprise me, so I covered my gasp with a cough. Don't think I fooled Bruce, though, he gave me a sharp look. When we were done, Tony told me to go relax, and I went back to my room, where I alternated between dozing and reading until it was time to get ready for the celebration. My curiosity was on fire, wondering what kind of fireworks they'd managed to make and if they came in colors.
It was finally the last night of Walpurgis, the most highly anticipated night of the festival. Given that it was such a solemn and sacred night, I took extra care with my appearance by making my hair wavy and putting it up attractively with pretty hairpins and wearing a new gown, a light and soft raspberry pink wool with a round neck, bell sleeves, buttons up the bodice rather than lacing, and a pretty, full skirt. The wide neckline framed my Asgardian necklace beautifully. I'd managed to embroider a simple pattern around the hems for decoration to make the dress special. It was still chilly at night and I took a light cloak with me for later.

I arrived at the meadow as dusk was gathering. When we had assembled, the honor of lighting the bonfire was awarded to Freydis Eriksdottir, and all of us lined up with splints, which we quickly took to our own hearths, lit the fires waiting there, and returned to the meadow. After that, we Valkyries served the ritual feast; we ate sitting on rugs in the meadow. My experience in my mom’s restaurant served me well and I efficiently served my allotment of diners. When everybody was replete, everything was cleared away and merriment began. There was singing and dancing around the bonfire and socializing farther away. As midnight approached, the bonfire burned low and the celebrating crowd drew still. When it was completely silent, the bonfire was extinguished and the only light came from the moon. The very air felt tight. Then all at once that pressure was released; the bonfire was relit. Tony set off his fireworks at the same time. The green, white, and gold sparks silenced the crowd absolutely before it roared its approval at the spectacular return of light. We served a special mead, very potent, and the revelry hit a new pitch. I was drawn along with the others as the crowd filtered into the forest that surrounded the meadow on all sides.

Soon I was alone, walking among the trees, lightheaded from the wine, tripping here and there over the luxurious green groundcover that had appeared everywhere the past few days. The tree trunks were rough under my fingers, and a fog was creeping in. I found myself at the cherry trees and knew that Tony's workshop wasn't far from the orchard. I wondered if he was there or if maybe he was wandering in the forest, yearning like I was. I heard steps behind me and turned. It was Tony. He kept walking toward me, and I knew he must have followed. My heart stuttered and I put out my hand. He took it, then swept me up in his arms and kissed me. It ebbed and flowed from a gentle exploration of my mouth to a hot, demanding plunder and back to tender. I felt a tree at my back and finally surrendered, fully opening myself to the experience. He stroked my cheek with the back of his hand and ran his fingers down to the top button of my dress, which he slowly opened, giving me every opportunity to say no. The next button was opened a little faster, and so on until my dress was open to the waist. Slowly again, he slid his hand inside my dress, over my ribs, and up to my breast. I caught my breath at the sensation and pulled his head down for another dizzying kiss. He started to drag my skirt up impatiently, our breathing hard and uneven, stroking my thigh, again giving me an opportunity to refuse. I reached inside his pants instead, drawing him out and stroking him before putting my leg around his hip and positioning him at my entrance. I felt molten with desire that only increased as he eagerly pressed inside me and began to thrust. One arm kept my leg up while the other hand laced with mine and was pinned to the tree. I held onto his arm as his pace began to increase. It was silent apart from the sounds we made, the fog muffling sound and enhancing my sense of privacy. When I came, I felt like something had exploded inside me, so intense I was limp and only he kept me upright, increasing his pace, almost frantic, until he found his peak. I came again, more weakly, and together we sagged to the ground.

But on this night there was no respite, and our mouths caught again. He opened my dress, dragging the bodice down to my waist and exposing me to him. I freed my arms from the sleeves and sank my fingers into his hair. He kissed his way down to my breasts and began to kiss and knead and stroke and nip, sparking that fire inside me again. This time he laid me down and speared into me quickly. There was the desire and need I felt for him, but beyond that, I felt a vastness connected with the earth I lay on, deep and rich and warm, ready to be planted and return bounty. There was a promise of fulfillment and completion, but I was too caught up in the roaring torrent in my veins,
the necessity of him moving inside me, the need to just lose myself in this moment, in what Tony and I were doing, how he made me feel. This time my peak was almost brutal in the intensity and pleasure and it was almost terrifying how much I felt. A great gush of energy rolled away from me as I shuddered. He slammed into me, back arching as he froze, then gulped for air, almost sobbing, before dropping down on me. I put my arms around him and we lay like that until I felt a hardening inside me again. Desire raced through me with every heartbeat and my muscles regained their tension as we began to move again. This time I rolled him over and took charge, giving him access and time to put his hands all over my body. He tore the pins from my hair when I leaned forward, letting my hair spill down around us and burying his hand in the strands. This time I teased him, keeping our pace slow and teeth-grittingly erotic. He teased me too, taking me to the edge of orgasm several times before backing off and building me up again. Finally my need consumed me and I sped my movements until another climax ravaged my body. Throughout it all, there was a heavy sense of the waking land, the promise of sun and rain and growth and harvest, and I felt a broad connection with the rites and the fierce primacy of the mating my body was experiencing. He groaned, heavy and almost tortured, and we stilled.

This wild and primal sex continued, abandoned from all restraint and sense, until near dawn. The pace and movements varied, but the consuming passion never failed. With those final raw orgasms, the need that had been riding us gently receded and we slept briefly, exhausted.

I woke up, entwined with him, covered somewhat haphazardly by our cloaks. I was amazed that he'd had the energy to think of it. False dawn had stolen into the orchard and a stiff, gusty breeze kicked up, shaking the tree limbs and showering us with dew and petals. Tony woke up and we looked at each other, our noses nearly touching.

"How do you feel?" he asked tentatively.

"Exhausted but so amazed," I said promptly, my voice hoarse. I expected to be really sore, but there was nothing but a mild, pleasurable ache. "You?"

"The same," he said, then hesitated. "I thought it would be different. I thought it would just be an opportunity to get close to you. I didn't expect that. At all."

"I was told that it was special," I admitted. "But I was hoping I'd find you among the trees." A guarded hope warmed his eyes and he turned his face for a kiss. This was gentle with enduring warmth, unlike the tempests we'd ridden earlier. I ended the kiss softly. "But there's more to do. A celebration for the rites of spring." I sat up reluctantly and his eyes flared, but he helped me find the sleeves to my dress, pull it back up, button up the bodice. We stood, and my legs were still unsteady. Tony smirked, but put my skirt to rights and I helped him do the same with his clothing. My cloak hid most of the stains on the dress. I put my hair into a chignon and pushed the pins back in so I wouldn't lose them. We tried to brush off the petals from the cherry blossoms, but it was harder than I expected. They were picturesque but pesky as hell.

"So I was thinking," he said as we got ourselves oriented in the misty remains of the fog.

"That's dangerous," I said playfully, and he patted my hand on his arm.

"So after I gather tree boughs and you gather flowers--" he paused as I turned away, picking some unusual white flowers growing in the drifts of the groundcover "--we do the Maypole, have the feast, that maybe you'd come to my rooms with me. We could sleep." There was a rare current of shyness as he spoke.

"I'd like that. We could sleep first," I suggested, then winked, picking a few flowers at each group we came to as he cut the bough of a hawthorne tree. I stopped. "I completely forgot to congratulate
you on your fireworks! They were terrific." We continued back to the meadow, him explaining how he formulated the fireworks, moving briskly but not in a hurry, stealing kisses as we went. At the meadow, we separated, him to do whatever with his branches and me to drop off the flowers to make the wreath for the Maypole, which was being erected as we walked.

Carol and Irene were also bringing in their flowers. They had a lot more colored wildflowers than I did. "What is this one?" I asked, holding up one of the white flowers. Their eyes widened when they saw how many I was carrying and then, as one, they smirked.

"It's the May flower, blooms only on this day," Irene said.

"As a consequence of successful fertility rites," Carol picked up. "The more successful, the more flowers bloom in your vicinity. You must have had... quite a wild night. It's all about about fulfilled passion, the most compatible partners for the night. And who might be the one who made all these flowers possible?" she asked playfully.

"Tony," I said. And smiled.

They laughed. "And you got lucky under a blooming cherry tree," Irene said, picking at the petals we'd given up on. "Good omen for the next year. It'll take some time to get this shindig all together, so we can take a bit of it and get cleaned up if we hurry."

We did just that, and it was in a different dress that I rejoined the celebration. The garlands were being placed on the tables brought out for the feast that would follow, and I was just in time to help make the wreath. I took a place at the May pole, Tony standing in the opposite direction as my partner, and we began to wind our way around the pole, the ribbons covering the post and the wreath gradually descending. It was quite ribald, considering the night before, and I couldn't help laughing. The ribbons were wound completely and we released them to let the wreath drop, then reversed the dance and freed the pole. Following that, the meal was put out on the tables and we served ourselves, enjoying the warming temperatures and sun, eating on the grass again and relaxing. Then we strolled off, my hand on his arm, back to his room.

But once we were inside, he seemed uncertain, leaning against the door. "What are we doing here, Alex?" he asked quietly.

"I thought we were going to sleep for awhile, and then maybe we could have sex again," I said. His expression didn't ease, and I sighed. "In the long term? I don't know. But if you're asking how I really feel about you, here it is. I haven't always loved you. When I first met you I thought you were a twit. Then when I worked in your robotics lab in high school, I developed a little schoolgirl crush on you until you freaked out and I quit," I admitted for the first time, flushing a little. "When I went to work with you in the energy lab, I respected you and was grateful for your mentoring. And I really came to like you, the person sitting across that partners desk, eating cookies and talking. Value you, the good and the...not so good. But since I've been here, the friendship that I felt got deeper and richer and more prized until I recognized it as love. I just didn't know how you felt, if your feelings might have changed too, and I was too afraid of upsetting our balance by asking." I drew a deep breath; his eyes dropped from my face down to my breasts, then back up again lightning fast. "But last night gives me hope. So I'm not as afraid to admit that I love you and to ask how you feel about me."

"A crush, huh?" he asked, smirking faintly. "And why would you have had a crush on me?"

I rolled my eyes. Seriously, this was what he wanted to talk about? "Oh, I don't know, your lively intellect, sparking sense of humor? And you treated me with respect, for the most part. I know you initially were inclined to hire me because of Emma and Bucky, but you listened to me, and for an
awkward teenage girl, that's incredibly heady. You have no idea how potent you are."

He looked a little anxious. "Yeah, about that time, Alex, I'd like to apologize for the way that turned out. My mental health was... not good."

"Yeah, I know." I inched closer to him. "Still smashed my crush good and flat. But that was good, in the long run. It removed some illusions I'd had. And it allowed me to get a really great job at Wayne," I said, twitting him a little.

"So why did you come back?" he asked, not moving.

"Because I grew up," I said simply. "A little time, a little distance, more maturity and experience, I understood better. And from little things Bucky and Emma spoke of over the years, I knew you'd gotten help. But the underlying things I admired about you were still there, your brain, your wit, your generosity, your desire to figure things out, to know things. So that was why I partnered with you and Bruce in my failed business at first; Bruce was the safety net in case you were more fragile than I thought. But you were stronger than I expected, and that's why I went upstairs and back into your lab."

"Our lab," he corrected, then levered himself off the door.

"Then when I got here, you were no longer my boss, just my friend. And later, when my feelings were changing, there wasn't the age gap. And I have an important job here too. I feel like we're equals."

"Alex, you've always been a better person than me. I aspire to be your equal," he said, finally moving toward me. I stepped toward him and he took my hand. A spark of static electricity leaped between us as he kissed the palm and the place in my wrist where my pulse beat.

"We can argue about that later," I said a little breathlessly. "I'm done with timidity and last night gave me hope that you're at least attracted to me."

"Oh, I'm more than attracted to you," he murmured, an exciting roughness edging his voice. "I feel things for you." My head fell back so that our lips were touching. "Things that include love."

"Oh, yeah? What else might that include?" He affected me like the strongest drink and I watched his mouth as he spoke.

"Admiration, respect, curiosity, lust..." he nipped my bottom lip. "Lately I've wanted to put you on your back and get between your thighs."

I stepped back and grinned wickedly at him. "Only on my back? That's kind of weak tea, Sparky. I thought, that with your creativity and imagination, that you could do better than that."

"Sparky?" Amusement warred with arousal on his face.

"Energy fairly snaps off you," I said impatiently. And winked. "And there are sparks between us."

"That there are," he said, catching me in his arms. "And just so you know, I have a vivid imagination. With your strength and flexibility, I can devise positions for us to try until Ragnarok comes."

"So I know I said nap first, wild sex later, but I wondered if we could shake up that order," I said breathlessly, loosening the laces on my dress and shrugging out of it. It slid down my body to pool on the floor. His eye went from warm to lava and he ripped the shirt over his head. He forgot to
undo the laces at his cuffs, so we had to get that untangled, and I got him out of his pants myself before sliding between the sheets. I remembered to take down my hair, tossing the pins on the table. I patted my lap, watching his erection grow. "Wanna play?"

He pounced on me, and we kissed, our hands roving. I found myself on top, aching for him, and sat up. "I don't want to be boring," he said huskily, "but I'd like to watch your face. I didn't really get to see that last night." I understood; last night had been mostly about sensation rather than sight.

I eased him inside me, enjoying the stretch, and began to rock. "I want that too," I purred. He ran his hands up my thighs and left one on my hip while the other caught my breast. I smiled. "And here, these beauties don't have to worry about age or gravity anymore."

He groaned. "I knew I liked this place."

As I moved, I paid attention to what he liked the most, trying to maximize his pleasure and mine. "Oh, god," he gasped. "That thing with your hips--do it again." I did, and he thrust his fingers between us to make me come, just before he did. As his breathing slowed, he relaxed, and I reluctantly eased off. He moved over so that I would have the warm place where he'd just been. It was chilly in the chamber.

Later, I woke up needing the bathroom and found myself covered by Tony. Our legs were twined together, his body overlapping mine and his arm across me. I started to wiggle free. "Don't go, Alex," he mumbled.

"Just to the bathroom," I promised, and he reluctantly rolled back. He engulfed me again when I got back, and when we woke up, we'd missed dinner and it was late at night. He put on some pants and his shirt, then brought back some snacks that he kept in his workshop. After that, we made some forays into creativity, then we went to sleep. The holidays were over, and work waited the next day.
The next morning, I reluctantly disentangled myself from Tony. "Can I see you tonight?" he mumbled, stretching his hand across the sheet. "Doesn't have to be carnal." I grinned and one intense brown eye snapped open. "Unless you want," he amended hastily.

"Definitely see you tonight," I promised, and he smiled and closed his eye.

"I like spending time with you," he sighed. I left and returned to my room. Today was my first day back as a trainer. I took a shower and dressed in a loose shirt tucked into snug pants, which were tucked into knee-high boots. I swung the swans feather cape over my shoulders, and poofed myself to Asgard, landing in the courtyard where fighters were practicing. My appearance brought an immediate halt to the proceedings and the men fell away from me, murmuring. I flicked the cloak back, exposing the blood-red lining, and strode to the stairs leading to the great hall. I like a little drama. Sif and Magni exited before I could get there, however, and a smile lit Sif's face. Magni crashed into me for a hug, then reluctantly relinquished me to his mother for a hug of her own. "The afterlife agrees with you," she said. "You look quite relaxed. You have a glow about you." The glow became a burn as I flushed, and she laughed. "I see we have much to catch up on! But first--" she gestured back down the stairs. We went down the stairs to the courtyard. We had plenty of room; the fighters were eager to see an actual valkyrie in action.

They might have been a little disappointed. The first step was to see where Magni was in his training. He was both rusty and had picked up some bad habits. We had a chat about this; he was downcast, but brightened a little when I said we'd get the rust knocked off in no time. We went back and started with foundational drills. I kept my attention on my student, but in my side vision I could see some of the warriors trying the drills for themselves. By the time we ended the session, Magni was sweaty and exhausted. I was not. There are significant advantages to existing in the afterlife. One of them was that things were different in the mortal world. It took significantly more exertion to even break a sweat, although the effort to remain solid and visible in this world was a bit of a strain; I wasn't used to holding it. Usually we were invisible to the mortal eye so we could choose. Magni had bowed to me in thanks for the lesson (a new behavior that I quite liked) and we were startled by clapping. Thor and his friends had appeared, joining Sif. Hogun cracked a small smile when he saw me, and we arranged to bout the next time I came for Magni's lesson. I was looking forward to it but worried that I'd gotten rusty myself; nobody else in Valhalla fought with two swords and Hogun was an excellent swordsman. Well, that was a concern for another day. We talked a bit, then it was time for my next appointment.

It was a day of firsts. I poofed to Folkvangr to run Captain Rogers' obstacle course. I removed my cape and started to warm up while I waited. I thought he said he'd run it with me, but perhaps I'd been mistaken in his intent. I waited awhile, then set off down the path. I didn't know if this was just an obstacle course or whether there would also be surprises like booby traps, so I kept my knife with me, just in case. It was a challenging course, but not very creative, although the zipline over a river was a lot of fun. After I was done, I poofed back to the trailhead where I found my uncle with Captain Rogers. The Captain seemed a little miffed I'd gone without him.

"When I'd warmed up, you hadn't arrived yet so I thought that you'd just meant for me to come by and run the course," I said. "I've got to help with the washing of the wool, we start this afternoon, so I'm afraid I couldn't wait."

"What did you think?" my uncle asked.

"It's nicely challenging. I loved the zipline," I said. "That was fantastic." Captain Rogers seemed
pleased. As I cooled down, Bucky asked me what was new, and I told him about Magni, the bout I'd set up with Hogun, and flopped down in the grass to stretch my piriformis. "And I've started seeing Tony."

My uncle seemed a little surprised by the last revelation, but not overly so. "Tony Stark?" Captain Rogers said, his tone unflattering. "You seem like a nice girl, and he's not very stable. I don't think he's a very good match for you."

"Steve--" my uncle started.

I cut him off, sitting up. "First, I'm a woman, not a girl. I know what I'm doing, I lived a full life on Earth. I don't need anybody mansplaining to me what I should feel and for whom. It wasn't a request for advice, and you don't know me at all. You associated with him for awhile in life, but he's changed a lot and apparently you've missed that entirely." His face flushed, although I'd taken care to keep my tone even and cool.

"Mansplaining?" he asked, confused. Bucky also looked puzzled.

"It's when a male explains something to a female that she already knows. It's an assumption that women need masculine help and input figuring things out. It's offensive."

"He's in love with your aunt," Rogers said. "Don't you think that's kind of... weird?"

"He was, but he got over it when he realized nothing would ever come of it," I said, finishing my stretching. "It's not like she ever reciprocated. But I know he doesn't feel like he's settling for second best, that he sees me when he looks at me." He looked skeptical, and I decided not to point out that he'd had a crush on Peggy Carter and dated her niece briefly. "Do you want to know how I know?" I said wickedly.

"No," my uncle said hastily. "Just as long as you're happy, sweetie."

"I am," I said simply, and picked up my cloak. "Thank you for letting me try your course, Captain Rogers." With that, I went back to Valhalla. I hurried through lunch, then we went to tackle the dreary task of washing the fleeces.

"Ugh," Irene said when I gave the recap.

"Let's be charitable," Carol said, chucking a few more fleeces into the water. "Maybe he was trying, in a totally hamhanded manner, to be helpful."

"I don't even know him," I said, still irked.

Carol sighed. "Very hamhanded."

"So what's this about an obstacle course?" Heidi asked, and I explained.

"I used to run Rugged Maniac races," Irene said, and I grinned.

"Spartan," I countered, and we fist bumped, then explained to the others what obstacle course racing was. This attracted the attention of other valkyries as we took the fleeces from the tubs where they'd been treated with lukewarm soapy water and toted the baskets of heavy wet wool to a slow-moving stream nearby where we beat the dirt out of the fleeces. On tables a short distance from the tubs, other valkyries sorted the fleeces; the quality of the wool varies from sheep to sheep and also from different places on each sheep, and skilled sorting was necessary. Short fibers were separated from long, and in each category the fibers were graded from coarse to fine. After a
thorough washing, the fleeces were placed on screens to dry; once they were dry, they were removed from the screens and put back in the cleaned carts to be taken back to the warehouse. Those of us not sorting the fleeces alternated between washing and stints checking the drying wool. It was a rare task where skirts were better than pants since we could tie the skirts up to keep them mostly out of the water. Like the shearing, this was hard work.

"We should make our own course," Dagny said as she fished out fleeces from the tub. "Use the obstacles that you were describing, make it fun. There's a waterfall some distance away; we could run this 'zipline' from the top and end the course by dropping into the pool." That got us talking excitedly, drawing everyone over to join the conversation. Even the senior valkyries were enthusiastic, the novelty of it attractive to them.

"We will bring it to Odin's attention and seek his permission," Eir said, and we went back to work, happier at the thought of the challenge, and we talked about how to make it as hard as possible in order to get the maximum benefits. Apparently the site was far enough away that we'd have to fly there, but we decided that once we got to the site, wings would be cheating on the course. This happy talk of planning obstacles helped get us through the back-breaking work of hauling heavy wet fleeces around.

At dinner, Bruce and Tony listened to our account of our labor. "I had no idea what all went into making cloth," Bruce said. "That's a huge amount of work."

Dagny, who'd worked in a textile mill during the Industrial Revolution, nodded. "There were machines that could help with the labor, but we don't have them here, and construction of labor-saving devices for the valkyries is low in priority," she said dryly. Tony perked up, and I wondered what he'd come up with.

A few days later, Eir had the news that Odin wanted us to run Captain Rogers' course and see if that wouldn't do. I was disappointed as were some of the others, but some were more pragmatic. Odin set a time when we could use it, and Irene and I, as veterans of obstacle course racing, led the pack through it. The valkyries were subdued at the end of it, and we returned to where Odin was waiting for us, along with Frigga and Captain Rogers.

"What were your thoughts?" he asked Sigrun.

"Thyra was correct," she said, nodding to me. "There is a modicum of challenge, and the idea of this course is novel to most of us, but ultimately, it is not enough of a challenge to be worthwhile. Our ideas are better." I saw Captain Rogers turn red. Odin frowned, and dismissed us to our work. Yay. More wool.

It actually took us a couple of weeks to clean all the fleeces. I was grateful to be able to train Magni as a break from the grind. As promised, Hogun and I sparred the next time I went to Asgard, which was both great fun to finally have a worthy opponent and also an incredible challenge due to his skill. The onlookers got the show they'd hoped for as we fought, the pace of the fight fast, our swords occasionally striking sparking off each other. Each nicked the other, but neither of us managed to land a "killing" blow by the end of the bout. There was absolute silence as we lowered our swords and stepped back, then a roar of acclaim as we clasped arms. Magni immediately asked his father for lessons, and Thor clapped us both on the back in approval. It was a nice way to end the morning; it was the most satisfying fight I’d had since coming to Valhalla. Thor showed up for the evening meal that night and regaled his father with a description of the bout.

Odin was pleased, pleased as well with reports of Magni's enthusiasm for his training and his progress, but it didn't help the valkyries any. Toward the end of the wool-washing trial, he decided that any obstacle course racing could be done on Captain Rogers' course as challenge did exist and
we didn't need to divert attention and resources to making our own course. The decision didn't sit well with us.

"God forbid that we actually get to have fun," Heidi said bitterly, picking at her lunch, and there were murmurs of agreement.

"We'll outgrow that course fast," Carol said, frowning. "Then what?"

"We will ask the All-Father again for a course of our own," Brynhild said firmly. "Let us all master this course quickly." Then the conversation turned after general agreement to other complaints.

"I went to request a chest for my rooms," I took my turn. "They said they'd put me on a list. But meanwhile, my winter blankets and clothes are sitting on the floor. The man asked if I have anything to trade, as that will get me bumped up the list, but I don't. I don't have any skills beyond what I'm learning to do with the cloth. And when I asked for some linen to make a dress for summer, they turned me down, saying that they didn't have any. But I'm sure I saw yardage there."

Heidi snorted. "They keep the yardage so that they can outfit the new arrivals. And Frigga and Odin's favorites. You'd think the valkyries would rate some sort of status, but no."

Eir spoke, which was a rarity in conversation. "You do have something to trade," she said to me, disgust in her voice. "If you lift your skirts for them, they move you up their lists a few places. But never directly to the top."

"What?" Irene and I said at the same time.

Dagny shrugged. "The men seek their release, but fail to value those who could provide it."

"They ought to be trying to impress us for our favors," Heidi said, scowling.

"I'm so dumb," I said. "I didn't know that that was what they were asking for. But it's disgusting that we should have to prostitute ourselves for basic supplies."

"The only place I've ever gotten good service was at the smiths; they at least equip us promptly," Sylvi said.

"We should learn how to do some of these crafts, so we don't need to rely on others. In all our spare time," Irene said. "We could build you a chest, Alex; it might not be pretty, but we could cobble together something."

"If anybody has yardage, I can sew basic clothes," I volunteered.

"I have a pretty green linen, but it's with the tailors," Heidi said. Others had some cloth, and in exchange, they agreed to help Irene build me a chest.

"The problem is getting hold of the tools," Brynhild said pensively.

"I can ask Tony if he could make us the basics, like a couple of saws, nails, that kind of thing," I said. I knew he would, even if we were still just friends. Somehow, I didn't think he'd like the state we found ourselves in.

I was right. Tony was furious. Bruce was disgusted, and I felt gratification that there were good men here too. Sometimes it was easy to overlook that. Bruce stopped Tony's rant by suggesting that Tony simply requisition the tools on the grounds that he needed them for his workshop. Tony shut his mouth in mid-bellow.
"That's a good idea, Bruce," he said. "Give us more time to work on a project we're doing for you, Alex." He rummaged in the paper on his bench top, then handed me a page. "I was listening to what you were talking about, how long it took to do each stage. I don't think I can come up with anything for the shearing part, but by next year you should have this--" it was a large drum with a paddle, like a washing machine "to help clean the wool, but this one" it showed two cylinders, one on top of the other and hand cranked to turn "can card the wool faster and in larger amounts than the little hand carders you have and we should be done with it next week." He showed me the machine in the corner and I gave the handle a go. It worked smoothly, the little wire teeth not quite half done.

"Oh, Tony, this is fantastic," I breathed. "Thank you, Bruce."

"If this works well, I can make more for next year," he promised.

"I figured out how to make furniture after the arena," Bruce said unexpectedly. "I'll find Irene, offer my help." He bustled out, and Tony had the ghost of a smirk on his face.

"Irene caught up with him during Thrimilcy," he said, and we grinned at each other. He drew me close and started stroking my hair. "Do you want me to talk to Odin about this? This is disgraceful. You work harder than anybody else here."

"I appreciate it," I said, snuggling close. "But this is something we must do for ourselves. We need to get change based on what we say rather than having to rely on men to intercede on our behalf."

"I get it," he said. "But I'm right behind you, Tiger. I've got your back."

Over the course of the next few weeks, I made a basic dress pattern based on the one that most dresses around here seemed to have been made from, but I improved the shaping with darts and adjusted the neckline and set of the sleeves for looks and comfort. Nanna, Gunvor, and Brenna had linen for dresses, and Kelsey had some for pants and a shirt, so I made more basic patterns. I had to bind the edges of the linen due to the tendency to ravel, but it was much easier with the sewing machine and once all the pieces were prepared, it was easy to sew them together. I put in the hems by hand, though; it looked better. The valkyries were thrilled, and Brynhild gave me a piece of fabric that she had since she already had a couple of linen dresses for the summer and I had none. Heidi went to retrieve her cloth from the tailors, but there had been a 'mistake'--they had made a shirt for one of the men out of it instead, one of the men who'd brought in from my first battle. That did it.

After my chest was built and delivered--it wasn't the best piece of furniture I'd ever seen, but it was sturdy and was what I needed--the carpenter group turned to a bed frame for Brynhildr; hers had fallen apart before Heidi had gotten there, and she'd died in the 80's. She was still "on the list." The older valkyries--our spokeswomen--took our problems to the All-Father.

"He was impatient," Eir said glumly. "He barely heard us out and said he'd speak to the men responsible."

Dagny snorted. "He did that once before, when I had just gotten here," she said. "All that happened was that the men took the shame from the scolding out on us. None of us got any goods for months."

"But Frigga was there," Sigrun said. "She did not look pleased. Perhaps she can persuade the All Father to more effective action."

Dagny said that what happened was the same thing that had happened the first time. The men, who
enjoyed abusing their authority, felt humiliated by the scolding Odin delivered and refused us any service. Brenna slipped into the store room one night and came back with news. There were no shortages of fabric, as we’d been told. There were still a third of the available shelves full of both wool and linen cloth we’d woven and dyed. And she’d seen the lists—in some cases our names weren’t even on them. On others, our names were crossed off, like mine on the list for a chest. Furious, a small group of us went back another night and got cloth and thread enough for those of us who needed clothing. I spent my nights in the workshop making the garments as quickly as possible. The recipients hemmed their clothes themselves so that I could work faster. We started to work on carding the wool, which aligned the fibers so that they could be spun. Tony's carding machine was a godsend; we still also carded by hand and took turns cranking the machine. It made much shorter work of what was a tedious process. Tony made me a spinning wheel to help with the next stage.

Meanwhile, we continued our training and I continued to work with Magni, enjoying the time away from Valhalla. Sif asked what my troubles were, but was unsure what could move Odin to act. It was nice to vent to a sympathetic listener. We ran Captain Rogers' course until we had it mastered and it was not challenging to any of us. We sought another audience with Odin but he refused.

"We're challenging his rule," Irene guessed. "And he does not appreciate being called on bullshit."

"Who does?" Carol shrugged. "But I don't know what else we can do."

"We could stage a sit in," I said into the depressed silence.

"What's that?" Dagny asked.

"We literally sit, doing nothing, until we are heard," I said. "It means the wool remains unspun, the flax unharvested, the meals and the mead unserved, any choosing... unchosen. We utterly withhold our labor until our complaints have been heard and acted on."

The older valkyries were shocked, but we newer ones were more familiar with civil disobedience and strike tactics and more open to it. But when Eir, the most traditional valkyrie of all, agreed to the idea, the rest of us were quick to adopt it. One night we took the tables directly beneath the head table and sat. We did not serve, and we ignored the men who tried to get us up and taking care of them. Unfortunately Odin was not there that night, but we sat until the hall emptied, and returned early the next morning and resumed our places. Odin was there for breakfast, and we sat calmly, unspeaking, until a group of men had complained to Odin. At length. Odin demanded to know why we were not performing our duties.

"We are disrespected at every turn, All-Father," Eir said calmly. "Since last we spoke, we have been barred from the store rooms due to the hurt pride of the men you scolded. We can get nothing. Astrid has been sleeping on a pallet of straw since well before you took up your permanent rule of Valhalla. She cannot get a softer pallet; the keepers maintain there are none. Yet each new arrival gets a feather bed. A chest for Alex, a bed to replace the frame that had pulled apart with age for Brynhild; these things are withheld unfairly, yet there are these pieces in the store room with dust upon them. Cloth for a dress for Heidi was used for a shirt for a new arrival instead. They refuse us the cloth we made yet there are no shortages. We cannot barter for them; we refuse to resort to sex in order to be begrudgingly handed what we deserve. Our skilled artists, like Gretchen, have the rugs and tapestries they create for barter taken so that they can be given to favorites. We ask for little, Odin, and get nothing in return. So until our grievances are addressed, we sit."

Odin glared at us and thought, and eventually strode from the hall. When the door closed, we relaxed. Runa brought pitchers of water and mead to the table. It took the most courage for the
oldest valkyries to participate; they'd been serving Odin for well over a millennia, Midgard time, and disobedience was almost unthinkable.

When Odin returned, he was accompanied by Frigga, who brought Captain Rogers, Uncle Bucky, and Emma. Tony and Bruce followed the party in but didn't approach us. I appreciated him standing back and letting us handle it. Plus, I was glad that distance might prevent any splash back on him if this went horribly wrong. Odin seated himself, Frigga by his side.

He looked around at us. "And who is responsible for this... abrogation of your duties?"

"It was my idea," I said respectfully, standing. I saw Bucky start to look worried. "We perform vital functions here but the only time we are particularly well treated--at least in the short time I've been here--has been during Walpurgis. Otherwise it's complaints during the rare times we are allowed to scrimmage, refusal of service of goods to which we are entitled, and we are taken for granted at every turn."

"You are a trouble maker." Frigga frowned at me.

"All we ask is for fair treatment," I said. Irene stood up.

"We serve the All Father to the best of our abilities and we pride ourselves on not complaining," she said. "But we get little in return for our loyalty." Other valkyries stood with us and told him what took them to the brink. Odin seemed unmoved, and Frigga appeared displeased.

"We give much, and in return we get a feather cloak," Eir said softly. She stood and left the hall. Hardly anyone breathed as she returned with her swans feather cloak, which she placed at the feet of the All Father. "I request to be released from my service as a valkyrie." We gasped, and Odin's mouth tightened, his eye narrowed. To my shock, all of our spokesvalkyries left the hall and returned with their cloaks, tossing or placing them before Odin. One by one, other valkyries did the same, and I felt like I'd failed. I shoved back and got up. On the way back with my cloak, I detoured to Tony.

"I'm sorry, Tony," I whispered, and kissed him on the cheek. I walked back and gently placed my cloak on the pile, the last to do so. I rejoined my sisters and we braced ourselves.
We ended up banished to Hela's hall. It wasn't at all what I expected; despite the name, it wasn't anything like hell. She had smiled slightly when the group arrived and asked what had happened that all the valkyries defected. Eir told her, concisely, and Hela's perceptive gaze raked us as we stood before her. It settled on me. "You seem to cause chaos."

"I don't mean too," I tried to assure her.

"My son introduced me to the Midgard gaming tradition of role playing games," she said. I attempted to conceal my surprise. Somehow it just seemed weird for a god to be rolling the 20d in a Dungeons and Dragons game. "You are what I believe to be the 'chaotic good' orientation. Just do your best to stay out of trouble." She signaled, and someone took us to our new quarters. The rooms were not all together, but at least Irene, Carol, Dagny, and I were neighbors. The rooms were smaller than the ones in Valhalla, but each was equipped with a bed, a thick rug beside it, a small table and comfortable chair, and a chest. The bed was soft and cozy, with two pillows perfectly balanced between firm and squishy, and many warm blankets as well as smooth soft sheets. A small fireplace had a fire laid and a plentiful supply of wood. It had a window, but it was too dark outside to know what the view was. There were no private bathrooms, but there was one for every four rooms, large and well supplied. We were told the way to the store house and were supplied, without question or comment, with stockings, shifts, dresses made from both wool and linen—here it was the rainy season, which could be chilly or warm—a shawl and a cape, pants, shirts, and boots, and another pair of shoes. A bag containing handkerchiefs, a comb, brush, and hairpins. Stunned, we took our piles of bounty back to our rooms, where the fires had been lit and a light meal left. I ate first, then put everything away before taking a shower. I combed my hair by the fire then went to bed, wondering how Tony was and missing him.

We quickly settled into a comfortable routine. In Hel, Ragnarok wasn't a big concern, and people were free to do as they liked. The oldest valkyries—oops, former valkyries—found the ones who had already quit and were reunited. Our group cohesion crumbled fairly quickly without our shared purpose although friends continued to meet and spend time together. We met a lot of new people, and at least we newer former valkyries had learned a valuable lesson. We conducted a lot of what on Earth were known as informational interviews and started picking up knowledge and training in various crafts and trades. Some of it was traditional; there was a woman from the Victorian age who helped to improve my embroidery and I picked up enough woodworking to be able to create utensils like spoons, objects like bowls, and some basic practical furniture building, using what I remembered my dad doing to actually learn how to do it myself. There was still fighting practice for those who enjoyed it, and I found some worthy swordsmen to practice against. I had left my swords in Valhalla, unfortunately, so I had to learn to fight with a single sword. There were plenty to choose from, and lots of different styles of fighting.

I was invited to the blacksmiths and discovered an affinity for metal. Here was a wealth of knowledge such as I'd never imagined; legendary smiths in their own right showed me the secrets of Damascus steel, and a master in the Japanese tradition taught me how to identify over twenty separate regions on a sword blade and its handle, how to determine what type of steel should be used for a particular blade, what the profile should be, the thickness of the blade, how much grind should be used. I learned how to smelt the iron sand in a tatara and I began to learn how to work pig iron and high and low carbon steel for the soft center and hard skin of the blade. I did the hard work of forging—heating and folding the medium and hard steel under the careful supervision of the master. Once the blank had been created to his exacting standards, he took over, split the spine of the blade and inserted a center of soft steel flanked by thin pieces of hard steel, and created a
blade that had the hardest steel forming the edge, a soft core to help avoid breakage, providing ductility, and surrounded by a more springy steel. A smaller knife to accompany the sword was created at the same time, but its construction was slightly less complex. The smith did the final heat treatment, cut a wide and a narrow groove into the steel to reduce weight without losing functionality or strength, and engraved a phoenix on the sword and a single feather on the knife before it was handed off to a polisher who refined the shape and brought up the beautiful hardening pattern along the edge. The polishing procedure took much longer than the forging had, and we went back to create a new set of blades. After the polishing, it went to a specialist who created the edge to the weapons. I was allowed to see how the tang was prepared for the hand grips, the creation of a beautiful hand guard with a cherry blossom pattern, the addition of the blade collar and scabbard wedge, and the end cap. The hilts were wrapped with a braided cord to help with the grip and a small metal decoration added to the hilt. The sword came with two scabbards, one plain, beautifully lacquered sheath for storage, and a heavier, more decorated version that was for use in battle. By the time these scabbards were created, another painstaking process, we had produced another set of blanks.

One afternoon I was called from my master to the Great Hall, where Hela graced me with a smile and gestured behind her; to my astonishment, Bucky stepped forward and hugged me. "What?" was all I could think to say.

Bucky shook his head. "When Frigga returned after you all resigned, she was in quite a temper; neither she nor Odin like to be questioned or corrected by lesser beings," he said dryly. "But after hearing what you had to say, I started looking around in Folkvangr. Although there are many more women there, they were also expected to accept less than the men, with a few exceptions for Frigga's favorites like Emma. The differences were more subtle than in Valhalla, apparently, but once I started looking, I saw them. Men always served first, getting the best cuts of meat, for example. I told Frigga that it wasn't fair, and there was an argument. So I left."

I looked at him, dismayed. "But what about Emma and Captain Rogers?" He shrugged.

"Emma had some ideas for trying to create change, but I don't think it will be as effective as she hopes, and Stevie wants to stay with her. They may come along later. I felt I had to make a stand too. Frigga and Odin ask much of the people in their realms, and if it doesn't include decent treatment, there's not much incentive to stay. They shouldn't be allowed to bully or exploit their people." He put his arm around my shoulder. "I was worried about you, sweetie, your face was absolutely white when you joined the others and defected. What on earth are you doing?" he added, looking me over.

"Let's get you settled in, Bucky Barnes, and you can catch up with your niece at the night meal," Hela said, gesturing one of her people forward. Bucky bowed to her and was led away.

"Wow," was all I could think to say.

"Indeed," Hela said, then smiled slightly. "The halls of the dead are open to all, Alex, and it is no trouble to absorb another. And I confess I find it amusing to imagine Odin and Frigga's reactions. Odin has always felt himself to be better than the rest of us, and since Frigga passed from the land of life, she has become more like her husband, her compassion, which was notable in her life, blunted." She grinned suddenly. "Serves them right. I will summon you if other interesting people appear." She studied me a moment. "How do your lessons in the smithy go?"

"Amazing," I said. "There's so much to learn and I'm not very good at it." I considered that. "Yet." The goddess laughed and dismissed me. I went back to the smithy and resumed my work, finishing out our hours. Then I cleaned up and hot-footed it over to the dining hall. I joined Dagny, Carol,
and Irene and explained what had happened.

"Wow," Carol said. "The resistance spreads." We laughed at her comment and speculated about what that might mean.

"Your uncle's here," Dagny gestured over my shoulder. "Bring him over."

I hopped up and drew Bucky over to join us, making the introductions. "It's always nice to meet Alex's friends," he told them. We peppered him with questions as the servers moved down the tables, placing dishes on the tables from which we served ourselves, refilling cups with water, ale or mead. "There's apparently a great deal of upset over your resignations," he said. "I didn't spend much time there, but the remaining women are also demanding change. Meanwhile, meals aren't being served; the kitchen just puts the food out on tables like a buffet, which angers off the warriors who are accustomed to being waited on. The men in charge of supply are getting nervous as the supply of cloth dwindles, the wool remains unspun, and the flax plants rot in the fields. There are a few people in Folkvangr who know what to do, but they're needed there. And of course, nobody is being brought to either realm. Thor was disturbed by the whole process; he thought his father had learned to treat women better. Tony just shrugged, said Odin had it coming."

He squeezed my hand. "He understands why you left, sweetie." Then he changed the subject, asking how we were occupying our time.

"We never want to be without skills again, to outfit ourselves or produce trade items," Irene said grimly. "So we've been picking up knowledge. People here are very good about showing you how to do things. Right now I'm specializing in furniture making, learning bookbinding on the side."

"Oh, Uncle Bucky, they have a library here," I said excitedly.

"Really?" he perked up. "That's the thing I've missed the most. There aren't many books in Folkvangr."

"Or Valhalla," I said. The others nodded. We all were enjoying the vast library.

"I'm learning storeroom management and shoemaking," Dagny said. I smiled. She was working on a pair for me, soft little slippers for around the house. Well, my room. I'd embroidered the uppers, and she was attaching them to soles.

"Cooking," Carol said. "I enjoyed it in life, and it's fun to learn how to scale up. Plus we do butchering, a new skill for me, as well as tending the kitchen garden and milling the flour."

"What are you doing, sweetie?" Bucky asked me.

"I started out with woodworking, enough to learn how to create essentials, like spoons and forks, bowls, that kind of thing. Some furniture making like my dad did, but I've been apprenticing with a master bladesmith. Japanese tradition, we're making katanas and tantos, but after we finish the set we're working on now, we'll do arrowheads, which isn't apparently nearly as labor intensive. What's nice is that each time that we finish a set of blanks, we shut down the smithy for a few days. Master says it's important to relax and recreate so that our concentration will be strong and unwavering for the next task. I also picked up archery again for a leisure time activity. There are some excellent archers and bowmakers here."

"We're all extremely wary of being left at the mercy of others again," Irene said, poking me. "But Alex here takes it to terrifying extremes."

"That's me, jack of all trades, master of none," I joked.
"Such a thirst for knowledge," Dagny said. "But the former valkyries have splintered into different groups, and we four have determined that among us all, we should be able to pick up sufficient skills and abilities as to allow us to provide for ourselves, should we need to. And not just get by, thrive." Her voice had hardened as we spoke. I nodded.

"Ug," Carol groaned. "Next I learn leatherwork. Which includes time in the tannery." I patted her shoulder in consolation. The reason why I hadn't been stuck with it was because my apprenticeship was taking a lot of time. Yay, metal!

"We still contribute to the greater good with what we work on as we're learning," I explained to Bucky. "I'm doing ceramics next. And our skills will enable us to be helpful in many places if more hands are needed in one specialty or another."

"What's really refreshing is that Hela doesn't play favorites," Dagny said. "As long as you're producing, no matter how long that takes, she doesn't care what you do, and you can make trade goods. For example, the clothing in storage is made in sizes, so for a custom fit, someone has to alter it for you, like Alex. In exchange, Carol makes her cookies, I'm finishing a set of slippers for her, Irene made her a little cedarwood box to keep things like her hairpins."

Bucky frowned. "How long does it seem like you've been here?" he asked, and I caught on.

"There must be a time difference," I guessed. "It feels like we've been here for a few years." The others nodded, and Bucky looked surprised.

"In Folkvangr, it's only been a couple of months."

"That's quite the time differential," Irene said, and he nodded.

"Let's hear it for the speed learners," Carol cracked, and we laughed. The dinner plates were removed and little honeycakes served. Desserts were a rarity in Valhalla and we all enjoyed them here. After we finished, we took Bucky on a tour of Hela's domain, ending in the library, where we all scattered to look for books. We were allowed to take a few at a time to our rooms, and I loved being able to read before going to sleep again.

Bucky fit in quite well, and I saw him around the smithies. After a few more months, my master felt that I would be better served learning how different types of swords were made and creating my own, and my apprenticeship ended. I'd gained a tremendous amount of knowledge and come a long way with my abilities. He set up sort of internships with other masters, who were happy to teach me their skills as well. And as a parting gift, he gave me the katana and tanto that had been the first ones I'd worked on and found me a teacher who would instruct me how to fight with it. It was different from the style I was used to; you used the spine and sides in a parry to avoid damaging the edge. But of primary importance was the skill of rapidly deploying the sword from the sheath and cutting. It was an art in its own right and practiced kneeling, sitting, and standing. There were solitary forms to perform to make the motions automatic, which I took to practicing in my room every morning. The fighting was done in such a manner as to accomplish the task in the fewest possible strokes, and ideally would be a movement to draw the sword in such a way as to cut the attacker, a movement to shake the blood from the blade, and one, flowing from the prior movement, to resheath the sword. By the time I left the forge, I felt I had a pretty good grasp on how to make a sword on my own and had picked up fighting tips and techniques for each type of sword I studied along the way. I moved on to pottery.

By the time I left the forge, I felt I had a pretty good grasp on how to make a sword on my own and had picked up fighting tips and techniques for each type of sword I studied along the way. I moved on to pottery.

It was at this time that I was summoned to Hela's presence again. I took the time to clean up as much as I could, a pot having gone kabloom on the wheel when my concentration was interrupted. Fortunately, it hadn't been a really large pot. When I trotted into the Great Hall, I was not very
surprised to see my uncle greeting Emma and Captain Rogers, but I was shocked to see Tony and Bruce. I edged over to Tony nervously. Sure, Bucky had said that Tony understood what I'd done, but it didn't mean that he was really ok with it...

Tony studied me intently. "Is there mud wrestling here?" he inquired, and I flushed. Then I found myself in his arms, being kissed in the most satisfactory manner.

"Tony, what are you doing here?" I asked when I got my breath back.

"Missed my Tiger," he said simply. "Things are a mess in Valhalla and I didn't want to stay there without you. I wanted to finish some outstanding projects I was working on for Odin first." He released me, and I stepped over to give Bruce a hug; he was standing at a distance looking awkward.

"We thought we'd stay awhile in order to give you some news," he said, patting my back and releasing me. "Tony's right, Valhalla is not the same without the valkyries, and not just because you bring the glorious dead." I could almost see the air quotes in his tone. "I wouldn't be surprised if Odin shows up here and asks you guys to return. You might want to think about that."

"I don't know if I'd want to go back," I said slowly, earning looks of surprise not only from the two men but also from Bucky and his companions. Emma gave me a big hug and Captain Rogers shook my hand. I wanted to laugh but didn't because he looked so ill at ease. Tony reclaimed me by putting his arm around my waist and asked me to explain.

"It's so much nicer here, Tony," I said. "Wait til you see." Hela smiled. "The quarters are nice, there's never any trouble obtaining something you need, there's plenty of opportunity to learn new things, everyone is polite and fair. There's a library. Why would I want to go back?" He kissed my hair, the new arrivals were led off to be shown to their new quarters and I reluctantly returned to the pottery. But my focus was completely shot, so I cleaned up and went to my room early to clean up. I ran into Carol and Dagny in the bathroom and brought them up to date on events.

"Tony's here? You must be so excited!" Carol said, and I grinned.

"Yeah, of course. I can't wait to see him again," I said. "But we need to focus; it's what Bruce said that gets me to thinking. His feeling is that things are crap in Valhalla and Odin might ask us to return. There are the questions of whether each of us wants to consider that, and if so, under what conditions. Because I feel personally like I don't really want to leave here, or at least, not without huge changes to the way things were."

Irene came in at that point and there was a quick recap. "We all would need to make individual decisions, if in fact that ends up happening, but I think that we ought to be prepared with a list of demands that need to be addressed to our satisfaction before we would even consider it," she said, and the rest of us agreed. Dagny offered to spread the news among the other former Valkyries and sped off. Carol followed me to my room to dress my hair in an extra special style, then I changed and went down to dinner, kicking my skirts out of my way impatiently.

Tony and Bruce were there already, and there was another wonderful hug and kiss, although not as intense as I really wanted because, you know, public. Also, Bruce was there and it would be rude to exclude him although I certainly wasn't going to ask him to join us. Hence, the short kiss. I laced my fingers with Tony's and drew them both over to the table we liked.

"So what are you all doing now?" Bruce asked.

"Well, the group sort of disintegrated after we arrived, the groups of friends separating," I said, and
they both nodded. "So I don't know what everybody's doing, but Carol, Irene, Dagny and I have formed our own group, and having been burned, decided to learn self-sufficiency. We're each learning different things, like furniture building, and metal working, and cooking. I'm learning pottery right now."

"Which is why you looked all muddy," Bruce said, and I grinned.

"Yeah, I fell out of the zone I was in when Hela summoned me," I said.

"What have you learned to do?" Tony asked.

"I learned some carving, enough basics to make sturdy, not-elaborate furniture, worked in the smithies to learn how to make swords and other weapons, and now pottery. Irene did a lot more with furniture, learned bookbinding--just wait till you see the library!--and is learning how to make and blow glass. Carol learned cooking from harvesting the vegetables, butchering, grinding wheat, to preparing and preserving the food. She's learning leatherworking now, had to spend some time in the tanneries." I shuddered. Such stinky work. " And Dagny learned how to make small buildings with stone and mortar." I drummed my fingers on the table. "We never want to be in a position where we are dependent on other people to provide our essential needs again. Hopefully we'll never have to use all the skills but they're also a way to chip in to the public good, make our contributions. We can also make things to barter, so we're in a really good position right now. Maybe one of us should learn basic agricultural methods, too. Just to be safe." Tony grinned and Bruce looked a little dazed, but then they stood at the approach of my friends, who greeted them before joining us. We had just settled in when Bucky brought Emma and Captain Rogers over to sit with us.

"What did they say?" I asked Dagny, and she shrugged.

"The older ones honestly couldn't be more done with Odin, no surprise there, and there's general resistance to the idea of returning among the others, but we agreed to think about conditions under which we feel we might be able to return. We'll meet at some point, come up with our list of conditions, and if Odin shows up, we'll be ready. If not, no harm done. We continue on as we are." That seemed good, and we turned our attention to the new arrivals, who showed up just as the servers started to bring out the meals. We caught up on general news; word about the mass resignation of the valkyries had spread to Folkvangr which caused unrest among the women there too, so both Odin and Frigga had their hands full. Loki and Thor were making themselves scarce.

As dessert was served, small spiced cookies, Hela appeared at our table with some questions for Tony and Bruce. Captain Rogers, sitting on my other side, turned to me and spoke. "Somehow I got off on the wrong foot with you, and I want to apologize. I'd say I'm not very good at talking to women, but I'm also awkward with men, people I don't know well in general, unless there's a mission or some sort of work to do. Buck never said much about you before you turned up in Valhalla, all he'd say was that he missed you, but Emma told me how close you were. And in many ways you resemble him--the hair, the eyes, the general face shape, although your features are more delicate. You share the same interests, and I felt like I kind of knew you. Obviously, I didn't, and I forgot that you don't know me at all. So I know I sounded bossy the few times we've talked and I understand why you didn't like that. I wanted to take this opportunity to tell you I'm sorry and ask for a fresh start." He put out his hand. I looked at him. Since we were going to be in the same afterlife now, and if I wanted to spend time with my uncle and not make it awkward, it was in my best interest to take Captain Rogers up on his offer and accept his apology. Plus I had to admire his willingness to apologize. I took his hand.
"Thank you, I'd like that," I said. "And I didn't give you a fair try, either. You were an irritant on the battlefield, and when we actually met, I wasn't in the mood to be gracious." He laughed.

"No, it was a bit much to ask after what you'd been through with that injury," he said. "We got off to a bad start."

"Well, hopefully a new start will be happier," I said optimistically.

'If it's not too much to ask, I'd like to see you spar with Buck one of these days," he said tentatively. "He speaks very highly of your skills, and I know you're a lot better with a sword than I am."

I smiled. "I'm sure that can be arranged," I said. Tony, still talking to Hela, absently reached over and found my hand to hold. This afterlife was shaping up to be nicer than expected.

And then a steward brought a new arrival over to our table and presented Peter Parker to Hela. Tony looked at me to check my reaction, which was an eye roll. He grinned and squeezed my hand. Well, I'd mended fences with Captain Rogers, so I could deal with Parker too. I sternly reminded myself that it wouldn't be fair of me to take out my antipathy for his daughter out on him and that Hel was a big place. We could be polite to each other. I spoke up, inviting Parker to pull up a seat and join us.
Reunion

After a decent amount of conversation, Tony and I got up and I took him to my room for a more personal reunion. After, he nuzzled my hair. "Missed you, Tiger."

"Missed you too, Sparky." I kissed his throat. "I was afraid you'd be upset."

"I was upset, at how you were being treated. You guys work like dogs. I didn't realize just how bad it was. You didn't tell me."

"I didn't know it all, what the older ones were going through. We're a tough bunch, but it's ridiculous that people withheld things that others were entitled to just because somebody was petty or well, assholes."

"But you like it here."

"Yep. There's so much more freedom here, everybody I've met is more pleasant."

"Good." I rolled him on his back and straddled him, enjoying access to touch more of him. I traced the terrible scars left from his arc reactor.

"So why do you call me Tiger?" I asked absently, bumping my fingers over his abs.

"I came down to the training room once and saw you and Hogun going at each other with those swords. You were moving so quickly and elegantly, graceful, with that slippery quality, totally fearsome and lethal. I thought of that poem by William Blake:

"Tyger Tyger, burning bright,
In the forests of the night;
What immortal hand or eye,
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

In what distant deeps or skies.
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand, dare seize the fire?"

he recited from memory. "So it seemed like an appropriate nickname here. You could carve up most of the people in Valhalla without breaking a sweat."

"I would break a sweat if I had to carve up most of the people in Valhalla," I teased, and he smiled.

"And look beautiful while doing it," he said, playing with the ends of my hair. "Your hair's grown a lot."

"So has yours," I said. "I like it longer, it's sexy."

"Yours or mine?" he quipped, and I grinned.

"So what provoked you to end up here?" I asked.

"Mostly, missing you. It's not just the sex, though," he hurried to assure me, "although your body and how you make me feel is a wonder of the world. I missed talking to you, bouncing ideas off you, eating dinner with you and finding out how your day went. Bruce is a great guy, don't get me
wrong, we work great together, but he can't replace you. And there was all this bitching and moaning from most of the warriors, they have to do a lot more for themselves and they hate it. I finished my work so it was time to find you and leave them to their misery. Odin's getting a little frantic, I think. He's not getting more warriors now that you guys are gone, dissatisfaction has spread over to Frigga's realm as well, and he has no idea how to fix things. This is nothing that my workshop can fix, and I wouldn't have if I could have." He looked over my shoulder. "I was kind of worried that you'd replaced me," he admitted.

"You'd be a hard act to follow, Tony," I said calmly, and turned his head so he had to look at me. "I haven't even tried. I missed you too, for the same reasons. I missed telling you about my day, asking what you were working on, you trying to improve my terrible chess game. Spending time with you, and of course, the sex is pretty spectacular, Sparky." I ran my fingers along his cock, smiling with anticipation as it gallantly hardened under my touch. "You think Iron Man is up for another adventure?" He laughed so hard tears squeezed out of his eyes.

"Iron Man?" he chortled. "Iron Man's always up for riding a tiger." And quickly, I found myself on my hands and knees. Oh, yeah, I'd missed him.

It wasn't hard to fall into a routine; Tony gravitated to the smithies, where he found an interest in learning how to make metal parts for furniture, like reinforced corners for trunks or chests, other hardware like hinges and drawer pulls, cooking pots and serving vessels. He was particularly drawn to the serving vessels because he could make them look stylish and beautiful. He made me a tray in bright-polished pewter for the top of my chest; the handles looked like tigers. It was really beautiful, and everybody was impressed with the work.

My uncle also worked in the smithies, but to his surprise, he found himself drawn to shoeing horses and started training to be a farrier. Emma took up with the jewelers, and Cap stayed with wood, but he also started helping to fell trees, bringing them to a low-tech mill, and tending to the wood as it air dried. He also made me new knitting needles to replace the ones I'd had to leave in Valhalla.

The former valkyries eventually met up and discussed terms and conditions should Odin discover he actually couldn't run Valhalla without us. There wasn't a rush on it; time here seemed to run really fast in comparison to Valhalla and Folkvangr. The list was extensive and I personally doubted that Odin would accede to the conditions.

One afternoon I received a summons to the Great Hall. I'd been glazing plates and had to clean up, making me a little later than I wanted. It turned out that I was the last to arrive. Hela stood at the head of a table of the former valkyries. Behind her, Odin stood, arms crossed. I slid into the last place around the table.

"Now that you are assembled, Odin wished to address you," she said. "Be advised that he does not have the power to remove you from this hall if you do not choose to go. You must leave willingly." She stepped back and gestured to Odin, who glowered at her.

"Enough of this," Odin said, stepping up to the table and looking around at us. "I have allowed you time for your rebellion. It is time for you to return to Valhalla and take up your duties."

We all looked back at him, unimpressed by his 'forbearance' with our 'rebellion.' "And what has changed during our absence?" Brynhildr asked.

Odin smiled a little. "Those in charge of equipment and supplies have been forbidden to demand...favors from you in exchange for goods and they must make all goods available upon request," he said triumphantly. I felt like rolling my eyes.
"Not good enough," Eir snapped. "Who has the list?" she asked us, and Heidi passed down the conditions we'd discussed and agreed on. Eir picked up the paper and scanned it, nodding. "As a show of good faith, you must first allow our representative to go to Valhalla and retrieve our personal effects from our quarters. Then, upon her return with the items, we will sit down with you and discuss terms for our return. For those who wish to return."

Odin was pissed that we were taking such a hard line, but we kind of had him over a barrel. Grudgingly, he agreed to allow one of us to go and retrieve our possessions. I stood, and I think he wanted to groan. But I had agreed to go because I was the only one who could get back here if Odin suddenly became uncooperative.

I looked around the hall; it was as clean as ever and empty, as it should be during the mid afternoon. I left Odin there and went first to my quarters. I gasped when I pushed open the door. My room had been ransacked. The furniture, including the chest the valkyries had made for me, had been broken, the mattress and pillows slit. All my few personal possessions were gone--my hairbrush, comb, hairpins. My knitting needles and spindles were broken on the floor. I clutched my pendant, grateful that I rarely took it off. And the clothing, including the apology gifts from Frigga, were gone. My spear, shield, and swords were also missing. I left and checked the rooms of the other couple of valkyries in the annex; same thing there. A mess, and nothing on the list. I left the building and ran down to the valkyries' building, passing Tony's shop and quarters on the way. They were pristine. The only thing Tony had wanted was the sweater I'd knitted for him, and I took my needles and pins and the scissors that I'd kept with the sewing machine. Then I went on. The quarters for the rest of the valkyries...

I pushed open the door to Runa's quarters and gagged. The smell was horrible, the destruction worse. Again, all personal items had been looted, including the valkyrie weapons. There wasn't a room in the complex that had escaped some sort of despoilment. I headed toward the forge to find out what had happened to our weapons. Suspiciously, the forge was deserted. I found a few pieces in the scrap metal pile, but not nearly enough. But I did find my swords. The scabbard was broken, as was one of the blades. The other blade was bent. I picked up the pieces, grabbing a rag to wrap them in. The rag was surprisingly soft and I took a second look. The pink color was familiar... then I saw the embroidery on the hemmed side and knew where my dresses had gone. The dress I'd worn for the last night of Walpurgis had been cut up for rags. I was infuriated. I grabbed the bundle and charged back into the hall. Odin turned at my entrance.

"This is all I found," I said tightly, and showed him the remains of my treasured swords. "Some of our armor is on the scrap heap in the forge, but most of it is gone. All our few personal effects have been stolen. Our clothing has been ripped up and used as rags. The valkyrie complex has been looted, the furniture smashed, urine and feces all over the place. How could you allow this to happen, Odin?"

"It was not my doing," he protested.

"You are lord of this realm, Odin, and you should have controlled your warriors. We had little to begin with, and it's all gone now." I was shaking with rage. "Why would anybody do that anyway? What is wrong with you people?"

"They were merely releasing frustration," he tried to placate me.

"How would you feel if you came back to find that they'd done the same thing to your quarters?" I demanded. "And it is definitely gender-based violence, because Tony's things weren't even touched!"

"Gender-based...what?" he asked, puzzled. His cluelessness was the last straw for me. I grabbed
the bent sword out of my bundle and stabbed him. Just the once, right in the middle, not over and over like Julius Caesar. I do have some self-control. I pulled the sword free, stuffed it back into the bundle, and popped myself back to Hel. I was still good at judging time, it seemed. They were still at the table.

"What happened?" Carol asked. "Where are our things?" Half choked with rage, I told them what I'd seen. That provoked everybody's tempers, and more than one of them wished that I could have done more damage to Odin. The meeting broke up, anger still high. The energy I'd gotten from my anger faded although the anger still burned, and I trudged up to the smithies to see if my swords could be fixed. Several smiths looked at them, and their opinions were all the same.

"I am sorry," my last hope said, patting my shoulder. "The steel isn't good enough and the damage is too great. But you can use these as a guide to make new ones, we will help you. And here, these grips look new. You can use them on the new swords. One of the specialists can make a new sheath too, using these pieces for a pattern." I had to be satisfied with that, and I would be grateful later, once my temper cooled off.

I went back to my room, appreciating it all the more, the way that my privacy was respected, that it was clean and cared for, that my things were where I'd left them this morning. Unexpectedly, I was a little weepy. There was a knock on the door; I snuffled, swiped at my eyes, and opened the door to Tony.

"Oh, Alex," he sighed, and cuddled me to him, rocking me gently, asking what had happened. I told him. "Oh, my darling, you've had a bad afternoon. Thank you for retrieving my sweater, though, it means a lot to me. I just wish you'd had better luck."

"I don't know why I'm so upset," I said, sniffing.

"Your private space was invaded, your possessions destroyed or stolen, your swords broken. Of course you feel violated," he said, kissing my temple. "You're probably wondering what would have happened if any of you valkyries had still been there when the perpetrators were rampaging around. And Odin let it happen." I nodded into his shoulder. He stood there patiently, letting me get through it, until I started to relax. Well, get less tense. "Do you want a cool cloth for your eyes?" he asked tentatively. "My mom used to do that when I was a kid, said it helped."

"I'll go splash my face," I said. I also needed to pee, now that I thought about it.

"When you get back, do you want to take a nap? You've got to be drained by that much rage."

"Will you nap with me?" I asked a little shyly, and he rubbed my back.

"I can't refuse an offer like that," he said. So I went and took care of things, and when I got back, took off my dress so I wouldn't get it all wrinkled. Tony was already out of his boots and jerkin, and patted the mattress in front of him. I curled up on my side and he fit himself to my back, putting his arm around me and gently rubbing my stomach until I fell asleep.

When I woke up, it was darker. "How are you feeling?" Tony asked gently, squeezing my hand. Sometime while I'd been sleeping, I'd taken his hand.

"Better," I admitted. He kissed my cheek.

"We can still get dinner," he said, and reluctantly I sat up. I could have stayed forever like that with him, but I was hungry. He laced my dress back up, waited as I fixed my hair, then settled my shawl around my shoulders. Winter was coming in Hel, and the air was chilly. "Let's eat, then come back
here after. I'm not as good as you are, but I can give a passable massage," he offered. I smiled at him.

"That sounds fantastic," I said, and he smiled and held the door for me. "You're such a gentleman, Sparky."

"That I'm not," he said immediately. "You'll never find me putting my cloak over a puddle for you."

"You are to me," I refuted. "And you'd be nuts to ruin your cloak like that. How would you possible wear it after? It would be all muddy and dripping. I can easily jump the puddle or go around it. Your manners are lovely, but it's more than that. You make me feel appreciated and valued, like I'm important to you."

"You are, Tiger. Never doubt it," he told me as we started down the stairs, he preceding me. Tony only thinks he's not a gentleman. "I think you might just be the best thing that's ever happened to me."

His words touched me. I quickly rubbed my hands together to warm them up a bit, then stroked the back of his neck. "You're important to me."

"Good," he said, offering me his arm as I stepped off the last stair. "My plan is to make myself indispensable to you. I used to envy the kind of relationship you had with Wayne, how close you were, how well you were able to make it work. True partners in everything. I never could make my relationships work. I'd like something like that with you myself."

"I think we can," I said as we entered the hall. "It requires a lot of work and a mutual commitment to make it work, and I'm motivated."

He pulled out a chair for me at the nearest table; we had just made the end of dinner. "So am I. A lot of distractions that I had when I was alive are gone. The company, the Avengers, being Iron Man. They were important to me, kind of my obsession because I needed them to fill a hole inside myself. They provided satisfaction and purpose that I never found with Pepper or Con, and I probably wouldn't have been able to find it with Emma, either, because I didn't know what I needed or how to get it. Here I can see what's really important. My work isn't as important and I don't need to be Iron Man anymore. I like my work, but what I want, more than anything, is you." I picked up his hand and kissed his palm, holding it against my cheek.

"That's good," I said, grinning like crazy. "Because I want you too. I recognize what I feel for you because it's similar to what I felt for Damian. You have similarities with him, you know. Problems with your parents--his mom was a real nightmare--but I think the difference is that Bruce stepped up and was a good dad. It's more than just contributing the sperm and providing a company to run. Bruce made a huge effort to also connect with his son, which was an advantage you didn't have. But you both cared so much about trying to do the right thing and both of you are good men. And for some reason, you both really like me, so there's that." I smiled and held his hand in both of mine. "The difference is that you doubt yourself, your worth. But I'm here to tell you that you don't need to doubt, and I will show you that until you believe it for yourself, Tony." I was cut off as our dinners were served; that was fine, convincing him would take time and persistence until he learned to see himself like I did.

We had just finished when Captain Rogers sat down. "Heard some bad things happened this afternoon," he said. All the relaxation I'd found with Tony dissipated and I told him what I'd found in Valhalla. He scowled. "Odin has command responsibility," he said. "He doesn't run a very tight unit over there. But then again, neither does Frigga, although it isn't as bad there."
The concept that a commander was responsible for the actions of his troops was fairly new in Midgardian law, mostly having arisen from the Tokyo and Nuremberg war crimes trials after World War II. I completely doubted whether Odin had ever heard of the concept, much less the Midgardian laws. Still, I appreciated the sentiment, which echoed my own. "Your friends were talking about a list of conditions you had before, saying what would need to happen before you would return."

"Yep," I confirmed. "The list just got longer. Somebody's going to have to explain what command responsibility is and why he needs to assume it." He smiled.

"I'd be happy to," he said. I smiled too.

"I will take you up on the offer," I said. "Odin respects you, he'll listen to you. Unlike me." I said that a little sourly.

Rogers shrugged his massive shoulders. "If he wants the valkyries back, he'll have to listen and make changes. He may prefer the traditional Asgardians and Midgardians who obeyed him without question, but times change, and if he wants new followers, he's going to have to adapt too. Happy to help." He got up and ambled away.

"I'm counting on you helping me come up with some strategies that will ensure compliance," I said anxiously to Tony. "I don't have any idea how to make him stick to his word."

"We'll work on it," he promised. "I feel terrible. I have all those nice things in my quarters in Valhalla; initially I thought all new arrivals got them. But it wasn't til I saw yours that I realized that there was a differential. I thought you were right, though, when you said there were a lot of new arrivals. But none of you had much, and now I realize how abusive the situation is."

"Wasn't your fault," I said, patting his hand, then lacing my fingers with his. I felt better when I was touching him. "If things get straightened out, maybe you can offer to redistribute some of it, but I'd be surprised if anybody accepts. I think we all would want a fresh start, which would include the right to keep what we make and the spare time to make things expressly for ourselves." I grinned fiercely. "I might declare myself an enforcer; if anybody tries to screw with us again, I'll poof them here."

Tony laughed. "It would serve them right. You said you were ending your work in the pottery; what do you think you'll take up next?"

"I'm going to improve my weaving. I'd like to make tapestries and some nice rugs, and my skills are totally not there yet. But first I have to make new swords," I said, scowling and itching to put the hurt on somebody.

"You're the most inquisitive person I know," he said, reaching over to adjust my shawl where it had slipped a little.

"I've learned enough to produce usable items since I've been here," I said. "Now I want to start refining my knowledge and skills to make things that are well-crafted and also look pretty. So I start that with the weaving, then cycle through my skills again, improving them as I go. Between Irene, Carol, Dagny, and me, no matter what happens, we could supply our needs reasonably well. Irene is picking up farming basics, and Dagny is hunting, so with all the skills we have, we could be pretty secure and able to provide for ourselves and important others." I patted his knee. "That sense of security... well, it makes me feel less anxious, more in control. I may be overdoing it, but I need to know that I could be pretty self-sufficient." Tony nodded understanding.
"Well, can I lure you back upstairs for that massage? I traded for a special oil. It smells really good, and I can't wait to use it on the most sensual woman I know," he said, and I stood.

"I'd love to have your hands all over my body," I replied, and he grinned, springing to his feet.

"Outstanding. By the time I'm done, one way or another, you'll be too relaxed to worry about a thing, and hopefully pleasurably exhausted enough to get a good night's sleep."

A delicious shiver ran over me. "I place myself with anticipation in your very capable hands," I said, and we moved with purpose up the stairs to his room.
As time passed, the former valkyries got more angry at Odin. He needed to show up; the longer he stayed away the more incensed everybody got. He owed an explanation and an apology. I shrugged mentally. All he was doing was turning up the heat on himself.

When he did show up, the first thing he did was to remove a link between the two of us that I hadn't realize he'd placed until it was gone. He was furious with me for having stabbed him, and Frigga, who had accompanied him, stared at me icily. I shrugged, distracted by the sudden ache in my chest. If I'd been alive, I'd say I was having a heart attack. He then ordered me to leave the smaller hall that Hela had provided for us for privacy because other residents of Hel were anxious to see Odin get his ass handed to him.

Brynhildr snorted. "Alex can serve as our group's representative in the...collective bargaining." She spoke the unfamiliar term carefully and vacated the head of the table, taking my seat as we switched. I stared down the table at Odin, then motioned over one of Hela's pages and requested the presence of two others. While we waited in silence, I brought two chairs over and set one on each side of me. The former valkyries started to smile, stonily. Odin started to look a little worried. When Steve and Emma showed up, I gestured them to the seats.

"Captain Rogers would like to explain command responsibility to you both," I said calmly, and sat back as Cap started explaining, slowly and in the most basic terms, what was expected of a leader. Bucky, Tony, and Bruce slipped in and stood along the wall. Thor and Loki hustled in a few minutes later.

"I am sorry we are late," Thor said to me, and stood behind some of the valkyries, about midway down the table. His parents looked nettled, but that might also have been due to Cap's lecture, which pointed out in excruciating detail what their failings were. Then I turned Emma loose on them.

"I'm very disappointed in you," she said to Odin. I knew the tone well; it was the same one I'd used on my kids when they'd willfully misbehaved. It took a HUGE effort to keep my face straight. Thor didn't manage it and had to turn away. Everybody there had been scolded by parents or had scolded their own children in a similar manner, and Odin turned an unattractive shade of purple. Emma reminded him of the fight in Asgard's Great Hall after the trial in the arena and Thor and Loki's faces got grim.

"It is disheartening to realize that your words to me in life meant so little after all," she said bitterly. "You continually fail to value women, even these women, who have borne great responsibility and duty for hundreds of years. You treat them like cattle instead of respecting their abilities and dedication. They work harder than anyone in the afterlife, doing backbreaking labor, getting no thanks or recognition, treated by everyone with complete disregard because that is how you treat them. And you, Frigga, you should know better. You're a woman, but you've become a petty tyrant now that you have power of your own." She shook her head. "I think I was on the wrong side in that battle on Asgard, although I can't regret helping rescue Thor. Hela runs her halls fairly and equitably. If she'd been successful in Asgard, she could have achieved much." It was harder to say who was more shocked at her words, Hela or Odin, but Odin purpled again in rage and embarrassment. Thor and Loki looked grave. Frigga was expressionless.

I pulled out our--the valkyries'--list of demands and quickly added a few more terms to it. Then I turned my attention to Odin. "This is a list of conditions that must be met before anyone will consider returning to Valhalla. They are non-negotiable. Had you been more reasonable from the
outset, some bargaining might have been possible, but that window has closed. Either you comply with the terms or you do not. It is your choice how to proceed. If you do not complete each term, then none of the valkyries will consider returning to Valhalla.

"First, you will make the concept of command responsibility clear to each and every person in Valhalla and explain to them how you will enforce it. How you do this is up to you, but it must be effective. The first punishment must be for those who ransacked the valkyries' quarters, destroying all that was in them, stealing personal possessions, and fouling the premises. Second, you will make it clear that the valkyries are to be treated with respect, that their goods are not available for seizure, and any bargaining with them for the goods that they produce must be done in good faith. The valkyries are to be compensated for the things that were destroyed and everything that was stolen from them is to be returned in perfect condition. Third, new quarters are to be built for them at a distance from the main hall, with larger rooms, private bathrooms, a private well, spacious public rooms, and storerooms, well furnished with well-made, attractive furnishings and the type of luxuries your favorites have received. The doors must be able to be barred against unwanted intruders--exterior and interior doors both. Fourth, the valkyries will have the right to personally punish those who directly harm them since your justice is not always reliable. Fifth, requests by the valkyries at the storerooms must be fulfilled politely and promptly. The valkyries will continue to create the cloth for Valhalla, but others must pull their weight and shear the sheep and produce the linen from the flax. Furthermore, the valkyries will select their portion of cloth for themselves before delivering the rest to the store rooms for distribution to the remainder of Valhalla's inhabitants. Sixth, a library will be provided in their dwelling. Seventh, the valkyries will construct an obstacle course for themselves that is challenging enough to provide training. If Captain Rogers would like to help in the building, he is welcome to run the course as well." I said, trying to mend a fence there. "Eighth, the valkyries will pour the first round of mead at meals and continue to serve the blots, but beyond that, other arrangements for food service must be made. Serving meals isn't a gender-specific task and the valkyries have more important things to do. Ninth, the work done to reequip the valkyries upon their return will take precedence over any other work. Tenth, the valkyries will be allowed to take part in the scrimmages between Valhalla and Folkvangr. Eleventh, the valkyries will begin to choose the slain again upon their return, not before. Twelfth, you, Odin Borson, will treat them publicly and in private with the respect and dignity that their work and contributions demand. This will help each valkyrie to determine for herself whether to return to Valhalla or to choose to stay here in Hela's realm. Thirteenth, Hela is freed from the imposition of any restraints by you. You are the lord of Valhalla, but you no longer have dominion over the Nine Realms, let alone any other afterlife. She is to be allowed the same freedoms that you and Frigga enjoy. Finally, fourteenth, the alterations to Valhalla and changes to the policies must be permanent and must be approved by a designated representative who is free to come and go without restraint before any valkyries will return to Valhalla."

Absolute silence fell on the hall. Suck it, Odin. You should have been reasonable from the start.

Hela looked astonished, Thor and Loki's mouths dropped open. Over on the wall, Tony shook with the effort not to laugh, my uncle was wearing a small, grim smile, and Bruce just looked interested. Peter Parker had slipped in sometime when I was focused on Odin, and he looked alarmed. Beside me, Cap and Emma were relaxed but unyielding. The valkyries looked pleased. I knew some of them wouldn't be going back to Valhalla under any circumstances, but I'd done the best I could for the rest of them, taking a much harder line than we'd have dared before. But it had dawned on me that that Odin needed the valkyries a lot more than they needed him. Bargaining power.

Odin finally got himself under control enough to speak. "You dare dictate to me!" he growled at me.

"I do." I fixed him with a calm look. I no longer had a personal stake in the proceedings and that
allowed me to be a better advocate for my friends. "You allowed the situation to degenerate to this point. You allowed your warriors to behave with no decency or restraint. You valued the contributions of the valkyries so little that no one else did either, taking their cues from you. Had you been a leader instead of merely a ruler, none of this would have been necessary."

"You overstep yourself," Frigga snapped at me.

"I do not," I said coolly. "I am bargaining for the best interests of the former valkyries. You might think, Frigga, how you would have felt in our position. To be expected to spread your legs to any man who could have bumped you up slightly on a list to obtain clothing, a piece of basic furniture. Nothing even special, nothing especially pleasing to the eye or highly ornamented or finely worked. To do the hardest work of anyone with no thanks or offers of help. And what if a valkyrie had remained in Valhalla when the men were destroying and stealing and defecating and urinating all over the valkyries' quarters? Do you not understand that she would have been raped or beaten or tormented?" She blanched. "A woman shouldn't have to be a goddess to be the sole decider of what happens to her body." My voice was like a whip and she jerked at the icy slap of my words. "Your sons used to speak highly of your love and compassion. I have seen none of it, from the moment we met. You made me suffer excruciating pain out of proportion with the accident that precipitated your anger, and you felt that buying an apology with lovely clothes was sufficient. But I don't have to deal with you. Folkvangr has no valkyries of its own; they have to deliver all your souls free of charge, as it were. You offer nothing in return. To your shame."

I passed the list of conditions to the valkyrie on my right, who passed it on down to Odin. "There you have it, Odin Borson. The terms and conditions that must be met before a single valkyrie will consider whether to return. Come back when you have accomplished these things, not before." I stood, and the valkyries followed suit. I turned and strode for the door, followed by everybody else in the room who was not a god.

"What did Odin do to you?" Eir demanded, pushing through the crowd to stand by me.

I rubbed my chest absenty; the absence of the link seemed to be felt chiefly in that area. "I think he severed the...whatever...that made me a valkyrie," I said. "All I know is that something feels missing now." Eir shook her head and touched my shoulder, a rare act. None of the oldest valkyries did casual touch.

"I appreciate your actions on behalf of the rest of us," she said, and a murmur of agreement swept the crowd. "You demanded much more than I would have dared."

I shrugged. "Nothing ventured, nothing gained. It struck me that we--you--actually have the advantage here. It seems, from what we hear, that Odin either can't or won't make new valkyries, so he is going to have to come around. And that gives you the power in negotiations. Never forget that legitimacy of government lies in the consent of the governed. Put another way, nobody has unlimited power over you. You can't be forced back to Valhalla and if you agree to go back, you have the power to shape the conditions under which you return. That list of conditions represents the best way to level the playing field and get you the respect you deserve that I could manage. Whoever goes back needs to remember that you are in fact indispensable and assert your rights. There won't be as many willing to return to Valhalla, which makes it imperative to hold together. The oldest of the sagas, which aren't retold by the bards much, tell of altogether more merciless valkyries than we are accustomed to being. So go old school. If you're cheated, lop off a hand. If you're disrespected, take swift and immediate action. Unfortunately, all hurts are healed after the next battle, but you can show them that there are consequences to mistreatment of the valkyries. None of them would be enjoying their afterlife the way they did if not for you." The women around me murmured. I took advantage of this and slipped out of the crowd.
Tony caught up with me a couple of corridors later. "Are you ok, Alex?" he asked, peering at me in worry.

"Not really," I said in a small voice. "It hurts, what Odin did."

Tony gently gathered me to him, pressing me close. I turned my face to his chest and let a few of the tears of shock and pain leak out to be absorbed by his shirt. "Oh, my sweet Tiger," he cooed, rocking me slowly, stroking my braided hair.

"Is she ok? Alex, sweetie, are you all right?" I heard my uncle's anxious voice and looked around.

"Will be," I said. Bucky shook his head.

"That bastard," was all he said.

"What are you going to do now?" Cap asked me.

"Going to go back to work," I sighed. "I left work on my new swords when Odin showed up. Although it doesn't make a difference now," I said drearily.

"Why not?" asked Thor curiously, and I felt oppressed that everybody witnessed my degradation.

"Because it doesn't matter anymore," I said, tears streaking down my cheeks despite my efforts to keep it in a little longer, just until I was in private with Tony. "I won't be sparring with Hogun anymore, and he's the only one who provides a real challenge. I don't need swords anymore." I turned and walked away as quickly as I could without breaking into a run.

Tony followed me up to my room, where he held me until I was done crying, then soothing me until I felt better, tenderly wiping my face with a damp washcloth and having me lie down with a cool cloth over my eyes. It did help. "Thing was, I was ready to go back if the conditions were right," I confessed to Tony wearily.

"I figured," he said simply. "You don't like to give up, and you were good at it." He kissed my fingers, then sat on the bed next to me. I scooted over and leaned my head against his leg. That was suboptimal, so we rearranged ourselves so that I rested between his legs, leaning back against his chest. He rearranged the cool cloth, put one arm around me and picked up a book to read as I took a little nap.

I woke up about forty-five minutes later to a rumble in Tony's chest as he spoke with somebody. I listened without moving as he thanked my uncle for something, realizing that while I'd slept I'd taken a really firm grip on the arm over my ribs. After the door closed gently, Tony stroked my hair with his free hand. "Feel better?"

"Yeah," I said. "Still hurts some, but it's better." I let go of his arm and removed the cloth from my face. He tossed the cloth onto the table and hugged me tight with both arms.

"Barnes just said that he'd stopped by the smithy where you'd been working on your swords and the master there said he'd finish whatever stage you were at and put them away until you returned," he said. My uncle was thoughtful.

"I should get up, do something constructive," I said, trying to sit upright.

Tony kept me in place. "Why?" he asked reasonably. "It's been a heck of an afternoon and you've just lost something that was important to you."
"It's still the workday, and I should be productive rather than wallowing in self-pity."

"You couldn't have a more Puritan work ethic if you worked at it," he observed. "Alex, my darling, it's not like grief gets doled out in tiny increments. Hela isn't driven by timetables or work product, and you've been working hard every day. You can take time for yourself. If you don't, if you bottle it up too long, the pressure will really mess you up and you'll be out of action for a lot longer. Take care of yourself, Tiger. You're precious to me."

So I stayed with him, snuggling and kissing. Tony's affection did make me feel better and soothed the various aches I felt. I didn't really want to go down for dinner, but I felt a little hungry, and besides, I didn't want my friends to worry. An appearance now meant that later I could retreat back here or to Tony's room. And maybe boost my endorphins with sex. I loved to be skin-to-skin with him, to feel cherished and understood and desired. I expressed my thoughts, to which he responded very positively, and he escorted me down to the hall to eat.

When we arrived, Irene popped up and gave me a big hug. "You were fantastic back there, Alex. Fuck Odin. Figuratively speaking. I'm not going back without you, regardless of the conditions." Carol also hugged me and Dagny squeezed my hands. We sat down just as the servers came out with the food. I picked at my food, not as hungry as I'd thought. Then I noticed that everybody had noticed, and made an effort to eat more.

"Yum," I said. It was delicious, I just didn't want it.

Carol rolled her eyes. "Jeeze, Alex," she said. "That is the most unconvincing thing you've ever said." She made me smile.

"Eat up, Tiger," Tony said briskly. "Otherwise you might not have the endurance to keep up with me later." I flushed, and the other women laughed.

Loki strode up and hauled a seat around at the end of our table, taking a piece of buttered bread off my plate. "You have sparked a revolution, my lovely," he said as a server brought him his own plate. "Barnes, Rogers, Parker and Emma met with Frigga to explain why they will not be returning to Folkvangr. Something about how they are not just pawns in a great game. I believe that Emma summed it up most succinctly when she said that the age of the peon has passed. Banner has declined to return to Valhalla as well."

"I'm not going anywhere without Alex," Tony said, and Loki nodded.

"My brother had to return to Asgard, but he bade me remind Alex that she is not limited to the reach of a valkyrie's wings." I sat there, tired, not in the mood for a riddle.

Irene kicked me lightly under the table. "You can poof yourself and others around by yourself, remember?" she asked impatiently.

"Oh, right," I said, feeling stupid.

"My brother would like you to reconsider taking up Magni's training once more. And once your swords are finished, you could also resume your fights with Hogun," Loki said. "Your location may have changed, but your worth has not. Odin can be remarkably stupid, but my brother is not." He smiled at me between bites of his dinner. "You make Hela's domain seem the best option for the afterlife, when my time comes. Neither Odin nor Frigga is speaking to me and it is certain that Hela's afterlife is the most convivial."

I changed the subject by asking what he was doing at Columbia these days, and he spoke about
how he'd organized a major event, lasting an entire semester, with guest speakers from races all over the Nine Realms discussing their cultures. It had attracted intense international attention and the press had been rabid to attend. Loki had designated a few reporters and photographers for a press pool and had kept the majority of spaces for students. Then governments all over the globe wanted to participate in the panels as well, and he was planning for a second event. The guests to Midgard had enjoyed their time as presenters, and this made it easier to line up additional speakers and participants. It sounded very interesting. By the end of the meal, I felt a lot calmer and more relaxed. Or wrung out, perhaps, is a better way to put it. When the dancing started, Tony and I said good night and went up to his room. He gave me a leisurely massage with the fragrant oil he had, then we made love tenderly.

"You seem to spend a lot of time wiping my tears and bucking me up," I said to him ruefully. "I hope you don't regret it."

His fingers traced patterns on my skin. "Alex, it humbles me that you let your guard down enough to show me your fears, insecurities, your hurts. It makes me feel like you need me. Even when you were young, you handled things yourself, tougher and more responsible than I could imagine being. You persevere like nobody I've ever seen. You kept rescuing yourself and others from the most appalling circumstances, and even Iron Man couldn't keep up with you. The only time I really saw you let down your guard was when those idiots dumped those chemicals on you. And sure, I know that you thought I was your uncle, but I was glad to give you a little comfort. You've always been special to me, one way or another, Alex. When you were a kid, I wanted to develop your talents. Then I had an opportunity to bring you into my company and we achieved a lot together. It meant more than I could tell you when you asked me to be a godfather to your kids. You've always been special to me, one way or another, Alex. When you were a kid, I wanted to develop your talents. Then I had an opportunity to bring you into my company and we achieved a lot together. It meant more than I could tell you when you asked me to be a godfather to your kids. You even made it possible for my company to survive with its own name. So I've gotten a lot more out of our friendship than you have."

"I wouldn't say that," I argued. "You encouraged me to dream big, wrote a recommendation to MIT on my behalf, which is when I really felt like my life began. You say that you were always late to my little tete a tete with supervillains and other troubles, but you always came. You helped make it possible for me to try out my business ideas, then bailed me out when it failed. I was able to make a contribution to the greater good with what we achieved in the energy lab. The way you let me handle my pregnancy problems was excessively generous, and you were a great godfather to my children. They always loved to see you. So no, our relationship was far from being one sided."

He smirked. "Martha always did want to take over my company."

I sighed. "Bruce said she was so like Damian when he first came to the manor that it gave him heart palpations. He had to explain to her that Wayne Enterprises didn't engage in industrial espionage and that having a strong competitor was great for healthy business. He had to explain it a few times before she backed off. But she really did adore you, Tony. So did Xander. Sometimes I think he would have done better going into your side of things, becoming an Avenger. He was very social and would have had fun with the team, but Gotham needs its Batman. I didn't even really have to ask Martha to buy Stark when it was tanked. She was already lining up the resources to take care of it. She said she refused to let May destroy everything you worked for."

"Your kids were the best, Tiger."

"Yep," I agreed, proud of what they'd managed to accomplish. "Xander died last year, well, last year here, anyway. Old age, believe it or not. I wasn't supposed to, but I poofed in so he wouldn't die alone. He died in his sleep, so he didn't see me until then. Whatever avatar claimed him gave us a couple minutes, I think out of professional courtesy. He said that he was satisfied with what he'd done with his life, that his daughter was taking over the night time family business."
"I'm glad to hear that. Must have been a relief to hear," he said, snuggling in.

"Yep. And I'm keeping an eye out for Martha, too. May that be a ways away."

"Well, you've done everything you can for your children, and everybody else, too. Maybe you should focus on yourself for awhile. Do what makes you happy," he suggested.

"Doing you makes me happy." I batted my eyelashes at him and he laughed and squeezed me.

"Besides that. Now that you can achieve some stability in your afterlife, find things that you enjoy. I don't think that Hela's going to ever toss you out and make you fend for yourself. And you have options that that weird power gives you, so don't forget to take that into consideration."

"I won't. But not tonight, Tony."

"Nope. Today was...more than you were expecting. So take it easy on yourself for a few days. You can go charging around after you've had a few days to rebound. Let me indulge you until then."

"You indulge me a lot."

"So what's a couple more days?" He kissed me lightly. "There's no shortage of time. Sleep in tomorrow and see where it takes you."

So I did.
Reinvention

I decided that Tony was right and that probably nothing bad would happen if I took a few days for myself. And nothing did. I slept in, read, did some knitting, napped, and gradually the ache in my chest went away. After a couple of days of this, I got bored and went back up to the smithies and started to work on my swords again. The master who had finished up the last stage for me pointed out a few places where my technique wasn't as good as it should be and gave me advice for fixing the errors. I did this, and continued folding the metal, carefully, and finally it was time to refine the shape. Then I took advantage of my first master's training and inserted a core of soft steel along the spine to help reduce the possibility of breakage. Then I cleaned the blades up and engraved a pattern similar to the design that had been on Ra's al Guhl's sword, the one Damian had claimed from him. I liked the feeling of connection it gave me. Then I first went to the scabbard makers with the remains of the original. One of them liked the challenge and measured the new blades. We talked about the hilts; I was just planning on using the cherrywood from my original swords, but was talked into consulting another specialist. This artist had the idea of inlaying an elegant swoop of fiery labradorite into the cherrywood for a little extra pizazz. It seemed a little much, what with the engraving on the blades, but when the blade was sheathed, the handle was visible and when I was holding the sword, the handle was concealed and the design visible, so it wasn't going to be too busy. Then I handed the blades to a finisher and I was done until everything was ready.

That was going to take some time, so I poked around the store room, finding the roving, and decided to dye and spin some yarn. Gretchen had time to teach me how to make the thick rugs for which she was famous (hers were beautiful, mine we'd just have to wait and see) so I spun up the yardage she'd specified and handpainted the dye on the skeins, greens, blues and purples for the weft, a solid dark purple for the warp. Gretchen loved the colors; handpainting wasn't a traditional valkyrie approach to dying, but I'd seen it done in the fairs in Pennsylvania that I'd gone to as a kid. The pretty yarn made my rug look more interesting than it was, and Gretchen said it was a good rug, especially for a first attempt, and that what I needed was practice. So to thank her, I dyed some skeins for her, black, gray, and red, a dramatic combination that she loved and would doubtless become a masterwork in her hands. Tony thought my rug was great, so I warped another loom and made one for him in shades of red. It was full winter here, and the stone floors were cold. Gretchen got together a number of former valkyries and had a class where she taught them as well. The rugs, for which I used handpainted yarn instead of actual technique to create interest, wove up pretty quickly and I made a few more for myself and Tony before making some for my uncle, Cap, Emma, and Bruce. As an afterthought, I made one for Peter so he wouldn't feel left out. He was spending more time with the women of Hela's domain, finding a place for himself, and I didn't see him much.

When I went back to pick up my swords, I was amazed at just how beautiful they were. The polisher had brought up a perfect finish and had carefully enhanced my engraving with a little refinement here and there and a keen edge had been produced. The hiltmaker had added a swoop of steel as a handguard, looking for all the world like a gigantic talon from some legendary beast. The cherrywood was polished with a blend of oils and beeswax for a soft shine, complementing the play of light from the beautiful inlay of labradorite, accented with a few carefully placed curves of copper, and was crowned by an elegantly shaped steel pommel. The scabbard had a body of cherrywood too, reinforced with caps on the end and a ribbon of steel winding around it for strength and looks, engraved with the same design on the blades. It was the most elegant set I thought I'd ever seen. I was so inspired that I went back and created a few knives to harmonize—a folding pocketknife and a larger dagger for everyday. After that, I felt more cheerful, like myself before that last meeting with Odin.
"Now that you're armed to the teeth again?" Tony quipped later that night, but I didn't mind. Everybody's normal is different.

A couple of days later, nervously, I poofed to Asgard with my new swords. My student was having lunch when I arrived, but a servitor scuttled off at the sight of me. Huh. I must have impressed the last time I was there. I sat on a bench and waited. I didn't have long to wait; Thor himself came out to greet me and took me back to where his family and friends were finishing their meal. Magni had grown a foot since I'd seen him and was now slightly taller than me. Sif was glad to see another woman; she was finally in the home stretch of her pregnancy and was more than ready to become not pregnant.

"Thor has told us much of the goings-on in the underworlds," Volstagg said, for once serious and not condescending.

"Quite lively, it must be," Fandral added.

"I was sorry to hear that your swords were ruined," Hogun said, downcast. I smiled at him.

"Well, that part at least could be fixed," I said cheerfully, and took off my swordbelt to hand the new scabbard to him. All the warriors were very interested.

"They're pretty enough," Fandral said doubtfully. I smiled at him and he cringed just slightly.

"A thing can be beautiful and deadly at the same time," I said mildly. Hogun drew the swords and smiled as he stood and practiced some forms with them.

"The balance on the blades is outstanding," he said. "They have both flexibility and strength. I worry that my own will not stand up to a practice bout. Who made these?"

"I did," I said, taking the scabbard back and belting it around my waist. "I made the blades, that is. They were polished and the edge created by a master, and other masters created the scabbard and the hilt."

"What is the design on it?" Sif asked, and I showed it to her more closely.

"My husband defeated his grandfather and took his sword," I said. "The design is similar to what I remember."

"That's honorable," Volstagg muttered.

"Damian wasn't even ten when he fought his grandfather," I said, annoyance tinging the edge of my words. "And Ra's wasn't a normal old guy. He had a way to resurrect himself when he died, so he was over a thousand years old at the time of the fight, with all those years of experience and strong and fit. Hardly a walk in the park."

"Wow," Magni said eagerly.

"It's not a real good career goal," I told him dryly. "For one thing, your grandfather is already dead. Can't kill the dead, and in any case, it's best to reserve the sword for when diplomacy breaks down." Sif smiled at me.

"But you stabbed Odin," Magni said stubbornly, and I winced.

"That was not meant for your ears," Thor told his son sternly. "You should have been in bed."
"But how am I going to find out the interesting things if I go to bed?" Magni asked, and Thor sighed.

"I did stab him, with one of my ruined blades," I said flatly. "And it ended up costing me dearly. I am no longer welcome in Valhalla." I studied him. The kid was still too excited about the whole stabby thing. I drew out my new dagger, tossed the scabbard on the table, and flipped it up in the air. The dagger thunked into the table point down and quivered. "Before you can be a general, you have to be a soldier first, then a lieutenant, then a captain. Learn to lead, lead well using your brain rather than your blood lust, and that dagger is yours. I made the blade myself." I nodded permission, and Magni pulled it out of the table and examined it. It was as beautiful as my swords, elegant and just as lethal.

"This could be mine?" he said, looking hopeful.

"Earn it and it's yours. Your father will tell you--if you choose to listen--that there is much more to kingship than charging into a fight, no matter how satisfying that may be. Responsibility is a heavy weight that is always with you and you must always think of your subjects first. Learn your history, not just of Asgard but of other realms. Everything can teach you. Figure out why great leaders were great in their own times and determine how you can use your own unique, considerable gifts." I slid the scabbard back onto the blade. We discussed resuming our hand to hand lessons, and when I got up to go, Thor and Sif walked me out.

"That is a handsome bribe," Thor said, grinning at me.

"It's not magic, but not everybody can say they have a blade made by an ex-valkyrie," I shrugged.

"Perhaps it will make him more attentive to his studies," Sif said. "He dreams of glory."

"Who doesn't?" I asked and both SIf and Thor smiled. "Maybe tricky Uncle Loki could provide some additional incentive to broaden his perspective." Thor looked mildly alarmed, then nodded.

"Magni can learn from our mistakes," he said, and we reached the steps in the bright sunshine. It felt nice after the cold from Hela's realm. We said goodbye, and I poofed back home.

I also resumed practicing hand to hand with my uncle, always a pleasure. Bucky had the physiological advantage of strength and was a little faster than I was, but I was trickier and my style combined elements from all sorts of combat traditions. For fun, I started intentionally practicing the lessons I'd learned from my ninjutsu teacher and revisited the lessons in capoeira, lerdrit, and bakom. Between the two of us, we were pretty evenly matched, and our bouts soon started drawing a crowd. It started with Tony and Steve, Bruce started coming, then the valkyries, then other denizens of Hel who enjoyed watching a good fight.

It wasn't long before we were asked to teach. A lot of people tried it but when they realized how much dedication and practice was required, the class size shrunk a lot. We ended up having a good chunk of the valkyries, some men, and Steve and Tony. Tony had an advantage in that he'd studied martial arts in life, but Steve was faster in combining what he learned with his personal brawling style. It was interesting.

I continued to work on my swordsmanship; there were several different styles to learn. I kept up the practice with my beautiful katana, and Tony quickly learned to stay in bed first thing in the morning while I practiced the forms. I didn't want to accidentally cut him, even if it wouldn't have killed him and the wounds would have healed. Fortunately for me, there was no shortage of practitioners in different styles and many of them were happy to teach their skills. There wasn't the intense interest in them that there was in Valhalla, so they had less demand for their expertise.
picked up the rapier and shamshir, in addition to what Sif was teaching me about the Asgardian broadsword technique. More interesting, actually were non-sword weapons. I really liked the cestus, a kind of fingerless glove that at its simplest was made from strips of leather and worked like wraps for boxing, but could also reach up the arm to protect from blades. At its more complex, metal plates could be added to make a pretty comfortable brass knuckles analog, or spikes could also be fitted. Historically, I was told that bouts between cestus fighters were outlawed before 400 CE due to the brutality of the matches. There was also the katar, a push dagger from India that made combat with it essentially boxing with a big knife over your knuckles. My agility and flexibility made this a good weapon for me to use. There was a Korean war fan, which was a lot trickier than the Japanese tessen in that it had sharpened blades along the edges, concealed by feathers, to inflict raking cuts and my teacher showed me examples that had small bladders for the dispersal of poisons or irritants when snapped open and wafted at the opponent, or concealed small projectiles that could be released with a really hard snap. The sai, essentially a long dagger with what amounts to the crossguard curved in the same direction as the blade and sharpened, used in pairs, was a natural weapon for me, and the kerambit, a wicked little curved dagger, originally from Western Sumatra and little sickles were also fun to learn. I learned how to throw the javelin and got more serious about archery, where I also learned how to make my own recurve bow and make and fletch my own arrows. And I started practicing with shuriken again.

I used my improving competency with the Asgardian sword to teach Steve. He'd just sort of picked it up, the same way Bucky had, but Bucky was more used to drilling with weapons and had done better. I had to insist on him learning the basic drills, but he was quickly embarrassed at how fast he would lose each bout we had and complied. Once he saw the benefits, it was easier to beat a level of increased competency into him. I also taught him how to use his shield better as a shield, effectively, in addition to his physics-defying Big Frisbee tosses. We learned javelin together, and while I had the edge in precision, he got longer range, so we each could lay claim to skill with this weapon too.

I personally was having a ball in this afterlife; there was so much to learn and so many people to learn technique from that it was like candyland. I worried about Tony, though; he was a high tech man in a low-tech world. One night when we were getting ready for bed, I asked when he was going to start engineering again.

He rolled his eyes. "There's no electricity here," he pointed out, with only a slight barb on the edge of his words.

I grinned at him. "You're too hide-bound," I chided him lightly. "That big brain of yours must be atrophying, getting flaccid." I slid my hand inside his pants. "Unlike other parts, which get a regular workout... Traditional electricity, from coal and other fossil fuels, nuclear, solar, you're right, that isn't part of the afterlife. But magic works here, Sparky, and there are many sources of energy which in theory could be harnessed. We don't need the full Industrial Revolution here, but surely you can see high tech applications that will fit in with this world as it is."

"Flaccid?" he growled at me. I'd kind of hoped that he'd have focused on the rest of what I was saying. "I'll show you flaccid."

Actually, what he showed me was the opposite of flaccid, but the fire had been lit. After we finished, he cackled. "I should find a way to harness sexual energy. When I come with you, it feels like a bomb goes off. That should power some light bulbs. Candle light isn't bright enough for work although it's romantic." He grunted and his brain started to tick as he started to figure out what he needed to know about magic. He kissed me passionately after breakfast and charged off.

I started working on a pair of swords for Hogun; his prediction that his swords weren't going to last
against mine was proving accurate, and I didn't want to give up the fun of bouting with him. Sif

told me that Odin was having a hissy about me continuing to train Magni, but Thor brushed it off.
"It was his idea in the first place," he said. "And the reasons why you should teach him are the

same. Magni will need to be strong in body and mind to follow me as King, and his fighting skills

will be needed. He listens to you and practices what you teach, which is more attention than he
gives his swordmaster." He shook his head. "All he can do is rattle on about how you and Hogun

fight."

"So why can't he learn the two swords?" I asked. "Use it as a carrot. If he listens to his Asgardian

master and works hard, that can be a reward. Hogun is an excellent teacher, if he's willing."

Sif sighed. "He'd much prefer you to be his teacher. He would moon after you, if he wasn't so

afraid of your skill."

"Well, I've got my hands full with Tony, so that's not going to happen," I said dismissively. "And as

I said, Hogun is an excellent teacher. Not even an heir to a might kingdom should get his way all

the time."

Thor flushed and Sif laughed. "It would be an honor for Hogun to teach the next king," Sif said

 briskly, and Thor agreed to use it as incentive.

The next time I went to Asgard, Sif had delivered her child, finally. A daughter, with her mother's

inky hair. They had named her Torunn, meaning "Thor's love"--accurate, if uninspired. Thor doted

on her, reminding me of his vow to have me train her too.

"When she's old enough," Sif said in exasperation. I grinned.

"And then we shall work on another brother for her," Thor said, and Sif sighed.

"One more only," she said grudgingly. "You're not the one who has to carry the babes for so long.
If you want more past the final child, you will have to bear it yourself." I laughed at the expression

on his face.

It was good that I had that nice interval. When I got back to Helheim, a page took me directly to a

meeting in progress. I walked into a silent room. The valkyries lined the sides of a table, with Odin

and Frigga at the foot. Hela rose from her seat at the head gracefully when I came in and nudged

me toward the chair. "Odin has come to speak with the valkyries about their return to Valhalla, but

they refuse to speak; they have appointed you their voice. But first," and her voice was rich with

amusement, "You must surrender your weapons." She signaled a page, who came forward with a

tray. I rolled my eyes and placed my scabbard on the tray, then my pocket knife, the dagger from

my boot, a handful of shuriken, and the steel-reinforced cestuses that I had begun wearing during

swordwork. Hela laughed, the valkyries smirked, and Odin glowered. The page retreated to place

the tray on a table against the wall, and I sat down in Hela's vacated place.

"Have the terms and conditions that were explained to you at the last meeting been complied

with?" I asked Odin briskly.

"Not entirely," he said, gritting his teeth. I shook my head.

"I told you there would be no negotiation and no return until all the terms that were yours to

complete were finished." I spoke calmly, though the place where the valkyrie bond had been was

beginning to ache and throb.

"I seek a visit from the representative to judge how well work is proceeding," he said through
clenched teeth.

"It is a reasonable request," I had to admit. "In return for a visit, I require an oath that neither Odin nor anyone working on his behalf or on his directions will seek to impede me from returning to Helheim after the inspection."

Odin looked furious, but Frigga, to my surprise, admitted that my request was also reasonable, and Odin had to choke out the oath. "If something unforeseen should happen, I will come to your assistance myself," Hela told me quietly, so I felt bold enough to go.

The three gods and I materialized in Valhalla's great hall. A few tables were positioned in the center, with some of the valkyries' personal possessions on them. I pulled out my copy of the list that everyone had compiled, and began to sort through the meager items, placing each individual's items together on an empty table I dragged over, looking them over and comparing them to the description. If any damage had been preexisting, it was noted in the description. I set aside a couple of cloak pins and brooches that had been damaged and checked off the items that had been returned in good condition. After I had sorted through the things that the looters had thought nice enough to steal, I returned to the gods with the list and pointed out where things had been damaged and the things that had not been returned, including all of the clothing. The bent brooches and pins would be easy enough to fix, but the missing things were a different problem.

"What do you expect me to do?" Odin said, with the anger of a man out of his depth. I shrugged.

"It is your realm, your responsibility," I said, and crossed my arms, waiting.

"You might summon a goldsmith to fix the jewelry that was damaged," Hela said helpfully.

"You must summon your people and demand their compliance," Frigga counseled her husband. She seemed much less antagonistic than she'd been the last time I'd seen her.

Odin sighed, and did as the two goddesses advised. The three cloak pins and two brooches were sent off with one of the goldsmiths, and warriors were summoned. The hall had a sizeable crowd, but by far not all the inhabitants of Valhalla were summoned to account, I noticed. I held my tongue and watched as Odin demanded that his people account for everything that had been damaged, destroyed, or stolen and not returned.

There was some backtalk, which shocked me and maddened Odin. He skewered the mouthiest one who claimed that plunder belonged to the looter, and in any case, who was he to let a woman tell him what to do? His wording was a lot more insulting and implied that Odin was being emasculated by grasping whores. The wound was like the one Frigga had inflicted on me, non-healing, and I tried to find some sympathy for the man but couldn't. In a voice that vibrated with the power he could command, he made everyone go bring the possessions that had not been returned and prepare for an accounting of the things that had been ruined. We waited in tense silence until warriors started returning, beginning with the goldsmith, who had easily fixed the jewelry. I placed them with the other possessions and crossed them off the list. One by one, the others returned and placed items like combs, jewelry, small chests, a jeweled knife, a few rugs and tapestries, a beautiful sword belt on the tables. Smiths returned the valkyrie arms and armor, and one man threw my magnificent fur apology cloak on the floor and spat on me. I held myself still; there was a provision that valkyries could dispense their own justice, but I wasn't a valkyrie any more and I didn't dare jeopardize the terms that I'd set forth. But Odin stepped up and threw the guy into a wall as I wiped the spit off with disgust. He yelled at the warriors, doing a fair job of demanding the display of respect and compliance with his orders. I gave him credit for his attempt at reeducation.
Everybody watched me warily as I checked things off the list. All the valuables had been returned, leaving only more common goods like my knitting needles and combs that I knew had been broken. I inspected the armor, finding that a few things were missing, like one gauntlet to a pair that Aldis wore. Some of the spear shafts had been broken. I lined up everything against the wall; shields together, spears, swords, helmets, all in groups, then turned back to the tables and quickly wrapped each woman's belongings in rags and put the bundles into bags I'd brought with me. I pointed out the damage to the armor. "Aren't you taking the armor back too?" Odin asked, and for the first time since we left he didn't sound pissed at me.

"That armor belongs to the valkyries. I can no longer claim any, and the other women have yet to decide to return." Odin looked like he'd bitten into a lemon at my words. He told me I could leave the bags in the hall while we were busy elsewhere, and we began our tour. First to the smithy, where Reginn assured me that it was understood by all the smiths that any work to be done for the valkyries would be done first. Then we went out to a building site in the forest, a nice distance from the main hall, where good progress had been made on a new complex. I spoke with the architect, who took me through the building in progress, pointing out where the library would go, spacious public rooms, a courtyard where a well had been dug, large store rooms, and the first of the private rooms, each with its own bathroom. He indicated activity to the side where lengths of timber were being shaped to permit barring the great main doors and each door in the complex. "Impressive," I said, and it was. When it was done, it would be a wonderful place for the valkyries. From the complex, we walked a distance to a staging area where building materials were being assembled that could be used to construct the obstacle course. From there, we went to the store rooms, where yardage was stacked and leather was rolled up; there weren't any finished dresses, pants, or shirts to replace what had been torn up as rags, but the clothing could be replaced. I was next taken to the wood shop, where I got to see the craftsmen working on beds, chests, tables, and chairs for the new complex. They were capable of beautiful work, we'd just never seen it for our benefit, but that looked to change. I was given a box that contained replacements for the knitting needles, spindles, shuttles, and the rest of the wooden goods that had been smashed.

When we returned to the main hall, the fabric had been brought over and added to the bags of goods. I set down the box on top of that and watched as people began configuring the tables and chairs for the night meal. Places were laid at the tables, and it looked like the meals were buffet style still. "I think I've seen enough," I said to Odin, and we returned to the hall in Helheim where the valkyries were waiting, along with the goods. From the way the women lit up, I could tell that most of them hadn't expected much. They went back to the table as I passed out everybody's bundles. There were some tears as some treasures that they never expected to see again were returned, and I smiled. I saw Odin looking embarrassed as he and Frigga seated themselves again. I sat down too, and faces that were in brighter humors turned toward me.

"I have a brief report for you all, so let me tell you what I saw and my thoughts, and let's save any questions for after the report," I said, and the women nodded. "First, I saw the construction site for the new complex. It's farther along than I would have expected, and it's very impressive. Those of you who return will be very pleased, I think. It includes a private well, capacious store rooms, the library, nice large private quarters with bathrooms. There are construction materials being put aside for the obstacle course. Reginn assured me that they will perform work for the valkyries before any other work, and when I showed up at the store rooms, the cloth and leather were waiting for me and I saw the construction of fine furniture at the wood shop. All the possessions on the list were returned. Some had to have repairs, and things that were destroyed were replaced, or the materials provided." I gestured toward the fabric. "So these were the things that were done well and should only need to be checked when the building is complete, and for continued compliance with the terms. Some of the terms on the list are for us--the valkyries, I mean-- to fulfill--choosing the slain and the weaving, and that is of course the responsibility of those who will return. Food
service seems to be done by buffet, so this has changed. Some things were not addressed in my visit, such as whether the valkyries will be allowed to fight in the scrimmages on a regular basis, the provisions regarding Hela, whether the valkyries will be allowed to punish any who harm them.” I drew a deep breath. "As far as changing the culture in regard to the valkyries, I acknowledge that it is apparent that Odin has spoken with the warriors. The problem is that many of them do not seem to have really gotten the message. There was a lot of attitude. So as far as the demands regarding command responsibility, the atmosphere of respect and dignified treatment, and the permanence of the changes, I can't say that these terms have been met yet, although most of the warriors I saw in the shops or the building site were polite and respectful.”

"Where is our armor, Alex?” Gefn asked.

"The armor of the valkyries remains at Valhalla," I said firmly. "Some of it needs to be repaired, but this will be done. Those who return to Valhalla can pick it up upon their return, otherwise you won't be needing it." There were nods at that.

"Is the All-Father prepared to swear to the treatment of Hela, participation in the scrimmages, our ability to exact our punishment from those who harm us, that the changes will be permanent?” Eir asked, her voice hard. Odin wasn't happy, but he swore to it.

Hildr nodded. "In that case, I am prepared to acknowledge the progress being made to fulfill the conditions, and I am prepared to hold my decision whether to return or not until a final inspection is made to determine the full compliance, which will allow the All-Father time to... adjust the views of the warriors." She looked around the table, sharp looks at the older valkyries who had pretty much already said that they would not be returning. She got back grudging agreement. Odin managed to thank them for their continuing consideration, and he and Frigga went away.

"What about all this fabric?” Heidi asked.

"I had a thought about that," I said. "We've all been well supplied here, by the grace of Hela and I doubt that we really need the fabric. I propose that we offer it to the store rooms here as consideration for what has been given to us." The valkyries were pleased with that idea and Hela, smiling, sent for people to take the stacks away.
I felt drained by the day's events as I reclaimed my weapons and accepted the thanks of the valkyries. I took my time with my weapons until the others had left, then stepped into the deserted corridors where I rubbed my chest, trying to soothe the dull ache. It was as if the connection that had been ripped away was trying to regrow, and I didn't care for that at all. I had time to kill before dinner, so I went to the weaving room and spent a couple of hours warping an inkle loom so that I could produce woven ribbons with a pretty design. There weren't many warp threads in comparison to the full-size looms, but they had to be very long so that I could produce enough ribbon for an entire project, which in this case was trim for a dress. And I was in no hurry. I loaded little shuttles with thread in three colors and got a knotwork pattern going before it was time to meet Tony in the hall for dinner.

Irene was the only one there when I got to our table, and while we waited, she asked for a fuller story, scowling when I told her how the people in the hall had behaved, but she had to admit that Odin had done a pretty good job of correcting behavior.

"Still, the fact that one of them spit on you is troublesome," she said.

"It wasn't pleasant," I conceded.

She let that go and we talked about other things. The most interesting thing was that she'd found some cotton seeds and wanted to know if I thought there'd be interest in it. "Oh, count me in," I said immediately. "I like linen a lot, but I grew up in cotton and I miss it. It's easier to produce than linen and it's not as fussy either."

"Then I'll see about planting it when it's warm enough," she said, amused. "We don't have much, but I'll make sure you get first crack at the fiber. You've certainly become one of the best spinners I know." We talked about what she was learning about agriculture; she was finding tending to the earth and growing crops very satisfying. Carol and Dagny turned up a little later, and Tony toward the end of the meal. He seemed energized, sparks fairly popping off him. I smiled. I knew what that meant.

"So what's new, Sparky?" I asked, nibbling on a cookie. Tony flashed me a grin; he'd been talking to a few people he could find who had magic, and he was working on possibilities for generators. His first project would be a lighting system.

"Oh, that'll be nice," Carol said. "Reading by candle light isn't always easy."

"Brighter light would be helpful for handwork," Dagny conceded. The familiar intensity was back in Tony's eyes and I felt pleased and relieved. He needed more of a challenge in his life than just picking me up and drying me off. We stayed for the dancing that night, then went upstairs for some energetic lovemaking.

I took a break from the smithies a few days later and joined other women in spinning wool. My new spindles weren't quite as nicely balanced as the wrecked ones had been, and Steve was happy to refine the weights for me so that they spun evenly and were appropriate to the weight of the yarn I was spinning. It was nice to sit with other women for a change, chatting as we spun. There were other women in the smithies, but everybody there was focused and the work didn't lend itself to chatter. They also had the luxury of a small herd of a strange type of sheep that yielded fleece that was a cross between alpaca and cashmere. They had the soft under fur from rabbits and large yak-like animals that produced a thick, coarse fiber that felted beautifully and made warm, waterproof
cloaks for wet weather. It was satisfying to make something that would be useful to everyone.

At dinner a couple of nights later, Steve and Tony turned up with a present for me, a compact spinning wheel, simple with treadles to get the flywheel spinning and large bobbins that could easily be taken off when full so I didn't have to stop spinning to wind it off the bobbins each time they got full. I'd seen some wheels in yarn and fiber stores when I was alive that hadn't been nearly as pretty. Steve had carved iris flowers and dragonflies on the flywheel and a nice smooth handle for carrying it around. Tony had created the plans for it, but Steve had done the work. It was lovely, and I promised him some of the softest, most luxurious yarn for a sweater in thanks. Tony got a more personal thanks later.

The wheel worked like a dream, and the other women were fascinated by it. Steve was swamped by orders in a short time. The yarn I spun on it was finer and tighter than what I managed on the hand spindles and it went a lot faster, too. I was able to spin the wool for his sweater in a couple of hours. I spun some for a sweater for Tony, too, then finished with enough of the merino-type wool for sweaters for my aunt and uncle and me before turning to make thread for the looms. That went so much faster and easier that I could have kissed Steve. I dyed his yarn a deep cranberry red, black for my uncle, and a pretty lavender for my aunt. I used a deep rich brown for Tony and a dark green for me. The tighter yarn showed a sheen on the wool for Steve that was very pleasing. Even with mine being the only spinning wheel in use, the spinning went a lot faster and apparently we finished in record time. I stuck around to help with making the incredibly dense, light felt from the yak-like wool, then went back to the smithies to finish work on swords for Hogun.

I enjoyed teaching Magni; he was a dedicated student, which I appreciated. Hogun was very pleased with the swords I made him and said he was honored. Our bouts were even better now that we had higher quality swords and we never failed to draw a big crowd when we sparred. It helped to keep Magni motivated with his swordwork; it was difficult to learn to use a sword in both hand, particularly if you'd been trained to use a sword and shield first.

One night when we got back to Tony's room, I saw a big box on the floor beside the table, and on the table, connected by a cord, was a lamp with a single large bulb. He proudly flicked the switch, which activated the nearly-silent generator, and the bulb lit with a lovely bright light. "You did it!" I exclaimed. "That's tremendous, Tony!" I kissed him soundly.

"Yeah, pretty much," he agreed modestly. "Proof of concept, so now I can refine the design, play with the shapes of the bulbs and the filaments, get something good before consumer testing, then I'll take it to Hela. There are a lot of places where safe, reliable, bright light would be helpful." He did exactly that. Carol, Dagny, and Irene each got a new prototype as it was developed, and I ended up with the final one. We started making love by its light, but Tony paused and turned it off before lighting candles. "It's too stark," he said, sinking into me again. "You're still beautiful, but I love watching the shadows on your skin, painting you with a richer light. It's more romantic. You deserve to be draped in light." What do you say to that? I kissed him for the compliment and rolled him onto his back so he could look to his heart's content.

He took his device to Hela, who was immediately alert to the advantages it provided, and for his first installation, he was assigned the granaries; the dust was highly flammable and the absence of a naked flame would make working with the stored wheat, oats, and other grains much less hazardous. There was quite a lot of testing to make sure that no sparks were created and that it would provide the desired safe solution. Tony is always in his element solving problems and creating solutions. I loved seeing him back in action.

Time passed; we broke up our labor with little holidays of our own and there were rites to be observed; Thrimilcy was as spectacular here as in Valhalla, for example. It strengthened the bond
between Tony and me; the wild sex was accompanied by the deep emotion we had for each other, and I was kind of sorry that this rite came around only once a year. But on the other hand, it was so exhausting that we skipped the May Day celebration and feast. I kind of regretted missing the feast, but the intimacy with Tony was worth it.

I was helping to pick the cotton when I was summoned. I sighed when I saw Odin and Frigga waiting with Hela as the valkyries trickled in. All of a sudden, I wished I was back in the field, even though picking cotton was hard work. After the heat from the field, the stone chamber was too cool, and I shivered. Odin, more polite than I'd ever seen him, asked for a progress inspection, which meant me. I got to my feet after he'd agreed to the usual terms of non-interference, and was surprised to see Peter, Bucky, Steve, and Emma come in at the invitation of Frigga, who wanted them to tour Folkvangr. Bucky crossed to me, kissed my cheek, and studied me. "You're sunburned, sweetie," he said with concern, but he relaxed when I reminded him it would heal fast, and that skin cancer wasn't a problem.

"I appreciate your concern, though," I said, and the valkyries smiled at us. I was the only one here with blood relatives that were known to me; nobody checked genealogies here, so the valkyries could have descendants here that they didn't know about. But I knew that they envied me my uncle and the closeness that we had that spanned more than lifetime.

When Frigga made her offer, a prelude to drawing their threesome and Peter back to Folkvangr, Bucky balked. "Here in Helheim, I have my niece again. I don't want to lose that contact." Steve slung his arm around Bucky's shoulders.

"Family's important," he said.

"Well, I'm not going back by myself," Emma said, squeezing my hand.

Frigga sighed. "I'm not asking for a decision right this moment," she said with an admirable amount of patience. "And something could be worked out if you had the inclination. But right now all I request is that you observe the changes I've made."

"I don't know if Folkvangr is right for me," Peter said unexpectedly. "I've always been more of a protector rather than a warrior, and I don't especially like the endless battles."

"Things can change, even in Valhalla," Frigga said, a little archly. "Come see for yourself and we can discuss further changes, individually."

Bucky was still balky, so I nudged him. "You're the one who taught me the danger of acting without sufficient intelligence. It wouldn't hurt to see what has changed and what she's offering." He sighed and gave in, and Hela accompanied them. I looked at Odin with resignation and we returned to Valhalla.

As before, I had to disarm before we left, but Odin stayed in the Great Hall to let me investigate on my own. I stopped by the valkyries’ old quarters first and saw that the wreckage had been cleared away and everything cleaned up. Excellent progress was made on their new quarters; the first floor was complete and the second about half done in all three buildings; a passage between each building had been constructed. Wood, it consisted of posts with beams across the top, and wisteria vines were being trained up the posts. It would be lovely when done. The central courtyard had a pretty little fountain to provide drinking water and small hedges of rosemary and lavender lined the walkways and seating areas. A few trees were placed where they would provide shade on warm days. The storerooms were packed with furniture ready to be moved in when the buildings were finished; I counted thirty seven sets of bed frames, tables, and a selection of either dressers with drawers or chests. Stacks of chairs, benches, and larger tables for the common spaces were also
complete. The quality of the work was excellent. The library was lined with shelves and a good quarter of them were laden with books. The stone floors throughout had pretty patterns, and the floors upstairs were wood, planed flat and smooth and well treated with oils to help protect the wood. The hardware to hold the bars on the doors were installed on the doors and frames although the bars weren't in place yet.

I stopped by the forge and found tables heaped with the weapons of the valkyries; the necessary repairs had been made and maintenance done on older weapons: the wood lining some of the shields replaced and new leather straps, the engraved work filled with niello for contrast, scratches polished away. Then I wandered around, interested to see how I'd be treated. Everywhere I went I was treated courteously enough. Tony's workshop and quarters had been left as they were when he left, judging by the dust. A faint trace of his tonic hung in the air of his quarters and I missed him briefly. I wished I could bring back my sewing machine, but I didn't feel this was the best time to ask for it. At the storerooms, the shelves were bare of fabric, and the head of the facility asked if I knew when the valkyries would return. I didn't know, but I indicated that they would make their decisions after the construction was complete. I went into the kitchens and found that the buffet-style service for everyone but the head table was the accepted practice now, and nobody seemed especially put out by it. A rotating slate of servers took care of the head table. I was offered some mead, but I declined. It wasn't that I didn't trust Odin, but... oh, who was I kidding? I didn't trust him. Back in the Great Hall, Odin was conferring with a contingent of his oldest warriors; I stopped a distance away to wait. When they concluded their business, they filed by; they either ignored me or just looked at me. Nobody said a word and nobody spat on me. A definite improvement. Odin asked if I'd seen everything I wanted, and I said that I had. He whisked us back to Helheim without comment, and I reported on what I'd found.

After running down the compliance I'd seen, I concluded with advice for the valkyries to begin making their decisions. "It shouldn't take them much longer to finish the buildings, and I believe that a good faith effort has been made to bring all the denizens of Valhalla into a more respectful attitude. People being what they are, I expect that there will be individuals who will cause problems, but that would be the exception rather than the rule, I think that all that remains is for Odin to swear that the changes that have been made are meant to be permanent, that the valkyries have the right to punish individual offenders for isolated, minor acts, that he accepts command responsibility as previously defined and that the valkyries will be treated by all with the respect that is their due, confirm the obstacle course and arrangements for food service and scrimmages, and that Hela is not subject to his jurisdiction, and I'm ready to sign off on the project." All heads turned toward Odin, who swore to all I'd said. He detailed that the valkyries could split their squad, one fighting for Valhalla and one for Folkvangr, in order to provide more of a challenge in the scrimmages and that their presence would always be welcome. He formally acknowledged that Hela had full dominion over Helheim and the souls there, to be left alone with no interference as long as she didn't try to cause trouble anywhere else. I thought that was fair, and so did she. "All right, then. The terms have been complied with. When all is complete in Valhalla, Odin will return for a final inspection, and following that, each valkyrie must give her decision." During this discussion, Frigga brought the others back, then rejoined her husband. I stood and turned for the door, eager to put this behind me. My chest was hurting again. Frigga stopped me and asked for my indulgence for a moment.

"I would like to offer an alternative to consider," she said, and her husband shot her a black look. "For those who do not wish to return to Valhalla but who might find the peace of Hela's halls a little... too peaceful, I offer Folkvangr as a possibility. Similar reforms in attitude have been implemented. There is plenty of room for all and the promise of regular battle." She nodded, and that seemed to be the end of it. I quietly left the room and went back to the cotton field. Those bolls weren't going to pick themselves.
It took a few more days to pick all the cotton, then Tony surprised me with a small, hand-cranked cotton gin. He'd diverted time from his lighting project to make it. I was the only one really excited about the cotton, so it had turned into my baby. Fortunately, it was easy to gin the cotton and I collected the seeds carefully and made roving from the brushed fibers, ready to spin. Spinning was a lot more difficult than with wool but not as bad as linen and it took longer than I liked to spin the thread. After that, I had to wait for a big loom to come up. Dagny helped me warp it and I took a couple of weeks to weave. I had a nice light fabric when I was done, about the weight of quilting fabric, and made myself a blouse and skirt and Tony a shirt. The rest of the cloth went to the store room. Tony liked his shirt. "The fabric of our lives," he said, quoting an old ad campaign, and wore it when he was relaxing, not wanting to ruin it in his workshop.

During this time, I answered individual questions from valkyries about what I'd seen in Valhalla, specifically about the new quarters. Nobody talked to me about their decisions, and I didn't ask. It was up to everyone to choose what was best for her, and I told my friends that if they wanted to return, they should. It was important work, and if they still felt drawn to it, they should take it up again. I didn't want anyone to stay here out of friendship and end up resenting it.

Tony and I did talk about whether we wanted to go to Folkvangr. I was kind of in a funk over the knowledge that things were changing. Tony, to my surprise didn't really want to go to Folkvangr, at least not then. He was all tied up in his lighting project, and since I didn't have a driving desire to spring back into battle, we decided we were fine where we were, for the time being. He knew I was down, though, and took me to a little waterfall where we swam naked in the pool, then found a little cave behind the waterfall to explore. Then more swimming in the clear, cool water, and we thought about making love in the quiet wilderness, but it turned out that mossy rocks aren't really any softer than bare rocks, and that put an end to that. Still, it was a wonderful diversion, and I felt more cheerful.

I had just finished a lesson with Magni and was heading to my room to shower and change after returning to Helheim when I was diverted to the small hall, where the valkyries were gathering. Odin and Frigga were there, talking with Hela. This time, Odin didn't require me to take off my weapons, so I didn't bother. The new buildings were deserted now; all the construction was complete, the furniture moved in. There were no curtains or rugs because the fabric was all gone, but individuals could bring her own things from Helheim if they returned. Everything was lovely and even the plants were thriving and growing. I poked around a little, then declared myself satisfied and we returned. I gave my report and answered a few questions, then Odin asked me to leave so that the vote could commence. I left, my chest aching like something was going to burst out of it, a xenomorph monster. I took my time in the shower and dressing for dinner. I was a good ways through a dinner I didn't really want when Tony, Steve, Bucky, and Emma arrived for the meal. Steve and Emma were returning to Folkvangr; my uncle would join them, but he said he was worried about me and was going to stay a bit longer.

"But even when I go back, Frigga said you'd be welcome to visit at any time," Bucky told me anxiously, and Steve patted my shoulder. I got through my meal before Dagny, Irene, and Carol arrived at the table. They seated themselves, and from the way they picked at their plates, I knew that they were going back to Valhalla and didn't know how to tell me. I kind of expected it and I didn't blame them, they still had that valkyrie bond, but knowing that I was losing my friends was a blow.

"What was the vote?" I asked.

"Seventeen of us are going back," Dagny said after a moment. "Four more are going to relocate to Folkvangr, but the rest are staying here." Seventeen valkyries out of almost four dozen. Odin was going to be trying to recover those losses for a long time. I nodded, and dropped the subject. After a
bit, I left to go on a walk. I didn't even want Tony with me while I dealt with that first wave of emotion. The vote marked the end of a phase of my life, and suddenly I didn't want to be in any Norse afterlife. I wanted to go someplace completely new, but, like Hogwarts, once you were sorted you were stuck. I'd known that I was done as a valkyrie before that, of course, but it wasn't so bad with my friends in exile with me. But now I was going to have to face what that really meant for myself now.

Then next day I showed up to say goodbye, and after a final round of hugs, I took off before Odin arrived to take them away. I went to the smithies and started work on a pair of daggers, wanting to take out my feelings on some metal. Tony and Bucky treated me with great care, which I both appreciated and resented. I was moody enough to aggravate myself, and took on hard work as a distraction. Then Bucky, having done all he could for me, also went back to Folkvangr.
My funk didn't pass, though, and I knew Tony was kind of worried about it. I just thought that I wasn't used to failing at things, different from loss, and there was no doubt that my career as a valkyrie had gone down in flames most spectacularly. The pain in my chest seemed to be easing, which was a relief. I kept up with my activities for distraction until I started enjoying things again.

I was in Asgard, working with Magni, when I began to feel weak. That was new; in the afterlife, you could exhaust yourself, but states like disease and general weakness just didn't exist; health was guaranteed. I finished out the lesson by having Magni take on one of his guards. He was showing continual improvement. I gathered myself and went back to Helheim, where I hunted up Hela for advice. She was concerned about the weakness as well and asked a lot of questions. The only thingy I could think of that was out of the ordinary was that chest pain. Hela frowned, asked detailed questions. She stood, telling me to stay put, and walked away, fading as she did so. I leaned back in the chair and closed my eyes while I waited. I woke from the light doze I'd fallen into when I heard Hela's voice, and frowned to hear Odin replying. Of all the people I didn't want to see...

The pain intensified with his presence, instantly propelling him to the top of my shit list. He looked me over, touched my chest with his fingertips, and his eyes unfocused. Hela bit her lip as she watched. A few breaths later, his hand fell away and he sighed. "As you suspected, there is damage from the... abrupt severing of the valkyrie bond," he said reluctantly to Hela. "The damage drains her life force."

"Fix it, Odin Borson," Hela invited him through clenched teeth.

"I am unsure if I can," he admitted after a tense moment.

"What?" Hela bellowed, and began to berate him for his temper. I got to my feet while they were arguing and they shut up abruptly.

"I'll be right back," I said, not looking at either of them, and left the room. I went directly to the library, where Tony was installing his lights. He was talking to a few people interested in his project, but he excused himself immediately when he saw me.

"Alex, what's wrong?" he asked, touching my cheek.

"I went to Asgard today, you know, training Magni." He nodded. "While we were working, I felt weak, so I had him bout with a guardsman then came back and talked to Hela. She brought Odin back. He said there's damage from where he broke the valkyrie bond. It's draining my life force, and he doesn't know if he can fix it. I'm feeling a little overwhelmed and I would really appreciate it if you came to help me sort all this out," I said, blinking against tears. As he listened, his expression went flat and grim, and he gathered me to him for a hug and kiss.

"Of course. You don't have to do this alone."

"I know. That's why I came to you," I told him, smiling as much as I could. His expression warmed and gentled.

"Means everything to me that you think that. Let me just shut off the generator and then we'll get this all straightened out, Alex."

So I waited a few moments as he shut down his project and returned to me, offering his arm. We
went back where the gods waited.

"I'd ask how you could do something like this, but--" he said nastily to Odin, who for the first time had no comeback. "The shit's really going to hit the fan when Barnes finds out what you've done to his niece."

"I don't really understand that expression," Odin said, puzzled, then dismissed it. "It was not my intent." Tony settled me in a chair and didn't bother to dispute the claim, instead asking for clarification and amplitude of the information I had.

"Her vitality is considerably diminished," Odin said reluctantly. "It would have been made worse with her visits to Valhalla and proximity to me. The bond was severed incompletely; it seeks to reestablish itself and, lacking the ability to do so on its own, uses her force in an attempt to complete the bond."

"Fix it," Tony said, rage strangling his words. "Get rid of that bond thing, and by god, you'd better do it gently, or I will make it my life's mission to destroy yours."

"I cannot remove the bond entirely," Odin said somberly, not provoked by Tony's outburst. "The damage caused by the breakage prevents it. The only solution I can propose is the reestablishment of the bond."

"And then you can remove it the right way?" Tony asked, still enraged.

"No," Odin said after a pregnant pause. "If the bond was reestablished--and it is possible that this might not be possible--it would be permanent. The damage has been done; like a scar, it will always be present, but reestablishment of the bond would restore the balance of the bond within her and her vitality would restore itself. Otherwise, she will fade away, ceasing to exist in this plane or any other."

"So her choices are to have her essence fade or to return to Valhalla," Hela said flatly.

"Yes." Odin.

"So I'd have to go back to Valhalla and become a valkyrie again," I said expressionlessly.

"Yes. But because of the... nature of your return, you could have considerable discretion in the work that you would do, once you recover. The only thing that cannot be negotiated is the choosing of souls. And it will take some time for your vitality to replace what was lost."

"I would be coming with her," Tony said, still sounding murderous. Odin nodded.

"I would expect that. You also would have the freedom to determine your work, once she is recovered."

"Not much of a choice," I muttered to Tony, and he stroked my hair.

"Not really, Tiger."

I looked at Hela. "Could you bring my uncle here? In case this fails, I'd like to be able to say goodbye."

"Of course." She glared at Odin. "In fact, Odin will bring him and can explain himself." Odin wasn't happy, but he stepped away from us and faded.
"Do you really think it's not going to work?" Tony asked me, his face going ashy.

"No, I'm pretty sure it will," I said on a sigh. "It's sort of a 'just in case' measure, like the possibility of something happening when you go in for minor surgery. The bond wants to be completed. But this way it can't be swept under the rug. Bucky's going to raise hell and Thor and Loki will also find out about it. And Sif and Magni. His life is going to be a living hell for awhile." Hela's grave face split into a smile.

"Marvelous," she said. "And no less than he deserves."

"I hate to leave the library half-done," Tony said to her, holding my hand. "But Alex comes first."

She nodded. "I understand, of course. Once she is recovered, I could bring you back to work."

"Or I could, once I'm able," I volunteered. "It sounds like I'm going to be out of commission work-wise for awhile."

Hela smiled at me. "You are always welcome here. But when the bond is reestablished, you will probably need to be taken to Valhalla; it will be easier for the bond to fully recover there. I can have your things packed up while we wait so that you will have them around you while you heal. Tony's too, of course." She sent people to our rooms and to collect my things from the weaving room and the smithies as well. Tony would complete his work and pack up his workshop when he was done.

"We can stay in my quarters if you'd like," he offered.

"We'll have to dust first," I said, then Bruce was brought in and the situation explained to him.

"Well, I'm coming with you," he said immediately. "No offense, Hela."

"I understand," she said, nodding. "Go pack up your things."

Bruce was back with his possessions all bundled up before Odin returned. He brought with him not just my uncle, but also his wife and Steve and Emma. Frigga's glare should have turned Odin to stone, my uncle was cursing in words and phrases I'd never heard him use, and Steve and Emma were also pissed. Bucky finally stopped swearing and crouched down by my chair.

"You're not looking so good, sweetie," he said, failing to suppress a quaver in his voice.

"Well, we're going to try this thing, which I think will work. But if it doesn't, I wanted to be able to say goodbye." Despite my best efforts, my eyes welled up. I looked between him and Tony. "I don't have the words to express how much you both mean to me. It's been an honor and a privilege to know you." I sobbed inadvertently, and that set off Bucky. Tony looked like his heart was breaking. "Come on, Odin," I managed to say. "You'd better do your best."

He didn't reply, just placed his hand above my skin, and the golden flow of energy appeared, twisting like it had the first time. And then it went out.

My blood froze. I hadn't been lying, I'd thought this would really work. "Do it again!" I gasped, and Odin tried two more times. Two more failures.

"I am sorry," Odin muttered, and stepped back. I closed my eyes, trying not to let my freakout bloom. Around me, chaos was breaking out. I only opened my eyes when I heard Thor bellow at his father. When had he arrived? Then I heard Loki, his smooth voice irritated and anxious.
"Do it again, Odin," he said testily. "Barnes, sheath your sword. Nobody does their best work with a blade to the throat." I opened my eyes to see that Bucky was indeed threatening Odin with his weapon. Tony tugged Bucky around the chair to stand beside him, and Odin tried again. Again, the bond failed to take.

"Ah," Loki said, the strain in his voice smoothing out. "I see what the problem is." He engaged Odin in a technical discussion that I didn't bother to pay attention to. The trials were taking a lot out of me, and the bond seemed frustrated that the attempts to reconnect weren't working.

"Alex," Loki said, turning to me. "It is not simply a matter of the bond reestablishing itself. You must be willing to do this. I understand that this is not your first choice, but you must find reasons to truly accept the duty again." I huffed out a breath and looked at him. "Odin has said that your duties are subject to revision. And you will still have your family and friends.

"Odin owes you reparation for the harm he has caused. And far more than a pretty dress or warm cloak," Frigga added, stepping beside Loki. "I understand why you would not want to answer to him again, given all that has passed between you, but consider the changes that you bargained for will also apply to you. However, there is nothing that cannot be negotiated in good faith, and with mediators and witnesses if you want," she added, and Odin looked even more hangdog than before.

"All right," I said grimly. I couldn't lose Tony now, didn't want to leave him under any circumstances. I looked through my memory to remember how it was when I took the bond the first time. Man, how dumb I'd been. But I held to the remembered desire to serve; I couldn't hang on to the pride and other emotions I had felt then. "One more time." I blew out a breath as Odin stepped up again.

This time, it took. I sighed, rubbing my temple, then my chest, where the pain had subsided.

"Alex?" Tony said, his voice tight with tension.

"It worked," I said wearily. The drain on my energy had stopped. This must be what it feels like when a dam is repaired. Bucky came around and patted my cheek, kissing my forehead, looking utterly relieved.

"This isn't over," he hissed at Odin, before sheathing his sword and stepping back.

"Alex?" Tony crouched in front of me. "Oh, god, are you ok?"

"Depleted," I said, then smiled at him. "But it's been fixed."

"Oh, my darling," he said, looking as washed out as I felt. "Well, let's get you settled in. I'll get the bed changed when we get there so you can rest. I'll clean it later."

"You're taking her to your quarters?" Emma asked, and Tony nodded.

"Familiar territory."

She nodded too. "Well, I'll come with you. I'll help clean up, then you won't have anything to worry about, you can just take care of Alex."

"It's been a shock for both of you," Steve said, clapping Tony on the shoulder, making him sway a bit. Tony rolled his eyes.

"We'll all help," Bucky said. "Then you can take care of our girl." I wanted to protest the use of the word 'girl'--hadn't been one since high school--but I lacked the energy and the inclination to correct
my uncle. So we had a crowd when we appeared in Valhalla at Tony's workshop. He brought a
cair out of the workshop into the warming early spring air and settled me in it, tucking his cape
around me just in case of chills, then disappeared briefly while he showed Emma where he kept
cleaning supplies in the workshop. I saw her go into his quarters and emerge with an armful of
cloth, then he escorted her to the main complex to drop off the laundry and get fresh sheets and
towels. I heard wood being chopped and Bucky go into Tony's rooms with rags and a jar of polish.
I closed my eyes for a little nap.

When I woke up, I was in Tony's bed, and he was asleep, engulfing me like he had after our first
Thrimilcy. Unlike then, when I tried to wiggle away, he woke up completely. "How are you
feeling?" he asked instantly.

"Better. Still dragged out but less tired," I said, touching his face and kissing him lightly. "But I
have to use the bathroom."

"It's late afternoon, and dinner will be served soon," he said. "So you go, do your thing, and I'll
bring back something to eat. You need to get your energy back. You're looking poorly, Tiger."

"Ok," I said. "Then maybe, since you have an en suite bathroom, perhaps you'd like to take a bath
with me?"

"That's the best idea I've heard all day," he said, kissing me. I snorted and he grinned. "Food, then
a long snuggle with my one and only in a nice hot bath."

"I love you, Tony. I don't say it enough, but I do."

"I'll never hear that enough," he said, blinking. "And I love you too. I unpacked your stuff, just to
move you in, so you'll probably need to hunt around a little to find where your things are. Feel free
to arrange things any way you want. I'll be back soon." He kissed me again and rolled out of bed. I
used the bathroom, then hunted out the robe that I'd finally made, stripping off the clothes that I'd
been wearing since working withMagni. I'd gotten all sweaty then but had forgotten it in the
ensuing drama. A bath with Tony was looking better and better, but I took a quick shower first,
washing away the grime and some of the tension. I always felt better when I was clean, and Tony
deserved better than me stinking from exertion and stress.

I came out and had cleared the table of things that hadn't been put away yet, finishing as the door
opened and Tony came in with a tray heaped with food and a pitcher. "Just water," he said as I
helped him place everything on the table. "And I've arranged our meals to be brought here for the
next few days until you start to improve." He'd brought a thick stew with a salad of early greens,
crusty bread, and spice cakes. I sniffed the delicious smells and dove right in. I'd missed lunch with
all the drama and was starving. We are quickly and without much conversation, then Tony piled
the tray with the dishes and took it outside to be collected. I went into the bathroom and started the
bath, adding some relaxing mineral salts. When he came into the room, I was shocked by how
exhausted he looked and helped him out of his clothes before taking off my robe. I slid my arms
around his trim waist and snuggled up to him, the simple skin-to-skin contact reassuring. His arms
went around me and he sighed. "Life with you, Tiger, is always exciting."

"You'd probably be better off with somebody less chaotic," I admitted, resting my head on his
shoulder.

"Never," he breathed. "All I need is fewer of these little moments of terror." I snorted agreement,
and we stood there for a few more moments before our arms loosened and we stepped apart. He
helped me into the bathtub, then stepped in and settled in with a groan. I sat between his legs and
laced our fingers together when his arms went around me again.
"So I know that you really liked working in the smithy in Helheim," he said after a period of silence. "I know that your weapons are made for you here, but I bet you could have your own smithy here, keep making those blades you like. You could have one out here, by my workshop. You could have pretty much anything you wanted. We could work near each other. I mean sure, that sounds kind of clingy, but I don't care." His hands began to roam my body, not for erotic effect, more like he was just making sure I was there.

"That would be nice," I said. "I also like spinning, and for weaving I'd have to use the big looms in the valkyries' shop, but I could spend a lot of time out here, I bet. If you don't mind, I could spin in your workshop. It's cleaner than a smithy will be."

"I like that a lot," he said, petting my breast. We stayed like that for awhile, sometimes talking, sometimes silent, until the water started to cool and we got out. I taught him how to French braid my hair, and we went to bed. That was kind of my pattern for the rest of the week; I slept a lot, ate when I was awake, and cuddled up to Tony; he seemed fine with providing quality snuggles. Gradually my awake periods got longer, and we went over to his shop too, cleaning first, then he started figuring out what he needed to continue his work for Hela in this workshop.

One afternoon we were interrupted by the arrival of Bucky and Steve, carrying a very large chair with them. They dropped it in the grass between the workshop and our quarters. I got up and went to give my uncle a big hug, Steve a lighter one. "You're looking better, sweetie," Bucky said, peering at me anxiously. "You've got some color in your cheeks, the circles under your eyes are lighter."

"She's still got a ways to go," Tony said, putting his arm around my waist. "But she's improving."

"You looked like death on a plate," Emma said, dumping a pile of cushions on the monster chair. "Anything would be an improvement, dear."

"Well, we thought that fresh air would be good for you," Steve said, motioning to the chair. "So I built a chair big enough for both you and Tony. The front of the chair can be put down so it's a real chair or put up so you have a short chaise. The back reclines to about a forty-five degree angle. Emma made the pillows for comfort, and we figured you could nap out here on nice days."

Just then, Bruce arrived with a smaller, more traditional chair. "This one's for your part of the shop," Steve continued. "I saw the sewing machine and Emma said you do a lot of handwork, so you have someplace nice to sit in there as well." Tony smiled and took the chair from his out-of-breath friend over to the workshop. I went ahead and held the door. He placed the chair in front of the windows and told me to try it out. It was a variation of a Morris chair, comfortable, with nice wide arms and a back high enough that I could rest my head on it. Emma had a cushion for this one too, and I thanked her and Steve again.

"And the next few scrimmages are over here," Bucky told me, patting my hand. "So I can drop in on you, see how you're doing."

"This is so nice," I said. "I can't thank you enough." Another round of hugs.

"Before the scrimmage, Frigga wondered if you were able to speak with her," Bucky said.

"I haven't left here since I got back," I said, yawning. "I've just been sleeping and eating, with gradually increasing periods of wakefulness. I think I can handle a conversation." Tony insisted on us waiting while he went to get my stole, just in case it was cooler in the main hall, then we all walked back. The walk wasn't terribly long and not hard, but it still tired me out and I was grateful to sink down onto a bench. Both Frigga and Odin waited.
"You look better, though not as recovered as I'd hoped," she said to me.

"I feel better, it's just that I get tired more easily,' I said, trying to suppress a yawn. Odin waved his hand and the the valkyrie bond smoked into visibility. Some parts were strong and bright, but other places still looked rather fragile. It looked a lot like a vine that had been damaged when somebody impatiently twisted it to remove it. He frowned slightly.

"The bond is repairing the damage done," he said. "The damage was extensive and it will take time to complete. Until the bond is healthy and vital again, it would be risky to attempt too much effort. You have no duties until it is repaired."

"But Hela thought you might like a project while you recover," Frigga said, and handed over a large cloth bag filled with the soft, downy undercoat of Helheim's rabbits. I smiled a little, it would provide a challenge; you could spin it tight and produce a very fine, strong thread, but the loft of the fiber would be lost. I liked it soft and fluffy. There wasn't enough for a large project like a shawl or sweater, but maybe enough for a hood for next winter...

"I look forward to thanking Hela soon," I told Frigga, and she smiled.

"Alex? What are you doing here?" I was hugged by Carol before I could say anything. "I'm so glad you're here, anyway. We can really use your help, it's crazy. There's so much to be done. The backlog on the souls alone--" she shook her head. "You retrieved more souls than anyone at a go."

"I won't be helping for awhile," I said flatly. I looked at Odin, who was still uncharacteristically subdued, and he provided an exceedingly terse explanation of what had happened, making sure she knew that my actions as the valkyries' advocate had made the damage worse by provoking the remnants of the bond. Part of me was meanly glad that this was being stated; I'd felt that my actions were the right thing to do, but it hadn't done me any favors and I kind of wanted the price I'd paid to be acknowledged.

"Alex, I'm sorry," Carol said awkwardly. "I didn't know."

"It wouldn't have made a difference if you'd have known," Bucky said, scowling. "You got everything you wanted, then you were all off with a 'thanks' and a hug, not even a mention of a visit, not so much as a backward glance. You didn't even ask how she was or wait for an answer about why she was here, it was all about what else she could do for you so you could slack off. And Alex might not recover fully. That's what you're worried about, isn't it?" he said, rounding on Odin. "That's why you looked worried when you saw the state of the bond."

"There is that possibility," Odin acknowledged. "But it is only a possibility. This situation has never happened before. I think it unlikely; the bond has grown much stronger since it was reestablished. It is repairing itself." In the background, I could hear Emma quietly talking a riled-up Bucky down.

Carol darted a look between Odin and me. "I am sorry, Alex," she said quietly. "You're at Tony's? I'll stop by later to talk."

"I sleep a lot," I said, covering another yawn with my hand.

"If she's asleep, you'll have to come back another time," Tony said neutrally. "No waking her up."

She nodded, remembered that she had a message for Odin about the scrimmage that was waiting for the gods to start and left.

"We must begin," Odin said, and Frigga nodded.
"I will tell Hela that you are improving," she said to me, and I thanked her. She gestured to Steve, and he, Bucky, and Emma got up.

"We'll be back next time," Steve said to me. "I'm looking forward to your continued improvement." I cracked a smile at his awkwardness, then Emma gave me a hug, followed by Bucky.

"Calm down," I urged him, wishing that there was flannel here. There was just something so comforting about an Uncle Bucky Hug With Added Flannel. "I really am getting better. And the next time you come by, I'll be even better." He sighed.

"Be sure to ask if you need something," he instructed me. "Rest up, use your new chairs." I smiled.

"I will, Uncle Bucky," I said, hugging him again. "Now go and kick some butt." He smiled at that, then followed the others out the door. Tony and I started walking back home, at a nice slow pace. He tried really hard not to be smothering, and succeeded for the most part, but he was concerned and it showed. After I drank some water for hydration, he installed me on the big outside chair, slightly repositioned so he could see it from his shop, covered me with a light blanket, and left me to my nap while he did some work in the shop.
We had a wet spring in Valhalla so I didn't get to spend much time outside on the big chair. Steve had put an oil finish on it to protect it and the next scrimmage brought over a can of the stuff so that it could be reapplied when necessary. We kept the cushions in the shop and as I needed less sleep, I took to sitting in the shop, spinning my rabbit fur. It was a pretty, fluffy yarn, and there was enough to knit a hood for the next winter, with a capelet that extended down over the shoulders to keep the neck warm under a cloak. I kept it in its natural white color; it was a nice contrast with my hair.

Hela came by for a visit and a consultation with Tony and Bruce, who usually worked with Tony in the shop. Since I was improving, they agreed to come and finish the installation of the lights in the library and I thanked her personally for the rabbit fur. She asked if there was anything else I wanted, and I asked if I could have some of the cotton seeds. She said that since I wasn't up to agricultural efforts yet, that they'd plant it in Helheim and she could bring the harvest to me. Cotton hadn't caught on there for some reason, but I still loved it and wanted to have more summer clothes made from it. And I wanted to experiment with a heavier cloth that I could brush to create flannel. It's a versatile fabric, flannel is; warm and soothing. She brought us up to date on the news in her halls, and mentioned that since the population of Helheim was so much larger than Folkvangr and Valhalla put together, she was going to loan Frigga and Odin workers to help with the shearing and flax harvest. Frigga and Odin still had to contribute workers, but they'd have help since there was no way the depleted valkyrie corps could manage it. The shearing was still going, late this year, due to the inclement weather, and I was just as glad to miss it.

I was getting stronger, but progress was frustratingly slow. Odin said that replenishment of the life force took time, but brought the bond back into sight so that I could see that it was in fact strengthening. I wouldn't admit it, but it was reassuring to see it getting better. Maybe I really would recover. Tony and I started taking our meals in the Great Hall again; it was nice to see something beyond the workshop and our quarters. The short walk gradually became less tiring.

The valkyries didn't come by to visit until a couple weeks had passed, shortly before the next scheduled scrimmage. I was starting to think that they wouldn't. I was dozing by the fire in the shop when I heard the door open. Tony and Bruce were working in Helheim and nobody really came by the shop, so I woke up abruptly. I still didn't really trust the inhabitants of Valhalla to refrain from payback. I looked around to see Irene, Dagny, and Carol clustered by the door uncertainly and waved them in. They perched on stools, and there was an awkward silence.

"You're looking better," Carol finally said.

"That's better?" Irene asked, and I rolled my eyes.

"Yeah, actually." Odin and I had had a chat the prior week about my role as a valkyrie, and it had come up that the creation and establishment of the bond always involved the use of vitality, which usually wasn't a problem. It was an issue right now because I was a couple quarts low and the bond used the vitality almost as quickly as it was created. "I won't really get stronger until the bond is repaired completely, which is still a ways away." The bond also had to work against my reluctance to be here. I'd accepted the charge again but didn't really want it, and that interfered with the bond. But surprisingly, Odin urged me not to change my attitude anytime soon because if the bond was unimpeded, it would suck away my vitality faster and he wasn't sure if I could handle that. So I was stuck with a crappy attitude, chronic weakness, and a stubborn bond.

"Do you know what you'll be doing, valkyrie-wise, when you get better?" Carol asked.
"Souls, cloth production, scrimmages, and teaching Thor's kids combat skills. I can have my own smithy too, and that will be built back here once I finalize the design."

"Are you going to be moving into the new complex?" That was Dagny.

"No, I don't think so. I'm happy here with Tony."

"You ought to claim some rooms, though," she said. "By all signs, Ragnarok is a long ways away, and you might need your own space from time to time. And it's the valkyries' building, you really made it possible. So you should have a place there, even if you don't really want to be a valkyrie. And it would be better to claim it now rather than later when it's full."

"That won't be for awhile, though," Carol said. "We've been bringing in souls, but he hasn't made any new valkyries." I suddenly wondered if he could. What if he was stuck until the bond healed? That would mean that he was contributing to the bond too. It made sense. The damage was on my end and he might not be able to fix it himself but had to live with the disruption until it was healed. I was a bad person, because the thought of Odin having to struggle with the imperfect bond too cheered me up.

There was a little more chat about what they'd been doing (the backlog of souls and helping with the shearing, mostly), then Carol, looking very uncomfortable, apologized. "Your uncle was right, you deserved more than a hug and a goodbye. We're friends, but I didn't treat you like one. And you did all that work for us when it wasn't going to benefit you, and it wasn't pleasant."

"I was happy to help. I didn't know what it was costing at the time. Bucky's just frustrated and worried, or he wouldn't have mentioned it at all. It's not really his business."

"It's nice that he cares for you so much," Irene said. "But he is scary when he gets riled up."

At that moment, the door opened and the man himself came in. Carol flushed and they all got up, Dagny giving me a hug. "We should get going, there's that scrimmage," she said, and they left quickly. Dagny nodded at Bucky as they passed.

He studied my face after hugging me. "You're looking better, sweetie," he said. "I brought some muffins for you, Emma made them."

"Oh, thanks," I said, peering into the basket eagerly. There was spiced apple and blueberry. I brought him up to date on my condition, and he nodded understanding as we nibbled on the muffins. Yum.

"Where's Stark?" Bucky asked, looking around.

"Helheim, working on the lighting for their library."

"I'm surprised he's taking time away." My uncle's voice was neutral.

"I am recovering fine, Uncle Bucky. It's going to take time and patience, is all. He coddles me outrageously, but he needs to burn off his energy and work, and Hela pops him back each night. He's happy to be working and it's nice to have some space. I really appreciate his care and attention--yours too, for that matter--but it's nice to have a break from the constant concern."

"Tony's more nurturing than I'd have thought possible," Steve said, coming in in his armor. "It's nice to see how you dote on each other."

My uncle grinned and patted my hand. "I understand. I just hate to see you hurt, I saw enough of
that in life."

I shrugged. "It happens, and it only feels like it's taking forever. Every time Odin shows me the bond, it's a little better."

"That's good to hear," Emma said, coming in. She handed me a sealed paper packet. "I finished reshrinking Tony's MIT ring as you asked. It should last a good long time," she said with satisfaction, and I thanked her. She'd done the same for my ring; it had gotten dangerously thin on the shank from wear and tear, and I'd hated to run the risk of losing it. We talked some about what they were doing in Folkvangr, and then I noticed an omission.

"Where's your sword, Steve?" I asked curiously, and he shrugged.

"It broke during a practice. The smith can't get to it yet, so I'm back to using my shield this time."

I got up and found the broadsword I used when I worked with Sif. "Use this one. It's got a decent blade. Once I get up and around again, I'll make you a good one. The blade is a little shorter than what you're used to, but that might not be a problem. Tell me what you think," I ordered, and he grinned.

"Yes, ma'am," he said, and we were able to talk a little longer before they had to go. Bucky kissed my cheek goodbye, and they were off for the battlefield. I started planning. Bucky's sword was utilitarian, a slightly better blade than Steve's had been, but he deserved an upgrade too. I started to sketch some possibilities, but took a nap before I finished.

I woke up in the twilight at the sound of the door, recognizing Tony's silhouette and relaxing. "How did it go?" I mumbled, stretching, and he came over, pulling me to my feet for a hug.

"Good. Really good. I'm making progress. It's cold in here, Tiger, let's go over to our quarters, get you all warmed up before we go down to dinner." He built up the fire from the coals in the fireplace across from the bed, and handed me my shawl. I was a little chilly; the fire in the shop had gone out while I slept.

He asked how my day went, and I told him about the muffin delivery and my plans to make swords for my uncle and Steve when I got better. "That's the first time I've heard you make a firm plan since this bond business went critical," Tony said approvingly. "I think you are feeling stronger."

"Yep." And I told him about the valkyries' visit.

"Took them long enough," he said critically. "I know they were probably embarrassed after Barnes shut down Carol, but they should have womaned up before that. But they have a good point about claiming a room in the complex, Alex."

"Kicking me out already?" I said, smiling, and he shook his head.

"Nope, but however conflicted you feel, you're still one of them and you should have a room in the place you were so instrumental in getting built. Plus, an eternity's a long time. I can see that there might be times when you'll want a little space, and that gives you someplace to go. Even your uncle and them have their own rooms in their place," he pointed out.

I reached out and brushed his cheek with my fingers. "We might need a little space from time to time, but I can always see us coming back together, Sparky."

"You bet your sweet ass, Tiger." He kissed me tenderly, then we went down to dinner. It was a rowdy crowd, the Valhalla side had won the scrimmage, and I was glad to get away from all the
noise after we ate. We picked up the muffins on the way home, and settled in on the bed to snuggle.

I opened the packet and handed him the ring that Emma'd repaired. "Yay," he said enthusiastically. "She does good work." I nodded, then shook out the second ring.

"Tony, nobody gets married in the afterlife, but I wondered if you'd wear my ring anyway," I said, holding up a thick, satin-finished gold alloy band.

He sat there so still it was like there was a gorgon lurking over my shoulder. "You don't have to," I said uncertainly, folding my fingers around the ring and lowering it.

"No, it's just--it's unexpected. ...Are you sure, Alex?"

"Am I the indecisive type, Tony? I wouldn't have commissioned the ring if I didn't want you to wear it." My tone wasn't as abrasive as my words.

He took my hand and carefully pried the ring out of my grip. He slid it on the ring finger of his left hand and kissed me, achingly tender. We made love for the first time since returning to Valhalla, slow and passionate, the intensity of my emotions making me feel raw and completely vulnerable. I couldn't tell where my skin ended and his began.

After, he rolled onto his back so that he could clutch me to him firmly. "Is there an inscription?" he wheezed, still out of breath. "Not going to lie, I'll be disappointed if there isn't."

I laughed and kissed the mess of scar tissue on his chest. "A² ex vita amore. Anthony and Alixandrya, so A squared, from life, love."

He sighed. "That's perfect. So perfect. I can't top that. I'll have to come up with something different for yours." I looked up at him and smiled.

"Can't wait to see it."

A few days later, he woke me up with a kiss, a bag of tiny cookies, and a slender band of shining gold. Inside, the inscription read "Love you more than science." I laughed, then put on a sorrowful face when I looked up at him, waiting anxiously.

"You still love MIT more than you love me," I said, and chortled at the look on his face. He signed in exasperation.

"There's not a lot of room to catalog the things I love you more than," he said reasonably. "And I would rank everything as second behind you."

I popped that thing on my finger so fast and held it up to admire. "It's wonderful," I said with pleasure. "Just like you." He looked smug, and we took the day off from my heavy schedule of napping to celebrate with cookies. Later, as the rain sheeted down, we lit a fire and sealed the formalities with leisurely, marathon sex. It was all I needed with him. Our feelings were acknowledged and our commitment out there for everyone to see. I didn't need a dress or a ceremony or anything else. We caught the end of dinner, then hurried back to our quarters for more celebrating.

A week later, Tony brought me home bags of cotton bolls and the gin he'd made. "Hela says to keep it," he reported, and I set to work, ginning the cotton to separate the seeds and plant matter from the fiber, then preparing it for spinning. I put a sheet on the floor to hold the fluffy mountain of roving waiting to be spun. I made about a third of it into a thicker thread that would be easier to
raise a nap from for the flannel I wanted to make. The next third would produce a lightweight, sturdy cloth, and the remaining third was very thin and tight in order to produce a gauzy fabric to make an airy, floaty dress for summer. My spinning wheel made short work of the mountain of fiber.

My mood had really improved, and I was more pleasant to Odin than I'd been since since I'd originally left Valhalla for Helheim. But I was unprepared to see how much the bond had repaired itself; there were still weak places, but they were no longer the frail, delicate things they'd been at the beginning. "Huh," I said, bemused, watching the energy sparkle. It hadn't been doing that at all.

Odin was similarly taken aback, but pleased. "Start preparing now for the resumption of your duties," he said. "Regain your strength and skills and finish the design for your smithy, so that it can be built." I had to admit, the prospect of actual work, not laying around like a sick cat, was enormously appealing. I finished my sketch, complete with measurements, appended a list of necessary equipment, and turned that in to Odin. Construction began a few days later. I finally showed up at the valkyrie complex and chose a room; the returning valkyries were mostly in one building and I was the only one in the third wing. I chose an end room, on the second floor, with a view of the cherry orchard that I really liked. It faced south, so there wouldn't be any issues with the rising or setting sun shining in too brightly. The furniture was cherry, pretty and graceful. I brought over a few things, including the valkyrie armor that I'd reclaimed from the smiths.

The wool was starting to come in, all washed and ready for spinning, so I first set up a big loom to weave my cotton, then started spinning the wool. The storehouses were anxiously awaiting the production of any cloth. A few woodworkers asked to examine my spinning wheel, and they produced their own versions for the valkyries who were the best spinners. It sped up the process a lot, and it wasn't before the big looms were being warped. I finished the heavy cotton cloth, dyed it a vivid cobalt, and made a small tool that would raise the nap and make it nice soft flannel. I had enough fabric for two shirts, and overdyed the cobalt with a red to produce a rich violet for the second one. I carved plain buttons from curly maple at night and stained them to bring up the grain. Then I put the cotton aside to help with the wool fabric, starting with the heaviest weight first.

The valkyries kept back a portion of the fabric that we produced, in accordance with the terms of our agreement with Odin, in anticipation of outfitting new valkyries. We had been amply supplied while in Helheim, but hopefully new valkyries would be joining us to make up the numbers. The store room complained, I just shrugged as we placed the stacks of fabric on the counter. "Take it up with the All-Father if you have complaints," I said indifferently. That shut them up, but I was not popular. Not that they dared show it much. Odin made it clear that random insults to the valkyries would be dealt with by us. Repeat offenders would be dealt with by him. And I was always armed.

When I wasn't weaving, I was trying to recover my form with my weapons. I also began to work on the broadswords for Steve and Bucky. I had to take frequent breaks, but they weren't too difficult to make. I made a nice sturdy sword well-suited for Steve's 'slash and bash' style, ran some fullers up the blade to reduce the weight, and engraved a star inside concentric circles near the hilt. I traded tailoring a couple dresses for two leather scabbards from Carol and finished Bucky's sword; more of a shorter gladius than Steve's longer version, it was well suited to his preference for stabbing but I also raised a keen edge for cutting. I wrapped both hilts in cord for a more secure grip but didn't engrave Bucky's blade, choosing to enhance the folding pattern in the metal with acid for decoration. Then I summoned up some nerve and popped myself over to Folkvangr to deliver them and retrieve my own sword. I could feel a little strain from exercising that ability, but not too bad.

"Wow," said Steve, twirling his sword in a circle.

"Don't--" Bucky and I said at the same time, just as Steve dropped it accidentally. He smiled
sheepishly.

"I have my own chorus of trainers," he said, picking it up. "You look a lot alike, particularly when you're frowning." I looked at my uncle and we burst out laughing.

"This is wonderful, sweetie," my uncle said, examining his sword. "You do fine work." I glowed at his praise. Then I watched as they squared off in a practice bout to make sure that the swords were as good as I'd tried to make them. Emma wandered up to watch, and afterword she looked at them with her ability and said that they were well-forged, very strong, and should hold up to a lot of use. We started to talk about steel as them men retreated for another round, and she offered me a special steel alloy to try; she'd have it ready the next time I was there. Nifty. A supercool new toy to play with.
After the men finished admiring their new swords, I had hand-to-hand practice with Bucky that left me winded, then I poofed over to Asgard. Magni was hitting the books, but Sif and Torunn were glad to see me. Sif shook her head as she rocked her daughter but said only that she was glad that Loki figured it out and got it all fixed. We discussed my recovery and when I thought I could start training her son again. Then she noticed my ring and smiled as I told her who had given it to me. We talked for awhile, then I went home. It felt good to be getting back into a routine.

That night Tony had some refinements for the lighting system he wanted to put into our quarters, the shop, the forge, and my quarters in the valkyrie complex. I listened to him talk about the science of the energy involved and how magic violated some of the classical mechanics of physics. I was interested in it, so it was a good conversation. I ended it with a smile.

"You're so sexy when you're talking about the conservation of matter and energy," I said. "That big brain of yours is amazing." He beamed at me, finished the explanation, and then showed me how else he was sexy.

The next day, I wove for most of it, pausing for a trip to Asgard. Magni gave me a hug and anxiously asked if I was ok. "Yep," I assured him. "I've lost some strength, so I'll be playing catch up for a bit, and you get a break." I beamed at him. "So let's see where we are." We were both a little rusty, and I directed him to work with his guard, who had been following along during our practices, on the days when I wasn't there. I was also a little slower in a bout with Hogun, but not as much as I feared. I went home feeling relieved, and that night stitched Bucky's blue flannel shirt as Tony and Bruce worked on manufacturing more parts for the library system on Helheim.

"Do you want a flannel shirt, Sparky?" I asked during a break in their concentration.

"I'm not really a flannel kind of guy," he said, and I nodded.

"How about you, Bruce? I have extra, in a purple color."

Bruce looked pleased. "Anything but green," he said, and I grinned and took his measurements. A few days later, I had it completed (I used a pretty simple pattern but added a breast pocket) and he smoothed it with his hand. Tony poked his head over my shoulder and felt the fabric.

"I should have said yes," he said. "This is nice." I kissed his cheek.

"Next time I make flannel, you can have one," I promised, and he smiled. Bucky was also pleased; they were entering autumn in Folkvangr and he hated to be chilly. He put it on immediately and gave me a hug. I sighed in pleasure.

"Your hugs are always great, but flannel puts them just over the top," I said, snuggling in. He laughed, and Emma tried it for herself.

"I can't believe I never noticed," she said. "I could stay here all day." Then Steve had to see the improvement.

"Well, I'm not as taken as the ladies, but that is really nice," he said. "Do you have any more, by chance?" he asked me.

"No, but the next cotton crop I have, I'll make more," I said. "Tony wants one too. He turned it down, so now he's jealous of Bruce, who did not."
"That's nice," Steve said, smiling at me. "I worry about Banner a little. He keeps to himself too much."

"Oh, Tony keeps him busy and meeting people," I assured him. "But summers being longer in Valhalla, I may get a second cotton crop this year. I replanted about half the seed, so if it doesn't work I'll still have some next year."

"How much are you growing?" Bucky asked.

"It's about a half acre."

"By yourself?" Emma asked, concerned.

"Yeah, nobody seems to want to go to the trouble, so it's just me, but that also means that I don't have to share. And there, I don't have to spend a lot of time weeding, there aren't any boll weevils, and there's enough rain that I don't have to worry about irrigation. I check it every so often, but the work is minimal until it's time to pick the bolls. And Tony made me a cotton gin, which makes processing it so much easier."

"You're pretty busy over there," Bucky said neutrally. "Are you sure you're not working too hard?"

"I'm not, Uncle Bucky," I reassured him, and went in for another hug. Aw, yeah. So snuggly. I was glad Tony wanted a shirt too.

"We're going to be scrimmaging again in a few days," Steve said.

I nodded, then released Bucky reluctantly. "Yeah, this will be my first one back."

"So do you want to come fight on our side?" he asked. "Since the valkyries split half for Valhalla and half for Folkvangr during the battle."

"Yeah, I think I will," I said, and he beamed. Bucky beamed. "I need a challenge to see where I really am. Teaching isn't the same thing." Bucky nodded, and I arranged to come over early.

When the other eight valkyries showed up, I felt like I had a pretty good idea of how Steve wanted to use us in battle and I was able to explain to him a little bit more about our capabilities. Heidi was the only one of the others I knew very well, but we were all interested in being part of the formal battle plan. They valkyries had of course been scrimmaging before this, but with my return the sides were equal and the group who preferred fighting for Folkvangr was beginning to trust Steve's strategies and tactics more. Today he wanted us primarily as ground troops so he could evaluate our effectiveness without our wings. I was glad; it was hot over here and the capes were both heavy and insulating. Not wearing the capes meant that we wouldn't be able to take to the sky when we summoned our wings, but it also made fighting a lot easier.

By the end of the scrimmage, I had some cuts, but the Valhalla forces had been actively trying to avoid me because I was very effective against them. We were the winning side, and the valkyries had contributed significantly to that victory, despite our small group size and limited use. Each side had lost valkyries, but I was not among the number. Odin sighed and Frigga smirked when they met at the end of the skirmish and Odin refused to assign valkyries to teams, insisting that it would be better for us to fight in more fluid groups.

The next day, I went back to helping to choose the slain. The souls might not have been chosen right after the moment of their death, but the ones slotted for Valhalla or Folkvangr were still waiting for us; we arrowed through space and time in order to claim them. There was a considerable backlog; there were battles throughout the Nine Realms in addition to individuals
falling outside of a mass conflict who had to be taken in hand. It was draining work, but necessary.

My third day back on this rotation found me back on Earth, over what had been Queens. Manhattan was being cleared from an attack prior to this, and the Kree had started targeting boroughs other than Manhattan. I wasn't paying attention to much, just following that inner valkyrie GPS, when I found my target soul. I placed my hand on the left shoulder, avoiding stepping onto a body whose soul was already gone, and was shocked, when the soul turned, to find myself facing Serena Johnson, my friend, student, and (now) former Captain America.

"Serena?" I gasped. I'd never known anybody I'd claimed before. She looked me, still stunned and not registering her change of state. "It's Alex. Alex Wayne."

"Alex?" she repeated, still struggling a bit with her death. "What are you doing here?"

"Well, I'm here for you," I said, taking her arm and gently pulling her away from what remained of her body. "I've come to take you to Valhalla."

"What?" she asked, surprising herself with a little chuckle. "Did Thor put you up to this?"

"Nope, it was his dad, Odin. Apparently Odin tracks Thor's friends and acquaintances more closely than I thought."

"So you're, what, a valkyrie? No way."

"Yeah, actually I am," I said a bit grimly. "That is a long story, though. If you want to hear it, you'll have to come to Valhalla with me."

"Is it nice?" she asked, as we started walking back to my horse.

"You know, it could be and was a lot worse. It's not a bad place to spend your afterlife. And there are a lot of the original Avengers around, too--Tony Stark, Bruce Banner, Steve Rogers. And Emma Harrington and my uncle."

"Captain America?" she said, perks up. She was a total fangirl for the original.

"He's in Folkvangr, Frigga's domain, but there's considerable crossover and I'll introduce you."

"Count me in, then," she said, looking over her shoulder once more, then walking straight. Like my uncle, her limbs flickered between the natural and artificial forms. Her right hand and forearm had been replaced, a legacy from that terrible mission, as well as her lower left leg, the injury that finished her military career.

I had to dismount to boost her up onto the flying horse; she'd never ridden before, but she enjoyed it, at least after the horse had taken a flight path over the undamaged part of New York. Back in Valhalla, we dismounted and I presented her to Odin, who smirked when he saw the shield on her arm. He directed the warrior who served as his second in command in Thor's absence to show her to her room in the annex where I'd lived before becoming a valkyrie, and I promised to come get her for dinner and we'd trade stories. "At last I have a Captain America of my own," he gloated. I laughed and went back to work. I distributed another eight souls to Folkvangr and Valhalla, none of them anyone I knew, before I was done.

Tony joined me in the shower, and I told him about my day. "It's nice that you have a friend," he said, soaping up my back.

"Beside you and Bruce?" I asked as I returned the favor. "I think you're really going to like her."
"Hope so, you being friends means she'll be around a lot. But a female friend who wasn't part of that whole valkyrie thing." Like Bucky, Tony hadn't been too happy with my valkyrie friends who had gone back to Valhalla before I'd had to return. Not wanting to make a problem, he'd gone past that, but he hadn't forgotten that they'd left me so abruptly.

We walked over to the annex, chatting about his progress. The library was nearly finished, and his personal project to light our workspaces and quarters was in the planning phase in his head. I knocked on the door and Serena opened it a moment later. And finally, a hug from my friend. "This is definitely weird," she said. "And not what I really expected." I introduced her to Tony.

"The man, the myth, the legend," Serena said, only half joking. "It's so weird to meet an Iron person I don't want to take apart."

Tony essayed a helpful smile. We walked the short distance to the Great Hall and joined the line at the buffet. "I thought the valkyries were supposed to serve," she said, adding slices of meat to her plate.

Tony laughed and I rolled my eyes. "Ditched that duty," I said. After we sat, I gave her a summary that, although concise, hit all the relevant material. She started to laugh.

"Look at you, Norma Rae," she said, poking me. She looked interested as Bruce set his plate down on the table. Tony performed introductions. "The Bruce Banner?" she said, sitting up straight. "Wow. This is incredible. You're such a legend--" And she was off. Bruce looked both flattered and nervous, but Serena does have that effect on people. She kind of hero-worshiped all Original Six Avengers, although Steve was her favorite because: Captain America. She exerted her considerable charm and started to draw him out, not unlike a rip tide. Bruce didn't know whether he wanted a lifeguard or not. Tony smirked. Serena is the most beautiful woman I personally know. She inherited thick dark hair and a flawless caramel complexion from her mother, whose family had emigrated from Rajasthan, and penetrating blue eyes from her father. Her statuesque figure filled out the Captain America unitard in ways that Steve Rogers probably never thought possible, and she's got a wicked sense of humor and the smarts to back it all up. If she wasn't so nice, I'd be jealous.

"You should have Alex make your weapons," Bruce said, needing a moment to recover after the charm offensive.

She looked taken aback. "You're making weapons now?" she asked, and I nodded, pulling out a dagger and handing it to her. "I thought you were strictly hand to hand, Hogun notwithstanding." she slid the sheath off the dagger. "Oh, pretty!"

"Well, I had to learn how to use a spear when I said I'd be a valkyrie, then when I was in Helheim, I took advantage of the opportunity and learned a bunch of weapons and how to make them. I still bout with Hogun and Sif is teaching me the Asgardian broadsword, though I much prefer the two swords, or one of the other weapons I picked up. There's the javelin and archery too."

"Kate would be so proud of you," she said, and we lifted our glasses to absent friends.

"So what happened after I died?" I asked curiously. "For that matter, how did I die? I've been assuming one of the Kree got me." She nodded.

"Yep, one of their ships crashed, took out your position." She hesitated. "It was a very closed casket funeral," she said. "Your kids buried you next to Damian."

I was pleased. "Did you get the necklace?" I'd left her a sapphire fringe necklace, dark blue fading
to white in each of the fringes. It had been one of Damian's last gifts to me, and the reason I'd left it to Serena was that it could be attached to a frame and worn as a tiara. I'd frequently teased her that she should wear one in her public appearances; TIME had named her its Person of the Year once, and had posed her in an elegant navy gown with a beauty-queen sash that read "Captain America" and long white satin gloves. She'd wiped out once during the shoot, tripping over the platform stilettos. That hadn't made the cover, though.

She rolled her eyes at me. "Of course, Martha delivered it right after the funeral. She smirked too. And despite the joke, it was nice to be remembered. It was a beautiful necklace." I looked up, smirking, to see Irene and Carol standing by the table. I invited them to join us and introduced Serena.

"You're a little after my time," Irene said. "When I died, that handsome Sam Wilson was still Captain America."

"Such a great guy," Serena said, nodding. "It was a real privilege to take over from him." She turned back to me. "But didn't Martha or one of the ladies in your family want the necklace?"

"No, I gave Martha The Pearls and the rest of her great-grandmother's pieces, my daughter-in-law the double strand and some other pieces, let my grandchildren take their picks. Once everybody made their choices, I made a few specific bequests, then donated the rest to the Smithsonian."

Carol blinked. "What?"

"My husband was excessively generous with his gifts," I said, shaking my head.

"Who was your husband?" Irene asked. It had never really come up because that was life, and this...wasn't. And Damian wasn't here.

"Damian Wayne," I said, sipping the mead Tony poured for me.

"Holy shit," said Carol, who'd been older than I was when she died. "You're Alex Wayne? I used to follow you in the papers, all those glamorous gowns, the jewels, the handsome husband." Then she looked at Tony and me. "And you worked with Tony at his company. I can't believe I never put it together."

"She did a great job in the energy lab," Tony said. "My favorite protege."

"I was your only protege in the labs," I said, poking him. He laughed.

Carol said slowly, "I thought you lived a charmed life, then there were those claims you made against the Joker..."

I looked at her. "It looked great on the surface," I conceded. "But my father-in-law, then my husband, then my son were all Batman. We all paid a price that most people never suspected." I gave Tony a wry look. "And I wouldn't have been the Avengers' trainer if I hadn't been in an accident with chemicals that made me a mutant. So for the good things, there were some bad things to balance it all out, and a lot of hard work to make up the rest." Tony squeezed my hand. I squeezed back.

Irene sputtered. "Bruce Wayne was Batman? Wow, I had such a crush on him when I was younger! How did you get mixed up with all that?"

"A blind date with Damian in high school," I said, laughing at the memory. "It was exceedingly rocky for a few years, then we reconnected when we were starting out after grad school. We got
married after the Joker was put away."

"After you put him away," Tony corrected me fondly. "He was terrified of you after that last time." I looked at him questioningly. "Barnes went in to see him just before he accepted that ridiculous plea deal, wanted to promise him a world of hurt if he so much as blinked at you again. Didn't faze the Joker at all until he mentioned he was your uncle. Barnes said he asked that he keep you away." I smiled, vindictively.

"I just wish I'd been able to go after him after he killed Bruce," I said. "That fucker. I told him that if he ever messed with me again I'd mangle every bone in his body. But I didn't have the time--the Joker vanished, Damian was devastated, the kids too. My hands were full."

"How much was the collection worth, before it was split up?" Tony asked.

"Last valuation had it just shy of a billion dollars. There were a lot of historic gemstones," I said shrugging. I looked around at the women gaping at me. "I believe I said that Damian was excessively generous."

"Don't you miss it?" Irene said. "The mansion, the fortune, the jewelry collection?"

"No, because the dressing up pretty much ceased to be fun after Damian was killed. I just kept it up because it was expected. He loved to see me in the pretty dresses with the sparkly things he bought me. It was just work after, except that work was actually more fun. The mansion was lovely; early in our marriage we worked with Bruce and Dick and Barbara Grayson, adding flowerbeds, a barbeque area, a patio, revitalized the conservatory, and Bruce passed on a fantastic library, but after that spurt of activity, it was up to the twins to change it the way they wanted. It was very much a family trust. A big responsibility. I was glad to move out, leave it to the twins, when they were getting going. And until I got involved with Damian, I didn't have a lot of stuff. My family didn't have a lot of money, and it's definitely easier with less."

"You gotta admit that the private jets were fun," Tony said, and I laughed.

"Yes, those were definitely fun," I conceded.

"So it's the simple life for you?" Serena asked, a little skeptically.

"Yeah, until our labor strike, we had damned little," Irene said grimly, and the three of us nodded.

"Now if I want something, I have to make it or trade for it," I said. "Or get gifts. Can't just whip out the credit card."

"So why didn't you become an Avenger?" Bruce asked. My least favorite question. "What with Bucky and Emma and Tony?"

"I'm not made like that," I said. "I could teach and I was happy to help patch people up when they came back from a mission, but I don't have the temperament to go out heroing. I saw the price that heroes pay up close and personally. The only reason I'm here was I picked up the fight exactly once. And here it's a completely different story. Nobody stays dead." Bruce nodded thoughtfully.

"I knew it had been bad when they came to tell me you were dead," Serena said, shaking her head. "We should have been there to protect the city. You did a good job, especially considering that firing the guns had been just simulator practice for you. But we failed in our duty to protect."

I rolled my eyes. "You were recovering from getting your hand blown off, May" we both snarled involuntarily "was being prosecuted, and everybody else was dead. So what exactly do you think
you could have done? The military, national guard, and the police were doing a damn fine job." Serena stared at me, slit-eyed, then smiled a little grudgingly.

"Rub it in," she said. "But the fact is that we should have been there, it shouldn't have been down to a 70 year old--"

"Hey! I was 69," I protested.

"Hand-to-hand instructor."

"I can still kick your ass," I said threateningly, and she grinned.

"Don't doubt it."

"So what happened with the Avengers?" Tony asked. Bruce leaned forward.

"Well, the military did decide to assemble another team. They looked specifically for individuals who could first fill out the legacy names. Martha worked with the military; she kept rebuilding Avenger Tower and reinforcing it; it's the strongest skyscraper on the planet now. She and Xander pledged the money that they'd inherited from you that wasn't in the Wayne Trust to the support of the Avengers, and they supported Stark's Avenger Tech division with resources from Wayne Enterprises, so there was plenty of tech available for the team. The military was glad to accept the resources, and now they're back to being a pretty autonomous unit. Martha negotiated and reduced oversight to three members of the military--one from each branch, Army, Navy, Air Force--and three Senators. And herself. They work with the team to clear the missions. It was working quite well, surprisingly. So there was me, Falcon, and War Machine, drawn from veterans, Iron Man, Hawkeye--Kate's kid, he's not half bad--the current Black Panther, also a woman, Wolverine, he splits his time with both us and the X-Men, Ms Marvel, and Speed. We've also got kind of an Avengers Academy for young people with abilities, helps train their powers, keeps them out of trouble, and puts them in the pipeline for the Avengers."

"So what was the latest battle about?" Irene asked.

"Oh, the Kree came back. The Scrulls finally accepted defeat and turned their attention elsewhere, but there's no quit in the Kree." She started to laugh. "At least there wasn't. The X-men and some international spook labs came up with a virus keyed to Kree genetic material and pumped it into the air all over Earth as the invasions began. The virus will attack their DNA and kill them quickly, it's targeted for brain cells. Next time, there will be that virus plus another, attacking different critical cells or metabolic processes, just in case they figured things out. The virus is too small even for their filters, and every time one of their ships get hit, the virus gets in. It shouldn't take too long before they either send everything they've got against us or find an excuse to ignore us again. And Loki is working with officials from every alien race we know to put diplomatic pressure on the Kree; it seems to be having an effect."

We talked some more then called it a night. The next day, I took her on a tour of Valhalla that included my smithy, and we talked about swords. She'd taken fencing in college but had never used a real sword before, so it was going to be a new field of knowledge, and I wanted to minimize her learning curve. I decided on a rapier for her, given that she'd competed in epee, and she could either use a main gauche, a dagger, in her other hand, or her shield. The master smiths had the right to provide the official equipment for the valkyries, but Serena wasn't one--yet. I was betting privately that Odin would offer to make her a valkyrie before too long. It would be irresistible to him.

The rapier and main gauche took a little over a week to make using Emma's new steel alloy, with a significant chunk of that going toward the engraving, a foliate design reminiscent of Napoleon's
own rapier. The scabbards were plain oak, her choice, and the hilts on both weapons were also oak, finished with beeswax that wouldn't make the hilts slippery. I was starting her instruction with the blades when we were interrupted.
In walked three of my favorite people, Bucky, Emma and Steve. There were the usual greeting hugs, then Emma produced a basket of muffins, and I introduced Serena. Tony, drawn as if by magic to the proximity of baked goods, materialized and snagged the first muffin. Not wanting to spat in public, I moved the muffins closer to me and took one myself as Steve and Serena shook hands.

"It's such an honor to meet you," she... gushed? Yep, definitely a gush. I hid my grin behind my muffin. Steve pinked up a bit and Bucky and Emma smiled fondly.

"It's nice to meet you," Steve said. "Alex told me about you. She said you were the first woman on a Delta team?" And they started talking about their military experiences. I borrowed her blade to show Emma how her alloy worked, bending the rapier about forty degrees, letting it go to spring back without distortion.

"Surprisingly whippy for a rapier," I said, "but it suits her style, she fenced in college." Emma nodded and we discussed technicalities for a bit as my uncle and Tony chatted. Tony took another muffin, and with a sigh, I pushed the basket toward my uncle and offered them to Emma as well, although she declined. Bucky grinned at me and took one for himself.

Bruce wandered in with a question for Tony and absently took a muffin from the dwindling supply as he joined Tony and Bucky's conversation. His eyes kept going to Serena, though. Emma and I looked bland aside from a smirk at each other. Serena and Steve were getting along very well; I tuned in to hear them talking about the shield. Emma went over to join that discussion, and, checking the time, I kissed Tony and went to the valkyrie complex to get kitted out for the skirmish that was to begin shortly. Today was a day when Steve planned to use us as an aerial unit, so I had to wear the cape. It was a hot day in Valhalla; the cooling effect of aerial combat would be welcome, but I carried the cape until I had to wear it.

I joined the rest of the valkyrie contingent on the battlefield and listened to Steve's instructions. In his everpresent desire to find out everything about everyone's combat abilities, he was going to have us stay aloft, a high stakes kind of move as there were archers and javelin throwers on both sides. I winced; 'death' wasn't permanent here, but getting wounded still hurt every bit as much as it had in life and I'd been struck by a javelin before. It had hurt almost as much as Frigga's wound had. On the bright side, using a shield was clumsy in the air so I could leave it on the ground and depend on my spear and blades. We had last minute instructions, then I swung the heavy cape over my shoulders and let it form wings. Then the skirmish began, the archers on both sides sending up an initial hail of arrows, and I took to the air right after the arrows fell.

I enjoyed the cooling air currents only absently as the Valhalla side valkyries rose to meet us. It was easier than it should have been to penetrate their defenses, triggering the archers again. A quick dash behind the Valhalla valkyries ensured that it was them instead of me who got pinned by the arrows, and I rolled away, averting my eyes from the valkyries falling from the sky, went behind the Valhalla archers, and started cutting them down. It wasn't fun, just butchery, even if their injuries would be of short duration, but that didn't mean that I wanted to see my sisters 'die.' I took out the archers although it would have been easier just to break their bows; this wasn't a battle for real stakes, only bragging rights and practice, and bows and arrows took time and resources to replace. I was joined by a couple more valkyries from the Folkvangr team and we made short work of the archers and the javelin throwers; I found that hamstringing them was the most effective way of quickly taking them out of combat.
Once our assignment was complete, we returned to the Folkvangr lines, found Steve, and got a new assignment. I accompanied the remaining valkyries, Steve, Bucky, and a handful of Folkvangr’s most vicious fighters and we plunged into the Valhalla host. I used my wings to hop in and out of trouble, and there was no one who was a match for my blades. In a shorter span of time than I thought it would have taken, I found the point of my blade at Odin’s throat. I smiled cheerfully at him as he swore at us and surrendered.

Odin sulked through the victory dinner and afterward announced that the valkyries would switch sides for the next scrimmage, meaning that he would be in command of my battle wing. Heidi and I rolled our eyes at each other. Odin was a pretty good general, but Steve was more creative and had the studies of centuries of combat across all Earth cultures to draw on, while Odin was more constrained by his traditions. My battle was going to get a lot less interesting.

And so it did. My battle wing bonded tightly and our skill level was higher than the other, but this was offset by Steve being the better general. The sides were more equal but not as fun. I started to get hit more under Odin's command, which didn't incline me toward him any. The valkyries under his command became a sullen bunch, which is when he took to drawing up the battle wings right before the skirmish began. The teams were random, but we had a chance of being assigned to the better general each time, which did help our morale. And finally we began construction of our obstacle course, which could be run individually or as teams. As obstacle course racers, Irene and I were charged with designing the obstacles and we made them as challenging (some said 'hellish', but I think that was an over-exaggeration) as possible and added some alternatives that could be achieved only with the use of wings or you could go around it, so you could run the course with or without wings. I instituted the rule from Spartan where you had to do 30 burpees if you failed an obstacle and quickly became the most disliked valkyrie for a time. Steve tried it but couldn't finish it the first couple times. He was in good company, though, to begin with there were only four of us who managed to complete the course at all, and our times were terrible. It gave everybody something to work on, though, and we had a glorious zipline by a waterfall as the last obstacle, a reward for finishing. We could fly down or use the zipline, and in the heat we took to dropping off the zipline into the water below. Very refreshing. During the winter, we'd have to use wings and glide down ourselves. Although, come to think of it, it might be too dangerous to run in the winter; the ice might make it impossible to get past some of the obstacles.

Meanwhile, I did get the second cotton crop in and intended to devote it entirely to the production of thread that I could use to make flannel. I caused a little riot when I made a dress of the thinner cotton for the summer heat; it had a full, tea-length skirt, a close-fitting bodice, and cap sleeves. Tony promptly adored it and the old fogie warriors clutched their pearls and inhaled so fast that I felt lightheaded from the lack of oxygen in the hall when I wore it to dinner the first time, and they complained about my indecency to Odin. Odin massaged his forehead and called me up to the head table to account for myself. I pointed out that men were going around shirtless in the summer heat and it was inhumane to expect women to be wearing long sleeves. I got on a roll, asking why ankles, arms, and elbows were obscene anyway. None of the men had a good answer beyond sputtering about how that just wasn't done. The battle was over, though, when Frigga felt the fabric and asked how I made it. In exchange for cloth for a dress for her, she promised me lessons with the women who made velvet in Folkvangr. I put her fabric on the fast track, and when Frigga showed up in a dress similar to mine (with sleeves to the elbow and a ruffle around each sleeve straight out of the 1700's) Odin decided that he was quite taken with the style and all the women got a break from the heat wave. Screw the patriarchy, we just didn't want to boil in our clothes. I had plans to gradually introduce shorts. The linen trousers we wore weren't terrible, but they weren't precisely cool, either. Tony generously offered to have me dispense with clothing when we were in our quarters together, saying it would be shocking but that he could handle it.

The linen started to come in and I was even more grateful for my spinning wheel as it wasn't nearly
as easy to spin as wool was. I took my share of the fiber and sat in the cool shade by the workshop; there was a stream that ran behind both my smithy and Tony's workshop that made it pleasant, plus every now and then I went wading. Going to Asgard was difficult, as they were in the dead of winter and the change in temperatures sucked to manage. It was worth it, though, as Magni was turning into an outstanding warrior and was looking forward to being considered old enough and skilled enough to join the royal guard. Meanwhile, Torunn was dismayng her father with her bloodthirstiness, demanding lessons of her own. Unable to resist his daughter, he had pretty wooden swords made for our practice, and when her parents weren't around I added a little fun by teaching her a few stealthy tricks I'd learned from my ninjitsu master.

I wasn't a bit surprised when Serena turned up one morning with a swanfeather cape of her own, and we valkyries had a little party to celebrate our first new member since our labor strike. She moved into the valkyrie complex, which drew me over there more often. It wasn't that I was estranged from the valkyries; we spun and wove together, did the obstacle course, fought in the scrimmages with Folkvangr, retrieved the worthy, but there was a little distance between the valkyries as a whole and me as a result of what had happened during the strike. Serena's change of status helped to bridge the gap. Then we got a few more, but nothing like we needed to make up our numbers. It was going to take a long time to build up our force.

I took a break from catching up on my metalworking when it started to get cooler--more people were interested in obtaining a valkyrie-made blade, it seemed--to learn how to weave velvet. The valkyries who had known how to do this had decided to stay in Helheim and none of the remaining valkyries had the knowledge. It was a devilish process. It required a special loom; two pieces of cloth were woven at the same time by running a weft thread through two sets of warp threads. The most experienced weaver then cut between the two pieces of fabric using a really sharp sword, creating a dense pile on each piece of cloth. It was both dramatic and nervewracking, and they kept me at it until I could produce a credible length of velvet on my own. Then I got to keep all the velvet I'd helped produce; Frigga had noticed that the velvet gown she'd given me had gone missing during the looting of our rooms. Tony urged me to make another dress for special events; Vetrnaetr, which occurred around Halloween, was coming up, and the Yule celebrations. "Take how much you like to hug your uncle when he's wearing that flannel shirt and turn it up to eleven," he said, cuddling me. "I love feeling your curves under silk velvet." So I drafted a pattern to show off my best features.

After that it was a pleasure to go back to quickly weaving my second cotton crop into thick fabric suitable for making flannel. I devoted the whole crop to it and had more than I needed for shirts for Steve and Tony; Emma didn't want one, so I made my uncle a second one and one for me. I improved the napping tool and made the flannel even fluffier. I liked it so much I made a patchwork of the scraps and made myself some loose-fitting drawstring pants for winter. I dyed the shirts after finishing them, a rich crimson for Tony, clear blue for Steve, a chocolate brown for my uncle, and a deep emerald for me. We had a cold snap at Valhalla when I finished, and Tony was glad to have the extra warmth. He looked wonderful in the strong color and he preened as I admired it on him. It was full-on winter in Folkvangr, so Steve and Bucky were really glad to receive their warm shirts, and I did a little quality control by administering a snuggle test.

"Yep, that'll do," I mumbled as I cuddled up to my uncle, who laughed and hugged me back.

"I never really thought of Bucky as such a huggy kind of guy," Steve said, kind of a blank look on his face. I shrugged and reluctantly let go.

"I don't know how he was before I met him, but almost from the start, I've found him fairly cuddly. Of course, I was pretty impressionable when I met him, and once I got past his reputation, which took a couple of days, he's always been so reassuring and soothing. And he was always there for
me when I ran into trouble, which increases his snuggle factor."

Steve smiled. "How old were you?"

"Sixteenish," I said, thinking back. "Almost seventeen. And not too assertive, it was really nice to have an uncle to hide behind." Bucky burst out laughing.

"She was a trouble magnet," he said ruefully to his friend. "But she never had trouble standing up to Stark, so don't let her get you thinking she was some kind of shrinking violet." Steve stuffed his hands into his pockets and I wondered whether he'd like a hug too. Well, you can't just ask that question, so I just stepped up and hugged him firmly. He started, then gingerly put his arms around me and patted my back.

"Uncle Bucky talked about you a lot," I told him as I gave him a squeeze and stepped back. "People always said that it was too bad we couldn't have met. He even gave me a sketchbook of figures you'd drawn to use as art in a business that I tried." He got a panicked look on his face and looked at his friend in dismay. I put two and two together and smiled.

"You did nude studies?" I asked brightly. "Well, these weren't them." Steve relaxed and flushed. "I think your sketchbooks ended up in the Avengers museum; last I heard, they had one on display and turned a page every few days." The color drained from his face and I took pity on him. "I shouldn't tease you like that; they use the ones with your costume designs--they still hold up, they're not at all dated--or landscapes, the doodles you did in WWII." Then I winked. "There are others that you have to have a curator's permission to view, and I think I know why." Bucky guffawed and slapped Steve's shoulder. "I have to say that there was serious fighting over the sketchbook that I had, when I was making the codicil to my will that designated possessions to specific people." I shook my head. "It got really heated. Martha and Xander actually started hitting. It was like they were five again."

They'd had a rough patch at that age when they'd decided to settle their arguments physically. It had been hard to get them to try alternative means of conflict resolution, but once we succeeded, that was the only time they'd smacked each other. Brats. "So how did you resolve the issue?"

Bucky asked.

"I balanced the sketchbook against the book with the code words that triggered Natasha's memories--she left it to me--and the bow that Clint left me." I snorted. "Not that Xander could draw that bow either, but it was the last one that he used as Hawkeye. They also both wanted that." Suddenly I laughed. "My Avengers stuff were the hot items. The only other thing they quarreled over that was not related to the Avengers was Damian's wedding band and my engagement and wedding rings. Xander got those, only fair since he couldn't wear any of my jewelry--" Bucky laughed "--and that was balanced out with Kate's custom made quiver and my MIT ring." I patted my uncle's hand, metal at the moment. "Because nobody was willing to give an inch on your possessions, I gave up and put them into a family trust with the contents of the Bat cave, actually. Xander was Batman, but the cave belongs to the family. It's not mentioned and won't be made public until Batman doesn't exist anymore, but your things, like the code book used to trigger you, your wedding ring, all that, are on display at the mansion, and researchers can request supervised access." This time it was Bucky who was embarrassed and Steve who grinned. "One of the Hollywood studios wanted to study the collection, they're making some Avengers movies, or at least they were when I died, they were negotiating with the twins. And I loaned MIT your collection of arms for study for a couple of years. That provoked a huge amount of interest, and Emma's work was the subject of several scholarly articles and more in popular scientific magazines."
Steve laughed at his friend, and Bucky punched him. "It sounds so funny, 'his collection of arms,'" he said to me, chortling. I grinned.

"All cybernetic," I assured him, and Bucky rolled his eyes. "The Smithsonian wanted those in the worst way too, they got rather starchy when I refused. They were barely mollified when I offered the bulk of my jewelry collection."

"Damian," my uncle chuckled. "He did love to see you play dress up and be the envy of every woman in the room, and himself be the envy of every man because he was with you."

I rolled my eyes at my uncle. Steve asked, "What made the jewelry collection such a big deal?"

"Damian would get it into his head to go after notable pieces in different styles--Art Nouveau, Art Deco, the best of modern work, or jewelers--Cartier, Lalique, Faberge, Van Cleef and Arpels, Harry Winston, or gemstone types. He went on a real tear with rings that looked like a variety of animals, a few Cartier panthers. He gave me a brooch of a ballerina set with sapphires." I smiled. "Brooches of different flowers. He really pursued carved gemstones for awhile, then it was historical jewels-- diamond earrings that had belonged to the last Romanov dowager empress, a sapphire and diamond collar belonging to Marie Antoinette, emeralds from the Empress Josephine, a pink topaz set from the royal house of Prussia, amethysts and diamonds from Bavaria, aquamarines from Britain. Then pieces from India, the Ottoman empire, nephrite and jadeite from China. The Artemis and Apollo diamond earrings. And not just rubies, diamonds, and sapphires, I had a beautiful moonstone necklace, garnets, peridots, topaz, tourmalines, opals, and absolute ton of the most exquisite pearls." I shook my head and laughed. "Damian loved the hunt, finding treasures, and fortunately he had excellent taste. He was like his cats, who liked to bring us toys to show us what good hunters they were." I kept the information that Damian liked to see me wear the gems and nothing else to myself. "The insurance company had a fit every time he updated the inventory; he had to add a permanent, walk-in vault to satisfy them." It had gone in off the surgical suite so that nobody had to go tromping through the bat cave, in a dedicated room where I also kept all the dress up stuff--shoes, bags, wraps, handbags, the evening gowns and cocktail dresses that the designers loaned me. There was a small area for his tuxedos and white tie, shoes and shirts, cuff links and shirt studs, but he never bought much for himself. He'd said he liked being overlooked when we were out. I'd looked to the heavens for support at the notion of being used as a human shield for my husband.

"Wow," Steve said. He looked a little shocked. I nodded. "It would have been a lot easier with less money," I said. "Some money is nice, but too much is a great responsibility and burden. That's what's nice about here, at least there's no money. I don't want to sound like I'm complaining. Damian was a wonderful husband and I never wanted for anything, but it's also true that we didn't have as much time together as I'd have liked due to his side gig as a superhero and his business drive, which also drove our social schedule. But I knew what I was getting into when I married him. I just didn't plan on so much jewelry." Both Steve and Bucky laughed.

"Tony wouldn't have given you jewelry like that," Steve said.

"Things would have had to be very different in life," I said indulgently. "But Tony would have given me a lab. Which he did, come to think of it. It was for different circumstances, though. As my mentor, he pushed me intellectually. I was very grateful that I had the opportunity to achieve something in my own right."

"Stark settled down a lot by the time she finished grad school," Bucky told his friend. "There wasn't anything improper going on, but he owed her from some hijinx when she was in high
"So your husband was faithful?" Steve asked. "I had it in my mind that men bribed their way out of trouble with jewelry."

"No, Damian was very singleminded. Once he fixed on something, that was it for him. And he fixed on me." I shrugged. "But infidelity was something that would have made me walk, so he addressed it when I made him do the prenup. If I cheated, I would have walked away with the assets I had but nothing more. If he cheated, I would have retained everything plus a payout of a billion dollars. Both those conditions did not include the Wayne family jewelry, which was my contribution to the clauses. He just really liked sparkly things. And he expressed his feelings for me with jewelry. My birthday, Mother's Day, Christmas, Valentine's day, Easter, St. Patrick's Day--that was always a green stone--Halloween, Thanksgiving, New Years. And often when he came home from a business trip." I looked at him. "And you're doing Tony a disservice by assuming that he ran around with his fly open. When he was in a relationship, he was faithful. When he was single, that was another story. But his faults don't include cheating," I said gently. Steve flushed.

"I hate to go, but I've got to go collect some souls," I said, sighing and turning for the cape. "I'll see you both at the next scrimmage. Steve, can't you figure out a way to rig the valkyrie draw? You're a resourceful guy. It's never as much fun on Odin's team." He grinned.

"No cheating," he admonished me.

I rolled my eyes. "Fine, but just for that, know that I'm going to be coming for you."

"I'm shaking in my boots," he said, smiling.

"You should be," Bucky and I spoke at the same time and grinned at each other, while Steve looked at us indulgently. I got one more quick flannel-enhanced hug before detouring back to Valhalla for the outfit and horse. Duty called.
I sat down at dinner, rubbing my temples and forehead. "Are we still in catch-up mode or are we retrieving more souls?" I asked the other valkyries.

"I thought we were caught up," Dagny said. "We had a little lull awhile back, remember?"

"I thought that the end of the Kree conflicts would mean fewer trips to Earth," Irene said, shaking her head.

"Now that there's not a common enemy, they're back to fighting among themselves," I said, taking a bite of my dinner. Heidi shook her head.

"I just retrieved a bunch of souls from Alfheim and Nioavellir," she said. "It's not just Midgard that's acting up."

"The people seem to be taking their conflicts a lot more seriously," Irene noted. "Several of the ones I've picked up recently have been really pissed at their enemies." I nodded; I'd had one who'd been trying to kick his dead opponent. Usually they were more dazed about their change in state; they'd been fighting because their government or ruler told them too and most didn't take it too personally.

"I've been seeing a lot of looting when I make pickups," Carol said, frowning. We all frowned. Battle was bad enough without people stealing everything that wasn't nailed down.

"I'm glad it's cooling off," I said, yawning. "This summer was so warm."

"I was worried that we were going to lose crops from the heat," Irene said. "But we had good harvests."

"It's been a tumultuous year," Carol said. "I'll be glad when things slow down and we can rest. We've still got weaving to do and souls to collect, but the scrimmages won't be as frequent, we probably won't be able to run the obstacle course, and we have the Yule celebrations to look forward to."

"I like nesting in the winter," Heidi said. "Nice warm fires all the time, being cozy inside while the snow falls. Makes me appreciate my home more when I have to go out in the cold."

"Well, thanks to our new complex, we'll have to venture out less unless we want to," Dagny said. "Maybe we could arrange for some basic foods to be kept in one of the storerooms so we only have to go out once or twice for meals." That piqued everyone's interest and I thought that Tony would be interested too. For that matter, it would be nice to not have to stop when I was in the middle of something at the forge. I resolved to make or trade for some canisters or bins to keep food in. Serena volunteered to check into creating a pantry for the valkyries.

Autumn was my favorite season in Valhalla. The trees turned beautiful colors, the air crisped up after the summer heat, and it reminded me of settling into MIT, which might just be my favorite place in all the worlds. It was a lot nicer to work in the forge and the weaving shed, and there was a nice bite to the night air that made cozying up to Tony very appealing. Steve came over one day and helped Tony chop enough wood for the fireplace in our quarters—probably more than was absolutely necessary, truth be told, but can you really have too much wood cut? I enlisted the help of the valkyries to chop wood for my forge; I used a combination of coal and wood, so while I needed a lot, it wasn't as bad as it could have been. And I helped cut wood to supply the valkyrie
complex. Tony started designing a lighting system for the valkyrie lighting system, working closely with Bruce who was the valkyrie contact for the project. Unsurprisingly, Serena volunteered to provide any assistance needed from the valkyries.

"So when are you going to sleep with him?" I asked her as we played a viciously competitive game of Gin Rummy one night as Bruce and Tony worked late.

"Dammit!" Serena growled as she lost the game. I grinned in triumph. "He seems kind of reticent. I don't know if he's that interested."

"Serena, Ragnarok could come before Bruce will make a move," I said, shuffling the cards carefully. We didn't have access to the plastic coating of Midgard cards, so damage was a lot more likely with the slips of paper. "Proposition him. Or even better, be direct and kiss him. See where it goes. He's been marked by the duality of his life with the Other Guy and it's his nature to retreat."

She shook her head as I dealt. "I don't want to scare him off. And I like him as a person, so if he turns me down, it'll be awkward. There aren't many places to hide in somewhere as small as Valhalla."

"Is he important enough to risk losing?" I asked, as I frowned at my hand. Crap. "Because you're mooning at each other but nobody's making a move. If you wait too long, you risk some other woman swooping in on him. You can be direct and express your interest in moving things past the friend zone, then see what he says. If he turns you down, you haven't done anything to be embarrassed by, and if he accepts, you can try a date."

She flushed. "Do people even date here?"

"Well, alternatively, you can wait for Thrimilcy, but that is a LONG time to wait. Who cares what other people do? Ask him if he'd like to have an evening picnic. There's a really nice little waterfall that's lovely, especially at night. There's a full moon coming up, and it's not really chilly yet. Romantic, private, but a sedate activity."

"Huh." She studied her hand. "So where's this waterfall?"

Several days passed, and I didn't hear anything. I wanted to ask if she'd asked him out, but felt I'd pried enough. I was passing behind Tony's workshop on my way to the forge from the weaving shed when I heard Bruce mention her name. I froze, making no noise, in order to eavesdrop.

"--Asked me if I'd like to have a picnic, said there was a pretty spot by a waterfall."

"What did you say?" Tony asked, sounding abstracted, but I knew he was paying attention.

"I panicked and turned her down." Bruce sighed.

"Why'd you do something like that?" Tony asked. "It's clear as water that you two are interested in each other."

"I panicked," Bruce repeated. "She's exquisite. She can do a lot better than me. What are we going to talk about? Avenging? That won't last long. Science? She doesn't have the technical background."

"Yeah, well, I thought Alex could do better than me too, but I looked around and frankly, I don't have much competition. She's not going to go for some knuckle-dragger like Eric the Red. And sure, she was all starry-eyed after that first Thrimilcy, but I thought she'd come to her senses. I'm a lot better than I was when she knew me on Earth--" Bruce snorted-- "but I can still be difficult. And
although Alex is smart, she's not on my level intellectually, and she knows it. We can talk on a certain level, and that's good enough. Besides, the tech here is at a level that anyone of average intelligence can understand. We're making it work. And who knows how long it'll take Ragnarok to get here? There's still plenty of time for us to break up."

"Her husband sounds like a hard act to follow," Bruce observed. "Adored her, gave her all that jewelry, took her on exciting vacations, trusted her enough to share the whole Batman secret with her, had kids with her."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Tony snapped.

"Just that Wayne committed to her completely, and that's probably what she's used to, what she thinks she has with you. Sounds to me like she doesn't," Bruce said peaceably enough, but there was a slight cut to the words. "It sounds like she loves you more than you love her and you're expecting things to go bust. And she might not have your IQ, but she's plenty smart, and she has a lot of other excellent qualities."

"How did this get to be about me?" Tony asked sharply. "We were talking about your bone-headed move."

"Ah, now, that's where you're wrong. You compared your relationship with Alex with an attraction between me and Serena, then you insulted both her and you, somehow. Seriously, Tony, you haven't changed as much as you think. Or Alex thinks. She thinks you've matured, but you haven't, really. You're just better at hiding your insecurity." I waited, feeling like vertigo had just given me a big wallop, until the sounds he made leaving the shop faded.

I wanted to sneak on past, pretending like I had never heard any of that, but instead, my footsteps turned to the door of the shop. Tony glared at me when I entered, apparently expecting Bruce again, then came to kiss me. I let him kiss my cheek. "What's wrong?" he asked, looking concerned.

"I was walking along the path behind the workshop," I said. "So I hear you think I'm not terribly smart and that I'm with you due to lack of choices and that there's plenty of time to break up."

"Oh, come on, Alex," he said, running his fingers through his hair. "I said that you weren't as smart as I am, not that you were stupid. And it's true that you weren't as smart as I am, not that you were stupid. And it's true that I don't have a lot of competition here."

Let's just say that the conversation went downhill from there and we had our first big fight. And it was quite a blow out on both sides. I left the shop, grabbed clothes and toiletries from the quarters we shared, and stomped off to my room in the valkyrie complex.

"What's going on, Alex?" Serena said from the door, attracted by the noise. We were the only two with rooms on this floor in this wing. I rubbed my face and sat on the edge of the bed.

"I overheard Bruce and Tony talking. It started out being about why he turned you down--he panicked, you might want to try again--and Tony said some things about me that hurt, so I'm retreating here."

"Oh." She came in and sat on the chair. "Want to talk about it?"

"Not right now, not really," I said. "All of a sudden I'm confronted with what I thought was true--that we had a strong relationship--with what might be true--that it isn't, and I've either been seeing what I wanted to see or that he's pretty good at acting. I don't want to leap to conclusions or do anything too rash. So I'm going to stay here for awhile, let things settle down, do some thinking."
"Well, that's probably for the best," she said, sitting on the bed beside me and putting her arm around me. "Let things cool off. Unless what you both said was unforgivable--" I shook my head "--then just settle down. You know, your marriage to Damian was pretty extraordinary," she said hesitantly. "Nobody is going to be exactly like him or love you exactly the same way. Obviously, I never knew the man, but from what you've said and what I've heard from other people, he was pretty exceptional and you two were a pretty perfect match. And frankly, Tony has a lot of damage, even I can see that, and I haven't known him for very long. So you need to decide whether you're ok with a less than perfect partnership," she advised, kind of brutally.

"Damian and I had our share of fights, but I never once felt that he thought I was less than him," I said, blinking back tears. "Once we grew out of being teenagers, anyway, he had a shitty attitude when we first met. We just had different strengths. But Tony does think that being a genius makes him better than me, and I don't know if I really want to be with somebody who thinks I'm second rate. Damian was a genius too, so it's not like I've never dealt with that before." I looked at the floor pensively. "He didn't say I was stupid, but he did kind of sound like he was talking to the village idiot."

"His mind is pretty much what makes him special, and if he's insecure, the more he's going to make of that attribute," Serena said. "And frankly, until he started working on that lighting system, his brains weren't terribly well-respected or useful here. You've been able to use other interests and abilities to find a niche for yourself that is respected--you're the best fighter among the valkyries who are a pretty elite group to begin with, you're the best chooser of the slain, one of the best spinners and weavers, your blades are good enough that the other blacksmiths have taken notice, you teach the children of the King of Asgard, and you're driving a lot of social change in a pretty closed society. So you're a much bigger deal here than he is, and even if he doesn't recognize it, Tony, who is accustomed to being lionized for his brilliance, is kind of marginalized here. It doesn't excuse him, whatever he said, but you might want to take that into account. I know you pretty well, and you're going to want to be fair and add evidence to both sides of the scale before making your judgment."

"But not tonight," I sighed.

"Not tonight," she agreed. "Look. Let's go, get an early dinner, then you can come back here, maybe take a long bath with a good book. Cathy says we just got some new ones. Lick your wounds a bit. Tomorrow is another day," she coached.

"And what are you going to be doing?" I asked.

"I'm going to see a man about a date." She grinned, and I smiled.

"In that case, let's go get something to eat."

We ate quickly, and we separated at the door. With a wink, she was off to locate Bruce and I plodded back to my room, unwillingly grateful that I'd listened to Tony and claimed a room at the complex. I threw lavender-scented salts into the deep bathtub, and as I was waiting for the water to fill, read the back cover of a new mystery. Nobody knew how we were getting books from the mortal world here, but the best guess seemed to be that books that were destroyed could be brought here, a lot like the souls were when their bodies were shed. I didn't care about the mechanism, I just liked to keep up with publication. After a bit, I tossed the book carefully to the door to avoid getting it wet, and sunk deeper in the water. I needed to make some plans. Plans were comforting, and lists, the offspring of planning, were essential to my process.

First of all, regardless of whether Tony and I resolved our differences, I needed to make my rooms more... me. And it was possible that the resolution of our differences would mean that Tony and I
were no longer together. So I needed to make my rooms more comfortable. Winter was coming, so I needed rugs for the floor and warmer bedding. I still had a lot of the midweight cotton cloth from my first crops, so maybe I'd make a quilt. I hadn't since I was a teenager, but it seemed really tempting. I could make a batt from some of the coarser wool that hadn't been spun yet. Too bad I'd used all the flannel for shirts. There were also very vicious, large predators in the woods that also had thick, soft fur. The men who protected our flocks tanned the hides and I'd heard they made beautiful, really warm coverlets. Maybe I could trade a custom blade for one. I remembered that after Damian had died, it had taken time to get accustomed to sleeping alone; for one thing, it was colder without my husband's warmth, and I thought that it might be the same thing in this case. I also had to hunt up the curtains for the four poster bed; the canopy and hangings would keep in warmth during cold nights.

I plotted until the water began to cool, then got out, banked the fire for the night, and made it an early night. The next day I had much to do. At breakfast, I found one of the guys who made the coverlets. He agreed to the trade with such alacrity that I wondered for the first time if Serena was right and people liked my blades. We went to his workspace and he showed me the hides he had; I picked out some copper colored fur and some silvery fur; the coverlet would be constructed with diagonal stripes for interest but not a fussy pattern. The hunter wanted a sword similar to my katana; we decided on the form and length and the wood for the hilt and scabbard. Everything else was left to my discretion. We parted, mutually pleased. From there I went to Asgard to train Magni and some of his friends. I'd agreed to add a few of his closest companions to the lessons so that he could have someone to bout with when I wasn't there. Torunn got some lessons too, then I sat with Sif for a snack and talk. She was pregnant again.

"I hope this is a boy," she said pensively. At my look, she elaborated. "The prophesies all reference the roles of Thor's sons Magni and Modi in Ragnarok. If I don't bear him another son, Thor will look elsewhere."

"It's Thor's sperm that will determine whether you're carrying a son or daughter," I point out. "And why is it so important that he has the two sons?"

"It's fated," she said simply. "Fate is immutable. All we can do is confront it with the absence of fear, and acceptance of our fates."

"What would happen if you just said 'no more kids, Thor, and if you play around, you'll regret it'?" I asked.

She shook her head. "One way or another, Thor will have his two sons." There was an awkward silence, then we started talking about Torunn's progress. Her mother was delighted at how quickly she picked up things, from her academic lessons to her weapons training. "She surprised her father by creeping up on him in a counsel meeting and poking his side with her practice knife," Sif said blandly, and I looked innocent.

"What did Thor do?"

"I believe your saying is 'you could have knocked him over with a feather.'" She smiled. "Then he was pleased with her skill and put her on his knee for the remainder of the meeting. It is amazing how clever she is," she said, baiting me a little.

"She is pretty special," I agreed.

Sif selected another cake. "It is to be hoped by both her parents that her cleverness continues and expands as far as it can." I took this to be a tacit endorsement and started thinking about other skills she could learn. I had a pretty wide repertoire, thanks to Bucky's training program in different
disciplines.

After I took my leave, I stopped by Folkvangr to talk to Steve. My armor was pretty much just left on my bed in the complex between bouts, but since I was spending time in my room, I needed a stand for it. Steve listened to what I wanted, then nodded. "That'll be easy enough, Alex. But how come you need one now? You've been a valkyrie for awhile."

I looked away and sighed. "Tony and I had a fight, so I've moved into my quarters in the valkyrie complex to give me some cooling off time. I used to just leave my armor on the bed, but obviously that's not an optimal solution."

"Do you want to talk about it?" Steve asked apprehensively.

"Not really, Uncle Steve," I said, stroking the cherry wood that he'd brought out for me to approve. I didn't miss his look of relief and suppressed a chuckle.

"Alex! This is an unexpected pleasure," Bucky said, coming over with his arms out. I stepped gratefully into his hug.

"I need an armor stand," I explained, slightly muffled by his shirt. "And I wanted the best."

"That's good," he approved. "You shouldn't just dump it. You should take pride in it."

"I don't just dump it," I objected. "I put it on the bed in a specific order. But I need the bed."

"Alex?" Bucky held me a little away so he could look at my face.

"Big fight," I said.

Bucky sighed. "So you're getting some space, cooling off, before looking at the problem," he nodded. "What's Stark doing?" I shrugged. "What else are you doing?"

"My usual," I shrugged again. "I had a lesson with Thor's kids, Sif's expecting again. And I traded a blade for a nice warm fur coverlet for winter. I thought I would also make a quilt and some rugs."

"She won a ribbon at a state fair for a quilt she made for her parents," Bucky bragged to Steve.

"Let us know if you need anything else," Steve urged me, and I nodded. After some chatting about less personal stuff, I got ready to go back to Valhalla. I popped back into the smithy so I could get moving on the blade I'd promised the hunter. I carefully built up the fire so it would be hot enough and selected the stock for the sword--I didn't have enough of Emma's nifty steel alloy so I went with something more traditional but still capable of producing a strong, flexible blade for someone who would need to rely on it. As was usual for my process, I selected the cord and the wood for the hilt and scabbard and put it on a tray with the other items I'd need to complete the project, then turned my attention to the metal. By dinner, I'd made satisfactory progress and went to clean up. I was a little late to the meal; I saw Tony sitting with the others at the usual table, so I sat down at a table on the other side of the hall and ate quickly. There were so many people in the hall that I didn't worry about being spotted, then slipped out before the evening entertainment.

The bed hangings I'd found for my bed were natural wool, which was a nice enough ecru, but I didn't care for it that much. After dinner, I took them to the dyeing shed and put them into a tub of a pretty bluish-purple. It would be a nice splash of color against the light stone of the building and would coordinate with the colors I was planning for my rugs and quilt--blues, purples, and touches of greens. I rinsed the excess dye off and hung them to dry, then returned to the complex to measure my bed and decide how much cloth needed to be dyed what colors. I spent the rest of the
evening painting designs on some of the yardage with wax; it would keep the natural color of the cotton when the fabric was dyed, then I'd wash the wax out.

It didn't take long to dye the cottons the next morning, and I left them to dry when I moved on to my smithy to pound some steel. Very satisfying way to work out aggression. I was trying to keep a calm face around others, but it didn't mean that the anger and hurt I felt had gone away. I worked on the blade for the rest of the day, and went to dinner. This time I didn't avoid anybody but sat with my friends in our usual place. Tony came in with Bruce and Serena but he sat at a distance from me. Nobody said anything, so word must have spread. After dinner, which wasn't as awful as I'd anticipated, I collected my things at the dying shed and went back to the complex to do some ironing and remove the wax resist from the cotton. On a roll, I contemplated getting started on my quilt, but then remembered that my sewing machine was in Tony's workshop. Grr. As was my spinning wheel.

The next day after breakfast, I went to his shop to retrieve my spinning wheel. It was lighter, so it would be easier to take with me. "Oh, come on," Tony said when I picked it up. "You don't have to do that, Alex."

"I do, though," I said. "Besides, it looks like you could use the room." I jerked my chin at the boxes of parts for the light fixtures, which were taking over all the flat surfaces. "I'll be back later for the sewing machine." I didn't want to go clear back to the complex just then, so I parked the spinning wheel at my smithy. When I went back for lunch, I deposited the wheel in my rooms and picked up the sewing machine. That took two trips, actually, one for the actual machine and one for the treadle table. I'd brought a bag with me so I could take my shears, needles, pins, and thread with me. There was a lot more room in the workshop, which Tony promptly filled with a table.

I worked on the blade for the next few days, finishing it just before the next scrimmage at Valhalla. Emma caught up with me just as I was straightening up. I asked her to look at the blade for defects, which she did and said there wasn't anything serious. People might not die in Valhalla, but I didn't want the hunter to be savaged because a blade I made was defective. It was also the first thing I'd made in trade for a stranger and wanted to protect my name. She had some more steel alloy for me. "Steve and Bucky told me that you and Tony had a fight," she said, then produced some muffins. I nibbled joyfully on one as we walked to the valkyrie complex.

"Yep," I said helpfully.

"And you haven't made up yet?" She looked surprised.

"Nope. We both need to cool down. It was the biggest fight I've ever participated in."

"Still, I'm surprised, is all."

"Tony had some legitimate grievances too," I said, brooding. "The rest was opinion and feelings, and that's harder to deal with."

"Huh. Well, Steve finished your armor stand and he and Bucky are putting it in your room." I perked up and we increased our pace. In my rooms, Bucky was just finishing putting my armor on the stand when we came through the door.

"Wow," I breathed. The polished steel looked lovely against the warm cherry. The parts of the stand had been turned on a lathe. It was unconventional; my helmet sat on top and below that was the breastplate, but there was an arm to the right that had a notch for my spear and a recess in the base to keep it in place and one for my bow. An arm on the opposite side held my cestuses, with a broad tray that also held my shuriken and smaller knives. Below that was a groove for my shield on
the base so it could stand unsupported. A rack was attached at the front; my swords were held on gracefully carved arms. First the scabbard with my matched swords, then the katana, the Asgardian broadsword, the shamshir, and the rapier. On a longer tray just above the base were the sais, the katar, my Korean war fans, the kerambit, and a pair of small sickles. A peg on the back of the stand held my quiver of arrows, but my two javelins still leaned in the corner.

"I didn't realize you had quite so much," Steve said, running his hand through his hair. "It's a good thing these rooms are large."

"That's fine," I said. "This is amazing."

"Glad you like it," he said, smiling. The stand was perfectly positioned between the two sets of windows. And by the door was a second stand, but it held just one thing, my swanfeather cape. It would keep the cape safe, out of the way, but right where I could grab it in case of emergency. We'd tried hangers, but the capes were too heavy and snapped them. The stand was reinforced where it wouldn't show with metal supports. I'd been laying it on top of the chest, which was inconvenient.

"Wow," I said again. "I can't thank you enough."

"My pleasure," Steve said, and I gave him a hug and one for Bucky for helping. Emma and I didn't hug, it wasn't our thing, but I thanked her again for the muffins and the steel. Then they had to go prepare for the scrimmage and I had to get ready. I wolfed down another muffin, then changed into the white dress. The stand made getting ready much nicer. I was reminded of my vanity back on Midgard when I was getting ready to go out to a party, putting on makeup and jewelry before putting on the dress and stepping into the shoes. Rituals are rituals, regardless of their purpose. I buckled my swordbelt, grabbed the cestuses and the cloak, and I was off to the battlefield.
Memories

I assembled with the other valkyries and we waited to be assigned to teams. Thor was here as his father's general, and, smiling, proposed that he and Steve choose with 'rock, paper, scissors,' a game he'd just learned from Loki. We laughed and Steve smiled and agreed. Steve won the first round, scissors to Thor's paper, and chose me. I stood behind him and the other valkyries divided briskly. Once the teams were set, Odin and Frigga nodded to each other, Steve and Thor shook hands, and at Steve's signal, we took to the sky, getting above the arrows, then using gravity and acceleration for our benefit as the battle was joined. All was fine until little fireballs started searing trails through the air. After one narrowly missed me, I looked for the source and frowned. Tony had devised a cannon-like device that lobbed the little fireballs. Usually, we sort of ignored each other when we were on opposite sides, but apparently the gloves were off today. I dove, faster than he could track me, landing right by it and quickly studying it. I saw a couple of things that looked necessary and pulled them free, stalling the machine. "Hey!" Tony protested, and Bruce turned toward me from where he was readying more fireballs. "Take it easy," Tony said, then lunged for my hand holding the parts.

"I am taking it easy," I retorted. "Me being serious means me trashing this thing. And that will happen if you get it going again." I jumped back for the sky, stuffing the parts in my pocket. And I thought that was the end of it, but about a half-hour later, the fireballs started up again. Heidi flew up to me.

"How do we stop it?" she asked. "Would a rock dropped from a height do it?" I nodded.

"It should," I said, and she grinned.

"Distract them," she said, and I nodded, gathering valkyries as I flew. A mass would make a more tempting target, and engaged the other team. My first opponent, Carol, was felled by friendly fire.

"Dammit," she snapped as she dropped suddenly. I grinned and moved on. And all of a sudden there was a crash and the fireballs stopped. We didn't investigate, just kept on with our part of the battle plan, until Steve signaled for us to come and get a new assignment. Thor and Odin were closer to the front than usual, and we had the offer of a high risk, high reward gambit; we could sneak around the flank and attack. The sneaking would be hard, what with the white dresses; we had just over half our number left and if we failed, we'd all be taken out. But we decided unanimously to try it; usually both Odin and Steve were careful with their most versatile troops so it was a rare opportunity. We had to go back through our lines and sneak into the forest, flying at the level of the leaves for some cover, then landing as close as we could get. There was no way we'd be able to creep any closer, so we decided on a charge that would hopefully take the opposition by surprise and happen too fast to get significant defense set up.

We waited until the battle had shifted left, then the opportunity was as good as it was ever going to get. We charged up a slight incline, muscling our way past some warriors. I had just put my sword to Thor's midsection (he could still be killed and I didn't want to have to explain to Sif why I'd accidentally slain her husband in a training exercise) when we were startled by the sound of screaming. It was different from the normal sounds of battle, where warriors cry out with the pain of their wounds; this was anger, beyond fury, actually, and the hair at the back of my neck didn't just stand up at the sound, it saluted. Thor's eyes got big and he and I and Odin and the two valkyries who had gotten through to him stopped struggling and turned to see a small pack of Odin's warriors ripping their clothes and cutting down anybody who crossed their path. And by 'cutting down' I don't mean just taking people out with their swords or axes or spears; these guys
were also tearing people apart with their bare hands in a terrifying display of atavistic strength. It
didn't seem to matter if they were friend or foe; they didn't seem to be able to distinguish anything
besides barriers to their progress. Their faces were red; if they'd been alive I'd have feared for their
blood pressure. Their faces were frozen in a rictus of rage and it didn't seem like anybody was
home, personality-wise. I turned and shoved Thor.

"Get out of here!" I shouted at him over the chaos and turned to put myself between him and the
maddened men. My fellow valkyries also interposed themselves between Thor and the... berserkers? Had to be. Odin hadn't said he was going to start using them. And we were going to have a talk about that, damn him. "Get up in the air!" I shouted to my fellow valkyries. Ryna and Maggie weren't our strongest swordswomen and would have an advantage in the air with their spears. They wasted no time and leaped in the sky, using the extra axis for more maneuverability. Then the first berserkers were on me. They were like nothing I'd ever fought, their viciousness and psychosis outside my experience. Still, I stood my ground, cutting and stabbing with all my skill and ability.

It wasn't enough. Broken fingernails on inhumanly strong fingers raked my arms and tore at my
armor and dress. Somebody bit me. An impact with my side broke some ribs. Someone caught my ankle and pulled, spilling me onto the ground. And I knew that my end was coming, I couldn't defend myself unless I was on my feet.

My arm was twisted, dislocating it at the shoulder. But before anything else could happen, Odin chanted and energy raced from his spear Gungnir to strike the berserkers. They jerked and twisted and howled in the energy before collapsing. I heard Odin declare that the scrimmage was over, and Ryna and Maggie landed beside me. I shook with reaction and tears leaked--those berserkers had scared the snot out of me--as the magic worked and my wounds healed. Maggie fixed my dislocated shoulder. I stayed on the ground, trying to get a grip, and Odin came over.

He looked at me, seeing that the damage was repairing, then spoke. "Why did you defend Thor? He was my general, not yours."

"Thor isn't one of us," Ryna said. "Those things didn't know or care what they were killing." I nodded.

"There were too many of them for even Thor. And Magni isn't nearly ready for rule," I said, wearily getting to my feet. Maggie clucked at me and helped me arrange my dress so the tears weren't showing anything private. Ryna cleaned my swords and handed them back to me. Then I glared at Odin. "You said that you weren't going to use berserkers in these scrimmages." They started to stir, and we three valkyries raised our weapons and moved reflexively so we were back to back.

"Peace," Odin said, using Gungnir to lower my swords. "They are depleted from the berserker
rage." And they did seem weak and disoriented. He looked at me sternly. "I did not order the
berserkers to fight, but their nature cannot always be contained."

I sheathed my swords. "Next time I see those things, I'm out of here, they can butcher whoever they can catch." Steve and Frigga arrived at this point; Steve looked around in puzzlement; Frigga frowned when she saw the berserkers.

"Peace, wife," Odin said, a little impatiently. "The berserkers did not respond to my call."

"Berserkers?" Steve asked alertly, and his shield twitched, probably with the temptation to throw it and take the former berserkers out again. "Are you ok, Alex?" he asked, seeing my face, which still had some moisture on it, and thunderclouds gathered in his face when he saw my torn dress.
"Yeah," I said, quickly scrubbing my face. "It was just a new and not fun experience, is all." I looked around, and saw my swanfeather cape trampled into the mud. I scowled and picked it up. With the added mud, it weighed a ton. I shook it gently as more people arrived. Maggie and Ryna helped by each taking a lower corner of the hem. The self-cleaning magic the cloaks all held helped the mud slide off, leaving no trace behind. They helped me swing it over my shoulders when it was clean again and this helped to hide the ruined dress, very nice as other war leaders were showing up, including, predictably, my uncle, Emma, Tony, and the remainder of the valkyries. By this time, those who had been possessed by the berserkergang were being helped off the field to recover and their victims were healed too. Little trace remained of their rage, but I huddled with the other two, who were also shaken. We listened to Odin formally concede the fight to his wife, then I slipped away to change before the banquet. There wasn't time enough to clean up, but I didn't want to wear the ruined dress any longer than I had to. I took the opportunity to brush my hair--very soothing--and rack my armor. I kept my swords on the belt, though, and put a nice little switchblade and a comforting push knife in my pocket after washing my face. I was as tidy as I could manage, and caught up with Ryna and Maggie on their way to the Great Hall. I noticed that they both had also kept their capes on. The weight was comforting, as was the ability to instantly have an escape route.

We had places at the high table for our bravery in facing the berserkers and protecting Thor. It was nice, but I wasn't very hungry, still reacting to the battle, and wishing I could just grab some food on the sly and creep back to my room to decompress. I'm not kidding, the berserkers had been terrifying. I made it through the feasting and the toasting and all, but when the music started up, I took advantage of the activity to slip away. I started at the hand on my shoulder and whipped out the little push dagger as I turned. Steve held his hands up and I lowered my hand, putting the dagger back in my pocket. "Wanted to check up on you," he said. "You looked really shaken and haven't improved much."

"I've heard about the berserkers, who hasn't?" I said, and he nodded. "But the reality... those men were feral. They didn't care who they attacked, or what they did. They were like wild animals instead of men. They were trying to rip my arm off." His face fell and I edged closer. I didn't know where Bucky was, but I could really use a hug. I was relieved when he opened his arms and I stepped into his hug. He was taller than my uncle and the lack of flannel was a loss, but he also gave high quality hugs. "Thanks, Uncle Steve," I mumbled, and he patted my back gently.

"Didn't take you long to replace me," Tony said behind me, his voice caustic. "Does Emma know you're cutting in on her action?" I'd had it. I pulled away from Steve and popped Tony's nose with my fist. Fairly gently.

"Steve is an uncle to me, and he was checking up on me after today's battle," I hissed at Tony. "Don't you dare try to make something out of nothing, it degrades you."

As I stomped away from Tony, who was bleeding freely from his nose, I heard Steve say, "You really put your foot in your mouth, Tony. I'm no ladies man, but even I know that jealousy isn't the way into a woman's heart."

I was glad for the cape as I chugged back to the complex; the night was cold and my righteous anger only got me so far. I knew Tony was insecure, but I wasn't in the mood to coddle him, especially after his rudeness. Steve was a really nice guy, now that I'd gotten to know him better, but there was nothing like that between us. Even if there was, he was with Emma, and I've neverhorned in on a relationship and wasn't about to start. When I got home, I started a fire and took a long hot bath after washing the battle off in a quick shower. My shoulder still felt a little tender. Then I pulled on my robe, put nice thick socks on, and picked up my quilting hoop, settling in by the fire. The rhythm of stitching relaxed me and I made good progress on my quilt, working for a
few hours. When I was tired and calm enough to sleep, I banked the fire, pulled on a nightgown, and snuggled into bed. The hunter I'd dealt with said that my coverlet would be ready in a few days, and I looked forward to it. The bed felt cold and empty, and it looked like winter was coming early and hard. The mountains surrounding Valhalla were already combing snow out of the clouds. I made a mental note to spin some chunky yarn for extra warm sweaters and socks, and fell asleep.

Serena caught up with me at breakfast; she'd heard Maggie and Ryna's accounts and wanted mine as well. "We need to think about strategies," I said. "Now that they've shown up in one battle, I'm sure we'll be seeing them again." Serena nodded and we talked a little about how we could best fight them. I was of the opinion that staying aloft and shooting them full of arrows was the way to go, but that would mean carrying around another weapon. After we'd run out of ideas, I asked how her date with Bruce went.

Her eyes sparkled and she blushed delicately. "Oh, he's such a sweet man," she said enthusiastically, and I grinned, glad that the picnic went so well. "We have a lot more in common than I thought, beyond Avenging. We like some of the same authors and books, and he pointed out constellations to me." She sighed happily; it sounded romantic.

"I have my sewing machine in my quarters, so if you wanted a new dress, I can whip something up for you," I offered, and we talked about sleeves and necklines. I pointed out that she could fill in a low neckline for other occasions with a fichu, and she said she'd try to sketch something out when she brought over the fabric.

"So no progress with Tony?" she asked, and I rolled my eyes and scowled, telling her about the previous night. She just sighed and shook her head, and we parted, each for her duties.

Today I was on soul duty; I felt like Charon, but with a flying horse rather than a boat on the river Styx. I tried to be nice about getting the newly fallen to move on, but I felt the press of more souls waiting for me and sometimes went with expediency over niceness. I came across a man who was still battle-maddened and unwilling to listen to reason. While I was trying to talk him down, I noticed people looting a computer store; not a big box store but a mom and pop. I might be able to overlook looting a grocery store--everybody needed food--but this just wasn't right. I dropped into the mortal world where everyone could see me while my soul still tried to skewer opponents, drew my swords, and commanded the looters to put what they had taken. They stared at me, stock still with shock. I sliced open a sleeve and pointed with the sword. Everybody rushed back into the store and emerged empty-handed. I let them leave, but one man started babbling about avenging angels. I rolled my eyes, dropped back into the ether, and grabbed my soul by the nape of his neck, getting his attention. I told him that if he came with me he'd get the chance to try to kill people on a regular basis but he was dead and couldn't do any damage here. That got through, and I dumped him off in Valhalla. Cnut the Great, acting as Odin's right hand that day, gave me a funny look as I reluctantly dismounted and steered my soul by the back of the neck again. Odin gave the standard greeting and Cnut took him away.

"What troubles you, valkyrie?" Odin asked.

"The souls are, frankly, acting like assholes. They're still enraged when they rise, and there's so many of them that there's not time to talk them down. And the living are acting like assholes, too. The looting is terrible," I said sullenly.

Odin frowned. "How long has this been going on?" he asked.

I shrugged. "It's too hard to keep track of how time is spinning out on Earth; there's too big a gap in time differentials. But since before Serena got here."
'This rise in incivility is troubling,' Odin said. "Go, do your best." I nodded and went back. This time I was on a college campus; it looked like a protest had gotten ugly and the students were facing off against police in riot gear. The police looked frightened and disturbed but they fired on the crowd regardless when somebody threw a stack of fliers at them. I watched as some students tried to aid the fallen, others engaged the police. One young woman whapped a sign down on somebody's gun hand, causing the gun to fire into the ground instead of a knot of students. She looked like she was using considerable force; the police she hit clutched his wrist, gun dangling from his hand uselessly. She went after another officer--I was getting a real Kent State vibe here. Then an officer shoved her and she tripped over the edge into a sunken courtyard. Her head hit with a sickening crack, and I waited in resignation until she sat up, pulling free of her body, strolling over to give my speech. She looked around at the chaos, shook her head, and hopped up behind me.

Everywhere I went was the same; protesters against armed forces or two groups of opposing armed forces. Protests where passers-by got violent and the protesters responded with violence of their own. I started dreading these assignments, even the ones where we had to prepare for a major battle. And it wasn't just on Earth; the violence and anger could be found across the Nine Realms. Thor got a lot busier putting down insurrections.

One evening Odin summoned the valkyries to a meeting before dinner. Loki was there; there was time to ask how he was doing. His second summit had gone well, but plans for a third were on hold as the participants, including trade legations and politicians were too touchy. He shook his head, then patted my shoulder as his father called to him and we settled down. Loki described the uncertain tempers across the Nine Realms and the violence on Midgard, saying that the current mood had existed for close to three Earth years now. There was a lot of property destruction, insurance rates were through the roof, countries were calling for martial law. There wasn't one cause, or even a couple; it was as if people were permanently at the high end of a hormone swing, touchy and ready to take offense at the smallest thing. Odin listened gravely and told us that he wanted to be kept up to date in what we saw and heard. He didn't tell us why he was concerned, but he would when he had something to say.

One afternoon I decided to go to Earth to see what the media was saying about the civil unrest, and went to the New York Public Library. I logged onto a computer using guest access (I still knew my library card number but surely it had been deactivated after all this time) and scanned the New York Times. There were a lot of theories, some of which involved end-of-the-world stuff as well as thoughts about a massive financial and social inequality gap. I tabbed over to the entertainment section, just to see what the kids were watching these days, and recoiled in horror to see a picture of Damian and me from our wedding in a flashy ad for a "showstopper series" whatever that meant "that explored the lives and love of the legendary Waynes." It apparently had the support of my damned descendants and interviews would be part of the series. Oh, barf.

The guy next to me looked at my screen and smiled. "Yeah, it's really good. I didn't think it would be, but--and let's keep this between us--but it's so romantic. They both won the genetic lottery, which helps with initial attraction, but they really seemed to be soulmates." He looked abashed, but brightened when he really looked at me. "Hey, you look amazingly like her."

"Yeah, I get that sometimes ," I said. I excused myself and poofed back to Valhalla once I was in an alley.

Over dinner, I told my fellow valkyries about the research I'd done on current events and I think everybody was disappointed that even the living didn't know the cause of the chaos they were generating. Irene went back after dinner--for some reason it was easier for her to manifest herself physically at night--and came back with more research from other sources around the globe, but no
new information. She sat down at the table where the valkyries were playing cards, looked at me and started to laugh. I rolled my eyes and tried to ignore her as she mirthfully started to tell the others about the television event, pausing first to explain TV to the older valkyries like Dagny. Apparently there had been a viewing party in the library. Damn it. "It started with an interview of her great great great-grandkids, who themselves are maybe middle-aged, they did it in the manor, apparently," she said. "It was episode two. The first one covered your and Damian's early lives--his identity as the descendant of Ra's al Ghul was known, but they didn't say anything about Batman--in the interview part, at least-- and they showed your baby pictures." I muttered an obscenity.

"There weren't any pictures of Damian until he was ten. The show started with you in high school, new to the city, how you made friends with a girl named Aslyn who set you up with Damian on a blind date. It showed Damian being a spoiled rich boy but it mostly focused on you, your meeting with Bucky and Emma, your internship at Stark Tech, the accident, all that. It spilled the beans about why you went to Wayne Enterprises, too. Did your aunt and Tony really try to have you fired?" I nodded and rested my head in my hands. "Geeze. It stopped just when the Joker abducted you guys from that party and the second episode had the interview where they explained that the information from this came from your father-in-law's diary. They read passages that expressed concern about the kidnapping and Damian's idea to try to protect you, what you said." She looked at me with sympathy. "It wasn't explicit, but part of the story was a preview of how the Joker kidnapped you after your graduation and how you got through that--they used old police records to reconstruct." I looked at her in horror.

"Oh, fuck. Those little shits. I'm going to haunt them forever," I said, shaking with anger. How dare they allow that to be used for entertainment?

"Alex, wait," Irene said, but I wasn't in the mood for it. I timed it for midnight and arrived in the entryway to Wayne manor. It had been redecorated since my time, still tasteful, but different. I went to the room where the Bucky display had been. It was still there, which was nice to see. They'd knocked out a wall and expanded the library into the next room. The tete-a-tete couch was still in its corner although it had been reupholstered. A cat ambled in, stretched, and I scratched its ears then headed upstairs. I went to the master bedroom, Bruce's old suite, phased through the door, and stood at the end of the bed, looking at the couple sleeping there. I tapped my foot.

"Wake up!" I shouted, and they sure did, jerking awake in confusion.

"Who are you?" the man said in shock. "How did you get in?"

I compared the two. The woman had fair skin but inky hair shot with silver and Damian's blue eyes, while the man had brown eyes and blond hair. I smiled involuntarily then remembered my purpose and addressed her. "I'm Alixzandrya Barnes Wayne, and you are in a great deal of trouble, young lady," I said, using my most severe mom voice. It worked, both of them quailed slightly.

"How dare you use what the Joker did to me for entertainment?" I bellowed.

"Oh, god, it is her," the man muttered. "He said she'd be furious."

"He who?" I barked.

"Grandpa Damian came by after the first episode," the woman said, yawning. "I'm your great great great grand-daughter Natasha," she said, waving a little. "This is my husband, Ethan. He was so pissed, said you'd be worse."

"Damian was here?" I tensed.

"Yes, he looked about the same age that you look--"
"What afterlife is he in?" I cut in.

"He didn't say and I didn't think to ask, sorry," she said. "It was a bit of a shock. At least you're kind of expected."

I slumped. "If you see him again, tell him that I'm kind of stuck in Valhalla but I hope to see him someday."

"Really?" Ethan said interestedly, and I nodded, distracted by the news.

"Tell him I miss him if he comes back," I said, trying not to tear up.

"He seemed good," Natasha said encouragingly. "Aside from being kind of terrifying, that is. He said he'd seen Martha and he loves you and misses you and that he hopes you're happy, other than this. He said that what happened was very private and I should have thought about how I'd feel if it happened to me and was luridly exposed to the public." That sounded so much like Damian, always having my back. "But let me tell you why we did it." I nodded after a moment. "The NYPD were doing a massive purge of old, closed cases, destroying evidence for cases more than fifty years old, and somebody saw your name and read the files, went to the press, who published it, salacious journalism. So the information was already out in public," she said gently. "Then that renewed interest in the sort of romanticized golden age of Gotham--that's what they're calling it--and the Wayne family. Then a production company was working on an unauthorized biography. We--the family--offered to cooperate in turn for some control over the scripts. We got it toned down a lot," she assured me, and Ethan nodded. "It was pretty.... graphic in the first scripts and the series sort of focused on you and the Joker as some sort of ultra-twisted romance." I wanted to throw up. "So we threw in the offer of family interviews here in the mansion, allowed them to use some family property in the movie like the pearls--Martha's and the ones Damian gave you--and they reframed it to the romance between you and Damian. And not overly saccharine, either. But it is kind of a fairy-tale romance."


"Grandpa Damian told me about caches he had around the city and I agreed to make sure they had current funds in cash and pre-paid debit cards. Yes, they still exist, Grandpa was also surprised--in case you could use them. There are four left, the ones in Central Park, Avengers Tower, Chinatown, and the Yale Club." I smiled a little. I remembered them, it was where he and Bruce had stashed stuff that either didn't fit in their utility belts or held resources like cash. Batman usually didn't carry much.

"I usually don't hang around in physical form," I said. "It's tiring. But it would be nice to have resources, just in case."

"So...Valhalla?" Natasha asked, leaning forward.

"Yeah," I said, and gave them the highlights of my career so far. Both she and Ethan were laughing at the end.

"I'm proud to be your granddaughter," Natasha said, chuckling. I went around the side of the bed and indulged myself stroking her hair. Thick and soft, just like Damian's, styled into a cute pixie. Natasha told me about their family--they only had one daughter and Natasha was Batman; that part of the family legacy was still secure, and my control of my physical form started to get shaky. My cape flicked into wings. Their eyes widened, and it was time to go. I kissed Natasha's hair and patted Ethan's shoulder. "Come back any time, Grandma, I'll tell Grandpa you miss him if he comes
back,” Natasha said, and I just smiled and returned to Valhalla, emerging near the complex. I went up to my room without seeing anybody and thought about what Natasha and Ethan had told me.
The next morning I went down to breakfast with Serena, who waited until I'd eaten something before pouncing. She howled with laughter, drawing stares from nearby non-morning people—when I told her about bursting in on my great great great granddaughter, but she listened soberly to the story about how the show had come about. "If they'd have made it some kind of love story between me and the Joker, I would have hunted up whoever had that disgusting idea and I would have killed him or her," I said flatly, and Serena nodded and patted my hand.

"But at least you know Damian's out there and he's well," she said, brightening up. "And your daughter, so that's great news." I scrunched up my face.

"Yes and no," I said, surprising her. "Yes, it's great to know that he's out there and he sounds fine. But I was doing better not knowing for sure, just hoping. Because now I miss him more. What we had wasn't perfect, we had arguments and disagreements, but it worked so well. Maybe it was just because we both had so much to juggle that when we were together we really made each other our top priority. And I just miss him. He was witty, and curious, interested in just about everything, smart, and just... so wonderful." I brushed a tear aside. "And he was one of those men who got better-looking with age, lucky me—he kept his hair like his dad did. And being Batman kept him fit and built." I sighed. She sighed too and patted my hand. "And I think I miss him more because things aren't looking good with Tony."

Just then, Dagny, Irene, and Carol sat down with their breakfasts and looked at me expectantly. I related the story to them, and like Serena, they drew attention with their hearty laughter. I crunched dry toast.

Carol drew her spoon through her oatmeal. "So we were thinking that we might go to the city tonight and catch the next episode." I sighed.

"It would be interesting to see a "tv show"," Dagny added.

In the end we went. We kept to the spirit plane, which also allowed us to hover midair and gave us the best views in the Barbara Gordon Memorial Atrium. There was a recap, then the program cut to a new interview, where Natasha held up the physical Brass Rat, the design almost worn smooth from a lifetime's constant wear, and talked about how much I loved going to MIT. I fiddled with the essence of the ring that had come with me when I died, the detail restored to new crispness. Then the story about Damian and the coffeehouse, which still made me smile. Damian's time at Harvard, and our experiences in grad schools on different coasts, returning to the city. She sighed when she told the story about how we met again at the New Year's Eve party, and held Ethan's hand. Then the show started. The actors weren't terrible, the woman was prettier than I was, but the actor didn't capture Damian's vitality or character very well. And he wasn't nearly as handsome or muscular and looked pasty. He had similar eyes, though. I didn't pay much attention to the overly sweet story unfolding on screen, but I didn't see Damian anywhere. It was for the best, probably.

The next night, my great- great- whatever, I was losing track—granddaughter Rose, in her late 20's, looks like, joins her parents in the interview. She tells about how she loves the next part of the story the most because it covers the same age she is. "And frankly, it's reassuring that her first business went under. Because while she was just ahead of her time—the Avengers have kept up the clinic and added physical therapy, accupressure, accupuncture, and nutrition for heroes—it's nice to know that just because you fail at something doesn't mean that you won't go on and be very successful in your next job. It kind of takes the pressure off. There's a legacy of high achievement that I don't want to be the one to break." Her dad kisses her cheek and Rose gives a summary that
takes us through the wedding and honeymoon. Fortunately, from my perspective, they get the Joker out of the way early, and I'm bemused to note they include the scene where I snuck into his hospital room to threaten him. The actor playing him isn't ugly enough, I doubt he has that disgusting smell, and you can tell that his rictus grin is an effect rather than being the real thing. Still, just looking at him makes me want to break his fingers. They cover the apartment fire, shutting the business, deciding on Tony's offer to work for him, moving in with Damian (shooting in our former suite, which seems pretty much unchanged), training the Avengers. It's surprisingly accurate, from what I remember. Damian's many successes at work. I cheer up to see our engagement trip--shot on location in London, Prague, and Budapest--reenacted and they use my actual engagement ring and accurately site the proposal in the Bastion. I can tell it's my ring because there's a gouge on the side where I smacked it on some equipment at work. Then they show Bruce giving us the binders, which makes me laugh out loud. I'm not the only one; it's done charmingly. Not nearly as daunting as the reality had been, but then Actor Bruce doesn't have much in the way of the air of command that my father-in-law had actually possessed. The wedding, and the honeymoon on the Orient Express. They show the start of my jewelry collection and the splash we made in the city's social scene, and I'm glad to see that family history recorded the fun Damian had with it. I sigh at the end of this episode as well, but it's a happier sigh. And Damian still wasn't evident.

The final night covers the miscarriages and pregnancy very accurately, including Damian's home office and later, the baby-friendly offices we had. My office doesn't look at all like it really did, but the console with the hidden cribs might be the original. There's a party I don't recall having after hearing about Ra's' death, the confrontation with Talia in the garage, Bruce's death, which is attributed to a botched kidnapping/extortion attempt orchestrated by the Joker, since he disappeared right after. Then peace and achievement until Damian's death, framed as another extortion attempt gone wrong. Then me and the kids going about our business until the Kree came back. It ended with a brief scene of me at the Avengers' funerals, then me manning that anti-aircraft gun. A shot of my headstone right next to Damian's in the family graveyard with dark red roses in the vases, then the screen faded to black. Then the interview with Natasha and Rose, who was now wearing an engagement ring of her own. "The family has a history of happy marriages, fortunately," Natasha said, patting her daughter's hand. "Each generation has had the example of the one before it, showing that it takes hard work and commitment to succeed, just like anything else. That's the most important family legacy, as far as I'm concerned."

Rose shows the camera my wedding ring. "Damian had it made custom; it spells out "I love U" in Morse code." The audience in the viewing room aaah's. "Alex told her son once that it was a daily reminder to cherish her husband and remember that they were a team in all things." I don't remember that at all. I just remember feeling gooey inside every time I looked at it. I feel sorry for Damian in this ridiculous thing; because his role as Batman is still secret, he comes off as sort of just my appendage--a captain of industry, no doubt, but in my shadow nevertheless, which isn't fair, but it does continue to protect the other important family legacy.

"Fortunately, Alex's mutations have washed out in the successive generations," Natasha notes.

"I don't know if I could do it," Rose confessed, "enduring a pregnancy like that," and her mom puts her arm around her shoulders and squeezes.

"You'd do anything you had to if you wanted your babies as much," she corrected her daughter.

"And Alex's experiences really helped doctors studying problems in superhero pregnancies, so it's another small way she served. But I'm grateful you won't have to go through that, honey." God, me too. I wouldn't wish that on anybody. Then the interview ends and there's a voiceover as the credits roll that talks about the Wayne business empire and the Stark part of it. Both are healthy and vibrant and Stark Tech in particular continues to be on the cutting edge, supporting not only the
Avengers but other humans with abilities or mutations. It ends nicely, then Natasha, Ethan, Rose, and her fiance Robert make a surprise appearance in the library. They talk a little bit about the experience of participating in the making of the show and Natasha says blandly, "It was quite something. I really feel like I met my grandparents." I can't resist. We're at the back of the room up near the ceiling, so I make myself physical for a moment. The flapping of my wings to keep myself aloft gets the immediate attention of all four on stage and I wink before fading back into incorporality. There's a bit of a hiccup as they quickly recover, people in the audience turning around to see nothing, but then there are questions from the audience that the kids answer. Somebody in the audience, though, wearing a hoody, keeps looking over at my position. Finally, after the panel ends and the crowd begins to disperse, he flips off the hood and I see heart-stopping blue eyes that wink, seductive golden skin with an appealing beard scruff, black hair and that cherished grin aimed right at me. Before I can react, though, he walks away, losing substance as he does. Nobody seems to notice besides me and my friends.

"Was that him?" Irene gasped, and I nodded, speechless.

"Wow. He is, as we used to say, a fine figure of a man," Dagny said, fanning herself. "I thought you were exaggerating."

For the first time in awhile, my heart felt lighter. "Anybody want to go for ice cream?" I asked. "I happen to know where I can lay my hands on some cash legitimately." That idea got universal acclaim and we stopped off at Avenger Tower to retrieve the debit card I found in the small cache. Dagny had never had ice cream before. I used dirt to smudge a heart shape on the paper sleeve that covered the card and left it in the hidey-hole. I should have brought a pencil with me. Soon we were seated in an ice cream parlor--it was new to me, but they had good flavors--eating sundaes (we'd splurged) and talking about the show. Well, the others were, I mostly listened and offered careful verification or refutation of some of the content when asked questions that were crafted to make it sound like my opinions. We weren't alone; several other patrons apparently had watched the show as well and were talking about it. The reception was generally positive, but there were complaints that my character seemed overly idealized and a Mary Sue. I had to agree. My temper was non-existent in the show for one thing, although my descendants probably realized now how big a mistake that was. I snickered. I was never going to give Mother Theresa or Gandhi a run for their money.

After we finished, we walked out of the store, down into an alley, and faded back to Valhalla. We walked back to the compound in silence. "You know what I noticed from the people in the ice cream shop was that they seemed to really seize on the show as a diversion, like they were grateful for anything to distract them," Carol said.

I nodded. "There were still guard posts all over even though the gun emplacements have been taken out." I shook my head. "The unrest must be worse than I thought. I feel bad that it's gotten to that point. I wonder what on earth is the matter with people." We looked up as snow started to fall.

The next morning, I was summoned to Odin. "I understand that you have spent a considerable amount of time in Midgard lately," he said gravely. "You have contacted your descendants." He studied me and I nodded. "I would have thought that your vigils for your children at the times of their deaths would have cured you of the temptation to interact with your extended family."

I was silent a moment and then told him about the show. "I was furious that my life was going to be exposed like that, my personal struggles just put out there for anyone to gawp at." I told him the story of my poor great-granddaughter, and he chuckled. "So then the others wanted to see the show, and we watched it but not in body." I sighed. "And my husband was there. I saw him at the end."
Odin frowned. "And this is why you were warned about interacting with the mortals too much. You have seen one who is dear to you and now you will be discontented. Contact with others in spirit is NOT encouraged. Those who are chosen for a special purpose, like my valkyries, cannot afford the distraction of chasing after what was. You were given your powers to further your purpose, although you have a natural ability to shift realms. I would regret having to limit your activities."

"I have seen for myself that he seemed content," I said after a moment. "I can wait to see him again." Odin queried me with a look. "My personal hypothesis is that after the end of the world there's a possibility that the divisions between the afterlifes will be gone or at least much less firm. I think I'll be seeing him then."

Odin regarded me without expression. "Who can tell," he said eventually. "But I would have your word that you will not seek him and that you will keep your distance from your family. Go to Midgard for diversion if it pleases you; the others seem to have new energy from the experience, but never forget your primary purpose."

"I can promise that," I said, and Odin nodded, accepting my word. He didn't say anything about leaving judicious messages if I picked up money. I didn't mention it and I would be circumspect, nothing too overt or revealing. I left the god feeling better than I had for some time.

I stopped in Tony's workshop. For once, Tony was alone. "Where's Bruce?" I asked.

Tony jerked around, then crossed his arms and leaned against the bench as he regarded me. "He's installing the last lights in your library." I nodded.

"Well, I wanted to apologize for eavesdropping. I certainly didn't learn anything good. What I heard just hurt and made me question myself and what I thought we had together. I wanted to know if you thought that there was a possibility of salvaging our relationship."

"What brought this on?" he said, hesitating a moment.

"I want to be happy. You made me happy." I shrugged. I didn't want to bring up seeing my husband. Seeing him had kicked my butt into gear; he'd have wanted to know why I was just reacting rather than acting, but I didn't want to bring him into the conversation. I didn't want Tony to feel like he was second place, because he wasn't. "So take some time. Think about it. You know where to find me if you want to try again. I do." I said, straightening up from where I'd been leaning against the door jamb. "You're an exceptional man and I don't understand why you have such a hard time seeing all your good qualities, not just your intelligence." I bit my lip. "I love you, Tony, but I hate feeling jerked around. If you're done, just tell me. I'm up for working on our relationship, but you need to be serious about it too. Everything else we can discuss and negotiate. Tell me if you want your ring back."

I turned and left the shop.

I felt lighter and freer when I got to my shop. Honestly, Tony was a great guy but his issues sometimes made me feel like Sisyphus and his boulder. I didn't have anything pressing and the snow was falling so I abruptly ditched work, grabbed a clean work towel, and went to the hot springs. I was the only one there and celebrated having finally taken action with a soak in the pool while fat, fluffy snowflakes tickled my face. I soaked my stress away, enjoying the contrasts of temperature, until the early dusk started to fall. I hauled myself out of the pool, towelled off briskly, and dressed again quickly. On my way home I stopped by the hunter's place and picked up my new coverlet. It was gorgeous and well made, and he seemed very pleased with the blade I'd made him. I'd put a small knife down the center of the hilt as a bonus, something that he might use for precise work, and he seemed more excited about that than practically anything else. I understood; I liked the unexpected too. The coverlet was quite heavy and bulky, but I got it home.
without dropping it and spread it out over the quilt. So pretty. I went to dinner and held a hank of
yarn for Carol as she wound it into a ball after dinner while we all talked. The wind started to pick
up, and I decided to make an early night of it. I left the shutters open and watched the snow whip
by as I snuggled into the blissful warmth of my bed.

The next morning I was up early, energized by the previous day, and donned my nice fur cape for
the walk to the Great Hall for breakfast and then to my smithy. It was nice and warm there and I
was able to set up for my next project before going to Asgard for Magni’s lesson and a duel with
Hogun. Torunn was drawn to sparking flurry of the blades and her mother had to hold her firmly so
she wouldn't get hurt. After Hogun and I shook hands and he left for his duties, I requested that the
guards bring in a hay bale and produced some wooden shuriken. I wasn't crazy enough to teach
hand to hand to a tot who didn't understand how she could cause harm yet, but she couldn't throw
very hard and the hay bale was the only thing the wooden shuriken would stick in. It held her
attention longer than Sif or I thought possible. Sif and I brought each other up to date, drinking tea
(ugh. Coffee hadn't caught on in Asgard, regrettably. Damian would have loved the tea) and eating
delicious snacks. Sif remarked on the early winter they were having; our seasons coincided for
once, and she gave me a pair of thick felted mittens, lined with a soft, fluffy layer, with a wide
gauntlet to keep the snow out that was patterned in pretty soft colors. Sif mentioned that Magni had
been given command of a scouting squad by his father. He was thrilled to bits, but trying to cover it
with manly stoicism. We looked at each other and started to laugh. When I got back, I started work
on a switchblade. The Asgardian scouts moved quickly and quietly over territory to spy on enemy
encampments and movements and there were times when a small blade would be handy. Folding it
into his hand if he had to punch somebody would also add more oomph to the punch. And this was
a significant achievement and deserved to be acknowledged.

Several days later, at the end of our practice, I presented Magni with the blade and showed him
how to use it, switchblades not being a thing in Asgard. It was larger than the ones I usually made,
but he had big hands and it needed to be sized appropriately. The novelty of it captured his fancy
and the way his companions reacted to it made him smug. I couldn't look at Sif for fear we'd both
start laughing.

Torunn wanted to know when she could lead a squad, and Magni's companions started to laugh.
"Girls don't fight," one said scornfully. Sif's face grew glacial.

"Is that a fact?" she asked icily, and the boys shut up fast.

"My mother could defeat you," Magni told his friend, frowning. "Do not mock the abilities of
women." I felt like cheering. "And you overlook the abilities of the valkyrie who trains me and has
graciously imparted some knowledge to you." The kid looked at the floor, then yelped. Torunn had
decided she didn't like being told that she couldn't do what she liked, and threw a shuriken at the
boy. The wood object didn't stick, but she'd thrown it hard enough to bruise his leg. My eyebrows
rose.

"Remember what I told you," I said mildly. "You can only practice using the hay bale." Torunn
frowned, and her brother scooped her up and put her on his shoulder.

"Let us see if we can wheedle a sweet from the cooks," he said to her, and they headed for the door
to the kitchens. His friends looked after him, then, excluded by their attitudes, left by another door.

"I have great hope for the next generation," I said to Sif, retrieving the shuriken and dropping it on
the table.

She smiled briefly. "It is still difficult to be a woman here."
I considered that. "Torunn will always be of Asgard, but there are eight other realms open to her. She will find her place somewhere where she can be herself." Sif nodded, considering that, then smiled brightly.

"Perhaps her uncle Loki will have some ideas," she said. "He has to maintain a personal bodyguard, anyway. She will never be considered for rule in Asgard, and I would prefer that my daughter not have to clip her wings to fit in."

"I'd be happy to give him my assessment of her skills," I offered. She was developmentally the equivalent of a six year old on Earth but she was showing great potential. "There's a lot of time before she has to consider a career, but it might not hurt to expose her to possibilities. Maybe a visit to Midgard with her uncle would be helpful in determining if a life in another realm is at all appealing to her."

"Magni and his friends have never left Asgard," Sif said, sipping her tea.

"The cost of rule is high," I pointed out, and we were still laughing when Thor came in. After giving his wife a kiss, he wanted to know what was so funny. Sif summed up the events, and Thor frowned.

"I will speak with Loki," he promised his wife. "A short visit." Sif nodded. Thor looked at me. "What do you think?"

I shrugged. "I don't think there's one of the Nine Realms that is free of sexism, but it's also true that Midgard has a lot of opportunities for women that are lacking in more traditional societies. If she starts out as a bodyguard for Loki, he can keep an eye out for her as she adjusts to what will be a big culture shock. And there's a lot of conflict across the realms now, you know that. Her job wouldn't be just ceremonial. She has a lot of natural ability and she has the drive and interest to succeed, at least if she maintains the interest. My husband was well into his training by the time he was her age, and that's proof that a kid can learn a lot and develop a lot of skill. That training was too harsh for a kid, but certainly she could do more if she wants. And exposure to a different way of life might open up other interests. Loki would be able to nurture those interests quite well down the road."

Sif considered this. "We will discuss this," she said, and I stood to go.

When I got back to Valhalla, I found Tony in the smithy.
"What's up?" I asked, removing my cloak and stoking the fire expertly.

He shifted. "I wanted to apologize for hurting your feelings. Please hear me out." I looked at him and nodded. "I am a genius. You are not. These are facts. It's not that I think less of you, we're just on different wavelengths. And here, it's all I've got going for me and it's not a lot, tech here is pathetic. You, on the other hand, have adapted a lot better than I have. You've carved out multiple niches for yourself." He blew out a gusty sigh. "I'm kind of jealous of that. You're well-respected and talented, and I think that I'm envious of that too. And I heard you saw Wayne in the city. So now I just feel that it's kind of inevitable that I'm going to lose you. I don't know how to fight for what we have."

I take a moment to process this. It seems so... Tony. But also kind of universal. People have loved and been fearful of losing that love probably since the emotion was first felt. "I saw Damian, that's true, but there's nothing that can be done about it. We're not in the same place, and I gave Odin my word that I wouldn't go looking for him or contact him if I saw him. So there's no question of me going back to him, Tony. I know on Earth you had everything going for you and it must be a big adjustment coming here where you don't have those advantages." I walked over to him. "It's true that when we were working together, our lab kicked into high gear only after you hired the PhDs, and I appreciate that you didn't mention that. I'm not brilliant, I'm just hardworking, and I just really hate being behind the curve." I nudged against him, and he cautiously put an arm around me. "I want to be with you and I hope you want to be with me. I haven't forgotten how you took care of me, right from the beginning, that fight where Frigga tore me up, when I got back after the first big choosing of souls, when that bond was healing. I cherish that. You've always been supportive of me, and I feel bad that I overlooked that when I overheard a conversation. I don't believe that a relationship is something to fight over. It's something to be nurtured and tended and strengthened. You matter to me. That's a fact. And it might be that in the long run we don't work out. But I know that I always want to be friends with you because... I simply can't imagine my life without you there. You left a big gap in it when you died, you know. But I think I overreacted to what I heard because I'm insecure too. What does Tony Stark see in me? I never doubted that you loved me but it made me doubt that love was enough."

He turned and folded me into his arms. I put my arms around him and my head on his shoulder. "Collaboration works like that, Tiger. You did the groundwork in the lab with the algae and bacteria, and more people came in with different knowledge and abilities and together we were able to do some good work, and faster than if it had just been the two of us. You and I made that possible, working together in the beginning, creating the platform for development. So how did you and Wayne deal with it?"

"It helped that we weren't in the same fields at all. He was always available for a consult, like with that business plan he helped me with, and I translated some of the stuff coming out of the Wayne labs into less technical explanations for him sometimes, but for the most part, business was just that and we talked about other things. Our family was a learning process for both of us, and intelligence wasn't a question there. He was the authority at crime fighting, I was the authority at patching him up when he came home."

"Here there aren't as many diversions," Tony said, resting his head on mine.

"Maybe you should pick up some hobbies," I suggested. "Maybe you need more things to be obsessive over." He chuckled. "I do love you, Sparky. Let's see if love really is enough."
That winter was hard, snowdrifts over my head alternating with spaces blown bare by cruel winds. The paths were icy and the sun rarely shined. We all longed for spring, which seemed slow to get here. The winter had us in its merciless grip and refused to surrender to summer. We had to face the harsh truth that we weren't going to get anything planted this year and we had to do something to replenish our dwindling supply of food. There were caves rather far away; they were extensive and on the other side of the hot springs, so hydroponic gardening was suggested. Tony and Bruce started making the lighting, adjusting the light spectrum for plants, while the rest of us with any technical knowledge collaborated on the actual system; blacksmiths made pipe that was open at the top and the seeds were placed in a stretcher-like device, miniaturized for insertion into the pipe. Living quarters were established for teams to spend a week at a time out at the station, rotating in and out. The flocks were also brought to the pools for their safety and a ready water supply; the big predators were also suffering from the harsh winter and it was easier to defend them by the pools. Another part of the cave system was devoted to growing food for them and the winged horses. We'd have actually sent the horses off to another place in the Nine Realms, but all the worlds were in the grip of this particularly vicious winter. The sheep had to be shorn slightly; it isn't good for them to carry around too much wool, but they obviously couldn't be shorn completely. Our population was growing and resources would be scarce. There was concern that this was the Fimbulwinter, a period of three years of non-stop winter that was kind of a kick-off to Ragnarok.

The next time that I was in the city, I picked up the debit cart from the cache at Avenger Tower. I smiled slightly at the inclusion of a pencil, and on the paper envelope, I wrote "Ice cream for curious valkyries" above a notation in Damian's writing for pho and tacos. It made me laugh. Below that I wrote "Reference materials: Ragnarok." That should help indicate a possible research direction for everybody. I went to Barnes and Noble and cleaned them out of Norse mythology and comparative mythology. Stumbling under the weight of the bags and the slippery sidewalks under my feet, I went to the library and printed off a bunch of stuff from the internet, paying a surprisingly high cost for the printing. When I put the card back, I wrote "Thanks!!" on the envelope and went back home.

I found most of the valkyries in the library; it was warm, cozy, well insulated, and well lit. I put my bags on the table and got their interest immediately. "We don't have anything about mythology in our library, for some reason," I said. "And nobody's really talking about Ragnarok, but I felt that we need to plan. So I have books about it, and stuff off the internet. I figured that those who were interested could divide up the materials and research the end of the world." The valkyries were enthusiastic. Odin's refusal to talk about Fimbulwinter worried more than just us, and we didn't know why he wasn't preparing us. Tony and Bruce were there, along with the SOs of some of the other valkyries, and there were enough books that everybody got one. I took one on comparative myth and the printouts I'd made.

A week or so later, we met again to discuss what we'd learned. I brought Loki with me; as a scholar and someone who grew up knowing the prophesies of Ragnarok, I thought he could provide us with a more complete interpretation. He made us describe what we'd learned from the books and internet sources first. What a teacher. The summaries we'd read didn't completely agree with each other, due to differences in translation and interpretation. The stuff from the internet provided more detail that might not be accurate. But essentially, the first tip off was a rising level of incivility and fierce battles that were to rage for three years motivated by greed, no mercy was to be shown and kinship counted for nothing. That sounded an awful like what we'd seen in the Nine Realms prior to the winter. We'd all remarked about it and Loki confirmed that the rise in the what we'd seen had lasted for about three Earth years. Then there was this winter, which prevailed through all nine realms. It was a fierce winter, with an abundance of snow and wind and precious little light from the sun. No one could remember for sure the last time the moon was seen. I personally was starting to feel like an organism that spent its life in a lightless environment. The myths said that wolves ate
the sun and moon, but we all thought it was safe to think that this was a poetic way to indicate that there wasn't a lot of natural light, just shades of gloom.

"This should also cover a span of three years," Loki said. "If it is the Fimbulwinter and not simply an exceptionally long winter." We all groaned.

"We should consider the impact on our bodies when it ends," Holly, who'd been a medical researcher, said. She'd worked on diabetes which wasn't a concern here, but she'd still been to med school. "When the storms pass and we see the sun again, our eyes aren't going to be used to it. We may need sunglasses. It's a good thing we don't sunburn, because our skin will be very tender. I'll think about what we may need to do to ameliorate the discomfort." I nodded and jotted that down.

Following Fimbulwinter, the cock Fjalar will crow to the giants, the golden cock Gullinkabi will crow to the gods, and a third cock will raise the dead. Then there will be a huge earthquake that will level mountains, uproot trees, and unleash wild animals. The Midgard serpent will be enraged and make its way to shore, causing water to surge over the land. Fenrir and Loki will be freed.

"What does that mean?" Dagny asked, puzzled. "Are you under house arrest or something?"

Loki smiled thinly. "For my misdeeds, I should be chained to a rock with the entrails of my children while a serpent drips venom on my face. My wife is supposed to collect the venom in a bowl, but while she empties it the venom will continue to fall on my face, disfiguring me. So you can see why I have had incentive to keep my nose clean following that unpleasantness in my youth."

I stared at him. "But Sif says that fate is insurmountable."

"And I may do something unforgivable," he said heavily. "But I think--I hope-- that this may be a fiction that simply puts me in the designated place at the appointed time."

And that would be at the helm of the ship of the dead, Naglfar, which is said to be constructed from the fingernails of the dead. It will leave its moorings and sail, carrying the inhabitants of hell.

I looked at Loki. "Where's hell, then? I've never seen or heard about it."

"It is under the guard of my mother," he said. "You have seen her in her benevolent guise, administering to those who lived decent though not heroic lives. In hell, with those spirits, she appears as a living corpse and is consumed by the same dark urges of those she guards. She is said in the stories handed down to Midgard that she is half living woman, half corpse, but this description merely attempts to explain the duality of her nature and the two realms she rules. The souls she brought with her when she attempted to conquer Asgard came from hell. Following her attempted coup, she further separated her realms and they no longer have interaction, as you have seen for yourself."

Following this, the giant wolf Fenrir, flames leaping from his eyes and nostrils, will advance with the Midgard serpent to one side, dripping poison from its mouth. The sky will open and the suns of Muspell will ride. Sutr, their ruler who has been stationed at the frontier of Muspell, will ride at the front brandishing his flaming sword, brighter than the sun. Around him everything will burn. The sons of Muspell will advance into Asgard through the Bifrost, which will crumble under their weight. They will advance to Vigror, a plain spanning a hundred leagues in all directions, which will host the final battle. Fenrir, the Midgard serpent, Loki, and the frost giants will join the sons of Muspell.

"Wait, what's Muspell?" Carol asked, confused.
"One of the Nine Realms, Muspelheim. It is to the south of Midgard, which is between it and Niflheim. The Midgard serpent is known by the name Jormungandr."

"So what are the other realms?"

"Alfheimr, home of the elves, Asgard, Jotunheim, where the frost giants dwell, Midgard, inhabited by you humans, Muspelheim of the fire giants, Nioavellir, the fortress of the dwarves, Niflheim, which is the home of the dishonored dead, hell, Svartalfar, the black elves who created the fetters that hold Fenrir—they are no more, now that Thor defeated the last of them. And finally, Vanheim, where the Vanir live. They are gods, but different from the ones you know from Asgard, which are the Aesir. There's a lot of contact between the Vanir and the Aesir."

Then Heimdall the watchman will stand and blow his horn Gjallarhorn to summon the gods. They will hold counsel with the Norns—the Aesir version of the Greek Fates—one final time and Odin will ride to Mimir's well to consult. The World Tree, the great ash Yggdrasil will shake, sending fear throughout the Nine Realms. The gods and the Einherjer will advance to Vigrior.

"Mimir is the keeper of the well Mimisbrunnr, located at the roots of Yggdrasil," Loki said, anticipating the next question. "Mimir discovered the well, drank from it using the horn Gjallarhorn, and gained the wisdom of the ages. Odin earned a drink from the well by plucking out his eye. Heimdall will sacrifice his ear when he comes to collect the horn."

After everybody has assembled, Odin, protected by gold armor and armed with Gungnir, will lead the force against Sutr, Thor by his side. Fenrir will swallow Odin, killing him, and Thor will slay the Midgard serpent, dying after taking nine steps. The god Freyr—he of Thrimilcy—would battle Sutr but be defeated because he gave away the sword that might have done the job in order to marry his wife. I rolled my eyes. If you know that you're going to be facing the Big Bad, why do you trade away the sword that will take care of him? This guy had needed a better negotiator for the bride price, apparently. Garm, a snarling evil hound I'd never heard of, will fight Tyr and both will die. Someone named Vidar will avenge Odin by pulling Fenris apart. My lip curled. Ew. Loki and Heimdall will battle, each killing the other. Sutr will fling fire all over the Nine Realms so that it all burns and the barren land will sink into the sea. Smoke, flame, and steam will shoot to the heavens. Following that, at some point the land will reemerge, verdant and abundant; crops will sprout and harvests will be abundant. The earth will be repopulated from a couple who had sheltered at the root of Yggdrasil. Some gods will survive and others be reborn. Wickedness and misery will no longer exist and gods and men will coexist happily.

"There's a lot that seems to be missing," I said as we all thought this through.

"You can't expect every little detail to be nailed down," Loki pointed out reasonably.

"So what do you make of this, Loki?" I ask. "Because it really doesn't sound too good for you."

He smiled drily. "Unlike my sister-in-law, I believe that fate is not inevitable. If it were, why bother with any of this? Even if we all gather on the plain, we could all just listlessly clank our swords together, but this will not accomplish all that is said to happen. I personally do not plan to go quietly on Naglfar or face Heimdall in combat. We have spoken of this, Heimdall and I, and we have agreed to avoid each other at Vigrior as much as possible and see what happens." He shrugged. "It may be that Sif is correct and I am wrong, but just in case I am right, I will be prepared. And the prophesy only mentions the fate of a few." That gave me a lot to think about.

"So what's the timeline?" Serena asked practically, looking up from her notes. "How long from the end of Fimbulwinter to the plain of Vigrior?"
"No one knows," Loki shrugged. "It could be instantaneous or it could take awhile."

"This isn't as helpful as I'd hoped," I said, rubbing my eyes, and Loki chuckled mockingly. "What do we know about other mythologies?"

"Hard to say," Carol said. "Not all mythologies were recorded or survive. Mesopotamian myth doesn't seem to have a conception of the end of the world, just an unpleasant afterlife in a dark hole. The Greeks seemed to exist in the realms of Hades forever. The Egyptians seemed to envision an eternal life, but it took years to journey there. There's a battle between good and evil in Zoroastrianism that features the destruction of the world and final judgment of the dead. Hindu mythology posits a series of cycles that ultimately ends the universe and starts another, not that dissimilar from Mayan mythology as I understand it. Aztec mythology doesn't really seem to have an end of the world. Chinese mythology seems to tie into the mandate of heaven; Taoist belief professes the return of a messianic figure who will take the faithful, destroy the rest, and create a new society based on Taoist teaching. The destruction of the world is symbolic. There's a series of events running up to the end of the world for the Celts, bad things not dissimilar to the lead-up to Fimbulwinter; their afterlife is said to be quite nice, everlasting youth, beauty, health, abundance and joy. The Cheyenne believed that the world was supported on a huge pole. A beaver continually gnaws on it and when it gets all the way through, the pole will fall, spilling the world into an abyss, and that's the end."

"The Abrahamic traditions--Christianity, Islam, Judaism--all have some conception of the sinning world that is ended with a big battle between good and evil and various types of judgment," Heidi said. We sat at the tables, depressed.

"What do we do now?" Kelly asked. "Sit and wait?"

"I don't know that there's much else we can do," Irene said. "We need to wait til the end of Fimbulwinter, anyway. It's awful out there."

"We have to be prepared," I said. "We don't know how soon the roosters will crow or how long it will take for us to end up at Vigrior. We need to be ready. Yeah, it's awful out there, but even if we get hurt, the wounds will heal at the end of the day." But this was not a popular idea and I couldn't convince anybody to train.

"Well, at least we have a pretty good idea of what's supposed to happen," Carol said, and the meeting broke up. I thanked Loki for his help; he nodded and picked up his high-tech parka before slipping out the door.

The meeting split up after that and we dedicated a section of the library to the books we'd been studying so that everybody could have access to what information there was. I looked up Freyr before I left; he was associated with sacral kingship, prosperity, virility, sunshine, fair weather, depicted as a phallic fertility god. Sounds like we should maybe throw him a few extra feasts, see if he couldn't lighten the impact of these winters a bit. The story behind his sword was that he saw the beautiful Jotunn Geror and asked his page to woo her for him. The page said sure, but the price was the god's shining sword, which will fight on its own if the bearer is wise. So the god agreed, and the page went off to woo the giantess. Offers of treasures and soft words didn't move her; she only agreed to marry Freyr after the page threatened her with destructive magic. Nice. Tony accompanied me back to my quarters in the complex; the weather made the short walk more attractive and the sheer mass of the complex provided insulation to the rooms, making them cozier. Even so, fires were lit on the hearth of every room in use or banked until the owner came back to keep the rooms from getting too cold. Once the stone got cold, it took a long time to warm up. We drew the thick curtains around the bed for extra heat retention and snuggled into the bed; the fur
coverlet kept in the heat generated by our activities. We talked about the mythology but we had no answers.

The next time I went to Asgard, Thor was waiting with Magni and Torunn, who cuddled on her jittery father's lap. Sif was in labor. "Isn't it early?" I asked cautiously. I put a package on the table; I'd knitted baby booties and a cap, figuring it would be wise to get the gift out of the way, given the uncertainties of the winter.

"It is," Thor said grimly. So Magni and I practiced his hand-to-hand and weapons work and he shyly showed me the two swords that Hogun had given him. We had our first bout. As expected, with his lack of experience, he was terrible, but we worked on fundamentals. Hogun was a very gifted swordsman, but not really a teacher, so I helped Magni with some drills. You had to learn how to use both arms and swords, difficult for someone who trained up using a sword and shield. I gave him exercises to train his left hand, and turned my attention to Torunn. Thor had spoken with Loki, who approved the plan to add Torunn to his bodyguard when she got older, so today I presented her with a wooden version of a katana, explaining that it was ideal for guarding purposes since the goal of its use was economy in movement. Very helpful when you're trying to fight off attackers and get the person you were guarding to safety. I demonstrated the drills I still did every day with mine and worked with her until she could do them too. Thor and Magni watched with interest. The little girl should have looked ridiculous; the sword was nearly as tall as she was, but her concentration and determination prevented this. I praised her and suggested that she and Magni see if they could get a treat for their work. Both of them brightened up.

"What weighs on your mind?" Thor asked after the kids were gone. I explained the valkyries' research and my questions about fate. "I do not know if I believe that fate is unalterable," he said slowly. "Some of it might be, like the events that set Ragnarok into motion. But perhaps not the actions of men or gods. I confess I would prefer different fates for my brother and myself. But more definitive answers would have to come from the Norns. If they themselves know." I nodded, thinking.

"But, say, you were offered protective gear prior to the battle on the plains of Vigrior," I mused. His solemn face split into a grin. "I would give anything a try." I smiled back, then offered to check on Sif, if he'd like. Men were banished from the room when women gave birth on Asgard. Thor brightened and accompanied me to the room. The guard looked at him in exasperation but let me through. Sif tried to smile when she saw me but was wracked by a contraction instead. The contractions were very strong but not close enough for delivery to be immanent. She and the midwives were worried due to the earliness of the labor, but there was nothing that could be done. She looked exhausted. I went to the door and told Thor to bring a pitcher of ice chips. He bolted, glad to have something to do. When he came back, I sat on the bed beside Sif and fed her the ice. It provided a welcome minor distraction as well as some hydration, and I told her what Magni and Torunn had accomplished in practice. I stayed with her, and around midnight, her contractions abruptly sped up.

"Finally," she said, and I offered my hand to hold. Holy cow, that woman has a grip. By the time the kid actually started his grand exit, she was exhausted and sobbing. I hoped Thor had been moved along and wasn't hearing this. The midwives and I encouraged her, and finally the baby was delivered. There was an awful, heart-stopping moment of terror, then he--yes, it was the Modi of prophesy--yelled, a thin scream. Sif relaxed, and eagerly took her son the moment he was cleaned and wrapped. She smiled and cried, and I left her to her son and helped the midwives clean up. Then one of them smiled, and I opened the door. Thor fell through, his face anxious. I patted his shoulder and walked into the corridor. I was surprised to see chairs a little way down; one vacated, the others occupied by Magni and a drowsy Torunn. Magni sat bolt upright when he saw me.
"You have a brother," I said quietly. "Your mother is exhausted but she's fine too." He beamed and got up, jittering in place until his father bellowed for his other children to join them. They were off like a shot and I smiled and faded over to Folkvangr. I could control when I arrived, so I showed up at Emma's shop midafternoon with the announcement of Modi's birth.

"I remember Loki telling me about this when Thor went missing," she said, frowning. "Refresh my memory." After I finished telling her the condensed version, she nodded. "People here are nervous too, and Frigga isn't giving her opinion. Probably nobody wants to go out on a limb here until we see if these winters are three years long, I guess. So what's your plan?" She laughed. "Alex, you always take the long view, so I'm sure you have some thoughts. Tell me what they are and we can get planning."
"Well, there are a lot of fatalistic people who think that Ragnarok is just going to play out the way it's foretold, like Sif and Odin. But to me, that has holes because accounts differ. You'd think that if it really was immutable prophesy, that all the accounts would be exactly the same." Emma nodded. "Others, like Thor and Loki, seem to be more open to things not going exactly as planned. So I propose that we work with these people. The Midgard serpent is supposed to spray venom all over the place instead of being bitey, so personal protective gear for Thor as well as perhaps bite-resistant armor in case I'm wrong. Loki and Heimdall have agreed to avoid each other on Vigrior but maybe I can train Loki to be a better swordsman. And I think it's imperative that we all keep ourselves fit. The scrimmages have halted due to the weather. I haven't been doing as much work as usual because of the winter, but I need to get my head on straight. It's not like I can die in a training accident," I said, irritable with myself.

Emma grinned briefly. "I'll pass that last bit on to Steve and Bucky. They've both been slacking off too. But in the meantime, I'll start working with alloys for crush resistance, see what I can come up that will repel quantities of snake venom. See what I can do to make the best metal possible for weapons. And when you finish making them, I'll inspect them for defects." We discussed plans for trying to ascertain the views of others named in the prophesy, which actually didn't look good since neither of us knew most of them and some of them, like Odin, weren't talking about it anyway. She gave me some spice cakes when I left to go home and take a nap.

The next day, I started work on my physical conditioning. I quickly discovered that the best time to get out to the obstacle course was just before noon; for some reason, the winds weren't as fierce there at that time and I had to have the help of wings to get past some of the obstacles. Rather than resenting the terrible conditions, I decided to embrace them as challenges. Fighting the wind would make my wings stronger. I made an ice axe like climbers use to help get over obstacles and my fingers and hands would get stronger from ice climbing. Not giving in to the horrible conditions would strengthen my determination and discipline. No, not horrible conditions. Challenging conditions.

And following the adage of healthy mind in healthy body, I visited Earth a few times and ordered texts on metallurgy, hand to hand systems like krav maga, fighting techniques like la canne, information on winter camping, and spinning, weaving, and sewing. Claire Schaeffer's classic book on couture sewing techniques was in its umpteenth edition, and I was able to up my game with my dressmaking skills. Since cloth was severely rationed, we were changing the look of our clothes with alterations instead, and these techniques made everything fit and look better. The reading provided me with challenges to think about.

I nagged Loki into showing up for some of the practices with his niece and nephew. He didn't really want to, but when I pointed out that more skill increased his odds of surviving Ragnarok and defending himself against Heimdall, should it come to that, he reluctantly agreed. Torunn was not thrilled to have the guy she was supposed to grow up to bodyguard getting better at defending himself--I think she was worried he wouldn't need her after all--but when I suggested that perhaps she could use his progress to measure her own abilities against, she got more interested. I increased her training in ninjutsu as well, and brought in experts on Asgard to teach her how to survey geography and predict weather changes; the stuff I hadn't learned during my lessons because of the technology I'd had access to. I sat in on these lessons too. Both Loki and Thor tutored her in power hierarchies and the military (Thor) and other power centers like industry, trade, and education, and the rudiments of diplomacy (Loki). Magni sat in on some of these lectures too, but they were primarily for Torunn's benefit. She needed to have a firm grounding in the spheres of influence her
uncle traveled in. Magni was getting more intensive lessons from his father, but sometimes he would say things to his daughter that were worded differently or summarized things that made his son think, and the knowledge from Loki helped him to better understand the influence and importance of the other realms.

Sif was quick to recover from her delivery and, afterward, said that it had been nice to have a shorter pregnancy. Modi had kind of a shaky start as premature babies often do, but then he began to grow and flourish. In fact, he grew quite rapidly. Everyone was startled, but it was my private opinion that perhaps this was due to the prophesy that he would play a role in Ragnarok and the aftermath, and a kid just wasn't going to be able to do that. If this was correct, it also meant that our time was shorter than most suspected.

We were firmly in the second year of unending winter before the word "Fimbulwinter" ever publicly passed Odin's lips. And even then, it was an acknowledgment that this current weather appeared to be Fimbulwinter, not the beginnings of a plan. Because of course Odin didn't have a plan, he believed in unalterable fate. It made me really nervous.

So one day, after I'd finished my lessons with the princes and princess, I took off for Yggdrasil. Its location wasn't a secret; the World Tree was rooted in Asgard and if you spent any time there at all, you could see the great ash tree in the distance. I was going in search of the Norns.

The Norns were often described as weaving the fates of gods and men, but I'd come to think that this was a conflation with the representation of the Greek Fates. As I approached the World Tree, there was no evidence of any weaving. I folded my wings and walked the last bit to the Tree; its branches were so vast that it veiled the ground for a good distance all around it and the snow was almost nonexistent. Even in this dire winter, it was in leaf; healthy green shone through the snow on its boughs. As I drew closer, I saw three beings hauling buckets of water from the Well of Fate to Yggdrasil, splashing its trunk, bleaching it white with the purity and strength of the water, keeping it healthy and strong. According to the legends, anyway. But even if their actions weren't strictly needed, I guess everybody has to have something to do.

When I reached the clearing where no snow lay on the ground, I could see that one of the beings looked to be an old woman, one a young woman, and one was so heavily veiled that you couldn't see. Legend had that they came from Jotunheim, frost giants, but they didn't look different to me; they were bigger than humans, but so were almost every race in the Nine Realms. The veiled one dropped her bucket by the well and seated herself in one of three chairs around a fire. "Come, child," she said impatiently. "Your time is not limitless." I approached to a respectful distance and bowed to her. "Ask," she ordered.

I wasn't sure if there was a limit on the number of questions or the time I'd be granted if they decided to speak, so I went for the big one first. "What is the nature of fate?"

The veiled Norn laughed, a lovely, musical sound. "Well, that is the ultimate question, is it not?" Behind her, the other two Norns laughed as well. "Sit." There were only two chairs left, one for each Norn, so I sank to the ground and crossed my legs.

"Polite," the younger woman noted as she joined her veiled sister.

"Respectful," the older woman said approvingly as she took the third seat.

"The answer is both complex and simple," the veiled one said.

"Skuld," the younger woman sighed. "It's mostly just simple."
"Verdanti is correct," the older one confirmed. "Orlag is all. The rest is just interpretation, with a few facts thrown in."

"Urd refers to the universal eternal law when she mentions Orlag," veiled Skuld said. "Would you like to know what Orlag is, child?"

"Yes, ma'am," I said promptly, and the three Norn laughed.

"All things end." We sat in silence as I worked this over in my mind.

"So what comes after the end?" I asked. "The prophesy of Ragnarok says that Sutr will destroy the worlds and everything on them, but the land will reveal itself again eventually, lush and fruitful and the race of man will be reestablished by two who hid at Yggdrasil's roots. What happens to the rest of us? Is fate immutable and irresistible? What--"

And Skuld cut me off. "First, it will be helpful to understand the Norn, our purpose and power."

"We represent destiny as it is twined with the flow of time," Urd said, her voice deep and weighted with age. "Fate, necessity, and being. What do you know of us?"

"Well, that you're the source of the prophesy of Ragnarok, that Asgardians, the Vanir and the Aesir seem to mostly view fate as fixed, and that you tend the World Tree. It seems that you're confused with the Fates a lot. And that heroes in the sagas always blame you when things go wrong for them or when they're stupid," I said, summarizing my research. It had been light on the Norn in general.

All three laughed. "It is the nature of mortals to want to shift the blame when the outcomes they desire do not occur," Verdanti said, amused. "We are the source of the prophecy of Ragnarok, but what others do with the information we provide we cannot control."

"We shape destiny by divining the runes in Yggdrasil. The World Tree connects all the Nine Realms and these runes influence events. They do not control destiny. Come here." Skuld led me to the tree, placing her hand on the vast white trunk. Three runes sprang from the flow of runes up and down the bark. "Providing insight into your character, nature, and abilities, here we have Raidho, representing travel, spiritual and physical. Journeys, relocation, evolution, changes in place. Seeing larger perspectives and the right moves for you. Personal rhythm, world rhythm, the dance of life. It is joined by Kenaz, vision, revelation, knowledge, creativity, inspiration, technical ability, the vital fire of life, transformation and regeneration. Open to new strength, energy, passion, sexual love. These qualities are tempered by hard passages of life as shown by Hagalaz in opposition, stagnation, loss of power, pain, suffering, loss, hardship, sickness, and crisis. Well balanced overall in temperament and abilities, overall.

"And here, your current man. Uruz. Strength and speed, untamed potential. Great energy. Freedom, action, courage, tenacity, understanding, some wisdom. Sudden or unexpected change, usually for the better. Sexual desire, masculine potency. The shaping of power and pattern, the formulation of self. And Algiz, protection or a protector. The urge to shelter oneself and others. Defense, warding off evil, shielding, a guardian. Connection with the gods, awakening, higher life. Ability to channel energies appropriately, good instincts. This is offset to some extent by Tiwaz reversed, what happens when events turn against him and energy and creative flow is blocked. Mental paralysis, overanalysis, over-sacrifice, injustice, imbalance. Strife, conflict, dwindling passion, difficulties in communication, possible separation. A good pairing on many levels, particularly the sexual dimension and complimentary abilities of creativity and protection.

"But here, the man whose character, responses, and abilities are more finely matched to you. Fehu, possessions won or earned, earned income, luck. Abundance, financial success, hope and plenty,

I felt kind of sucker-punched. I could see truth in her words and felt a little naked. "And look here, other individuals capable of great heroism and influence, whose impact can be seen throughout the worlds." Other clusters of runes surrounded mine. Skuld dropped her hand from the bark and the runes resumed their movement through the tree. "Our work is to warn the gods of future events, teach them how to use the present and remind them of the lessons of the past. The gods cannot question or influence us; all flows from the universal external law." She was silent a moment. "Yet the gods, who used to be frequent visitors, especially Odin, have ceased their visits. We are powerful enough that they envied and respected us."

I heard a honking noise and looked over to see that some swans who had taken offense at my swan-feather cape had waddled over and were extending their necks and wings aggressively. "I'm sorry!" I apologized. Skuld laughed indulgently.

"We can possess them occasionally to interact away from Yggdrasil," she said. "They have not forgiven me for using their feathers to create your capes." My mouth dropped open and she laughed again. "Yes, the valkyries were designed after me by Odin. Before you, I rode to take the slain and decide fights. I showed Odin how to create the capes that give you flight, and how to give the abilities to interact with the mortal realm and choose the heroes, creating the bonds between you and him, but anchored in the Tree, ultimately. After those who should have known better confused us with the Fates, I took advantage of it and began to guide the weaving of the valkyries before the battle to identify the chosen. I still select the fallen but have passed the retrieval to your group of sisters." She led me back to the fire, resuming her seat as I thumped down onto the ground. This was information I'd never heard a whisper of.

"But regardless of our power and the strength of the pull of fate, humans and gods alike can change their fates," Urd took up the conversation. "Child, no being is chained to fate like a slave. The only real power that fate has is what gods and men choose to ascribe to it."

"Gods can only act within time although they can sometimes foresee what is to come. They are powerless to prevent anything, however, since truth cannot be changed," Verdanti said. I sighed. I'd gotten mixed up somehow. "There is a difference between fate and truth," she said. "Events will occur that none can stop, such as the appearance of Sutr with the evil souls emptied out of hell. That is truth. It is also truth that Odin will be present and he will die. However, this is truth because he has made it so; his belief that Fenrir will consume him is absolute."

"Fate is a mixture of truth and belief," Urd said. "We provide the most likely predictions based on the conditions at the time. When Odin asked us for the fate of the world, we had no hint that man would become as powerful and influential as they have." She nodded to me. "Simply with your questions you are changing fate. Loki and Thor do not accept fate as inevitable. This belief will change outcomes in the fight on the plains of Asgard."

"The truth is that the world as we know it will end. It is not the truth to say that the end is absolute. The truth of how this comes about is not set on a firm timeline; time is mutable to some extent," Verdanti said helpfully.

"Put another way, the cocks will not crow the moment the Fimbulwinter ends," Skuld said. You will not all ride for Asgard the moment the cocks crow. Remember, the third cock raises the dead,
and that does take time of itself. So, my daughter, if I were to give advice--"

"Which we seldom do, the truth is that everyone must interpret it for themselves--" Verdanti interrupted, and Urd nodded.

"If I were, I would advise preparing for the coming events in the best way that you can devise. Be ready and prepared. Fortune favors the prepared, I heard somewhere, and you have a knack for knowing what is needed. Keep an open mind, stay alert, and be willing to fight for the outcome you desire." Skuld finished.

"It is interesting to see the preparations of all," Urd said blandly. "Others, with other beliefs, prepare as well. Everyone faces the same immutable truth--the end of the world as is known. But the forces that will be faced vary according to their beliefs. Or their placement. There are those like you, who do not worship the gods you live among, but you accept their reality, which is, in the final analysis, what is needed far more than mere belief in their existence. What lies beyond the end of the world is not really known. Prophesies were made at one point, but prophesies can change as the circumstances that surround them change. Interpretation is everything." I flashed for a moment to the prophesy in the Harry Potter books.

I couldn't think of anything else to say, so I stood and thanked the Norn for their guidance, bowing last to Skuld. Urd and Verdanti smiled.

"Come back if you have more questions," Urd invited me. "The company is welcome."

"Thank you," I said, and took a step backward before turning and trudging back into the snow. I flew back through snow driven by battering winds and found Loki in the courtyard. He looked curious. As half Jotun, he was unconcerned by the temperatures or the snow.

"It is late for you to be here, is it not?" he asked.

"It is, but I didn't want to wait to have to track you down later. I just came from the Norn," I said, speaking quietly. "We were right. Fate isn't fixed. If you'd like to know more, go visit them. They're very nice and not nearly as confusing as I thought they'd be."

"Well, well," Loki said slowly. His green eyes brightened.

"It would be worth both you and Thor going," I suggested, and his grin was a lovely thing to see.

"Another thing," he said. "I will be bringing Torunn back to the city with me for a brief visit. This will probably become a pattern. Would it be possible to shift her instruction there?"

"Don't see why not," I said. "Will this be at the embassy?"

"Yes, it will be a way to ease her into Midgard customs and experiences. She will be able to interact with my current bodyguards as well as the embassy security." We discussed timing, as he wanted to be there for the first lesson so there would be no misunderstandings, and I went back to Valhalla.
Revelations

I had a lot to think about when I got home and went inside the complex, shaking my wings inside. "Wow," said Iris, a newer valkyrie who came in after me. "Your wings are huge. Did they grow or something?"

"No, I've just been using them a lot," I said.

"But the weather is terrible."

"Provides more opportunities," I said briefly. "Ragnarok is approaching and I have to be ready."

"Why just you?" she asked. "Why are you saying it like that?"

I raised an eyebrow at her. She'd been in the library during the valkyrie discussion. "Because I urged the rest of you to train harder or at the very least not slack off, but nobody sees the need. And that's up to you, but I don't know how long it will take after Fimbulwinter for Ragnarok to come. I'm not counting on having enough time to get battle-ready. I can't force anybody to work, I'm just responsible for myself, and whatever comes, I'm going to be ready." She frowned and went to her rooms in the other wing, and I went to mine. My hair was wet from the melted snow and I wanted to dry off.

When I got to my room, Tony was there, building up the fire. He dried my hair for me and we talked about what I'd learned about Ragnarok from the Norns. I didn't mention the rune stuff, partly because our relationship wasn't on the firmest footing, and partly because I didn't remember enough to really explain it like Skuld had. And ultimately, what difference did it make?

"Gotta say that I'm relieved," he said when I was done. "I don't like predestination or unchanging fate. I'm nobody's puppet. Nobody's got their hand up my butt."

"No, you are not," I said, smiling. Then we went to dinner. One advantage to walking is that you can wear a hood that stays up. I was nice and warm still when we got to the Great Hall. We had tucked into our meal when Serena and Bruce joined us.

"Iris is peeved with you," Serena said, picking up her fork. "She says you accused her of slacking off."

"Is it an accusation if it's true?" I asked. "Because the only time she leaves the compound is to retrieve souls and to come to the hall for meals. This is Fimbulwinter, and sometime soon, we're going to be engaged in a fight with the highest of stakes. She's not going to be ready. She's not even studying strategy or tactics." Serena flushed. It was what she was doing as well. I shrugged. "Everybody has to decide for herself how she's going to represent herself on that final day. I prefer to be ready."

"Not everybody runs combat classes or has a smithy to work in," she said.

"That's an excuse. Most of my workout happens up on the obstacle course. I read, stuff to engage my brain, help me make better blades, but also military history and works by great military thinkers. Last time I was in the city, I dropped by the library and researched information about the Army's War College. I'm about at the point when I can go there some night and study their resources too. I've been just going where the generals direct during the scrimmages, but who knows what will happen at Vigrior? Fortune favors the prepared," I said, smiling slightly.
"I'd listen to her," Tony advised, taking another bite. "One of her mutations was what the X-Men called "enhanced preparedness." It seems to have followed her into the afterlife too."

"What's that?" Bruce asked. He's always interested in other people's mutations. Talking about them is kind of bonding.

"Professor Xavier said that it's an weird little gift, and easily underrated. Limited precognitive ability, limited keen tactical awareness. But mainly, it's the ability to be prepared for emergencies. Survival by being prepared. In life, I never forgot to put my phone on the charger or lost a credit card. More importantly, when I listened to my gut, I didn't misstep. It helps me to anticipate my opponent's moves in combat. The only times I've been killed here were when an opponent unexpectedly entered the game. It's not perfect, but it helps a lot. My father-in-law had it too, but his was a natural gift, not an induced mutation."

"What's it telling you now?" Serena asked, her anger forgotten.

"To get out there and train as hard as I can." The humor dropped from my voice. Every time I thought about the subject, there was a strong urge to do as much as I could, with the decided feeling that it still might not be enough. I tapped my fingers. The urge manifested itself in a twitchy feeling. And I decided that the next day I'd go visit my uncles and not take no for an answer. Maybe Bucky needed a reminder about that little quirk of mine too.

"But the obstacle course? That's got to be really dangerous." Bruce asked, frowning. I shrugged.

"You can only die once," I said, with a slight joking edge to my voice. "But I've adapted. I have an ice axe to help me get over, through, and around the obstacles. I'm stronger now than I've ever been. And the two of you need to...do something." I shook my head. "I don't know what. But it wouldn't hurt for you to do more physically." The twitchy feeling lessened a bit.

Tony sighed. He too preferred the warmth of his shop. "I suppose it wouldn't hurt."

"I can only tell you what I think," I told him. "I can't make you do anything, but I just can't shake the feeling that time is short. Not that change is imminent, but that it's coming sooner than we think it will. And we are not ready." It was that last bit that knotted my stomach up.

When we got back to the compound, I stopped by the library where most of the valkyries were gathered. Many of them looked at me coolly, so I guessed Iris had been busy spreading her story. "I spoke with the Norn today."

Serena gasped and punched my arm. Ow. "You didn't mention that at dinner."

"No, it's something for everybody to hear and judge for themselves," I told her, rubbing my arm. "What they said is that there are things that will happen. These are facts, like the battle at Vigrior. They are unalterable. The prophesy about Ragnarok came a long time ago, but a lot's changed since then. They said that fate is not fixed. They prophesied what they saw but events don't have to unfold the way that popular belief says that they will. Given this information, combined with the big gaps in the original prophesy, I think that all bets are off the table. We need to be as prepared as possible when changes occur. The timing of the events isn't nailed down; nobody, even the Norn, knows how long after Fimbulwinter it will be for the cocks to crow or even if they crow simultaneously or at different intervals. Or how long after that Heimdall will summon us to the plains of Vigrior. All that's been said about the valkyries is that we ride to battle, the first of Odin's forces. So, it's true that I think Iris has been taking it too easy. Yeah, the weather sucks, but you simply can't count on there being enough time to get back into fighting condition. Or that the battle at Vigrior will happen in nice weather."
"So what are you doing?" Heidi challenged me.

"Work, combat with the princes and princess of Asgard and a few others, work in my smithy, but mostly running the obstacle course. It's almost impossible. Almost. But I use an axe to help me get through the obstacles. It hurts when one of my wings are wrenched by the wind or I fall, but my wings and I are stronger and tougher than ever. And I'm not neglecting what's behind my eyes, either. I'm studying warfare too. I want to be able to give it all when the time comes, everything I have to give." There was some general murmuring. I shrugged.

"I can't make you do anything, and Odin, who could, is gripped by the notion that fate can't be changed. But I have my pride. Aren't I a valkyrie? Whatever happens, I want the survivors of Ragnarok to tell the story of Alex, how she fought at Vigrior and brought honor to the valkyries. You all do what you want. But if you doubt what I say, you should pop over to Yggdrasil and speak with the Norn yourself. One of them came up with the idea of the valkyries--she was the one who originally gathered the heroic dead and agreed to pass that knowledge to Oden and thus to us--and she's easy to talk to. Just be polite." The others gaped at me and chattered among themselves, and I went to my quarters with Tony. It had been a big day and I wanted to relax with him.

The next morning my first stop was Folkvangr and I ultimately tracked down my uncles at their home. They were taking it easy. "Sweetie, come join us," Bucky said, indicating a sofa. I perched on the edge of it nervously.

"What's up, Alex?" Steve asked. "This doesn't look like a social call."

"It isn't." I blurted out most of what happened with the Norn, once again leaving out the rune stuff. That was personal and unrelated to Ragnarok. "I don't know what will happen after Ragnarok, nobody does, really. I just know that we're not ready, and I'm here to beg you to get up off your butts "and start preparing."

Bucky frowned. "You just said that nobody really knows what's going to happen. How can you be so certain?"

"Uncle Bucky, remember when you took me to be tested by Professor X and Dr McCoy?" I leaned forward, clasping my hands. His face cleared and he looked enlightened.

"I don't remember," Steve said pointedly, and Bucky ran down the essentials. "So you think it's that precognition thing?" Steve said, turning this information around in his head.

"I do," I said fervently. "I've learned not to ignore it. The last time I did, I got a phone call from the police telling me that my husband was dead. I was going to tell him not to go out that night but I worked later than I planned, and he'd already gone when I got home." Steve looked thoughtful and I changed my tack.

"Well, I'm doing my teaching and working at the smithy, but I'm also up on the obstacle course most days, but maybe that's a valkyrie thing, that drive," I goaded them. That stung.

"How many are up there?" Bucky asked me, sitting upright.

"Well, just me," I had to admit, mumbling. The men started to laugh.

"If you feel that strongly about it, I'll start working," Bucky promised, coming over to give me a hug.

"Good," I said into his shirt. "Because you're kind of squishy, which is awesome for hugs but not survival." I looked up at him anxiously. "You don't have to try the course if you don't want to. Just
start swordwork again, go from there, build up stamina," I urged. I glanced at Steve. "I'm also planning on breaking into the Army War College some time to further explore tactics and strategy."

"I'm in," Steve said immediately. "Wouldn't hurt to learn more, and I expect things have changed since I fought."

"I'll let you know when we're going. Serena's coming too," I said, and he smiled. He liked his successor.

"Might not hurt to try to get Frigga to start up the scrimmages again, now that Fimbulwinter's been acknowledged," Bucky said to Steve. Steve nodded, and I went on my rounds, content that I'd done what I could there.

After that, I had to bide my time. My words got through to some of the valkyries; a couple of them joined me on the obstacle course, including Serena plus Bruce, Steve, and Bucky. More of them started weaponswork again, using the disused weaving shed for a salle. Despite its name, the shed we wove in was a large building, well-built to keep off the weather, and possessed of stoves rather than open fireplaces; once the looms were moved to the sides, there was plenty of room for several people to practice. Not all of them did, though, but there was nothing I could do about it.

When we were as sure of the layout of the War College--where the library was--as we could be, Serena and I picked up Steve and popped over for a look-see. I had money for copy machines and a personal communicator--the successor to smartphones--that had an excellent camera. The War College was still located in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, and I used to know that area pretty well. Mom and Dad were Revolutionary War buffs and we went all over the state and surrounding area to tour battle sites, and we went to the library at the War College to access materials once; Mom had a Redcoat ancestor who was a prisoner of war, and she'd found his name on a document. We poofed in after midnight--the library was still open to the public, but we lacked ID, and somehow I didn't think that the Army would be thrilled with the explanation that ghosts wanted to learn about military strategy for a future Armageddon-style event, even if two of us were Captain America.

Our plan hit its first snag when we materialized. That is, Serena and I materialized; Steve wasn't able to outside the Norse afterlife. Steve was disappointed, but I flicked on the copy machines to warm them up and Steve went off with Serena. Because I didn't have a military background, we agreed that I would look for more general material that could be adapted to low-tech units. That pretty much stopped us at the Vietnam war; beyond that, the tech started to take over, and we didn't have tech beyond gunpowder. I knew Tony could make the gunpowder, but we were also limited in how that could be applied since we didn't have large-scale manufacturing capability. So rather than wandering around uselessly, I went online--some things don't change much, thank heaven, it was still easy to search--and got a list of references to check. Then I cross-referenced with what was still in print and ordered a crap ton of reference works on battle strategy through the ages to be bought and picked up at the Barnes and Noble in the city.

Sending Steve and Serena off by themselves had been a bad idea in terms of work product. I found them going over records of the Battle of Soissons in WWI, which was where Steve's dad had been killed. They looked up guiltily, and I was about to remonstrate, then thought better of it. "Take your time," I said instead. "You know, you and Serena can come back on your own." I thought that over and smiled. "Steve, you're incorporeal, and Serena can make herself so; there really is no rush and we might get better information that way." I was getting more enthusiastic. They both relaxed and brightened up; Serena and I made copies of some case studies that were in older textbooks, and we poofed back.
Steve took the copies we'd made and Serena and I went to the Barnes and Noble, aiming for a point after the books I'd ordered had arrived. We stopped at the Starbucks after picking up the bags of books and warmed up with coffee and sandwiches, both outrageously expensive. But winter was affecting the availability of food here, and I felt guilty about buying mortal food, although the cases had a decent amount of food in them and the store wasn't crowded. It might just be that not many people could afford these luxuries any more. We looked at the bulletin board on the way out; it had notices for several soup kitchens. One was sponsored by the Wayne Foundation. There were other notices for public lectures and concerts with modest admissions fees. From what we'd overheard in the stores, this kind of live public interaction was the most popular entertainment around. Movies and TV shows were very limited because it was too difficult to shoot on locations—there was snow everywhere, even around the Equator—and power was rationed; there wasn't enough for the lights for a large number of productions. So people stayed home or they went to large gatherings. Some of the lectures addressed Ragnarok. Without speaking about it, we walked out into the driving snow and reappeared outside the lecture hall; it was on the Columbia campus. We sat in the back after I paid the admissions fee for us both and listened. It was good to know what people thought, although it was just a rehash of what we already knew with no real answers. Afterward, I put the remaining money and debit card back into the cache at the tower with notations for the War College, Barnes and Noble, and the Ragnarok lecture. I added a note that warned that Ragnarok was coming, that it wasn't going to necessarily go by the book, and that nobody knew what would happen after the battle, but that I was proud of the work the Foundation—and by extension, the family—was doing.

The next time I checked, Damian had written a sarcastic "YAY!" after the comment that I didn't know what would happen. An unfamiliar hand noted that the information wasn't terribly helpful. I shrugged. "You know what I know," I wrote in response on the first page of a little notebook that had been left there. "I don't even know if there will be a direct impact on Midgard; the battle is set for Asgard. Hopefully you guys will be sitting on your asses tanning while I'm swooping in, armed to the teeth, glorious in battle. Maybe I'll send you a postcard." I grinned at the thought, then put on some of the lipstick I wore when I was in the mortal world and left an imprint of my pucker on the page.

We entered the third winter with the hope that it really was the last one and dread for what would eventually follow. I was getting tired of the limited foods that we could grow hydroponically and the limited activities that we had. I focused on training, making a supply of weapons for me and my family and close companions; after I finished outfitting them to my satisfaction, I'd stockpile weapons for others. I also listened and learned as Steve and Serena distilled the knowledge that they were developing into combat strategy and tactics.

And FINALLY Frigga succeeded in baiting her husband into beginning the scrimmages again. It was a disaster. Most of the warriors weren't in good shape anymore and it was difficult to coordinate movement due to the noise from the wind. But Odin was embarrassed by our showing, and finally instituted training. Serena and I were assigned to get the valkyries back up to snuff, and with that endorsement, we had a free hand. Unmoved by threats, curses, or crying, we drove them over the obstacle course and weapons training outside, in the wind and ice and snow. Serena was going to lead the practices indoors, but I pointed out that we'd be fighting outside, against beings from a realm of fire. We couldn't practice with the heat, but I was sure that they'd be wind. Conditions would be adverse. Serena nodded and we led the practices in areas where the snow was almost cleared from the ground by the wind as well as deeper snow. My operating theory was that if we trained in the worst conditions I could find, we'd be ready for bad conditions in war. And if the conditions weren't as bad, we'd be even better off. I met Steve and Bucky on the obstacle course from time to time, but they were in charge of training Folkvangr forces and had their own responsibilities.
In my smithy, I planned and overplanned. I had quiversful of arrows, half a dozen spears, a dozen javelins, throwing knives, shuriken by the gross, and was making chain mail to supplement my armor. I had backup swords for my uncles as well as daggers for them, a sword, armor, dagger, and shield for Bruce, an extra sword and dagger for Serena as well as some chain mail for her, and started to make swords, daggers, and arrow and spearheads as a stockpile. Emma kept me supplied with alloys for the most important work, and together we created crush-proof armor for Thor, a couple of swords for Loki as well as better armor, improved armor and weapons for Sif and Magni, Torunn, and Modi. We had no luck finding protection against snake venom, though, and ultimately, I asked Loki to buy Thor a Tyvek suit that would provide the most protection along with an impact resistant plastic face shield—I could modify a helmet to provide attachment points—and Tyvek booties and gloves. It was the best we could do, and when he took receipt of them, I warned him not to put them on until he saw the snake; there's only so much even advanced Tyvek can withstand, and it wouldn't be worth much if it got cut in the fighting prior to the Midgard serpent. I made parts for Tony's inventions; he was working on cannon primarily; it was tedious and time-consuming to drill the bores. I did a lot less soul retrieval in acknowledgement of my other responsibilities. We were getting a lot of new souls; they strained our resources but I was glad to have them. My stockpile of extra weapons was soon depleted and the other forges were running almost around the clock to keep up with demand.

I dragged into my room one night, exhausted after a morning of training the heirs of Asgard and an afternoon working with the valkyries, to find Tony standing by the fireplace in our room in the complex. He brought me a towel and helped dry my hair after I changed into dry clothes and sat in the chair by the fire to warm up. "Look, Tiger, I don't know how to say this," he said, crouching at my feet. "So I'm just going to say it. I love you, you're always going to be special to me, but I'm not in love with you anymore."

It was a shock, but I realized that it wasn't wholly unexpected. We'd been drifting apart with the demands of preparing for the end of Fimbulwinter and the beginning of Ragnarok. But I wasn't quite ready for our relationship to end, and Tony took me by surprise. I asked him to go so I could deal with it; I felt pain and rejection and hurt, and I didn't want to guilt him into staying with me. It was some time before we could sit down and talk about it. But he reassured me that I was still critically important to him. "It's a lot to ask," he acknowledged, "but I depend on you in my life. You listen to me, you understand me, we work together like hand in glove, and... I like spending time with you. It's just that the romantic part of us has run its course." There wasn't anybody else, so I wasn't being chucked for a newer model, at least. And while I hadn't always liked and respected Tony, from the time I'd started to work with him after college, I had. And that respect, admiration, and friendship had grown throughout my adult life and into the afterlife so after the hurt faded, we still had a really steady foundation to fall back on. It was a difficult transition, at least for me, but we made it through just fine. We spent nearly as much time together as we had before, and if my nights were lonely, usually I was too tired to care. I was still the best conditioned valkyrie, certainly the strongest and most skilled warrior. And all that took effort that I was happy to give.

It was right after I'd achieved equilibrium, finally, that Odin summoned me to speak with him before dinner one evening. He gave me a special commission—to make the armor he would wear into battle on the plains of Vigrior. His only direction was that it had to shine gold in the light. The other smiths were furious that I'd gotten the nod over those with more experience, but I gave them a chunk of one of Emma's alloys and told them if they could work it successfully, I'd yield to them. A week later, they returned the metal; it was scarred and had been heated, but not successfully shaped. I soothed the hurt feelings with an offer to let them engrave the armor when it was made. They accepted the face-saving work, and that was that. I took my time; Emma and I worked together on the design and fabrication; the armor needed frequent fitting as it was created, and
Odin seemed to really like what we came up with. As each piece was finished, I sent it to Reginn with special tools capable of cutting the metal, and he returned the armor engraved with stunning knotwork. The armor was gold-washed—electroplated not in gold but the golden Asgardian metal they used so much which was much more durable—and one night before dinner, I presented Odin with the armor he would use to lead us into battle at Ragnarok. I sat at his right hand at dinner for a week, a substantial sign of his favor.

Bucky was pissed that Tony had ended our relationship, but Steve told him bluntly that it was none of his business. After that, Bucky was still pissed, but at least managed civility when he talked to Tony. He coddled me, inviting me for dinner with Emma, Steve, and him, making sure I had all the hugs I needed. Steve was also more huggy, but this uncle sat me down and gave me individualized tutoring covering the materials he and Serena were studying in the War College. They’d almost been caught once, but Serena faded into invisibility and the guard had looked around, shaken his head, and returned the reference material to a cart for reshelving. Steve was a good teacher, and I learned a lot. In turn, I imparted these lessons to my students, Magni, Torunn, and Modi. All three kids had had growth spurts and now Torunn was spending about half her time on Midgard with her uncle. Her parents missed her terribly, but she was learning a lot. Loki’s other bodyguards knew better than to laugh at her after she kicked the ass of a couple of them in training bouts, and her training as part of the protective detail was going very well. I continued her weapons training, her hand-to-hand, and found her an instructor in ninjutsu like I’d had, to provide her with extra skills. The other bodyguards turned their noses up at these tricks, but she thought they were idiots and threw herself into learning. Loki, of course, liked that she had non-traditional, sneaky skills.

Soon, the Yule celebrations approached. We were halfway through our last season of Fimbulwinter.
Changing

This year the yule celebrations were mostly quiet and more devout than usual. Frigga came, as usual, for Mother's Night, the first night of the twelve, the night of the solstice. And for once, there was a brief gap in the clouds and a cessation of the snow that allowed us to actually see the moon and hope to see the return of the sun. The traditional vigil was kept in silence in the Great Hall and I think most everybody was wondering if this was the last time we'd celebrate Yule. All of our celebrations in this third year of Fimbulwinter had the same depressed air to them although the veneration was sincere. Mother's Night then kicked off eleven days of feasting (moderated for the foods that we had available), dancing, and gift giving. A sun wheel was burned in the hope that we would see the sun return (obviously this was going to happen, the sun hadn't gone anywhere as evidenced by the fact that the planets were still in orbit, but the shades of darkness we lived in were extremely depressing). Because all the Nine Realms as well as the halls of the afterworlds were slowed to match the march of time in Valhalla, everybody was celebrating Yule at the same time and we traded off festivities with Folkvangr. It was nice to spend holidays with family. I went to Helheim with a gift for Hela, not wanting her to be forgotten for her kindness even if she wasn't currently there. I spent one of the nights of the season in her halls. And for the first time since I'd been in Valhalla, Odin authorized the Wild Hunt.

The point of this Wild Hunt was less to actually hunt anything or anyone but as a harbinger of great storms which in this case meant change as well as the terrible storms that were blanketing the earth. Normally the valkyries didn't take part in this, but for this one that had so much significance we were allowed to come, and I found myself perched on the back of an immense black horse like the rest of the riders. Where the horses or the great hounds that accompanied us came from, I had no idea. But Odin sounded a horn, and as the Master of the Hunt led us out. The landscape of Midgard whipped by as we galloped, the hooves of the horses not even touching the ground. Modern people had lost their fear of the Hunt, and I could see them taking pictures and watching from inside as we passed. The wind keened as we rode, and anyone unlucky enough to be on the streets as we passed was taken up and set down a distance later, scared but unharmed. It was especially weird to see Odin's eight-legged steed Sleipnir run.

On Christmas Eve, I went to Midgard and, feeling like a creeper, watched the family for a little bit. More time had passed than I was aware, apparently, as I didn't recognize the Waynes who were gathered for the festivities. I sighed and returned to Valhalla.

After that, there were a few smaller festivals, like the one for Thor, but otherwise, it was nose to the grindstone again. It was at this time that Magni was named as a Captain of the Royal Guard. The next time I went to Asgard, I studied him as he led a practice for his unit. He'd really grown up, and was a handsome young man who favored his father in looks but who was, by all accounts, less hot-headed than Thor had been in his youth. He was disciplined and strong. At the end of his lesson, I presented him with the dagger I'd made and that we'd bet on. He seemed thrilled that I'd remembered. Then I smiled and gave him a bigger one.

"We bet on the little dagger, and it's yours because you earned it fair and square. But this one is sized for your hands now." He had much bigger hands than he'd had as a kid and it would have been awkward for him to use the small dagger now. I'd designed the new one especially for him; beautifully figured walnut for the scabbard and hilt, bright-polished metalwork, and intricate knotwork etched into the blade. I'd had a lot of practice since I'd made the little dagger, and this was better, plus I'd used some of Emma's strongest alloy. I set an immense tigers eye cabochon into the pommel for a little manly glitz. Magni studied this unexpected gift closely and his grin nearly split his face. "Well done, Captain."
I smiled indulgently as Magni took off after a bow to me, clutching both daggers. "What did you bet on?" Torunn asked.

"If your brother learned to lead responsibly and well, I'd give him the dagger. It was less a bet and much more of an incentive. He was a little too eager for glory in battle." She looked a little forlorn. I smiled. "Tell you what. You earn a place in your uncle's bodyguard, and I'll make a blade for you," I said, and she eagerly accepted. I'd have to get going on it; I spoke frequently with Loki's guard captain and he kept me up to date on her progress. It wouldn't be long before she was ready. The captain wasn't thrilled to have a woman joining his force, but he was a fair man and when she earned her place, she'd be accepted.

Modi, when I saw him next, was having a temperamental teenage mood. His mind wasn't on the lesson, so I sat him down and we talked. It wasn't easy growing up in his brother's shadow. Magni was well-liked and outgoing, a version of their father, and Modi was more like his mother in temperament, more guarded unless among friends. He had real responsibilities but unlike his brother, no tangible inheritance of rule. "And don't think to warn me of my uncle's misdeeds," he said, sighing. "I've heard it all, and truthfully I don't wish my brother harm. I love him and wish for his success. I just want my own place in the world. Where I'm not just the spare after the heir, or that I'm just here because of a prophecy that names me."

I was silent a moment, considering what he said. "I understand your desire to be recognized for your own merits," I said finally. "It isn't too early to consider what role you want to fill when you're a man. You will be a skilled warrior too, and you're smart; you could rise to become a general in Asgard's army. If that's what you want to do. You could also learn from Loki's experience and carve out a different role for yourself. Identify a need and fill it. And don't forget that we will be facing Ragnarok sooner or later. There might be whole new opportunities that neither of us can anticipate after that is over. My advice to you is to figure out what you're interested in and what you're good at. Then consult with people who have experience or knowledge in those areas, and start to craft your future. You don't have to be relegated to the spare unless you want that or fail to act to earn a different role." Modi considered this, thanked me, and took himself away.

"I worry for Modi," Sif said, stepping out of the shadows. "Thor and I are trying not to repeat the mistakes Odin and Frigga made with Loki, but he's a difficult child in some respects. Magni was easier at that age, eager to prove his manhood on the field and in the bedroom, but Modi... he thinks too much." She smiled slightly.

"Magni is a tough act to follow," I acknowledged. "But at least Modi is thinking about his options, which don't seem to include deposing his brother."

"We can be grateful," Sif agreed. "And we are careful in how we guide him. But he would do well in the Guard and as an advisor to Magni. Modi is quite intelligent, but he has the soul of a warrior."

"Is there some sort of an elite unit to which he could aspire?" I asked, leaning back and frowning. "Earth militaries have special forces that recruit the best in their specialties. Is there something like that that Modi could work toward? Earning a place, then leading it?"

"No," Sif said slowly. "But perhaps it is time for a little specialization."

"Thor could pop by Folkvangr and consult with Steve," I suggested. "Get some ideas about how it could be done. Steve led a specialist unit created especially for him, he'd know what to do. Loki might also have some ideas. I don't think he'd like his nephew to make the same mistakes that he did, and Loki can be quite subtle in his guidance." Certainly my children had benefited from their godfather's trickiness. Sif seemed interested in this and we talked some more before I left.
I dropped by Loki's office at Columbia. He was just getting ready to leave, so we left his offices, not much warmer than the outside. Power generation was a huge concern and everybody had to conserve. The coal and other fossil fuels were long gone, hydro was limited as was geothermal, solar a non-starter in this crisis where the sun was seldom glimpsed. Wind generated most of the energy although small nuclear reactors were coming in to vogue again and were being built as quickly as possible. The best ones updated thorium reactor technology and were much safer and easy to build. The delays were in refining the thorium fuel for use and until more reactors and wind turbines were online, a lot of people were cold. There had been a lot of deaths due to exposure. It was very difficult to get the wind turbines built with the weather so awful, so the abundant wind went largely unharvested. Logging the national forests wasn't the solution either, for outside of the environmental concerns, the snow was too deep and the ice too treacherous for logging to be done. It was a terrible situation to be in.

Loki was probably the only person on the planet who didn't mind much. He was wearing a cloth coat these days, having given his high tech parka to his secretary to help keep her alive. My swansfeather cape had magic attached to it so I was kind of chilled but not really cold. I had thick, lined mittens and the hood that I'd made with Hela's gift when I was recovering from the valkyrie bond debacle, so I was in pretty good shape. The same could not be said for the few others we saw on the street.

Loki blinked through snow as a snowball caught him in the face. "Asgardian fucker!" an individual yelled, pelting him with more snowballs. "You aliens! This is your fault!" Loki's bodyguards moved to intercept, but we'd drawn interest, and others were heading our way.

"Get out of here!" the guard captain yelled at his boss, and I took Loki by the arm and escorted him away quickly. But others were coming. We ducked into an alley, hiding on the far side of a dumpster that hadn't been serviced in some time, and Loki sent one of his duplicates, appearing to stride quickly through the snow. It diverted the onlookers, who followed it.

We waited to be sure it was calm before emerging from the alley. I gave him my cape, hood, and mittens to wear and went incorporeal, which had advantages and disadvantages, but my outerwear would help deflect attention from Loki. Hopefully.

It worked; we got to the Asgard embassy without further incident, although I could have poofed into existence quickly to defend him had there been more unpleasantness. Loki shrugged it off as he hung up my cloak and accessories. "Resentment is to be expected," he said matter-of-factly. "Ragnarok is a legend from Asgard, a Norse myth. Nobody really is prepared for the reality of a myth." He escorted me into a small room that was easier to heat and we had cups of precious coffee. I explained what brought me to him, and he considered the issues confronting his nephew. "He is lucky that he has not been brought up with the expectation that he could rule," he stated. "And many have had a hand in diverting him from the path that I was on. I could see him doing several things, for he is gifted. Yet perhaps the suggestion you made that would create a special force from the Asgardian guards would suit him best. Who can tell? It is up to him to decide. It would not accord with Asgardian sense of honor to use what are known here as "black ops" but specialization could be valuable." He thought about that for a bit, then put it aside. "My brother will have to decide that," he said. "Now, tell me how things are in Valhalla."

"Snowy, icy, cold, dark, and filled with people who are pissed at me because we have to scrimmage in all that and train," I said, rolling my eyes. He laughed.

"Mother told me you delicately got things in motion."

"Nothing delicate about it. I was just persistent." I tugged absently on my pendant. "I just wish we
knew more about the timing of it all."

Loki smiled. "Your pendant, combined with your induced skills, helps you to see things clearly where others cannot or will not."

I ducked my chin to look at the crystal that he, Thor, and Sif had given me at high school graduation, so long ago. "So what is this, anyway? When I first came to Valhalla, your mom was not pleased to see me with it, but I forgot to follow up on that."

"It is part of the crystal housing that contained the Mind stone that was in the scepter I used when I tried to take over Earth," he said factually. "It fractured when the being known as Vision was created, and Thor took the pieces back to Asgard. The crystal was inert when the Mind stone was placed inside it, but over time, it absorbed faint traces of its power. The piece you have is one that aids force of will. I believe at the time of our gift that this was conflated with concentration, but I believe that force of will is a truer representation of its effect. And now, after so long together, you and it are in tune and can accomplish much. I doubt you even notice you draw on its power any longer." Surprised, I stroked the crystal.

"How many pieces are there?"

"Just five," he said, relaxing.

"No wonder your mother was perturbed."

"Yes, she rather thought it was wasted on you, but she has come to see it differently," Loki said, smiling slightly.

"It's been very useful," I acknowledged, "but I'm not so sure I don't agree with her now that I know. I don't really do great things, and something like this should go with somebody who does."

"I disagree," Loki said immediately. "Your scientific work in life, although the patents are expired and superseded by other work, provided the foundation for lighting technology that is used to this day. It is not a source of heat, but it provides light, which is desperately needed during Fimbulwinter. And your impact in Valhalla is second only to Odin himself. Never before has someone stood up to Odin as you did and got him to change his mind, not even the formidable Emma. More importantly, he has modified his conduct. You have gotten everyone preparing for Ragnarok, whether they thought it necessary or not, and you have provided a confirmation to those of us who felt that the prophesy was not absolute. Thor and I have both been to the Norn. We have hope now where before we had none. So we work and we prepare, and perhaps it will be enough."

His comments and praise made me feel awkward. He mercifully changed the subject and we talked about Torunn and how she was progressing. I was helping her acquire the necessary skill with weapons and fighting techniques while the head of Loki's security was teaching her more about threat assessment and when and how to act. "She's progressing well," Loki said. "I expect that she will be ready to join my detachment by Walpurgis."

"I'm sorry for her because there aren't a lot of ways to use her skills on Asgard," I said. "But at least she has options."

"Midgard is a good place for out-of-water Asgardians to come and reinvent themselves," Loki said wryly. "Perhaps she'll find other interests here as well."

I couldn't stay long; as always, there was work to be done. Especially if Torunn would be taking up her professional responsibilities so soon, I needed to get her sword done. I had in mind a beautiful
katana with a black-lacquered sheath and intricate metalwork. Maybe Emma could help with the ornamentation; she was so good with that work. I hopped over to Folkvangr and reported the scene in the city to her as well as my request. She shook her head over the incident and agreed to help with Torunn's sword. We talked about designs; Thor had told her that Torunn was captivated by snow leopards, so we figured out how to use that: an engraving on the blade and ornaments on the hilt. Other metalwork would be in the form of irises (wisdom and valor.)

I went home, satisfied. There was a lot that I wanted to keep my eye on and that took some managing. I made sure that I was ready for valkyrie training; Serena had taken over as our field leader and we were learning how to use the strategy and tactics she'd been studying with Steve. It meant a lot of practice. I made a point of attending each practice even when I had legitimate other duties and working hard to serve as an example for the valkyries who would rather stay inside where it was warm. I'd had to have words with them at one point and tell them that as new valkyries they'd had it easy, but that we didn't serve for an easy life. It irritated me that they took everything for granted, but then they hadn't been around for the big labor strike. They were starting to tune me out. After discussion with the older valkyries, the ones who had come back from Helheim sat the new ones down and set them straight. They only enjoyed the luxuries of the compound because of what we'd achieved and they were told, very clearly, that they had to earn this with their service. I understood that there might have been some diagrams involved as well. And if they felt that the price was too high, they needed to turn in their cloaks. And a few did, but the ones who remained quit whining and got to work. They were shocked when Odin banished the ones who quit to Helheim, but I just shrugged. "What did you expect? Valhalla is for warriors, the best of the best. The rest don't belong here." Ok, it was harsh, but with Ragnarok staring down at us, there wasn't time for hurt feelings. And it kept everybody focused on our responsibilities and motivated.

Walpurgis came along, and true to her uncle's prediction, Torunn was accepted into his guard. There wasn't a ceremony or anything, so at the end of our last practice before she took up her post, I gave her the sword. Emma couldn't make it; she was working with Tony on some fussy bits of stuff for some thing he was designing. Better her than me; I had enough work from him without having to deal with the detailed stuff. Torunn's eyes got big as I presented her with the katana, a companion tanto, and a couple of small knives that were easy to keep on her person. She loved the snow leopards and actually got a little moist around the eyes. Her parents sighed, regretful that their daughter was leaving home, but also proud of her accomplishments. Thor teased me about the arsenal I'd made for his daughter, and I smiled at him and Sif. "Sif and Loki were outstanding godparents to my children. I'm glad that I have the opportunity to assist yours. All three are special to me, but Torunn is especially dear."

It was a few days after that that Thor announced the creation of specialist forces in the Asgardian guard; there was an aerial combat group and one that sounded quite a lot like the Howling Commandos. Modi was young, but he joined the commandos. It wasn't just a royal appointment; Modi had a lot of skills he could offer, and his new commander recognized this. He also received the gift of sword and dagger for his accomplishment, and Magni was eager to understand the implications of how his brother's unit could be used. He was shaping up to be a fine commander, more innovative than his father.

It was a very hopeful time, since the snow was showing signs of melting, and we were all holding our breath, wondering if we'd finally reached the end of Fimbulwinter. Thrimilcy was celebrated with almost desperation; everyone who could find it within themselves joined to give spring a much-needed boost. Tony and I talked about it and decided to participate together; neither of us had or wanted a different partner. And while the sex was as spectacular as ever, that deep connection we'd had was no more. It was just excellent exercise rather than the bonding of a relationship, and while I missed that feeling, I realized for the first time that I really was ok with
the change in our relationship, that we'd actually successfully navigated the treacherous way back
to friendship. A deep, sincere, precious and meaningful friendship, but that intimate spark was
gone. And I didn't mourn it. I was facing firmly toward the future.

When spring arrived, we had to deal with a lot of flooding and practices were temporarily
suspended. The buildings didn't flood much because they'd been built with an eye toward defense--
on the tops of hills or rises--but the land had to be drained so crops could be planted. And that was
hard work that we weren't used to anymore. Holly had been right; our eyes were having trouble
getting used to sunlight again. Not just sunlight, bright sunshine--those who could blow glass were
busy making lenses for sunglasses and I created a chemical film to darken them while the other
smiths made metal wire frames. They weren't snazzy, but they worked as we got accustomed to
bright light again. It cracked me up to see the einherjar working in the fields with their shades.
Even Odin helped to drain the fields and get the planting started. You had to admire that kind of
leadership. We borrowed a bunch of people from Helheim to help with the planting and the sheep
shearing. The sheep were happier than we were that spring was back and gamboled after they were
shorn. Getting the wool cleaned and ready for spinning was a priority; we cut way back on our
practices and worked well into the night spinning thread for the looms. The looms were set up as
we went, and those who weren't spinning worked hard to weave the cloth. When they outpaced the
supply of thread, they made sure that the roving was ready for us and did other work. It wasn't just
us, though, everybody was working hard, mostly in the fields. And you've never lived until you've
seen legendary Viking warriors arguing about the best way to plow a field. They had contests. It
wasn't just us, all the Nine Realms were digging out, cleaning up, and getting back on track.

The cocks did not crow.
We celebrated our first harvest of quick-growing vegetables with a feast. I hadn't realized just how much I missed the warm sun, the feeling of earth on my feet as I helped with the harvests, gentle breezes, the smell of green things. That summer we got two crops of linen in, I got two crops of cotton, and there was a huge abundance of fruits and vegetables, as if the soil was celebrating too. We worked harder than ever; when we weren't spinning or weaving or helping bring in harvests, we were in meetings learning strategy and tactics or practicing or scrimmaging. Free time was reduced to a few minutes around bedtime or meals.

I was outside, enjoying dinner on the grass in the waning sun with my friends when the golden cock Gullinkambi strutted past us to the top of the stairs leading to the main entrance to the Great Hall. And crowed. The sound echoed in the sudden silence. At first, nothing happened. It was if all Valhalla held its breath. Then an insidious pain crept over me, intensifying until I was wracked with it, and I lost consciousness.

When I woke up, I was still on grass, but in an entirely different place.

I sat up and surveyed the area. We were on Asgard again, I could see the citadel, and I could tell something was very different. I bit my lip against an unpleasant feeling as wings split the back of my blouse, which was weird; I hadn't been wearing my cape. I felt.. heavier. More solid. The people of Asgard were spilling out of the citadel to help us. As I looked around, dazed, Tony asked if I was ok. I was, he was, nobody seemed to be anything but confused... Then I realized what was different and pressed my hand to my neck. There it was.

A heartbeat. I placed my hand over Tony's chest and felt his heartbeat.

"My friends?" Thor was puzzled as he saw me, but he took a step back when he saw Tony and Bruce. Only the valkyries had been able to leave the halls of the dead.

"The cock crowed at Valhalla," I said simply as Tony helped me up. "We seem to be mortal again. I thought the second rooster was for the gods, but it got us instead."

Thor's mouth gaped open as Magni joined him. "The dead have been raised?" he asked us, and Tony nodded.

"Apparently. Well, at least us," I said absently as I poked my finger with a knife. A bead of rich warm crimson blood appeared on my finger instead of pearly ichor. I looked around quickly, then down to my finger again. "Holy shit, you guys."

"When does the fight begin?" Magni asked tensely. His father patted his shoulder.

"Not yet. Find your mother, tell her what has happened," he directed, and as Magni jogged off, Thor's commanders began to arrive. We listened as they reported the sudden appearance of the honored dead who weren't as dead as had been assumed. Also, piles of personal possessions had been found.

"The halls of the dead are truly empty," Odin said as he approached. Thor bowed to his father, and out of respect for this moment, I took a knee. The rest of the einherjar who were in the vicinity instantly followed suit, and after a long pause while the guardsmen adjusted their thinking, they too knelt at the appearance of their king emeritus. Odin gazed around; I realized with a start that this was the first time he'd seen the mortal realm since his death. He smiled slightly to see me and
placed his hand gently on my head, then smoothed the feathers of one of my wings. "My
valkyries."

"Can you put the wings away?" Loki asked, and I started. I hadn't seen him.

"I don't know," I said frustrated. "They're different now." With an effort I managed to get them to
get them to fold tight to my back. "They act like real wings," I realized. "Before, they were a
construct. Their nature has changed." I nearly swore. I didn't need to learn how to use my wings
again. Loki snickered, and I concentrated briefly. My left wing popped out and shoved him off
balance. I smiled.

"They have grown," Odin observed, gently extending them. Understatement. They were more than
double their previous size. "Flight will be different." I had visions of valkyries going splat like
fledgling birds as we learned to fly with our altered equipment and wanted to cover my face.

Sif arrived with Frigga, Steve, Bucky, and Emma. Bucky beelined over to me while Steve and
Thor exchanged a hearty handshake. I was glad, I could really use a hug. After marveling at my
new wings--and not all the valkyries I could see had them--we tuned in enough to hear that the first
order of business was to get quarters for all of us and collect our possessions so that we could
claim them. Thor put Magni in charge of this and escorted his parents and our little group of
newcomers inside the citadel. Sif assigned us rooms but it was kind of academic until we had some
possessions. It had been early evening in Valhalla, slightly earlier in Folkvangr, and nobody was
terribly tired. Plus being alive again was weird and taking some effort to adjust to. At least Serena
and I were ahead of the curve on this one, since we'd taken a physical form in the mortal world
frequently.

It was just weird. Smells seemed more intense, my vision a little richer. Sounds seemed to have an
extra emphasis. My skin seemed more sensitive. I took a quick look in a mirror and saw that I was
unchanged from what I'd looked like in Valhalla, at least. That was good. Aside from the wings, of
course. They tended to drag on the floor unless I made a special effort to keep them up, and they
extended well more than a foot over my head. Ungainly things! And how was I going to sleep? If
anybody suggested a perch, I was going to punch them.

There was a knock on the door, and I opened it to Modi. His eyes got big when he saw the wings.
"I thought Magni was joking," he muttered. Then he hugged me, which was unexpected. "They are
bringing in the things that came with you to claim," he said. "They will be ready for you shortly. I
wondered, however, if you'd like a moment to test your wings?" I would. He led me to the top of a
tower, presently deserted in all the excitement, and I tried to jump up into the air like I had when it
was just my cape. Modi watched my failure silently, but had some suggestions to make from his
observations of wild birds. So I warmed up the muscles, getting used to the feel of it, stood on the
crenellations, and jumped; I hovered briefly above the tower floor before dropping down.

"So I'll need more muscle," I muttered.

"Or get used to using it differently," Modi suggested. "And birds glide a lot, they're not always
beating their wings." We chatted a bit more before going down.

It was good I had Modi with me. I found my clothes, personal items including my spinning wheel,
and my cape, now a ceremonial item. Modi snagged a page to take these things back to my room,
then we went over to the tables with weapons. I smiled to see my bundles of arrows, the spears and
javelins, my armor, all the rest of it. I paused for a hug from Torunn, who had come up with Loki's
guard, and the two of them managed to lug my gear around. I found my tools, but not my stock or
the anvil; Magni came over, looked at us, took my helmet and shield from me, and said that the
heavy stuff was in the courtyard and would be left there until workspaces were assigned. Loki
strode over, amused.

"Oh, great," I said. "Just who I wanted to see." I pulled out a sword and handed it to him. "Emma's alloy for weapons, as tough as she could make." He smiled slightly, testing the balance, then resheathed it.

"And your excellent work," he said. "There is an assignment for you. Now come." I followed him over to Odin, standing in front of the great golden throne. His ravens perched on the arms and watched everything.

Odin started to laugh when he saw me and my helpers. "I had no idea that you were so productive," he said, and I shrugged. Then the smile dropped away. "Do you still have the ability to go between realms?" I concentrated and shifted to the yard at the embassy on Midgard, then back. He sighed in relief. I wasn't surprised; if our abilities came from the World Tree, I expected that they'd persist despite my change of state. It was just harder as there was more of me to move. "Excellent. I am posting valkyries to Midgard since you still have the abilities to shift between the realms at will. While you are there, I want you to make observations regarding the state of affairs and how they have addressed the end of Fimbulwinter. Loki may have additional requests. Train there and observe; report to me each morning." His austere expression softened. "And if you have the time, I give you leave to contact your descendants. Just be discreet with your knowledge." My eyes lit up and he smiled. "Now go, Heimdall will send you and your things. These might as well go with you," he said, gesturing to his grandchildren. Modi and Magni looked thrilled; it would be their first trip out of Asgard. Loki led the way, and soon we were walking along the Bifrost bridge, both beautiful and bizarre.

Heimdall's normally impassive face showed hints of amusement when we showed up. A page had brought the bundle of my clothing and personal things, and I carefully picked up my cape before tucking my bundle under my arm. Heimdall opened the Bifrost to us, and after an somewhat unpleasant ride, we ended up in the driveway of the embassy. Arriving at the embassy with all three of Thor's heirs was a shock for the staff, but the presence of a valkyrie with inconvenient wings was even more upsetting to them somehow. And when Loki explained that the cock had crowed in Valhalla several of them looked faint. But their staff was efficient and put my stuff in a guest room quickly. The princes and I got a tour of the full embassy--I'd never seen the whole of the mansion before--and when we got back (Magni held my wingtips off the ground when I forgot) Loki had my picture and genetic and biometric markers taken for official embassy credentials and identification. Torunn was excused to take her brothers (who were also issued their own credentials) on a tour of the city. I smiled. Here was something that she could do that her brothers could not. Loki sat me down with the chief of staff for a lecture on embassy protocols. It was dry, but I paid attention. I was paying such close attention that I didn't know my wings had disappeared. Loki noticed, though, when he brought a pot of coffee in for me.

I felt so happy when I smelled the rich, fragrant aroma and the first mouthful pampered my tastebuds. "You really are a god," I sighed, teasing him. My enjoyment was cut short when Loki asked what the hell had happened to the wings. He was concerned, and I had no idea what I was going to tell Odin, but they popped out again. "Damn," I said. "That hurts." After a conversation with Loki and the chief of staff, a man named Eric, we had the hypothesis that the wings were a response to emotion. We decided on emotion as the trigger, but it was also possibly a fight-freeze-flight response as well. I was obviously going to have to try for conscious control as well; another thing to add to my list of things to do. I didn't want to go outside the embassy dragging enormous wings along too. The chief of staff assured me that wings had not become commonplace on humans in the time since I'd last spent a lot of time on Midgard. For material guaranteed to soothe, the security chief gave me a manual of safety protocols to study. And when Torunn and the boys got back, they were dispatched to the public library to bring me more reading material. Finally, the
boys quit dragging their heels and went back to Asgard. After studying the manual some, I was shown my quarters and, wing-free, I went to bed. I was exhausted. A real, bone-deep tiredness that came from having flesh, blood and bone again.

The next morning I got up early and tried practicing wing control. It wasn't easy, but every time the wings popped out they hurt less and I concentrated on how it felt when they erupted and retired. I had a tenuous control by the time I went down to breakfast. The successors to TV were all tuned to news programs and I got an idea of how Earth, specifically the US and even more specifically New York was dealing with the cleanup from Fimbulwinter. Their flooding had been a lot worse, but their spring and summer had been as successful as ours had been, and food was finally being produced in such quantities that the survivors were fully fed. Time on Earth was running on its own schedule again, and they were on their second summer. The cost of the winter had been high. Numbers were just being released that showed that the US population had been over 500 million before the three-year winter; after, it was the same as it had been in 2000, just over 282 million. Most of the deaths had come from exposure, but other significant causes were starvation and disease. Even mass burials weren't sufficient; cremations had been much more common. And this scenario had occurred all over the world. No country had been spared, and in poorer nations the death toll had been even higher. The infrastructure was in surprisingly good shape, as there had been no freeze-and-thaw cycles to destroy the roads or railways. Industry was revving up again as now the shipment of raw materials and finished products was possible, safe, and predictable again. And the winter had apparently provided a significant correction on global climate change. Temperatures were more in line with what had been seen in the 1970s and 80s.

After this introduction, I was glad to go out into the courtyard when I was invited to take part in weapons training. Luckily, the strength that I'd built up over the long Fimbulwinter had translated to my new body and I was able to show them what a valkyrie could do. But now I had a new worry—the wings. These were larger and more cumbersome than the cape wings and I wasn't sure how the physics worked. I had a strong, fairly heavy body, and birds were a lot more lightweight. And protecting these wings during a fight was going to be a bitch. The guard captain promised to think about working with the wings, and after I'd showered I poofed back to Asgard. Once on the Bifrost was enough, thanks. I stayed in the observatory, chatting with Heimdall, while I waited for Loki and we walked to the citadel together.

My report on Midgard conditions was met with dismay. Loki had reported on the strength of the winter and the lack of resources but not the death tolls, and there were a lot of people who had been handicapped by severe frostbite or other cold-related illnesses. "But on the bright side, the graveyards haven't been disturbed. So it looks like we're the only dead to rise. As far as I can tell, nobody's reporting a return of the dearly departed." My flippancy was quashed by a stern look from Odin, and he assigned more valkyries to the Midgard embassy. Dagny, Carol, and Heidi were among those sent to other embassies in the Nine Realms, but Irene was posted with me and a few others to Midgard. Serena was posted to Asgard. The guard complement was also strengthened by Thor. All the valkyries were told that our priority was to get control over our wings and find out how well they worked. We were a lot heavier than hawks or owls, even if our wings were correspondingly greater, and we had to find out our limits.

After the meeting, I hunted up Emma and explained my concerns about fighting with the wings. She understood and said she'd research a lightweight covering for the bones and major blood vessels in them; one strategic cut and I could bleed out fast. The blood vessels were large and close to the surface. I mentioned this to Odin before I left and he made it a priority for Emma. He also arranged for daily morning workouts for us so we wouldn't lose our group cohesion, and dismissed us.

Once I hit New York again, I had no fixed duties and made a beeline for the family cache at
Avengers tower. I went to a couple of stores and bought some jeans, bras, shoes, and went to Mood Fabric, still in business and attended by a black and white French bulldog puppy, for fabric, notions, and a couple of patterns for tops that I could modify discreetly so that the wings wouldn't ruin every blouse I had. That night I fashioned a blouse that looked like it draped in the back in order to conceal the places where the wings erupted, partially over my shoulderblades.

When I got back the next day from Asgard, I asked to borrow a car and driver, and we set out across the bridge. As we drove, I made note of the changes. Poor New York. All the battles with the Kree, and the damage done by Fimbulwinter. Buildings were condemned and waiting to be torn down; there wasn't the population to support complete rebuilding. But farther out, the old mansions were still mostly maintained. I directed the driver to park on the side of a road, tested the fence, and climbed over it. I pushed through unfamiliar bushes and around trees, keeping out of the cleared areas, until I mounted a slight rise with a hole in the ground. I grinned. I was worried that it had been closed up. Climbing down wasn't the easiest thing I'd ever done, but after the obstacle course, it really wasn't hard. The interior of the bat cave was surprisingly similar to how it had been in my life, and I dropped to the floor by the computer bank. I was pretty much unsurprised when a hologram flicked on.

"Halt. You are trespassing on private property. Legislation enacted during the great winter allows for trespassers to be shot on sight. Identify yourself or face the consequences," the stern-looking man said in a Scottish accent.

"My name is Alixzandrya Barnes-Wayne," I said immediately.

"That is impossible. The individual with that name died centuries ago."

"It is possible," I corrected him. I waved my Asgardian identification that marked me as part of the diplomatic mission.

"Place your identification in the slot for verification," the hologram said. I did, and a red light scanned my card. I was startled for a moment by the appearance of apparatus designed to check the biometric markers, and there was a longer pause.

"Records are retrieving," the hologram said. The computer buzzed a few times and we waited some more.

"How is this possible?" the hologram asked. "Your genetic markers are the same as the original Alixzandrya Barnes-Wayne. Are you a clone?"

"I am not, although I don't really know what you'd call me." I took a deep breath. "I really am Alex. There was this thing in my afterworld, and I've been resurrected."

There was a long silence and the hologram didn't move. I wondered if it was stuck. "I believe this is beyond my capabilities to make a decision," it finally said. "I have summoned the master. You may be seated, but you may not leave until this matter has been addressed in a satisfactory manner."

Not wanting any perforations in my nice new body, I sat.

I looked over when the elevator door opened and a man tore out of it and skidded to a stop. "Is it really you?" he asked breathlessly. I stood up.

"I'm not sure who you're expecting, but I'm Alixzandrya Barnes-Wayne." I smiled hopefully. "Back from the dead."
The man stared at me and thumped down in the chair. "I kind of didn't believe it when my dad told me why we kept the caches around the city stocked. I thought it was some kind of game."

"It kind of was," I said. "The funds were sometimes used for frivolous things. I'd like to thank you for doing it, though. My husband is somewhere out there too and this has been our only method of communication. Odin told me I couldn't seek out my family, so this was as far as I dared push it."

"So you're really from Valhalla?" he asked. "And the extended winter? Was that really a harbinger of Ragnarok?" He looked a little freaked out, so I crouched in front of his chair and patted his hand.

"Yes," I said, and explained what had happened so far. "I don't know--nobody knows--if this just affects Asgard and its afterlifes or whether the effect is broader. I think we'll have a pretty good idea when that third cock crows. If the dead here rise too, I think it'll be a pretty solid indicator that it's a broader event." He thought about that and stood.

"Huh. I guess you're right. By the way, I'm Daniel Wayne," he said, flushing at his forgetfulness. "I don't know--" His hands waved, so I just moved in for the hug. His arms closed around me tightly.

"I'm so glad to meet you, Daniel," I said. And I was. I couldn't see a trace of Damian in his face, but it was a strong face. "I'm glad you're taking this so well. It's a lot to take in."

"You showing up at Natasha's bedside is a family legend now," he said, releasing me reluctantly and sitting in the chair again. "I always hoped for a visit myself." And he filled me in on his story--his mother had died a few years after his birth and his father hadn't remarried, so it was just the two of them and his dad's sister Amy, then Amy died from pneumonia early in Fimbulwinter and Batman had gone down keeping a food depot guarded against looters. Daniel looked young, a little younger than my current appearance, and he was the only one living here. The butler, Craig, had died of old age the year before and he hadn't found a replacement yet.

"Oh, son, I can't imagine keeping up this pile by yourself. You should close it down, move into the city," I said encouragingly.

"I need some distance from the business," he muttered. "And there's the Batman thing." I was worried about the boy; he seemed a hair away from breaking down. It was a lot of responsibility for a man just in his twenties on his own. Then I had an idea, of varying brilliance.

"I wondered if I could impose on you," I said gently. "And feel free to say no if it's too much of an imposition."

"You want to stay out here?" He cheered up.

"Right now I've got to stay at the embassy. There are fighting practices to do and I have to report to Loki and go back to Asgard. But with me--well, a parallel afterlife, Frigga's place called Folkvangr--was my uncle Bucky. And Steve Rogers. And Emma Harrington. And Tony Stark and Bruce Banner were with me in Valhalla. Tony, Emma, and Bruce are working on weapons for Ragnarok and they could really benefit from a higher tech environment. They all know that the Waynes have always been Batman and they can keep the secret. And I think you could use the company. My aunt's a great cook," I added for good measure. "So's my uncle, for that matter." Daniel lit up.

"Sure, whatever I can do," he said, nodding.

"I'll bring it up tomorrow," I said. "And I'd like to come back myself."

"This is your home too," he said. And he took me upstairs and gave me a tour. It was a little
shabby, but times had been hard and it was too much for just one person to keep up. I fixed a late lunch for him and he told me about himself. Daniel had things that he had to do and said that I could count on his discretion, and I had left a driver by the side of the road, so we parted and I said I'd let him know as soon as I had news.

As soon as I got back to the embassy I went back to Asgard. Odin heard me out, talked to Frigga, and agreed. I could take the others with me the next day. My family and friends were excited to go back to the city. I told them a little bit about Daniel--I couldn't get the Elton John song out of my head now--and Bucky patted my hand. "We'll look after him," he assured me. "He's family too." I smiled. Emma asked what the food situation was and looked relieved when I told her there was plenty now.

We were chatting when Odin looked up to the ceiling. "The third cock has crowed. The dead are leaving Helheim." He looked at me. "I have seen the Norn," he said. "There will be a period of time before the prelude to the battle begins. When we hear of earthquakes that level mountains and uproot trees, get these people to the embassy and back to Asgard. Stay with Loki as long as you can." I nodded and he dismissed me. Back on Earth, I left a message for Daniel.

When I turned on the news, the only story was that the dead had returned to life. Not a physical resurrection in the sense that bodies were raised from graveyards; reports from all around the world stated that the dead were returning. They were just appearing, from ghostly portals.

Governments were panicking as were the people. It had the hallmarks of a disaster; the logistics were impossible. How were they to be fed and sheltered? I popped back to Asgard with the news. Thor sent emissaries to the rest of the Nine Realms for information. Several hours later, we got news that some of the realms were willing to provide assistance, as their populations weren't as great as Earth's and they had more resources. Thor came back to Earth with me to address the UN. Interestingly, the dead associated with the Abrahamic traditions--Christianity, Judaism, and Islam--hadn't made an appearance yet. It was all from pagan traditions or other major religions like Buddhism and Hinduism. And what a mess it was proving to be. Not everybody understood the modern languages, customs, or laws.

The next day, I went back to the manor with my uncles, aunt, and friends. Daniel had prepared bedrooms for them and there were plenty of spaces for everyone to work. Additionally, Daniel offered to supply them with whatever their work required. Then he smiled at me. "It's good that you warned me, or I might have had a heart attack," he said, and looked behind me, smiling. I looked around, and there he was. I slapped my hands over my mouth and my eyes overfilled. I couldn't stop my wings from snapping out. Damian stepped up to me.

"I always knew that one lifetime with you was never going to be enough, Alixzandrya," he said, holding my face in his hands.
The difference between belief and reality had never been so clear to me. I'd believed that I would see him again in a more meaningful context than a glance across a crowded room, but the warmth of his hands as he cradled my face, the exquisite blue of his eyes was overwhelming. I reached up and kissed him hard, then plastered myself to him as my emotions leaked out of my eyes. Him too; he had to swipe at his cheeks a lot too. Uncle Bucky put his handkerchief into my hand, and I got a little composure back. "You've gotten a few new things since I last saw you," he said admiringly.

"They used to be a cape, but since we were raised, they're attached," I said. "So they're new, and I can't control them very well yet." I tried to pack them away, but I was still too emotional and all I made them do was flap awkwardly.

"I've always thought you looked like an angel," he said, kissing me gently. "But I understand you're a valkyrie, so you've got the appearance of an angel but kick butt too." He stroked my hair back. "I ran into Martha, she told me about seeing you that last time."

"Where is she?" I asked.

"She'll be along after a bit, she's finishing up some work."

"Where were you?"

"The Greek underworld, Sweet pea. Turns out there was a rogue Greek or two in Ra's line. I've been working for Lord Hades. There's a bunch of us who find the newly dead and guide them down to Charon. Apparently people used to be able to find their way by themselves, but what with development, the old portals were built over or are difficult to access. We help them, they're frequently scared and confused. Martha finally convinced Hades that he needed an HR department." Damian chortled. "She just got everybody organized with records with their details and what part of the underworld they went to. She was a little irked when the joint emptied out." He hugged me again, resting his chin on the top of my head and sighing in contentment.

I heard an "ahem" from the doorway and looked around to see Alfred standing there with a tray of tea and coffeepots and goodies. Damian just barely beat me over and rescued the tea tray when I flung my arms around Alfred. He was younger too, fit and in his prime. "Miss Alex," his familiar voice said. "How good to see you once again."

"And how are you finding life these days?" I asked, finally releasing him and stepping back. Damian's arm came around my waist, delicately avoiding the wings, as Alfred reclaimed his tray.

"It is good to be home," he noted. "I arrived shortly after Master Damian, and Master Daniel has offered me a position based on Master Damian's recommendation. I expect there is much to catch up on before I have things running efficiently, but I believe that I am up to the challenge."

As Alfred arranged the tea in the library, Damian greeted the others, hugging Emma and Bucky, shaking Tony's hand. Tony looked bemused but not snarky. I introduced Bruce and Steve, and Bruce looked between me, Tony and Damian with a little concern before greeting him amiably. Damian was excited to meet Dr Banner and Captain America. I simultaneously introduced Daniel, who was hanging back a little, and smiled as Bucky hugged him, saying he was glad to meet his nephew. Emma patted his cheek.
"I'd hoped to do some baking for you, but if Alfred's here--"

"I expect that there will be ample opportunity for you to display your talents, Miss Emma," Alfred said as he presented me with coffee. I nearly teared up again. I do so love my coffee. "There is much to be done around the mansion and as I recall, scientists and inventors work best with a steady supply of cookies and other baked goods." Emma brightened.

Steve thanked Daniel for the place to stay and was told that it was no trouble, he looked forward to the company. Daniel then turned to Tony and Bruce and offered to show them and Emma to possible workplaces so that they could take their pick. They departed, chatting amiably.

Damian came back into the library with a straight chair from the dining room so that I could sit and not mangle the wings. I was still too emotional to make them go away although I'd at least managed to get them folded and still again. He seated me and handed me a plate with cookies. I almost started crying yet again. Chocolate. So missed at Valhalla. Ginger scones. Cucumber sandwiches. My uncles sat too and plundered the tray. For a good five minutes there was just silence and us stuffing our faces with the goodies. I felt guilty until Alfred came back with a replenished stock for the others.

We talked, and Bucky and I made an effort to facilitate Steve's acquaintance with Damian and Alfred. "Steve was kind of my nemesis on the battlefield at first," I told Damian. "But he's become another uncle."

"She's not mentioning how she beat me every time we met," Steve said ruefully. "I was supposed to be Frigga's big general." Damian grinned.

"I'm not surprised," he said. "Alex is very gifted and she had the advantage of being trained by her uncle from a fairly early age."

"I told you, punk," Bucky said to Steve complacently, poking him. "That kind of talent's a family trait." Steve rolled his eyes and gagged. Damian smiled at the horseplay and held my hand.

"Are you staying here, Petal?" he asked me, and my face fell.

"Not immediately," I said regretfully, and Damian's expression sobered. "Odin posted me at the embassy. There's daily practices on Asgard for the valkyries to keep us cohesive. Hopefully I'll get better control over these damned things," I said irritably about my wings. They twitched. "Then I have to gather information for Thor and Odin. Ragnarok is on its way, my dearest, and I just don't know if there's time enough to get everything that we need to be done." I shook my head. "It half kills me, but that's got to be my priority. I have confirmation that fate isn't fixed unless we let it be, so there's maybe a way to keep what is basically an apocalypse from happening. Or maybe just from being so bad." I thought about that, depressed and a little desperate. So much to do, and the stakes were so high. "I don't have to depend on wings or the Bifrost to get back and forth, so I'm hoping that if I keep at him, I can wear Odin down. I want to get to know Daniel better, see if I can help him out some, and then, of course, there's you now. But I only have leave to spend time with my family when my work's done."

"Martha told me about you and Stark," he said. There wasn't any condemnation or judgment in his voice, just acceptance.

"That ended during the winter," I said. "He was good to me and for me while it lasted. It just wasn't meant to be forever."

"Well, that works out, then," Damian said cheerfully. I couldn't help but smile back. "There were a
couple of ladies for me, but it wasn't ever serious. You've always had my heart." He took my hand, smoothed out my clenched fingers, and kissed them. "I know all about the pull of duty, Sweet pea. You don't have to explain anything to me." And that was all either of us needed to know. We got up and offered Steve and Bucky a tour of the mansion. We helped them pick up their bags and Emma's things as well, and I thought of the perfect place for them; in the newer wing there was a set of three interconnected bedroom suites. Alfred intercepted us, automatically taking the bags from me and nodded his approval of the location.

"I will see to it," he promised, and tugged the bags away from Damian. "You gentlemen may leave it with me. Perhaps Miss Alex and Master Damian could show you the rest of the mansion while I make up the beds." Despite his deferential tone, it was no request, and my uncles dropped their bags like they were on fire. Alfred made a little shooing motion, and we went through the part of the mansion that was familiar to us. The conservatory had been turned into a vegetable and herb garden and the room beyond the library had been turned into a games room, with a pool table, dart board, ping pong table, card table and a corner with tv screens and comfortable chairs.

"This is far too big for one person," Damian said, frowning. "We need to get the kid a girlfriend. Or a boyfriend, depending on his preferences. Somebody special for him."

"I feel that it's been very hard on him since his father died," I said softly. "There's the company and Batman, and dealing with the winter was hard enough for us, and we didn't have half the challenges that Midgard would have had."

Damian nodded. "The global economy took a hell of a hit. Goods couldn't be reliably transported due to the weather; a lot of ships and their cargo were lost. Farmers were screwed because they couldn't grow anything and it was difficult to switch to hydroponics. And of course, the consumers..." I nodded. Damian had been busy, already starting his analysis of the disaster.

"We had trouble as well, but Valhalla is much smaller and we didn't have the same problems," I said. "Plus, we were already dead, so I'm not sure what would been the practical result if we couldn't eat." Damian thought that over.

"Well, I'm going to offer to help him out," he said. "He's our grandson, I don't know how many times removed and I'm not asking. But in an advisory capacity; he's the CEO of Wayne Enterprises and the company still made a profit somehow, so he's plenty gifted. Just to lighten the load, give him a hand until he finds his footing."

"You're such a good man, darling," I said, reaching up and brushing his hair back. "I still feel like I'm riding a tiger, but I feel better now. I've been worried for Daniel since I found out about him. So what's going on with your afterlife? I had the impression that the Greeks didn't have the tradition of a cataclysmic final battle."

"From those mythology books? We don't," Damian said, still cuddling me. He winced as my wing accidentally poked his eye. Steve and Bucky listened. "It was a huge shock to Lord Hades but even all his considerable power over his domain couldn't prevent the gates from opening. He's going to visit the gang up on Olympus to see if they have any information or ideas. I doubt they'll have new thoughts; as a group the gods haven't kept up with changing times very well, but you never know. Poseidon's just been pissed about the garbage and ocean pollution, even though that's been getting better. Hermes has picked up a lot, he flits back and forth a lot. Aphrodite and her son Eros also have kept their hands in with humanity, so to speak, but I don't think they have any more idea about the end of the world than anybody else does."

I didn't say anything more since I heard footsteps in the corridor. "The others are gathering in the library," Alfred said, and on the way out the door, I gave him another quick hug.
"It's just so good to see you again. I missed you," I told him, and he smiled.

"I found myself in a Celtic afterlife," he said as we walked the short distance to the library. "It was fine; there was a great deal of fighting, interesting things happened, but on the whole, I prefer to be here, supervising the family. I am grateful that Master Daniel had a position available."

The others were back and attacking the tea. Understandably so. "I've got to get back to the embassy," I told them. "I'll be back when I can."

Daniel, who had stood when I came in, came over for a hug. "You're welcome any time," he said. "I hope that you can move out here too, but in case you can't, the door locks have been updated with your biomarkers so you have access whenever."

"You're such a good kid," I said fondly. "You may rethink your offer after dealing with this bunch, though." He grinned back.

"I can always go into work if it's a bit much," he said, and I laughed.

Damian moved, but when Tony stood up, Damian gave me a hug and kiss and said he looked forward to my return. Tony walked outside with me.

"Are you guys going to need the car?" I asked, and Tony shook his head.

"No, we need to do some research before we can get to work on new projects," he said. I told the driver, wandering around the splendid gardens at the front of the house, that he could return to the embassy when he was done.

"Do you mind if I take some time here?" he asked. "We don't have flowers like this in Asgard." I smiled and cut a little bouquet for him.

"I'm sure nobody will mind if you walk through the garden," I said, and turned away with Tony.

"I'm glad for your sake that Wayne's back too," Tony said as we walked along the mulched path back to the driveway. "I know you loved me and what we had was really good, but you never loved me like you love him."

It was true. I opened my mouth, but Tony shook his head. "I'm glad that you're happy, Tiger. In retrospect, it was good timing when we broke up. It would have hurt a lot more if we'd still been together. " He gave me a kiss on the cheek and went back into the house. I took a moment, then warmed up my wings and managed to fly a short distance down the driveway. Damn, the cape wings had been so much easier, powered by magic rather than effort and muscle. It was more than I'd been able to do yesterday by a little, so yay, progress. I quit when my attempts were more like prolonged hops and poofed back to the embassy.

Loki was at Columbia, so my news was going to have to wait. I took the diplomatic pouch with me when I poofed back to Asgard. Thor was in a meeting, and groaned when he sifted through the contents of the pouch, mostly from Midgard leaders in varying degrees of panic about the sudden influx of the formerly dead.

"As if we had any control," he said in disgust. "No power in the universe could stop the cocks from crowing. We thought the second cock was only supposed to summon the gods, not our honored dead. And it's not as if we had any idea that it was going to call forth dead from other afterlives."

He considered me. "Well, you had a theory about that."

"Well, as to that, it's also interesting. A huge group of people haven't shown up--yet. Followers of the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim faiths are still in the ground, so you might want to point that out
to everybody who's sent you a letter/plea/demand, whatever. Those guys show up and the demand and strain on resources will be overwhelming. Some of the people who have shown up have traditions about a battle like Ragnarok, and some do not. Those in the Greek underworld, for example, were just turned out. They don't have any purpose like we do."

"Have you spoken with one of these Greeks?" Odin asked. "You seem to have very specific knowledge."

I inclined my head to him. "I have. My husband was sorted there after his death. He's back, and my daughter will be as well." Thor perked up. He liked Damian.

"This is fine news, Alex. Perhaps we can conscript him to help."

"We have a many-times grandson, and Damian has pledged to help him manage things. However, his analysis of Midgard conditions will probably be very helpful to you. He said that the Olympians were caught completely flatfooted by this turn of events. I think that my daughter is probably waiting to return until she has some information about the thinking of the Greek gods. My opinion, and it's only my opinion, is that the World Tree influences things far more than I had any conception of before this." The Asgardians looked startled.

Odin was thoughtful, considering this. "Continue your practice and the collection of your information." He drummed his fingers on the letters he'd read from Midgard. "With the reappearance of your husband, I expect you had planned to ask me for permission to increase your contact with your family."

I nodded with no apology. "Yes. My grandson Daniel has offered to house Emma, Steve, Bucky, Tony, and Bruce and supply Emma, Tony and Bruce with work space and whatever materials they may need for their work. Because I can move myself around without the need for transportation, I can still be summoned for help very quickly even if I moved out to the house. And there's a lot of land out there where I can practice flying."

Odin immediately looked like he'd veto my request, but stopped and thought about it. "You would be happier if I agreed to this," he said. "And there is no real reason to keep you at the embassy. So long as you keep up with your other responsibilities and carry the means for instant communication with you at all times, I will grant your request." His face softened slightly. "I remember being separated from Frigga."

I grinned, elated, and Thor relaxed. I could tell he'd been about to try to intercede with his father for me.

"Thank you, Odin." He brushed my thanks aside.

"This is just as well," Thor said. "I am increasing staffing at the embassy to address the diplomatic concerns and Loki is cutting back his responsibilities at the university to help. He plans to use 'graduate students,' whatever they are, to handle incoming calls, visitors, and mail. They will receive 'college credit' for an 'internship.'" You could hear the quotation marks in his voice and I smiled. Clever of Loki. "Housing in the embassy is going to be crowded. I need Steve and Bucky to run practices with the guard too, make sure that they are prepared for battle as well as embassy guard duties," Thor continued, passing me a letter to give to them. I nodded. "Loki has received a request from the UN General Assembly to speak to them regarding what we know. I am assigning you to accompany him and assist him where possible." He studied me. "Work on controlling your wings," he advised. "It will be more impressive if you can summon them at will."

"I'm trying," I said tersely. "It was a lot easier when they were tied into the cape." Both Thor and Odin smiled, and the meeting went on to other matters of concern.
Toward the end, Thor said that he had instructed Loki to offer the governments of Earth the option of Svartalfar. "It was the realm of the dark elves. A clever people, they created Fenrir's fetter Gleipnir, but since I killed Malekith, they are no more and the world is still abandoned. Parts of the world are inhospitable but other parts are habitable and people could thrive there. It could help relieve overcrowding on Midgard. Alternatively, those who are having difficulty understanding the modern Midgard could be placed in a low technology environment to dwell according to their customs." He waved a letter. "It's all in here."

After the meeting broke up, I went in search of the other valkyries. Irene had consulted a group of falconers in New York and had some ideas for us about how to build up our wings, based on how young falcons learned to fly. There was a bunch of people who studied peregrine falcons, the fastest on earth, and they had some good suggestions. "The young falcons, called eyases, start testing their wings around five weeks of age, start to fly around week six, get stronger and faster through week seven, and start catching prey in weeks eight and nine. This suggests that if we keep at it, progress should be fairly rapid." She demonstrated warmup exercises and how the falconers thought that we could gain wing strength and agility. We moved away from the citadel and practiced. None of us could fly very far yet, but I could tell that the exercises would be effective. It was like when Damian and I had tried rock climbing; we were strong enough, but afterward, our arms, shoulders, and backs had hurt from the different kind of movement and use of the muscles. Then we had a late practice with arms, and finally we were free to go. I returned to the embassy and found Loki, so I gave him the diplomatic pouch and explained my new assignment as well as the idea of dumping the most primitive people on Svartalfar. That interested him and he started making notes and plans to go there himself to report on conditions.

"I'm moving out to the Wayne mansion," I told him. "With Odin's permission, since I can get back and forth easily. My husband has shown up." I couldn't help the big grin on my face and I was jittery with the anticipation of getting back to Damian.

"Damian's back?" he asked, surprised, smiling himself. "This is good news. Next week, I would like to meet with him. Get a personal communicator from the chief of staff before you leave." I said I'd have Damian get in contact, then went upstairs to hurriedly pack. I couldn't move fast enough and just crammed my clothes into the space around my weapons. Maybe I could get it unpacked before Alfred saw. Then I poofed over to the manor, unexpectedly weary from the effort of moving so much stuff, landing on the front step. I didn't want to just burst in on everybody and since I had a body now, I didn't want to risk landing on top of somebody. It was just past 9 pm, not too late, and I was desperate to carve out as much time with Damian as I could. Alfred opened the door before I could even drop my stuff to knock and smiled at me.

"Congratulations on your success, Miss Alex," he said. "The house has not felt quite right without you." He seemed surprised by the sheer volume of my baggage, and I shrugged sheepishly and helped haul it over to the elevator. "The others are still in the library. Master Damian has been given your old suite, and I will move your things there as well." I thanked him and made a beeline for the library. Damian jumped up when I entered, and folded me in an almost uncomfortably tight hug.

"Does this mean that you're able to move in?" Daniel asked hopefully.

"Odin didn't even put up much of a fight. He might be getting soft in his resurrection." I sat with Damian on a loveseat and filled them in on the meeting where I thought it was appropriate, giving Steve and Bucky their written orders. Daniel immediately offered them a vehicle so that they could go back and forth. The cars were self-driving, so they didn't even need to get their licenses renewed. The group had been busy while I was gone too. Tony, Steve, Bucky, Emma, and Bruce had contacted the Avengers and had a meeting with them the next day. Then Emma and the
Science Bros were going to go over to Wayne Enterprises and start getting up to speed on new technology and see what could be done with their work for Ragnarok. Damian was going to go straight in to the Wayne building with Daniel to learn how the corporation had grown and business was conducted these days. I smiled. Everybody had a job to do and the mood was positive. Damian and Daniel were getting along well, and Daniel seemed relieved to have some help.

Soon after, it was time for bed. Being a meat sack was a lot more tiring than I remembered. Damian and I took the stairs up to our room, and I looked around. Subsequent generations had changed it some; the windows were much larger and the trim had been changed to a sort or neo-art nouveau style that was very attractive. The furniture was different, but the mattress was still comfortable and the fireplace still worked. The bathroom was also updated, but in similar colors. The bedroom and closet were in a creamy white, lavender, and a slightly darker green, with a beautiful dark green and ivory rug over the worn cherry floor. "It's different, but still home. Now that you're here," I said, and that was the last talking we did for awhile. We only went to sleep because we both had a lot of work to do the next day.

The next day, Damian woke up covered up by my wing, which he sweetly said he liked, and started to laugh when he saw my piles of equipment. His laughter faded as he watched me strap on my swords, put my dagger in my boot top, fold the cestuses over the sword belt, and add small knives and shuriken and a tiny variety of switchblades, push knives, and folding knives to my pockets. My wings were under control again, so I shook them out briskly before getting them to go away. I was having a pretty good morning. "Did you want to carry something too?" I asked him. "I have some spares." Without waiting for an answer, I located a good-sized folding knife for him. "Opens letters, if nothing else, and it's not a good idea to go unarmed right now."

Looking bemused, he accepted it, more to be nice, I think, but I didn't care why as long as he had something to protect himself and Daniel with. Damian had formidable hand-to-hand skills, but it was a mark of how much I'd changed that I didn't want him to go around unarmed. We reluctantly went down to breakfast, and I reveled in the family meal. Then I wished everybody a good day and poofed to the embassy first to check in with Loki. He'd gone to Washington to speak with the President and had left instructions for me to carry on. I encountered Torunn in the courtyard as they guards were warming up for their daily practice, and invited her out for a dinner with the family when she was free. I wanted her to broaden her acquaintance, but I also wanted her to meet Daniel, specifically. Multitasking. Then it was back to Asgard and practice with the valkyries. We started out with wing exercises and practiced getting in the air, hovering, and flying until we couldn't go any farther, then divided into two sides for a scrimmage of our own. After we finished, I went back to the citadel and hunted up Hogun for a nice duel with the two swords. Then I blipped back to Earth. Loki was still working on the political angles of everything. His natural slipperiness made him a great natural diplomat. So I went home. Everybody but Alfred was still in the city.

Alfred was glad to take a break from learning how the automation in the mansion worked and showed me around the expanded mansion. In the new wing, the ground floor had a lap pool built in, twenty-five meters. That was great news; I hadn't swum laps since the last time I was mortal and put a swimsuit on my mental shopping list. Daniel had his suite in this wing and the large room on the ground floor was his home office. There were six suites on the second floor and the third floor held three more suites and a glassed-in workout room with resistance and weights as well as a simulator that could provide scenarios for runners, bikers, skiers--cross-country or downhill--a moveable climbing wall, and rowers. Wow. The glass walls and ceiling could be dimmed to control the amount of sunlight and could be opened to allow fresh air in. It was a wonderful setup. Down in the batcave, technology had been improved of course, and new models of the batmobile, a sleek motorcycle, and a small personal aircraft were safely housed.

The medical suite was similarly improved and Alfred had me scanned with and without extended
wings, just in case of injury. Interestingly, even when the wings weren't visible there was an indication in the scans that something extra was on my back, but it wasn't a clear scan of bones and membranes and feathers, just a featureless blob. Most interestingly was the discovery of the structure of the wings. Unlike a bird, which has bones along the upper part of the wing only, my wings were more like a bat's, with bones that extended down through the wing. The claw on top was fairly small and hidden by the feathers. I'd assumed that my wings were like bird wings because they had feathers, but apparently I had bat wings that were covered in feathers. The AI balked at my wings but eventually accepted them and accessed my old records (archived) for comparison. Alfred showed me how human arms and bat and bird wings had the same bones--humerus, radius and ulna, carpals, metacarpals, and greatly elongated phalanges. Very interesting. It was like I had four arms now. More research showed that the wing structure of a bat was much more flexible than a bird's and acts much like a human hand. They can be moved like a hand and sort of swims through the air. The claw helps bats climb so they can take off from a higher point.

I was glad that I had Alfred with me because he had made a study of bats over his life. "Bird wings provide more lift, but bat wings are more maneuverable," he said enthusiastically. "And bats are mammals, unlike birds, so there might be something there that makes the bat a better choice for the wings. Because bat wings are more flexible, the degree and direction of lift can be changed very quickly. They have an unmatched agility in hunting."

"So by trying to emulate birds, we're not getting the most out of our wings," I said, and he nodded.

"The larger the wing, the more lift you get, but the tradeoff is less maneuverability and more stress on the wing. And the feathers will increase drag," he said. He took me out to the batcave and together watched recordings of bats in flight, compared to birds, and he had recommendations for possible ways to get the most out of our wings. We went upstairs, I thanked him profusely, and went outside to practice.

Flying was hard work, and I found it was much easier to start from a height. I went up to the roof and jumped off. Gliding was a piece of cake, and maneuverability was a lot easier once I had some momentum going. It was really fun, for the first time since the wings had become part of me. I buzzed the car when it rolled up the driveway to the house and landed well. Fortunately. It would have been embarrassing to wipe out in front of a crowd.

Damian popped out and came over for a kiss. "Productive day?" he asked mildly, and I grinned, flush with triumph as we walked up to the door.

"You bet," I said, cackling. "I'm literally Batwoman!"

That required some explanation. Damian laughed, Daniel didn't seem to know what to think about his granny, Steve had questions about my abilities, and Bucky warned me to remember that I wasn't dead anymore and be safe. Tony wanted to know if we needed tall ladders in our arsenal for Ragnarok. I smiled at his snark and was hit by inspiration.

"What about siege engines?" I asked. "Catapults? Build them big enough and we can climb up the supports. Plus if you use a load of shot instead of one big mass, you can probably increase the number of casualties you inflict on the enemy." That got me a sharp look and he and Emma put their heads together.

Later that night, the computer system chimed with a notification or additional results from the scans done in the medical. Genetic analysis showed that my mutations had survived my latest incarnation somehow. I was glad; I had the feeling that I was going to need all the help I could get come Ragnarok.
Planning

My brain felt like it had finally begun to catch up with all the change, and I had a list of things to discuss with the valkyries at our next meeting. I explained about the wings, first of all, along with some ways I thought we could work on our agility. Exercises inspired by agility drills done by football players, actually. Then came my second big idea, which was that we should all, to the limits of our abilities and gag reflexes, get some first aid training. "We're mortal now," I pointed out, "And we're going to get hurt, if not in training exercises, then definitely on the battlefield. We need to be able to patch ourselves up and also probably serve as battlefield medics," I said. "I can envision needing to evacuate key fighters if necessary." I firmly suppressed a vision of either of my uncles being wounded. Both my ideas were well supported, and then it was time for practice. Since our flight control was iffy, to put it kindly, we focused on ground tactics for this practice.

Following practice, I went to the citadel, showered, and reported for another strategic meeting with leadership. I reported on the valkyries' progress, and Thor supported our decision to get medic training.

"You and Serena monitor training," he directed me. "Come up with a list of those who are the weaker fighters; we can use them to transport the seriously wounded and treat the lesser hurts in the field; they'll still be able to defend themselves and their patients while not affecting the impact of the valkyries in general."

"Holly was a doctor," I said thoughtfully. "She should probably lead up our medical corps and have input into the decision of who to assign there." Thor nodded.

Then there was Loki, who had met with the general assembly of the UN and offered the abandoned planet. Canny as always, he'd gone with data on the size of the planet (larger than Earth by about a quarter) and maps that showed the arid, inhospitable deserts, the ice caps, and the land mass that supported a surprising diversity of ecology much like Earth's: rainforests, plains, mountain ranges, and a variety of climates ranging from tropical to arctic. There wasn't much volcanism on the planet aside from those strange deserts and it was tectonically sluggish compared to Earth. The ambassadors had been enthralled to the point of breaking the rules against personal communication devices on the floor. They had immediately sent their governments the official recording of Loki's presentation and the ground rules. "No offense," he said to me as we rode back to the embassy after his presentation, "but you humans have polluted your planet quite thoroughly. Because access to the new planet is controlled by us, we are imposing conditions, the main one being that technology given to the settlers be pre-Industrial Revolution and with limited weaponry. We will place societal groups according to their preferred terrain and level of aggression. The more peaceful groups together, the more aggressive on a different continent. And because the only effective method of getting to and from the planet is through the Bifrost, it is more or less a one-way trip. Some monitoring can be done, but the use of the Bifrost on a regular basis to move people and materials back and forth is not possible, and the planet is not to be exploited for resources for Earth. And besides, the Bifrost is supposed to be fractured by the sons of Muspell during Ragnarok, and it wouldn't be fair to have the settlers become dependent on Earth only to have that help cut off."

There were a few other ideas that were more negotiable and they'd already agreed to send a team to map the planet and identify hazards as well as things like edible plants. Loki had also agreed to provide a few Asgardian translators, who had the magically-granted ability to understand any language and speak it, to interpret for those groups with extinct languages. They would not be conducting negotiations, merely translating. And there were deadlines; it had to be done quickly so that it wouldn't interfere with our preparations for Ragnarok. "I do not expect much complaint about this," Loki added his personal observation. "Due to the strain on resources, I presume that the leaders will want to get this settled as soon as possible. We can assemble settlement kits
quickly that contain seed for agricultural societies, some livestock, weapons appropriate to the level of the groups, building materials, tools, that sort of thing."

"Impressive work, brother," Thor later complimented Loki, who smiled. Then there was a discussion about the large number of requests for information about the Norse pantheon and how their religion worked. It seemed that proof that other gods existed and the lack of proof for three of the major religions had rather shaken some people's faith and they wanted to know more. Thor rolled his eyes and said he'd assign a few people to come up with materials. There was discussion of other key items, and we were dismissed.

I had practice with Magni and Modi--until a time came when everyone was too busy, the practices would continue--then back to the embassy for practice with Torunn. Then back to the house. The family were all out, so I lifted weights and did my cardio. It felt unsatisfying, so I went online and did some checking. There was still a Spartan Race, and they had upcoming races in the area. I contacted the organizers, identified myself as an enhanced, returned person, and asked if I could still race. Within about fifteen minutes, I had a reply that confirmed that I was welcome as long as I registered as an elite racer, so I did, and added an item to my list to tell the other valkyries about it at the next meeting.

Bucky and Damian grinned when they heard my plan at dinner, and Steve was enthusiastic and wanted to register too. "We can't get into our old obstacle course," I said. "Valhalla is closed to us," I'd tried to go back once, just to see, but hadn't been able, "but this is the next best thing. I've got to keep challenging myself, getting better, and this adds some fun. At one point, I wanted to complete all three races, which are different lengths with different numbers of obstacles, but I think this is more doable now." I grinned.

"Er... Alex," Daniel said.

"You can call me Grandma," I said encouragingly, and he smiled.

"Grandma, you can build an obstacle course here, if you want," he offered. "The family trust also has some property in the Rockies; we bought it to protect it from development, but the terrain is more varied there, including cliffs and a river. Construction of an obstacle course should have minimal impact. It's not really inhabitable without a lot of work, the terrain is too rough. I'm the trustee, so I'm in a position to make the offer. Since you can sort of transport yourself; you and the other valkyries."

I accepted, of course. Bucky and Steve looked disappointed, so I offered to transport them too. They could help us build the course. We could include some modifications for un-winged participants. Right after dinner, Daniel showed me the location of the property on a map and aerial surveys. "There's a place for a zip line!" I crowed, and Daniel smiled. We were alone in his office, and he fiddled with a stylus.

"I wanted to let you know," he said. "I saw the lawyers today. With you and Grandpa back, and others will probably follow, I wanted to make arrangements. This is your home, of course, and I want to be absolutely clear that you are welcome to stay here as long as you want, the remainder of your lives, if you want, but there are also other family properties. You have full access to the family assets, including the trust. We drew up papers that will give every returning member of the family a half billion dollars in cash and assets as well as an equal share in the family trust. And don't waste your breath arguing," he said mildly. "It's done. Here's the information for your account," he said, passing me a neat-looking card, a rigid crystal plate with my name engraved on it. Despite his statement, I did spend time arguing with him. It was far too generous. "The family is worth around a trillion dollars now, we made a killing in alternative energy, remediating hazardous
waste sites and revolutionizing trash disposal and recycling, so this is literally a drop in the bucket. Part of that comes from the patents we bought with the purchase of Stark, including your work on bioluminescence, so you earned that. And it means a lot to me to have family around again. The law firm that the family uses is ready to assist you if you want, and you also have access to the family's financial planners, if you want." I blinked a few times and leaned over to kiss his cheek. "I talked to the Smithsonian personally, and they're being difficult about giving you back your jewelry. They won't give it or sell it back, but they have agreed to loan you your pieces if you give them enough notice. The pearls and a few other pieces are still in the family, in the safe."

I looked around to make sure we were still alone. "Sweetie, the jewelry was mostly Damian's thing, not mine. I don't really want it back. If he thinks he's going to start that up again, we're going to have to have a chat."

Daniel frowned. "But he gave you all those pretty things. Don't you want them back?"

"Not really. I'd rather have Damian than all the diamonds in the universe. The insurance thing was the most enormous pain and I never felt the same about most of it after Damian was killed."

Daniel digested this. "The Smithsonian did offer to give you a private tour of your collection," he said. "I was hoping you'd go. I'd kind of like to hear more about it now."

"Let me know your schedule, sweetie, and we'll go. Afternoons would be best." It was the very least I could do. Daniel's face brightened, and he said he'd arrange something. Damian poked his head in and came over to me for a kiss and snuggle. I told him about my plans with Daniel, and he looked interested.

"I'd like to go too, if it's not horning in," he said to Daniel and me. Daniel grinned.

"That would be great," he said, then slid another crystal plate over to him and explained. Damian shook his head, then gave Daniel a hug and a kiss on the cheek. They picked up a conversation/argument about who would be Batman. Daniel was prompt in offering Damian the identity, but Damian said that he wasn't there to take anything away from Daniel. Then Daniel offered to be Robin, and the debate would probably still be going on except that I stepped in.

"Daniel, honey, you are Batman now. You're doing a fine job of it by all accounts I've seen, and very importantly, you know the city now, how it's changed, and who the players are. Damian can be your Robin and give you the benefit of his experience. Or he might like to have a new identity, sort of like what Dick did when he became Nightwing. I'll let Alfred know, and he can talk with you about costumes, honey. And you're about to discover what the addition of a support team means for you, Daniel. Alfred all by himself is amazing, and there are a lot of intangibles included." Damian laughed and Daniel looked bemused. Just knowing there are people at home waiting for you, ready to help you do your job is a comfort, let alone the actual help. And sure, you can pop yourself into the med suite, but having someone to fuss over you just a little makes a big difference.

When we rejoined the others, they were talking about their visit with the Avengers. "Reactions were mixed," Bucky told me. "They're not sure what to make of us."

"Not really their choice," Tony said, sipping a whiskey. "We've got a meeting tomorrow with the head of Wayne, who's backing the Avengers, and the Senators who make up the advisory board. We'll see what happens."

"Depending on what you envision, I'm prepared to support your integration," Daniel said, and they discussed what might be possible. Part of the situation was that, like Damian, they didn't know the
players or the terrain any more, and their ideas about tech were wildly out of date. "Still, the emotional impact of the return of most of the original Avengers is potent," Daniel said briskly. "And my ideas include more than just a rah-rah, flag-waving appearance here and there. I plan to propose that you start out doing a little PR, but as you become more conversant with the advances in society and tech that have been made, full integration to the extent permitted by your responsibilities to Asgard. Most of the current roster of Avengers are new, and they're a little insecure. Our current Captain America has been contemplating stepping down, and I think Captain Rogers' return will help him with that decision. You all bring a wealth of experience that is unique. We don't have an Iron Man, the Winter Soldier was never made a legacy name, and nobody's claimed Paladin for generations. That leaves Dr Banner. Interestingly, unlike Grandma, your mutations didn't survive your return."

"I don't think they survived my death," Bruce said mildly, and I nodded.

"We can try to induce that mutation again, or you might prefer to be support staff now," Daniel said, and Bruce, who'd looked worried, relaxed.

"Definitely staff," he said.

"You all have choices," Daniel said to them. "Nobody's going to make you be Avengers again. But if you're contemplating joining again, there is absolutely room for you. If you envision a different role, we can also explore that." He nodded to Tony. "Mr Stark, if I might have a private word with you?" Tony looked interested and stood. "Uncle Bucky. You're family too, which means that you get a credit line." He gave Bucky another of the crystal plates and led Tony from the room. I snuggled up to Damian and filled the others in on my day. Steve was, as expected, really interested in the obstacle course and asked for the information on the Spartan race.

"If you'd like company," he said to me awkwardly.

"That would be awesome," I said immediately, and pulled up the website for him on one of the library's consoles. "It's so much more fun to do it with a team. I did it once on my own and it wasn't nearly as much fun."

"Come on, Buck, you gotta do this too," he said enthusiastically. My uncle looked a little grim, but eventually let himself be talked into it. They also had to run as elite racers, subject to more stringent rules. Nobody even tried to convince Emma to run the course too.

"Sweetie, what's this about a credit line?" Bucky asked me finally. "He doesn't owe me anything, I'm not really his family."

I frowned. "You're my much-loved uncle, so of course you're family," I said sternly. "He's arranged for money to be available for any of the family who shows up, since none of us have jobs that pay yet." I reached over and squeezed his hand. His left arm had returned as a novel organometallic substance that was even more cool than his metal arm had been. "He wants you to know he considers you family. And he's been completely alone for a few years. It means a lot to him that some of the family have returned."

"I guess I can't give it back."

"Not without hurting his feelings." Yeah, I was going to guilt my uncle into keeping it. And I wanted him to acknowledge that publicly so that when he found out how much there was he couldn't change his mind.

"I don't want to do that. He's a good kid," Bucky said in resignation. I smiled and Damian squeezed
Alfred came in to refresh drinks and handed me a link to the batcave computer. "The medical suite has completed your genetic analysis, Miss Alex," he said. My eyebrows lifted. That kind of analysis used to take weeks, not hours.

"What are the highlights?" I asked.

"The strength of your mutations has increased somewhere between a quarter to a third of what they were when you were killed," he said. "Most interesting is that there is nothing else in your genome. Those extraordinary wings have nothing to do with your DNA."

"Well," I said, not surprised much. "They come from the World Tree, so they must be magic instead." Alfred and Damian looked interested, so I told them about my visit to the Norn. Then I asked Damian about his afterlife.

"Well, I was killed close by one of the entrances to the underworld, so I was able to find it myself. One of the guides was coming out to find me, but I didn't want to leave my body with the suit on." I nodded understanding. "He said he'd take care of it for me if I went along, so I did. Found out later that Chester took it off and hid it." I nodded again.

"Xander found it when he turned on the tracker," I said.

"But first he asked if I had any money, and I had a small amount in the utility belt, but no coins, so I just took a bill with me. That's another reason for the guides; they help look for found money on the streets since nobody's buried with a coin for the ferryman anymore. The entrance and the path down to the Styx are very atmospheric; Lord Hades likes you to understand the importance of your death, makes it kind of a spectacle. So when I got down to the river, there was a little wait for Charon. When he showed up, there wasn't any problem with me boarding; the fare is only ten cents. Inflation has never hit Charon. But he didn't want to make change; money doesn't buy anything in the afterlife anyway, the fare is symbolic, so I just paid for the next ones in line who didn't have a dime with them. When we got to the other side, you approach a wall that looks a lot like the one in Lord of the Rings that's around Sauron's domain." I smiled. "And there's Cerberus, about three times the size of Sigurd" the creature in question raised his head as if to sniff dismissively "with the three heads. He's got red eyes, long fangs, drools a lot, but when he's not intimidating the new souls with the futility of doing anything but accepting your fate, he's really friendly. Likes ear skritches. You also have to pass the Erinyes before you get to the Gates of Death, held by Thanatos. If you look around, there's a lekythos, a funerary jar, that's placed unobtrusively nearby, filled with a fragrant oil. I made an offering to them, just to be on the safe side, then through the gates. Then you're judged by Minos, Aeacus, and Rhadamanthys."

After he was silent a moment, I asked where he'd been assigned. "Well, I could have gone to Elysium. But it's all just lying around, no labor, and it sounded boring. So they requested that Lord Hades make the determination, and he assigned me as one of the guides. Hermes used to do it, but there are too many people dying all the time even for a god to keep up, so some of the dead will take on the task. I liked it. It gave me something to do, and I got to keep up with the mortal world somewhat. That's where I found out about that TV program." He rolled his eyes.

"I didn't think they did you justice," I said and he chuckled. "The actor wasn't nearly as handsome, either."

"Sweet pea, I was glad that I wasn't featured more prominently. It was ridiculous."

"It could have been much worse," I said, agreeing.
"So Natasha informed me," he said in agreement. "But after that, thanks to her generosity, I was able to treat my fellow guides periodically."

"Tacos and pho?" I asked, laughing. "Please tell me it wasn't at the same time."

"Some of us had pho, some had tacos," he said. "Food carts. Wonderful things. When Martha showed up, she also wanted something constructive to do, but Hades didn't quite know what to do with her. Eventually she talked him into creating a record of the dead, so she went around Tartarus, the Asphodel meadows, the mourning fields, Elysium, and the Isles of the Blessed asking everybody where they'd lived, dates of birth and death if known, occupation, spouse and children if any, any biographical data they wanted to share, cause of death, and where they were assigned to the underworld. She enjoyed learning so much. And you know how she like to put things in order."

I nodded. Martha was absolutely ruthless in her quest for order. She usually got it, too. "So that was pretty much my afterlife. Guides came and went, if you got tired of the duty, you could request placement in wherever you'd originally been sorted and pass the afterlife there. There were only a few others who also stuck around for the whole of my tenure."

"Now I'm envisioning the Greek afterlife as some sort of Harry Potter sorting ceremony."

"Except without a feast afterward and the hat would be easier," he said, grinning. We talked a little more, then Damian and I made it an early night. I had a lot of time to make up with him.

The next morning I was up and practicing flight. While I was learning more about the capability of my wings, I did like the bats did and dropped from a height. So I went up to the roof and jumped off. Took a bit of nerve the first few times, then as I trusted my wings more, it was easier. I saw immediately what the increase in maneuverability meant for aerial combat and worked hard on my agility. Then it was meeting with the valkyries, where I announced the new obstacle course, the Spartan, if anybody wanted to participate, and the formation of the medical corps, and then practice. Serena went back to Asgard with me, where Thor and Odin instructed us on how to choose the valkyries for the medical corps and we kicked around ideas for getting us trained in at least basic first aid. It was decided then that I should set up a training class on Earth and all the valkyries would attend. Those with the desire to know more as well as everyone who would be part of the medical corps would get more training. "Everyone must continue to train with weapons," Odin said, and we nodded. We were valkyries first. Thor told me to bill the classes to the Asgardian embassy.

Serena came back with me to Earth, and we arranged with the Red Cross for first aid and CPR classes. She was interested in running the Spartan, so we went online and I paid her fee. Alfred, who was delighted to meet Serena, served us lunch, and afterward, informed us that everybody was at Avenger Tower if we wanted to drop by. Serena hadn't been back since we were returned, so she definitely wanted. We landed outside, repacked the wings (it had gotten a lot easier) and inquired at the desk for Daniel Wayne. I had a flashback to the time I came here with Aslyn, when I was just getting to know my uncle and both Aslyn and I were trying to get jobs. Whatever the guard heard put a surprised look on his face, and without comment he had us sign in and I spoke my name for the record. The guard directed us to the elevators with full access to the tower and told us that Daniel was in the conference room on the Avengers level and to go on up.
Recruitment

Damian, Daniel, Steve, Tony, Bucky, and Bruce rose as Serena and I entered the conference room. "He's cuter than I remember," Serena whispered to me as Damian held a chair for me. I smiled smugly. He sure was. Awkwardly, Bruce did the same for Serena. I adjusted the swords automatically as I sat.

"We don't come armed to meetings," one new guy I didn't recognize said to me critically.

"I do," I said briefly. "The end of the world's coming, and it takes awhile to pick up everything if I'm in a hurry."

"How much could you possibly be carrying?" Another guy I didn't know. I shrugged, took off my sword belt and cestuses, took the dagger out of its holder in my boot, pulled the thin short straight sword from its sheath along my spine, removed five knives from my person, and tossed a handful of shuriken onto the table.

"That's not much, Alex," Serena said critically. "What happens if you get in a real fight?"

"Work off some stress?" I asked, shrugging. I meant it for a flippant answer, but it actually sounded pretty good. The ever present niggle feeling that the end was coming sooner than I'd like created an almost everpresent tension. It wasn't often that there was something that could distract me. I'd get tired hauling around everything that I wanted to carry with me all the time; this was a compromise. She just shook her head at me, and I collected my little stash and made it go away again. It wasn't much of a collection, but it did shut up the two bozos.

"We were just discussing the integration of the old and new Avengers," Daniel said, taking control of the meeting. "We've reached a compromise that nobody is particularly wild about, so it's probably a pretty good one." I smiled at him. "Given that our original Avengers have commitments to our allies on Asgard, there's not really a question of them resuming their roles immediately, and there's a learning curve for the modern world, anyway." I heard Steve snort. "The two teams will begin to integrate, however; the originals will provide leadership and experience to the newer team, who will in turn help the others to acclimate. Bruce will be working with Tony in the labs seeing to tech and equipment as they get up to speed. Serena, I wanted to make you the same offer as I made the original Avengers--a spot on the team if you'd like, with a new identity. We could devise a patriotic identity like Liberty, or you could do something completely different. And G- Alex, a position with Bucky as a trainer." Serena and I flicked looks at each other.

"It's not that that doesn't sound like fun," I said to Daniel carefully. "It's just that I'm answering to both Thor and Odin these days and there's not a lot of free time available. " Serena agreed. Daniel smiled.

"I'm working on the presumption that you manage to blunt the worst effects of Ragnarok," he said. "That there will be an 'after.' That's primarily what this meeting is for, to lay the ground for future work. The Senators who provide oversight with me are on board with this plan. You just missed them, they had to go to a committee meeting. They're very excited with the possibilities."

"They're not the stuffed shirts I imagined that they'd be," Bucky said cynically.

"No, I had to work hard, planting suggestions, hinting, to get those three on the oversight panel. They're rising stars, and equally important, they all come from different parties, so there is a wider range of perspectives and ideas. They're also committed to public service and put country before
party, so we're pretty lucky. A few years ago we were stuck with an old fossil who wanted to use
the Avengers as a political tool." He shook his head.

"Well, this meeting was to get the ball rolling. I'd like everyone to think about it and when you
have an answer, let me know. There's no rush. Ask if you have any questions." And with those
words, a chef from the kitchen pushed in a cart with tea and coffee and snacks. Yum! I realized that
I was pretty hungry after the morning workout. Maybe I could persuade Damian to go to lunch with
me after this. There was some socializing and I made an effort to meet the new Avengers, sizing
them up a little as potential pupils. They weren't terribly happy with the return of the older
Avengers and I couldn't decide whether they were just concerned that they'd take over or whether
they just didn't want to share the spotlight. Or some combination thereof, or something completely
different. I worked my way over to Tony, who looked complacent.

"So what's up, Sparky?" I asked and he was momentarily smug.

"Wayne and I had a chat about Stark last night. Not about me getting the company back, you guys
bought it fair and square and it would cost too much anyway, especially since I have no money.
But he did offer me a leadership role once things settle down. I don't want to run it, so it's looking
like I'll be getting a new lab. Once I get up to speed and there's time." He sighed.

"That's great news, Tony," I said, smiling in relief. I was going to have to find out what kind of
cake Daniel liked and make him one. "It doesn't feel like Stark without a Stark. What about
Bruce?"

"I'll be bringing him with me," Tony said. "Wayne said he'd negotiate directly with him." I grinned.
Make that two cakes for Daniel. "So what will you be doing?"

"Honestly, I can't think that far ahead," I confessed. "I'll probably accept the training offer if I
survive Ragnarok, but I'm so focused on that that there isn't a lot of time for anything else. I just
have this sense of urgency that won't go away. It's distracting." Tony was silent a moment.

"You're listening to it, that's good," he said. "But if any of us survive the end of the world, Tiger,
it's going to be you. You're just that good." Daniel joined us, kissing my cheek.

"Grandma, do you want to take a tour while you're here?" I agreed with pleasure, and discreetly
pressed a crystal plate into Tony's hand, throwing him a wink before collecting Damian, Serena,
and Bruce. Bruce had already taken the tour, but where Serena went, so would he.

"What did you give Tony?" Serena whispered to me as we walked toward the stairs.

"Stark Tech is owned by Wayne Enterprises now, but it's a publicly traded company. I bought
some stock and gave it to him. He should have a stake in the company," I told her quietly. I
scooped up a decent chunk of stock, costing just over a million dollars. He could sell some if he
needed money, shares were trading at just over a thousand, and I had no doubt that he was
considering his options.

The floor under Avengers territory was still guest quarters; the floor below that mostly storage; it
made me a little nostalgic and sad to see my former lab used to park boxes and things. Most of the
rest of the tower was IT, with the nodes that had taken the place of servers offsite. There was two
floors of a clinic, the floor with the cafeteria, and the bottom five floors still had stores and
restaurants. There was the regular parking garage, an upgraded secure parking garage. The first
subbasement had the clinic for street heroes. The shooting ranges had been changed; they could be
converted between straight target practice and a shooting range with popup targets for firearms or
arrows, or anything else, for that matter. The training rooms had been upgraded as well; weights
were in a separate room and there were devices like the one in the manor that could be configured to be a treadmill, stationary bike, rowing machine, ski trainer, stairclimber, or moving climbing wall. But most of the space was just open space for practice, with unbreakable mirrors along the wall. Shower facilities and locker rooms had been moved to the same level as the weights. Looking around, I could almost see Pietro on his treadmill and Natasha stretching in the corner where the barre used to be.

"So if you want to take me up on my offer, Grandma, you can see that the facilities are pretty nice," Daniel said craftily, and I smiled at him.

"That they are, sweetie," I said affectionately. Serena was unfamiliar with the aerobic machines, so we stepped aside so I could demonstrate how to switch modes and select intensities and the recordings of real outdoor biking routes, ski slopes, hiking trails, cross country ski trails, and mountains for climbing.

"I'd sign on just for access to those machines," Serena told Daniel when we rejoined the group. He grinned.

"Feel free to drop by any time," he invited her. "We'll get you access, but don't make up your mind just yet. Take some time to consider." He then proposed lunch, and we went back up to the cafeteria. It was still excellent. Afterward, I had some things to do at the embassy. "Will you be free the afternoon after tomorrow?" Damian asked me, and I thought about it.

"Yeah, nothing's come up, anyway."

"The Smithsonian promised us a tour," Daniel said, so it was agreed that after I got back from Asgard, we'd take a shuttle down to Washington and see the Wayne collection with the curator. Damian excused himself and we walked over to the embassy, making a quick stop at city hall first. He came inside the embassy to say hello to Loki, who was delighted to see him. The boys chatted a bit, and I had the opportunity to introduce Torunn. We set up a dinner at the mansion for the next week--disaster dependent, of course.

The next morning, Odin showed up at valkyrie practice, observed our practice with the wings--I felt I was coming along nicely--as well as our weapons practice, and took the opportunity to clarify our chain of command. Serena was named as our battle captain; she would be in charge of our tactics and work with Odin and Thor on the strategies that would use our abilities to their fullest. I was named as our leader for all other matters. It wasn't entirely unexpected to anyone, although some of the newer valkyries, who didn't all like me much, were displeased. Odin set them straight, praising my abilities, my integrity, and my toughness. He looked around at the ones who were still defiant.

"I have no wish to force anyone to do anything," he said. Although his words were mild, power ran through his voice and it made my wings itch. "If in good conscience you feel that you cannot subject yourself to Alex's authority"--he'd given up using the valkyrie names he'd given us--"I will release you from your obligations." He shrugged, an odd mannerism on him. "I only want the best. Alex has a strong understanding of my goals and desires and I trust her to implement them in the most effective way. She has proven herself the strongest advocate the valkyries have possessed. Consider your choices. I will return tomorrow and any who want to resign may do so then." He turned and left.

Serena looked at me with wide eyes and a smirk. I rolled my eyes, and we picked up with our stretching again. Everybody was whispering, and valkyries began poofing away, going on to other responsibilities. "Congratulations," I said to Serena as we began walking back to the citadel. "You're obviously the best choice for our field command." She smiled.
"It's nice. It's what I like doing. It's what I'll miss the most if I rejoin the Avengers. Steve will be taking that over."

"If I were you I'd negotiate a role in that," I advised. "Especially if you're successful leading us, you'll have a pretty potent argument for why you should have at least tactical responsibility in some situations."

"You think it's possible?" she brightened. I shrugged.

'Never hurts to ask. Daniel's reasonable and he looks at results. His opinion counts for a lot with the Senators on oversight. Steve's got the advantage of getting to know Daniel better, but we can counterbalance that. We're having a dinner at the house next week. You're invited. Bruce will also be there," I mentioned, smirking. She shoved me, laughing.

"Do you think anybody's going to quit?" she asked more soberly.

"Geeze, I hope not. We need everybody. I know I can be too blunt and that offends people sometimes, but I just can't shake the feeling that we're running out of time."

"You could be more tactful sometimes," she agreed, "but you say what people need to hear, even if it's not what they want to hear or are expecting to hear. You'll change your mind if presented with evidence, but if you think you're right, you won't back down. These aren't bad qualities. Some of these valkyries don't have the same grit."

"Aren't you the old lady now?" I asked, amused.

"You know what I mean. But the one I'm really worried about is you."

"I'm not going anywhere," I protested.

"Because you can't. When you linked up again, didn't you tell me once that Odin said the bond couldn't be broken again? So what happens when he meets his end by the jaws of Fenrir?"

I'd forgotten all about that. "Shit. Way to harsh my mellow."

"You don't have a mellow these days. You're tense, just waiting for an earthquake somewhere to call us to action."

I sighed. "I don't know. I don't think anybody knows. Maybe I should visit the Norn. I can't for a few days, though. Got stuff today and tomorrow's that family obligation. Daniel wants to take me to the Smithsonian to hear stories about the jewelry Damian gave me. He's even gotten a curator to join the fun. I'm not that excited, but it will make him happy, and he's been kind of depressed, I think. I love the Smithsonian, but it doesn't look like there'll be time to see any of the rest of it."

"It's nice of you," she said. "It sounds like it's a family legend. Probably wonders if he can find a woman that will suit him as well as you and Damian suit each other."

"I'm working on that. I've got Damian looking around for likely women; not in the company, that's too awkward and pressuring and a possible lawsuit, but he's meeting people who do business with the company."

"Matchmaker."

"Not really, I'm just expanding the pool of potential dates for my grandson. If you weren't seeing Bruce, I'd have chucked you into the mix. And I'm looking around for Tony too. Not at Stark, but
the rest of Wayne Enterprises is ok for a hunting ground, I think. She's got to be brilliant, able to
keep up with him, have a good sense of humor, and pretty or striking. Let me know if you meet
anybody like that."

"Not likely, I'm just dealing with Asgardian men these days."

"And that's not Daniel's preference. Ok, well, keep your eyes open anyway."

We soldiered on. When I went back to the embassy, planning to relocate groups to the abandoned
planet was in full swing. Preliminary survey results were back and the food chain in about half of
the habitable areas had been discovered, bacterial samples were being analyzed, and testing was
being done on the native flora for toxicity. The work was being fast tracked all over the planet by
universities and public health organizations. Corporations were donating equipment (for tax
writeoffs, at least in the US) and governments were accumulating supplies to send with the
colonists. The Asgardians were assembling the supplies into pods to be put down when colony
sites were finalized. It was really busy and there wasn't even a place to work out with Torunn. So
we went out to the house.

Torunn was charmed by Alfred--who isn't?--and we went out into the back yard to practice. It was
good to do it on grass rather than an artificial surface, and reminded Torunn that Vigrior won't take
place in a parking lot. We need to move our practice onto grass more, and that goes for her
brothers, too. The idea went on my list. We were still at it when everybody came home. We were
going almost full tilt, in fact, and I had to call a halt as the onlookers were too close. She greeted
Damian and I introduced her to Daniel, who promptly invited her to dinner with us after practice,
and she'd met Steve, Bucky, and Emma at the embassy. Tony and Bruce would be along later; they
had gotten caught up doing research. We'd had a good practice and called it quits after she took my
notes on the practice. Bucky had no criticisms, but he did ask me to clarify reasons I did some of
the things that I did.

"It's what works best for Torunn," I said. "It's different for her brothers." After quick showers, we
assembled in the library for pre-dinner cocktails. Daniel had a million questions for her about her
training, when she started, if she liked it.

"I was begging my parents to let me learn for as long as I could remember. My father wasn't that
enthusiastic, but Alex taught me a few tricks, he saw that I was good, and he let me train. Mama
was always on my side, but women don't have as much influence on Asgard as men do. It's why
I'm happier here on Earth."

"She was a bloodthirsty little imp," I said, smiling at her. "She picked up a lot of the ninjutsu skills
very easily. Makes her a good bodyguard for her uncle; she can blend into crowds easily and make
it look as if he's alone when he wants to be incognito."

"That practice was pretty intense," Daniel said.

"Alex is one of the few who can keep up with me," Torunn said. "She's still better, though."

"You're closing the gap," I said to her encouragingly. "I wouldn't be nearly as good without my
mutations, but your gifts are natural."

"You're not my grandfather's best valkyrie for nothing," she shrugged. "Doesn't matter how you
developed your abilities, just that you have them."

After that, the conversation moved on to the others, and we heard how everybody's days had been.
Tony and Bruce showed up toward the end and joined us. Alfred had made trifle for dessert, a new
confection for Torunn, and damned tasty. There was coffee afterward, then Torunn excused herself when a guard from the embassy showed up. The message was for me, though; Odin was calling for all the valkyries to attend him in the Great Hall of the citadel on Asgard the next morning. Bemused, I offered the guard some dessert while he was here; he accepted a small portion dubiously, but the wonderousness of Alfred's confections won another convert.

Torunn went back to the embassy with him, and we all scattered to do other things. Emma, Tony, and Bruce put time in at the workspaces that Daniel had set up for them, and Bucky asked if I'd work out with him. I accepted with pleasure; Bucky was the one person I could go all out with. Steve, Daniel and Damian decided to postpone whatever they were going to do in order to watch. Alfred, after clearing away the remnants of dinner and dessert, joined us too. Bucky and I did hand-to-hand almost exclusively since we were pretty much at the same level. There was never any holding back although we were slightly sluggish after the excellent dinner. I remembered, belatedly, that I tended to eat too much of Alfred's cooking and I couldn't afford to put on any more weight if I wanted to fly. After the fight was over, I felt a lot better for having had the opportunity to work off the tension that gripped me most of the time. Bucky'd almost broken my nose and the bout had ended when I dislocated his shoulder, so we repaired to the batcave for some quality time with the tissue accelerators, now even more effective than they had been.

"That was the scariest thing I've ever seen," Daniel said quietly as I gingerly poked my nose after treatment. I heard the sound of my uncle's shoulder going back in and winced. "Either of you could have killed the other."

"It's always a possibility," I conceded. "But as long as we're so evenly matched, it's highly unlikely. I looked at him and tossed bloody gauze into medical waste. "You keep your edge, become better, by pushing yourself as hard as you can. Bucky is the only one I trust enough to fight with like that, but even with him, I'm holding something back because I'm not trying to kill him. He's not trying to prove anything either. Hogun's my match with the swords, but he's lost a step. He's getting older." I sighed. It would be awhile before I had to start pulling back in our bouts, but we could both see that day approaching. I looked over to see Alfred putting Bucky under an accelerator panel. The good thing about this reboot of mortality was that Bucky and I were chronologically about the same age. Aging together would allow me to have as much time as possible with my adored uncle. "But if you'd like training, either Bucky or I would be happy to work with you. Damian should be your first stop, though; he's tricky and elusive and knows the demands of being Batman very well. He can help you with acrobatics--he trained with Dick Grayson, the finest acrobat I've ever seen--as well as the kind of fighting that leaves your opponent alive afterward for questioning." Damian came over while I was speaking. He didn't like watching me fight on a personal level, but neither Bucky or I got many strikes in. He did enjoy watching from a skills standpoint, though. He asked some questions about some of the things he'd seen, and as usual, I offered to show him how to do it.

"I don't understand how you can just watch Grandma fight like that," Daniel said to Damian. "That was absolutely savage."

"I don't like to see her hurt, but I appreciate the skill involved. It helps to keep her safe, son, which is my highest priority. Bucky's essentially her guardian angel, a very unique one; he knows when to help and when to let her act on her own. They have perfect trust in each other."

"Huh," Daniel said, and then Bucky came over, good as new, for his post-fight hug. I made a note to look for some flannel shirts for him. There was just a hint of fall in the air, and I knew how much he hated the cold. Fimbulwinter had been the hardest on him of anyone I knew. Daniel asked him a few questions about how he'd trained me, and we all went back upstairs. Bucky and I didn't fight like that very often; it was really draining, and despite what I'd said to Daniel, dangerous.
Accidents happen. So it wasn't something that even Steve had seen often, and we were a lot better than the last time Damian or Alfred had seen us go all out. We said good night on the ground floor, and Damian and I went up to our suite. He drew me a bath and gave me a massage after that left me almost unable to move.

The next morning I felt sensational. I'd managed to shrug off the tension, and although it was creeping back, I still felt carefree. I kissed Damian goodbye, got my breakfast to go, and popped into the observatory to say hello to Heimdall before going across the Bifrost to the citadel. Odin stood in front of the great golden throne. Although he didn't sit in it anymore—Thor was king, there was no point in confusing anybody—he could have, and his authority was reflected by his appearance before the seat of power. His ravens roosted on the arms, watching us closely. I stood with Serena, Irene, Holly, Carol, and Dagny. After greeting us, Odin said that while he hoped we would all stay, now was the time to speak up if we wanted to be released from our service as valkyries. "This will be the last time that this offer is made," he said sternly. "Consider carefully."

There was a moment of silence, then Alyson, a troublemaker, stepped forward and dropped her cloak on the ground. Odin's eyes narrowed. I stepped forward, picking up the cape, shaking it off, and carried it over to Odin, standing to his right. Serena walked over and stood at his left, and then valkyries filtered through to stand beside Odin or face him.

"We lost eleven," I fretted after the choices were made and Odin had taken them away to break their bonds. "Eleven out of thirty-two. That's really going to hurt."

We were glum, but Dagny shrugged. "At least we got rid of the dead wood. Those of us who remain are committed. I know that I can trust you, my sisters, to stand with me on the battlefield." I nodded, taking heart, and asked Holly for her recommendations for the medical corps, which she would direct. We were having a meeting when Odin returned and looked at us benignly.

"Take heart, my valkyries; things are not as grim as they appear." He gestured, and I turned to see a collection of women approaching. I started to grin. We were saved. I stepped forward and greeted Eir, Brynhildr, Runa, Gretchen, Gefn, Hildr, all the rest, plus a few I didn't know, who had resigned before even Dagny had joined. There were forty-four former valkyries who were rejoining our ranks. I introduced the new valkyries whom they did not know, and the ones who had returned to Valhalla after our labor dispute greeted old comrades.

"The numbers are good," Serena said quietly to me as we watched the dignified reunion.

"Better than good," I told her with conviction. "These women are the reason why we have stories of valkyries. They are as legitimately bad ass—and more—as you can imagine. Don't make the mistake of underestimating them in any way and be open to their considerable expertise, and you'll do well. But you'll see."

Odin got our attention again and reiterated our chain of command. The older valkyries made no complaint, and following that, he dismissed us and we went to a meeting room where we explained our work to this point and what our plans were. "How are you for armor?" I asked.

"We have been to the smiths," Eir said briskly. "We have our shields, and they still had most of our helmets, other armor, and our weapons. What we lack, they will be supplying in short order."

"Excellent. Serena will need to work with you to see where your skills are and how they can be developed. Holly is in charge of an effort to provide medical assistance on the battlefield. We are all taking the class to enable us to fix up minor wounds training or on the battlefield, and some will get further training. Our basic class has been set up for tomorrow, so we'll need a second one to accommodate all of you. We are constructing an obstacle course to help with our training, which
we will be discussing in greater detail tomorrow. We have daily training meetings to work on
group cohesion, sharpen our skills, and develop tactics, as well as address any other issues that
arise. I'll let Serena and Holly speak and get things arranged so that we're a unified group again," I
said, stepping back and gesturing to Serena. Serena set up a schedule for individual testing and
dismissed the rest of us for the next few days from boutting. She was going to watch the old-school
valkyries scrimmage to better understand what they had to offer and how to integrate their tactics
into ours. I volunteered to set up another first aid class, after which Holly would choose additional
members for her team. Then the meeting was over and we listened to them describe how they'd
changed their minds after being released from Helheim, wanting back in on the action. Frigga had
broached the subject on their behalf with her husband. And here we were.

"Not going to lie, I'm really relieved," I said. Gretchen smiled. They were staying in Asgard.

"We are out of practice," Brynhilr said factually. "We must work hard, but we will be by your side
on the plains of Vigrior." I left them to their planning when Odin summoned me. They had located
the winged horses and were bringing them to Asgard. I was relieved that we'd have another
resource. Thor had a warning for me as well.

"The other aspect of Hela's domain contained villains, the scum of the Nine Realms. They were
also released at the cock's crow and he do not know where they are although Heimdall is searching
when he can." He sighed. "Hela has always had that duality of her nature, watching over two
afterlives, shifting between two forms. But when the cock crowed and released her charges, she
had... an episode. She morphed between her two forms uncontrollably. She finally stopped, and
when she did, she had stabilized in the form of Hel, the guardian of the place you never saw. The
aspect of Hela, your benefactor, has not been seen since. The prophesy says that she will lead the
dishonored dead of Niflheim at Ragnarok. We were holding her here, in the cells, but somehow she
has escaped. We do not know how; there were no surges in the power that guarded her cell, no
fluctuations at all. So she is a free agent and we are concerned that those of Niflheim will be
scheming somehow. Be alert." Great. Something else to worry about. I felt the tension start to coil
between my shoulder blades and they dismissed me.

I had enough time to go down to the embassy, request that they set up a second first aid course, fill
in Loki about what had happened and drop off the diplomatic pouch before going home and getting
ready for the afternoon's jaunt.
Museums

I popped home and got ready for the afternoon's activities. Up in the attic I'd found some of my old clothes in a couple of trunks; from what I could remember, it was most of my suits and nice casual clothing, with my lingerie and a few of my cocktail dresses as well. At the bottom of one of trunks were shoes, and there were a few suits of Damian's. They were in excellent condition, and I brought them down to our closet. They still fit well, although some of the oldest suitcoats were tight over my shoulders and arms; I'd gained muscle. I was pleased because I wouldn't have to go shopping; as ever, retro fashion enjoyed a certain popularity, and these styles were considered classics. So I chose my favorite pair of black wool trousers, comfortable two inch black pumps, and a light blue silk charmeuse blouse, applied new makeup that I'd gotten (advances in technology made this stuff long-wearing, oil controlling, and easy to remove) and styled my hair. I was waiting in the library with a couple of cats when Damian and Daniel arrived, looking handsome in their suits. Seeing them together, I saw that while there wasn't a facial resemblance, they had similar body types and height. Daniel came over after Damian kissed me hello, and presented me with a banker's box.

I opened it to find some familiar boxes. I smiled and picked up the oldest one, opening it and pulling out Martha Wayne's single strand of natural pearls. I handed it to Damian, who closed the clasp for me and kissed the back of my neck while he was there. Daniel smiled. "Thank you, honey," I said to him.

"I thought you should have these," he said. "They're the family pieces." I quickly sorted through them; there was Damian's double strand of cultured pearls and the matching earrings, my wedding and engagement rings, the diamond earrings that my parents had given me for high school graduation (and replaced), a few other pairs of earrings and rings, the rest of Martha's jewelry, a couple of brooches, some necklaces, the cuff links I'd given Damian, his wedding ring, some other pieces including onyx shirt studs that Bruce had given him. Some things I recognized, others were new to me, added by other generations. "Grandpa says that there are still safes up in your closet, you can keep them there. They're yours." There was a little discussion about that, which Daniel won, and Alfred appeared long enough to admire the pearls on me again and to whisk the box away.

The three of us went back outside, where there was an unusual pod-shaped thing on the driveway. It was a personal shuttlecraft that could seat a maximum of six, configured today for three, and Daniel showed us how it worked. It was pretty simple; input your destination, the shuttlecraft cleared the flight plan, and you settled in for the journey. He began to input the address for the Smithsonian's Museum of Natural History, but Damian asked if we could make a quick detour. Daniel agreed, a little curious, but put in the address we gave him. From the mansion it was just a short, almost bird's eye path to city hall, where he accompanied us in. We had an appointment, and very shortly, we were reciting marriage vows before a judge and exchanging the rings I'd nicked out of the box. I sighed in pleasure as he slid my wedding band on my finger and returned the favor. Daniel was open-mouthed with surprise, but graduated to a big grin by the time we kissed. We signed the license, thanked the judge, had Daniel sign as witness, and then we were on our way to the museum. The whole thing hadn't taken fifteen minutes.

Daniel had a million questions about when we'd decided to get remarried, why we'd done it, why hadn't we made a bigger deal about it. "Well, the original deal was until death, which, since both of us were dead, nullified the contract," Damian said, picking up my hand.

"When I saw him again, it was as if he'd just come home from a long trip; he was still my
husband," I said, squeezing his hand. "He is the only man for me, really. But since it wasn't official anymore, we waited until the authorities had some time to figure out how to deal with dead people coming back to life. Once they had some guidelines, we went and applied; this was the first day we could get married." Damian and I grinned at each other. "And we wanted you there."

"There's no need for a big wedding," Damian said. "We had that, it was fun, but as far as I'm concerned, this is just sort of clearing up a paperwork glitch. Alex is the only woman I could ever marry. She's always held my heart." I put my other hand over his.

"I can't imagine that two lifetimes will be enough," I said, and Damian touched my face.

Daniel had more questions, this time they were about how we met, how we knew that each other was the one. We laughed about our misadventures, including our very first date and our first night together, when Bruce had walked in on us. That was still a funny story. It was only about a twenty five flight down to DC, so storytime was cut short. Our side trip hadn't even made us late.

We met the curator, a Dr Matthews, by the elephant in the Rotunda, and we went into the staff-only research wing. There, armed guards stood by a table where familiar boxes were laid out. They retreated behind the table as Dr Matthews invited me to open the boxes and share the stories. Then he leaned closer. "Are those the Wayne pearls?" he asked, and I took them off to let him have a closer look. "Remarkable," he said, finally handing them back. "Natural pearls are so rare now, especially pearls of this caliber. And these haven't been seen in public for at least forty years. They're exquisite." I smiled and had Damian put them back on, then we started looking at the jewelry pieces. The Artemis and Apollo diamond earrings, the Faberge aquamarine pendant, the diamond ivy bracelet he'd given me for my birthday, a Lalique necklace, important works by Cartier and Van Cleef and Arpels and other master jewelers, rings shaped like animals and birds and flowers, floral and geometric brooches, important earrings and necklaces, a dazzling assortment of precious metals, luminous cabochons, exquisitely carved gemstones, and flashing faceted gems. Between the two of us, Damian and I remembered when each piece was purchased and a story related to where I'd worn them. Finally, we were done, but Daniel and Dr Matthews were still enthralled and we'd drawn a crowd of other staff members. Including, it turned out, the Director. She said it was an unparalleled opportunity to relive a period of history and wondered if we'd cooperate with museum to have a special display of some of the pieces. After some looking between the three of us, the family agreed in theory, and the Director said she'd be in touch. There was some small talk, then Daniel said he'd like to take us out to celebrate, which prompted a question about the occasion from the museum curators. Damian and I smiled at each other when Daniel said we'd just gotten married again, and the Director and Dr Matthews both congratulated us heartily and I showed them my wedding ring, with the diamonds that spelled "I love u" in Morse code.

"What would you have done if you didn't have the rings?" Daniel asked.

"If not for your good timing," Damian said, smiling at him, "We would have asked if the family still had them later, and if not, had new ones made. But the originals are better." Dr Matthews sighed at the sentiment, and we said our goodbyes. Daniel took us to the Aerie, said to be the capitol's best restaurant, decorated with gryphons and a gold, white, and sky blue theme. We told him about our first wedding, how Bruce and Alfred had pretty much masterminded the whole operation, where Damian had proposed to me, our honeymoon on the Orient Express.

"I've been extraordinarily lucky," I said, tears in my eyes as I looked at my husband. Daniel sighed and ordered champagne. "I like the decor," I said, looking around.

"Are gryphons your patronus?" Daniel asked, and we laughed. It was a lovely evening, and
everybody was happy when we got home. Alfred opened the door to us.

"You and Master Damian have a visitor, Miss Alex," he informed me, and followed us into the library.

"Mommy!" a voice squealed, and a woman popped up from the sofa between Bucky and Emma. I was nearly flattened by the charge from my daughter and my wings came out instinctively to help keep me on my feet. I dimly heard silk ripping but didn't care.

"My precious girl," I managed to say, tears streaming down my face as I hugged her fiercely. And something new happened. My wings had become more flexible with use and training, and they folded protectively around us, like bats' wings do.

Damian let us have some time, then asked "Can a dad join this hug?" I made my wings go back, and after a struggle packed them away, and Damian got to hug his daughter, then I made it a family hug. Damian gave me his handkerchief, then, as it turned out, we were fresh out as Bucky and Steve had volunteered theirs earlier when Martha had seen her aunt and uncle. Alfred brought in a box of tissues and placed a trash can nearby. We sat on the sofa opposite Bucky and Emma; Steve had vacated the sofa for us and sat with them. Then I nudged Martha up and introduced her to Daniel, who had been waiting so patiently. Damian brought a chair over and sat, arranging us so I was sitting next to him, with Martha in the middle by Daniel.

She had an update from Olympus; it seemed that the Greek gods weren't sure what to do, this not being part of their expectations, and they were sitting tight. I looked over at Bucky and he nodded slightly; I knew he'd be talking to Thor and Odin. Perhaps an emissary could be sent. Then she'd come home. "I was so thrilled to see Alfred again, and he told me where you were, then called Uncle Bucky and Aunt Emma. It's so exciting to meet Captain Rogers. Uncle Bucky told me so many stories about you, I'm pretty sure I embarrassed myself with all the fan girling. And Daniel. Let me look at you." She studied him a moment and grinned. "Your eyes look just like my grandson Edward's," she said fondly, patting his cheek. Daniel was at a bit of a loss; I sympathized. Martha was a force of nature. "Alfred said you call Mom 'Grandma,' so you just call me Martha. Too many grandmas is distracting."

"Grandpa said you'd be coming along," Daniel said, smiling with pleasure. "Alfred said he'd prepared a room for you."

"I did, Master Daniel," Alfred confirmed, coming in with a tray of cookies, tea, and coffee. And Tony and Bruce.

"Godpop!" And Martha the Missile was up again, flinging her arms around a startled Tony. I grinned. He smiled gently and hugged her back, smoothing her straight obsidian hair.

"About time you got here, punkin," he said gruffly. And sniffled, just slightly.

"Gotta have the information," she murmured, beaming at him. She then offered her hand to Bruce. "Martha Wayne," she said.

"This is Bruce Banner," Tony told her, as Bruce shook her hand.

"Wow, THE Bruce Banner?" she asked. Then she looked over to us. "Is he working for us, Danny? Because if he's half as good as the stories, his brain is beautiful. Get him up to date and he'll be amazing."

"Um, yes, Daniel has been very kind," Bruce said cautiously.
"I'm sure he is kind," and she threw a smile at Daniel. "But he's also smart, which means that he'd see your value too." She urged them to pull up chairs, and we chatted for awhile before calling it a day and separating for bed. Damian was pulling back the covers and I was wondering where my robe went when the door opened and Martha slipped in. She was wearing the robe in question.

"Had to borrow some things, Mom," she said, coming over for another hug.

"You're welcome to anything I have, baby," I said. "But let's go shopping tomorrow and get you some of your own things. I'll be at the embassy tomorrow, so if you come with me, you can see Loki."

"What have you got going tomorrow?" she asked, snuggling into the hug.

"We have a first aid class for the valkyries. And I'd love to show you off to the others," I added, delighted. "Then I have to pop to Asgard briefly, and I think that's it. Serena has excused us from practice for a couple of days." I explained briefly what had happened. "Oh, and you can meet Torunn, Thor's daughter. She's serving at the embassy in her uncle's bodyguard detail."

She peppered me with questions about what I'd been doing, then started in on her father. We curled up in the bed and she sat at the foot, just like she'd done as a child. Finally she yawned. "I'd better get to bed," she said. "This resurrection thing is taking some getting used to." I kissed her good night, followed by her father, and she crawled off the mattress and stopped dead at the sight of my little armory on the floor. "Jesus, Mom," she said, aghast. I shrugged.

"It's what I do, honey," I said to her. "I had a nice stand in Valhalla that Uncle Steve made for me, but none of the furniture came with us when we were booted." She stared at the pile of metal. I think it was hitting her then what I was preparing for. I was sorry for her, but there was nothing I could do. "So, uh... Bucky and Emma and Steve, too? What's going on there?"

"I've never asked," I said delicately, giving her a firm look. "Whatever the nature of their relationship is, it's none of my business. It's working for them, and that's all anybody needs to know."

"Ok, right," she said, grinning at me, then she left.

The next morning after breakfast, I rode in with Daniel, Damian, and Martha; they dropped us at the embassy and after a call from the gates, Loki himself came down to grant us entrance. "Martha, my dear," he said, hugging her. "She's my goddaughter," he told the guard at the gate proudly. "Make sure she has access." We walked up the drive and they accompanied me to the courtyard, where I had the pleasure of introducing my daughter to the other valkyries, who were waiting for the first aid class to start. Serena remembered her; they'd met a couple of times, but Martha exerted her charm on the rest before Loki whisked her away. Serena wanted to update me on the new valkyries and their integration. While we were talking, a sleek white swan waddled up to us and honked at me. I looked at it apprehensively; it opened its beak again, and said, in the unmistakable voice of Skuld, that I was not to worry about my bond, that it would be fine. The swan glared at me through one beady black eye and snapped its beak on my little finger. I swore and it looked triumphant before waddling off into the shadows and melting away.

"Fuckers really hold a grudge," I said through gritted teeth. Curiously, the other valkyries didn't seem to have noticed the swan. "I didn't even do anything with their damned feathers." Serena started to laugh.

"Saves you a trip to Asgard," she pointed out. "So you'll have plenty of time for shopping with your daughter."
"I think my finger's broken," I hissed.

"Good thing your first aid class is about to start," she said, laughing, and patted my shoulder.

"You need anything at the stores?" I asked. "Sorry, I haven't thought to ask before."

"No, the embassy has taken care of what we need, for those of us who are stationed here or visit a lot. The others care doing fine with what they have. Earth's the outlier on fashion, really." I nodded and joined the class as the instructor started to set up. First aid had gotten a lot fancier than I remembered, and there were a lot of high tech supplies available at a very reasonable cost. The instructor showed us what she would recommend in a personal kit, which included a portable x-ray scanner. She asked for a volunteer, and I raised my hand and said that I thought my finger was actually broken. So we got a practical demonstration on the use of the instrument and a new (to us) instant-set foam cast. The bone was cracked, not all the way through, so it didn't have to be set. She showed us an injection that encouraged the initial formation of bone. She was able to administer it, having a lot more training, and after that excitement, we set to work learning for our test.

At a break, I thanked her again for fixing my finger and asked her about getting more advanced training for some of us. I roped in Holly for that discussion, and we learned about how some of our number could get advanced classes. I said that I'd been a paramedic before, and Holly had been a doctor, and she advised us to contact our boards and ask about how we could get up to date. When she turned away to talk to other students, we moved aside. "You'll be needed on the battlefield," Holly said to me, "but I think it would be beneficial for you to get trained too. You never know when those skills might be needed. And frankly, I don't know how many of us are suited to more training. We're a queasy bunch," she said. We'd seen some graphic recordings that had caused distress in our ranks.

"Wait til you get to know the ones who just rejoined," I advised as we went back to our tables. "They're a lot tougher than us modern valkyries." They were too. Our training, much more abbreviated from the ones I remembered, only took til lunch. We took our tests and all passed. There was a round of applause for our instructor and we thanked her before dispersing. Holly and I found Loki in his office with my daughter, Torunn, and Thor, laughing and having a good time. Holly submitted a list to Loki of the equipment we needed for our kits and left to contact the state medical licensing board. Thor was telling me how he'd invited Martha to Asgard to see her godmother Sif when Odin came in search of me. Thor introduced my daughter to him.

"You do not look much alike," he said, looking between us.

"Fortunately, she resembles her father," I said fondly, brushing her hair back. Her dad is a babe.

"Are you not a warrior like your mother before you?"

"My skills aren't as good as hers," Martha said matter-of-factly. "I can defend myself just fine, but my brother inherited more of her abilities than I did."

"And where is your brother?"

"I don't know," she said tensely. "He wasn't in my afterlife, that's all I know." Odin regarded her, and she looked back, steady but not challenging.

"Now I see your mother's influence," he said, sighing. He gave me a list of things to do the next day and let me know that the smiths were expediting the armor for the returning valkyries. Good, something to check off my list. "But it will take some time," Odin said glumly. "Demand is high
and our supply of metal is low."

"What kind of metal do you need?" Martha asked.

"Steel, mostly," I said, as Odin flapped his hand in dismissal. He's not the detail kind of guy, mostly big-picture.

"Danny acquired a foundry last year," Martha said, her eyes narrowing in concentration. Damian and Daniel had been talking about the scope of Wayne Enterprises on the drive in. "I can find our their production; we could probably supply your needs quickly and efficiently." Loki smiled in satisfaction, and Odin looked intrigued. Business wasn't his thing, but he admired knowledge and skill, regardless of their application. I went to Asgard quickly to find out what the smiths' needs were and when I returned, Martha said she'd get on that this afternoon. We went for lunch together, then shopped. "So really, Mom, what happened with Tony?" she asked, puzzled. "You said you were together, but you're definitely not now that Dad's back, and he doesn't seem upset."

"We broke up during Fimbulwinter," I said, holding a blouse up to her. "It was wonderful while it lasted, but we'd gone back to just friendship when we were chucked out of Valhalla. It was good, he wasn't hurt by my going back to Damian. He's pretty much my dearest friend," I said abstractly as I held up a pretty ruby colored suitcoat. 'I need to find him a woman, though. He deserves to be happy." She grinned.

"Matchmaker," she taunted me as she took the coat from me.

"I just want everybody to be happy," I replied as we moved on. "And Tony doesn't always know what makes him happy. So a nudge now and then..." Martha smiled and shook her head. She got the basics of a good wardrobe, leaving the suits and slacks to be altered, and I picked up a few pairs of cross-trainers. Shoe technology had sadly lagged in Valhalla.

Then we went to the office, where Martha and Daniel immediately looked into the company's steel holdings. I asked Damian how he was getting on.

"Daniel's got the company running like a precision instrument," he told me proudly. "There's not much for me to do, actually. Will you still love me if I turn into a slacker?"

"That would last for about a day and a half," I said fondly. "You'll just find yourself something else to do."

"You know me too well, Sweet pea," he said, nuzzling my hair. "I guess I'm just going to have to figure out what I want to do for my second act. I can't freeload forever." Then he winced as Daniel threw a ball of paper at him and rolled his eyes before turning back to Martha, who was pointing out something on his screen.

The next morning, Martha went into the embassy with me with information about the steel that Wayne could supply, and she and Loki set to dickering. As far as Wayne was considered, the amount of steel was small and they had it on hand. Daniel was inclined to be generous, given my association with Asgard, but it wasn't charity, and it wasn't long before Martha produced a contract, already signed by Daniel. As soon as the pen left the page after Loki's signature, Martha called the office and Daniel personally got things in motion. We waited while Loki summoned a guard to courier the contract over to Wayne, and the three of them took the Bifrost to Asgard. I didn't, waiting for them in the observatory, chatting with Heimdall. Then it was up to the citadel, where Sif waited. I watched her greet her goddaughter, and they settled down with tea. I watched Serena work with the new/returning valkyries for a bit, then trained Magni and Modi. I stopped by the smiths to let them know that steel was coming, to their great relief, and took care of a few more
things. The first load of supplies for the obstacle course was set to go down later today, and after practice tomorrow, we'd start setting things up. It should go pretty fast; the obstacles had been premade and it was a matter of just assembling it on site. Daniel had offered to supply our needs, but he'd done enough with the donation of the property. When I got back to the sunroom where everybody was still talking, Magni and Modi had joined the company and were very attentive to Martha. I smiled. She was a little too much woman for either of them, at least at this stage of their lives. I had to get going, so I told Martha I'd see her at home, and said goodbye to everyone else. I blipped back to the embassy and started checking items off my list.
Things were going about as well as I could hope, so I was satisfied. Sure, there were things I was missing—I would do pretty much anything if I could get Xander, J, my parents and Bruce back, for example. But I was working on the premise that they were in the Christian afterlife, since nobody had come back from that. And there was the matter of the threat of Ragnarok that followed me around like a shadow. But aside from those things, I was enjoying being alive again and exceedingly grateful for what I did have.

The day after my shopping trip with Martha, I was up early for practice; it was our first integration with the old valkyries and I was so eager. They had centuries of experience and their ferocity was inspirational. All of them were masters of at least one weapon, and just to watch them fight was an education. I'd missed them after they'd stayed in Helheim. Serena played around with formations and tactics, aided by Brynholdr, the most skilled in that area from among the older valkyries, and Eir led on the battlefield. There was a learning curve associated with the integration, but it went very well. After that, we had lunch and went down to start assembling the obstacles. The Wayne land was beautiful, even prettier than the parcel in Valhalla, and everybody was in a good mood. I left early to check on the steel as well as chase down other loose ends and was a little late back. Damian, Martha, and Daniel were waiting for me back in the embassy, talking with Loki and Torunn, firming up the plans for dinner in a couple of days. I mentally smacked my head. I'd forgotten about that, and it had been my idea.

We chatted on the way home; Martha had run into a friend she'd made in the underworld. Ann was British, but she'd been living in Boston, teaching computer science at Harvard. Damian smirked at me and I rolled my eyes. She'd been working on computational biochemistry and was down interviewing for a position at Columbia, not having been dead so long that her knowledge was completely out of date. "You should invite her to dinner," I encouraged Martha.

"I invited her to the dinner we're having this week," she said. "Alfred said there was room." I smiled. Alfred would make room. And Martha knew no unexceptional people, so I was certain she'd be a great addition.

At home, Steve had a surprise for me; he'd worked with Alfred to create a new weapons stand for me. It resembled the one he'd made for my room in Valhalla, but this was made from beautiful curly cherry that Alfred had found in one of the outbuildings. The wood was still pale, though it would darken with exposure to light, and the lively figure in the wood would show up even better. The stand came in two parts; one rack for my armor, helmet, cestuses, knives, swords, and knives, and one for my spears, javelins, arrows, and bow. Alfred suggested the apple orchard as a shooting range if I wanted to practice at home, and Daniel reminded me that I also had access to the Avengers facility. The racks were works of art, and I thanked them both. Damian was quiet and I could read him well; he was disturbed not by the arms and armor themselves, but that they represented an event that would be very hazardous and nobody knew what it would mean for those killed in battle. There might not be an afterlife this time. I arranged with Alfred, quietly, to have the stands moved from our room to the one next door so Damian wouldn't have it in his face each day. Alfred actually moved it downstairs to the cloakroom; nobody really went in there but him and it was really convenient. He also provided me with a sports bag, originally intended for hockey players, that was durable and allowed me to carry everything with me in one bag.

The next few days passed quickly and productively, and I looked forward to our dinner with anticipation. I had no idea how many people would be there, having lost track, but it was certain to be a good time. I made it home a little early to do some extra grooming and went down to help
greet the guests. Damian came down with me and we indulged in some time on the tete-a-tete couch, which we didn't do much these days, wanting to socialize with the others. Daniel was the next one down and we joined him in the central seating area. Alfred served cocktails and said that the meal was on track for when the guests got there. Martha and Bucky were the next ones down, and I had the opportunity to catch up with how the armies of Asgard were progressing in their training. Then Steve and Emma came down, and Tony, and the our guests started to arrive. Loki, Torunn, and Thor and Sif had brought Magni and Modi. Bruce came in, apologizing for his lateness, just in time to greet Serena. But there seemed to be some unusual tension there, and I made a note to ask her about it the next day. One of the Avengers oversight committee came, and in a social situation was less stern than he appeared when he was a Senator in public. Martha introduced me to Ann, who was shockingly beautiful. She was moderately tall, with a willowy figure, rich creamy skin, and exquisitely beautiful wavy dark auburn hair. Her brown eyes were large and velvety but sharp and didn't miss much. She was delightful, witty and well-spoken. I reached out and dragged Tony over as he was passing by to make the introduction. She was intrigued with the legendary Tony Stark, and, smiling, I nudged my daughter along.

Martha didn't start snickering until we were at the canape trays that Alfred had placed on the desk. I just grinned at her. "Do you have any other awesome friends?" I asked her sotto voice.

"Haven't run into anybody else, but I expect I'll be making some new ones. I'm going to have to, if you keep setting them up with your friends," she replied, popping some sort of bacon-wrapped morsel in her mouth.

"Excellent, dear," I said, patting her shoulder. "You do that." She snorted in amusement before going over to Torunn. I found my husband talking to the Senator and Loki and joined the conversation. Or listening, anyway, they were talking about trade. I excused myself after a few minutes and found Bucky, talking to Thor about his responsibilities to Odin and Frigga, updating him about the progress of the training he and Steve were doing. This was a conversation I could add to, and we were comparing notes when the Senator joined us. Thor was an occasional Avenger, not totally under the authority of the oversight committee. Bucky had agreed in principle to rejoin the Avengers, but the Senator, I was surprised to find out, primarily wanted to talk to me.

"I understand that Daniel made you an offer to resume your former position as a trainer for the Avengers," he said to me, and I nodded.

"I don't have the time to do it now, but yes, he made that proposal."

He nodded thoughtfully. "Young Wayne doesn't have the final authority to make that offer, however," he said, surprising me slightly.

"Daniel may be young, but he's a fine businessman and nobody's fool," I said.

"I am concerned that he's stacking the Avengers with relatives and I want to know where your loyalties lie," he said baldly. "All I know about you is that you're a legendary socialite still known for jewelry and haute couture and that you have been granted Asgardian citizenship."

"She is a valkyrie, and prized among our people," Thor said calmly. "She has ties to Asgard, but that does not mean that she is hostile to the planet and country of her birth."

The Senator grunted. "I'm much more than what I wear," I said to him, allowing some chill into my voice. "If you search, you'll find my name on patents during my first lifetime and I managed the labs for Stark Tech for decades. Right now my primary responsibility is to prepare for Ragnarok, so discussions about me rejoining the Avengers' staff are premature. Daniel may be family, but you obviously don't know him well. The Waynes have, during my time at least, and Daniel shows
the same integrity, always been impressed with talent and ability. My father-in-law hired a couple of people who had hit hard times out of friendship, but that was all he was willing to do. They started off in low level positions and rose or did not based on their work performance." I laughed. "I'd have never had so much as a friendship with Damian if I was as vapid as you assume." My voice cooled again.

"Are you saying there has to be some sort of loyalty oath?" Bucky asked, frowning. The Senator looked wary.

"We need to make sure that you're not agents of a foreign government," he said and Bucky exhaled hard.

"Politicians," he said to me and Thor in disgust. "Steve's not going to like this either." I nodded. Steve's dislike of oversight was strong enough that this might change his mind about rejoining the Avengers.

"If you choose not to join the Avengers again, we can certainly use your abilities," Thor said immediately. "And Loki has a gift for helping others identify and pursue new interests." Bucky looked thoughtful.

"It would be nice to try something else," he agreed.

"You could do whatever you wanted, Uncle Bucky," I said, and he put his arm around me.

"You too, sweetie. You always said that you made a mistake on your Masters," he reminded me. "You could study something else if you wanted, try a new field if you wanted. Stevie could go back to art school," he said, and from his tone, I could hear him thinking about new possibilities. Thor smirked and the Senator looked worried.

"I didn't know you were related to the Winter Soldier," he said to me.

"You don't know much, then," I said briefly. Thor grinned.

"Their closeness has always been well-known," he said dismissively. "My own sons have modeled their relationship on the love, trust and loyalty that Alex has for her uncle, which is fully reciprocated. I am grateful for that," he said to Bucky and me. "Avoiding the problem of jealousy between the brothers." I was surprised to hear that about Magni and Modi, and apparently my uncle was too. "They are not perfect, as is no one, but their integrity cannot be questioned by anyone with rudimentary intelligence." He shook his head. "Alex's one weakness is for baked goods. She makes hard decisions and pays the price for those decisions without complaint. Her conscience is clear and her loyalty and honor are noteworthy. She has earned the respect of my father, and that was hard enough for me, his son, to do." He shrugged and picked up his glass. "If your exercise of power drives Alex away, you will lose more than one trainer with a depth of experience you can only dimly grasp." He nodded to us and went in search of a refill.

"I'd forgotten that I had options, once this is all over," I said to my uncle.

He took my hand. "You're just focused, sweetie," he said. "You want to make sure that your valkyries are as prepared as possible, that you have done everything within your power to get them there. But you have a fine mind, and you should look around, see what's new and interesting to you."

"Damian is going to want a new challenge too," I said thoughtfully. "Daniel is running the company superbly, and I can see Martha going into some sort of partnership with him, but Damian
will want to do something different." I tapped my lips with my finger and looked at my uncle. "And you might consider that you and Uncle Steve have the same freedom to explore as I do. What did you want to do before the war, Uncle Bucky? Because I think you just might have sacrificed enough already." We looked at each other, and he smiled, that big gorgeous smile I loved and didn't see enough.

"Let's see if you're right about fate and make it through Ragnarok. Keep our focus, then actually relax and think about it, sweetie." I smiled back and leaned against him.

"It would be nice not to have to be armed all the time," I said wistfully. "Maybe we should do some preliminary work with Loki, just to identify some possibilities. Remind us that there might be a different outcome."

"A different outcome?" I'd forgotten the Senator was still there.

"Ragnarok is supposed to end in the destruction of all but a handful of men and gods," I said briefly. "But I have it on good authority that fate isn't as fixed as people might think." I touched the cast on my little finger. It should be coming off soon.

"We've just got to make it through," Bucky said, and I nodded.

"I thought I heard my name." Loki's wonderful voice made me turn around and smile at him.

"You did. I was wondering if you do career counseling for old friends."

"Ah." He glanced briefly at the Senator. "I wondered if you might not be getting tired. Your skill at arms is exceptional and something Thor and I can only aspire to, but your laudable brain isn't being used. Yes, we must talk and I will explain the options you can find at Columbia." He caught me twisting my brass rat and laughed. "You cannot blame me for trying to attract exceptional students. You two let me know when you have some free time. And I am professionally acquainted with recruiters and officials at the Fashion Institute and Parsons, if Rogers also wants to look past the final battle."

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see the dismay on the face of the Senator. His approach had irritated me, and the more he talked, the more I knew that he hadn't done any research or asked any questions about me or my uncle. They'd released the information to the press about the return of most of the legendary Avengers, and this put him in a tight spot. "Sweet pea," Damian said, coming up to me and taking my hand. "Alfred's about to announce dinner. Sorry, Bucky, I'm escorting Alex in," he said with a grin that Bucky returned. Just then, Alfred did announce dinner service and I stood next to my husband.

"Please come through to the dining room," I invited Bucky and the Senator. "You won't be disappointed," I promised, then we walked down the hall, followed by our other guests.

"What was that about?" Damian murmured.

"Senator started questioning my loyalties," I murmured back. "Then Bucky reminded me that I could go back to school if I wanted, and it turns out that Bucky and Steve might want to do something different from Avenging, so it was a bad tactic." Daniel had placed me at the head of the table with him at the foot, with Martha and Damian near the middle at both sides in order to keep the conversation lively. Damian held my chair as everyone else found their seats. Martha smirked at me and cut her eyes to the side where Tony was seating Ann. I wanted to laugh that she'd undoubtedly gotten Alfred to switch the place cards. Serena was on Daniel's right, the Senator to his left, and Magni was on my right with Bruce on my left. It was Magni's first
experience with a Midgardian social occasion but he was enjoying it very much, he assured me. Bruce was quiet as always, but I made sure to include him in the conversation, and Emma on his other side kept him engaged too. Alfred's meal was delicious, of course, with one of his special salads followed by individual Beef Wellingtons and roasted vegetables. Dessert was a variety of eclairs and cream puffs, served with coffee or tea, then we adjourned back to the library with our cups, or you could have brandy. After a reasonable time, our guests, showing every indication of having had a good time, said their good nights, thanked Daniel, and departed.

The Senator was the last to leave. "I didn't mean to offend you," he said to me.

With difficulty, I held my tongue and said I hoped he'd enjoyed dinner instead, then Daniel stepped up and escorted him to the door. When he got back, Daniel asked me what the Senator apologized for. I shook my head and picked up my coffee cup, which had gone cool. Oh well. "Basically accused you of nepotism, stacking the Avengers with your relatives, and questioning my loyalty."

Daniel rolled his eyes, and Alfred shook his head as he freshened my coffee. "I reminded her that she has options after Ragnarok," Bucky said. "Loki offered career counseling with an eye to enrolling her in Columbia" Tony snorted derisively "and she reminded me that I have options too. I'd forgotten," he admitted. "Hey, Stevie, Loki knows people at Parsons and FIT, if maybe you're interested in exploring some options with us." He chortled into his coffee. "So now the Senator, who should have done some research, has some problems." Steve started to laugh, which set off the group.

"Maybe it is time to see what regular people live like," Bruce said. "I need to brush up my knowledge. Maybe it's time to do something other than nuclear medicine." This set off a lively discussion among the former Avengers. I settled back and Damian kissed my temple.

"It would be nice to be able to relax again, not always be ready for the worst case scenario," I admitted to him as we got ready for bed. "I have a second chance. I should make the most of it."

Damian spit out his toothpaste and hugged me. "You do have a wonderful mind," he said. "We can both look into other possibilities. It would be an adventure we could both have." We kissed, and his hands explored my body.

"Oh, god!" Martha protested as she bounded into the room.

"You don't knock, you take your chances," I said sternly. Damian laughed and Martha flushed.

"So is it true, you really might not go back to training the Avengers? Steve's talking about graphic design and Emma is considering reopening her jewelry store. Uncle Bucky just asked if money for education was still available through the GI Bill."

"It's something that I'm considering," I told her. "I've gone through the loss of almost an entire team of Avengers and the grave wounding of one of them. I've spent my time since then participating in mock battles, training, weaving, and making weapons. Preparing for the apocalypse, basically. Baby, it would be really nice to do something meaningful that isn't life or death."

"Huh. When you put it like that, it makes a lot of sense. Tony and Ann hit it off," she said in an abrupt change of conversational direction. "She asked him out. They're going on a date tomorrow." I grinned in triumph and we high-fived.

"Ok, honey, that's enough for tonight," Damian told her. "I have a wife to make love to, and I sincerely doubt you want to see that."
"Yuck," she said, making a face and marching out the door. My laugh died away as Damian turned his full attention to me. I didn't find his attentions at all yucky.

The next morning, I was early to practice and caught up to Serena. "Thanks for inviting me to dinner," she said. "What was going on with the Senator?" I told her about his bumbling.

"Well, it's a fair question, they need to know that you're not a new kind of HYDRA agent," she said, surprising me. "Alex, they don't know you, and a lot could have changed while you were dead," she argued, then frowned. "That sounds weird. But it's odd that he didn't do any background research on you."

"I did get the training job originally through Tony, due to my relation to Bucky," I admitted. "But there's nobody who can say I didn't do my best. You're right, of course, but his timing was terrible. It's not something you bring up at a social occasion. That is business and should be treated like it."

She nodded and we started to warm up. "So what's with you and Bruce?" I asked. "You guys seemed off last night."

"We're unravelling," she said bluntly. "And I really don't want to talk about it."

"Ok," I said, and I didn't need to know more. That was personal. "I'm sorry, though."

"You have it so easy," she blurted out. I looked up, startled. "Everybody thinks you walk on water, you've got a husband who adores you, one of your kids, descendants who have welcomed you with open arms, wealthy descendants at that. You have no worries, you can tell the oversight committee to stuff it if they irritate you, you have options."

"Well, I'm not even universally liked, let alone a water-walker, and you know it. You're well respected and certainly more popular than I am. I've worked for my position in the valkyries and it hasn't been easy. I have options, but so do you. You don't have to back to the Avengers any more than Bucky or Steve does. Yeah, I'm lucky to have so much family around me, and I know it, but I've got a lot of worries and concerns, which you also know," I said mildly. This wasn't the first time that I'd been envied, but I hadn't seen this kind of resentment from her before. I got up and walked calmly away to say hi to Dagny and Irene, also just finishing their warmups.

Today we practiced a mixed approach, with some in each battle group fighting on foot and some on the wing. I wondered if we could get to practice with the winged horses but decided not to mention that today. I spent a lot of time aloft, the returning valkyries in my group not fully in control of their wings, which I knew was good for me, but it was really hard work. Then back down to the obstacle course, where we spent a few hours erecting obstacles. After the other valkyries went on to other duties, I stayed put and enjoyed my lunch in the spectacular setting, enjoying the absence of other people. I missed solitude. There was the sound of the wind through the trees and grasses and some birds were singing, so it wasn't utterly still. Just very relaxing. After my lunch and a few more moments of enjoyment, I went back to the embassy and learned that the steel had been delivered and taken to Asgard by way of the Bifrost. As I was talking to Loki about other preparations, my husband popped his head in. Loki smiled and told him to draw up a chair. We finished our business, and he had both of us take a computerized interest indicator test.

"Not much has changed," Damian said ruefully. He scored highest in aspects of business. I grinned. I'd scored highest in the sciences and engineering, still. Loki smiled and sent information to our personal communicators about Columbia's programs in those colleges with a promise to talk more about areas of special interest once we'd had the opportunity to explore and think. Then he told me that Hogun was staying at the embassy for a few days, and I tracked him down while Damian and Loki talked. We arranged a couple of practices while he was down, then I collected my husband and we went home.
The next week passed quickly. There was a distinct distance between Serena and me; it wasn't hostile, but it was there. We communicated effectively about matters involving the valkyries, but that was it. I didn't think I had anything to apologize for.

The day for the Spartan race came up. Only Irene had accepted my invitation to run it, so it was just Bucky, Steve, and us. It was the first time I'd run as an elite racer, and although we ran together, we couldn't assist each other, which was a big adjustment. We were all used to helping a comrade when they were down. We ended up posting good times. Steve absolutely loved it and wanted to do the next longest race. I was up for it, but Irene and Bucky were not so enthusiastic. We took our participation medals, tired but feeling good about our success. Irene promised to see me the next day at practice, and the rest of us drove home. There was another surprise when we got there; Peter Parker had turned up, having come down by Bifrost from Asgard, where he'd been working to help organize the denizens of Helheim. He'd come down to help Loki at the embassy. Emma, Steve, and Bucky were happy to see him, lots of hugs and backslapping, and Daniel offered him a place to stay. Although I was friendly, I was just as glad when he declined; Loki had given him rooms at the embassy. He stayed for dinner, though, and by the end of it, I was warming up to him. Either he'd changed or I had--probably both--and we got along better than we ever had. That was welcome. Emma had very welcome news for me; she'd devised protection for my wings.

She'd used one of her super-light alloys to create a sheath for the bones at the top of the wings that curved around like a cuff bracelet, and there was a colloid that she wanted to paint on my individual feathers that would, when cured under a specific frequency of light, made them much more resistant to breakage or damage by coating the rigid shaft of the feathers. By targeting this part of the feather rather than the whole thing, the vanes would still be responsive enough for flight. The shaft would be somewhat less flexible, so she treated some feathers--a few primaries, secondaries, and coverts--on each wing to test the effect first. The extra strength to the feathers made a difference, but it was positive, and I had her treat all the feathers. She said she'd work with any valkyrie who wanted the wing protection, and I spread the word. A careful test by Serena showed that the coating really did help turn aside a blade, which would save the feathers and the skin beneath a lot of damage. On the vanity side of things, the metal colloid imparted a faint, dark silver sparkle where it was painted, which was attractive.

The returning valkyries were outfitted fairly quickly once the steel was up with the smiths, and I felt better once everyone was fully outfitted and training was going as well as I'd hoped; the valkyries were quick to learn and had a lot of experience to draw on. I had a meeting with a board from the licensing body for paramedics and brushed up my physiology and anatomy and studied new textbooks. The result was that I was allowed to ride along with EMTs for a month to demonstrate my skills after passing a battery of tests, and eventually my certification was renewed. It wasn't just window dressing; protocols had changed and the scope of our responsibilities had broadened. Due to new classes of painkillers, we could administer these drugs ourselves because they had no interaction with most types of drugs. There were a lot fewer drugs to worry about, anyway; common problems like diabetes, high cholesterol, many heart problems, and COPD had been cured. The painkillers worked by targeting nerve signalling; there were no intoxicating side effects and so were not drugs of abuse anymore. It was really cool to study.

One morning, we were in a pitched battle, learning how to integrate the winged horses, when the World Tree shook. It was an extremely disquieting experience but not the terror that was supposed to happen as a precursor to Ragnarok. Serena caught my eye and jerked her head toward Yggdrasil, so I flew as fast as I could. The Norn were waiting for me and Odin right behind. "This is not the sign," Urd addressed us both. Odin and I glanced at each other, then looked back at Urd. "There is a disturbance of some significance on Midgard."

"Take some valkyries and investigate," Odin ordered me, and I nodded to him and the Norn, then
returned to the valkyries. I selected a detachment of modern valkyries that included Serena, and we poofed back to Midgard.

It was utter chaos. The dead from the Abrahamic traditions had finally shown up.
Integration

Everywhere we looked, people were materializing out of thin air into solid forms. There was an extraordinary variety of fashion styles and everyone was gawking: the contemporary people were looking at the new arrivals and the newly mortal were gaping (how obviously depended on social class, apparently) at the infrastructure. Serena and I looked at each other and grabbed our personal communicators. The news cycles were full of observations about the returning souls, but no information. I picked someone who looked to have died in the 1990s and asked what was going on.

"Well, I died in a traffic accident," the young man said to me. "And I went to heaven, met Jesus, had a talk about how I'd underperformed in life, the bad things I'd done as well as the good, and went on. Then there was an announcement that we were being returned to life and not to waste this opportunity... and here I am. This city is unbelievable." We nodded in full agreement. "I don't suppose you know what I should be doing now, do you?" The young man looked hopeful.

"Well, I'd suggest that you go to a police station," I suggested after a quick look at Serena. "I'm sure they're collecting information on returned souls. This was kind of unexpected, so plans will be evolving, but this is not the first time that souls have been returned. I'd imagine that remaining calm and patient is going to be important." The man nodded, and I gave him some cash. "I don't know what the supply situation is looking like, but this will at least feed you a few meals." He grinned.

"Thanks, lady. My name is Nick Davis."

"Nice to meet you, Nick. Serena Johnson," she said, and they shook hands.

"Alex Wayne," I added, shaking his hand too.

"Wayne..." he said, and he looked like he was remembering something. "Do you know an Alexander Wayne? Funny that you have the same name."

"My son was named Alexander," I said, my mouth suddenly dry. "We called him Xander. Black hair, blue eyes? Smart, funny?" Nick grinned.

"He's a buddy of mine." I had to restrain myself from grabbing him and shaking information out of him. Serena put her hand on my shoulder.

"If you see him, tell him his parents are back and at the house," I said. "Or he should check out the Asgardian embassy. His godfather's there." I wanted to run out and find my son, but I had other responsibilities too.

"Tell you what, Nick," Serena said. "Go to the police station and register with them, and maybe you could take the long way to this address--" she gave him the address to the embassy "-- and give your name at the gate. We'll see that you have a roof over your head."

"Hey, thanks," he said, looking relieved. "I'll look for Xander before I go." I smiled at him.

"Thank you," I said fervently, and pointed him toward the nearest precinct. Serena and I went directly to the embassy, seeing that the guard was listening to a couple straight out of the Gilded Age; from the sound of it, the man was the robber baron who'd built the place that now housed the embassy and he was with his wife, demanding entrance. Good luck with that. The guard nodded to us and we slipped through the gate and walked quickly away from their protests.
Inside, Loki was interested in what we had to tell him, and when I told him that Xander was out there, he asked what I wanted to do. "I want to go out and search street by street for him," I said, "but that just isn't practical. The streets are crowded by the worst tourist season in history and it would be like finding a beading needle in a huge haystack. I need to get a grip. Xander's smart, he'll find a way to get in touch. But I wondered if we could use the fence outside the embassy."

"Go on," Loki invited.

"If we could supply paper and Sharpies or something, let people post their names, who they're looking for, maybe where they could meet, post them on the wall."

"That's a great idea," Serena said.

Loki nodded to her. "Do it, see what information you can collect while you're helping," he said. "Alex, take the pouch and report to my brother. It won't affect Asgard, but perhaps we can provide some resources. I'll have staff call the police stations and let them know about our wall." He gave Serena a minicomputer. "Start a spreadsheet, that could help the authorities as well as helping to reconnect families and friends." She nodded and turned for the door.

"I hope your mom shows up," I said to her. Serena's mother was the only one in her family who had died in the city. Most of her family had lived in Georgia. "I'll check in with you later." She nodded and left, and I took the diplomatic pouch and poofed to Asgard.

Thor and Odin were talking with Magni about some aspect of kingship when I arrived, unscheduled. "Speak," Odin commanded, and the three of them listened as I summarized.

"What numbers are you looking at?" Magni asked. I shrugged.

"Honestly, it's not possible to estimate," I said. "Christianity is the predominant religion in the U.S., and there are significant numbers of Jews and Muslims, too. And this is cumulative, hundreds of years of worshipers in the New World, over a millennia longer in the Old World. And we haven't even seen Buddhists yet, or anyone from other Asian religions or philosophies yet. But hundreds of millions. Probably billions."

"Are you jesting?" Magni asked, disbelieving.

"No."

Thor groaned. "I shall return with you and learn more," he said. "You humans breed too much."

"Can't do anything about that now," I said, and he sighed.

"I will expedite the settlements we have been working on," Odin stated.

"It should relieve some pressure," I agreed. "Thank you." He waved this off and cancelled our practice the next day, saying that he would send some valkyries down to supplement the embassy guard. Thor brought Magni with us so he could see both the spectacle and diplomacy in action.

Heimdall set us down just outside the UN. Magni looked around, incredulous and a little frightened, I think. He'd never seen such a population. Even Thor looked a little overwhelmed. I cleared a path inside for them and returned to the embassy. I checked my communicator; no messages. I found Loki and reported; he nodded. "Check with Serena, see what they need."

I went outside, carrying hastily printed contact forms that had been cut in half to save paper, and found her presiding over tables that had been set up. Embassy staff had organized people into lines;
returnees listed their names, dates of birth and death as much as they knew, immediate family members, and a place to meet on the forms. If they were unfamiliar with the city, a location like Central Park was suggested. There weren't enough maps, but each staff member had a tourist map with the location of the embassy marked and the returnees could orient themselves. The staff members took the forms, input the information into a spreadsheet, and others posted the forms; one section of street-side fence was for the first half of the alphabet, the other for the second half. There were a couple of people helping those who were illiterate. The embassy, assisted by local businesses who donated, handed out bottles of water with each returned form. "So far, so good," she reported. "But we could use additional help." I nodded and reported back to Loki. He said that he'd go back to Asgard to request a lot more people. He'd called the mayor's office to let her know what we were doing over here and to get looped in to official communications.

I took a moment to call Damian and let him know that, against the odds, I'd bumped into a friend of Xander's. He was thrilled and hopeful, and we traded information. We were essentially doing much the same thing, although they weren't having people post their information. Daniel had immediately placed orders for emergency supplies to be handed out and word had gone through the company to increase production of a water purification straw to be handed out as well. He'd also made donations to relief organizations, both from company funds and the family trust. Then I went to work.

The people were a little dazed by the crowds--who wasn't?--and the ones who had been dead the longest were really freaked out. There were some who'd never seen so much as an electric lightbulb.

We were relieved after night fell by a wave of guards and valkyries, as well as our own other returned dead and I finally blipped home. Damian returned shortly after I showed up; he and Martha had taken the flying pods to scan the roads leading out from the city for family members who might be returning on foot. He grinned and hugged me, then drew me outside, where I witnessed Alfred with uncharacteristic tears on his cheeks hugging Bruce. There was a long hug, followed by backslapping, and I got my turn to say hello and get a welcome home hug. We came inside eventually with Martha, who wouldn't let go of her grandpa, had sandwiches while Bruce told us what he'd seen, and we all traded stories. Bruce listened in bemusement and asked to see the wings. He was quite taken aback by them, but smiled when Alfred told him they were essentially fancy dress bat wings. Alfred had already gotten Bruce's old suite ready for him, having gone through the house when the news had broken that the dead were returning, and, thinking quickly, had gone out shopping to increase the food we had in the house as well as obtain supplies in anticipation of generations of Waynes. He'd gotten some clothes and toiletries specifically for Bruce and more anonymous items for others; a lot of workout clothes that both men and women could wear. Daniel came home shortly before midnight, fatigued but excited to meet Bruce, who'd provided the foundation for Wayne to become the second largest corporation in the world. And the original Batman, of course. He'd brought Bucky and Steve back from the embassy and Tony, Bruce, and Emma back from the labs. Bruce greeted Bucky and Emma like the family they were, shook hands with Steve, said hello to his old rival Tony (there was a certain amount of evaluation done on both sides) and was introduced to Bruce. It had been a weird day, even for all of us, and we all went right to bed after that. Damian and I were so tired that there wasn't even any canoodling.

Things eased up by the end of the third day. By then, the National Guard had been called in, martial law imposed for everybody's safety, and the Red Cross and FEMA, as well as other charitable organizations, were working to assist the newly living. There was an enormous strain on resources, and despite all that could be done, there were sanitation problems and difficulties getting people even a blanket and food. The government confiscated the contents of grocery stores and stocks of basic supplies and ordered all businesses to stay shut down and nonessential people to stay in their homes and off the roads. Daniel, Damian, Martha, and Bruce went in to the city to
help direct the resources they commanded to help all around the world, and the Avengers suited up and helped with crowd control. Bruce Banner moved to the embassy to work there, glad not to be the Hulk anymore, who couldn't have helped anyway. I popped back and forth between the embassy and home. Odin directed the flow of supplies from the other realms while Thor and Magni stayed in Midgard. Modi helped his grandfather, and groups of original newly living were transported to their new homes on Svartalfar. That relieved some pressure and they were already working to create new settlements for whoever wanted to escape the craziness on Earth. Even given the inhospitable regions, there was room for a lot more people, especially at the low technological level that had been mandated. We valkyries resumed our training on Asgard; we'd done what we could, and we still had preparations for Ragnarok to make. A bunch of newly risen weren't going to change that.

That night, we had a celebratory dinner at home: both Bruces, Buckey, Steve, Emma, Tony, and Peter were set to join us. I was really fatigued when I came through the door with Serena. I'd just accepted a drink from Alfred when a glass shattered on the floor. I looked to see Serena staring daggers over by the window.

"Oh, my fucking god," I breathed. "You have got to be kidding me!" That last came out as a shout. May Parker flinched.

She was standing with Emma, Peter, and Tony. Martha was slouched in a chair, completely ignoring her. Bruce--my father-in-law--looked reprovingly at me. I ignored him. "You have a lot of nerve to show up here," I spat at her, venom dripping from my voice, then I had to hang on to Serena, whose wings were out and was going to go after May. My wings popped out and cut off her view. A small table tipped over accidentally. Too many wings in too small a space. Serena forced herself to calm down and her wings folded back although they didn't go away entirely.

"I invited her," Daniel told me. "Apparently there are things I don't know."

"Yeah, like how she got an entire team of Avengers wiped off the map," Serena snarled, brushing aside my wing (and that wasn't easy). I gave up and put it away. "Incompetent. Unfit. The court martial said there wasn't enough evidence to convict you, but I know you're responsible for this." She shook me off, holding up her arm that, like Bucky's, had shifted to an organmetallic. "You were the only one behind me."

"I know you don't believe me, Serena," May said, finding some spine from somewhere. "But I didn't. We were never friends, but I'd have never shot you in the back." Her voice trembled but we were unmoved. I stood with Serena, both of us crossing our arms as we looked at her. Her dad, who had looked aghast at Serena's accusations, looked at his daughter.

"Sorry, Alex," Serena said to me. "But I can't eat with that." I nodded understanding and took her to the door. We always poofed to and from the porch so that we wouldn't bump into anything or anybody.

"Sorry, Serena, I didn't know," I apologized. "If I had...I would have made my excuses."

"I know." She exhaled. "I'm sorry, Alex." She shook her head. "It just feels like my life is falling apart. I shouldn't have taken it out on you the other day."

"It's ok. This whole thing is difficult. And now it's been ramped up to eleven with wild cards we couldn't expect. We'll talk tomorrow."

"I don't envy you now. You're going to have to go back in there, aren't you?"
"Yeah." I looked grim. "Bruce insists on manners." I laughed shortly. "Now that he's back, he's setting the tone again. Daniel is fine with it but right now..." We said goodbye and I trudged back inside.

"Are you all right, Miss Alex?" Alfred said quietly just inside the door.

I blinked back tears. I was tired and felt overwhelmed. The stress of the last few days left me vulnerable to flashbacks. I hadn't seen May since I'd testified at her trial and it brought back the loss of my friends and students back. I thrust away the memories of seeing the recordings the clean-up team from the military made, the bodies... I blinked hard. "I don't know. It's just a bit much for me." I exhaled. "I can't. I just can't sit down to eat with her."

"I'll convey your apologies to Master Daniel," Alfred said soothingly, and he gave my arm a pat. I trudged up the stairs. I took a shower, but even the highest water pressure couldn't help the knots in my shoulders. I took some aspirin and went into the conservatory to try to relax. It smelled nice in there and was silent and calm. Damian came up sooner than I expected.

"Petal," he cooed, sitting beside me and handing me a plate. I wasn't hungry, though. "You're burning through a lot of calories," he said sternly. "You've got to replenish or you're going to get sick." He waited until I'd taken a couple of mouthfuls. "So that was unexpected," he said, and I rolled my eyes at him. "She told us about how that mission, how it all went wrong, but she denied shooting Serena with her repulsors."

"Of course she would," I said bitterly. "But the heat map showed that she was the only person behind Serena, and conveniently there was an EMP right after that that wiped out the team's electronics and recordings. And while a repulsor isn't the only thing that could have destroyed Serena's arm, no weapon was found at the scene that could have done it. She was thrown a bone at her trial."

"I will feed you if you don't eat, my wife," Damian threatened, and I forced down a few bites. "So she had to explain to Tony what she did to his company and the other Avengers what she'd done."

"I feel sorry for her father," I said. "He really did try to teach her better."

"Makes me grateful for my daughter," he said, sighing. That made two of us. Martha could also be pigheaded, but she knew when she was out of her depth and when and where to ask for help. "She spent a lot of time explaining to Stark how it wasn't her fault she'd tanked his company and tried to throw you under the bus, but Martha wasn't having it. All she did was offer Tony free run of the company archives that include the internal documents prior to the purchase that showed the state of the company at the time she bought Stark. He's furious and Bucky and Steve are pissed, both that she tried to blame you, saying the labs weren't producing much that was useful, and the fact that she didn't call for a retreat on that mission when it all started going to shit. Here." He took my plate away and started gently working the knots out of my shoulders. "Tony told her that he was disappointed that she didn't have enough character to admit her mistakes."

"He's had to eat a lot of crow himself," I said, sagging a little in relief as he smoothed away the tensions. "He doesn't respect cowards." Damian kissed my temple.

"Bucky and Steve said flat out they wouldn't work with her on the Avengers, and Daniel said that there wasn't an offer on the table. Emma's first reaction was to stand up for May, but that got harder and harder. She's upset with you, though, that you brought it all up." I sighed and he put his arms around me.

"She's not the one who had to deal with all the fallout. Bet Bruce is pissed with me. I was not a
"Well, all you did was say a bad word," Damian said, nuzzling my hair. "You did prevent Serena from mangling her, so that offsets things. And in the final analysis, you shouldn't have to sit down to dinner with somebody like that. I think you sort of soft-pedalled what happened when we were catching up, Sweet pea."

"I thought I'd never have to see her again, and I thought I'd come to terms with it," I said. "But seeing her again...Ugh. Standing there, like everything was fine and she wasn't a pulsating sack of shit. If Serena and I had both piled on, Alfred would be scrubbing bloodstains out of the Persian rugs. Or I would, it wouldn't be fair to make him clean up my mess. We wouldn't have killed her, but she'd be in the hospital. She got an Iron Man suit rather than bothering to put in the work to learn hand to hand. She never could learn shit."

"Sometimes bloodstains are for a good cause, Miss Alex," Alfred said, coming forward with a small plate. "And if you were to finish your dinner, I have some dessert for you." I peered over the edge of the plate at the large piece of chocolate cake and picked up my plate, eating as fast as I could politely. Alfred smiled slightly and we exchanged plates before he departed to do Alfred things. I snarfled the cake down with a lot more enthusiasm than I had my dinner, and after a cautious look around, licked the plate at a couple of spots of frosting. Damian roared with laughter, then took me back to the bedroom where we spooned on the bed, talking about other things. I reveled knowing that Damian had my back, literally. It was nice and toasty from where he was snuggled up around me.

The door opened and Martha stuck her head in, cautiously, followed by the rest of her when she saw that nothing that would require brain bleach was going on. She flopped down on the bed on her side so that we were face to face. "What a cow," she said. "I forgot how she was. You'd have thought that being dead would have taught her some humility or something."

Her father reached over me to tug her hair. "Why?" he asked reasonably. "Doesn't seem to have changed you." I laughed as Martha rolled her eyes.

"I've never betrayed a trust like that," she said. "I'm no angel, but there are things I won't stoop to. So why mess with a good thing? Besides, our afterlife wasn't meant to be improving, not like the Bible says. And I know, dad, cows are nice animals and I shouldn't insult them with that kind of comparison." Damian snickered into my hair. "So dinner went kind of splat after that. She made the mistake of appealing to Bucky." She sobered. "He said that he couldn't see the little girl that he'd played tea party with and that he thought she'd been a decent woman. That was the punch that hurt the most, I think. It obviously hurt him to have to say it. Hey, how come Uncle Bucky never played tea party with me?"

"Because you always wanted to either play 'running the multinational corporation' or "Uncle Bucky's sidekick,,'" her father remembered. "Emma asked you once if you wanted to host a tea party, and you said no because we had Alfred." Both of us laughed.

"Alfred does a better job of pouring tea than I ever could," she defended herself. "The master at work."

"That's an interesting point you made, sweetie, about the Bible," I said. "This resurrection thing doesn't seem to be tracking what the Bible says, although I couldn't tell you the last time I read Revelations. At least Ragnarok is pretty much adhering to script."

"I wish Xander would hustle up and haul his ass back here," she burst out. "He could tell us more, I'm sure. And I miss him." I patted her cheek.
"You didn't hustle up either," I pointed out reasonably. "I had to wait. He's probably doing something and will show up when he's done. He knows we'd want to see him."

"But he's my twin!" she burst out. "It's bad enough waiting for my kids and husband, but if I have to track down Xander, he's going to be so sorry."

"Give it a couple of days, Missile," Damian said to her. "If he's not back then, then you're a go for launch." I yawned suddenly, and Martha leaned forward to peck my cheek.

"Night, Mom, Dad." She jumped up and scuttled out the door.

"She exhausts me, and we're about the same age now," Damian said wearily. "I feel old."

Reluctantly, I sat up and swung my legs out of bed.

"You're not such an old man," I said flirtatiously, and he laughed and chased me into the bathroom.

Daniel apologized the next day and I apologized for causing a scene, and that was the end of it, at least as far as I heard. The practice was especially hard, and I ended facing off Serena more often than not. I didn't mind, though, she was working through some tough stuff. In the afternoons we all went to the embassy to help. The embassy had been officially designated a place to register and get information on relatives, and Daniel's IT department had imported data from our spreadsheet and half a dozen more to form a master database. There were open terminals for the database for those who knew how to operate them, but those who didn't needed an interface. I was helping a man in 17th century breeches (we also had a little fashion guide on our personal devices to help us recognize when a returnee might have last walked the earth) who seemed completely overwhelmed (I understood completely) when Karla hailed me and we switched returnees. I saw her assisting the man to a chair before I turned to the couple in front of me. Something about them just announced "1980's" to me. Perhaps it was the man's mullet or the shoulder pads of the woman's jacket.

"Hi there," I said amiably. "Welcome back. How can I help you?" They exchanged a glance.

"Please, we're looking for our son," the woman said, passionately entreating me. "It's been just so long."

"Hopefully, he's registered, but as you can see, there's so many people that he might still be waiting," I said with an encouraging smile. "But it's easy to check. What's his name?"

"Bruce," the woman said quickly. "Bruce Wayne."

My mouth dropped open. "Thomas and Martha Wayne?" I asked incredulously. They looked at each other and nodded to me. Their hands squeezed each other.

"Please, do you know who he is?" the man pressed me.

"Yes," I said with a firm nod. "I even know where he is." As they exchanged looks that lit with joy, I turned slightly away, switched to the phone mode and waited.

"Sweet pea," my husband's voice said affectionately.

"Damian, you've got to grab your dad and get down to the embassy immediately," I said.

"Alex, what's the matter?" he said sharply.

"Your grandparents just showed up. They want to see their son."
"We'll be right there." And he hung up. I turned back to them, smiling.

"He's on his way, Mr and Mrs Wayne," I told them. The Waynes clutched each other. I thought that Thomas might fall over and found them chairs. "I haven't introduced myself properly," I said when they were seated. Mrs Wayne looked at me curiously. "My name is Alex Barnes Wayne. I'm married to your grandson."

"We have a grandson?" Mrs Wayne breathed.

"The one and only Damian," I said, and crouched between them to show them some photos. "This is Bruce, when Damian and I were married the first time, he gave me your pearls as an engagement gift," I told her. "They're still in the family. And this is Damian," I said, flipping to another one.

"My word, he's handsome," Martha said, and I grinned at her.

"He's got your eyes, Mrs Wayne," I said, "although you can't really see them in this picture. And our daughter, Martha." They looked like them might cry. "She has a twin brother, Alexander, but he hasn't shown up yet."

"Is that Alfred?" Thomas asked, and I gave him my device and they swiped through the images after a brief instruction, me identifying others in the pictures. "Howard Stark's son? Spitting image aside from the...interesting facial hair."

"He's a friend of mine. Wayne purchased Stark during my time," I told him, and he grinned.

"Let me look at you," Martha said to me, and studied my face.

"When Damian and I were first engaged, I was introduced to some old friends of yours," I said. "I wished then that I'd known you. Didn't dream I'd get to." She smiled. I looked around at the signs of a disturbance and saw a wedge of people pushing through the crowd. "And they're here." I waved, and Bruce charged up to me, then looked at the people I was with.

"Mom? Dad?" His voice was tentative, as if he expected them to disappear. But his eyes welled up as he looked at them, and his mother flung her arms around him, followed by his father. They were both shorter and slighter than their tall, powerful son. I hugged Damian, who was watching closely and smiling, and Martha put her arms around the both of us. I freed an arm and drew Daniel into the group hug.

"Son," his dad said hoarsely, and Damian disengaged to be introduced. They examined him too, and he gently hugged them and introduced Martha and Daniel.

"I may have to revert to my first name," my daughter said.

"You don't have to, you gorgeous girl," Martha said. I turned away again and called Alfred, smiling. At first I thought that the connection had been lost, but no, Alfred was just speechless. For a moment, then he assured me that all would be ready.

I left them to the reunion--I still had people to help--and assisted a couple other people with registration. One of them hadn't had family in the area and the people the other asked about hadn't registered. He looked at the Waynes enviously and turned away. As I watched him go, I saw a face in the crowd that caught my eye. I knew that face, though the skin tone was different.

The Joker was back.

As if sensing my shocked gaze, his head turned until our eyes locked.
He grinned.
I shranked a little inside. He might have been terrified of me once, but he sure wasn't anymore. A slow moving knot of returnees walked between us and by the time they passed, he was gone. My first inclination was to hide, but I conquered that. I don't hide from anybody, and I taught the Joker respect once. I could do it again. He had no idea what I'd become.

But that worked both ways, I realized as I helped another person. I had no idea what he'd become, either. Obviously more nuts, because he'd ceased to fear me.

Damian waited until I'd finished before stepping up and putting his arm around my waist. "Dad's taking his parents home," he said. "Daniel, Martha, and I are going back to work. I'll see you at home, Sweet pea," he said, and with a kiss, we parted. I waved as Mr and Mrs Wayne left with Bruce, then the smile dropped off my face and I hunted up Loki.

"Grand," he said, sighing. "So in addition to all the harmless people, we have to look for the evil ones as well."

"I feel like I should have anticipated that," I said, "but I didn't. I guess I went along with either some fundamental misconceptions of the Christian afterlife or Hell has opened up too."

Loki cursed. "We should have. Look what happened to Hela." I shook my head. "I will alert the Chief of Police myself," he told me.

"Just what we need," I said grimly and he agreed. I went back outside.

I went home a little reluctantly; I'd have to tell my family about what I'd seen, and I didn't want to kill the mood that had bubbled up from the Waynes' reappearance. But it would have to be done. Damian was mixing drinks when I walked in, Alfred being busy in the kitchen with a welcome home dinner. "How's it going?" I asked quietly. He grinned.

"Dad's playing it safe," he murmured. "Hasn't gotten around to telling them about Batman yet. That's going to take some time." I nodded and we joined the group. Mr Wayne pounced on me.

"So how did you meet my grandson?" he asked. You could tell how much pleasure he got from being able to say that he had a grandson. "He just laughed when I asked."

I laughed too. "It was on a blind date in high school. But we didn't really connect until we had come back to the city after finishing grad school." I almost choked on my drink, thinking about the coffeehouse. "But things had really changed when we ran into each other at a New Years Eve party at the St Regis and I went on a charm offensive. It paid off, and I was able to convince her to marry me." He stroked my cheek.
"He's irresistible," I said, grinning at him. He snorted.

"I'm quite resistible to everyone except to you, Sweet pea," he said. I held his hand as we smiled at each other. Mr Wayne sighed at the story.

"Alex worked at Wayne Enterprises during high school, but she never traded on her connections," Bruce told his parents. "She's always had grit. Reins Damian in when he gets too rambunctious."

"And then there was Xander and me," my daughter put in. "We were a test even for her." I smiled as her great-grandmother smiled at her and patted her hand. At that point, the second group arrived home. Great timing, it prevented more questions than we were prepared to answer at this time. I introduced my uncle and Emma, Steve, and Tony. Bruce had moved to the embassy, I think to be able to retreat into himself as much as he could. Mr and Mrs Wayne were familiar with the story of Captain America and the Howling Commandos and were delighted to meet them all. Alfred called us in to dinner. I was pleased to see that Daniel offered Mrs Wayne his arm and Mr Wayne took Martha. Conversation over the dinner table was more general and turned to current events. Event, really--there was only one that anybody was talking about.

"Dinner was spectacular," I said to Alfred as dinner ended and he rose. "I have no idea how you do it." He smiled.

"It is easy to rise to an occasion, Miss Alex," he said.

"Yeah, but you do it all the time. I really respect that," I said, and he shooed me off. But I did. Valhalla had been very enlightening, and while I'd never had to make my own meals there, having to help with the creation of everything that we needed had opened my eyes. Alfred's craftsmanship in so many areas was something to be seriously appreciated, not just noticed as I had before. It is hard enough to learn new skills, let alone to the extent of Alfred's mastery.

In the library with coffee, the Waynes plied their son with questions about his youth, education, taking over the company. It got a little stickier when it came to Damian. "You didn't marry the mother of your child?" Mr Wayne said, disapproval shading his tone.

"Grandfather, Father didn't know about me for a decade," Damian came to the rescue of his dad. But I noticed the formality in his address; when he used that method of address, he was getting ready for a fight. Apparently, spoiling for a fight had been his default mode for about fifteen years, up to just past the point where he'd died the first time. Huh. I'd forgotten he'd died before. I should ask how the first and second time compared.

"She tricked Bruce about the conception," I said, taking Damian's hand. "She wanted to use Damian as a lever against him. She was... not a nice person. She'd never win any Mother of the Year awards."

"That's an understatement, Petal," Damian muttered.

"Did you meet her, Alex?" Mr Wayne said, looking at me intently.

"A few times." I decided not to go into my history of beating up my beloved's mother. "Wow. She was a rampaging--- she was a real piece of work."

"What were you thinking, Bruce?" his mother scolded. Beside her, Mr Wayne snorted back a laugh. Damian was a blend of his parents in looks, and Talia had been quite beautiful. Rotten to the core, but the outside had been spectacular. And now was not the time to discuss Bruce's attraction to the bad girls. I didn't think his parents would really approve.
"The important thing is that Bruce stepped up when he found out about Damian," I said, earning a covertly grateful glance from Bruce. "It couldn't have been easy, but he committed himself to being the best father he could be."

"It was a learning curve for both of us," Damian said. "But he was a model for me when I became a father."

"And, of course, it was much easier with Alfred," Bruce said, squeezing Alfred's hand as he refilled his coffee cup. The two men shared a lifetime of experiences in once glance between them.

"Where did you meet Alfred?" Martha asked. Ooh. Good question.

"I suppose it couldn't hurt to tell now," Thomas said, looking at Alfred.

"I doubt it, sir," Alfred said, moving back to the desk to get Damian's teapot.

"I did some work for the CIA," Thomas said, sipping his coffee. "Observations, conversations in passing. I traveled quite a bit for business, you see, establishing overseas markets, and it was easy to report what I saw and heard. I never passed documents or information directly. I might be instructed to pass along code words to an individual on a few occasions."

"Wow, Dad," Bruce said. I echoed the word in my mind. It might be easier than we'd apparently thought to explain Batman.

"I'd gone to an occasion in London one night where veterans were being honored," Thomas went on. "There was something of a kerfuffle and I noticed a veteran who had intervened to protect a member of Parliament who was also in attendance. Afterward, I introduced myself, and one thing led to another. Pretty soon I had a butler/driver/bodyguard for my wife and baby." I suspected that there was a lot being left out of that explanation, but it was a good summary.

"A decision I have never regretted, sir," Alfred said, circulating with a plate of cookies.

The conversation became more general and Martha Sr wanted to know more about her namesake. Martha is clever and witty in addition to smart and devious, and she charmed her great-grandparents quite thoroughly.

The next morning after breakfast, I excused myself to go visit my weapons stand before we left. Yesterday I'd just carried two knives, but that was no longer sufficient. I quickly stowed a variety of knives and shuriken on me; the reason I liked the tough cargo pants I was wearing so much was because the fabric didn't betray the presence of a knife unless it was a darn big one. I finished by tucking a tiny stiletto into the underwire of my bra and ran face first into Alfred.

"Is there something amiss, Miss Alex?" he asked, but it wasn't really a question. So I told him.

He nodded. "I see. I will take the necessary precautions," he promised, and I walked out to where the others were waiting, checking to make sure I didn't clank anywhere.

Mr and Mrs Wayne were staying at the manor, so it was just my family in the pod. I waited until we were headed in before telling them that I'd seen the Joker the day before. Nobody wasted time asking why I hadn't said anything earlier; the questions were focused on what he'd looked like and acted, and the obvious conclusions were drawn. "The interesting thing," I said slowly, "was that he's not frightened of me anymore. Things have changed for him too. So keep in mind that we can't predict much based on prior actions. And I don't know if he's still up to no good. I don't think he's on the side of the light by any means, but I don't know. He didn't do anything illegal. We've got to be careful in how we approach this." There wasn't much time for discussion; the pod touched down
on the embassy grounds to let me out.

"Careful out there, Tiger," Tony said soberly, and I nodded. Damian followed me out.

"I don't care if the Joker is now a candidate for sainthood," he said to me. "He looks at you funny, you drop him. The family has lawyers." I assured him I wasn't taking the potential threat lightly, and he kissed me and returned to the pod. Bucky and Steve didn't say anything until it had lifted off.

"Are there any pictures of that guy?" Steve asked.

"There's got to be something online, he was notorious," Bucky said.

"Just remember that he's normal colored now," I said. "Dirty blond hair, fair skin. Same grin, though, same eyes."

"Yell if you see him again," my uncle said.

"He touches me again, I'm going to break off his finger," I said evenly.

"Don't overreact," Steve warned. "The last thing we need is for people to start violence against returnees."

"The Joker and I have a pretty bitter history," I told him. "I will deal with him appropriately when I see him again."

"Don't go out looking for him," Steve ordered me.

"Who has the time?" I asked, my words clipped. "But he'll come looking for me. I can guarantee it."

"Be safe, sweetie," my uncle said, kissing my cheek and cutting off the conversation. We exchanged a look, and I knew that Steve would be receiving a brief history lesson soon. I nodded and went in to find Loki. He gave me the diplomatic pouch and told me that he'd alerted the mayor and police chief. They'd sworn a lot; this was another dimension to add to the overworked police, but like me, they'd felt it was something they should have considered before. I poofed to Asgard, encountering Modi as he brought some documents to his grandfather. He looked harried.

"If this is command, I'd prefer to simply be one of the Guard," he muttered as we walked toward the Great Hall.

"Just remember that these are extraordinary circumstances and that your responsibilities are greater because you are a prince of Asgard," I counseled him, and he nodded after a moment.

"I think I prefer the great Odin as a legend," he said softly as we entered the hall and I smirked at him. We waited as Odin listened to the conclusion of a report on the resettlement of the first wave of returned (going smoothly, with few issues, and it was almost complete) before he turned to us. Modi placed the stack of documents on a table and Odin asked for a report. I updated him with what I'd seen on the news, omitting anything personal, then added that I knew that some very bad people were back as well, adding another element to a volatile situation.

"Remember that you are performing duties for the rulers of Asgard," Odin said. "Do what you need to do. You always have asylum here." And with that, he dismissed me. Modi walked me out of the citadel.
"Magni needs to cultivate a good relationship with Midgard's leaders, and Torunn has a responsibility to Loki," he said after we emerged into the sunlight. "But I have diplomatic immunity too. If you need help, remember that the most that can be done to me is that Midgard can refuse my presence." He patted my shoulder and went back inside. I went to practice with a lighter heart.

But Serena saw through me, although she waited until we were stretching after practice. "I thought that I was ok after all this time," I said. "But seeing him again, bold as brass and twice as crazy looking, that stirred up a lot of stuff that I thought I'd worked through, that I'd pretty much forgotten about."

"Don't seek him out but do what you have to do if he comes after you," she advised. "Given the past history between you, if you can establish that he's the one pursuing you, you'll be free and clear if you have to take action. Just remember that while he's changed if he's forgotten to be wary of you, you really haven't. You're the same good person you've been for as long as I've known you, you're just more skilled. You're as good with your weapons as you ever were with hand-to-hand, and what's most important, you're nobody's victim." She concluded her pep talk with a pat on the back, and we showered and changed before going back to Earth. We had to stop by Odin first.

"The wings of some of the valkyries have begun molting," Serena reported factually. Modi tried but failed to suppress a snicker. I rolled my eyes at him.

"How long will it take to regrow the feathers?" Odin asked, frowning.

"We'll be speaking with an expert on our return to Midgard," Serena told him. "If we truly have swans' feathers, we should have answers for you later. Of course we can still practice without the wings until they're back to normal."

I frowned, thinking about that. "But fundamentally we don't have bird wings," I reminded her. "We have bat wings. We may not need our feathers to fly. We can test that out."

Odin sighed. "Keep me posted. This was much easier when you simply used the capes."

"I've got no argument there," I agreed, and he dismissed us. We went to the Prospect Park Zoo because they had the Audubon center there. But first we detoured to see the Pallas's cats and Geoffrey's marmosets. Cute animals always make things better. We were able to speak with a zookeeper about swans.

"Swans, like all birds, need to replace feathers that wear out, because feathers are structures like our fingernails or hair," he said. "The old, worn feathers are loosened in their follicles by the growth of new feathers, which push them out. Swans are what we call 'synchronous molters' since they change all their feathers at once. It can happen as quickly as two weeks or take as long as six weeks. Some raptors, in contrast, can take up to two years or more to completely replace all their feathers. During this time, they can't fly, which is dangerous, but the relatively short period of time this molting takes does help to ameliorate the danger."

"Why do they molt that way?" I asked, puzzled.

"We don't know for sure, but swans, like geese, ducks, and pelicans, tend to be heavy relative to their wing surfaces, having what we call high wing loadings. The loss of a few feathers seriously compromise their flying ability, so we think that evolution favors a quick overhaul rather than prolonged replacement."

We thanked him, and he smiled. "That's not a question I get a lot, so points for novelty. I've just
been imping feathers on a hawk that damaged a couple of its primaries and it was nice to do something that required less concentration. I like swans; they're beautiful but they can be touchy, and they seem to have their own personalities."

"What's imping?" Serena wanted to know.

"It's short for 'implanting.' It lets the bird fly after damage to a feather and molt normally, prevents damage to blood feathers, which are developing feathers that bleed, sometimes a lot, if they're damaged. You use a feather from the same side of the wing, the same type of feather, lay the undamaged feather on top of the damaged feather so you're not adding or subtracting length or changing the angle, and cut both feathers in the same place, about an inch and a half from the base. Then I insert a splint into the shaft--they're hollow--and use a fast-drying epoxy to glue the pieces together."

"What do you use as splints?" I asked. "And why epoxy over something like superglue?"

"We use bamboo for splints; they have to fit snugly into the shaft and bamboo's easy to cut and work for this purpose. Half of the splint goes into the damaged feather and half into the replacement. The longer the feathers, the more support from the splint that they need, but they can't be too long. Superglue sets too fast; you usually need a longer open time in order to make sure the match is as perfect as you can get. I use plastic wrap under the broken feather to prevent getting epoxy on any surrounding feathers."

We thanked him and stopped at a couple of stores before going back to the embassy. Serena said that she'd take things back to Asgard and prepare kits for the valkyries tonight.

I went straight out to work, pausing for a moment for the app to open on my communicator. Hearing my name, I saw Carol grinning at me, then my mom as she turned toward me. She was with my dad. And J. I struggled hard to keep my wings tucked away; it was hard to control them when I was emotional.

"Another reunion," I heard Loki say with satisfaction, and I released my brother long enough to smile at Loki. Beside him was Torunn; she didn't pay attention to her protectee or the people he was talking to; all her attention was in scanning the crowd for threats. "Of course I remember your parents and your brother, Alex. Why don't you come inside the embassy for a moment?"

"Thank you, that would be lovely," my mother said. She still had her accent, even after a good chunk of afterlife. She looked a little wilted, and as I followed them inside, I quickly called my daughter for a pickup, teasing her by not identifying who'd shown up.

"Transport's on its way," I said once we'd stepped through the gates.

"Wonderful," Loki said, guiding us off to one side, out of view from the gate. I sighed in relief and let the wings out for a good shake before tucking them away again. Loki knew about my control issues.

"Alixzandrya," my mother said sternly. "What have you gotten yourself into? I love you dearly, but you're no angel." Loki and Torunn started to laugh.

"I'll explain it later," I promised. "But no, I'm not an angel."

"You are to me, dear girl," my dad said, putting his arm around my shoulders and giving me a kiss on the cheek.

"I'm with Mom on this one," J said to me, smirking. I curled my lip at him amiably. I smiled as the
pod dropped down and Martha popped out.

"Grandma! Grandpa! Uncle J!" she said excitedly, throwing herself into her grandparents' arms for a proper greeting. J watched in amusement as we stood with our arm around each other.

"Some things never change," he said to me. "Where's Xander?"

My smile dropped. "Hasn't shown up yet. But you know him, he likes to study the situation before getting involved. It would be nice of him to consider that his mother would like to see him." J squeezed my shoulder before hugging his niece.

"I'm going to take them to the house, Mom," Martha mumbled.

"Bruce is home too," I said, and my folks brightened. They had a great relationship with Bruce. "And his parents registered yesterday." My mother looked especially interested. I mentally kicked myself. I hadn't even thought about seeing if Britain had any sort of registry. My grandma would be showing up there. Something to add to the list. "They gave Bruce kind of a hard time about being an unwed father, so maybe..." My dad nodded and I knew that they had a mission. I saw them into the pod and as it lifted away, I called Alfred.

"It will be lovely to see your parents and brother again," he said with pleasure. "I'll put the kettle on for your mother." Alfred is priceless.

Then it was back to work. I helped to register more people and facilitated a few reunions, which was nice. Through the rest of the afternoon, I kept an eye out for my missing son, my grandchildren, J's kids, and the odd supervillain.

I saw none of them.
Redemption

When I had to take a bathroom break, something occurred to me, and dreading the answer, I called the morgue. Whoever answered the phone was a little shrill. "Of course we have bodies," he snapped. "We've been overwhelmed and there's no place to put them all. All we can do is take DNA samples and a photo, do a cursory superficial exam, and have them taken off to be cremated. If you're worried, come by one of the morgues so they can take a DNA sample from you. It'll take about an hour for an analysis. We've been trying to get the word out, but the damned media are just covering heartfelt reunions." He hung up, and I got permission to take a longer break. There was a morgue about five blocks away, so I set off.

It took longer than expected to get there, but the sampling was quick, of course, and the overworked assistant was happy to send me away with sampling kits for others at the embassy and a promise to contact me if my DNA matched any of the bodies they'd processed. If there was a match in the future, I'd be notified as a matter of routine. They did both mitochondrial DNA and paternity testing, so one way or another, if I got Damian to take one too, we'd be notified if any of our descendants were processed there. On the way out, the assistant asked where I was working, and when he heard that I worked at a registration point, asked if we could start taking the samples with our incoming returnees. It was just a swab on the inside of the cheek, easy and painless, so I agreed and took a couple of cases of the kits with me.

Loki sighed when I told him about the situation in the morgues and had everyone who was processing the returned huddle with me for training. Nothing to it, really, hold the swab by the shield on the handle, swipe, insert into the vial, and the name and right thumbprint was placed on the label. We didn't even need an ink pad; just pressing the thumb on the label caused a chemical reaction with an ink and the print was visible.

Some people didn't understand the purpose of the testing and refused, but most were eager to take advantage of something that might help them find family, even if they didn't understand DNA or how it was read. We ran out of the kits by the end of the afternoon, and after I'd swabbed Damian when he came to pick me up, Serena took the kits back and arranged for a more massive delivery the next day.

On the way home, I'd received notification that seven of Damian and my descendants had been processed in the morgue, all victims of presumed random violence. We had a family tree that Daniel had made up so we could track people we were hoping to meet. It was surprisingly sparse; no individual had more than two children, with most having none or one. The women who were my descendants more often than not had no children, and I wondered if my problems had been inflicted on at least some of them. I knew that Martha hadn't had them, but she'd had two children, one had died soon after I had, and her daughter hadn't had kids. Xander had had two children, one of whom had had a son, and this general sort of pattern kept repeating. Or maybe it wasn't anything to do with difficult pregnancies and more to do with the Batman legacy.

When we got home, my folks and Bruce's were chatting on the patio. The summer was edging into fall, and I groaned as I thought about all the difficulties this change in seasons would cause for the overburdened authorities. I kept these thoughts to myself, though. Daniel came out with some drinks for them, and after greeting everybody, I went inside to change and put away my weapons. Damian came with me and it was wonderful just to keep my arms around him as we talked about our days. When we went back downstairs, Alfred was firing up the grill and my mom sat up, making room on the chaise for me. I put my arm around her and Damian sat with my dad, J, and Bucky as Thomas listened and started to integrate with the expanded family's males. The Marthas
drew up chairs too, and my daughter and I caught my mom up on current events.

"Now, dear, what on earth is going on with those wings? Is that a new mutation?" Mom's practical.

"Wings?" Martha Sr asked. I got a little nervous. She hadn't seen them and I didn't know how rational she really was. A couple of returnees had caught sight of them in the beginning and that caused more problems that the fight we'd been trying to break up. Some thought we were demons, some angels. We'd been called abominations and things had been thrown at us. It had been hurtful.

"Yes. Part of the valkyrie gig, Mom. In Valhalla, we had swansfeather capes that we could put on and off, and they transformed into wings. But after Valhalla was closed to us, the wings became part of us."

"Valhalla was closed to you?" Martha Sr asked, catching the nuance.

"It's still there, Odin says, but we can't get into it anymore because we're not dead. Or maybe because Odin's not there." She looked enlightened.

"Can I see them again?" my mom asked, so I extended them. She stroked the feathers and I explained the coating that Emma had applied.

"Are they functional?" Martha Sr asked.

"Yes," I said. "During our morning practices we fly. We might be grounded soon, though. We're starting to molt." I shook my head in disgust as if on cue, one of my primaries floated to the ground.

"My word," Thomas murmured. "That's really quite extraordinary." Then men had come over when the wings appeared. Damian picked up the shed feather and smoothed it.

"So how did it happen that you ended up with real wings?" my dad asked. "Why do you need them?"

"Well, we believe that Ragnarok is approaching," I said with a sigh.

"I've heard of that, but I don't know what that is," Thomas said.

"The Norse end of the world," I said grimly. "Basically a big battle between good and bad that takes place on Asgard. We believe that it's coming because the signs have been coming true, one after the other. It's the things we haven't been expecting that are tripping us up." The faces around me were puzzled. "Like the prophesies said that three cocks would crow and different things would happen. The second cock was to crow in Valhalla and the gods were supposed to rise, the third and the dead would rise. So we thought that all the cocks would crow at the same time, which didn't happen, and the gods included the honored dead in Valhalla and Folkvangr, which is Frigga's afterlife and essentially a less-publicized version of Valhalla, and the dead didn't just include the Norse dead, but everybody. So there are things that aren't clear from the prophesies, and the Norn won't be more specific." I sighed.

"The Norn?" Martha asked.

"They're similar to the Greek Fates, but they tend the World Tree rather than spin and cut threads. Much nicer than you'd think. One of them created the valkyries."

"You met them?" my mom asked, a little stunned.

"Yeah, we needed answers, and it's not like you can't find the World Tree in Asgard," I said. "All
they said, basically, is that some events are fixed and unalterable, like Ragnarok, but what we tend to call fate isn't unchangeable unless you accept it as such. So Odin is going to be killed by the great wolf Fenrir because that's in the story. Thor's supposed to be die from the Midgard serpent's venom after he kills it, but we've gotten some protective gear for him in the hopes that he won't. He's willing to try to alter his fate, Odin isn't. And Loki and Heimdall have agreed to avoid each other at all costs, so I.. I guess we'll see.

"Sounds like a Doctor Who episode," my brother muttered, and I grinned at him.

"But if events on Asgard affected things on Earth, how do you know that this Ragnarok won't affect us too?" Thomas asked.

"I don't," I said after a moment. "All I know is what is supposed to happen on Asgard."

"What?" Damian said.

"The battle is going to happen on Vigrior. But the World Tree extends through all the Nine Realms, and one of the indicators that Ragnarok is imminent is a shaking of the World Tree that produces extreme fear. So all the realms will know that something's gong on. Who's to say that smaller conflicts won't erupt in the other realms? Loki and Thor have presented these thoughts to the authorities, but they've got their hands full as it is without having to plan for something that might not come to pass. And ultimately, the prophesy says that everything will be destroyed; this isn't a game for all the marbles, it's supposed to be a fixed conclusion, but that after time has passed, a couple of people will repopulate. But there's no indicator if this happens in one realm or all of them. It's quite specific as far as it goes, but it doesn't go very far. It's possible that despite all our preparation, nothing will change and everything literally goes up in smoke. Or maybe the destruction is confined to Asgard. We don't know."

"So you're going to go to Asgard and fight, even though you know you're probably going to die?" my mom asked, her face white.

"Yes. I personally feel we have a pretty good shot at preventing total destruction. Tony and Emma are working on a way to protect the Bifrost from destruction. And we've all been training hard. I accepted the charge of a valkyrie, which not only includes bringing the heroes to Valhalla but following Odin into battle at Ragnarok. Even if I tried, I don't think I could not do it," I said to my parents gently. And there was no way I was going to explain the unique valkyrie bond I had; since it was tied into the World Tree, I privately felt that if it died in Ragnarok as it was supposed to, I might not make it either. Nobody needed to know that, really. "So I'm trying to pack as much as I can into the time I have before the battle," I said softly. "It's more that I ever thought I would have again."

Although it cast a huge damper over the party, I was relieved that at last it was all out, cards on the table. There was silence as everybody digested this. "But if the fix is in and the conclusion is unalterable, why do you even have to fight?" J asked suddenly, and I grinned fiercely at him.

"That's just the thing, J. The Norn say that the fixed event is the battle. It will happen. But if we all got there and had a fist-fight instead, it wouldn't produce the same outcome. The battle is inevitable, the outcome is not. But not everybody believes that. Odin, who has spoken to the Norn himself, cannot be convinced that things won't happen just like in the prophesy, and a lot of the oldest beings are of his mindset. So there's going to be a pitched battle regardless. But there are those of us who feel that destruction isn't inevitable and we're going to do all we can to preserve what we can."

"Of course you would," my dad muttered, rubbing his eyes.
"We're not unprepared," I said gently. "I'm one of the finest warriors in Odin's forces, and all of us have trained hard. Additionally, I have excellent armor, including protection for the wings, and I have up to date paramedic training. We have some very fine minds working on field weapons to help tilt the advantage to our side."

"So what's the signal?" J asked.

"There will be an earthquake that brings down mountains, but nobody knows where in the Nine Realms this will happen, so it's not the best indicator. The one that everybody will feel is the shaking of the World Tree, which will produce heavy fear in all beings. Once that comes, I'll get my arms and armor and leave. So in case that doesn't happen when we're all together, know that being able to spend time with you all again has been the greatest experience of my existence."

The silence that followed was absolute and lasting. It was broken by the arrival of Bruce, Emma, Tony, and Steve, who'd been working at Wayne in the labs. Emma, Bruce Banner, and Tony had established a routine of inventing and prototyping and handing off the inventions to Steve and my father-in-law for testing. Bucky too, when he was there. He'd come home early to greet my folks and J.

"You've had the Ragnarok conversation," Tony said, sipping his bourbon as he observed us. "There's nothing that will squash the conversation and spirits as completely." I smiled at him a little. But this wasn't his first rodeo with the topic and it wasn't long before he lightened people's moods. Tony is a complex man and sometimes an aggravating one, but he does have his gifts. By the time dinner was ready, conversations had recovered.

It wasn't until later that Thomas pounced on me. I was doing my evening check on my weapons and armor (yeah, yeah, a little OCD), finding a place on one of the shield straps that I'd need to watch, when he sidled into the cloakroom.

"Bruce explained this... Batman concept he started," he said to me, and I looked at him with interest. He stopped and started a few times, as if he didn't quite know how to put what he wanted to say. Maybe he didn't know what he wanted to say. I waited patiently for him to articulate. "How could Alfred let him do this? How could he let his son? How could any of you? Did you know before you married Damian?" The words burst out of him like a flood.

"I don't think Alfred's consent was sought," I said, trying to blend the facts that I knew with what I suspected lay behind the questions. "Bruce had to depend on Alfred when he was growing up and their relationship is very close, but I have always felt that Bruce would have done this no matter what Alfred said, and I am quite certain that Alfred tried to talk him out of it. But failing to do so, he made sure that it was as safe for Bruce as possible. Damian... I don't know what you've been told about Damian's mother, but most likely it was soft-pedalled. I know I considerably understated the matter when I said that she wasn't going to win Mother of the Year awards. She and her father abused Damian terribly. By the time he was dumped on his father's doorstep, he'd been trained as an assassin. His fighting skills, with and without weapons, are extraordinary. And he had no social skills. I thought he was a boor when I met him, and that was after seven years of improvement. Damian viewed Batman as a family trust, and one that he was proud to assume as a public service. I knew about it almost from the beginning." Thomas's mouth had fallen open. "We'd managed a friendship after I started working at Wayne Enterprises, and one night we went out to dinner after work. It was fall semester, I remember, because we were both studying Hamlet and discussing it on the way to the car. That's where we were jumped by a group of assassins that Damian's grandfather had sent for him. We managed to defeat them, but Damian was severely injured." I could still see him on the concrete floor of that parking garage. "He'd been knifed in the gut, beaten... it was really horrible. But he had me drive him back here, which is when I found out that there's a
surgical suite downstairs, that Alfred is a medic, and that there's a resident batman. Later, after we started dating, I took over patching up Damian when he came home. If I'd pushed him to choose between me and crime-fighting, I'd have lost." I regarded Thomas soberly. "Damian and I did agree to hold off on introducing our children to the whole thing until they were in their mid-teens, I think. Martha wouldn't have anything to do with it because of how Bruce had died, but Xander weighed his options and gave it a try. He could have quit if he'd wanted and neither Damian nor I would have held it against him. It was their choice to make. I'm not saying it was easy to see them go out and not know what condition they'd return in, but... that was the way it was. As a parent, there's only so much that you can protect your children from. And they did make a difference."

It took Thomas awhile to sort through all of this. "After that fight in the garage, why didn't you tell Damian to stay away? I think most girls would."

"By that time I'd been learning hand-to-hand from my uncle for awhile. In the basement of Avenger tower, so I overheard plenty about fights and why the heroes do what they do. I have mutations myself; they're enough to make me more than human but less than superhero material. It was a lab accident; some boys were horsing around and I got drenched in chemicals and solvents and zapped with live current. I'd started practice because there was a boy in school who was making my life miserable and assaulted me on the sidewalk one day. Being able to defend myself makes me feel good about myself and decreases the chance that I'll be a victim. Doesn't eliminate it," I sighed, remembering the Joker, "but it does decrease it, or at least enables me to get my revenge." I smiled at him a little sadly. "After helping him, I felt kind of a bond."

"Did Damian or anybody go after the man who killed Bruce? Or Damian, for that matter?"

"Nobody went after the Joker; Bruce was very much against killing and for the most part everybody tried to live up to that. I didn't go after him, although I should have. I told him once that if he disturbed me or anyone I cared about again, I'd really do some damage. But the kids were hysterical and Damian and Alfred needed support too. So that opportunity slipped away. I did kill the Riddler, though."

"Why do you think you should have gone after the Joker?"

"Well, the Joker and I have a history ourselves, and it's pretty brutal. He pulled a stunt at a New Years Eve party. Damian and I had been set up by our friends, and we'd been having a good time. But the Joker came in, took a bunch of people hostage, but he was particularly excited to get his mitts on Damian, and apparently I intrigued him. We escaped, though, and after that, Damian said that he was going to keep his distance from me to protect me. Didn't work. The Joker tracked me down after high school graduation and kidnapped me one night. I got away eventually and beat the hell out of him. He kept his distance for awhile--had to, actually, he was locked up--but he broke out again and came after me again. He had his thugs abduct my brother, and after that... the gloves were off. After that, I encountered him once more and I really hurt him. But after that, he left me alone. So I left him alone."

"How did you get away from him?"

"The first time, I headbutted him. He ordered his goons to put me back in the cell with Damian, but I got the key and we made our escape. The second time... the paralyzing agent wore off faster than he'd expected."

Thomas blinked. "The paralyzing agent?" I nodded.

"So Damian and I had been through thick and thin by the time we even started dating with intent, not blind dates. We both knew everything of substance about each other and I think now that we
were sizing each other up for a serious relationship from the start. We got serious pretty quickly. But he wanted to spend some time balancing out the bad with the good."

"And what was the good?" Thomas asked, beginning to smile.

"Flowers," I said dreamily. "He used to use the language of flowers when he sent me bouquets. And ice cream." I smiled back.

"I'm surprised that he wasn't more extravagant," he said, offering me his arm.

"He mostly waited until we were married," I shook my head. "Then it was jewelry." Thomas started to laugh. "I'm not even that fond of it. It beat all the animals he wanted to adopt, though; he's kind of a hoarder and there are only so many pets that you should have. But if you're interested in how he spoiled me, most of it's in the Smithsonian." Thomas stopped laughing.

"That sounds excessive," he said. I nodded.

"Excessively excessive. He didn't go into high gear until his mother died, though; he inherited all her assets. He broke down the businesses, wiped out the criminal aspect, but he had a lot of money that he didn't want. He donated most of it to charities, but then he thought about the jewelry. His mother really didn't like me." Thomas started to laugh.

"Why did he do it if he knew you didn't really care about the jewelry?"

"Well, it's all pretty and sparkly, so it wasn't like I was completely indifferent, and it was a very tangible way for him to show his love. It allowed him an outlet for his magpie tendencies, and... well, he was sometimes the victim of racist behavior because he's partly Middle Eastern. Aside from a few fights as a kid, he pretty much swallowed it in public, but it hurt. Later, he got revenge in other ways. There was one guy who'd created a lot of trouble for him, called the feds on him. He hired away all that guy's best people and the business tanked. To be fair, though, he mainly did that because the guy put his hands on me. Otherwise, he took pleasure in generous contributions to charity; he was often in the paper at ribbon cuttings or groundbreakings for various public enterprises, and I think it made him feel better to have a wife who was well turned out by his side, that he could afford to be so remarkably extravagant. For my part, I cultivated relationships with designers, especially those with roots in the Middle East, so that when we were out I could look the part."

"You didn't mind?"

"It would have been nicer to have more evenings at home," I acknowledged, "but he did enjoy going out there, expanding his knowledge and acquaintance of the right kind of people, pursuing business interests." I laughed fondly. "And with him I had fun too."

"Who were the right kind of people, then?"

"Business people, the ones who worked in innovative ways or made forward-thinking projects. Potential business partners. Smart people, inventors, people who wanted to make a difference in the world." I smiled at him. "But he also listened to those who were older and more experienced."

"What did you do after he died?"

"Same thing, mostly, just by myself. It wasn't much fun without him, but I had connections of my own that I used for the benefit of Martha's stewardship of the company, and partly to keep a little of Damian alive. There's a Damian Wayne Memorial Garden in Central Park and an elementary school named after him in the Bronx. The Damian Wayne Memorial Trust still takes applications"
from public schools and after school programs for funding and supplies. Damian had done something similar in Bruce's memory; that trust provides funds to send inner city kids to summer camps and funds youth sports programs."

We stopped by the stairs. "Look, I know that you and Martha would have had plans for Bruce that included virtually none of what happened after your deaths. But Bruce used his loss in a manner that kept him from being just a rich guy with a sob story and turned him into a hero. And I'm not talking about the costume. He made a very real difference, saving lives, making the city safer at the risk to his own self. And that made him a hero to me. Rehabilitating Damian is something else that he doesn't get enough credit for. Most people probably would have thrown up their hands and sent him to a succession of boarding schools, but he did the hard work himself, with the result being the best husband and father I could imagine. Bruce had a wonderful guardian and he accomplished some really extraordinary things, whether the public knew it or not."

"So you're saying he ended up better than he would have if Martha and I had been there."

"No. He would have been different, but I don't doubt that he still would have been an outstanding man and a fine civic leader. The main difference in outcome is that there wouldn't have been a Batman and there wouldn't be Damian." We parted, Thomas quite thoughtful.

The next morning, I remembered to do something I'd been meaning to do but forgetting. When I went down to breakfast, I handed Martha a box. She took the cover off and picked up one of the boxes inside. She smiled when she saw her pearls. I smiled too.

"It was nice of you to give Grandma her jewelry back," Damian said on the ride in.

"They were hers, she should have them. Besides, I still have the pearls you gave me. And no, I don't want you to start in on another jewelry collection, Damian," I said anxiously, and he laughed.

"I think we're done with that for the most part," he said affectionately. "Besides, your beauty requires no ornamentation. I should have seen that to begin with." Martha rolled her eyes.

"I'd gag, but that was actually sweet, dad." Bruce laughed.

When I got to work, Serena's mother had turned up, great news. We popped to Asgard for our training and she told me more as we warmed up. Space was at a premium in the city, but Loki had authorized the purchase of cots and air mattresses, blankets and pillows for close family members, and the ballroom and most of the large public rooms were set up as refugee shelter. "That's such terrific news," I said. Serena had perked right up and she was trying to find out information on the rest of her family in Georgia. Unfortunately, not every city had a database like ours, and some had rejected Daniel's offer of free software on the grounds that it would take too much time and money and personnel who weren't available to replicate their records. They did have a searchable database in Great Britain, but it didn't work with ours and I'd had to submit a formal request for information on my grandma along with documentation since I was a foreign national.

Afterward, we winked back to the city, changed into street clothes, and went out to help. I was waylaid by Peter. "I wanted to apologize for May's behavior the other night," he said. "I'm so sorry. I had no idea what she'd done. We--MJ and I--tried to do our best with her. We were overly indulgent, she was so bright and personable."

I nodded. Martha had had the same qualities, but she'd turned out differently. I didn't want to rub Peter's nose in that, though. "At some point, you have to accept that your influence as a parent only goes so far," I said quietly. "She was an adult when she made her choices. My personal feeling is that she let it all go to her head. She's got such a strong personality that it would have been difficult
for even you to set her straight. We all do the best we can as parents, and hope that our kids have absorbed our lessons well enough." He didn't say anything, just stared at the floor.

"Martha turned out all right," he said.

"Martha and May are two different people. May has to accept the consequences of her own actions. Nobody made her do the things she did. Once we were in a disagreement and I said "your father never would have done that," I'm sorry to say. It wasn't fair of me. But she said that that was why she wanted to do it. She wanted to differentiate herself from the comparison, although you really were a good example to follow." Peter just shook his head. What do you say to a parent whose kid had turned out badly? "She's got a second chance, though. If she wants to redeem herself, there are a lot of options out there for somebody who's driven to make a difference." It was all I could think of to offer.

"You think so?" He finally looked up.

"I do." I nodded. "She can't undo what's been done, but she's got another opportunity to show her character. If she wants to, she can change opinions about her by the good that she can do now." Serena was going to kill me if she found out, but-- "Look, Peter. There are opportunities out there now that have never existed. If she comes up with a good idea that isn't an ego trip, let me know. I'd put down a small stake." I had to do something for him. He was ashamed of his daughter and this might be a way to help her get on track. "If you don't tell her." This time a hint of a smile lifted the corners of his mouth. He knew that this was something offered on his behalf, not May, but he wasn't going to turn it down.
The days were shortening, and still we had long lines of people to register or ask for news about their family. The feds were issuing tentative ID cards that would permit people to access disaster relief services, and we had diverted some embassy staff to assist the federal employees. There were two classes of identification; the first group of people had the best verification--DNA matches and knowledge of identification like a social security number, like me. Most people fell into the second group, where identity was presumptive. Most people would be telling the truth, but others wouldn't.

I hugged Daniel when I got home. "What was that for?" he asked, but he hugged me back.

"For being such a great guy and taking us in," I told him.

"Anybody would do the same," he said, brushing it aside. He seemed embarrassed, so I let it drop, but he was wrong. We were seeing quite a few people whose descendants didn't want to know them or give them shelter. There were some desperate people out there.

"So what have you been up to?" I asked him. We were the first ones in the library. He grinned and started telling me about plans to hire returnees to help build housing for the influx. "There are a lot of buildings out there that have to be demolished and cleared, then building can start. The past few days I've been buying properties, acquiring equipment, and setting up some hiring fairs. We need skilled operators for the demolition equipment, but it won't take modern skills to help to separate the metal from the masonry, for example, so people who are willing to work hard can get a job, regardless of when they were here last. Same for construction; some of it has to be done by skilled labor who know the ropes, but we can train people and there are other jobs that don't require a lot of knowledge, like unloading deliveries. So I've got lawyers and architects and construction managers burning the midnight oil, and the city's promised to expedite the permits and get inspectors out on a timely basis. We need to build right, not cut corners that could lead to tragedies down the road. I've asked for city inspectors to validate our materials; no substandard concrete, for example. There's a lot of money to be made, and I don't want anybody to fall prey to bribes, so we're setting up some safeguards. It will still take time, though, and I worry about the winter."

As he discussed another priority of the company's medical division, which was to set up clinics for the inevitable illnesses that would come with exposure to bacteria and viruses, I reached over and patted his hand. He stopped speaking. "You're an excellent man," I told him. "Have you considered hygiene classes? Because the oldest returnees have never heard of the germ theory of disease." There had been problems with people washing in the city lakes and fountains, and human waste disposal was also a problem. I was just grateful we weren't in the heat of summer.

"No, I haven't even thought about that," he said, squeezing my hand, then made some notes. Then it hit me.

"I wonder if I'm still vaccinated," I said, sitting bolt upright.

Daniel's eyes opened wide. "Oh, no," he said, and immediately notified the medical division and the clinic in Avenger Tower. "Ok, Grandma, we need to go in a little early tomorrow and get you vaccinated. All of you. And pass the word to the valkyries that they should come by."

Damian put his arm around me after sitting by my side and entered the conversation. "Great. And be sure to discuss this with the mayor the next time you speak to her. The last thing we need are massive outbreaks of disease. The need is great, but no one company, even Wayne Enterprises, can provide answers to everything," he cautioned Daniel. "Focus on a couple of priorities, then enlist
other businesses to help." He provided more advice, supplemented by Tony, Martha, and Bruce when they came in, and Damian, his daughter, and his father started making outreach plans to other CEOs in order to free Daniel to run the business. Then I grinned as Bruce gestured his father over.

"Come on, Dad, get in on this," he said. Alfred insisted on dinner first, then that group started making plans in earnest over coffee and tea. The rest of us left them to it and went to the game room next door for some fun. I appreciated the opportunity just to have a good time with my extended family.

The next day I went over to Asgard early right after receiving vaccines for everything from measles, mumps, and rubella to polio, tuberculosis, pneumonia, HIV, and three different strains of hepatitis; I had to borrow some space in the smithies to fix a little damage done to my short sword in practice and refine the edge. It didn't take as long as I'd thought it would, and I was able to do my archery practice before the rest of the valkyries arrived. It was our big day; all of us had lost a lot of feathers and we were going to try flying without them. We'd been collecting our shed feathers so that we could imp them if necessary. The loss of the feathers was throwing off our balance in flight, and there were several of us who had lost all their feathers who were going to try to be bats.

"The wings look ridiculous," I muttered to Serena. They did. They were pink and soft, the claw on the top plainly visible. They looked much more majestic with the feathers on. And where the new feathers were growing in, they itched.

"It's a little embarrassing," Serena conceded. We winced as Sara crashed and burned, but she wasn't one of our strongest flyers. She motioned Carrie up, and we sighed in unison in relief as she did better.

And they sunburned, as we found out. Serena put a halt to flying during peak UV times until the feathers grew in, which meant that we'd need to practice on our own. That was ok, though, the manor had three stories, which would provide me with great practice space. I could practice when everybody was asleep, just to keep the wings strong and agile. I suspected that the citadel would also provide the same sort of launching pad for others.

Later, I was at the embassy when I saw a very familiar face. It was another that I didn't like. Talia al Ghul was there with a taller man, lean, with the eyes of a raptor. I surmised that this must be her father, R'as. I kept my face turned away and waited until they took their temporary registration cards and went away before going over to Carol and checking the registry. They hadn't used their real names and had declined the DNA test. I checked the box by their names; it was an alert for known criminals. We registration workers had been assigned numbers by the city to help track down any questions or problems, and I added my number so that they'd know who to talk to. Ugh. Damian was going to pitch a fit and fall into it when I told him.

But the news wasn't all bad; about half an hour before quitting time, I saw Selina in the crowd. She hadn't been able to register due to the crowds, and she looked exhausted and dehydrated. I found a chair for her and gave her a bottle of water, letting her recover a bit. I filled out her form and asked if she wanted to do the DNA, and got her signature and fingerprint. I handed things over to my replacement and helped Selina into the embassy grounds to wait for the pod. "You can see that the authorities are trying their best, but it's just overwhelming," she told me. "There are shortages in shelter and supplies, and even if you can get a cot someplace it's so hard to sleep with all the noise. Last night there was a big fight, then later somebody was found stabbed nearby."

"Well, you're coming home with me," I told her. "My descendant is a fine man, he won't mind."
winked at her. "And Bruce is there." She sucked in a breath. "So are his parents," I continued. "And Damian." She gripped my hand. Just then the pod dropped into the courtyard and I urged her inside. The look on Bruce's face was wonderful. Daniel grinned and asked me if another room would be needed.

"I think not," I said, laughter in my voice, and Damian joined in the grins. On the way back we pretty much ignored Selina and Bruce and talked about other things. I wanted to get in touch with Holly since he wanted to update his license to practice medicine, and Daniel and Damian talked about how their efforts to address the vaccine issue had gone. Wayne doesn't produce vaccines, but it does make the equipment for injecting them, and production was being ramped up. They had what was now a public health necessity; a big Star Trek-type bloodless injector that allowed for the insertion of a full bottle of vaccine and allowed metered doses to be administered without the need for needles. The process of vaccinating a crowd of people went a lot faster and was more sanitary.

I waited until Damian and I had gone up to our room before telling him about Talia. He was gently rubbing my wings to remove the last feathers and relieve the itching and stopped. "You're sure?" he asked tensely.

"I'm sure about Talia," I assured him. "I was assuming that the other person was R'as."

"I don't doubt that it is." After a minute, he resumed his ministrations and I sighed in relief. What on earth did the valkyries without a Damian do? When he finished in silence, I sat up and both hugged him and put my wings around him. The nudie wings let in more light than the feathered ones. "Oh, Sweet pea, of all the people in the world I never wanted to see again, those two top the list."

"Forewarned is forearmed, darling," I said. "The new IDs have tracking technology that won't be familiar to them. I got a look at it--Loki showed me--and they use nanotech in the ink."

"Did they see you? Do they know you saw them?"

"They weren't looking my way when I saw them. I don't know if they saw me or recognized me. They might have one or more confederates with them who saw me look at Talia, but I don't know. I tried to keep my face neutral but I'm sure there was some shock for a moment."

"Even if they didn't see you, we have to assume they'll be looking around for us," he sighed. He reluctantly released me, and we went downstairs for dinner. It lightened the mood a bit to see Bruce introduce Selina to his parents and dance around how they'd met. But Selina is made of stronger stuff.

"I was a cat burglar," she explained daintily. "I intend to turn over a new leaf." Thomas and Martha grilled them both without mercy. It was kind of fun to see Bruce on the other end of an interrogation. By the end, though, they seemed reconciled to Bruce's lady love.

Damian, who'd been poking at his dinner, spoke up. "Dad, Alex spotted Talia and R'as today." Bruce swore, but it was Alfred's response that was most arresting. His expression was furious, but in a typically understated way; his jaw clenched, he stiffened, and his eyes were hot and hard. Bruce questioned me closely about where I'd seen them and how I'd recognized them.

"I was a cat burglar," she explained daintily. "I intend to turn over a new leaf." Thomas and Martha grilled them both without mercy. It was kind of fun to see Bruce on the other end of an interrogation. By the end, though, they seemed reconciled to Bruce's lady love.

Damian started to chuckle. "I can't imagine Talia would be too thrilled to see Alex again. She never got the best of her when they encountered each other, except maybe the first time."

"Why is that, Damian?" Martha asked.
"She just sort of introduced herself to Alex when we first started living together and came out of that ok, but I think that every other time they met, Alex got the better of her."

"Mom beat her up," Martha helpfully clarified. There was a shocked silence. "To be fair, she threatened Mom a lot. The last time, she was going to kidnap me or Xander because she'd given up on Dad playing ball. There were barely enough goons for each of us to have one."

"You're not helping much," I said to her wearily. She laughed, and there were more questions from my folks, Damian's grandparents. Bucky was the only one who didn't have trouble wrapping his head around it.

"But what are they doing in this city?" I asked, desperate to change the subject. "R'as died in his stronghold, and Talia wasn't in the city when she died."

"Huh," Bruce grunted. "They're here for a reason, probably related to Damian, so we need to know more."

"What's the delivery schedule on the card blanks?" Daniel asked me.

"The data on the returnees is added to the city's records each day around noon and midnight. The physical identity card blanks are dropped off at about eight in the morning each day. So Talia and R'as's will be delivered tomorrow morning."

"If I get you a device, can you get access to the card blanks?"

"Depends on what you mean to do to them. I can't alter them."

"No, it's a card reader," Daniel said, shaking his head. "It gets the wavelength and signature for the card and movement can be tracked if you know those two things. The cards don't transmit, but every time they go by a data point, the card is read and the time and location noted, which builds a record of the bearer's movement."

"I can do that," I said, and after dinner, Daniel got me the reader. It was small, about the size of an old-fashioned box of matches, and all I had to do is lay it on the card and press a button. The information would be read in under a second, so it was fast, too. I'd need to intercept it inside the embassy since the device wasn't strictly legal. If I missed it before it was put out for distribution, we'd be out of luck. When we went upstairs for the night, I called Loki and told him what was going on. He just told me to get there early.

Which is what I did, blipping over a good half hour early. Loki told me to stay on the gate for the daily deliveries of ID cards and the testing kits before I went up to Asgard, and it couldn't be easier. I found the two cards easily and scanned them quickly. The boxes were then taken to divide up by alphabetical groups, and I went to practice. I personally found it easier to fly with the bat wings rather than the feathered wings, but the pink bat wings still looked silly.

I couldn't find Odin to ask whether he had anything for the diplomatic pouch to Loki, so I had to search for him. He was down on the Bifrost with Heimdall, Tony, and Emma, who were discussing a potential solution to strengthen the Bifrost against breakage by the sons of Muspell. The solution involved infusing the structure that supported the Bifrost energy with metal ions, which would change the look of the bridge but had tested well. Heimdall and Odin were cautious, and consented to a practical test of a small portion. Odin grunted when he caught sight of me. "I know not why we are trying to change fate," he grumbled.

"Because the Norn say that only the battle is fixed, not the outcome," I replied automatically.
"Our understanding of the words of the Norn are different," he said, one of his usual defenses.

"Guess we'll see," I said, and he smiled unwillingly. He did have some things for his son, and after I picked up the pouch, I went downside. I grabbed a hasty lunch after delivering the pouch and joined the other helpers. Since word of the ID cards had spread, we were getting a lot more requests for registration and people who had previously registered came back for cards, anxious to be able to access assistance. The crowds at all the registration sessions were thick, day and night. We had more DIY terminals, but we had to have guards on those, because true to human nature, there were those who would have stolen anything that wasn't nailed down. Although we did that too, affixing the terminals to tables with metal clips and bolts. I was assigned to help the ID card processing as it was the busiest. The process was simple enough; we matched the receipt and the name to the ID card, inserted the card in a printer, took the image of the person, at the printer created a 3D image embedded in the plastic card. It couldn't be altered, so the ID was secure. The time it took to print the image was the most time consuming, even though we had more printers than lines of applicants. I was responsible for setting up the printer and handing out the completed cards. I found myself face to face with Ra's al Ghul, or 'Brian Brown,' as he was calling himself. But I was ready for this and kept recognition out of my face and voice as I handed the card, still warm from the printer, to the man. I only touched the edges of the card. "There you go, Mr Brown," I said in the usual friendly way. "Be sure to update your ID when you get permanent housing." I told him that he could get on the list for an apartment at kiosks throughout Central Park and other temporary housing facilities. He looked at me intently as I spoke, then nodded and vanished into the crowd.

That was the most interesting thing that happened, though. When the pod set down at six, the other valkyries went to get their vaccinations and I stayed put, overseeing the shift change. I was just about to go in when I saw a familiar face. I grinned and plunged in, coming up with one Dick Grayson. He sagged with relief when he saw me. "I thought I'd never see a familiar face again," he said as we hugged.

"Come with me," I said, and I tugged him through the gates. J, who saw us first, grinned and popped Damian with his elbow. Damian looked over and strode up to us.

"Grayson," he said, then flung his arms around his brother, who hugged him back, astonished. "I thought you'd never show up," he mumbled. Then Bruce, looking around for the holdup, saw him and came over too, tears in his eyes. Daniel monopolized Dick on the way home, eager to talk to the first Robin.

"Alfred," Dick said in a strangled voice when he came in with us.

"Master Dick," Alfred said, warmly. His eyes glistened. "It is good to have you back, if I may say so."

"It's good to be home," Dick said, and sniffed. Martha and Thomas were intrigued by Bruce's first adopted son and got to know him over dinner. Daniel smiled. He was very much enjoying his suddenly expanded family, and after dinner, went into the registration program through a programmer's back door and searched for Dick's parents. His dad had registered.

"I couldn't," Dick said when Daniel offered to house Dick's dad too. But Daniel wouldn't accept no for an answer, and finally offered the gatehouse, which had been restored as a small two bedroom, two bathroom guesthouse. Dick finally accepted and he would come in with us the next day to search for his dad. There was a general direction for where he was sleeping at night, but conditions were crowded and it would be difficult to find him.

It took a few days, but Dick found his father at the same time that his mother registered. It took a
further few days for his mother to be located; she'd picked up her ID at City Hall and there was a notice waiting for her to call the house. So the Flying Graysons were reunited at last.

Where Daniel, Damian, Bruce, J, Martha, and Thomas were working at Wayne Enterprises, my parents, Martha Sr, and now Dick's parents started to work in the expansive greenhouses that Daniel had constructed during Fimbulwinter. It was something of a masterpiece and allowed food to be grown year round, with a high degree of automation. He'd supplied his own needs and donated fresh produce to soup kitchens and food pantries. This was revived, and they also took care of running the harvest from the apple and pear orchards and would also deal with a small stand of chestnuts when they were ready. Alfred was in his element, making applesauce, cider (hard and fresh), and pear preserves. There was apple cake and pear tarts and some were stored in the cellar, the rest donated. It might have been a drop in the bucket in comparison to the barrelful of need, but barrels can be filled with drops, it just takes awhile.

Loki remembered Dick and offered him a job at the embassy in the guard, which he accepted. I think that Damian might have been behind it to make sure someone had my back, but I wasn't being critical. It was nice to work with him again. The other valkyries liked it too; they flirted with him whenever there was a spare moment. He was in prime condition, like everybody, and Dick had always been handsome.

And progress was being made on the Batman front too. We had a couple of Batmen, so Alfred was kept busy making their protective gear and weaponry, as well as that for Robin and now Nightwing, and they took turns patrolling. Scared the bejeezus out of those who weren't around when Bruce took up the identity and the oldest returnees swore up and down that he was an agent of Satan. The problem was that there were so many people doing harmful things that they were busy breaking up crimes rather than developing information on our new criminals. People being what they were, undoubtedly a hierarchy was forming, but we didn't know who or where their places in the developing hierarchy were. Or where they basing themselves. Lots to know, and not much time to devote to it. There wasn't as much space for hideouts, either. The police were turning a blind eye to squatters in buildings that were abandoned and/or waiting to be demolished so that returnees could have a roof over their heads, and that really took most of the available space in the city. And Alfred, J, and I were available to patch up the guys when they got home, although I was only brought down when Damian needed needed more than superficial patching up. Fortunately, those occasions were rare. We'd had a bit of a fight about it; I'd wanted to be waiting for his return, but he pointed out that I practiced combat every day for hours before putting in time at the embassy, plus the extra practice I put in at home with my wings and archery, usually done in the morning before I went off to Asgard. He got stubborn with me and threatened not to patrol if I didn't compromise, so I did. Sulking, with bad grace. It was my right as his wife and by long-standing tradition to fix my husband when he got back from a night on the town, but I had to admit that I did better with a little more sleep.

Training was going really well. Each day we were randomly assigned to two teams and each side was assigned an opening tactic. From that, we had to improvise, and everybody got the opportunity to command a team. Some of us were better than others, and our casualty rate varied. We applied first aid in the field, with Holly taking care of the more serious wounds, and those with wounds that were severe or would show came down to the embassy, where they had a tissue accelerator. It was an older model but worked perfectly well. Those of us who had been reunited with family always got a session in order to keep concern (and fussing) down to a minimum. It worked great. Until Dick saw me getting fixed from a spear wound.

"Does Damian know?" he asked.

"We don't talk about it, but I'm certain that he realizes I get hurt during practice," I said, wincing as
Irene adjusted the plate over the wound and mopped off some of the blood.

Later on, Damian was extra snuggly and the next day three brand new accelerators showed up at the embassy.

And more good news: Commissioner Gordon and his daughter Barbara turned up. The former Commissioner stayed at Headquarters, but Barbara moved into the gatehouse with Dick.

One night I woke from a nightmare. Since seeing the Joker again, I'd had started having the old nightmares again now and then. Since Damian was out and about that night, I thought I'd wait for him down in the batcave. I stretched out on the table in the little treatment room just off the main cavern and rested while I waited. I woke up some time later to hear voices out by the computer consoles, so I got up and padded out the door.

Imagine my surprise when I heard my precious son's voice.

And from what he and Bruce and Damian were saying, they'd been working together for awhile.
"My word," was all I could think to say. The three of them swiveled toward me. I was then literally speechless and I was afraid to try to open my mouth for fear of what I might say. As it was, I held myself in place because I really wanted to slap my husband.

"Alex," Damian said, stepping toward me. "Xander's been following the criminals, finding out where they're living, where they're setting up their operations, what they're doing--"

"You know I've been worried that he's been hurt, maybe among the dead," I finally said flatly. "And you let me keep thinking that, because if he was ok, he'd have shown up by now."

"Mom--" Xander started.

"Surely you would have known that I'd want to see you or at least know that your body wasn't rotting away in a ditch somewhere. And Martha. Your twin. It's extraordinarily hard for her not to know where you are or how you are."

"It was my idea," Bruce said. "Having somebody who wasn't registered, looking into criminal activity undercover. And in case you were being watched--and since the Joker is back, you are probably under at least casual surveillance--it would be known that your son was still missing, the other valkyries and embassy staff ask you every day."

"I can't believe that you would be this cruel," I said, looking at all three men. I didn't waste any time. I popped up to the bedroom and got dressed for practice. Damian burst into the room while I was packing my change of clothes for the embassy after practice. I ignored him and popped down to the cloakroom and picked up my arms and armor, ignoring Bruce. Then I popped to Asgard. Their summer was lasting longer than ours, so it was no hardship to stretch out in the grass of our practice ground on the edge of Vigrior and try to rest. Eventually my mind calmed enough for a restless sleep, but I was still up with the dawn. I went up to the citadel for some breakfast and to practice on their archery range.

"What's wrong?" Serena asked as we warmed up. "You've got your battlefield face on."

"I found out that my husband and father-in-law have been working with my son. He's apparently either observing or infiltrating the gangs that are forming," I said sharply.

"Wait, what?" Serena said, stopping and looking at me. "They didn't tell you he was ok?"

"Nope," I said, biting off the words. "They apparently think I can't lie. Bruce said that 'since I'm probably under surveillance by the Joker' they wanted it to look like my son was still missing so whoever is watching won't be counting him into their plans."

"Oh, my god," Serena breathed. "What are you going to do?"

"Don't know," I said grimly. "Right now I'm so angry I don't even feel the hurt. I never thought Damian would do something like this to me. I don't know how to handle this." I hated saying it but it was true.

"Well, I can give you an outlet for your rage," she said, and today we worked in small groups. My group quickly figured out that something bad had happened and that I didn't want to talk, so I spent practice in three-on-one combat. I was tired when we finished, and took the diplomatic pouch for Loki reluctantly. Thor noticed and asked what was wrong. He and Magni were shocked that my
husband would keep that knowledge from me.

Loki didn't say much, but he did offer me a cot at the embassy if I wanted, and I did. I took a moment and called my daughter. She was in quite a state, Damian having come clean that morning. "I can't stand to look at either one of them," she said, snarling. "But Daniel didn't know, just that they had an informant. He's sending me to London to oversee the business there for awhile."

"Send me some pictures so I can visit," I requested, and she said she would. I needed the pictures in order to visualize my arrival point.

"But I need some time to get a grip on this," she said, and I said that when she was ready for a visitor to let me know, letting her know that I was moving to the embassy.

"All the grandparents are furious with them," she said, barking a laugh that wasn't really funny. "They're really in a state. Bruce and my father are in over their heads."

"Good," I snapped, and then I had to go out. I found some relief in helping people get registered; at the very least it gave me something else to think about.

I popped back out to the house to pick up my stuff. "I was unaware," Alfred said, shaking his head. "I regret that I was unable to spare you the shock, Miss Alex." He had packed Martha's things and was preparing to drive them over so that she could take them on her flight.

"Not your fault, Alfred," I said, hugging him. "I'm going to stay at the embassy. If you need anything, though, call me."

"Thank you, Miss Alex. Likewise, if you need anything, please let me know." That was the hardest farewell to make. My folks were beyond furious, and Martha and Thomas were very nearly as angry. It was a little reassuring to know that I wasn't overreacting. Daniel called me later that afternoon. If he'd known anything about Xander, he'd have told me, regardless of what the others wanted.

The next day after practice, Thor changed my assignment. I was to work as a trainer for the guards; Thor was forming a specialized unit composed of some of the finest fighters in the guard and he wanted me to put the keenest edge possible on their skills. I would still take the diplomatic pouch back and forth, though. I was given a nice little room in the citadel, from which I could see the World Tree in the distance.

After dinner that night, I returned to my room and the rage receded enough for the hurt to surface. When I dropped down to Midgard before valkyrie practice the next day, Tony was waiting for me. He didn't refer directly to the upset with Xander, but his hug was warm and made me feel marginally better. He mentioned that he and Emma had taken rooms at the tower and that Bucky and Steve were also being reassigned to Asgard.

"I thought that there was just one empty room at the tower," I said, distracted. He grinned at me. "Ann made room for me," he said casually. I wasn't surprised, remembering how attractive and smart Martha's friend was, but I didn't know it had gone so far. "Well, we haven't seen much of each other lately," he shrugged. "And it feels kind of weird telling you about my new girlfriend. It shouldn't, you were back with your husband, but I felt like... it would be saying I've left you behind. And I haven't; we're still close, but..."

I smiled. The expression kinda hurt, but Tony was Tony and he deserved a smile, at least. "I was hoping you'd find somebody," I said affectionately. "I'm glad for you." He exhaled, then smiled at..."
"If you need anything, let me know," he said. "Emma wanted to assure you of her support too, but we didn't want to go over the top. How are the feather growth on your wings going?"

"They're about half grown in now,' I said with relief. "They're not nearly as itchy." He smirked.

"As soon as they're fully in, come by the tower and Emma'll treat the feathers with that protective compound." We chatted a bit more, then I picked up the diplomatic pouch. I told Loki where his goddaughter had gone, and he nodded. Then our conversation was focused on the job, a big relief. Torunn, her uncle's preferred shadow, also didn't say anything but she did tell me to let her know if I needed anything.

It was a relief to get back to Asgard. Odin did say that the deception was unworthy, but we talked mostly about the valkyries and Thor discussed the special group I'd be training, starting that afternoon after lunch. Then there was good news; I'd be working with Steve and Bucky. So after I finished morning practice, I had a light lunch, not willing to load my stomach up too much before another practice. I put my armor on, armed myself with my shield, spear, and swords, not having had a chance to ask Steve or Bucky what I should bring.

I was overdressed. I was the only one in armor (I'd have to ask Alfred how he'd gotten the metal so shiny) but Steve told his recruits that I was a good example. "All she knew is that she will be training you," he said. "So she came well prepared."

My uncle laughed. "Reasonably well prepared," he corrected his friend. "She probably didn't bring her knives." I smiled at him. The recruits looked slightly puzzled.

"It is well known that this valkyrie is always armed," one recruit ventured. "But why would she bring knives to a practice? They are unworthy weapons for a warrior."

The smiles were wiped off Bucky and Steve's faces. Mine hadn't worn one to begin with. "You haven't grasped the nature of this unit, then," Steve said. He proceeded to explain it; it sounded to me like it was a version of the Howling Commandos. "And if any of you feel like this kind of warfare is beneath you, speak now and I'll have you reassigned. But if you're still willing to get your hands dirty, let's get started."

Training, I discovered immediately, would be oriented to penetrating to achieve specific objectives. And if the valkyries were shock troops, this group was more like the Maquis of WWII. We valkyries were to take care of any aerial threats and first penetrate quickly to the vulnerable rear of the invading army where we were to raise as much hell as possible, but these guys were being trained for guerrilla warfare. Ambushes, sabotage, the use of their mobility and small group size to harass the enemy and hit and run. They would also be given key targets once they were identified and orders to eliminate their target. I would be training them in archery and Bucky would be specializing in how to take care of a target closer in.

I blessed the Hawkeyes more than once during our training session for the excellence of their teaching. Clint in particular had been a wonderful teacher. I was a little less patient, but the stakes were higher than teaching a teenage girl so she didn't embarrass herself in class, and we probably had less time to do it in. It was easy to determine who had the most talent with a bow. Then Steve had them demonstrate their skill with javelins and discovered that they all had range, but their targeting was... erratic. Then to the use of spears and polearms, where expertise was greater, then swords, the basic weapon for Asgardians, which is where they excelled. Competency took a huge drop on closer work with knives. Bucky showed them how useful a knife could be. He tried to sneak up on me but I was too wary of him from our decades of training together and he couldn't
surprise me. He grinned at me and successfully ambushed Steve. If he'd been playing for real, Steve would be dead. We quickly established a protocol where Bucky was always moving around the men. Sometimes he was there to help, sometimes he was there to attack. And the men never escaped unscathed. He'd inflict a shallow cut to remind them to pay more attention. After he'd terrified them sufficiently, he started showing them how to defend against it. The men had incentive to learn quickly.

I talked to Bucky after that first training session to make sure he was really ok with using his asset skills again. He said that he was because the stakes were so high, and this time it was his choice. I also felt that part of it was because when the armies gathered at Vigrior, he and Steve would observe and assign targets, but they wouldn't be going out with the unit. They had to command the armies with Thor and Odin. They would be sending them out after the shock troops--valkyries above, at least initially, and the berserkers on the ground. Our job was to get ahead of the berserkers as quickly as possible in the event that we were grounded so that we wouldn't be in their paths. The unit was to focus on its targets and take them out as quickly and efficiently as possible.

Uncle Bucky tracked me down about a week after we'd started the training, after dinner when I was outside, on a little hill overlooking Vigrior. It was becoming my favorite spot. "Hey, sweetie," he said behind me, and I got up, brushing grasses off, to receive one of my uncle's special hugs. They don't really make anything better, but I always felt better because of the caring that was behind it. "How are you doing?"

By now the rage was pretty much gone, extinguished by the sadness that my husband, who I loved more than life, would play that kind of game with me. And my son. He should have known better. And Bruce. I thought he understood me, my training and skills, my outlook better than that. The hurt spilled out as I talked, sitting down once more, looking out at our eventual battlefield. He kept his arm around my shoulder as it all came out.

"Have you been back to the city since?"

"Mostly just to go back and forth with the diplomatic pouch," I replied, taking the handkerchief he offered. "There were a couple of times I covered for a little bit when there was a problem or when one of the workers was notified of a family match. Talked to Tony once, my parents came by to check and see if I was ok."

He didn't have any advice to offer; he'd just wanted to give me a shoulder to cry on. "Daniel did come up with a program linked to the surveillance cameras outside the embassy," he said after we'd sat in companionable silence awhile. "He did it to run facial identification on those who were there for registration as well as just passing by. The Joker was identified as picking up an ID for a falsified name, Jack Farceur. He was seen standing to the side, ostensibly looking at his ID, but listening to the two valkyries who were operating the printers. Daniel got the original footage, which has sound as well, and after cleaning up the audio, found that they were talking about you. One had overheard that something bad had happened to your son and was telling this to the other. Surveillance also caught Ra's al Ghul at a distance several times, scanning the embassy workers, as well as a few as-yet unidentified people who did the same thing. It's not clear if all of them were there to check for you, but your presence--or absence, actually--has been noted."

"Just as well I'm up here, then," I said dourly and he agreed.

"So what do you think you'll do now?" he asked.

"I'm not planning on anything," I said. "Just to get through Ragnarok, hopefully."

He shot me a side eye. "Honey, you're not, um... you won't--"
"Am I suicidal, you mean?" I asked dryly. "No. I'll get through this. I'm just a little lost right now."

He exhaled and relaxed. "You know you could do anything you wanted," he said.

"Yeah, when it's right, I'm going to pick up an MIT catalog," I said. "Maybe I'll go for a PhD, if I find something interesting enough." We talked for a little longer, about nothing in particular, and he pulled me to my feet so we could return to the citadel.

A couple days later, a message on my communicator caught up with me and I swung by the tower to see Tony and Emma. She'd made cookies and fussed over me a little. It felt nice. I swung by Tony's lab and found him working on an Iron Man suit. I smiled. Ann was assembling a resistor. "Hey, Tiger," he said, jumping to his feet. Ann smiled at me. They made a good looking couple. He settled me onto a stool. "I wanted to see you to kind of feel you out," he said. I looked at him attentively. "Ann has an idea to start her own company," he said. "Well, we'll both be working on it. The oceans are still pretty trashed. There's all that plastic waste and damage from climate change. We've got some ideas to work on that, computer monitoring of water quality, finding and processing the plastic; the computer stuff will be mostly Ann's baby along with the biochemical engineering. I'll engineer solutions. We were going to ask you if you'd like to join, work on the biochem end of things. And we were going to ask Damian if he'd join as CEO of the business."

I stopped and thought about it. "I personally am going to pass on the offer to do biochem. I don't know what I want to do after Ragnarok, but I think I'm going to try something different. But if there's an investment opportunity, I want in." I saw the two of them exchange looks; hers was excited, his was confident. "As to Damian, I don't think you could do better, actually. Once the current crop of fires gets put out, I don't know how many Waynes will be needed at the company and he'll be looking for new opportunities. It's Martha who works the best with Daniel. I'd strongly recommend that you hire him."

Tony looked at me sharply and I knew he caught my drift. He'd probably thought about asking Damian to invest, but he might rethink that.

"How much were you thinking for startup costs?" I asked, and Tony thought that since they were starting from the beginning, about ten million. I grinned at him. My cheeks hurt from the exercise. "That won't hold you for long, Sparky," I said. "I'll invest a hundred million for 49% of the company." Ann sucked in a deep breath, but Tony started to dicker, as I knew he would. We ended up with my investment and each of us owned 33% of the company. It was a lot of money, especially for a startup, but if they could do what they set out to do--which I didn't doubt--it would be worth it, even if it was a bad deal for me from the initial investment side. "Get the papers drawn up," I said, "and let's get this started."

I went back to the embassy feeling pretty good. I had no doubt that the business would be successful and it felt good to me that I'd helped do something beneficial. Working with Damian, it would really successful and after they got going, I wouldn't be surprised if Tony tried to buy me out. Ha. He could try, but I know a good thing when I see it.

Thinking about that, when I got back I made an appointment with the embassy lawyer to make a new will. I wanted to make sure this business was covered if something happened to me. Then I flipped over to London at Martha's invitation. She clung to me and we finally talked about what had happened. But she had some good news; my grandma had registered in Britain's system and she'd seen her just the day before. They'd made arrangements to meet again on my next day off and I was so coming back for that. I went back to the citadel feeling much better.

We started having mandatory days off because there was concern from the medical staff that we were training too hard, and the next one fortunately coincided with the day I was going to meet my
grandma in London. I arranged with Bucky and Steve to take the afternoon off too, which wasn't a problem. They didn't really need my help that much; I suspected that my assignment was more a way to get me out of the city while I was going through my issues. I was grateful for it, though.

I got to Martha's before she was even up; I picked up a book and read while I waited. When I heard Martha stirring, I called out to her and started the coffee. We both preferred it to tea, although Martha had gotten some for Grandma. Martha fixed a breakfast of eggs, sausage, and tomatoes while we waited, and we caught up. She was finding the work at Wayne--London engaging, for which I was grateful. We'd both been notified that both her children had turned up in the morgue, but she'd wanted time by herself and I hadn't pushed. It was another shock on top of the other. And her husband had gotten in touch. He'd moved on, he said. My poor baby. I wanted to mother (well, smother) but Martha said she just wanted to work and deal with her problems a little at a time. As long as she was addressing and not suppressing, I could respect her wishes but warned her I'd turn up the mothering if I thought she needed it. She sighed and we snuggled up on the couch with our coffee. What was bothering her the most was that she still hadn't had contact with her twin.

It was a relief when Grandma showed up. She'd brought snacks for afternoon tea, a custom of which all three of us heartily approved, but she fixed tea for herself and we sat down to talk, paused to make lunch, then talked more until tea. We stayed for dinner and Martha and I saw her off. She refused to take the transportation pod owned by Wayne Enterprises, saying it was a brief trip to Cambridge, where the government had resettled her. I stayed a little longer to make sure Martha was really ok, and went back to Asgard satisfied that she was as ok as was reasonable possible. She'd mentioned that my folks were coming out the next week to see her. I smiled; I'd be willing to bet that Martha and Thomas would be rotating out the week after. I told her to let me know if she needed anything or just wanted to talk, then scheduled another day with her three weeks out.

The next day, after valkyrie practice (I did feel better for the day off) I was assigned back down to the embassy for a few days. Despite the vaccinations, we still had a couple of valkyries who had gotten sick, and there were a few battling colds. In the interest of public health, nobody sick could work. "It's ridiculous that they don't have a vaccine for colds," Irene remarked as we got lunch before our shift.

"The viruses mutate too fast," I said, biting into a sandwich. The cold and a few dermatological issues like athlete's foot were the most resistant to eradication. Even the Asgardian healers didn't have a really effective treatment for colds, and they were seeing it more with the influx of humans living and working in the citadel.

Irene grunted and we moved on to other topics. Her parents had been registered and she was going to get time off the following week to visit with them. "Let me know if they need anything," I said to her, and she patted my shoulder. Then it was to work. It was nice to interact with people again where I wasn't barking orders at them. The government was starting to funnel registered people into better housing situations; even when they were in large spaces like the ballroom of an abandoned but structurally-sound hotel, they were providing partitions for privacy and noise control and lockers for personal effects. Other companies were stepping up like Wayne and prioritizing refitting abandoned buildings into apartments or starting new construction. The unregistered had less nice accommodations, but they were still being fed and housed. It was an incentive for people to register.

I was a little surprised to see the Joker across the street toward the end of my shift on the third day. He wiggled his fingers at me, and, after my shift was over, I crossed the street. I alerted one of the guards to keep an eye out, although I didn't see that he had any thugs around.
"How lovely to see you, pretty," he said as I joined him along the fence, an arms-length distance between us. The hated nickname still got on my nerves.

"Ummm," I said, unwilling to commit myself to anything.

"You don't seem that pleased to see me," he said, and I rolled my eyes.

"Given past history, you can't expect confetti and Champagne," I said briskly.

"I didn't mean for Batman to die," he said instantly. "It was an accident."

So he knew that Batman ran in the Wayne family. Good to know. I'd wondered what he did know about his archnemesis. "That's nice, but I meant the times you kidnapped me and tried to make my life a living hell."

"I admit that my courting may have been too avant garde," he said. "I regret any distress I caused you." You have GOT. TO. BE. KIDDING. ME. That was the suckiest apology I'd heard since my husband tried to justify not letting me know my son was alive and well.

"I'm a changed man, pretty," he said hastily, after a look at my face. "And to prove it, I thought I'd sing a little song in your ear. That boy of yours isn't as good as he thinks. He's drawn attention to himself from the wrong people."

"Xander?" I asked, standing up straight. "You know where he is?"

"Yes, young Alexander," the Joker confirmed. Then he rolled his eyes. "Do you mean that your husband has not seen fit to share that information with you?" he asked mockingly. I stayed silent. "He looks quite like his father. He's dyed his hair, but the roots are showing, and he's done nothing about his eyes or skin tone. His resemblance to what can be seen of one of the Batmen flapping around the city has been noted. That and he was observed talking to Nightwing, and not in an adversarial manner. His dear granny has plans for him, and they're going to be executed quite soon."

"How do you know this?" I asked, frowning.

"Well, criminal associates do associate, pretty. We're in the process of dividing up the city among us. Crime is so much better when it's regulated. And a man has to think of his prospects," he added.

"Thanks for telling me," I said, and he grinned. I flinched a little at the sight of that maniac expression and the grin faded. "Do you know anything about why my descendants are ending up in the morgue at such a high rate?" I asked, pushing a little. The grin vanished.

"It just so happens that I'm not the only one who's in on the Waynes' masquerade," he said. "It's not serving anybody's purpose to go public with the information--yet--but there are some who are interested in cutting down on the number of possible costumed crime fighters. I am not among them," he said. I don't know why, but I believed him. I nodded to him after rolling that around my head a moment, then said thanks and went back to the embassy.

I found a relatively quiet corner in the building and called Damian's number. It went to voicemail. Score! "I just received a warning that Alexander has been identified by some of the criminals he's been keeping company with," I said coolly. "Including your mother. He said that she's planning to execute a plan involving him soon, so you'd better pull him out now. Also, I had a confirmation that there are people who are targeting the family, taking out our descendants before they can take up the cowl again." I hung up, feeling relieved, and chatted with Loki a little before taking the diplomatic pouch back to Asgard.
Inception

It was about a week longer until someone showed up at the embassy. Torunn was waiting for me when I came down with the afternoon diplomatic pouch. "You have a visitor," she told me soberly. "Loki put him in his office so that you'd have privacy." I debated whether just to hand off the pouch and go back to the citadel. "You might as well get this over with," she said sympathetically. "You can do it. You're a valkyrie of Asgard and you can do anything, even teaching boneheads like my brothers." I looked at her with a faint smile. "I, of course, was a quick study."

So I gave into the flattery. Also, she was right. I might as well get the meeting over with.

I let myself into the office; Loki rose from his desk, patted my shoulder, reminded me of a meeting that wasn't scheduled, and left. I took his seat behind the desk and leaned back in the warmed chair.

"Thank you for seeing me," Bruce said. I looked at him, my face feeling like a mask. "Thank you for your warning about Xander. He's back home now, and safe." I stayed silent. "How did you get your information?"

"I have my sources too," I said evasively. Silence stretched out.

"I'm sorry that we kept Xander a secret from you," he said finally. "I thought that since it was dangerous, when he got back you'd never have to know. It wasn't supposed to take so long." I just stared at him. It was a horrible, pitifully inadequate apology, but I could tell it was sincere, that he thought he'd done me some kind of favor. The silence descended again, thick and oppressive. "Do you have anything you'd like to say to me?" he prodded.

"Yeah, lots," I said. "Most of it is four-letter words, though, and very repetitious. Where do you get off thinking that you can make that kind of decision for me? When did you think I got all fragile? I'm tougher than I've ever been, both physically and mentally. There is nothing that I can't handle. Except getting stabbed in the back by people I trusted. You have no idea how much damage you've caused. I thought I raised a decent boy. I thought I married an honorable man, but there's nothing I don't question about it now. What else did Damian keep from me? I had absolute faith in him. I never thought I needed to ask questions." The rage was building fast and it actually hurt to keep it in, but I had to. I could seriously hurt the man across the desk, and I didn't want to have to deal with any fallout from that. "You suck!" I said, venting the anger and hurt and disappointment a little. "YOU ALL SUCK SO GODDAMNED MUCH!" Needing some kind of physical outlet, I pulled the dagger from my boot and slammed it into the desk. It felt good. There was shocked silence. I pushed my wedding ring across the desk. "Take this back to him. I can't wear it anymore."

Then the door opened and Loki pounced through, ready to control the situation if need be. His eyes went between Bruce and me, lingering on the dagger embedded in his desk.

"Don't come back here," I said to Bruce. "Anything you have to say, say it to my lawyer." Without a word, Loki handed Bruce a card for the embassy lawyer. "I'm done with you." Then the door opened and Loki pounced through, ready to control the situation if need be. His eyes went between Bruce and me, lingering on the dagger embedded in his desk.

A few days later, I went to the tower to have Emma treat the feathers in my wings. They looked splendid, nice and new and crisp. "Wow," she said when I extended. "They changed color." They
had, going to a dark gray that had iridescence flashes in the light.

"Yeah, it's nifty, isn't it?" I said as she started at the top of the left wing. "A lot of us did. Some of us still have all white feathers, but more of us have shades of gray. There are even a few with black feathers. I like it better. More individual." We chatted as she worked; she'd baked a batch of brownies for me, which I was stealthily consuming. Steve and Bucky might have been reassigned to Asgard, but one or the other came down almost every night, so she saw a lot of them. We talked about Tony and Ann's new venture.

"I'm looking into corrosion-resistant alloys for the ocean machines, but they have to be both resistant to salt water and something that can be used in mass production," she said, and we talked about that difficulty until a gentle cough at the door drew our attention. Emma stood back as I trotted over to Alfred to give him a big hug.

"How've you been?" I mumbled as he hugged me back, carefully avoiding the wings.

"I say, Miss Alex, your new feathers are spectacular," he said admiringly. "The color and shimmer are enchanting."

"They are not unlike pigeon feathers," I said flippantly, and he shook his head.

"Grackle, I should say." He handed me a bag that contained his own homemade metal polish in a hermanetic glass jar and a supply of rags. "Let me know when you run low and I will make more for you," he instructed, and I smiled. We talked awhile longer before he had to get going. "It is wonderful to see you, Miss Alex."

"You too, Alfred. I miss you." He cleared his throat. "Miss Emma, it is a pleasure to see you as well." She smiled.

After he left, Emma resumed painting the feathers. We were silent, but it wasn't awkward. She was almost done when Daniel stopped in. He also complimented the new color and sat down so that Emma could finish, then I had to leave the wings extended so that the coating could cure.

"I offered Selina a job," he mentioned, and I looked at him curiously. "In security, testing our security systems and locks--the ones we produce as well as our in-house security." We smiled at each other. "She'll be traveling a lot, so it's just as well that the position came with a small apartment near Wayne Enterprises." I nodded. He sighed. "Alfred is furious with Bruce, Damian, and Alexander; he calls them "Mister" rather than "Master" now. I never realized what impact a small change like that could have."

"The first time I came out to the mansion was with my friend Aslyn and her boyfriend of the time; it was kind of a screwed up double date, Damian was grounded. Alfred referred to the boy who drove us as "Master," and I'd never thought a respectful form of address could be insulting, but there it was. Alfred has at least a hundred ways of conveying his opinion," I said.

Daniel nodded. "Your parents were going to move out entirely, but I persuaded them to stay in the guesthouse instead. I'm glad, I'm really enjoying to get to know them better."

"They just love you," I said. "And they're glad to have a different kind of work to do, they're finding working in the greenhouse and orchards very satisfying."

"Your dad is talking with Alfred about felling some of the trees on the property. The woods need to be thinned some for health, and it came out that he used to be a woodworker. So they're talking about sending the wood to a sawmill and using it around the estate."
"Dad made really nice furniture," I recalled, smiling. "In the attic, there's still the canopy bed that he made for me as a kid. Martha used it for awhile when she went through a rather prolonged princess phase." Daniel grinned and we chatted about other things. Then Emma gave me the go-ahead and I warmed up my wings, then hopped into the air, testing the effect of the new coating.

"The feathers don't flex quite as much, but it's certainly within an acceptable limit," I reported setting down again, and Emma smiled.

"You bring me the most interesting challenges," she said, putting her things away. Daniel invited us both to lunch, but Emma had a meeting.

We went to a nice restaurant and I asked questions about how he was and what he was doing. We'd talked some on the phone, but it wasn't the same. "I apologize for that," I said, and he shook his head.

"Don't," he said. "I know you're in a lot of chaos right now. I never thought that you were abandoning me. But maybe we could arrange to have more lunches."

"Done," I said promptly, and we agreed to lunch every other week, with the option of more, depending on scheduling.

I'd eaten too many brownies, so I tried to balance out with a very healthy salad. He had barbecued chicken and asked how work was going for me. "Pretty absorbing," I said. "Morning practice most days, then either a rotation training Steve and Bucky's unit or work at the embassy. I think we're finally seeing the crowds start to lighten. Finally. But there's still so many." We talked about that and how his plans to employ returnees to help build the new housing were going. Groundbreaking had started at the first site. Additionally, there were a lot of highly skilled craftsmen available, and he'd had the idea to hire the cream of the crop for a new company that could restore old buildings or do the finish work on new ones. Plaster workers, stone masons, carpenters, ironworkers and the like; he had plans for a new highrise of luxury apartments, hoping that an exclusive address and premium finishes could persuade existing homeowners to buy in and allow existing properties to be redeveloped for more tenants while employing returnees. He'd bought an old mall that had been shuttered, had it rezoned, and this provided workshop space in the big anchor store spaces and the company's offices. Work was being done to retrofit smaller store spaces into apartments for roommates or families, with a few restaurants going in at the old food court site and other amenities developed, like a laundromat and grocery store. The old craftsmen were working with modern ones to understand the building codes--or even what they were--and helping to build their own development. There was a small fleet of company owned vehicles, too--cars right now that could be borrowed like Zipcars, and there would be pickups added to the fleet once they were up and running with jobs. Many were learning to drive and he'd hired what he termed 'cultural counselors' to help ease his workers' transitions into modernity; sociologists, psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, anthropologists, nutritionists, life skills teachers, financial advisors. Now he was on the lookout for outstanding talent in many fields.

"There's still a lot of people with money of their own, and we've got an unparalleled opportunity to gather some of history's best makers in one city," he said. He had agents scouring returnees in big cities all over the world, offering jobs to the most highly skilled. Where they weren't interested in emigrating to New York, he was establishing other artisan colonies in London, Paris, Cairo, and Beijing. I loved how his mind worked.

"I can't tell you how sick I feel about that whole mess with your son," he said finally, fiddling with his coffee spoon.

"It's not your fault," I assured him.
"It happened under my roof," he said. "I feel responsible." I just shook my head and patted his hand. "I didn't understand their dynamic," he said. "My father and I worked very differently. We always talked a plan through and he sought my input, even when I was too young for it to be much good. Bruce decides what he wants to do and what others' roles will be. And apparently Damian just falls into line."

I sighed. "That was their pattern; Damian would work separately when he wanted to investigate his own ideas."

"Well, I've put a stop to that," Daniel said grimly. I looked at him with interest. "The company, the family trust, the house and all of its contents--including the batcave--are mine. I'm happy to share everything I have with the family, make no mistake about that, but I am in charge. And I have informed all of them that if they want to continue using the batcave, there will be a change in policy. I am to be kept informed of all operations, and I can shut down any investigation I choose to. I'm pretty reasonable, but I won't have a situation like this reoccurring."

"Wow," I said after a moment. "I would have liked to be a fly on the wall there."

Again the grim smile. "I don't appreciate what they did to hurt you. You're the first person to make me feel like I mattered as more than a job and a paycheck for a long time. And I don't mean that to sound pathetic," he said, waving his hand irritably. "It's just that after Dad died, there wasn't any time to cultivate friendships or romances, and even the butler I had before Alfred wasn't at all like Alfred, it was very much just a business relationship, not family. I didn't realize how isolated I'd really become before you turned up. Bruce wasn't and isn't pleased, and I expect that at some point he'll explore his options. He was given the same share from the trust as you and everybody else got, so theoretically he could fund his own operation. If he could find the land. There's nothing big on the market these days. And he wouldn't have access to the bat computer, or the archives, or any other resources, which is a big disadvantage. I retain authority over the computer, and there's a restriction against anybody copying files or other information without my approval. Alfred wouldn't be going with him; he's assured me that I am his employer."

"Double wow," I said.

"My toys, my rules," he said inflexibly. "I can't change what happened, Grandma, but I can make sure nothing like that happens again." He was about to say more, but a call chirped on his communicator. He picked it up, frowning. "Sorry, Grandma," he said, and took the call.

When he ended the call, his eyes were bright. "That was a hospital out in Newark," he said. "They think they've got my dad admitted and they want to know if I can confirm."

"Want some company?" I asked. So I went with him; the man had been brought in after being fished out of the river, a beating victim in a bad way, and DNA taken for comparison to the registry. The hospital was backlogged and it had taken a couple of weeks for everything to be processed. The man had amnesia, couldn't remember anything about his return. While Daniel was being shown into the room, I wandered off and got a list of home service providers, including nurses and physical therapists. I took the information with me.

I found Daniel looking for me; it was his father, and he could remember from before his death, which was good news. They were going to keep him longer; his spine and spinal cord had been damaged in the beating, and they were administering medications to help heal the spinal cord, but the spine needed more time without movement, monitored carefully, before my grandson could be released. I held up a chip with the information on home care that I'd received. "It's a start," I said. "There are probably other sources for help as well."
We went back to the city, our spirits having had a big lift from the news. I was looking forward to meeting Daniel's dad when he was healthier and had a chance to understand what had happened.

The next week, Martha came back for a series of meetings and visited my parents and Damian's grandparents while she was here. She came by the embassy, visited Loki, and went out for the evening with Torunn. The two of us had dinner beforehand, and I was glad to see she was doing so well. She'd accepted that her husband had moved on, mourned the loss of her kids again, and mostly was fine, although she had her moments of pain, anger, hurt, and loss. "But what about you, mom?" she asked.

"Bruce came by the embassy once," I said. "He offered a stupid excuse, and I told him to go away, and that if he had anything more to say, to contact my lawyer. Well, the embassy's lawyer, who is doing my will."

"Are you ok, Mom?" she asked in concern, leaning forward.

"I'm fine, honey, but there's no point in being untidy in business." She grinned. "There is a task I'm leaving to you, though." She looked attentive. "Tony and Ann are going into business together and I agreed to fund them in exchange for a third of the ownership." Martha nodded. "I'm asking Daniel to take care of that because it's straightforward, it just takes time for all the paperwork to be drawn up, as you know, and a signature. The other thing I've pledged support for happened after I talked to Peter. He's ashamed of his daughter, so I wanted to throw him a lifeline. If May straightens up and has a sound idea for a business that isn't entirely selfish, I've pledged to put a small amount of money into it. Nothing grandiose, just a simple business, and I won't commit more than $50 000. It will be handled through Peter so May doesn't know where the money is coming from, that was the primary condition."

Martha leaned back, disgusted. "God, Mom, you getting soft?"

"I'm not doing it for May," I told her. "I'm doing it for another parent. Peter tried to do the right things with May, and it's not his fault she went wild. He has to live with knowing what his daughter did, and it's a heavy burden for an honorable man. You and she have some similarities, you know, you're both pigheaded and willful. If you had made a mistake, I would appreciate somebody giving you a second chance. But it's up to May to change or not." She looked at me with resignation.

"When you put it like that, I guess I'll do it if you can't," she said. "But I don't want to, so you'd better not be going anywhere."

"I'm not planning on anything new, sweetie."

"So what's going on with you and Dad?" she asked.

"I haven't spoken with him," I said quellingly.

"You're not wearing your ring," she noted. I shook my head.

"No, I returned it to him."

"Are you going to get a divorce?"

"I don't know right now. I haven't come to a decision. That incident has caused me to question everything I thought I knew about my marriage. What did I overlook? Did I turn a blind eye where I should have questioned? Trust is a very potent shield, you see. God knows what he might have done and me too dumb to look around. I wonder if I over-idealized our marriage because he was killed at a fairly young age. And I wonder if it was something I did, I haven't been as involved in
the vigilante business since my return." I snorted a laugh. "Marry in haste, repent at leisure."

"That's stupid," my daughter objected. "You still patched him up when he got home, which was most of your involvement the first time. If Dad thought that your attention being elsewhere on serious problems entitled him to do that, he's the one with the rocks in his head, not you. It's a lack of respect and trust, even if he didn't think of it like that. If he was just following Grandpa Bruce, then he was uncharacteristically a sheeple. And Alexander is a moron, plain and simple." She brooded. "My personal take is that it was originally designed to be a short fact-finding mission, report some names and numbers and a few locations. But Alexander probably got in good with somebody and the mission was extended. At that point they should have brought us in, at least to the point where they let us know he was alive and well, maybe a brief meeting. Obviously he came to the house." She shook her head in disgust. "I know that in the afterlife I made my own decisions without having to think about anybody's input, but it wasn't that hard to start thinking about the interests of other people when I got back, so I'm not letting anybody off the hook for that."

She stomped off to go out with Torunn after that, and I hoped she'd have some fun. Fun was in short supply, and the night life not as robust as it once was.

We had lunch before she was going back to London, and I was glad to see that she was a little more relaxed and rejuvenated. She looked less stressed and tired, anyway, a little more upbeat. As we talked over soup and salad, a vibration struck that rattled my teeth.

"What is that?" Martha asked, looking around. Then we were hit by a fear so deep I felt it touch my soul. We clung together, shaking, sobbing, and unable to speak. It was as if a huge wave of terror had swallowed us up, slamming us with a palpable, physical force. It receded slowly, reluctantly, and I noticed everyone else in the restaurant had been affected. Looking out the window, I could see people on the street had felt it too; they were curled into fetal positions or seeking futile shelter in the lee of buildings or vehicles.

"I think that was the kickoff for Ragnarok, Martha," I managed to say though my teeth were still chattering. I put my hands on her cheeks and made her look at me. "I have to go now. I love you very much, and if it's at all possible, I'll return after the battle."

Her eyes filled with tears. "Be safe, Mom," she managed to say. "Love you too." I stood after crawling out from under the table--when had that happened?--and staggered for a moment before popping to the embassy. Loki was whiter than I'd ever seen him with the reaction to the fear discharged by Yggdrasil, but he was calm and efficient as he directed the Asgardians out to the courtyard to wait for the Bifrost. The human staff would continue operations as normal, then there were sealed orders if no one returned in three days. All my gear was up on Asgard. I told him and Torunn that I'd see them at Vigrior and took myself to the citadel.
There wasn’t a lot of chaos up at the citadel, but then, this had been long expected and everybody was prepared. People rushed around, but there was determination, not fear, in the halls as people moved with purpose. I reported to Odin, who told me to get ready and come back. I hustled to my room, pulled on specially modified, comfortable athletic wear--padded leggings, sports bra, an Under Armour t-shirt. Then I quickly put on boots and my armor--shin guards, breast plate over a gambison that came to midthigh, shoulder protection. I grabbed my bag with every weapon I possessed and put the cestuses on top. I took a stocking cap to cushion the helmet, picked up my shield and the bag, and returned to Odin. The bag was heavy, even for me.

Serena arrived just after I did, and together we helped Odin with the armor that Emma, Reginn, and I had created for him. Visually, it was stunning, shining golden armor richly ornamented with knotwork patterns and a great tree of life on his breastplate. He wore green under the armor and looked every inch the king, Gungnir in his hand. We walked behind him as he strode toward the Great Hall, black cape billowing behind him. The capes the Asgardians favored were dramatic and regal, but I always thought of the movie The Incredibles that showed how dangerous they could be to your average superhero. Well, it was unlikely that anyone from Muspelheim would show up with a jet engine. Thor, Magni, and Modi caught up with us and Thor took his place at his father's right hand, carrying his ornamented helmet with the horns and wings. Magni winked at me and took my bag. "Thanks," I wheezed, and his smile dropped off as he realized how heavy it was. He and Modi traded off on the walk down to the elevated throne.

The rest of the valkyries joined us. We didn't look as awesome as we usually did when we were skirmishing at Valhalla--not even the oldest valkyries had chosen to wear our traditional white dresses, in the end. If not in modern athletic gear like mine, they were dressed in tough canvas pants and shirts under their gambisons. All our gambisons were crimson red, though, a nod to the lining of our old swanfeather capes. Everything else was dyed a green so dark it was almost black, showing our allegiance to the royal house of Asgard but a different shade that only we wore.

All the royal guard was mustering, forming up in ranks before Odin and Thor. Frigga arrived; unlike the valkyries, she wore a dress under her armor, but then, she would be fighting on the ground. Other gods joined us, splendid and terrible in their battle dress, armor bright in the light. Baldur was accompanied by most of the dogs he had bred, having earned back the right to care for them. En masse, they were both beautiful and terrifying, all huge, with flowing fur and teeth. Steve and Bucky reported in, followed by Emma and Tony, Loki and Torunn. Thor's boon companions, Fandral, Volstag, and Hogun, arrived and stood to the side. Hogun caught my eye and nodded gravely.

"Our time grows short," Odin said, and was rewarded with instant silence and attention. His voice carried the length of the hall without strain. The acoustics were incredible. "Our enemies approach. You have grown with knowledge of the prophesy that we will meet the sons of Muspell on the plains of Vigrior and engage in such a battle that makes the worlds split." He was silent a moment. His eye flicked to me almost imperceptibly. 'Fight bravely, my warriors! Fight for Asgard and your honor! Fight, my heroes, and there will be feasting in Valhalla this night!' The royal guard shouted in response, banging the butts of their spears on the hall floor. Odin walked down the steps of the throne and through the ranks of the royal guard. Thor joined him, slightly behind him and to the right, followed by the valkyries; the others came behind us.

At the massive outside door, Sif brought Sleipnir to Odin. Thor paced by his father's right stirrup, joined by Loki at the left. Serena followed directly behind, and the valkyries joined her in a v-
shaped wedge. We walked to the edge of the battlefield, stopping as Odin surveyed the expanse of green, peaceful and calm. Then he made his first small deviation, positioning himself in the gap in the trees between Vigrior and the way to the Bifrost rather than in the openness of the plain. He dismounted, Sleipnir immediately lowering his head to graze. We arranged ourselves behind. Odin spoke intently to Loki, who listened closely and nodded. Loki bent his head as Odin placed his hand on his head, then gripped his son's shoulder before stepping back. Loki signalled to someone, and as he moved away toward the World Tree, I saw Torunn join him. As we stood, I hoped that things would get moving soon; both out of anxiety and because it was getting hot under all that metal.

I put on my helmet, put on the spine sheath with the short sword, the scabbard with the dual swords at the front of my left hip, the katana behind my hip. A dagger in each boot, in wrist sheaths, in pockets on my gambison. Thirty shuriken in a waist pouch, plus the first aid kit we'd devised like an uncool fanny pack. I took the rest of my personal weaponry over to the side, under the trees, driving the spears into the earth, adding two full quivers and bow with spare bowstring, and folding the bag and tucking it into the tree. I took the bundle of javelins and rejoined the army.

Ranks formed. Odin swung up on Sleipnir, the valkyries behind him. Behind us were Thor, Magni, Modi, and the rest of the gods and generals. Behind them, the select royal guard, followed by the Asgardian guard. Looming over all from the rear were the great siege engines that Tony and Emma had created and built.

At last, we heard the horn, a deep and hectic note that silenced all conversations.

The space around the Observatory grew dark and turbulent, splitting with a groundshaking crack as the sons of Muspell, led by Sutr, came through the rift to ride down the Bifrost. Which was holding. Humanoid they were, but not human; their dark armor glinted sullenly in the sunlight. Drums pounded as they marched, banners fluttering. It was an awe-inspiring sight. All they needed were some floats in order to have a proper parade, I thought, trying to buck myself up.

Odin motioned and the valkyries stepped up beside him. I was on his right and Selena on his left, and the others ranged out beside us. Sleipnir reared, and the deep baying of the hounds sounded as the invaders came up the rise into view. Our initial plan was to bottleneck them; there was a rather narrow path to Vigrior--about the width of the Champs Elysees. They could come through the trees as well, but some of the guard was infiltrating that, which would slow them down.

The horse bearing Sutr came into view, a mammoth beast about the size of Sleipnir. The fire giants, like the frost giants when they weren't blending in, were visibly different from the Asgardians. Their skin was in deep tones of reds and oranges shading in and out of black like lava, their dark hair moving in the waves of heat generated by their bodies. Sutr's sword glowed brightly. It was hard to look at, but it seemed to be wreathed in flame. They moved slowly toward us, their pace increasing my dread.

Movement to the right caught my eye as a ghastly-looking ship sailed over soil and rock. The dishonored dead of Niflheim, right on schedule. And Hel at the helm, colder and harder than I'd ever seen her in her guise as Hela, half dead, half alive. Gross. There was nothing of the gracious goddess of Helheim who had welcomed us to her halls.

As the invaders drew closer, Odin issued his first command. The catapults and trebuchets rumbled to life and began to throw loads of small, heavy projectiles that splintered on impact into the oncoming forces. The first screams started from the living victims. Sutr snarled, and raised his sword, which dripped flames each time he moved it and started fires. It was as if he had an unending supply of napalm flowing out of the thing. Two flights of arrows went into the sky, theirs
and ours. We raised our shields to block them and stood fast as arrows clattered off the metal. There were a few casualties, but not many, at least on our side. The other side seemed to take more. Then a group of naked men pushed through the valkyries. They were armed only with swords, and it took everything I had to stand my ground and not fall back from them. They milled around in front of our lines, psyching themselves up, I guessed. The instant that Sutr's forces were close enough, those of us valkyries with javelins threw them, taking out a few more fire giants.

Then the berserkers screamed, a sound so terrifying in its atavism that I did step back. But so did the invaders, which provoked something in the berserkers in response. They screamed again and charged the line. I didn't wait to see what happened when they crashed the Muspell lines; I remembered the chaos they caused during the scrimmage. Most of the valkyries turned and moved to our rear, climbing up the siege engines and taking flight off the tops. As I made my first turn, gaining altitude, I saw Steve and Bucky with the unit we'd trained, giving them their targets, which would be the apparent leaders of groups of invaders. I raised my hand to them and flew on. With us was a small contingent of those who would work as medics. We had the strongest of their fliers and the ones who could fight the best; the valkyries were fighters first and medics second.

Serena and I had been the first to launch; despite the gravity of the situation and the risks we were all taking, I loved flight. As we streaked forward over our forces, our passage was met by cheers. And some leftover arrows from the other side, but I increased my altitude above them and saw the others adjust too. I drew my swords as we approached the enemy lines and dove, taking a chunk out of Sutr's arm as I passed before regaining altitude. Our army roared its approval and I heard the order for the charge. The berserkers were causing carnage and achieving better penetration than I'd thought possible in the little time they'd had. My wings beat faster. I rolled here and there to avoid spears and javelins thrown at me, then I was at the back of the enemy forces. I went higher, then stooped down on my first target. The beings looked like cave trolls from the Lord of the Rings movies, except uglier. Maybe they were nice people off the battlefield, but right now they were trying to swat us out of the air. I made diving runs on them, aiming for the necks where I could do the most damage with the smallest risk; I might accidentally embed a sword in a vertebra, but for the most part the neck is a target-rich environment with all those muscles and major blood vessels.

My first miscalculation occurred when I got too close, coming in from a risky angle. I sliced the cave troll's throat open and was rewarded with a fountain of blood that sprayed my right side as I passed, only to be hit accidentally as the cave troll went down. I bounced off another cave troll and splattered on the ground, having to retract my wings instantly and roll to avoid being stomped. It was more frantic on the ground, but I aimed for the hamstrings to help my sisters who were still on the wing. We gradually took down all nine cave trolls, and the other valkyries got me and a couple others who'd been knocked down airborne again by grabbing our hands as they passed by us in pairs and flipping us into the air. It wasn't the easiest way to get back aloft but it worked, and our first objective met, we headed back for our lines, each of us taking a slightly different path back so that we could give the best intelligence. Unexpected movement to my left drew my attention; one of the enemy had thrown a javelin that had impaled Brynhildr. I saw her body go lifeless and plummet. There was no point in trying to help. I flew on.

I saw that the berserkers had made it to the midsection of the invaders, their paths marked by bodies and red. Only a few were left, but their fury and bestiality were keeping them going. I would have shuddered, but you can't do that while you're flying. I took another cut out of Sutr's back as I passed, and landed beside Odin.

We'd done a good job of keeping the enemy from getting onto the plains; our lines had both spread out and there was fighting in the trees, but we hadn't been forced back much. Odin took our reports, and I saw a couple other gaps in our rank. We must have lost more valkyries on the ground. We
reported the success of our objective, summarized the conditions we'd seen as we overflew the enemy, and waited as he gave orders to the runners, who peeled off to find the generals. As Odin turned back to us, we heard a howl that froze my blood. Serena sent Eir into the air; she was the best of us at getting airborne from the ground. While we waited for her report, I took a packet of energy gel from my first aid pack, then another. The actual combat was taking a lot out of me. Eir reported the approach of a great wolf that had what looked like a broken golden leash around its neck.

"Fenrir approaches," Odin said calmly. "My valkyries, I am proud of your skill. Your service to me and Asgard has been exemplary. My thanks to each of you. Fly, attacking the knots of the fire giants and those from Niflheim that stand fast until you can fly no more, then fight on foot."

We saluted one last time as he turned Sleipnir toward Fenrir, and we pivoted back toward the siege engines. Serena assigned our positions, then I detoured for my spears, bow, and arrows, and was one of the last into the air. We flew along the path of Odin, flying past him and splitting off to our assignments. I put three spears into the side of Fenrir before diverting.

Serena had sent me where the fighting was currently fiercest. I gained height in the air and dove, using my spears and my mass to cause chaos among the fire giants, knocking them aside when I couldn't land a killing blow. Periodically I perched in a tree to tape up a wound or suck down some more energy gel. Or give my wings a rest; they'd cramp now and then, which made flight hazardous. We'd never gone full tilt against each other in practice, which was a mistake. I was working more than I ever had in practice, going faster, taking more chances, driven by urgency and adrenaline, which made my muscles work harder when I needed to evade. When I was recovering in a tree, I'd see who I could pick off with an arrow. Unless I got lucky with a shot into an eye or between the ribs, one arrow was never enough, and it didn't take long to exhaust my supply. I flew, using the spare bowstring as a garrotte whenever I ran across somebody with the right sized neck. I whipped the bowstring around their necks, planted my feet on their backs, and pulled. Sometimes strangulation killed them; other times, the bowstring cut into their necks and severed blood vessels.

I wearily labored into the air, thick with smoke on shifting winds, and flew high, seeking a place where I could be the most effective. I saw the body of the great wolf, surrounded by bodies in green and gold armor. Sleipnir was down, not far from his master. Another valkyrie was un移动ing on the ground; I was too far up to see who it was, but it was one of us who had retained white wings. And on a knoll, I could see my uncle fighting with Steve and some of the guard and losing. I set my spear and dove for the enemy combatants. My spear broke and I let it go immediately. I felt white hot pain searing through my wing and hit the ground hard. One of the guard helped me to my knees and took a look at the wound; it was an arrow that had gone between the feathers. I sorted through the medical pack for medical-grade superglue and the last packets of energy gel, managing to tell him not to glue his fingers together, then panted in pain as he yanked the arrow all the way through the wing and applied the glue to set. My helper mopped off the feathers as best he could--wing wounds bleed like crazy. I couldn't put away the wings, they hurt too much, so I folded them as tight to my back as I could, and rejoined the fight.

Just in time to see my uncle go down. I carved a path to him and Steve guarded us while I put a pressure bandage on Bucky's leg; it was too close to the artery for me to be easy about it. I had to remove his breastplate; a spear had punched through it and into his side. I slapped a bandage on that one too. Looking around, I couldn't see any valkyries in the sky, so I covered Steve's retreat as he dragged Bucky to the back of our lines. I was looking around for my next target when I heard familiar sounds and managed a faint smile. "Sparky," I said, smiling at Iron Man as he set down next to me. The guards gaped at him.

"Hey Tiger, I brought you some water." He handed out big bottles of water around, and I chugged
mine. I couldn't remember ever being so thirsty.

"What's the news?"

"I'm sure you saw that Odin's down," he said, and I nodded. "We're holding our own. Those guys from Niflheim are mostly dead again and we're making headway into the fire giants. But Sutr has started a bunch of fires. And it looks like Jormundgand--that big snake--is making its way toward us."

"Which way?" I asked, and Tony pointed. I drew my swords again and took a deep breath. The guard were looking at me. I pointed in the direction Tony had indicated. "Let's go!" I shouted at the guard, and started marching. It wasn't as heroic as I'd have liked, but I couldn't fly and even with adrenaline, I was tired. Tony slightly rose in the air and cleared a path for us. I picked up speed and started jogging.

I was pretty focused, and started violently when something landed beside me. It was Serena, on one of the winged horses. She smiled at me and a second horse touched down too. I took a moment to bind up a wound on her arm that was dripping down her and the horse, and one of the guard boosted me up on the second horse's back, there not being a saddle. I had the guard scout me a couple of spears since mine were gone, and Serena told them not to go after the snake due to the venom it was spraying in copious amounts, but to collect others and go after Sutr.

"Freyr is making his way over there," she said, and they nodded and departed.

"So, snake or fire?" she asked me.

"Let's do a little bit of both," I said, and she smiled fiercely. "Let's see what we can do to that snake, even if it's just a little distraction for Thor. Then let's go after that fire giant."

"You still have your bow?" she asked, and I looked around, seeing it where I'd crash landed. The horse ambled over and carefully picked it up by one of the limbs. I leaned forward to take it and Serena passed me a double handful of arrows, sticky and smeared with blood. I didn't comment, just put them across the top of my thigh where I could hold them against my hip by raising my leg a little.

"Ready?" I asked, and she nodded.

"Alex, it's been a privilege," she said, and I smiled.

"It has been," I agreed, and we clasped arms like badasses before urging the horses on.

I didn't feel like much of a badass when I saw that snake. It looked considerably larger than the skeleton of Titanoboa I'd seen, the largest snake in the Midgard fossil record that was in excess of forty feet long and a ton in weight. It looked like an albino, red eyes and white scales with a big white frill behind its head. Its fangs looked to be longer than my forearm and the holes in the fangs from which it spit venom were clearly visible, even at a distance. Venom dripped continually except when the snake sprayed the environment. It wasn't discriminating; it got the dishonored dead as well as fire giants and Asgardians, and where the venom touched vegetation it withered. And it moved a lot faster than I thought something that big ought to be able to. Thor was in his protective suit, I was glad to see, and a few more valkyries on horses rendezvoused with us. They didn't have distance weapons, though, so Serena had them fly lower, harassing any of the fire giants who might try to use us as target practice. We stayed behind the snake, up high enough where we could distract it, letting the horses take care of evading the ropes of venom that the snake shot at us. When Thor looked like he was going to attack the snake, Serena and I alternated; I fired arrows
then threw the spears, and Serena threw a spear or javelin. The snake seemed to get pissed, and swung its head between us and Thor, trying to decide who was the bigger threat. Its indecision cost it. Thor darted in for the kill, using an enormous two-handed sword before calling the lightning.

The great snake thrashed in its death throes, convulsing, the ground beneath it vibrating with the force of it. Thor jumped free, and I counted his steps with bated breath. When he'd taken ten, I relaxed marginally. We hovered until the snake lay still, just in case, then we turned the horses to the last great battle, Freyr against Sutr.

The leader of the fire giants saw us as we closed in and swung his great sword, which dripped flame into the trees. My horse reared back and I slid off her back, falling about fifteen feet. I landed badly, messing up my wings something fierce, breaking my right arm and doing something to that ankle. I managed to get the right-hand sword back in the scabbard and diverted a guardsman to help me put a sling on my arm. There was nothing that could be done for the wings; the guard wound a bandage around my waist, securing the wings to me so that they didn't flop and get hurt worse. I made myself walk on toward the fight.

Smoke from the fires that Sutr had set made the air thick and hard to breathe down here; it would be too dangerous to fly as heat from the fires rose and was whipped into cyclones of flame. Ash drifted down thick as snow, the trees popping into brighter flame as the fire penetrated and lit the sap. I got as close as I dared, following a couple of guardsmen. They engaged one of the few fire giants left, and I decided to try the distraction gambit again. I sank to the ground on my knee, laying out all the knives I had and the shuriken, then threw them, trying to time my projectiles when Sutr was attacking. They didn't hurt him much, but they were an annoyance and allowed Freyr an advantage. Sutr roared, brushing my dagger out of his thigh, and pointed his sword in my direction. One of the other fire giants whipped around and kicked me. I felt myself flying through the air, my body going limp, and searing pain as I hit the ground again. My head bounced off something hard.
Eira

I opened my eyes once and saw a stone floor before going back to sleep. The next time I woke up, I was still groggy, but I was sensible enough to register that I was lying on my stomach on a comfortable surface covered by a white sheet that had a hole cut through it for my face, sort of like a massage table, and my arms rested on soft pads closer to the floor. I could see my left hand. I closed my eyes again and reflected briefly on the end of my battle, deducing that the world hadn't come to an end while I was unconscious. That was nice, but I wouldn't have wanted to be awake for that anyway.

The longer that I was awake, the more I ached. My muscles, particularly those in my torso, hurt a lot. My right arm was throbbing and my ankle set up a backbeat of pain. But the wings were the worst; the pain felt like splinters of broken glass. I didn't panic until I found that I couldn't move anything more than fingers or toes.

Footsteps rushed over as I struggled. "Calm yourself," a woman's voice commanded, and I obeyed. Even that brief exertion had tired me out. "We have placed you in a stasis field to support the healing of your wings," she said more gently. She moved a little, and I saw new light spill onto the floor. It brought up flecks of mica in the stone. It was pretty. My back started to warm up, and I wondered if I was naked. I hoped not; it was undignified, although I thought my butt looked pretty good for someone who was on her second lifetime.

"Your vital signs look good," the woman said in an abstracted tone. "Your healing progresses well, although there is little we can do to help bone repair itself in your arm and ankle. A medication was brought for you and other casualties that does help repair the breaks, yet it is still a slow process and cannot be rushed any further. It is your wings that have caused the most concern, however; we have never treated them, and your injuries were extensive. And your head, of course, but we have experience with that, at least, as well as another Midgard medication. Rest now," she said, then something cold was placed against my neck, and I felt the punch of a pressure injector so I didn't have a lot of choice in the matter.

I think I was woken up the next time. Everything was a weird shade of orange. I started--at least, I tried to--when the floor moved. Then an eye looked at me, which seriously freaked me out. What kind of drugs was I on? But then something moist nuzzled my hand and I realized that there was a dog under my table. Odd, but nice. I moved my hand so that I could scratch the dog's muzzle a little. Then a man I couldn't see asked me how I felt. I thought it over. "I'm achy all over still, but my arm and ankle don't hurt as much as they did. My wings don't hurt. I have a headache, though."

"Hmm. What do you remember from the last time you were awake?"

"I have broken bones," I said after some thought. "My wings and head were hurt badly. I was in a stasis field."

"That's right. Good. Given the level of brain damage you experienced, it wasn't clear if it would affect your memory, but you were treated promptly, which helps to preserve the mind and the physical tissue."

"What happened?" I said, speaking to the floor. I was still on the massage table.

"When you were injured? We were told that some of the fire giants were kicking you around like a toy. When Freyr fell, a group of the guard managed to cut down Sutr, diverting the attention of the others from you. A few other guards rolled you onto a cloak and brought you back to the citadel. It
wasn't certain whether we'd be able to save your wings, but the treatment was successful. I'm going to release the stasis field shortly. I want you to try and keep the wings up, rather than sagging onto the table. Are you ready?"

"Sure," I said, and my wings got heavier as the stasis faded away. It was some trouble to keep them up and stable, but not bad, and they had me move them, increasing the motion until they were tight to my back.

"Excellent," the man said in a satisfied voice. "Now we will assist you to sit up." I raised myself on a tripod of knees and left hand, then sat back and swung my legs to the right, sitting up slowly and finally getting a look at something other than the floor or a dog. I was glad to see that I had anightgown on, although it was pretty swanky for hospital wear--it was knee-length, with a halter front and a tie that fastened over the nape of my neck. It was backless, the better to allow my wings to hang out. It was something nice enough that could be worn as a day dress, given underwear, and I was glad not to be flashing strangers, medical professionals though they might be. The dog came out from under the table; it was much smaller than Sigurd and Torburn. Nobody paid it any attention.

"That's great, it starts with an earthquake, birds and snakes and--"

"What?" the healer interrupted me, sounding startled.

"It's just an old song," I explained. "Just popped into my head for some reason." He looked at me doubtfully, like he thought I still might have brain damage.

My arm and ankle had casts on them, although they were much lighter than I expected, and I was extensively bruised. "Any dizziness or nausea?" the man asked. He was tall, thin, and tired looking. They must have been really busy after the battle.

"No," I said, thinking. "The light's pretty bright, though." The other man, who hadn't spoken yet, nodded.

"Your brain has recovered remarkably well, but it is still healing, and you might be sensitive to light and loud noises for a while longer." They gave me a quick examination, after which I learned that the bruising to my internal organs was mostly healed, that my dislocated shoulder had healed successfully, that the casts could probably come off in a few more days, that the rest of the bruising was ugly but superficial, and that I was considered out of the woods but that they were going to keep me at least until the casts came off.

"Wait, how long ago was I brought here?" I asked. The bone shouldn't have healed that fast, even with the medication.

"Just over three weeks, the first man said. "You were in a coma for most of it. Now, we will have someone take you to a bathing room, and after that to a room where the light will be kept at comfortable levels. After a rest and a meal, we will ask you to explore your memories so that we can determine if there is any memory loss."

Before I could say anything, he signaled, and a young woman came in with a low-backed chair on wheels. The man picked me up and placed me on the chair, carefully arranging the wings over the back, and the woman steered me out and into a large bathroom. Great, I really needed to pee. After that, she helped me to a bench, taking off the nightgown, and turned on a gentle shower of fine water droplets; more like a heavy mist than a shower. The odd orange color started to fade from my vision. She worked shampoo gently into my hair and I soaped what I could reach with my left hand. She took care of the rest, including a very careful washing of my wings. I was alarmed at the blood and mud and guck that washed away.
"We washed as much of you as we could when were treating you, but we were focused on your injuries, and a sponge bath is never as good," she said, and I agreed. A lot of what I'd taken for bruises washed off. "And there were so many casualties." The flow of water was gently increased so I could rinse off, after which I was dried off and put into a new nightgown. "Now I'm going to show you a mirror," she said. I looked at it with trepidation, but my face wasn't as bad as I'd expected and whatever else they'd done, they hadn't shaved my head. A victory for my vanity. But my wings were absolutely trashed, the pretty feathers mostly broken off. I was a lot thinner as well, not that I'd been heavy before. I looked gaunt.

"Damn," I said morosely. "I just finished molting." The woman helped me back into the chair and smiled.

"It's been very interesting to watch the treatment on your wings. The wings of the other valkyries we treated disappeared after a few days. We kept expecting yours to vanish too."

"What?" I said, startled.

"They think that because their bonds were with Odin, that they disappeared once that bond was broken. It does not explain why yours are still here," she said, turning me into a small room without a window. I realized then how much I must have stunk, because it smelled a lot better in there.

"Odin made a mistake and I ended up bonded to Yggdrasil," I said vaguely as I looked around. The dog came in and sat by the door.

"Really?" the woman said. "That's interesting."

"Indeed," another woman said, coming through the door. I recognized the voice as the first healer I'd talked to. "It might also explain why you live, when by all measures you should have died of your injuries." She studied me; I saw an older woman, thick blonde hair arranged on her head, careworn and tired. "I would like you to try to put your wings away," she said after a moment. "Stop immediately if you feel pain or discomfort."

I gingerly put them away, nothing hurt, exactly, but I could tell that they hadn't moved for awhile. She had me take them out, then repeat the process a couple more times so that I and they could be reassured that things were back to normal again. "It's quite interesting that they simply vanish," the older woman said, examining my back.

"It makes sleeping and sitting a lot easier," I said, and yawned. The women helped me to a chair and a light meal was served. After that, I was helped into bed, and told to rest a little. I went to sleep almost immediately. It had been a lot of effort, and I had a full stomach. I was woken again about an hour later, pleased not to be face down. I'm not really much of a stomach sleeper. I was given some water, propped up on some pillows, asked if that hurt, and they brought in my uncle. He looked awful, but then he probably hadn't been in a coma for three weeks either. "Sweetie," he said in enormous relief, restraining himself to smoothing my hair back and kissing my forehead. He dropped into the comfortable chair and scrubbed his face with both hands.

"Uncle Bucky," I said with relief. "You're ok?"

"I'm fine, sweetie. You patched me up well enough so that Stevie could get me to the healers, and it didn't take them long to fix me. You, on the other hand..." he shuddered. "I saw you when you were brought in. For some reason, you had a swan with you. It honked and flapped its wings until the healers came over. They thought you were too far gone to be saved, but the swan bit one of
"They're not worth it," he said. "It wouldn't let up until they started treatment. Modi was one of the guards who brought you in and said that the swan belonged to the Norn and they had to work on you."

"Those swans are vicious little bastards," I said, yawning and sitting up a little more. "I hate having to be grateful to one." Bucky rearranged the pillows behind me. The dog also yawned, and Bucky looked over at it and smiled. "Oh, you can see it too?" I asked, relieved. "I thought I was hallucinating."

"Were you having problems?" he asked, frowning.

"Oh, everything was orange for a little while, but it went away. Nobody was acknowledging the dog. As a hallucination, it's really nice."

Bucky smiled a little. "No, that's one of Baldur's. She found you on the battlefield and brought Magni and Modi over. I guess she's adopted you. Baldur said her name was Eira, which means 'merciful.'" I patted the bed, and the puppy walked over, struggling to get on the bed until Bucky gave her a little boost. She was a beauty, with soulful brown eyes and a red coat that had a pale patch on the center chest and darkened to black on the ear and tail tips, around the muzzle, and provided socks on her big paws.

"Sorry," I said to her. "I thought I was seeing things. But what were you doing on a battlefield? You're too small yet for that sort of thing." I got the impression of contentment, and she curled up at the end of the bed where I could put my feet against her back. My toes were cold.

"Sometimes you see things that aren't there on that concussion medication," Bucky said. "Emma saw plaid once, had some other sensory side effects, but they aren't permanent."

"That's good," I said. "How's Uncle Steve? I didn't see Emma out there, but Tony was in one of his Iron Man suits. Did he make it? What about the valkyries? Thor, Torunn, Loki--"

"Stevie is fine. He had some cuts and bruises, standard for a battle. Emma came out without a scratch. Stark's fine, his suit protected him and he helped bring down a lot of those fire giants. Thor's fine, his protective gear worked against that snake venom. Loki and Torunn were sent into the roots of Yggdrasil to kill Nidhoggr." I remembered that; Nidhogg had been the dragon that nested in the roots of the World Tree, gnawing on the roots. The prophesy had said that if it bit through all the roots during Ragnarok that the tree would be killed, which would help bring about the doom of the worlds. "They were successful and good as new after a little healing after their return. The valkyries took a hell of a hit, sweetie," he said gently. "You, Serena, Dagny, Carol, Eir, Kata, Asa, Staeina, Visna, Jora, and Runa are all that's left."

I tried to get my mind around that. "I knew we took losses, but not that many," I said numbly. Eira lifted her head and whined, belly crawling up the bed to put her head on my stomach. I stroked her head absently. Bucky let me process this information; there was nothing more he could say about it.

"You missed the funerals," he said after a bit. "Odin was the first one, then they sent out the valkyries, then the rest of the dead. They built big ships because of the sheer numbers, aside from the small boat for Odin. They would have built individual boats for the valkyries, but Serena said no, that they should go out together. When they were a good distance from the shore, the archers shot fire arrows, and the rites were complete."

"I'm just as glad to have missed it," I said, rubbing my temple.
"I'll let you sleep now, sweetie," he said, patting my hand. "But one more thing you should know. Damian's here. Thor said he should be allowed to see you, since it is the right of a husband." I groaned.

"Thanks for the warning, Uncle Bucky," I said wearily. I didn't want to deal with Damian yet. "Wait, so the Bifrost was saved?" Bucky smiled. "Awesome job, Emma and Tony," I said, cheering a little.

"Yep, they did what everybody else thought was undoable," Bucky said with satisfaction. "Now, you rest awhile. I'll be back later." I closed my eyes obediently.

I was woken up for lunch and told to rest as much as I could to help my recovery. I woke midafternoon and was taken to the bathroom and had a shower. When I was settling back into bed, Serena poked her head through the door and smiled. I told her to come in.

"You're looking a lot better," she said, relieved. Eira thumped her tail on the bed. Serena grinned. "So you've met your new friend," she said, and I nodded.

"She's a pretty girl," I said, scratching behind an ear. "Come to think of it, I think I saw her on the battlefield a few times." I got the impression that she'd been following me, running after as I flew away on the horse to help with Sutr.

Serena held up a couple of bags. "I brought some of your stuff from your bedroom," she said. "Plus an imping kit. Your wings are a mess, woman." I smiled, and she had me unpack the wings. We both quailed a little when we saw the extent of the damage to the feathers. There were maybe four intact feathers on both wings combined, and they were small ones. Faint scars on the wings themselves wound around the stumps of the feathers. "The healers worked hard to keep the damage from affecting the way the feathers grow, so next molting, everything should grow in nicely, no deformation," she said as I turned to face her, sitting up crosslegged. Eira moved so that she could watch. "But the wing joints were dislocated, the bones cracked, cartilage separated, tendons torn. And that was with the armor that Emma made for the bones. They weren't sure it could all be fixed at the beginning, but then they calmed down." I started cutting bamboo splints as Serena laid out the feathers. They were white, but since we'd be imping almost all of mine, it wouldn't matter. It was going to be a lot of work, though. "Doesn't matter," Serena shrugged. "Thor has given us all really light duty until we decide what we want to do next. I volunteered for wing duty," she said, winking at me. I laughed. "I miss mine, but I'm glad somebody still has theirs. It makes me feel like we're still valkyries. And you're not going anywhere for awhile." I nodded.

"We didn't have our own wings for most of the time, we borrowed them from the cloaks," I said, "but we all took to them pretty fast once we got them." Serena nodded and started to work at the bottom of the wing. I handed her the knife, feathers, splints, epoxy, and pieces of cling film to protect the wing and the bottom feathers as she went along. We got the inside top of the wings complete before I started to droop. I wasn't doing much but it was still too much of an exertion to go on for long, and after the epoxy had cured enough, I packed the wings away and settled down for a nap. Serena left the imping kit and said she'd be back the next day.

"Everybody'll be glad to hear you're doing so well," she said as she got up. She hesitated by the door. "You did know that your husband's here, right?"

"Yeah, Bucky told me," I said, frowning.

"Good. I didn't want you to be surprised."

When I woke up again, a dim nightlight near the door was shining. Eira had nudged me; someone
was coming through with a tray, turning the light up by half. I struggled to sit up and the tray was placed on my lap. I looked up and saw that the orderly was instead my husband. I wanted to throw the tray at him, like I was in an overly-dramatic 80's music video, but I was hungry. Eira growled at him and plopped down between us. "What are you doing here?" I asked after a few bites.

"I needed to see you," Damian said quietly. I nodded and swallowed.

"Hand them over," I said, gesturing. He looked blank. "The divorce papers."

"I don't have-- that's not why--" he said, startled. "I don't want a divorce." I grunted.

"Maybe I do," I said, spearing a piece of meat savagely. He looked down at his hands.

"I would deserve it," he said. "But I'm begging you not to." I continued grimly shoveling my food in my mouth.

"What makes you think you get a say?" His shoulders slumped.

"I promise that I will sign anything you want, without complaint or protest, I won't contest anything, as long as you permit me to explain. Just once."

"Why do you think that you deserve that courtesy, Damian?" I asked. "You knew..." I cleared my throat. "You knew that I was giving up hope that my son was still alive. I felt sure that he loved me enough to... And all the time, you knew he was alive and well. Stupid as the day is long during summer solstice, but physically well." I shook my head and finished my meal, shoving the tray off my lap. Eira's attention was diverted and she licked the plate. "You know, it's a sad state of affairs when my rapist/stalker tells me what's going on with my son rather than my husband."

Damian flinched at the venom in my words as well as the words themselves. "What?"

"You heard me. The Joker is the one who let me know that Alexander had been made and was in danger. I'm sure he didn't do it out of the goodness of his heart, but he did it anyway. Trying to get into my good graces." My voice cut like a whip's lash. I rubbed my temples.

"No," he breathed.

"Yes." My voice had no give in it.

One of the healers came into the room and looked at us. "You were permitted entrance as long as your presence did not cause our patient distress. You need to leave now," he said to Damian, who got up without complaint. He picked up the tray and left after a final look at me that mixed guilt and pain. Big deal. I rearranged the pillows and curled up on my left side. Eira snuggled in behind my knees, and with that comfort, I slept.

The next morning, I got a doctor visit, breakfast, and a shower, in that order. I was feeling better, but still so weak. I was glad to see Bucky and Steve, who brought me some grooming implements for Eira. "Emma said you'd need these," Steve said, handing over a metal comb and a couple of brushes, as well as a box of cupcakes. Yum. Chocolate buttercream frosting and vanilla bean-flecked cake. Eira plopped down beside me, and we talked about the battle as I groomed the pup. The death toll on Asgard was pretty high, but obviously not as bad as originally predicted.

"The fear that Yggdrasil unleashed was potent and it unhinged a lot of people throughout the Nine Realms," Bucky said, shaking his head. He sat on the end of the bed while Steve took the chair. Don't worry about it being crowded with the patient, her dog, and her uncle; it was generously sized for an Asgardian male, so I probably could have hosted a slumber party if I'd wanted. "There
was a lot of chaos and there were groups of individuals who either took advantage of the disorganization or got caught up in it. Attempted coups in several countries, by quick-thinking people who already had plans in motion. Rioting, looting. General destruction. There is a substantial death toll everywhere, including Earth."

"It was particularly bad on that dark elf planet where so many of the pre-industrialized societies were relocated," Steve said, sighing. "A little silver lining is that there will be more room for those who wish to give up their tech and live a simpler life. There's a number of groups who are interested in it, but they'd have to give up their guns, which is the sticking point for several, who point out that there are dangerous animals there. The Asgardians refuse to allow any kind of firearms on the planet, either brought to it or manufactured there."

"Why is that?" I asked. I frowned. "It seems odd, now that I think about it, that they don't use handguns or rifles, just big defensive fortifications to take out ships."

Steve shrugged. "It's easy and it kills at a distance, which they think of as dishonorable, unmanly. If you're going to kill somebody, you should have the guts to do it face to face, not in a cowardly manner."

"Huh," Bucky and I said almost in unison. Steve smiled at us.

"Sweetie, I want you to consider talking to somebody when you're released from medical care," Bucky said.

"Huh?" I said again.

"A psychologist, psychiatrist, therapist, counselor, whatever," he elaborated. "That battle... I know you trained for it and were as prepared as any new soldier could be, but I have to tell you that it was exceptionally brutal, and I've seen a lot." Steve nodded. "I saw you a few times," Bucky continued. "You were flying so fast, dive-bombing the enemy, making sharp turns... I don't know how your wings weren't ripped right off you. It's a real miracle that you made it through alive. I saw you garrotting this fire giant. You half took off his head. Everywhere you looked there was blood and guts and bodies and savagery. You saw your friends shot down. It might not be popping up now, but it will, sweetie."

"Are you seeing somebody, Uncle Bucky?" I asked. His face was haggard and sometimes he had that thousand yard stare he had in the few pictures of him as the Winter Soldier. He nodded.

"It's brought up a lot of things I'd rather forget," he said quietly, and Steve leaned forward to squeeze his foot. Eira whined softly and shuffled over to him.

"Maybe you could get me the business card, then," I said, and he nodded.

"So what are you guys going to do now that Ragnarok's come and gone and we have a future to look forward to?" I asked them.

Bucky sighed, and the tension left him as he exhaled. "No idea. I just know I'm done with warfare of any kind."

Steve smiled at his friend. "Neither of us is going back to the Avengers. It's time for me to move on with my life. I'm going to go to art school. Emma thinks that I should try fashion design. It's tempting. Wearable art."

"Wow," I said wistfully. "Your shows would be the hot ticket during fashion week. Everybody would want something from your collections. Apparently the catalog that was produced from the
show that you did with the Avengers costumes has been periodically reprinted. They're studied as both case studies for superhero costumes and theatrical costuming."

"I'd be happy to design things for you, Alex," he said immediately.

"I'd love a Steve Rogers original," I said, feeling hopeful. He smiled.

"What about you, sweetie?" Bucky nudged me. "You had to have had some thoughts before the battle."

"Just that I need a fresh start too," I said. "Thought I'd just go back to MIT, study something different, but now I don't know. Maybe it's time to give another institution a go." Both men smiled indulgently at me. "Tony and Ann offered me a job with their new company, but this time I think I'd like to go out on my own, where nobody knows me."

"That may be harder than you think," Steve told me. "There were reporters up here not long after the battle, trying to explain things to their readers and viewers. The heroism of the valkyries was described pretty often. And here in the citadel, the bards have also come up with a couple of songs and I understand are working on some sagas about the whole thing. There's a whole verse in one of those songs about you, specifically. I have to admit, the tune is pretty catchy." I cursed under my breath.

"I don't want to be famous," I said crossly. Bucky lifted a shoulder.

"Sorry, kid," Steve said wryly.

"You shouldn't be so extraordinary then," my uncle said calmly. "But the fuss will die down."

A man popped his head in the door. "General--"

"Yes?" Both Bucky and Steve spoke, and the man colored.

"Rogers, General Rogers. Thor has requested your presence." Steve sighed and levered himself up.

"Gotta tie up a few loose ends before that, then," he said. "Glad you're feeling better, Alex. I'll stop by tomorrow."

Bucky waited until the footsteps in the hall had faded before speaking again. "When I go back, it won't with Steve and Emma," he said quietly. I stared at him. "What we had between the three of us worked the best in Folkvangr. It looks weird back in the city, and the only reason nobody made a fuss of it in public was that there was a lot of other stuff going on. I'd rather melt into the crowd." He smiled at me. "Must be a Barnes thing. Nothing's happened between Steve and Emma and me, we're still friends. I just want... privacy. And a clean start, too. Leave the bad behind. Thanks to Daniel, I have the means to do that. Don't worry about me."

"I will, though," I said, and yawned. "Sorry."

"You need sleep, sweetie. I'll come back tomorrow. Take it easy, and send somebody if you need anything," he said affectionately, and scooted off the bed. Eira stretched, then ambled up for an ear scratch before curling up for a nap.
Serena and Carol came in with lunch, and I ate quickly while they cooed over Eira and brushed her some more. She was going to be a big shedder. Then I sat up and each of them took a wing; Carol started in with the small feathers on the wing Serena had started on the day before while Serena took over imping larger feathers on the other. "So what's going on now?" I asked as I cut more splints.

"Pretty much what you'd expect after the war is over," Carol said. "Soldiers are being let go, including the valkyries." I opened my mouth, and she hurried on. "No, it's not like Thor is tossig us out. He's offered to form a guard of those who are left, but nobody's really that keen on it. Most of the oldest valkyries either want to integrate here or resettle on that new planet, they won't have to learn how to deal with technology that way. The rest of us have just had enough of fighting."

Serena nodded as she deftly dry-fit a feather. "Respect to your grandson, Alex, but I'm not going to pick up an identity with the Avengers, either. I'm done with the killing and violence."

"I hear you," I said. "I want to go back to school, do something completely different."

"Thor has offered all of us assistance," Serena said. "Supplies for those who go to the new planet, a place here, or a sum for those of us who want to go back to Earth--a scholarship or training if necessary, or just to be able to rent an apartment and get started. Plus letters of reference from both him and Loki. So it's just a matter of figuring out what we want to do. I'm also leaning toward going back to school, I just don't know what yet. Loki says he can get me set up with some career aptitude tests back in the city."

"Yeah, I took those. I haven't changed a lot," I said. "Still high in the sciences." They laughed.

"But you have changed a lot," Carol said, cursing as she cut her thumb.

"There's a supply of bandages on that table," I told her, and she got up. "I think they forgot they were there; I don't need them. What do you mean, Carol?"

"You're really a strong leader now, and if you can wrangle a bunch of culturally diverse valkyries and get a god to bend to your will, you've got some serious mojo. You don't put up with crap from anybody, and you're not afraid to square off against anybody. When you first showed up, you weren't exactly shy and retiring, but you were softer, less confrontational. So you've been toughened by your experiences, and that's not a bad thing," she hurried to say. "It's just different. It does make you more unyielding, though. And god help anybody who doesn't measure up to your expectations."

"Now that we're not facing the end of the world, you might want to relax," Serena said. "Sometimes you get so uptight I swear you're making diamonds. Go to a spa, get a facial. Have some fun with your little puppy there."

"Relax? What's that?" I cracked, and Carol grinned.

"Exactly. Now that you're not responsible for us anymore and we beat the end of the world, take a vacation. I have never seen anybody more in need of a beach and a mai tai."

"I sunburn. I'll need an umbrella."

"So get better and plant yourself under an umbrella," Carol said. "Just don't make any big decisions
right off the bat. As a personal favor."

"What do you mean?" I asked, handing her some fresh epoxy.

"You and Damian. It's not my marriage and I don't actually have an opinion about whether it would
be better for you to split or not. What they did to you was pretty heinous. But it isn't a good idea to
make any big decisions when you're recovering from a near-death experience followed by ages of
stress. Unclench first."

"I know I don't get a vote, so don't bite my head off, but you two were really good together, and
you loved him so much," Serena said. "So take time, it's not like there's a rush, is there? Relax, heal
up, THEN decide if there's any reason to stay together." I thought about that for a bit.

"That sounds reasonable," I said grudgingly. "So what do you think you'll be doing, Carol?"

"I did data entry before," she said. "So definitely something more active. I'd like my butt not to
expand to fit my chair when I hit middle age. I'm thinking about construction, learning a trade. One
thing about Valhalla was that I really learned to like working with my hands."

"Daniel is rounding up mastercraftsmen for a new business," I said thoughtfully. "Part of that is
equipping them to navigate the modern era, including letting go of sexism. They're going to need
apprentices, journeymen. If that's something you'd be interested in, I'll get you in touch with him."

"You think he'd have room for me?"

"I can pretty much guarantee it."

"Danny loves his grumpy," Serena teased, and I laughed.

"Fortunately for me," I said. "He's very indulgent."

By the time I needed another nap, the front of one wing was complete and the other about half
done. Serena and Carol got faster with practice. I managed to share my cupcakes with them so I
didn't look too greedy, then they left and I took a nap. I woke up when Eira was struggling to get
back on the bed.

Dinner also brought Damian. Eira looked at him and I got the image of her lifting her leg to pee on
him. "No, go outside," I told her, sighing. She hopped down and out the door without a backward
glance.

"If you'll just listen to what I have to say, I'll go back to the city tonight and leave you alone until
you're ready to talk. You come to me when you're ready," he said quietly. I thought about it briefly,
then consented. Let him defend himself, then he'd leave me in peace, what's not to like?

"Xander contacted me outside the Wayne building one night," he said. "He said that he'd seen
somebody he thought was Two-Face, although the damage to the side of his face was much less
severe, talking to somebody who looked an awful lot like Penguin. He was going to investigate,
then he said he'd register and come back to the family. He wasn't going to do it before because he'd
heard that... pro-villain sympathizers were among those working in the registries and thought he'd
have better cover if no one had confirmation of his return. So he started snooping around and
started to get really good intelligence about the formation of new gangs, the establishment of a new
pecking order of decades of supervillains. He kept his distance from Talia and R'as; even with
bleached hair he was worried that they might recognize him."

I snorted. "The Joker had no problem. Bleached hair is like a ball cap. It's not as effective a disguise
"The longer he was in, the more he was learning and the more dangerous it got. Initially, I thought it would be a short assignment and he'd come right back home. The longer he was involved, the harder it got to tell you. I was hoping to avoid your reaction," he admitted. "So I let myself be convinced that you'd never have to know about what Xander had done. I tried to get him to stop, but he was on a hot streak and didn't want to stop. He's always been singleminded." I had to nod begrudgingly. Xander had such a one-track mind that he could have served as the dictionary definition of it. "And the time has long passed since I could compel him to do anything. Bruce was on his side, the information was giving us a big leg up in terms of our response to criminal activity. He didn't see how you'd perceive us keeping silent about Xander's activities. I'm not here to apologize for either of them. They have to do that themselves. I'm just here to admit that I was wrong, to apologize, as sincerely as I am capable of doing, for hurting you." He looked down at his hands, and for the first time I noticed that, along with his wedding band, he wore mine on his pinkie.

"I've done a lot of shitty things in my life," he said. "There are many things that I would do differently or not at all. But there's nothing I regret more than this. I failed to realize how much you'd changed in Valhalla. I thought that your afterlife hadn't affected you much. Overall, mine was pretty easy. Guiding souls to the Gates for judgment. We had time off where we could goof off around the city. When I heard you say that you'd retrieved souls for Odin, I just assumed that you'd had a similar experience. Even the scrimmages didn't sound too serious. I didn't want to ask for details; I figured if you wanted to tell me you would. And you were pretty focused on preparing for Ragnarok. I kind of depended on that distraction too. If I had to articulate how you've changed, I'd say that the experience has stripped away things that aren't essential. Your focus is so acute it's more than Xander's, but you have an ability to put it aside when you have to, like you did with the family. You always asked about my day, showed interest in what others were doing, what their plans were. And I'm not implying that this was manufactured or artificial in any way, but I realize that I didn't reciprocate fully. So I've failed you one more than one front. We just fit back together like we did before death, and I took that for granted." He stood up. "So I've said what I needed to say. I'll answer any questions, whatever you want, at any time, at your convenience." He held out an envelope. "Daniel asked me to give you this. I haven't looked at it, I don't know what's in it." I took the envelope; it was one of those internal mail things. I unwound the red string and pulled out a couple of pages; one of them was a handwritten note.

"Dear Grandma," it read. "I hope you're feeling better. Loki said you've been in a coma. The whole family is concerned of course, but Loki keeps us posted. I'm looking forward to seeing you again and hope that you'll come by when you're up and around.

"Two things of interest. The first thing is going to exasperate you, I think. Apparently a reporter got into the Asgardian embassy in the chaos when people were being beamed up for Ragnarok. She had a camera, and documented the whole thing. The runup to the battle, the battle itself. She stayed up in the trees for the most part, and slipped back to Earth with the first beam down. The reason I know this is because I know the producer; he was telling me about it in an effort to secure financing to release the film. I got to see a rough cut. Objectively, it's both amazing and terrifying, and if released will probably win a lot of prizes. The valkyries are both spectacular and terrifying. She got good shots of you guys flying in formation as well as fighting. I agreed to provide financing on the condition that all attempts to identify the warriors in the movie cease immediately. If I didn't provide the funding, someone else would; it's that good and interest in the battle is intense. Names other than a few Agardians like Thor can't be used due to current privacy laws, although individuals can give consent if they want, so your identity will be somewhat protected. It won't stop people who see it from trying to trace the warriors, but it's about all I can do. So tell Thor that this is coming, and of course I'm available to talk with him or his representative about it."
"The second will be better news for you, I hope. I've had a couple of women contact Wayne Enterprises hoping to get in contact with you. Aslyn Akiyama, Margaret Harris, and Karen Grant. I've enclosed their contact information and would like to assist them if you'd like. As always--

"Love, Daniel."

I looked around frantically, but couldn't find a pen. Damian didn't have one on him, so in the end, I used a feather from the imping kit, cut it down to make a crude quill, and used coffee as a pale ink, writing in large letters and as clearly as I could. "THANK YOU!!!!!!!!!!!!!! I'll contact on return--please help them! Love, Grandma." I asked Damian if he'd take the envelope back to Daniel, and he said it would be no problem. I slipped my response into the envelope and handed it over. He took it, said goodbye, and left.

I turned my attention to the other paper from the envelope; it turned out to be messages from my three friends, hoping that I was well and asking me to contact them. I helped Eira back onto the bed (she came back after Damian left) and told her about the news. She wiggled and licked my face and was happy or irritated at the right places. I hugged her, kissing her fluffy head, and looked around for a robe. There wasn't one, so we padded out into the corridor without. Good that the hospital gowns they gave me didn't open up the back.

Eira and I went to the Great Hall, where, sure enough, Thor was listening to his subjects from the imposing golden throne. I looked around and saw Loki talking to Magni off to the side, so I sidled around and touched Loki's arm. He looked around and down, and both men smiled when they saw me. Loki hugged me first, then Magni. "You look well," Magni said. "Have the healers released you, then?"

"No," I said thoughtfully, "but they also haven't told me I can't get up and move around. But I have some information that I wanted to pass on immediately. Daniel wrote me, said that a reporter snuck to Asgard with the people who were Bifrosted up for the big battle. She had a camera, took footage of the battle, and is planning on releasing it as a film."

Loki rolled his eyes strenuously. "You humans," he said, and I shrugged. "We will inform Thor."

"Great," I said. "Daniel said he'll make himself available to discuss it with you or anybody else Thor designates." Suddenly I simultaneously yawned and shivered. Loki immediately put his green cloak over my shoulders and looked down at my bare feet. Both he and Magni sighed.

"Hello, Eira," Magni said, and she yipped a hello at them both. Loki walked to the throne, and Magni escorted me out of the Great Hall and went down another hall. Eira and I walked back to our room and got back into bed. The adventure had tired me out. My stamina sucked.

The next morning, the healers gave me clearance to start moving around. My response to light was back to normal, my headaches were gone, and my casts were ready to come off. It was a relief to have them taken off, even if they were lightweight. They wanted me under observation for a couple more days, which suited me fine; it would give Carol and Serena time to finish the wings. Lunch brought another letter from Daniel; It was waiting for me when I got back from my first trip to the dining hall. He reported that Loki had been in touch about the film, so that was being handled, and that he'd contacted my friends and offered them a place to stay if they needed one.

Lunch had been a sobering experience. I kept looking for faces that weren't there anymore; there were so few of us left. Asa, Staenia, Visna, Jora, and Runa were going to resettle on the dark elf planet and would be leaving the next day with their stake, in fact. Eir and Kata were going to stay on Asgard. Only Carol, Dagny, and Serena and I were going to go back to Midgard. Those last three came back to my room with me, Dagny apologizing for not seeing me sooner. She'd been
helping to make records of those who were killed during Ragnarok, at least on the Asgardian side. The fire giants had turned to ash and coals when they died, which was pretty nice from the disposal side but made estimates of numbers difficult. The only one we had a name for was Sutr. The hilt of his sword had been found and given to Thor as a trophy of the victory. Those who had come from Niflheim were easier to identify; there were a lot of survivors with long memories. There hadn't been any ceremony with the disposal of their remains; they'd been dumped onto pyres and cremated. A stone cenotaph was being created for placement on Vigrior where Odin had waited for the invaders. "It's going to be topped with an idealized statue of a valkyrie," Dagny reported. We all rolled our eyes. "It's a human idea that the Asgardians have embraced," she said. "They like that way of honoring the dead." She and Serena started work on the back sides of my wings while Carol finished the fronts.

"Look, I'm only here for a couple more days before the healers turn me loose. Then I'm going back to the city. Does anybody want to come with? I'm planning on staying at a hotel for a week, then going on vacation. I'd be happy to get you guys rooms as well."

"Haven't talked to Damian yet?" Dagny asked, surprised.

"Oh, I have, but I'm not ready to deal with it yet," I said as I cut more splints. I was getting tired of bamboo slivers. "I'm going to go on vacation and relax, then I'm going to find a therapist and deal with everything. Then I'll decide what I want to do, then talk to Damian."

"Sounds like a plan," Serena said briskly. "I'll take you up on your offer, then. That should give me time to figure out what to do about housing and such. Also, Loki said that PhD candidates at Columbia were volunteering to help trauma victims. I figure we qualify."

The next couple of days were an odd blend of activity and a few naps, then Thor arranged for our payouts, and we got packed. And I finally tried to relocate myself. I wasn't sure if I could still shift myself around the Nine Realms, but it turned out that I could. Must be another perk of bonding with a tree. I hoped I didn't get the yen for photosynthesis. It was just a matter of waiting for my friends and Eira at the embassy, then we went to Le Meridien. I'd chosen it because it was nice, they had four adjacent rooms, accepted dogs, and had nice amenities that included swimming pools and a spa. I figured we all could use a little pampering.

We settled into the hotel, then had dinner together. I was still tired, so I went to bed early while the others kicked back in the bar. I had a long bath, then snuggled down with Eira for the night. The next morning we met for breakfast, then I went to see Daniel, taking Eira and Carol, and Dagny and Serena went to Columbia. Daniel was in a meeting, so we waited, chatting a little, while Eira charmed Daniel's assistant.

When the doors opened, I saw it had been a family meeting. Martha reached me first, kind of a cross between a hug and a tackle. I could see that she'd noticed all the weight I'd lost, but she didn't say anything. Thomas stepped up, and after a hug, joined Martha, who was greeting Carol and meeting Eira. Everybody fell under the spell of the fluffy puppy. Bruce stepped forward, but I looked at him coolly and he halted, looking awkward. Damian didn't approach, just watched what was going on. Alexander tried to hug me, but I stiff-armed him. "Mom," he said. "I can explain."

"I'm still furious with you, Alexander, and I don't want to talk to you now. It isn't the place for it anyway."

"When can we talk then?"

"Later. It won't be for awhile."
"Mom--"

"Alexander." My voice cracked like a whip. "Don't push me. You're in no position to make any demands." Martha grabbed his arm and pulled him away.

"What were you expecting?" she hissed as she hauled him out the door. "You have no idea what you put her through, you jerk--" her voice cut out as the door closed. Thomas kissed my cheek and said that Martha Sr would like to see me too. Then he dragged his son and grandson out. Carol watched it all without comment.

"Daniel," I said, holding out my arms, and he came in for the hug. "How's your dad doing?"

"He's at home now, we found a nurse," he said, hugging me back. "It's so good to see you, Grandma." He gave me a final gentle squeeze and stepped back, so I introduced my friend and my companion. Like everybody, he was enchanted with fluffy little Eira, and picked her up for snuggles before inviting Carol and me into the office.

"What can I do for you ladies today?" he asked as his assistant took away the cups from the meeting and poured us coffee.

"Well, while I was recovering, Carol was helping to fix my wings and we were talking about what to do now. She turned down Thor's offer to stay on Asgard as one of his personal guards--we all did, actually. Like most of us, she liked doing all the handwork we did in Valhalla, and she's looking for a fresh start, learning a trade. So I thought of you." I smiled at him. "You've got to have some sort of apprentice program to support your masters."

He looked flummoxed. "I don't, actually. But that would solve a lot of problems. I can't believe I didn't think of it before." He kept Eira on his lap, petting her, while he asked Carol about her interests and abilities, then sent her down to HR to fill some paperwork, asking her to come back on Monday to start work. Then he called his assistant in and told her to start working out on an apprenticeship program. He pulled up an internet search on the old guild systems in Europe and studied it briefly. He nodded, identified several points to use as foundations for the new program, and handed it off.

"It's fascinating to watch you work," I told him. He beamed, then asked about Eira. We chatted for awhile, getting caught up on wider events, and he told me more about the Ragnarok movie.

"It needs to be scored, have professional narration, better editing, but it's so compelling to watch that I didn't even notice two hours had passed. You could see exactly how the battle progressed from the Asgardian viewpoint. They must have really tall trees, because she was up pretty high to get that much perspective. She was closer to you valkyries than I would have thought possible."

I scowled. "We weren't looking in trees for idiots. But yeah, the trees are huge, they're about the size of giant redwoods, but different species. Related to Earth trees, but genetically distinct."

"They're going to have a screening pretty soon for friends and family; you and your friends should come. You don't have to identify yourselves."

"Thanks, Daniel. It depends on where I am, though." He nodded, and we finished by him telling me that he'd put up Aslyn, Karen, and Margaret downstairs. When I showed up, there was shrieking and hugging and tears, and ultimately we dried off and went to lunch, running into Carol in the elevator and bringing her with us.

We went back to the hotel, and I called Serena to see if she wanted to have lunch with us. I had to
pop Eira up to the room and give her her lunch and collected Serena on the way back down. We'd gotten a nice table in a corner. "So you were Captain America?" Margaret asked her. "When I died, it was still that hot Sam Wilson."

"Sam was a sweetie," Serena said. "Yeah, I took over after him."

"Are you going to go back to Avenging?" Aslyn asked.

"Nope, I'm done with fighting. I want a nice quiet office job," Serena said, then reconsidered. "But not too quiet." Carol and I laughed.

"What about you guys?" I asked my other friends.

"I practically need another college degree if I want to go back in computers, it's changed so much," Aslyn said, shrugging. "So I think I'll go back and get an MBA. There's a lot of scholarship money out there now, to get people trained and educated. I already applied at Harvard, I can do the whole thing online. Boston is even more crowded than New York."

Margaret nodded. "I need to brush up, but I can still do urban planning."

Karen said that she'd like to get back into construction management. "There's so much building going on that it shouldn't be hard. I have to pass a test now so I need to study building codes, but it's surprisingly not too bad. I'd like to work for a company for a few years, really get my feet under me, make sure my knowledge is sound and complete, then strike out on my own. What are you guys going to do?"

"Force this one to take a vacation," Serena said, nudging me. "Then I'm going back to school. With GI benefits, I'll be in good shape. I took Loki's aptitude tests, and I'm looking into finishing my degree in architecture, go on and get my Masters. I had about three semesters left before I went Avenging, so maybe add another one to get back up to speed. Columbia has a good program. Maybe I should look around some, but honestly, I've had enough change lately. I just want to settle down and find a new normal with friends around." I patted her shoulder.

"I have more to learn than anybody," Dagny said. "I need to take remedial classes, Loki said. Then if I haven't figured out yet what I want, I can always start with the general studies courses."

"Well, Daniel Wayne is going to put me into an apprenticeship in the building trades, so I'm set," Carol said cheerfully. "What are you going to do after your vacation, Alex?"

"Well, I thought about going back and doing science," I said, breaking off as our plates were delivered. "But I'm thinking about doing something a little different. Maybe museum conservation. Something calm, that uses science, but isn't all about one field." Aslyn, Margaret, and Karen stared at me. "What?"

"I'm just surprised is all," Margaret said. "You not full-on scienceing? It's just a new look."

I stuck my tongue out at her. "Well, my afterlife was all very low tech, very hands on. We all learned a lot of different skills, which I liked. I need something with a physical exertion component."

"So where are you going on vacation?" Serena asked pointedly.

I frowned at her. "I am going. Daniel had a few recommendations, which I plan to research this afternoon after my nap."
"Alex, are you ok?" Aslyn said. "You, napping? Last time you did that you were pregnant and completely zonked out on medication." I gave my friends a condensed version of what had happened.

"So Damian's back to being a dick," she said, and we eye-rolled at each other.

"Well, this is a whole new offense," I said, just to be fair. She shook her head and finished her salad.

"You look like a dancer who's overtrained," Karen said, peering at me. "Your friends are right. You need to relax. Get a massage every day until your muscles remember how not to stay tight and contracted. Put some weight on."

I held onto my temper. "Yes, I know all that," unable to keep all the annoyance out of my voice. "None of this is new to me." There was an awkward silence. "Shit, I'm sorry," I said, blowing out a breath. "But I'm just tired of people saying I look like crap and that I need to take a break. I KNOW that, better than anybody."

"You have changed," Karen said after a moment's silence. "Before, you would have smoothed everything out, downplayed your own feelings." She winked at me. "Good for you."

"She had to carry us for awhile," Carol said. "We were content to stay inside as much as possible during Fimbulwinter. If she hadn't kicked us into shape, weeded out the dead weight, we'd have been toast during the battle. There wouldn't have been enough time to get as strong and conditioned as we needed to be, and even then, I felt we could have trained harder."

I nodded. "During the fight I realized how big a difference there was between even an intense scrimmage and a full-out battle where you really need to put your opponent down, as fast as possible. And the flying was so different. That was really the hard part."

"That was unforeseen," Serena said. "I thought the capes would still work. Having our own was a whole new complication." We had to explain to the others what had happened, and a farther backtrack to explain my different wings. There was some silence while the others thought about this.

"Wow," said Aslyn eventually. "You had a way more exciting dead than I did. I ended up in the Shinto afterlife. Very peaceful. But even I can't claim to be in a relationship with a plant."

We burst out laughing. "It's probably more like a high school crush," I said, winding down. "I doubt Yggdrasil even knows I exist." After that, conversation got more fun and general. I was glad to see my two groups of friends integrating so well. Before we left the restaurant, I asked them all to let me know if they needed anything. "Thor gave us very generous separation pay, so I can afford to help."

Aslyn laughed. "Daniel already took care of that," she said, putting her arm around me as we walked out. "He arranged for store credit for us in the tower and said that he'd settle with you."

"Receipts, please," I requested, and my friends rooted around in their purses before handing them over. "Did you guys get enough stuff?" I said, glancing through them.

"Enough to hold us until we get jobs," Margaret said. "Then we'll be able to pay you back."

"You don't have to--" I started, but Karen shook her head.

"Daniel won't take a cent for rent, and I'm grateful to be out of the tents with the temperatures
getting colder so I didn't argue. But I like to pay my way." Aslyn and Margaret nodded.

"OK, then," I said, and quickly jotted down totals before handing the receipts back. "I'll settle it with Daniel, because he's not going to want to be paid back. You guys can pay me back whenever, so if you need something, go ahead and get it." We arranged lunch for the next day, and the rest of my friends scattered. I went upstairs for a nap with my pup.
Over the next few days, I gave my three friends some cash from my Asgard pay so they weren't limited to the stores in the tower, saw a therapist twice, and decided on a vacation spot. I'd considered going somewhere that was not a beach, but beach vacations seemed to be the only ones where you were expected to do nothing but lay around, so I went to St. Vincent, where the most strenuous thing I did at the lovely resort was watch turtles and dolphins, go on a few nature walks, and stroll through the botanic gardens. Otherwise I was sacked out on the beach under an umbrella, sipping rum beverages and water. I arranged for a dog walker for those occasions when Eira didn't want to get sand in her fur, and we both relaxed. I got a few spa treatments and daily massages, and by the time I started to get bored, my muscles weren't automatically tightening up. I'd paid for the vacation using the family money, but for day to day things, I preferred to spend the money I'd earned.

When I got back, I moved into a tiny apartment. It was new construction, put up by Wayne Enterprises, but I'd applied as Alex Barnes, using Loki and Thor for references. It turned out that the courts held that women reverted back to their maiden names when they were returned, and I'd forgotten to change my name after I got married again anyway, so it was still my legal name. I didn't want to trade on my family, just my references. The apartment was a small but nice studio, with a view of the ocean if you climbed on a chair to look through the large window. Serena, Dagny, and Carol weren't in my building, but they were in buildings in the same complex, which was nice. Phase one of this particular project had been completed, and phase two was past the halfway point. Aslyn, Margaret, and Karen had applied there; while I was on the beach, they'd found jobs, so I was the slacker. Daniel was perturbed that I hadn't let him help me with housing, but he thought the apartments had turned out nicely enough. I furnished mine pretty simply, with the bed pushed against the wall under the window so that Eira could sleep in the sun.

One night, I met with my friends for dinner and drinks, and passed out some souvenirs. "You look good," Karen said, and that was all that was said. I did look a lot better. We got caught up, and I heard about Carol's apprenticeship--she was learning finish carpentry, feeling that these skills were the most broadly useful. Aslyn had started her MBA program, and Margaret was working for the city again and taking a few classes, one a semester, to get a formal understanding on how urban planning had changed.

"Damn Vanilla anyway," she said. "I was just really starting to hit my stride when I died. There's so much to make up for. If I ever see him again, I'm going to slap him so hard."

Karen had caught on with a smaller construction firm, where she could work closely with the owners, learn the ropes. She was pleased to see that a lot of her old skills were in use still; what she needed to brush up on was building codes. Once she passed a licensing test, she could work anywhere in the state, for herself or another employer. "We'll see, though, these people are nice to work for, and I'd hate to just use them to get credentials and experience."

Serena was already working hard. She had been accepted to Columbia; they'd moved to a rolling acceptance program with classes of short duration to acclimate returnees to academic study, brush up study skills, make sure that reading, writing, and math skills were up to snuff. If she worked hard, she could complete them in time to start real classes the next semester. She'd also gotten a work placement through the school as a receptionist at an architectural firm where she could study when it wasn't busy, and also learn more about architecture, how the business worked, how to work with clients.
"That just leaves me," I said unenthusiastically. "I need to get off my ass. The most meaningful thing I've done since getting back was to find a yarn store. That was pretty amazing, though. Beautiful new patterns! All those beautiful colors and types of yarn, and I didn't have to spin any of it!"

Serena, Dagny, and Carol laughed, being well acquainted with my work in Valhalla, but I needed to explain it to Aslyn, Karen, and Margaret. "You actually had to spin your own yarn? That's crazy," Aslyn said, shaking her head.

I put out my arm; I was wearing a sweater I'd made in Valhalla. "Lookit. I made all of this once the wool was shorn and processed. And the yarns here are so beautiful." I sighed blissfully and reached into my purse to bring out a cake of rich purple yarn that I was going to cast on to make an evening wrap. "It's a cashmere, angora, and silk blend. So much nicer than what I had to work with." I rubbed my face on it gently. "And aniline dyes. So beautiful." Everybody laughed at me.

"So are you going to do that for your career?" Margaret asked. "High end yarns? Weaving?"

"Lord, no," I said hastily. "I like doing it, but it's so labor intensive that I can't see how I'd make a profit. Besides, I really like that it can be a hobby rather than a way of life."

"So what are you looking into?" Dagny asked.

"Well, I was looking into museum conservation, I love the idea, but I'd have to learn a lot about art history, which frankly, I'm just not that interested in." I sighed. "So now I don't know, and I'm starting to get a little nervous." Aslyn and Karen groaned.

"Here we go again," Aslyn sighed. "You should have seen her in high school. She was so worried about college and picking a major, just a ball of stress for about a year and a half."

"That early acceptance to MIT was a godsend," Karen said. "Look, why do you think you need to get everything straightened out right this second? You have time to decide."

"Well, Eira wants me to find another interest beside her," I explained, which got a laugh. "Honestly?" I hesitated, then decided to come clean. "I don't want to be left behind. You guys all are doing new and interesting things, everybody I know is out to make their mark. I worry that my best work is behind me."

"Look, the news says that even Einstein's having trouble catching up," Margaret pointed out. "And it's not like we're going to drop you just because you're not blazing a path in a field. For god's sake, don't do something just for other people's expectations again. Remember how that worked out with your plans with your brother? Whatever you do, do it for you."

"Columbia has a program on historic preservation, it's in their architecture and urban planning school," Serena said diffidently. "They have courses in conservation, internships, international field trips. It's pretty cool. And there's a big need for people who can work with historical buildings, especially those that are listed. Between the damage done by the aliens, sheer age, and now stresses on the infrastructure brought about by the population explosion, there's a big need. They had a colloquium that addressed preservation and war. They actually tried to recruit me into that program first, and they have some joint and dual degrees."

So the next day I went to visit Loki in his office. He was turning into a de facto career counselor for us returnees with an Asgard connection. Not his job, but he was really good at it. "That might be a good fit," he said, peering at me. "There's some science, but it also would let you play with your appreciation for old buildings." He called over to the department and got me an appointment
in about half an hour. We filled the time by talking about other things; Thor wanted either Magni or Modi, or preferably both, to learn conflict negotiation and mediation skills. Both were provisionally interested, their interest in fighting having been largely sated by Ragnarok. Loki was nudging his niece along too. "She's an excellent bodyguard, but she has more potential than that, and I'd hate to see her hurt or killed just because someone has a grudge against me. I want more for her than that. Thor, of course, would prefer his little girl to get involved in something less hazardous. She's expressed an interest in journalism. That should be safe enough." I immediately had a vision of Torunn as a war correspondent, but didn't express this. Then he walked me over to the graduate school of architecture, planning, and preservation, and dumped me on them.

I was a lot more interested in the program after I left the meeting. I'd always liked the character of old buildings, admiring the details that were too expensive for modern buildings, and here was an opportunity to use both my interest in science and this interest to leave a literal mark on the world. Serena was right; there was a huge demand in this field, and they could offer scholarships and grants to incoming students regardless of need. They gave me a tour of their facilities, mentioned a new concentration of classes that were taught by returnees that helped develop skills in hands-on work in stone, cement, plasterwork, and finish carpentry, and I met some faculty, who emailed me copies of publications and gave me trial access to journals and textbooks. We set up another meeting in a week for followup, and I staggered off, a little dazed by the opportunities that the program presented.

I also spent a lot of time reconnecting with my family, spending a lot of time with my parents, especially, but also Thomas and Martha Sr, my daughter, and Daniel's dad Mark. I went out a few times with my brother, and he met my new friends and renewed his acquaintance with my old friends. I smirked when he called me up the next day and asked for Dagny's number.

I finally bit the bullet and summoned my errant son. Returnees all were physiologically in their 20s, but I was still his mother, regardless of what I looked like now, and I expected some answers. I seated him in the chair in my apartment, while Eira and I sat on the loveseat. The pup was suspicious and didn't warm up to him like she had with Martha. The disapproving puppy made Alexander ill at ease, even more so than having to explain himself to his mother. I listened to him speak for awhile, then cut him off. "Alexander, you're giving me justifications and excuses. I want to know the reasons why you did this." I watched my son fidget, then he let out a sigh and relaxed.

"Initially, I just thought I'd get some basic information about how decades' worth of criminals were interacting. Whether they were fighting among themselves, how they were determining their hierarchy. But I got a really good entree into that society as a low-level member of the Joker's gang." My eyes narrowed, but I kept the rest of my response to myself for now. "So I wanted to continue, to find out what they were doing, how they were dividing up the city in terms of territory and vices. It provided a lot of help in determining how to address the crime we're seeing."

"I'm not disputing the validity or importance of the data," I said, keeping my voice controlled. "What I want to know is why you didn't feel like I should know that you were back, alive and well."

"it was only supposed to be a short-term assignment, initially," he said after a moment. "Then when I stayed in, I just didn't want to have to explain. It got harder to explain why the longer it went on, and I just thought it was easier to wait until I was done."

"So it was about what was easy and convenient for you," I said after a moment, and he nodded reluctantly.

"And Grandpa thought that the more people who knew what I was doing would be a security risk,"
"You seemed to have forgotten that I was present for both your birth and your death, and a big chunk of the time in between." Eira got up and turned around before lying down, her back toward Alexander. "During that time, I kept a lot of things confidential, and I managed to conceal that I knew what you'd been doing when the Joker tried to surprise me with the information. So I'm a lot more quick-witted than you give me credit for. I've dealt with a lot of unpleasantness, and I never made a fuss about the family's vigilantism or demanded that anyone give it up. What hurts is that you only thought about me as an inconvenient response that you didn't want to have to deal with. I thought I'd raised my boy better than that." This time I did let my voice sharpen. "From what you just told me, I realize that the Joker knew all along that you were there and he was allowing you to be fed information. I know that he was permitting this, because he could have blown your cover at any moment in any number of different ways, and he as much told me so. So you owe your prime intelligence-gathering post to me and the Joker's desire to impress me." Alexander's face went about as pale as his golden skin would allow.

"I'm sorry, Mom," he said. "I just didn't want to get into trouble."

"And that is an admission that you knew what you were doing was wrong. So why did you do it?"

"Because it was...gratifying. To work with Dad again, doing something important. To work with Grandpa, as an equal, show him that I upheld his legacy. He said it would cause you distress to know what I was doing."

I rubbed my face with one hand and stroked Eira with the other. She was unimpressed. "He's not wrong that I would have been disturbed by what you were doing, but I wouldn't have tried to stop you. Think back. Did I ever try to stop you? No. I gave you input that I hoped would help you make smarter choices. And it isn't like I'm some fragile flower who needs to protected from the harsh realities of life, so I guess that what it comes down to is that my feelings were less important to you than trying to impress your grandfather, who is, by the way, not the most terrific role model."

"Come on, Mom, that's not fair. What I was doing was important."

"And I'm not disputing that. It's just nice to know where I stand in your hierarchy. Behind the rubber suit. You know, Alexander, I have fought for you from the moment I knew I was pregnant with you, and I have done my level best to be the best mother I was capable of being. You've had one lifetime, and that's established your character pretty firmly. So I think I need to step back and let you go do your thing." I bit my tongue hard; I would not say that he was a disappointment, that I was glad I had one kid who didn't view me as a pain in the ass. But I wasn't going to try to hurt Alexander in return; that was a zero-sum game. I stood and indicated the door.

"Mom--" he said, before walking to the door. "Do you forgive me?"

"You haven't given me a good reason to. You just seem to want me to not be mad anymore so you can get it off your conscience. That's not good enough for me." I opened the door, he stepped through it, and after a moment of us looking at each other with nothing else being said, shut it gently.

After that, we went to the tower, where I let Eira go play with Sigurd and Torburn. Torburn especially, he loved small things and especially enjoyed having an Asgardian puppy around. I signed the papers with Tony and Ann, presenting them with the funds for their business and we were officially partners. I had never seen Tony looking so well. I'd seen him happy before, and well balanced, but not often together in life, and it also seemed that he'd laid his personal demons
to rest. I was glad for him, I just wished that the same could be said for me. It wasn't hard to be enthusiastic about the business; they were packing up to move to larger facilities they'd rented with the proceeds of Tony's bonus from Thor, and now that I'd made my contribution, they'd be going full out.

"You have a standing offer to come work with us," Ann said as I got ready to go.

"I appreciate it," I told her sincerely. It's always nice to have a backup plan. "But I've been looking around, and I think that I might be going into architecture and historical preservation."

"Huh," Tony said, staring at me. "I wouldn't have expected that, but you're no longer the same person you were a lifetime ago, Tiger. But whatever, that sounds interesting." He walked me out, asking how things were going for me. He tsked when I told him about my son. "Did I tell you I got in contact with my parents? We're meeting next week."

"So that's why you seem a little addled," I teased him, and he gave me a side eye, which only made me laugh harder. "Seriously, though, is Ann going with you? I think you need some support for this, and she makes a terrific impression. We could get you letters of reference that you could use to impress your dad," I suggested. This time he laughed.

"I'll definitely be name dropping," he said on a sigh. "But I plan to tell them both that I appreciate what they did and tried to do for me. Hopefully that display of unexpected maturity will help." We talked more about this as we went down the stairs.

We got to the door and I cursed. I had forgotten something. My puppy. I told Tony to let me know if there was anything I could do, and went back upstairs. I found all the dogs in Steve's office. Eira had apparently worn out Sigurd, who was sprawled on the floor with his tummy up. She was curled up with Torburn. I went to give Steve a hug, and he wanted to know how I was doing, how the visit to Columbia went. We talked about his enrollment in FIT in January. He was excited about his new start in life. And Emma had decided to enroll there as well, studying jewelry design. She'd kind of picked up what she did as she went along, before, and decided that she could use a more solid basis for her work.

"Howard and Maria Stark have been found," I casually slipped in. He smiled, pleased to hear this.

"That's great news. Do they need anything?"

"Tony's going to see them next week. Howard was taken to Washington as soon as he'd registered, pretty much. I do have a favor to ask, though."

His eyes twinkled. "You want to know if I'll talk up Tony to his dad." I flushed and nodded.

"From what I hear, Howard will only think Tony's puffing his accomplishments. But if he heard some of it from someone he respected..."

"That won't be hard. Tony really has done a lot any parent would be proud of, and he looks to be doing more. I'll be happy to do it," he assured me, and I relaxed a little.

"So what's going on with you?" I asked. "Is it just post-battle letdown? You don't look quite as happy as I thought you'd be."

"You're too perceptive," he said quietly after a moment. "I heard from Peggy. She's disappointed, I think, that I'm not willing to meet with her, maybe with an eye toward renewing our relationship. But we're both of us different people, with lifetimes' worth of different experiences, and I'm happy with my wife. That reminds me." He rummaged around in his desk and handed me an envelope. I
smiled when I opened it. It was an invitation to a small ceremony on the rooftop of the tower, where they planned to get married again. "We did the big wedding, we did city hall, and now we want something with close friends and family."

I grinned and offered to help with anything that needed doing, but it was all well in hand. "And I'm worried about Bucky," he confessed finally. "He's not unhappy, but he's not happy. And I feel like I'm taking something away from him by marrying Emma again, he decided to bow out himself, but..." I nodded.

"I'm meeting him for dinner shortly, I'll see if he'll tell me anything. You know him, though, he's reticent about a lot of things."

"Just do what you can," he urged me. "You don't need to tell me what you find out if you feel you shouldn't, I just want to know that he's ok." I promised, kissed his cheek, and collected my puppy, who was initially reluctant to leave Torburn but perked up when we left to meet my uncle. She adored Bucky.

We met at a dog-friendly bar for a pre-dinner drink, where he grilled me about my meeting with Alexander. He shook his head. "Sometimes we just get too involved in things and forget how others will see them," he said gently. "Sounds like you gave him a lot to think about. That kid, though." He shook his head and asked about Columbia, seeming pleased about my new direction. "The important thing is that you're happy, sweetie. I'm proud of you for considering different things. This will give you new opportunities. You'll be able to walk down the street, look at a building, and be proud that you helped to save it. You'll be actually leaving your mark on the city."

We talked about that for a bit.

"And how are you, Uncle Bucky?" I asked. "I'm kind of worried about you."

"You mean about Steve and Emma's wedding?" He half smiled.

"Among other things, yeah."

"I'm ok with it, sweetie. It will be good for both of them. I think Stevie expected a fight, tell you the truth. But I'm just not in love with Emma anymore. I feel bad about it, and I'll always love her, but that fire's gone, like you and Stark. But to tell you the truth..."

"You can tell me anything," I said softly after a moment. "I can keep a confidence."

He smiled at me, then the expression dropped away. "I feel like I've lived... a second-hand life. I was just getting going when I was drafted, then I was a POW, a commando, the asset... when I was reclaimed, I went to work with the Avengers because they were about the only people who'd hire me. Doing a lot of the same things for a different cause, at least there weren't assassinations. I followed Stevie into crime fighting on the superhero scale, then after he died, took over his job, his wife, had the same afterlife. I want to be my own person now. Finally." I thought about that, immediately understanding why he hadn't told his buddy any of this.


"I'm not in the market yet, sweetie. After the wedding, I'm going to travel some. See some places I've always wanted to go. The Grand Canyon, the Alamo, Hawaii, Yosemite. Then I'll figure out something to do."

"Well, call if you'd like some company for a few days," I said. I was a little worried about my
uncle. His life hadn't been easy. "I can always pop out somewhere, still got that ability. But if you're out there during the summer, the Alamo's all yours," I shuddered, and he smiled.

"I'll let you know," he said noncommittally. "And I made us reservations for dinner," We finished our drinks and walked to the restaurant. We were awaited, as I soon found out.

"Aunt Becca?" I said, recognizing the woman from family photos. She smiled and held her arms out.

"Alex, honey, look how you've grown! You grew up so pretty," she said, hugging me tight. Then she released me, stepping away to introduce the man at the table. "This is your grandpa George," she said. He stood up, and I recognized him too. After my parents died, J and I had cleared out their house and found a cache of forgotten family photos. George had been in several of them with his wife Annette, and had been the kind of man who looked better as he aged, much like my dad.

"You're Henry's daughter?" he said, standing up eagerly. "My word." I got a hug from my grandpa too, at long last. Then we sat down, me between Grandpa and Aunt Becca, hearing about them and telling them what I'd done. Uncle Bucky elaborated when he thought I was being too modest.

"I thought you had another brother," I said, wanting to stop talking about me.

Aunt Becca rolled her eyes. "Billy. According to the registry, he was hit by a mag lev train. Apparently he didn't know what it was. To be fair, the tracks are different from the trains we knew." The three siblings bickered amiably about the wits of their brother. I was grateful that Bucky had more family around. I know I felt better when J was around to talk to; there are some things only a sibling understands. Then we made arrangements to meet my parents and J for dinner; I called my parents from the table and we agreed to meet that weekend. J was reluctant to deal with another family dinner, but I lured him in by saying I had some exciting news. Aunt Becca laughed at my methods when I hung up. Then I spent some time explaining some modern technology to them like personal communicators and the modern internet. I excused myself between dinner and dessert, visited the bathroom, then hustled to a store two doors down that sold the devices, getting one each for my aunt and grandpa. Over dessert, I showed them how to add numbers, connect to the internet, and take pictures, something they were both enchanted by. Bucky got teased for his long hair.

"Where are you living?" I asked anxiously over coffee. Grandpa had been placed in a small apartment (in the Bronx, he sighed. Apparently Brooklynites had a firm bond with their borough), but Aunt Becca was still in the tent city in Central Park. I immediately invited her to stay in my apartment; I couldn't shake the memory of her as an old, frail woman, even with her sitting beside me, young and vibrant. Beside, it wasn't right that she should be in a tent when I could help.

"Oh, no, dear, I'm fine. There's a new apartment building opening next week in Queens, and I've been guaranteed a place there," she assured me, but Bucky was still worried. She finally told him that it was an adventure and to stop with the fuss. "It's the most adventure I've ever had, and I'm enjoying it," she said firmly. "Well, the most adventure so far. Women seem to be able to do a lot more these days," she continued thoughtfully. They both refused both my and Bucky's offers of financial assistance, but we exchanged a look. We'd find some way of getting them to accept some money. I tilted my head toward my aunt, and Bucky nodded almost imperceptibly. He'd work on his brother, while I worked on my aunt. When my grandpa excused himself, I invited Becca to lunch the next day under the guise of showing her around the city, which had changed so much since her time. After dinner, Bucky went with Grandpa to see his new place and Eire and I walked Becca back to her tent. We had girl talk about the family; I'd missed her. She was outrageously fun. She heard the basics about my difficulties with my husband, son, and father-in-law and reserved
judgement until she had time to assess the situation more fairly. I took this to mean that she'd tell me once she'd formed an opinion. Once we got to her tent, we said goodnight, then I poofed discreetly back to my apartment. It took a lot more concentration and effort to move mass like my puppy rather than a soul, but it had been a long day and Eire was tired. Being adorable is hard work.

The next day, I took a leaf from her book and bulldozed my aunt into letting me take her shopping just by virtue of not taking no for an answer. We got some clothes for her, including a warmer winter coat, gloves, hat, scarf, and boots, and when we parted, I pressed an envelope with some money to furnish her apartment with into her hands and scuttled off before she could protest. At dinner, I made sure to keep at least one person between us at all times so she couldn't slip the envelope into my coat pocket. Grandpa was also sporting new warmer clothes too, and Bucky and I smiled conspiratorially. Dad was overwhelmed to see his father after so long, and J monopolized Aunt Becca. Martha and Alexander were glad to meet these new relatives but hung back a little, letting the older generations get reacquainted. Martha invited her great-grandfather out to lunch the next week, and Alexander asked Aunt Becca. It was very satisfying.
Rapprochement

It was difficult going for awhile. I was referred to a professional therapist, the PhD candidate I'd been seeing felt inadequate for the depth of my issues. So that kind of sucked. But my new therapist, although she didn't hurry me along, expected me to work on my issues. I might always not make progress, but as long as I was trying we were ok. Complicating the process was that I caught sight of the Joker a few times. There wasn't really anything that could be done. All three times, I was out in public, couldn't prove it wasn't just a coincidence. Besides, I didn't know where he was living (the address he gave was as fake as his name. Farceur was French for a joker or comedian) or what he was up to, but I started having the nightmares again. The ones where I was paralyzed were the worst.

Bucky helped with the arrangements for Steve and Emma's wedding, serving as the Best Man of Honor--they didn't have anybody else in their wedding party. It was a lovely ceremony, held in the garden on top of the tower (fortunately the weather was beautiful that day, if a little crisp) and followed by hors d'oeuvres and drinks. Howard and Maria Stark had gotten a last minute invitation, and I got to meet these shadowy figures from Tony's life at last. I was unimpressed, frankly. The afterlife didn't seem to have done either of them any favors; Maria seemed nice, but she was too weak to stand up to Howard. Emma was thrilled to see her mentor again and they and Steve had a great time together, Maria discreetly fading into the background. I teamed up with Ann to keep Tony out of the bourbon, but finally I had to drag him off to the side for a little pep talk.

"Listen to me, Tony," I said, catching his chin in my fingers to make him look at me. Despite our efforts, he was a little drunk. "I know you crave your dad's approval for a lot of reasons. As a dad, as someone you want to validate your work. But you need to accept the fact that he might just not be capable of giving you what you need. Look at yourself and what you've accomplished. You built Stark Industries into one of the world's great companies. You created Iron Man so that you could do the right thing. I did some checking, and there's always been Iron Man toys on the shelves, and public opinion shows that the public still has more trust in Iron Man than they do in Congress. Look at the people who respect, admire, and love you. You were instrumental in saving the Bifrost, without which almost everybody would still be stuck on Asgard, which would have been cut off from the Nine Realms, and the work you did with the siege engines during the battle was very important. And all these accomplishments are only a little of what you're capable of. Look at what you're doing now, working on important environmental issues, building a new business which, knowing you, will be the basis of a new empire. You have a wonderful woman by your side, working with you as well as going home with you. You may want his approval, but you don't need it, Sparky." I tapped his chest over the mass of scars where his arc reactor used to be. "You can believe me when I tell you that if your father remains distant and critical, that's his defect, not yours. You are a wonderful person, and one of my best friends. I am proud to know you."

He was silent a moment, the alcohol slowing his brain slightly. "Easier said than done," he said, and I nodded.

"Sure is, but it doesn't mean that it isn't true. You keep thinking he's this great man, but he's just a really successful businessman. He's a terrible father, although he might be a better husband." I made my voice more soothing. "You two might never have the relationship you want. If you can't, you need to let it go and find another dream. Like maybe a family with Ann. Be the dad you wished you had." His head snapped up at that. We stared at each other for a couple of minutes, then I nodded. He reared back a little.
"Huh," he said. "I never pictured myself as a dad."

"You were a great godfather to my kids," I pointed out. "Even changed their diapers. You have a lot to offer a child, Tony. Give it some thought."

Looking abstracted, he wandered off in search of Ann. I smiled, then emptied his bourbon into a potted plant and gave the glass to a waiter. I touched base with my uncle, then Steve and Emma left for their honeymoon in India. Bucky slipped away shortly after that, going on his road trip. I looked around and saw Tony and Ann talking to Maria, which was good. The tower caterers were cleaning up, and it was time to head off myself. I had a brief, unpleasant conversation with Howard Stark that reinforced my opinion of him as a jackass, then I went to a therapy appointment.

After a nap with Eira and a walk, I went to dinner with Damian. Things were carefully casual until after we'd ordered. "Here's the thing," I said, buttering a roll. Yum. "I understand what happened, that Alexander thought he had a good chance to get information. The Joker was allowing Alexander to get the information for his own purposes, but that's not really relevant for this discussion. It kept dragging on, and he wouldn't stop, and you two didn't want to admit what had been going on because you knew I'd be angry and hurt. Is that a good summary?"

"It's fair," Damian said. "But what do you mean about the Joker?"

"He identified Alexander pretty quickly and let him have a place in his gang," I said. "I think he did that to feed information about his competitors and to get on my good side. I've seen him a couple of times, from a distance. Did Alexander report anything especially heinous that the Joker's doing? Because I think he was keeping his nose clean for the spy, but now that he's unmonitored he'll go back to his old businesses."

"He said that the Joker was dealing in false identities, theft from government warehouses, bootlegging, of all things--cheap spirits. There's a huge market because there are so many people who are still in the process of getting resettled and employed, who aren't adjusting to returning to life, one of a hundred reasons."

I snorted. "I'll bet fifty dollars that he's going back to his old trades--drugs, prostitution, human trafficking. Whatever's the most lucrative these days. Since sex workers still aren't legal, there's room for a lot of abuse and profit."

"Shit," Damian said. "It makes sense. There's one player who's got girls out on street corners in Staten Island, the Bronx, making inroads into Queens. We don't know who it is yet, and there are rumors of some chemists setting up shop for somebody pretty far up the criminal food chain." He studied me. "You're looking pale, Alex, and I can see black circles under your eyes despite the makeup. Are you sleeping enough?"

"Not really. I have nightmares. Some of them are about what happened during the battle. Others are the old reruns. And yes, I'm seeing somebody."

"I was wrong to keep the information about Xander from you, Alex. I can't say it enough, and I'm sorry for the pain I caused you. I owed you the truth. I didn't live up to my wedding vows and I...I'm sorry. It was wrong."

"It caused me to question our entire marriage," I said quietly. "I don't know what else you withheld from me."

"Nothing like this. I didn't give you details about my other job, but you never asked for them. But I never covered up anything, Alex. I know that now it's hard for you to believe me, but this thing
with Xander is the first and only thing of its kind."

I was silent as the waiter brought our plates and refilled my water glass. Suddenly, I was just desperately tired. Almost, but not quite tired enough, not to savor my dinner.

"I accept your apology, Damian," I said after a few fortifying bites. "But I don't know where to go from here. I feel like something's been broken."

"Something has been broken, Alex, your trust and faith in me. I did that." He looked at me and touched the back of my hand gently, tentatively. "What do you want?"

"I want for none of this to have happened," I said. It came out as more of a wail than I'd like to admit.

"Well, I can't go back and change the past, no matter how much I want to," he said. "But I have a proposal to make." I looked at him inquiringly. "I have to show that I'm worthy of your trust again. You can't just have your faith restored in an instant, I need to earn it. So what I'm proposing is this. This," he said, gesturing around. "Dating. Getting to know each other again. You letting me try to earn your respect. Because I will do anything I have to to get you back. If it's possible."

I felt a little lightheaded with relief. "Slow steps," I said, and he smiled. It was the first full smile I'd seen from him that night, I realized.

"I'll crawl if you need me too," he said.

"I don't think that will be necessary," I said, and took my next bite with a warmer heart.

After that, the atmosphere lightened up a lot. He asked about what I was thinking of doing, asking thoughtful questions and commenting intelligently about the program at Columbia I was applying for. I asked what he was doing these days, and he'd accepted Tony and Ann's offer to helm their new business.

"What did you think of his parents?" he asked.

"Maria seems to love her son, but she's too weak to achieve family peace. If I had to judge, I'd say her loyalties are more with her husband than her son. Howard's just a jackass. Cynical and kind of... brittle? Treats his wife more like a possession. Too ambitious for morality to be more than a surface affectation. Apparently somebody mentioned that Bucky's my uncle, so that automatically put him against me. I can understand that, after all, Bucky did kill him and his wife while he was brainwashed. But there was an insult directed toward his son about sleeping with the enemy, said that everything I'd achieved was a result of who I know." Damian's eyes narrowed. "It stung, because I did get career boosts because of who I knew. But I wouldn't have kept achieving if it hadn't been for what I could do on my own."

"Damn straight," Damian said.

"I had to restrain myself from kicking him off the roof," I said moodily. "But I doubt I'll see him much. He was dismissive about his son, so I think he'll probably stay in DC."

"Daniel said that he's been in contact about acquiring the Stark company," Damian said unexpectedly. This time it was my eyes that narrowed.

"Martha acquired Stark fair and square," I said. "And Howard doesn't have the money to buy it back."
"He might get backers. But Daniel doesn't want to sell, the older tech and patents are still valuable and the new stuff developed as part of Wayne is very profitable," Damian said, and we ordered dessert. I got chocolate mousse made with bittersweet chocolate and Bailey's whipped cream, and he got apple pie with a scoop of vanilla bean French custard-style ice cream. We traded bites; the pie was spiced with allspice and cloves as well as cinnamon, different and delicious.

"What about the name and trademarks, though? The name is important." I'd have to talk to Daniel about whether the purchase of just that much was possible and what it would cost. Because Tony could use that as a springboard...

"It shouldn't cost too much," Damian said, reading my mind. "He wouldn't be buying the existing business or the patents. Daniel's given some thoughts to what it would take to absorb the actual business into Wayne if he sold the Stark name, ran it past the board. They're resistant to selling the IP, but the trademarks are a different story." My fingers twitched. Damian grinned at me. "Go ahead, send the text," he said indulgently. "Your loyalty to your friends is one of your many admirable qualities." I swiftly sent an inquiry to my grandson. I had some rights as a third owner of the company.

"It doesn't upset you that Tony and I are still close?"

"No," he said. "We weren't together and there wasn't the possibility of it at the time you and Stark were involved. And it's over, both of you have moved on and I don't think there's anything romantic between you anymore. There's love, yes, but I really see it as platonic."

I exhaled in relief. "You're right, but I needed to hear your thoughts. I can't just dump my friends."

"I don't want you to," he said. My communicator buzzed, and I looked at the text. For just the right to use the Stark name and the associated trademarks for a new business, he would sell it—to Tony—for five million.

"Wow," I said. "There are pro sports stadiums that cost more for naming rights each year."

Damian had his device out and was tapping furiously. "I'm advising Tony to jump on this. With the initial capital they have, they can afford it." We'd barely finished our desserts and started in on tea and coffee when Tony and Ann ok'ed it. Damian looked at me. "We should have your consent too, as a third owner of the company." I smiled.

"Have Daniel draw up the papers," I said. "Let's get this done as soon as possible."

He laughed. "You're something else," he said fondly. Daniel would get things started the next morning. Damian started planning to acquire all sorts of trademarks so as to limit Howard's ability to use the name for whatever business he was planning, shooting off a message to the new firm's lawyers.

I realized that this was something I loved about him: how well we worked together. It didn't seem weird to be doing business when he just pledged to rebuild my trust in him, even if it wasn't romantic. It was more than romantic, I thought. It reminded me about his other good qualities and how well we fit together. And I didn't think he was doing it with an ulterior motive; it was just something that we'd always done.

"So why did you accept Tony and Ann's offer to be the CEO of their new company?" I asked curiously.

"Well, there's not really room for me in Wayne these days, Daniel has everything well in hand and
I didn't want him to find some made-up work for me to do. So looking elsewhere, there's Starks' proven track record, the very real need that they're looking to fill. They're going to need somebody who's dedicated and skilled at the helm. And it's going to be interesting and exciting. Plus they offered me a one percent share of the company." His bright blue eyes twinkled at me and I laughed. I'd forgotten about that one percent--Ann, Tony, and I had thirty three percent each.

After the surprisingly comfortable dinner, he walked me to my apartment building and saw me safely inside. I didn't really want to admit it, but I felt better with the escort. I know, me the big bad valkyrie being afraid of a little street crime, but it wasn't that, it was the Joker. How helpless I'd been when he'd used Ivy's toxin on me. My wings and hard-won skills would mean exactly squat if he used that or something like it again, and although I didn't really want to admit it to myself or anyone else, that scared the tar out of me. The building had good security that would provide a nice first layer of protection, but I was back to putting a chair under the doorknob of the front door. And thank goodness for doorknobs. I'd have thought by now that we'd have those portals like in Star Trek that automatically opened for you. I preferred the security of a good old-fashioned physical barrier.

The next day I received a delivery of daisies, with a website and a request for a date that Friday on the card. I smiled, put the flowers in water, and looked up the website. "New beginnings." Eira sniffed, begrudgingly approving, and we went to therapy. She accompanied me; it was helpful to hug her and she didn't mind a few tears on her fur. After that she was rewarded with a trip to the Asgardian embassy, where she could run freely on the grass and play. The Asgardians enjoyed seeing one of their special dogs on Midgard, and it raised my status quite a lot, I was finding out, that she'd picked me as her companion. We were scheduled to go back to Asgard the next week so she could visit her mom, who hadn't been entirely happy that her puppy decided to leave home so young. I wanted to show that I was a responsible caregiver and companion, and Eira deserved time with more of her own species.

Thursday I dropped in on Tony again. Ann was out doing some preliminary testing on the beach. "I wondered if you could make me some sort of tracker again, Sparky," I asked as Eira, having received a good skritch and a Milk Bone from Tony, ambled off to find Torburn and Sigurd, but mostly Torburn. He played with her the most. They were being cared for at the tower during Steve and Emma's honeymoon. He leaned back in his chair and looked at me thoughtfully, so I explained that I'd seen the Joker, that I'd talked to him, and that I was nervous about it. He didn't know all that the Joker had done to me in the past, but he knew enough. "Plus there's Talia and R'as. I don't know them at all, but I don't think they've left, and Talia really doesn't like me. It might come out to be nothing," I said, trying to convince myself. I sure didn't fool him.

"Yeah, that's simple enough," he said. "Even if it only provides you peace of mind, it's worth it. Give me a few days." We agreed that I'd come back on Monday. "I'll probably encode the tracker with emergency numbers before giving it to you. Who do you want?"

"You?" I asked, and he nodded, flicking his hand.

"Of course. Who else?"

"Damian, Bucky, Steve, Carol, Dagny, and Serena," I decided. "I'll want the cavalry if it comes to that, and it provides some protection with gaps, like with my uncle being on his road trip, or if somebody just can't get away from work."

He snorted a laugh, then we talked about other things, my date with Damian, the new space for the lab down by the waterfront, the acquisition of the Stark name and trademarks. He made a call and a notary came down to witness my signature on the documents as a business partner. Mine was the
"Excellent," Daniel said with satisfaction, leafing through the pages before summoning a courier to take it to the lawyers. He smirked at me. "I don't really like Howard Stark. He's got the attitude of somebody who skates on the edge of legality when it suits him, and I wouldn't be surprised if he crosses the line easily for marginal gain. Plus he's intending to go back into weapons development, my sources tell me. I don't approve of that, we have more than sufficient existing ways to kill each other, and I'm not going to assist that in any way."

"Howard might have offered more money," I said.

"It's not all about the immediate offer of money," Daniel shrugged. "We get a good chunk of money we can use right now, plus the PR department is on this, they'll be spinning it as an exciting new venture from the first big name in environmentally sound energy. It'll be good for our brand and public perception of the company, and it's possible that Stark and Ann and I will develop a closer working relationship, leading to more opportunities. Besides, it's not like Wayne won't benefit from it still."

"I noticed the partnership aspect," I said. "Wayne gets the first crack at manufacturing any solutions Tony and Ann come up with for the market."

"Stark balked a bit, but it only applies to this first venture. I expect that he'll branch out into other fields and technologies before too long, expanding. There will be other opportunities then, and the company will have access to high-quality manufacturing and distribution networks with Wayne. Plus this frees them up to focus on R&D."

"And Damian will make all the trains run on time," I noted. "It's a good set up for everybody."

"Glad you like it," Mark said, coming in and kissing my cheek before patting his son's shoulder and sitting down. "It's going to be my first campaign." We talked a little more before I left so they could get their work done.

Friday I got my admittance to Columbia in the mail, starting spring semester, and access to the competency modules I'd need to complete before then online. I got online and did some work on that before looking into how to get Eira certified as a psychiatric service animal. I frowned. I didn't like the idea of that much, mostly because it slapped a big ol' label of 'disabled' on me, but my therapist diagnosed me with PTSD as well as a budding anxiety disorder at the last session. I was becoming less willing to places after dark, increasingly worried about being followed, being in crowds bothered me, and my nightmares were hitting a whole new level of special that combined specific elements of the Joker's torture along with images from battle. And sometimes Talia would be in the background, watching. I'd left the session with a prescription for that oldie but goodie Xanax for short term treatment. I hadn't started it yet and might not, although I had it filled, just in case. Because Eira was intelligent and understood what people said, it was easy for her to focus and avoid distraction. She already served some of the functions of a psychiatric service animal by interrupting panic, waking me up from nightmares, monitoring crowds when I got anxious, and sweeping our apartment when we got home. There wasn't a training program for service animals that was required, just a list of behaviors they'd had to master, and I went over these things with her, explaining what they were and why they were important, asking if she'd mind doing this for me. She was agreeable, wanting to defend her chosen person, so I ordered her a service vest with the appropriate patches denoting status as a service dog and asking others not to pet while she was on duty.

"This sucks," I told her. "I did the PTSD thing after that kidnapping thing, I did the therapy. I
shouldn't have to do it again, I should be fixed. But maybe you won't have to do this much." But my therapist told me it didn't always work like that. I was gearing up for a battle with my own mind, one that wasn't going to be easy to win. Claudette, my therapist, told me that it wasn't really a matter of doing battle, either with myself or the things that were messing me up, but to me it was. I liked to think of it that way. Battles were things I could win. I missed Bucky more than ever, although Aunt Becca was a great stand-in; she just didn't have the same depth of relationship that I had with my uncle, who also knew what I'd gone through. And my grandpa promptly took over Bucky's ice cream duties. It was fun to have a grandpa.

I suspected that between my therapy and school prep, I wasn't going to have a lot of time to indulge in a grudge, so I called my son. He was flatteringly eager to hear from me and proposed a late lunch, which I accepted.

He'd gotten there a little before me and gotten a booth. The high backs of the benches made it a little more private. We ordered before Alexander burst out with an apology for being selfish and singleminded. "I kind of dragged Dad into agreeing to it. Grandpa was fine with it because of the information I had. We all knew I was ok, so it wasn't hard to delude ourselves that it was ok not to tell anybody else. I didn't consider how you'd feel about the deception, and I'm sorry. But given what you said about the Joker, reevaluating the information, I'm not sure if it's even accurate, so it was for nothing."

"Oh, I'm pretty sure that the parts that aren't about the Joker are accurate," I said dryly. "But you don't know him. You've never really seen what he's capable of doing. And he's changed since he's been returned. I don't know how, and that worries me. Do not underestimate his cunning or his depravity. I think he's just hiding his true face for now."

He nodded. There was silence as our sandwiches were served and fresh drinks brought. "I'm just really sorry I hurt you, Mom," he said. He looked near tears.

"You going to do anything like that again?" I asked.

"No," he said with finality. "I need to get in the habit of being more open. I might not give a lot of detail, but I swear I won't do that to you again, Mom. I took you for granted. I thought it was just a matter of you being on my side."

"I am on your side," I objected. "I just need you to be on my side too."

"I understand that. Now," he said with a half-hearted grin. "I promise." For a second, I could see the earnest Cub Scout he'd once been.

I left the lunch feeling better; at least things were on the mend with my son too.
The tracker was ready on Tuesday. Tony went with me to the clinic to explain it to them. "It's an implant," he explained. The doctor looked rebellious as he explained how it was triggered by surges in adrenaline, cortisol, and DHEA. Unlike a wearable tracker, it couldn't be discarded, and I had an app for my communicator that I could hit to cancel it if it was a false alarm triggered, for example, like almost being hit by a vehicle. "It shouldn't trigger with an initial flush of stress hormones, though," Tony said. "It shouldn't trigger unless there's ten seconds of a certain concentration in the blood."

"It's not certified for use by the government," the doctor said sternly. "Medical devices are regulated by law."

"But it's not actually a medical device," Tony pointed out. "Its monitoring of stress hormones is only incidental to its function, which is to provide GPS coordinates for location."

"I'd prefer that it be done by a medical professional," I cut in when the doctor opened her mouth. "But if it's going to be a problem, I can implant it myself. Local anesthetics, and I can get my hands on a tissue accelerator." The doctor glared at me, then capitulated. Five minutes later, I was laying on a table, Tony observing, as the doctor made a small incision under local anesthetic to place the tracker just on the inside of my pelvis. It clamped around a blood vessel just inside the iliac crest with a tiny flat plate with the hormone sensor just barely extending into the vessel. The pelvis was the ideal place for placement; the area was rich in blood vessels of the appropriate size and was well protected with bone and muscle.

"The whole device is made with vibranium, which is nontoxic and non reactive as well as being the strongest naturally-occurring metal on the planet," Tony said abstractly as he oversaw the placement of the device. I couldn't see it, so I just lay there and waited. "The seal of the vibranium around the tracker and sensor is perfect, I had Emma do it, she checked the whole thing out too. But even if it wasn't perfect, if any blood or blood product were to get inside the device, it would shut down and an error message would be sent that it needed to be replaced. The tracker collects and uses kinetic energy from the action of the blood against the sensor."

"Ah," the doctor said, nodding.

"That's amazing, Tony," I said, a little sleepy and bored since I couldn't see anything.

He flashed a grin at me. "Anything for you, Tiger. You do attract trouble." I sniffed, and the doctor started to use the accelerator wand; it provided a small beam of the energy that ran the device, allowing for pinpoint precision and use during surgeries. My down time was limited to the twenty minutes of the procedure.

This was good, I had a therapy appointment, followed by classwork and a phone call with Damian that night. I took delivery of a phalaenopsis orchid, which was white with a deep pink center. The card specified the meaning as beauty. It was delivered by Alfred, who additionally had a basket of cookies for me. Eira pranced over, as taken with Alfred as she was with her. It was wonderful to see him and he had time to come in for a cup of tea. I managed to wrest the hostess duties away from him and served him a nice cup of strong black tea with milk and sugar, the way he liked it.

The next day, I went to Asgard to visit with Sif. She'd had fairly extensive injuries too, including multiple fractures on each rib from where she'd been stomped by a fire giant, and was only recently allowed visitors. The two of us had sustained the worst injuries of anyone who lived through the
battle, but her Asgardian physiology was just different enough that the medicines that had assisted my healing didn't work on her. She'd had fierce post-concussion syndrome. This time I brought a huge bouquet of flowers and some chocolate. She was quiet and quite thin, but glad to see me and Eira. Eira curled up with her as we talked. Sif mentioned that I looked pale myself and I said that I was having nightmares and was jumpy and skittish. She nodded, and suggested going to see the Norn.

"Isn't Skuld the original valkyrie?" she asked. "She might have some suggestions since what you're doing isn't as effective as I think you'd like." After Sif got tired, we left and tracked down Eira's mother, Hillevi, who was a lighter colored version of her daughter and even bigger than Torburn. Her head came up to my sternum, and I really really never wanted to upset her, but she was indulgent and affectionate with Eira. I scratched behind her ears as I told her things that Eira had done, how many friends she'd made, the time she spent with Torburn and Sigurd, how much I valued her companionship. Her father Egil came in, nosing his daughter affectionately before coming over for an introduction. He wasn't as large as Hillevi and had a coat similar in color to Torburn's. A pack of puppies skidded in following their father, and I also met Eira's three brothers and two sisters. After Eira's parents were satisfied with what I told them, I left so they could have some family time and unpacked the wings for a flight to Yggdrasil.

I was out of practice, not having flown since the battle, and my back, shoulders, and wings hurt by the time I landed a respectful distance from the great ash. I left the wings out, though; it felt good to have them out and working. But it was a bit of a mistake; one of the swans rushed me, flapping its wings and extending its neck. Skuld turned her veiled face toward me and called off the swans, laughter in her voice. I was too relieved to take offense. Verdanti and Urd came over and looked at my wings, exclaiming over the pretty gray ones.

"Maybe when they go back to being gray the swans will leave me alone," I said nervously. The Norn laughed and ignored that, asking questions about the imping process instead. Then I handed out the chocolates that I'd brought for them--Loki adored chocolate mints and chocolate covered caramels, so I'd figured the Norn might like them as well. While they explored the candy box, I explained the nightmares and fear, the agoraphobia that was establishing as a result of panic attacks and PTSD.

"This might partly be the result of your experiences, but it might be partly due to the influence of the tree," Urd said thoughtfully, and got up. I accompanied her to the tree, where she brought up the runes that signified me. Unlike the first time I'd seen them, they seemed somehow lopsided and out of whack. "Yes, your difficulties are being reflected in the larger universe," she noted. The runes faded into the trunk again and I followed her back to the others, where I sat on the ground.

"The tree suffered damage during Ragnarok," Urd told me. "The dragon caused harm, and Loki and Torunn inadvertently cut some of the smaller roots during their battle with it. And there are snakes down there, which is quite offputting. I think that in as much as you have that small bond with the tree, its discomfort is affecting you."

"It is surprisingly delicate for such a large tree," Verdanti observed. "Yet the burdens upon it are many and stressful, so perhaps it is understandable. You and it are connected, but--and this is not meant as an insult--I doubt that it even feels the bond."

"Most likely it registers the bond with the same attention it would give to an individual leaf."

"Which is to say not at all," Skuld said to Urd. "It would be much the same as we notice an individual hair."

"Leaves--and hair--have finite use," Verdanti said to me. "Your bond with the tree does not make
you immortal or unconquerable. It does give you a little extra energy, but given enough time, the bond will dissolve, much like a leaf falls away from a tree in the autumn. Unless the bond is renewed."

"You are vulnerable to the... I cannot say feelings or emotions, for the tree is not sentient as you understand it. It has no brain, but you are influenced by its... moods, I suppose is the closest comparison. You must learn to filter its moods while allowing the undoubted benefits of the connection to continue. If the connection is shut down entirely, your wings will vanish and your ability to to dislocate your place in time and space will cease, at least until you return to Valhalla."

"So I'm going back there when I die?" I asked, and Skuld nodded.

"There are few as worthy," she said, and smiled. "I may escort you to the hall myself. It is Orlag, the unchangeable fate."

"Just before I lost consciousness in the battle, I had a moment where I thought I could everything," I said after a moment spent debating with myself. "All the afterlives included." I shuddered. Some of them were not nice places. "I thought perhaps that either I had serious brain damage or that something else was open to me. Or most likely, that I was dying."

"Oh, your brain damage was extensive and probably allowed you to see the greater universal order," Verdanti said thoughtfully. "But although you might be destined for Valhalla, consider that you have the ability to go anywhere you have seen. So it matters less where your loved ones go if you can go there as well. The lord of the realm may not permit you to come and go freely, but there is always a way in." I let all that sink in. I hadn't spoken to anyone about that. Tree bonds and afterlife maps sounded like a total hallucination, and I felt that even the finest therapist might have me committed if I started talking about that sort of thing.

"But the immediate problem is your bond with the tree," Skuld said, getting us back on track. They guided me. I couldn't pinpoint the location of the bond in me either, but the Norn had enough suggestions and experience and wisdom to help me regardless. It would take practice to develop enough strength to keep a mental filter in place automatically, but they assured me that it would come in time and help with my psychological stability.

"What else troubles you?" Urd asked.

"Ragnarok itself," I said after a moment. "In a way, it seemed pretty easy to avert the end of the world."

"Explain," Verdanti said.

"Well, There was supposed to be a big battle that pretty much wiped the slate clean, right? Almost all life would have perished. And while plenty of beings did die, a few tweaks here and there--convince Thor to wear personal protective equipment, give Loki another path, for example--and that's all it took to stop it? It just seems so... anticlimactic, in a way."

The Norn burst out laughing. "It is instructive to remember the difference between unalterable fate and everything else, little sister," Skuld said indulgently. "What is fixed and what is free. The battle was fixed but its outcome was not."

"It shows the cycles of the universe," Verdanti said. "Life is cyclical. There is birth and death, one cycle, which begins anew in the afterlife. You see cycles everywhere if you look. Nations rise and fall. Species evolve and become extinct. So it was here. After a period of relative order, a great upheaval. An explosion of life followed by millions dead, yet the losses were not as great as
expected. The old order fell, whether or not it is widely known, and another is arising in its place, the dimensions of which are not known or set in fate, but mutable. Asgard still has a preeminent position due to its manipulation of the Bifrost and dark energy, but with a king who is less inclined to exert his will on the Nine Realms as a matter of policy. The implications of this, which will spin out over the course of millennia, can only be hinted at now."

"You yourself speak of fresh starts and second chances," Urd said. "And what is that but new beginnings, the start of a new cycle? And do not forget how much of Ragnarok was shaped by the fancies of men and gods!"

"They read far too much into the unalterable nature of the battle," Verdanti sighed, shaking her head.

"It was as if one day this whole new fate sprang up," Urd said, her voice on the edge of laughter. "Once a story is set through belief, there is little even we can do to change it."

"It is true, however, that if Sutr and the fire giants had won the battle, the shape of the Nine Realms would be very different," Skuld said soberly. "The Nine Realms would be subject to the tyranny of destruction on Sutr's whim. That outcome, which we intended to be a caution, was taken to be the fate, and the other possibilities forgotten." The Norn nodded, and I reflected on this. I started to my feet when the swans waddled over determinedly.

"I should leave, probably," I said hastily. "I've taken up a lot of your time." They laughed.

"Not more than we have to spare," Skuld said indulgently.

"It is pleasurable to speak with one who listens," Verdanti added.

"Return when you will," Urd invited. "Feel free to bring more sweets if you please." I smiled, tucking my hands in the pockets of my jeans as one of the swans snapped its serrated beak at me, backing away.

"Thank you for your help and conversation," I said, nodding to the Norn before fleeing the birds. Their chuckles followed me into the sky.

My stock with Hillevi rose when I hustled back into the citadel. Ugh. I hate being terrorized by waterfowl. My wings drew attention, reminding the Asgardians--on two or four feet--that valkyries still walked among them. Hillevi, Egil, and the other puppies had never seen them up close and examined them with interest. Rescue arrived in the form of the princes.

Magni and Modi spoke courteously to Eira's entire family, and I felt Egil's relief that his daughter had made a good choice with me personally as well being lucky in my acquaintances. Modi picked up Eira for a snuggle--she was the most fluffy of her family and her soft fur was almost irresistible--and Magni told me that they had some of my things. Mystified, I said goodbye to Eira's family and accompanied Magni. Modi brought up the rear, enjoying cuddling Eira and talking baby talk to her. I guess some behaviors are universal.

"Brother," Magni said impatiently, "you realize that you sound ridiculous."

"She's just so fluffy!" Modi said, hugging Eira closer. She looked extra small since he was so big. Magni snorted a laugh and we chatted as we walked. The brothers congratulated me on my Columbia acceptance. They were too busy with things on Asgard to begin working toward taking classes in mediation as their father wished, but were looking forward to it down the line. We arrived at a storeroom, and I was ushered in. I'd been right; I'd taken all my stuff with me when I
went back to Midgard. Except for my armor and weapons. I looked at the display, a little taken aback. It had been cleaned up, but it was dented and torn. My shield had a jagged cut that exposed the cherry wood underneath, my helmet had a sizeable dent on the side that corresponded with the first big hit I'd taken from the fire giants when we met to take down Sutr. And there were dings and other damage I didn't recall receiving. But they had my dual swords and my katana, which had survived intact. The sword that had been in the spine sheath was broken. My daggers were there, but only one of the throwing knives and none of the shuriken. My spear, bow, and some of the arrows, but none of the javelins. Off to the side were four swans feather cloaks.

"Our father asks that you return these to their owners," Modi said, holding Eira so that she could see better. "We are to accompany you to Midgard to help carry these things for you." I folded my wings away as I located my cloak and put it on for a moment.

"The cloaks may be ceremonial outside of Valhalla," Magni said, "but let no one forget the valkyries and what they did for us." The boys helped me pack up the weapons and armor in sacks and we Bifrosted down to the embassy, where a cab was called for me. I put a couple of hangers together to support the weight of the cloak; the hangar I'd used for it was still at the mansion. I'd have to ask Alfred if he could locate it for me. I tucked it carefully into the back of the closet and left the others on the couch, texting the others to come get them when they had time. I didn't know whose was whose, but they'd know, just as I'd been able to pick my own cloak out of the pile. I didn't know what to do with the armor, though, so it stayed in its bag. I didn't know what I wanted to do with any of it, so I just placed the bags against the wall and got ready for my date with Damian.

We went to a classical music concert at Carnegie Hall, followed by a late dinner. He was charming and we caught up on each other's doings. He had me explain the tracker to him, asked how my therapy was going but didn't pry, and listened with interest about my visit to Asgard and the Norn.

"So Eira's going to be a pretty big girl," he said with amusement. "Were her parents nice?"

"Yes, although they judged me pretty thoroughly. They weren't happy that she chose to leave home, especially so young, but she's a pup who knows her own mind." He wanted to hear about my preparation for Columbia and told me about his work at the business. Stark was in business as an independent concern, press releases were about to go out from Wayne Enterprises, and apparently Howard Stark was livid he'd lost the opportunity. "Daniel said politely that the patents and trade secrets were not for sale to anyone. Howard's definitely going into weapons again. It's what he knows best."

"It's not going to be as easy going as he remembers," I said, finishing my dinner. "The mood of the world has changed, and even if it hadn't, there simply isn't the money for large arms purchases. Governments have to focus their attention and budgets to provide for all the returnees, and there's still cleanup going on in many places around the world from the rioting and all that happened during Ragnarok."

Damian smirked. "I'm positioning the new Stark Tech in a humanitarian light--once we get the ocean cleanup technology launched, Stark's going to start hiring for improvements in green energy, ways to improve freshwater quality and access globally...you know how he thinks. Howard's going to be eating his son's dust," Damian said with satisfaction.

"He's also going to start up with Iron Man again," I said, finishing my coffee. "Not as extensively as he did the first time around, but he does love it. Especially the flying. I think he's the only one going back to Avenging, and even he's kind of an Avengers Emeritus, letting the current roster handle most of it."
Damian swirled his tea in the cup. "Well, Dick and I are going to splinter off, do our own thing, which is a part-time thing. There are enough bats in the city," he said quietly.

"That's interesting," I said.

"Yeah, we're still affiliated with the main group, but independent. Team ups for big things, but otherwise we'll share facilities, subject to Daniel's conditions, of course, and that's about it. Nightwing's going to come back. I have to come up with a partner sort of name. Dick insists."

"Um.. Nightgown?" I proposed, and he laughed.

"Pass. Try again."


"Be serious," he said, laughing harder.


"Sounds a little feminine," he said.

"And Robin is so masculine?" I asked, teasing him a bit.

"Maybe Nightclubber isn't so bad after all," he said, smiling.

The banter continued as he walked me home. I kissed his cheek and did a subtle inhale. Damian always smelled good. Then I went over to retrieve Eira from Dagny, who had been providing company for the little dog. The other valkyries had gathered, had picked up their capes from my apartment and were hanging out at Dagny's. It was a group I was glad to join.

"I forgot to tell you, Magni wanted me to pass on a message from Thor," I said, laughing as I watched Serena tossing treats; Eira tried to catch them in her mouth. "We all have the right to travel between Asgard and Midgard whenever we want, and we're specifically invited up to celebrate Winternights."

"I forgot that was coming up," Carol said, rubbing her head. "I like Winternights. It's a good feast, not too rowdy. Is there going to be a Wild Hunt this year, or did we get it all out of our system before Ragnarok?"

I shuddered. "I'm not doing that again," Serena said. "Once was enough."

"Do we want to go up together?" Carol asked, and we agreed. I said I'd RSVP for us, and we chatted, getting up to date. The others were interested in hearing about my visit to the Norn and what they said about the tree. Then I remembered and told them that I'd volunteered them as potential rescuers in case my tracker went off.

"How likely is it, do you think?" Carol said stretching. "I'm only asking so I know if I'm expected to put in time on the treadmill."

"I'm not sure," I said, smiling at her. "My threat assessment is all messed up right now, but I think as I get better at screening the tree out, I'll get more normal. No jokes!" I warned, and Serena closed her mouth and grinned at me.

"We live weird lives," Dagny observed placidly. We agreed to go up to Asgard together for the
celebration, and the party disbanded. Eira 'chatted' on the way back to our apartment about the fun she'd had. Either I needed to get out more or I needed to have her socialize with others. We stopped in the grassy area and I threw a ball for her, letting her race around and burn off energy before going home.

A couple days later, during a phone call, Daniel said that the Ragnarok film was done and the director/documentarian had set up a screening for the producer, financier, possible distributors, and their guests. The family was invited, of course, and the valkyries. Formal invitations would be sent, but this was the heads-up.

"Um...I don't suppose that you could leave my parents off the list?" I asked hopefully. I couldn't imagine that they'd enjoy seeing it.

"No, Grandma," Daniel said firmly. "They'll see it sooner or later, anyway." I muttered a curse under my breath and he laughed. Heartless boy. "It is pretty graphic, though," he said, sobering. "Just a warning."

Great. Something to look forward to.

The invitations came the next day and were for the following week. In the interest of not looking like a bunch of valkyries, we dressed up and went separately. Eira seemed glad to miss it. I handed my invitation over to the bouncer at the door and ambled in to the small theater which had been rented for the occasion. My extended family was about a third of the crowd. I made sure to greet my parents first, then keep my distance. I had a feeling they were going to be mad at me when they saw what I did during the war. Waiters circulated with wine, beer, and water. I took a bottle of water and a beer.

The best surprise was that Uncle Bucky was back. I gave him a big hug. "I thought you were still in Hawaii," I said.

"It was pretty. Did you get my postcards?" I nodded. "Well, I went hiking, saw the volcano, tried surfing. It was fun. Got bored just sitting on the beach, looking out at the ocean. Made me realize that if anything happened, there's really nowhere to go. Tidal wave, enemy attack, earthquake--there's only so far you can go to escape." And there's a downer image for you.

"I'm glad you're back, anyway," I said, giving him another hug. He grinned.

"And miss this?" The grin slipped away. "I don't actually want to see it, but if it's going to be as big a thing as Daniel suggests, I'm not going to be able to avoid it. Best to know what it actually looks like." His voice was flat, kind of how I felt. I nodded, then greeted my kids. Thor, Loki, Torunn, and the embassy's lawyer arrived, followed by Damian, Daniel, and a woman I didn't know. The mystery was solved when she went to stand in front of the screen.

"Thank you all for coming this evening," she said. "Welcome to the premiere showing of 'Ragnarok,' which is a documentary of the recent events on Asgard." Her eyes darted to the king and prince royal of Asgard, and she cleared her throat. "If you'll please be seated, we'll start the screening."

Everybody dutifully filed into the rows of stadium seating with our drinks; I sat at the end of one of the rows, ready to make a quick escape if necessary. There wasn't any popcorn, but on the other hand, while this was an action flick, it wasn't going to be entertaining.

It opened with a long pan up one of the enormous trees of Asgard, followed by a view of Vigrior before anybody got there. The theater experience has changed significantly since I saw a movie in
my last lifetime. The screen was quiet and peaceful, the long green grasses waving gently in a breeze that blew through the theater as well. The smell of warm earth and vegetation steals through the air. "This is where it begins," the narrator said in a smooth voice. "The battle called Ragnarok. This is where, according to myth, that the Old Norse gods will battle the sons of Muspell, for the fate of the Nine Realms. And the gods will fall, one by one, until the fire giant Sutr causes an apocalypse that will wipe almost all life from the faces of all the worlds." The camera tracks slowly down to the the Bifrost bridge and out to the observatory. Those are some crazy good lenses on that camera. The narrator continues, explaining the prophesy. You can hear birdsong and leaves rustling in the breeze. The filmmaker had a fantastic view of the battleground; I even thought I knew which tree she was in; there had been a huge one that protruded slightly into the path that connected the bridge to Vigrior. Then there's silence once again, and the birdsong cuts off abruptly. The camera pans over onto Vigrior, and you can see Odin's army approaching. The camera zooms in and you can see Odin on his black horse Sleipnir, in beautiful golden armor that looks like something a prop department would make. The sun glints off Gungnir in his hand. His sons accompany him, one on each side of Sleipnir. Behind him walk the valkyries; we walked in a wedge like a spearhead, with Serena at the point. You can clearly see our faces, grim and determined-looking. We looked sharp; the colors we wore identified us as a distinct unit even though all our armor varied from one valkyrie to another. And behind us, Odin's host. The other gods, followed by the generals, the royal guard, the Asgardian guard. Baldur's hounds were right up with the gods, weaving in and out, pacing, snarling and focused. I didn't see Eira there, or any puppy, for that matter. The ranks were precise, every member of the guard in uniform. It is so highly stylized, in fact, that if you weren't there, you'd think it was a bunch of actors. There's the line of generals led by Frigga; I recognize Bucky and Steve as well as the older Viking generals. And the rumble as the siege engines are moved into place behind our lines.

Odin draws closer, then halts in the gap in the trees. Things happen as I remember them. The camera follows Loki and Torunn as they leave Odin's side and start for Yggdrasil. Oddly, the filmmaker doesn't seem to understand that this is the World Tree or what its significance is. You can see us all getting ready; the formations are broken for the preparation. I can see myself take my weapons into the trees after putting on my blades, returning with the javelins. The formations are restored, and you can see the tension and readiness on every face. The camera sweeps down the ranks, capturing expressions.

Then the powerful note as Heimdall blows the horn. My chair vibrates with the sound. The camera pivots smoothly, and you can clearly see the churning of the space around the observatory, turning ugly. Black and boiling. And it splits. A huge fire giant on a hellish steed, with a flaming sword. Sutr steps out onto the Bifrost bridge. My fingernails grip the armrests.
Screening

The narration quietly identifies key players and units in both armies, continuing like play-by-play for a ball game. I felt dread again as the spill of sullen darkness like magma flows over the Bifrost bridge toward us. Their war banners flutter fitfully in the breeze, the deep drums mark their advance. A quick look at our army shows us immobile, barely seeming to breathe, as Sutr leads his forces up the rise toward us. Then the first show of nerves by the filmmaker: the camera cut swiftly to note the arrival of the ghostly ship bearing the dishonored dead. Hel was at the helm, guiding the ship as it sailed over the ground. Lines were flung over the side and villains of the Nine Realms swarmed over and down, joining the advance against our defenders. The sun shone bright and strong on us. Odin holds up Gungnir and the siege engines grind to life, flinging loads of projectiles that fragment on impact, drawing out screams of agony from the enemy. Sutr slows and halts a decent distance from us. He and Odin regard each other, then Odin signals: Sutr then hails his archers in response. I hadn't seen that the first time, and it might help explain why their casualty count was higher than ours from the arrows. We were more prepared.

The camera zooms in and you can see the hail of arrows embedding in our shields or bouncing off. After the arrows cease, we bring our shields down and break off the arrows. Then the berserkers come forward, pushing us to the side; the first disharmony in our ranks. They mill around in front of Odin, who gives the command to fire javelins. Fortunately, my back is toward the filmmaker since I'm righthanded and she's to the left. A quick pan of Sutr's forces show a few fire giants fallen, more wounded. Then the berserkers scream.

It still makes my hair stand straight up. The filmmaker almost drops the camera, recovering it with a muttered "fuck." The invaders shriek back, but the sound is higher and lighter than I remember, less fear-inducing than the berserkers. The filmmaker mutters "oh, Jesus," as the berserkers rip into the Muspell lines, and it's a prayer for protection rather than a curse. The filmmaker can't quite believe what she's seeing, for the camera swings between the valkyries proceeding to the rear and the berserkers ripping armor off, sinking fingers into flesh and tearing; the camera mostly stays with the berserkers. You can tell when the first of us launch, though, because the camera turns to us abruptly. "What the fuck?" she breathes as the camera focuses on us. You can see us circling, getting altitude and speed until we're all in the air, then the camera tracks us as we arrow for the front, a roar of approval in our wake. You can see one of the lead valkyries dive at Sutr, drawing first blood, raising another roar from the Asgardians. Then the valkyries break their formation to avoid projectiles, and disappear from view.

Now there are things I hadn't seen. After the valkyries deploy, the generals come forward and receive their orders. The gods are the shock troops and crash into the vanguard of the enemy. I see Steve get his orders and jog back to a unit of the royal guard. Bucky receives his orders and follows suit. The generals report to their units and begin their work. Some filter into the trees, but the mass of them advance, each with a section of the line to engage. Thor leads a group to intercept Sutr. Then the serious screaming begins as being on both sides get injured or killed. Slow or fast. The noise is incredible, and a coppery tang perfuses the air. Then the camera sees specks in the air and zooms in to see the returning valkyries. And a valkyrie falls from the sky. Brynhildr. The spear that punched into her is sickeningly visible.

You can see me take another slice of Sutr, then we landed around Odin. You can see we're not as immaculate as when we left; there's blood on us, ours and theirs, but our armor is still in good shape. Audio is turned up to the max, and I can hear Odin again, receiving our reports, sending runners to adjust the line of battle. Then the cry of Fenrir. Guttural, primal, savage. All our heads snap up, and an expression of resignation crosses Odin's face. Eir goes aloft, flies away, returns.
Her face is frozen as she reports on the advance of the great wolf. Odin gives us our last orders. There's a pause I don't remember before we salute him again and turn for the rear. I can see me detour and come back laden with weapons. I've got the quivers on my back, a bow too, and my hands are filled with spears. Once more the valkyries streak up the field, following Odin, before one throws spears at the wolf, and they fly on.

For the first time I see Odin's final moments. The clash with the massive wolf, foam dripping from its jaw, is brutal and short. Horse and rider work in concert, and Odin is thrown from Sleipnir's back when the horse is brought down with a deep slash of long sharp claws raking across his belly, gutting him. Odin screams in rage and inflicts grave wounds on the wolf; the Asgardian royal guard closes in to assist as Fenrir snaps his jaw shut on Odin and shakes him like a toy. You can see the precise moment that the life leaves his body. He flings Odin aside and bats Christy, one of the youngest valkyries, out of the air with his massive paw. The guards howl and strike the weakened wolf. Even with almost two dozen men on the attack, seventeen of them join Odin in death before Fenrir draws his last breath. I barely register the filmmaker cursing softly. The camera skitters over the battlefield as the fighting settles into a routine. There I am, bowstring around the neck of a fire giant, my wings beating hard as I pull back, the flesh surrendering to the force. I fall back as the bowstring slides through flesh and blood fountains out in a sick gush. I remember this one; the bow string got caught in the spine and I had to abandon it. The filmmaker is reduced to whimpering as the camera cuts to other valkyries wielding their swords from the air, units of guardsmen working together to defeat the fire giants or those from Niflheim. Everywhere you look is chaos and blood and fire as Sutr lights the forest with his sword. Acrid smoke joins the overwhelming smell of blood and the lesser smell of shit from bowels that released at death. Baldur's dogs dart in and out, bringing down invaders on their own and ripping them apart or helping the guard. The camera jolts around, catching moments here or there but not following anything through to the conclusion anymore.

Valkyries still circle, but you can tell we're getting tired. I see Irene go down, dashed out of the sky by one of Sutr's lieutenants. And more are brought down by projectiles. Including me. I see the arrow rip into my wing and my crash landing. Iron Man appears, using his repulsors against the fire giants before landing somewhere out of camera range. Then a few winged horses take the sky. The filmmaker inhales sharply. "What are they--where did they get--" The filmmaker finds a new branch of the tree and films the battle already in progress: Thor against the massive serpent. The track of the snake is clear; its venom kills all vegetation where it lands. "What on earth is he wearing?" The filmmaker sounds baffled at the sight of Thor in his Tyvek suit. Then the valkyries join the battle and I see the effect of our diversions from a different angle. We draw the serpent off balance by raising its center of gravity as it tries to strike at us, and Thor darts in, a vicious backswing of his sword slicing halfway through its body. Then he called the lightning to finish off the monster.

The camera follows us over to Sutr. Unbelievably, you can see little Eira following us too before the camera outpaces her. All hell breaks loose. I'm dumped from my horse, but fortunately for my family, you can't see my landing. The fire and smoke helps to obscure the fighting. Individual battles fade in and out of view. There's an awful second where you can see some fire giants kicking me around like a soccer ball, wings obviously broken, before it was mercifully veiled by the smoke again. Freyr slashes his sword through Sutr's abdomen, vulnerable from damage to his armor, and it looks like Sutr is mortally wounded. Then Freyr, Sutr's equal for a brief time, is slain by the last act of the dying giant, decapitated. His death whips the remaining Asgardians into a fury, and the last fire giants go down under their swords. I become aware of the filmmaker mixing curses with what she can remember of prayers. Right now she's stumbling through the Lord's Prayer, soon to butcher the Hail Mary.

There's a brief silence, oppressive, as we realize that there are no more foes on the field. Then
there's a guttural roar of victory, a moment to savor the impossible, before our forces start checking the fallen. The few sons of Muspell who live soon don't, and you can see their corpses turn to coals and crumble into ash. Cloaks are ripped up for bandages, and teams of fighters turn into corpsmen, taking the wounded back to the citadel. I see Magni and Modi hauling ass carrying someone in Magni's cloak. You can't see me, but there's a growing bloodstain on the bottom. They join the stream of those going to meet the healers who have come out of the citadel to do triage.

The camera leaves the wounded and catches up with other citizens of Asgard who are coming to help with the wounded, put out the fires, and clear the battlefield. The narrator explains quietly that the activity continues through the night, and we're only shown snippets. The sun comes up on the smoking ruins of the forest and a large portion of Vigriör and the helpers who have worked through the night. The honored dead of Asgard are taken off to the lake in the distance, where they will be placed in boats and immolated.

The camera slowly pans past the carnage of the battlefield to the undamaged field, the blades of grass heavy with dew, then fades out gently.

The brief credits roll, and the lights come up.

I swipe at my cheeks, grateful that my makeup doesn't run, and take deep breaths to steady myself. Before I can do anything more, the filmmaker stands and turns around. "Thank you for attending this viewing of "Ragnarok," a powerful film that explores the meaning of myth and the compelling nature of belief." She draws breath to blather on further, but a man in a nice suit comes to the front of the theater.

"You Melanie Kipp?" She smiles at him.

"I am. I--"

"You've been served," he interrupts her, shoving a bundle of papers at her before turning and leaving. Her jaw drops, and she looks down at the document and up at his back. This unusual activity seems to put the evening to an end, and people start to stand. I pry myself out of the seat but before I can do anything else, my parents are there. My mom grabs me tight, wiping tears off her face too. My dad just shakes his head and joins the hug before gently disengaging my mom and leading her away. I'm not fooled, though, there's another conversation in my future.

I find the other valkyries, and we cling together for moral support. Then we huddle, talking quietly. "I didn't remember it being that bad," Dagny mutters, and our heads nod in unison.

"She's looking over here," Serena observed, and we all whipped around to glare at her. She has a look of dawning recognition on her face, and it takes all my self-restraint not to go over to her and threaten to rip out her spine. Or maybe just rip out her spine.

Loki joins us. "Are you all right?" he asks us all, looking at us with compassion.

"I didn't ever think I'd have to see that again," Carol said. Serena puts her arm around her supportively. "To see Odin die like that--"

"I didn't see that when it happened," I say, and heads nod again.

"He believed he would fall and did not want the valkyries to see," Thor said, joining us. I have to scrub my cheeks again. "I have filed a 'lawsuit' to halt distribution of this 'film.' It was made illegally. The battle of Ragnarok is not to be gaped at, and certainly not to be profited from."

"You could see our faces clearly," Carol said tightly. "With facial recognition, our identities will be
out there right after the first public showing."

"We can join the lawsuit," I said grimly. Thor beckoned the lawyer over and we got his card along with an appointment first thing the next morning.

Bucky, Emma, and Steve joined us. The men looked furious, and Emma was white-faced. She'd been in the rear the whole time and hadn't seen the carnage as it had happened. Our enlarged group glared at the filmmaker again and she started to look worried.

"It's bad enough that this film was ever made, but you can identify so many people," Bucky fretted. "Alex and the other women are going to be looked at like freaks if this is released. It won't matter whether or not they currently have the wings." Arrangements were made for them to join the meeting tomorrow.

"There's an injunction to keep her from dumping the film on the internet or making it public in any way," the lawyer said briskly. "It keeps a lid on it until the matter can be heard in court. I have spoken with her personally to be sure she understands that."

Daniel joined us, looking disturbed. "She'll violate the injunction if she's worried enough about the lawsuit," he said. "This film will make her name in film, it's the career opportunity of a lifetime. But only if it's seen. It'll probably be worth any amount of fines to get it out to an audience." He looked around. "I'm sorry. This new cut is a lot more intense and detailed than the first one I was shown." All I could do was look at him bleakly.

I had a restless night, and I was exhausted when we met at the lawyer's office at seven. They other valkyries looked to be in the same condition and I have rarely been more grateful than I was for the coffee than an associate brought in for us. That tipped me to the importance of our lawsuit; a paralegal or legal secretary usually gets the coffee, not a lawyer. Legally, it was going to be an epic case, the first one involving the rights of an interstellar entity. It was probably going to go to the Supreme Court. Looked like this film was going to be career-making for more than one person.

The lawyers tastefully didn't dwell on that, and got down to our expectation of privacy. They believed that we did have a reasonable expectation of privacy since the battle was never meant to be recorded by either side and it took place on a completely different planet where most Midgardians were not allowed to set foot. Those who did enjoyed the confidence of Asgard's rulers and a mutual trust.

"I have to be honest, however," the lead lawyer said, rubbing his eyes. He was Clark Andrews, the lead partner of the well-respected firm of Andrews, Early, and Lee. "This film is going to be released, one way or another, legally or not. The filmmaker's ambition and the money that can be made from it will make it attractive to distributors, and I have heard a rumor that a number of prints of the film have been made and are ready to be shown. All she has to do is put them into the hands of theater owners, and the rest..." He shook his head. "Realistically, the most we can do is set precedent for the future and try to contain the damage with this film." He shook his head. "I'm sorry we can't do more," he said to us. "We talk about the law being a sword and a shield, but seeing that film last night made me very aware that this is just a vague metaphor. A real sword and shield would be much more useful."

"And this is pro forma, but we must officially caution you against attempting a more direct personal solution to the problem," Amelia Early said briskly, sweeping all the complainants with a gaze. "I didn't see the movie, but from what Clark said, all of you are formidable warriors who could cause a lot of damage with very little effort. You may be served with restraining orders if she figures out who you are, and I would advise you not to fight them. Just stay away from Ms Kipp. Don't even make so much as eye contact with her if you see her. Don't give her a reason to make
"There is an emergency hearing this afternoon," Kim Lee said with a sigh. "We have amended our filing to include the complainants Ann Doe, Betty Doe, Cathy Doe, and Donna Doe," she nodded to us. "Given the practical difficulties of suppressing this film as discussed by Clark, we need to focus on what remedies we will be asking. Amelia and I have only heard Clark's description of the content of the recording, however, and one thing I need to understand is that there is the implication that you ladies actually have wings?" The four of us looked at each other uncomfortably. "As our clients" we'd signed representation agreements prior to the start of the meeting and I'd paid the retainer for all of us "whatever is said in this meeting is privileged and confidential."

"We used to," Serena said reluctantly, after a pause. "But because we got our powers directly from Odin, when he died, our wings went away."

"I still have mine," I said after debating whether to lie by omission.

"What?" Lee said, startled.

"The mechanism works differently for me. I still have mine." The three lawyers, plus a couple more associates looked astounded and excited.

"May we see?" Early asked, and after another hesitation, took off my suit coat and reluctantly extended my wings into an electrified silence. Well, electrified from the lawyers, anyway. It was no big deal for the rest of us.

"My god," breathed Andrews.

"You can see why I don't want it to get out that I still have these," I said pointedly. "You people are looking at me like I'm a freak. Imagine what others will do." The lawyers looked only slightly abashed.

"Why are some of the feathers different colors?" one of the associates asked, and I put the wings away self-consciously.

"The little gray feathers are all that's left after the battle," Dagny said in a hard voice. "We had to imp the rest on." That sparked an explanation of feather care. I was asked if they could see the wings again, and they moved the feathers gently to see the scar tissue underneath. When I'd had enough, the wings went away again and everybody sat down.

"My niece is not a freak," Bucky said in a dead flat voice that was starting to acquire the tinge of a Russian accent. The lawyers looked at him nervously as he patted my hand where it rested on the table. The interesting organometallic substance of his left hand caught the light in the conference room.

"We understand," Andrews said to him. "And I especially want to warn you to keep your distance from the documentarian. Your reputation is going to hurt you if anything happens to her." Uncle Bucky shook his head curtly.

The meeting was steered into safer channels, namely what we wanted as a remedy. Thor wanted all recordings and copies destroyed, and alternatively, jail time for trespass and illegal entry into a sovereign nation, and forfeiture of all profits from the film.

"What do you ladies want?" Andrews asked us politely. We'd put our heads together as Thor made suggestions that tended to end with the filmmaker fried by lightning.
"We want all frames that show any living valkyries excised from the final version of the film and all of those images destroyed from all recordings, copies, or any images taken from the recordings," I said in a steely tone. "Additionally, you can see my dog in a few seconds of the film. Those have to go too." The other valkyries nodded.

"You have one of those dogs?" Andrews said, sounding a little faint.

"Yes. She adopted me after the battle. She's still quite young, and she needs to be protected," I said with resolve. The other valkyries added their support to this.

"Additionally, I want damages for emotional distress," Serena said, scowling. "I didn't sleep last night, and I'm going to have to go back into therapy for this. She knew it would be upsetting for people to watch. That's why she's so excited. Fucking ghoul."

"Oh, that's a good addition," one of the associates said, scribbling something down. "Negligent and intentional infliction of emotional distress--"

"Get on it," Lee said, and the associate ran out of the room. Other associates received assignments to look up case law and precedents and left.

"We're going to rewrite the law on privacy and free speech," Lee muttered with relish, nodding to us and leaving to start rewriting the complaint to include our grievances.

"And what do Captain America and the Winter Soldier want?" Andrews asked. "Because there's an argument to be made that you're public figures and have a reduced expectation of privacy."

"I disagree with that," Steve said. Andrews raised an eyebrow. "We were Avengers, but that was before we died. We've been leading private lives since our return. We're not superheroes anymore." Bucky agreed.

"We're going to be writing new law on returnee's rights," Early said, and got up to leave. "Fortunately, this is just a hearing on the injunction. We've got time to polish this up for the filing of the formal complaint."

"All right," Andrews said. "It would also help me if I had a better understanding of Ragnarok, what it was supposed to do, how it was supposed to happen, whose fault it was." Loki related the prophesy for him. Even with full details, it didn't take too long. Andrews finished his notes, then looked up, puzzled. "So why didn't this happen?"

Loki grinned at me. I sighed and related my conversations with the Norn. Then I had to explain who the Norn were and that their relationship to Yggdrasil was. And the importance of the World tree.

"They sound like witches," he muttered. "Frankly, I'm uncomfortable with the supernatural aspects of all this." I rolled my eyes.

"It's just magic," I said crisply. "And magic is just science we don't understand yet." Thor grinned at me. "The Norn were originally frost giants, they're not bizarre new life forms."

"But haven't they changed during their association with this tree?"

"They have," I acknowledged. "But that's an evolution, not a creation. For gods sake, they like chocolate. How weird can they be?"

"Pretty weird," Serena said, her voice bubbling with mirth. "You didn't tell him about the swans."
"Swans?" Andrews asked warily.

"Yeah," I said in resignation. "They don't like me. Skuld keeps them as pets or something. They associate me with the creation of the feather capes that are a symbol of the valkyries. Apparently she made the original cape with their feathers. They hold a grudge." Andrews rubbed his eyes. "One bit me," I volunteered the information. "They're pretty hostile. If you see them, you should back away, put your hands in your pockets for safety. But they also made a big fuss and got me treatment after the battle, so I guess maybe I owe them." I thought about that briefly. "Next time I go visit the Norn, maybe I should bring some swan chow or something." The other valkyries burst out laughing.

"This is not a matter for levity," Andrews chided us. "If that even happened."

I scowled at him. "Oh, it's real. I have the x-ray to prove it. Believe it or not. The facts don't change regardless of your personal belief." I leaned back and crossed my arms. He looked at me cautiously and grunted, moving on.

When we finally got out of the meeting, I found Damian waiting at the curb with a pod. Although he offered to see the other valkyries home, they had other destinations and scattered. Inside the pod were heaps of flowers: iris (wisdom and valor), gladioli (flower of the gladiators), white heather (protection), lots of ferns (shelter), red carnations (admiration), and a box that contained a head of garlic (courage, strength) and packets of flower seeds: nasturtiums (victory in battle, conquest), white poppies (consolation), violets (watchfulness). There was a box I'd almost overlooked of red rosebuds (pure and lovely). I snapped off some leaves and handed them to him (you may hope). Then I looked back at the box with the garlic and seeds and started to laugh. He joined me, and helped me carry everything up to my apartment when we got there. After Eira was greeted ( he had a nice meaty bone for her in a cold bag) I thanked him for the flowers, then put my arms around him and dropped my head to his shoulder. He sighed and put his arms around me, then asked how the meeting went. "Oh, my darling," he said. "The things that happen to you."

He said that if I wanted to take a nap, he'd wake me up in time for lunch before the hearing, so I pried myself on the bed and fell in face down. I felt Eira settle in with me and went to sleep I woke up to find stew on the stove and all the flowers in vases around the apartment, with the rosebuds by the bed. I smiled at him, and Eira and I got up for lunch. During the meal, he offered to take Eira to the park after they dropped me off at the courthouse for the hearing. Eira looked hopeful, so I thanked him for his thoughtfulness, and for lunch and fixing all the flowers.

"The garlic was a bit much," I said, then grinned.

"I couldn't find any garlic in bloom," he said, shrugging. "And you can put it to good use." He offered to do the dishes while I got ready, and I accepted with alacrity before grooming and dressing in a black suit with white blouse. I slipped into a hoody to help obscure my face once inside the courthouse. As we walked out to the pod, I noticed that Eira's back now came about a third of the way up my thigh.

"You're growing, baby," I said to her, and she yipped and her tail wagged.

"How tall will she get?" Damian asked.

"Her mom is a little bigger than Torburn, her dad about the same size. So she's got some growing to do." I waved goodbye as the pod scooted away from the courthouse, then went in. After passing through the scanner, I flipped my hood up and found the courtroom, waiting for the judge to call our case. I joined the lawyers and Thor; the other valkyries and my uncles joined us shortly. All of us had hoodies. Melanie Kipp and her lawyers arrived just as the case before us wrapped up. They
vacated, and the bailiff called us forward. Our lawyers explained the situation, adding on a gag order to protect our privacy. As expected, the lawyers for Kipp argued strenuously against both the gag order and the injunction against promoting or releasing the film. The judge heard both sides, asking pointed questions of both, and affirmed the injunction against the film and granted the gag order, expanding it to prohibit Kipp or her associates from trying to identify us for any purpose.

"The issues that will be raised are real, novel, and substantial," she said to Kipp and her lawyers. "I will not have you undermining the integrity of the legal process for personal gain. You may not promote or distribute your film in any manner, in any forum, until the matter is litigated."

"Your Honor, that could take years," one of the lawyers objected. "Interest in the subject matter is high now. My client stands to lose a lot of money from the delay."

"She should have thought about that before sneaking into what is at least a foreign country illegally," the judge said crisply. Then she turned to our side and approved restraining orders against all complainants. Kipp smirked over at us. I restrained myself from flipping her off and looked forward with a bored expression.

"Your Honor, I object. My clients were members of the armed forces of Asgard, but they are not uncontrollably violent. They have full faith and confidence in the legal system and are committed to having their day in court." The judge hesitated, and amended the restraining orders to expire after three weeks, which she felt would give us all plenty of time to cool down. The smirk dropped off the filmmaker's face and came up on mine. Deadlines for filing the formal complaint were discussed; the judge said that we couldn't use the usually ponderous legal system to drag out the lawsuit and took input from the lawyers about how long it would take to file, then set a date. It was sooner than our lawyers would like, but a lot longer than Kipp's lawyers were pressing for, so I guess it was a good compromise. Then our hearing was over. "I expect that they might do some forum shopping to get this heard sooner, so we need to be prepared for that. She might go on the offensive and sue us first, so the situation is fluid and we need to be prepared," Early warned us. I sighed when I was on the sidewalk. The pod containing Eira and Damian appeared. My uncles said they'd call later, and after hugs, the valkyries separated to do their own thing.

I filled Damian and Eira in on the proceedings. "I need to get a security system for my apartment that shows my coming and goings. Just in case anything happens to that woman, I need to be able to alibi myself." I'd also offer to get ones for the other valkyries. We needed to be smart and careful.

"Well, in the interest of an alibi, there's time for a massage," Damian suggested. "And I'd like to take you and Eira out to dinner." My pup perked up, so I agreed to it, and soon we were in a spa, and my tight muscles were getting pummeled. Eira curled up in the corner, having no interest in this part of the plan, but brightened up when it was time for dinner. We went to a French restaurant with a heated patio for dogs and their people, and had a pleasant, relaxing dinner. He drove us home and escorted us to the door.

"Thank you for today, Damian," I said, and brushed my lips over his.

"My pleasure, Alex," he said, grinning. He gave Eira a farewell skritch, and turned back to the pod after we were safe inside the building.
The next few weeks passed pretty quietly. I found some security systems that were adequate for what we needed for our apartments and we took a day and installed them. The gals weren't thrilled about it, but understood the need for an alibi in the event we might need them. We placed the cameras very carefully so that they showed just enough of the doors to identify anyone coming in or out and made sure the time and date stamps were on. Aslyn, Margaret, and Karen were aghast by all this and very supportive. My friends are the best.

Not long after our appearance in court, there was a bit at the end of the late night news about Nightwing's new partner. I snapped to attention and Eira raised her pretty head. She was going through a definite growth spurt. "Vigilante superhero Nightwing seems to have acquired a new partner," the female news anchor said, fanning herself. The camera hastily shifted to a citizen recording of Dick in all his glory, his costume (unlike most) leaving pretty much nothing to the imagination. It was superlative eye candy. You could tell that there was zero padding involved. Then another figure in black landed by Dick, and I started to laugh. Neither of them wore capes, showing off their excellent butts to the viewing public. They seemed to be arguing. I laughed harder. Then they turned, and I was relieved to see it looked like Damian at least wore a cup. But otherwise, his costume clung to his muscles every bit as coyly as Dick's did. Damian had his sword on his back and a utility belt. Dick didn't have a belt, but he did have some equipment attached to the costume at the small of his back. Then the guys caught sight of the citizen recording them. Dick grinned, winking behind his domino. Damian looked self-conscious and tugged at his costume a little. The costume didn't have much give. Even Eira snorted in amusement. "Who are you?" a female voice asked, a little breathlessly.

"Nightwing at your service," Dick said cockily. "This is my partner, Nightgown. You can call him Nightie for short." Damian growled, and I howled.

"Oh, did you decide against that? This is Nightingale, then." Damian shoved Dick, who was laughing.

"Nightfall," he growled. The woman behind the camera giggled. Damian glared at Dick and jumped off the roof. Dick, still laughing, waved to the camera and followed. The camera zoomed in on his butt before it disappeared.

"And Gotham has another protector," the anchor said, a trifle breathlessly.

"If they're not careful, there's going to be a wave of petty crime just so they can be picked up by those two," the sports anchor said, looking like she might join them. The male anchor just laughed and bid goodnight to the audience.

I watched the late night show that followed, not as much for the political commentary or the guests—Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig, Ty Cobb, Joe DiMaggio. Ted Williams, Hank Aaron, Roberto Clemente, Shoeless Joe Jackson, Reggie Jackson, Willie Mays, Barry Bonds, Cy Young, and Joe Morgan, who were discussing the formation of the Hall of Fame league, designed to settle, forever, the endless discussions of fans about how players from different eras would stack up against each other in head-to-head competition. There were similar adjustments going on in football, basketball and hockey as well. Soccer had one too, but it was drawn from superlative players all over the world and under the aegis of FIFA; it would travel and take on national teams. The Hall of Fame leagues had two teams (football) and six for hockey, basketball, and baseball. The teams would play each other and teams in the active NHL, NBA, NLB, and NFL. These leagues had acquired the feel of minor league teams almost overnight. The athletes were training to modern standards,
and even non-sports fans were excited to see the initial results. I was interested, of course, but more than that I didn't really want to go to sleep. I'd had the worst nightmare ever shortly after the hearing. The modern cinema experience triggered a lot, plus when you're actually fighting, your focus is tight, your adrenaline zinging through you, and I hadn't noticed nearly as much as I'd seen on screen. The horrors of war were brutal and moved much more slowly than I'd experienced at the time. Plus I hadn't seen what had happened after I'd lost consciousness. Eira had had to wake me up, and I'd been dripping sweat and tangled in the bedclothes. I'd still been shaking even after a shower and the diversion of changing the bed. My therapist had set me up with a different therapist who specialized in combat-related trauma in veterans, and my progress had been swift in the little time I'd been working with him. But I was still reluctant to sleep.

On Halloween, I went up to Asgard using the Bifrost with my friends, aunt and uncles, and Eira for Winternights. It's normally a little wild, kind of like Carnivale, since it's the beginning of the winter season, a celebration of a successful harvest and a time of increased leisure. This year, though, it was more sober, with more emphasis on the honored dead and divination after the events of Ragnarok had marked us. The veils between the planes of existence are thin at this time of year. Together we focused or attentions to the pleasures of hearth and home, a good harvest, the celebration of kinship and friendship, led by Frigga. Hela and the Norn were honored in remembrance of the fallen and the power of fate, and offerings made. The four of us from Midgard and the valkyries who had settled on Asgard made a trek out to the World Tree. We brought chocolates for the Norn and a selection of snails, grains, and vegetables for the swans. The others made me give the swans their treat, the jerks. Like I haven't dealt with them enough. Still, I owed my life to them, at least in part, so I placed our offering where Skuld indicated. They weren't a bit grateful, but they did dive right in. They seemed to like the snails best. It had started to snow on Asgard, the beginning of a normal winter, and our visit wasn't long but seemed appreciated. I also brought some boxes of Milk Bones for Eira's family--she was certain that they'd like them, and after a dubious moment where they crunched in to be polite, they did get a lot more enthusiastic. I felt a little guilty that their daughter was so far from home, but I'd grown to rely on her love and companionship. I toyed with the idea of trying to get into Valhalla again, but I didn't feel stable enough to see Odin and the others just then. I didn't doubt that I could do it; I was the only one of the valkyries who could still move around the Nine Realms at will. Maybe next year.

The next day, Damian came up to get me for a date. We were going to go out to the manor for a family dinner, my first since Xander's deception had been uncovered. I let him into the apartment and gave him a kiss. My lips curved against his before I pulled back slightly. "Nightgown. It's good to see you, darling," I said, before bursting out into laughter.

"Dick," he said in disgust, rolling his eyes. I just laughed harder, and Eira made the funny little snorty/chuckly sounds she makes to indicate amusement. He regained his good mood on the road to the mansion, though, even when I teased him about the fit of the costume.

"Rides up a bit in the back," he noted, then changed the subject as I chuckled. Our daughter was still in London, thriving there running the company branch, but my parents came for dinner, along with Thomas and Martha Sr, Dick and Barbara, Xander and Bruce. Daniel got me settled on a sofa and Mark sat beside me, cutting out Damian. I hadn't had much opportunity to get to know him, so I enjoyed the chat. The beating he'd suffered had created nerve damage that might not be reparable even with modern technology, meaning that he might always have to use the cane. He was ok about it, though. We looked over, breaking off our conversation, when Damian shoved Dick. Dick was laughing. I shook my head, grinning.

"Boys!" Bruce barked.

"What's that about?" Mark asked.
"Did you catch the late night news on CBS the other night?" I asked.

"No, I'm usually in bed by then. I prefer early mornings to late nights these days," he said, eyes twinkling. I smiled.

"They had some footage shot by a civilian," I said, starting to laugh. "Dick and Damian. The woman shooting the video asked who Damian was, and Dick ran through a few...unapproved code names." Mark started to laugh too.

"I'll have to find that on the internet," he said, chuckling. Then Alfred came to call us for dinner, and I grabbed him for a hug as I passed. Dinner was delicious, of course. On the way back to the library afterward for coffee, I found myself walking next to Bruce, who held me outside the library for a moment, offering a heartfelt if awkward apology for causing the rift between me and my son and husband.

"I never stopped to consider that you might feel differently," he said humbly (a significant achievement for Bruce). "I'm sorry for the damage and hurt I caused to you." I had to accept the apology, and as he escorted me over to a sofa where Damian was accepting his tea from Alfred, I asked his opinion on the Hall of Fame baseball league. He lit up. "I've got season tickets," he said eagerly. Then he glanced at me sideways. "Would you like to go to a few games with me?" he asked.

"Thank you," I said. "I'm looking forward to seeing Ty Cobb's ferocious style of play, and of course I want to see Lou Gehrig. Even when he was deteriorating from ALS, he managed to fend off other first basemen on the team who went on to start for other teams, unlike Cal Ripkin, who played for a pretty mediocre Baltimore team."

"They're still deciding whether to put all the former Yankees on one team or not," Damian contributed as Alfred handed me a coffee cup with several macarons perched on the saucer. Damian looked at the two on his saucer before looking at Alfred pointedly. Alfred ignored him and handed Bruce a snifter of brandy. "I'm torn between wanting to see the ultimate Yankees lineup versus some of the Yankee greats plus some others. But the pitching is what's really holding my interest. How will the pitchers hold up against modern day hitters."

"There's room for a lot of movement," Bruce pointed out. "The players sign with the Hall of Fame team as a single entity, and can be assigned and reassigned to different locations in order to provide the best sport. They're currently thinking to start with all-star lineups made up of the best of the Yankees, Red Sox, the Cubs and White Sox on one team--that ought to be fun--and the other three teams with the best of the rest, then mix up the rosters more." There were set to be teams in New York, Chicago, Boston, Detroit, Los Angeles, and Phoenix. Others joined our conversation and the discussion broadened to all the sports. Martha was eager to see Joe Montana against Terry Bradshaw. I couldn't wait to see Patrick Roy face off against the scoring greats not just from his playing years but also Marcel Dionne, Gordie Howe, Stan Mikita, and Rocket Richard. Damian was practically salivating to see Pele, Maradona, Messi, the Ronaldos, Zidane, Cruyff, Beckenbauer, Zico.

"Not Beckham? Gerrard? Rooney?" I twitted him, and he just rolled his eyes and sipped his tea, stealing one of my macarons. I frowned and moved my saucer to my other side. Xander sat on the floor with Eira, who was accepting him provisionally as long as the petting didn't stop.

It was a good evening.

Damian took me home, giving me a box of lush red roses in full bloom. I pulled one out, cut the stem off with a pocket knife, and threaded it through the lapel of his suit coat. I felt a little giddy as
he walked me up to the door. We kissed, and it felt like coming home. "Sweet dreams," he whispered, and held the door for me and Eira.

And I did have sweet dreams.

The rest of the week was taken up by preparation for and a deposition for the lawsuit--I had to identify the frames of the footage where I was visible, and this necessitated seeing some of the movie again. At least they only showed the scenes with the valkyries and I had to answer questions about how I had become a valkyrie. They only asked questions about how it had happened in the first place, and I made a mental note to ask everybody not to volunteer any information about how the bond was taken away and restored. There were questions about Ragnarok and the events leading up to it. Opposing counsel jumped on my conversations with the Norn. My lawyers advised me when not to answer or what to limit my answers to, and after a few hours, it was over, but I was shaken. Eira, too big now to sit on my lap and sporting a larger service dog vest, helped to keep me calm and focused. I also identified the few frames that showed her. No way did I want her to be singled out and maybe targeted. Her fur was darkening as she got bigger, though, which was a help. We passed Serena on the way out; she was up next. I muttered my request not to bring up my bond, and she gave me a reproving look. I grimaced an apology, and she patted me on the back as she went in. I called the other two for brief conversations, not wanting the information to be seen in texts or in voicemail.

I stood on the pavement a moment, wishing for some warming summer sun, but instead, snow sifted down gently. Eira looked stoic, and we turned for home. I felt shaky, my nerves and temper inflamed from even the little of the movie I saw again. "Alex," someone called, and I turned to see Tony, Ann, and Damian in suits, looking official.

"What happened?" Ann asked, concerned. She gave me a hug. "You look wiped out."

"Deposition for the lawsuit," I said tensely.

"You ok, Tiger?" Tony asked.

"It was just unpleasant," I said. He looked at me skeptically.

"Uh-huh."

"I had to watch the scenes from the movie that showed valkyries and identify if I saw myself." I shuddered, and Tony put his hand on my shoulder. "They asked questions about how I became a valkyrie, what we did, how we trained, how we prepared for Ragnarok, Ragnarok, all that."

"I'm sure they were interested in how Odin chose his valkyries," Tony said neutrally.

"Yeah, I had to explain about how I impressed him on the battlefield. Fortunately, they weren't very interested in the scrimmages. I think they were expecting some big ceremony or something." Tony's kind eyes glittered, and I knew he got what I was trying to communicate. I didn't want my different abilities known. If they didn't ask, I didn't want anybody dropping information. "What are you guys doing?"

"We just signed the lease on the new premises," Ann said, and I shook my head. I'd been invited, but I couldn't make it because of the depo.

"Right. I swear I'd forget my head if it weren't attached."

"Well, there's a little office for you there as a partner," Tony said briskly. I started to protest and he cut me off. "You get an office even if you don't expect to be there much. It is the smallest one,
though." He made me laugh.

"They're going back to get ready for the move," Damian said, brushing hair off my cheek. "Would you like to go to a late lunch? I'm already packed." He looked smugly at Ann and Tony. Tony rolled his eyes and sighed.

"Back to the grindstone," he said, patting my shoulder and offering Ann his arm. She gave me a smile and they walked away. Damian stepped up and folded me into his arms, and I let myself relax for a moment.

"You're still trembling," he said in concern. "Let's get some takeout and I'll walk you home."

"I feel like such a baby," I muttered, and bit my lip to keep my eyes dry. Eira leaned against me in support, but I wasn't ready and staggered. She looked sad, and I reassured her that she'd just gotten bigger and I wasn't used to it yet. We stopped for soup and sandwiches at a deli, and I waited outside with Eira since they weren't canine accepting. Because we were late, there wasn't a line and Damian was back fast. He asked me about the remedial coursework, which I'd completed the week before and said that Alfred was going on vacation.

"You're kidding," I said in amazement. "He refuses to take vacations."

"Daniel said he'd be fired if he didn't take a break," Damian related with relish. "He didn't care for the blackmail, but he agreed to a brief one. They compromised on ten days."

"That long?"

"Daniel started with a month off, aiming for two weeks, realistically. Alfred started with three days." He smiled.

"Where is he going?"

"Mexico. He wants to explore the Aztec ruins." We talked about that for the brief time it took to walk the rest of the way to the apartment. Then we sat down to eat—he'd gotten Eira her own sandwich.

"Why don't you take a nap, Alex?" Damian suggested. I hesitated.

"I don't really like to sleep," I hedged, and his expression was understanding.

"If you'd like, I can stay so you won't be alone," he offered, and I hesitated again before thanking him.

"It's no problem, Sweet pea," he assured me. "As I said, I'm all packed up. A benefit to a paper-reduced office. I still don't know why things aren't paperless by now, but there you are. I was just going to look for a new desk, and I can do that any time."

I really was tired, so I went and changed into my nightgown and crawled under the blanket, leaving the curtain open for the reassurance of the sun. Eira hopped up and snuggled up against me for comfort, and I slept.

I was shaken out of a dream of smoke and ash and pain and blood to see Damian, white to the lips, his hands on my shoulders. Eira was standing over me, nudging my hair insistently. "I understand why you don't want to sleep," he said tightly. Eira sat down as I sat up and put her head under my hand. I stroked her thick fur automatically.
"It's been getting better," I said. "It's just that damned movie." Cautiously he sat on the edge of the bed behind me and encouraged me to lean against him. I huddled into him and felt sheltered as he rubbed my back and stroked my hair.

He didn't say anything for a bit, letting me relax. "How's the lawsuit doing?" he asked.

"Surprisingly rapid," I said. "They'll file next month. They've got some sticky issues that have never been litigated before because nobody's ever involved Asgard in the legal system before. The defendants tried to have it transferred to state court because they felt the state laws were more favorable, but it's got to be the federal system since it involves a foreign country and there's diversity among the parties. That filmmaker is legally a resident of California." We talked about other things for awhile until I relaxed enough to sleep again.

"So I've been thinking," I said, not moving. "I was wondering if we could start spending some nights together. And not because you wake me out of my nightmares, which can't be fun for you."

"Are you sure?" he asked gently. "I don't want you to rush and regret it later."

I snorted a laugh. "You've been extremely patient, and no, I don't feel pushed. I've been thinking about it before this, but the nightmares... but you've just seen that. And I feel loved and safe when I'm with you." He kissed my hair.

"Good. Because I do love you and I want you to feel safe with me. I can't protect you from everything, but I want to be right with you when it's bad, helping you through it. I won't ever hurt you again."

I turned my head and kissed his neck because it was closest. "I know," I said simply.

"I just rented a place in town," he said. "It's within easy walking of the new office. I'd like us to take our time together, not rush in to living together until we've gotten used to each other again, but there's plenty of room for you there too. I can spare you a drawer and some closet space," he said, and I chuckled. "Will you help me pick out the furniture? Later, not right now," he amended hastily. "I'd like for you to try to sleep again. I could take a nap with you," he suggested, a little shy.

"Yes to all of the above," I said, and felt Eira approve. She retreated to the foot of the bed as Damian returned in his boxers and we curled up together, spooning.

This time I had no dreams.

I woke up gradually, wondering why I felt so nice and warm and limp, then I remembered. I lay there quietly, letting Damian sleep and just enjoying his presence again. Then he muttered something and his arm tightened around me. I turned over and snuggled into his front. "I missed this," he mumbled. "I took you for granted, Alex, and I'm sorry."

"I think when you're married that you do take the other person for granted, normally," I said, shrugging as much as I could lying on one shoulder. "Because you know that you're a team and that the other person is there for you. But that's enough apologies, Damian. I know you're sorry and I forgive you."

"I don't deserve you, Alex."

"Debatable. Because now I'm a lot more damaged than I was, so I'm not exactly a prize. And I'm not without flaws either."
"You're perfect for me," he said.

"And you're perfect for me," I told him. We spent what remained of the afternoon kissing and talking, just enjoying the intimacy. It was romantic rather than passionate, and I admitted that I was enjoying getting to know him again. "It reminds me of when we were courting, before. That was magical."

He smiled at me tenderly, his eyes soft and kind. "That really was a wonderful time," he said. "So yeah, I want to be intimate with you again, to know your body, but suddenly I'm feeling a lot more secure. Let's have some fun, take our time. Let's court again, relive that magic."

"That sounds amazing," I said happily.

"Excellent," he breathed. "Let's get up, go to dinner, and the three of us do a little furniture shopping," he proposed. "Eira's part of the family, she should have a say in the furniture that makes her comfortable too." Eira woofed a little, pleased, and we got up and did exactly that. We went to his new apartment first, a spacious two bedroom, two bath place in an older building that still had some 20th century charm with crown moldings, plaster detailing, original wood floors, and tall ceilings with large windows that let in a lot of southern light. It wasn't even too far from my apartment, between me and Columbia, actually. I mentioned this and he smirked. "It's an advantage," he said casually, and distracted me with talk about paint choices. Then we went shopping and found pieces we both liked and that Eira liked, although she thought Midgard furniture was awfully small, even though the sofa was large. The find of the night was an enormous ottoman, fairly soft and covered in a soft green upholstery velvet, that would do as a bed for her when Damian and I were otherwise engaged. She liked the idea of having a bed of her own, although she assured me that she liked sleeping on the bed with me, and sent me the image of her snuggled between me and Damian during a cold winter night. She made me laugh. We got a king sized bed. And a nice desk for his new office.
Dinner

We went back to my apartment after shopping, and after watching the late news, went to bed. I woke up the next morning feeling great.

"I can't remember the last time I had such a good night's sleep," I said over breakfast. Damian looked pleased.

"Happy to help, Sweet pea," he said, pouring me more coffee. "What's on your agenda for the day?"

"I get to register for classes today for next semester," I said, pleased. "And I have a meeting with my faculty advisor. That's this morning. Then I have therapy this afternoon."

"Come by the office after you get done in therapy," he invited me. "Then you can have a look at your new office and we'll go out to dinner."

I beamed. "Sounds great." I wasn't really involved with the business beyond funding it, so I hadn't seen the new premises. Some days it was hard enough to get up and take care of Eira. But today I was feeling perky. He was going out patrolling with Nightwing that night, so no sleepover.

"I wondered if I could impose on you to be at the apartment for the furniture delivery," he asked hesitantly. "I forgot when I paid that I have a meeting during the window."

"Sure," I said. "That won't be any trouble."

"I'll get you a key," he murmured. "And perhaps you can bring over some of your things and whatever Eira needs." He smiled. "Did you notice the fireplaces?"

"No," I said with interest. "I can't believe I missed those."

"One in the bedroom, one in the living room. Both functional, they use gas. And it's cold at night."

"I like those features," I purred, and he grinned.

"I'm not patrolling tomorrow night," he mentioned.

"There's a storm moving in overnight," I said demurely. "It might be nice to try them out."

"We can go out for dinner, then spend the evening in." And so a plan was born. "And then you can spend the night."

"What's your dad going to be doing?" I asked, with a slight frown on his face. He laughed.

"Dad went to Asia today for Daniel. He'll be gone for a couple of weeks. Beside, he does not have a key."

"That's a relief," I said, and Damian guffawed.

"I think none of us wants a repeat of that," he said, wiping his eyes. "I thought for sure you'd head for the hills. But you were very self-possessed and insisted we finish before having breakfast downstairs. That was when I was sure you were the woman for me."

"I had a pretty strong hint that you were the man for me that first Christmas party back in the city.
It was Bruce's annual work party and you asked me to dance. You'd taken dancing lessons."

"The band played "Night and Day," he said, remembering. "When we were kids I didn't like being outclassed, and you were a much better dancer than I was. It was initially motivating, then in college I kind of hoped to bump into you at a club or something, show you that I could improve. But I never did."

"I didn't like clubs much," I said. "We went mostly to kind of dive bars where you can play pool, drink cheap beer, hang out. And I wasn't one for small talk--I could take only so much of 'where do you go to school? what's your major? do you have a boyfriend?' We did mostly campus parties, some of the more casual bars for dancing. The ones with the cheap covers." I sipped my coffee. "I felt that we'd last that first time I came over to the suite to patch you up after that beating you took. You looked really bad, but although I hated to see you hurt, I thought I dealt with it pretty well. I felt like I could cope with your nighttime lifestyle choices and I wanted to make sure you were going to be ok."

"You did more than pretty well, Sweet pea. Oddly, I've never had qualms about placing my life in your hands. Even that first time, the garage, I had the feeling that you were going to get me out of trouble. And you always did. Meeting you was the greatest gift I've ever received." One of the many things I liked about Damian was that he never pretended to be above his emotions; if he teared up, he had his reasons and he wasn't embarrassed about it. I was, however, surprised to find him on his knees beside my chair, sobbing into my lap. I let him get it out, stroking his silky black hair, letting him clutch my hand.

"God, I've been so stupid," he finally said, looking up at me through red eyes and sniffing. "This crime fighting thing. It's taken you away from me too much. I've been on the wrong end of a beating before, but you've borne the worst of it. What happened in high school to you, and after you came back, then I died and left you alone, then my latest jackassery." His eyes were even more brilliant surrounded by the red as he looked at me, wonder on his face. "But you still keep coming back."

"Yeah, there might be some residual brain damage," I joked. I smoothed tears off his cheeks. "I'm glad you've had this epiphany, darling, but don't overreact and say you're going to quit nightgowning it," I said, stroking his hair back. "Because I think it's something that satisfies something inside you." He gave me a watery chuckle. "I want you to be who you are, Damian, I just want you to be less secretive. That you treat me as an equal and let me face trouble beside you."

"I saw you sometimes, after my death," he said. "I used to follow you and the kids around Manhattan." He shook his head. "First Boston, then the city. I never used to think of myself as a stalker." I burst out laughing and leaned forward to kiss him. "I do want to continue fighting at night," he said after touching my cheek. "But not forever. A while longer. It makes me feel like I'm making more of a contribution than just handing over checks to good causes or cutting a ribbon." I nodded, understanding.

"Then how about this? A bargain. You go on with your extracurricular evenings, until you reach the point where you slow down a little, when you miss a step. Because I would really like to grow old with you once, darling."

He exhaled and seemed to soften a little. "That is an agreement I can honor," he said, kissing my palms before pressing them together between his own.

I placed a kiss on his forehead, then helped him to his feet. He had to get to work, and I had a meeting. We left together, and when we were down on the pavement, ready to separate--he had to
go home to change and shave--I put my hand to his cheek, feeling the stubble of his beard on my fingers. "I keep coming back, Damian, because we belong together. Nothing can change that."

"I will endeavor to not drive you away again," he said, his voice catching.

"Just don't be a dumbass," I said, patting his lips before lowering my hand. "Use that big brain for something besides business and tactics." I smiled and laughed. He looked abashed.

"You have my word," he said, and kissed me lightly before hurrying off. I went off in the other direction.

So I was still in a really good mood when I got to the school. Damian does his best to honor his word.

The meeting with my new advisor was energizing and exciting, and I couldn't wait to start classes. Dr Lenz helped me register, explaining how to navigate the programs that the university used, and gave me a list of textbooks I'd be using, in order to give me a head start on my classwork since I was eager.

I met Aslyn for a spontaneous lunch off campus and told her about it; we traded stories about our experiences in education thus far. "And somehow I ended up in a dual degree program," I told her, shaking my head, still a bit dazed. She laughed. 'The Masters in Architecture and the Masters in Historic Preservation. I'll get to take more interesting electives that way," I said.

"You're such an overachiever," she said, poking my arm. "Good thing I am too. I'm going to apply to law school, do a joint MBA/law degree."

"What is wrong with us?" I wondered.

"Work hard, play hard," she said briskly. Then we got to talking about other things, and I caught her up on how things were going with Damian. "It's about time, Alex," she said. "You're happier when you're with him."

"I am," I said. "I just needed to let go of some stuff. It's just been difficult lately, there's so much to deal with." She nodded.

Soon we needed to get going, as I had to get to therapy. And I seemed to be having a moment of clarity; the therapy seemed to make more sense. Or maybe it was just the good sleep I'd had. I had a nice walk to Damian's new place just in time; of course the delivery people were prompt, right at the beginning of the window. The smell of fresh paint wafted out as I let the delivery people in and I made my best guesses where Damian would like the lamps, bed, dresser, sofa, ottoman, and the little kitchen table and chairs. I smiled to myself, looking at the new delivery. He just barely had a drawer to offer me, he was a bit of a clotheshorse. The mattress thumped into place in the four-poster bed and I tipped the delivery people on their way out. Then I realized Damian had no sheets. Or pillows. Or towels. Or blankets... I hustled out and did some shopping.

When I returned, it was dark. I'd had the uncomfortable feeling that I was being watched, but that was ridiculous. Nobody knew where I was, and there were just a lot of people on the street these days. I frowned and made sure the door was locked behind me. I ripped into the packaging for the sheets and stuffed them into the washer, then unpacked the pillows, taking off tags. Washing technology had improved a lot while I was dead; the cycle was complete in fifteen minutes. Ten minutes for the dryer. I was carrying the freshly washed sheets into the bedroom when I heard a key in the lock. I stiffened; it was too early for Damian to be back. I threw the sheets on the bed and waited, shaking out my hands, ready for who or whatever came through that door.
Alfred blinked at me owlishly when he saw me. "Oh, Alfred. Sorry, you startled me," I said, coming forward to draw him into the room. "I wasn't expecting you. Damian didn't say you'd be by."

"Miss Alex," he said warmly. "I apologize for startling you. I was unaware that you'd be here. I thought that I would bring a few things over for Master Damian." He indicated the garment bags he carried.

"Damian asked me to let the furniture delivery in," I said. "Then I realized he had no sheets or anything." Alfred laughed fondly. He took suits out of the garment bags, then helped me make the bed. I'd gotten the mattress pad on and we each took a side to put on the sheets, blankets, and folded the duvet at the foot, talking about the fiber content of the sheets (I'd found a really nice cotton/linen blend in a crisp white) and his upcoming vacation. He was leaving the day after tomorrow. I could sense that Alfred wanted to know what was going on but was struggling not to ask.

"We're back on track," I mentioned as I fluffed the pillow on my side and smoothed the pillowcase.

"I am pleased to hear it, Miss Alex," Alfred murmured.

"That's why the huge ottoman," I volunteered. "Eira has her own place to hang out. I'm bringing some things over tomorrow."

"I do like that dog," he said with satisfaction. Then I got a text, wondering where I was. I'd forgotten I was supposed to meet him at the office. Alfred shooed me off.

"Enjoy your evening, Miss Alex." I smiled and hustled out. As advertised, the storm was moving in, and big fluffy flakes were lazing down to earth. I dashed the couple of blocks to the office and up the stairs. The space was large, open, and bright.

"I was starting to worry," Damian said, helping me out of my coat.

"You didn't have any sheets," I explained, and his face went blank.

"Oh, god," he said, looking rattled. I smiled.

"I got you a few things, so you'll have someplace to put your head tonight." I smoothed his tie.

"And Alfred came by while I was there, he brought you some suits."

"I'd probably die from exposure without help," he said. "Thank you, Sweet pea." He tucked my hand into the crook of his arm as he showed me around. "Tony and Ann are finishing up at the old place."

"It looks good," I said. He showed me into an office. It was very small, about the size of a baby walk-in closet. Its window looked out into an alley. I smiled. In his office, the lovely desk he'd bought was already covered with paper and stuff. Then we walked to a restaurant and had a nice time talking about our days. He laughed when he heard that I'd increased to a dual degree.

"You never do anything by half, Petal," he said, and asked questions about what that would entail. It was a very nice dinner, then he walked me home, coming with me as I picked up Eira from Serena's apartment. Serena waved at Damian and smirked at me, and then we went to my apartment. Damian came in to make out some, then took a bag of my things to put in his apartment and went to do his heroing. There was some residual comfort from Damian, because my sleep was undisturbed.
Eira and I were about to go out for our morning walk when a delivery arrived: a huge bouquet of lovely white lilies (it's heavenly to be with you.) She seemed to enjoy watching me put them in water and fuss a little, texting thanks to Damian, who confirmed that I would be meeting him at the restaurant where we had a reservation.

Today was a day of meetings; people I didn't see enough of. First up was breakfast with my grandpa, Aunt Becca, and Uncle Bucky. I was distressed to learn that Aunt Becca was still in the tent city, there having been a snafu when she was supposed to move into an apartment. She dismissed our concerns. "The tents are well built--the fabric these days is astonishing--and there are safety features . The fabric can't be cut with a knife and the openings are secured with biometric locks. I have a nice heater and at nights it's cozy. During the day I'm rarely at home; I got a job with the emergency census." The government had commissioned a census just four years after the once-a-decade one to help understand the impact of the returnees. She was enjoying it a lot, meeting new people, being out and moving around.

"I'm not questioning your competency, Bec," Grandpa said.

"Good, because you know that would be a bad idea," she replied, sipping her coffee.

"I'm having problems with it because I can't help remembering you the way you were when I was a kid, Auntie," I admitted. "Obviously you're not old and frail anymore, but I still want you to have a real bed. Winter's not far off. Are you sure I can't ask Daniel to bump you up the list?"

She smiled and patted my hand. "You're a good girl, Alex, but I'm fine. People camp all the time in winter, I'm told, so I'll be fine. And no, I don't want preferential treatment. The people above me on the list deserve an apartment as much as I do."

"Don't argue, Alex," Bucky said wearily. "She's the most stubborn person in the family, and that's saying a lot." Grandpa nodded, while Becca beamed at him.

"It took a couple of lifetimes, but you finally learned there isn't any point trying to boss me around," she said fondly, and Bucky snorted.

"So, sweetie, tell me how your meeting with your faculty advisor went," he asked me, changing the subject. So I told them how I was now pursuing a dual degree.

"That sounds like a lot of extra work," Grandpa said.

I nodded. "I'm not actually sure I'll go through with it," I said. "But there are some very valuable electives that are only available to those in the Architecture program and I want to get a better understanding of architecture. The difference between the classes I want to take and the second degree is four classes, so I might just get the extra credential. Depends on how valuable that extra semester will be."

Grandpa smiled at me. "I'm very proud of you, sweetheart." He'd taken a job wiring new construction and found it engaging enough, but he was attending city-sponsored classes on career opportunities for returnees that described different careers and what training or education was needed for each field. "What are you doing these days, Buck?"

"I agreed to take over as the Avengers' combat instructor, temporarily. Their current one went on a mission that broke just about every bone in his body." He shook his head. "And they can't be without instruction for as long as it's going to take to put him back together. It'll give me time to figure out my next steps."
"Are you going back into the field, James?" Aunt Becca asked mildly. Bucky and I looked at her in early stages of terror. When she used Bucky's first name, it meant that she had some very definite thoughts that she was going to share with him.

"No, Bec," my uncle said hastily. I smiled. It was fun to see my hyper-competent uncle cowed by somebody. "It's just training. And there's a lot of work to be done." He shook his head and contemplated the situation. "You said that Stark was going to be doing some work as Iron Man, didn't you, sweetie?" he asked. I nodded. "Don't suppose you could speak with him and get his ass over to the tower--sorry, Bec--to take them in hand? Because they're not very well disciplined."

"I'll speak with him, see what he has to say," I promised, and he nodded.

"You should drop by the tower," he told me. "See the training facilities they have these days." I smiled.

"I'd like that, Uncle Bucky. I'm looking into gyms these days, but they're so high tech. I haven't seen a single weight. Maybe I can see how they're supposed to work and decide whether they'll be worth my time."

Bucky snorted. "I'm not sure they are. Tech isn't the answer to everything, and the best training opponent is a human." I said that I'd drop by the next day. Then Grandpa and Aunt Becca went to work, and Bucky went to the tower to try to sort out the Avengers. I went on to have coffee with Peter.

He too was going back to school, doing a refresher in business, polish his credentials. There was a lot of past talent out there, and competition for certain kinds of jobs was fierce. "I mention that I ran Stark Industry, and they ask if I'm related to May Parker," he said grimly. "It's a bit of a drawback."

I nodded, toying with my small coffee. "How's she doing?"

"Well, she went into that program, the one where they're recruiting people to go work on farms."

"Sounds like the land girls of WWII," I commented, and he nodded.

"That's where they got the idea. She was working on a farm, but took an opportunity to transfer to a ranch. She's caring for alpacas now."

My eyebrows raised. "That's quite a switch." He nodded.

"But surprisingly, she's enjoying it. Even more surprisingly, she's good at it. I went for a visit. Her bosses speak very highly of her abilities."

"She's got a lot of potential," I said. "Her abilities weren't in question, it was her judgment and her hubris." I cocked my head a little. "Are there any prospects there?"

"Yes, actually." He fiddled with his doughnut. "She could buy into the business. She would still work with the existing herd and build her own. She would continue to use the ranch and their business network to sell her fleeces for a small portion of the profits. The alpacas are herd animals and do best with a lot of their kind around." I didn't know about the business of alpacas, but I did know spinning. He brought out a few little bags. "This is the quality of the alpaca--fur? Whatever," I took it out of the ziploc bag and played with it a bit. It was fine and soft and twisted nicely. "This is the kind of alpaca she wants to breed and manage." The second sample was even finer. "It's called a Royal alpaca. And this is vicuna." The vicuna was even softer.
"Wow," I said.

"She wants to start out with three Royal alpaca females and one male, and add vicuna after she's gotten a little more established." I was surprised that she wasn't just jumping in.

"Well, I'm prepared to give her $50,000," I said. Peter brightened and rubbed the side of his head. We looked online and found that this would allow her to buy a decent quality male as well as her proven females with a little left over. "She might want to pay stud fees instead, buy an extra female."

After we were done with our coffee, we went to the bank and I got the funds on one of those nifty crystal plates and gave it to him. After that, it was lunch with my gals, hearing how Carol's apprenticeship was progressing, Margaret's work with the city, Karen's progress in the construction company, Dagny's progress in school. It was hard going for her--she'd been dead for a couple of centuries and she'd never gone to college--so Aslyn, Serena, and I offered tutoring. Aslyn announced her dual degree program to milk kidding, which she deflected by announcing that I was also adding a program. Serena snorted. I squinted at her.

"Serena, what are you hiding?" I asked, suspicious.

"I thought that perhaps I'd add on the real estate development program," she said, abashed. "It's only three additional semesters." I laughed.

After lunch, I waddled over to the office. Damian was out, but I wasn't really there for him although it would have been awesome to see him. I found Tony and Ann setting up tanks for algaes they were hoping would consume weathered old plastics and metals.

"What's up?" Tony asked. "Wayne's at the old place, getting the landlord to sign off on our move out, getting back the deposit."

"Today's been a day for catching up with people I haven't seen for too long. It's all revolved around eating and drinking. Big mistake," I said ruefully. "So I'm here for two reasons. First, measure my office to see what kind of a desk can be fit in there since you insist I have it." We smirked at each other. "Second, Uncle Bucky's been pressed into being the Avengers' combat trainer since their one is in the hospital. He wanted to know if, in your capacity as Iron Man, you could show up here and there to kick their asses." Ann snorted.

"Probably," Tony said, eyeballing adjustments in what he said was an automatic feeder. My personal opinion was, that when you were engineering a species, that they did best with some coaxing and coddling and attention, which included feeding. You do your measurements and water testing before the feeding, and you can more easily see how they're doing. I'd caught a die-off early enough to prevent it, once. But I held my tongue; this was their show.

"You haven't kicked anybody's ass for weeks," Ann teased him, and I grinned.

"Ok," he said, putting down the screwdriver and tossing me a measuring tape. "I'll go by this afternoon. I need to work on a new suit, anyway." I got my measurements and left, going to a couple of furniture stores before finding a table I liked. It was sturdy and had pretty turned legs. I got a desk chair, a set of chrome metal shelves, and some basic office supplies as a backup to whatever they were using. Additionally, my little office was right off the lab space, so they could use the shelving for storage. There's never enough room in a lab. I arranged for delivery and took the office supplies with me, planning on dropping them off later. After that, I dropped by Wayne for a coffee break with Daniel.
He was thrilled to hear that Damian were working things out. I guess he hated to see Grandma and Grandpa arguing. Things were working out pretty well with all the Batmen available--Bruce, Daniel, and Xander rotated the duty and I guess it was pretty lively in the batcave. He liked the idea of Dick and Damian doing their own thing; they all shared information and the batcave, so independence was a matter of degrees rather than a complete separation. That continued closeness was what Daniel liked; he hoarded his relatives and liked them close by.

"Are you and Grandpa going to move back to the manor?" he asked, tapping his stylus on the desk. "Your old suite is waiting for you."

"We're not living together again yet," I said, smiling. "And when we do, I would personally prefer some independence. Damian gets too focused on his second job, which is what led us to our current state of affairs." Daniel looked crestfallen. I patted his hand and topped up his coffee cup and congratulated him on making Alfred take a vacation. He gave me in invitation with my friends to Thanksgiving dinner and asked how my preparation for going back to school was going, interested when I told him about the adjustment I'd made to my plans.

"Are you going to come work for the company when you've graduated? We could really use someone with your skills," he asked brightly. It was a day of disappointments.

"I don't think so," I said. "I want to see what I can achieve on my own. Or, at least, as much on my own as is possible when word gets around to whom I'm related." Daniel's face sagged. "Honey, it's not that I'm ashamed or embarrassed to be related to you. It's just... Look. From the time I was in high school, who I knew has kind of shaped my life. Meeting Bucky led me to working for Stark. Bruce kept an eye on me when I went to work in his company. Both he and Tony wrote recommendations that helped get me into MIT. I worked for them both, briefly, then back to Stark and urged Martha to acquire Stark for Wayne when the time came. I spent a lot of time on Damian's arm, being an asset to him and the company socially. And after he was killed, I was still Alex Wayne, showing the flag at social and charitable events. I feel that I, myself, got kind of lost in the shuffle. Even in the afterlife, I came to Odin's attention and favor because he liked my aunt and uncles. Then I was a valkyrie, one of Odin's chosen warriors. So I want to see what Alex Barnes can do on her own. Not to say I wouldn't work with Wayne on projects, but I need this for me."

"I didn't know you felt that way," he said quietly.

"It's not a bad thing," I said reassuringly. "I chose it, all of it. I didn't have to meet my uncle, I could have gotten a job in retail or fast food or something rather than go to work for Wayne. I didn't have to get involved with Damian, and I could have limited what I was willing to do socially. I didn't have to go back to work for Stark. I could have even turned down being a valkyrie when it was first offered. It wasn't a bad life by any means, honey, for the most part, I was exceptionally blessed. But in this lifetime, I want to play by my rules."

"I can understand that," he said after some consideration. "I just miss you." He sighed. "And if you go into business for yourself, I've just got a new competitor to worry about." I smiled.

"Doesn't mean I'm not going to lean on you for favors," I said cheerfully, and he smiled.

"I'd be hurt if I couldn't help," he said, and we drifted into other areas of conversation until Catwoman--I mean, Serena--came in for a meeting.

"It's good to see you, pet," she said after air kisses. She cracks me up. "You let Bruce off the hook too early," she said sternly. "But we're having an evolving discussion about consideration." I laughed outright at that; she's totally got Bruce wrapped around her elegant finger. I said goodbye
and let them get to their meeting. I was feeling really good about my accomplishments. I had one more meeting; coffee with my parents and J. I ducked into the bathroom before leaving.

At the coffeehouse, I just had water. J stared at me. "What's wrong?" he asked. "You never pass up the opportunity to acquire additional caffeination." I had to explain my very efficient scheduling. Mom laughed. It turned out that they were working on plans too; Mom wanted to open another coffee shop and Dad wanted to pick up woodworking again. They were in the city, looking for properties. Mom wanted Dad to make the tables, chairs, counters, and other fixtures for the store, and they'd found a space in a redeveloped old industrial park for his shop. It was filling up with other burgeoning small businesses. The area had two or three other developments like that, in fact, and Mom was angling for an empty space that was rather central to all the industrial parks.

"The space is rather large," she fretted.

"If you have the only good coffee in the area, it still probably won't be big enough," J said, and I agreed. Then Dad pestered J for an update to his plans, and he said that he was planning on going back for retraining and to brush up on his skills. The AMA had created a certification program for returnees; what you needed to learn depended in large part on how long you'd been dead. Then he wanted to focus on epidemiology. "I've always liked it, but now it's critical, with all the returnees. Conditions in less developed countries are abysmal, even with help from the UN and WHO. So much of it is just sanitation, but there are diseases popping up all over, like polio again." He shook his head. "And for some reason, viruses that were relatively stable are starting to mutate, avoiding the suppressing effect of vaccines. It's a whole new rodeo out there."

That was worrisome, and I didn't really like the idea of my little brother wading off into unknown viruses and bacteria, but it wasn't my decision to make. Then I got my opportunity to humblebrag. Dad was amused, but Mom was still uneasy about this career choice, since it would take three or four years before I could be back out into the workforce. "You could do your science again in less time," she suggested.

"It's a new life, I need a new challenge," I said, nicely but firmly, and Dad jumped in on my side. Good ol' Dad. Then Mom said that Grandma wanted to come over for a visit.

"Can she come over for Christmas?" I asked eagerly, with J just a second behind me. Mom smiled and said that this was the plan. J and I high-fived each other. Grandma always made Christmas better, not the least because she always made special desserts and breads for the holidays.

I had just enough time to get home to get ready and drop Eira off with Dagny (Serena was going to start her first tutoring session that evening) before meeting Damian for dinner.
I hustled into Ravel on time, but Damian had still beaten me there. Shoot. I hoped my hair and makeup were still good; no time to check in the bathroom now. Named after the French composer rather than an unfortunate knitting incident, Ravel was the new big thing in the city's cuisine. Nice classical music set a lovely tone (literally) and the lighting was subdued and romantic. Ivory silk lined the walls, the wood was dark, and the seating plush and comfortable, inviting diners to take their time. Ivory tablecloths covered the tables, which were set with silverware in mismatched patterns and gold-rimmed china, with a little art glass oil lamp burning by a forced blue hyacinth (constancy, I couldn't help identify.)

The menu was small but filled with delicious sounding things. We started with oysters. I winked slowly at Damian as the first one slithered down my throat. He shifted a little and diverted me by asking how my day went. He was amused to hear about all my meetings.

"In retrospect, it was a mistake to center all the meetings around food and/or coffee," I admitted, and he laughed.

His day had been less exciting, working on making contacts in the fishing fleet who could point him in the direction of ocean trash for their experiments, starting to research sources for equipment and supplies.

He said my day had been more interesting and we talked about the conversations I'd had. "You ladies are a lot more ambitious than I am," he said. "Why is that?"

"Serena and Carol and Dagny and I got into the habit of learning a lot about different trades and skills when we were in Helheim," I said. "We never wanted to be at the mercy of anybody for the necessities of life again. Aslyn's always been driven, but more broadly focused. Karen is also driven, but she has a tight focus on one thing. After she retired from dancing, she ended up taking over project management in her family's renovation business."

"Why didn't you really want to go back into science? Your mom has a point, you'd be working and creating sooner."

I toyed with the knife at my place setting. "Honestly?" When I looked up, he nodded.

"Always."

"Because I'm not sure now that I would have chosen science if I'd gone to a regular high school," I said slowly. "My folks wanted me to get a good job, I had those test scores, STEM occupations for women were being pushed hard and I did like science, so it was natural to continue in that. But if I'd had a broader vision, I might have done something entirely different. My education was geared to the plan J and I developed, and when that went splat, I really wasn't qualified for much. My degrees were in very narrow fields. If Tony hadn't taken me in, I'd have ended up doing production chemistry, drug research, or something else boring, probably. As it was, my career was most successful outside the lab. I pushed our research along in the beginning, but it took off when we got the PhDs in. So... I want to do something that is my choice, through and through. And there's something about working on old buildings, taking care of them, restoring them, that's really appealing." I stopped as our entrees were placed before us. "But I don't want to tell my mom that. I don't ever want them to think they pushed me into something I didn't want to do. Because I did like it, and for my skill level, I did a pretty good job." I took a few bites of dinner. I had a chicken dish that was divine. "And it wasn't as if even my masters was wasted; when we got the wings for real,
it helped me figure out the biomechanics. They're not perfect analogs of bat wings or bird wings, no matter what they look like. There are features that are unique to them and it helped me work with the healers when somebody damaged theirs, understand how to build up strength and use them for combat. That level of familiarity helped them when they were working on my wings. They'd have had to be amputated, otherwise." I'd spoken to the healers about the injuries I'd had when I'd been recovering and had been shocked at how bad it had been.

Damian had listened intently. "Take your time in classes," he said. "Learn everything you want to. I'll help however I can." He smiled at me. "I want you to be able to do everything you want. It'd be fun to go to parties and listen to people say 'There's Alex Barnes, the noted conservator and architect. Is that lucky guy her husband?"

I laughed. "You have a weird idea of fun," I said, and he nodded. The conversation got more playful and flirtatious, and we declined dessert to go to his new apartment. It wasn't a long walk, but it was made longer from frequent pauses for hot kisses. I felt my old craving for him build and enjoyed stoking that feeling with the kisses. When we got inside his apartment, he kissed me so well my eyes crossed, and it took a minute to recover enough to appreciate what he'd done with the place. What had to be every rose in the city was massed in the front room; a line of little bud vases led to the bedroom, where the heady scent of even more roses filled the air. The bed was turned down invitingly, there was a bucket on the floor filled with ice and water and a bottle of cava. Two glasses were on the floor. Long-burning pillar candles were clustered here and there, lighting the room romantically. I let myself be swept away by the sensuality of the moment; flowers and candles and wine were fairly standard romantic accessories, but Damian's kisses spun my head more than wine ever did, his hands stilled my mind as he stripped off my lingerie and heated my blood. I wrapped my legs around his waist as he entered me, keeping him close, stroking his skin, feeling my arousal climb until all I could feel was him moving inside me, lighting up the nerves that led to a titanic orgasm and a couple smaller ones until he came too. He managed to keep up on his elbows enough so I could still breathe, but it took time for us to get our breathing calm and my legs to stop trembling enough that they fell to the sides, still cradling him between them. The sweat had cooled by the time he stirred a little, eased out reluctantly, and swept the sheet over us, rolling so that I lay on him like a blanket, where he could stroke my back and butt. We took a break to drink the wine, and after that, I was buzzed, the alcohol and Damian's tender lovemaking making me feel like I was on fire. All the love and desire and passion I had for him erupted in me as we rocked together and I had one of those moments of dizzying clarity when you know with every fiber of your being that what you're doing is the right thing. In the back of my mind had been the niggling fear that I might not feel that way about him again. The feelings were so powerful that I couldn't hold back the tears as we finished, gratitude that I could still feel that love, that sense of safety and protection with him again. Damian wrapped my in his arms, not saying anything, just stroking away the tears. I was surprised to see tears on his cheeks too, which I kissed away. I lifted myself enough to release him, then his hands found my hips and pressed us close together again.

"I was going to wait," he said hoarsely. "I was going to draw you close again, not pressure you or demand anything, play the long game like I did before, but I can't wait, Alixzandrya. Everything in the cosmos just shifted a little for me. The scent of you, the silkiness of your skin, the pleasures of your mouth and hands and body enchant me. Your mind is fascinating. You fill a space inside me with joy and love and warmth. I want you to come home to me and tell me about your day and what you learned and what you're planning, laugh with you and comfort you when you're low, tell you about what I did and where the company is, plan activities for our weekends, be a couple among our family and friends. I want to be by your side, to be your support and encourager. I want to be your true partner." His hands cupped my face. "Choose me, Alex. Live with me and be my love. I will try every day to be the man you thought I was."

I took a deep breath.
"Do you still have my wedding ring?" I asked, and he let out a sound that was a blend of a sigh and a sob, and gently shifted me off his lap. He went over to the dresser, the candlelight painting his skin in exquisite warmth. When he turned back, he knelt on the floor by the bed, and I scooted over to the edge. He took my hand, slid my old band on my finger, and kissed my finger where it rested.

"You are the center of my universe, Alex," he whispered. "My true north."

I placed his hand between my breasts, a little toward the left one, so that he could feel my heart beating. "You're my heart's desire, Damian," I said helplessly. "I've been yours forever, it seems."

"And I'm yours, omri," he murmured, getting to his feet and pulling me to mine, our bodies pressed together. "Ameli, rohi."

"What does that mean?" I asked breathlessly.

"Omri means my life, my darling. Ameli is my hope. You're rohi, my soulmate." His voice was rich and deep.

"Arabic is very romantic," I murmured. I drew back slightly and tugged him back into our bed. He climbed in after me, and sat against the headboard again so I could straddle him and twine my arms around his neck. We kissed, his mouth ravaging mine, until I could feel him stirring again. I broke the kiss, sliding down until I was laying between his legs, and took him in my mouth, teasing him, drawing things out until he was on the edge, then backing off and rising enough to slide down around him again.

"I know we're still married," I said, as my heart sped up again and my breasts brushed up and down his chest. "But our family is larger than it was, and what I feel for you is special and sacred. How do you feel about renewing our vows in front of our family and friends?"

He groaned in passion, then gazed at me with heavy lidded eyes. "I want the world to know that my most gracious lady has accepted me back into her life, her bed--" he nipped my shoulder and gently squeezed my breast, toying with the nipple--"her body, that I am her chosen. The more witnesses, the better."

"Ok, but the part about the bed and my body can be implied, right?" I asked, gasping as he rolled his hips, spearing deep into me. "Because everybody likes you, darling, but I don't think anybody else needs to see that."

"No," he growled, flipping me onto my back and thrusting harder. "You're mine, and what is between us is not for anyone else to see."

"Ok, good," I said. "So family and friends, everybody's clothes stay on--" He started to laugh, sinking fully inside me and leaving me impaled.

"Yes, everybody will remain fully clothed during the ceremony and the party," he promised, snickering. "But then we come back here and every stitch comes off and we will celebrate by having each other as often and as creatively as we can manage. I think we can plan this one by ourselves, no binders needed." I laughed, remembering the dog and pony show that had been our first wedding, impressively guided along by Bruce and Alfred. "I don't really want to go back to the manor, though. I want our lives to be separate, our own, a little bubble of love and daily activities and talking and making love wherever we want." He started to move again.

"I already told Daniel I wanted my own space," I said, sinking my fingernails into his muscular back. I panted. "Stop for a sec," I requested, and with an effort, he stilled again and looked at me
quizzically. "This is something to consider for the future. It's a big deal, and it isn't something we should just jump into, not that we have time right now anyway. There's my education, and there's a program that takes place in Paris that I want to consider. But when my medical records were reactivated by the tower clinic, they reviewed them with me and told me that, if I wanted, there's medications I can take beforehand and during that would enable me to have a regular pregnancy. It's like when you want to bend wood, you steam it to make it pliable. The drugs build up and will make my uterus able to react normally." He jolted, accidentally slamming into my cervix, for which he immediately apologized.

"If that's true, if it's that safe for you, then yes, I want more kids with you," he said intensely. "But only if it's safe. I won't risk you with another pregnancy like the one that produced Martha and Xander, no matter how much we love them, and I can't handle more miscarriages." He sighed deeply and started to move, gently and tenderly. "There's a lot to get done first. There's the lawsuit to deal with, then your schooling, and I have starting to build a business empire on my part, and that will take a lot of effort, at least for the short term. Then as you start on your career, maybe, I'll reverse my birth control and you'll do the same, and take the medication, and we can have a few months of practice before I get my best swimmers going and impregnate you." His voice sounded very satisfied and I laughed, then caught my breath as he pulled out, put me on my hands and knees, and started stroking deep, one hand going from my breast to between my legs.

"I'm hoping for a lot of practice," I said dreamily as I settled in and enjoyed the ride.

"Oh, Petal, it will be my pleasure to practice with you long and hard."

"Long and hard? I thought that was just you," I cracked, and he laughed.

"I might retire Nightfall when you're carrying our child," he said, startling me out of the erotic haze that possessed me. I looked around at him. He sank back on his heels, pulling me with him, my back against his front. I pulsed slightly, moving gently on him, his hands kneading my flesh and playing with me. I put one hand behind his neck and he kissed my temple as he teased me with his body. "I'd rather watch our kids grow up then die too early and leave you a widow. I want to do this with you for the rest of our lives, long may they be. In fact, when I'm a hundred, this is how I want to go out, heart failure after one final mutual orgasm with you."

I snorted a laugh." That's quite a goal you have for yourself, my darling. As it happens, I like the sound of that. Simultaneous orgasm, mutual end, because I don't want to be the only one left again." I whimpered shakily as I jolted closer to a climax. "Retire Nightfall when the time is right," I whispered before I stopped thinking.

In the morning, I was sore and stiff, not having had erotic exercise for far too long, but Damian stroked my skin gently, massaging my inner thighs and carefully sliding a couple of fingers inside to relax the muscles inside, releasing pressure points before finding my g-spot and coaxing me into a nice little orgasm that woke me up and energized me rather than tiring me. Then we took a shower together and he fixed me breakfast from a hamper Alfred had left when he did the floral decorating the day before.

"So will you move in here with me?" he said. "I just signed the lease, so I don't feel I can back out now. And I know you have a lease too, but I wondered if you might get your aunt Rebecca to take it over. There's plenty of room for both of us and Eira."

"I noticed the food and water bowls," I said, feeling hazy and contented with love. "I'd like that, and I'd love to get Aunt Becca out of the tent city. That's an excellent suggestion, darling."

"I aim to please," he said, bowing to me from where he sat. "What are you doing today?"
"Just therapy this afternoon," I said.

He squeezed my hand. "How about you come by the office after you're done and I'll leave early, help you move and clean the apartment. Then tonight we can switch on the fire and cuddle. I'm desperate to build the bond of love and a shared life with you again," he said with candor. I smiled at him.

"Eira will want to be part of the cuddles," I warned him.

"That's fine. She looks nice and warm." I laughed, and after breakfast, he walked me to my apartment before going to work. I retrieved Eira before Dagny went to work clerking in an urban garden company that had just gotten started. Dagny was thrilled to hear that Damian and I had reconciled and offered to help me clean the apartment when she got home from work that afternoon, filling in with a half shift that day. Eira listened attentively as I sat her down and explained how things were changing. She was interested and mainly wanted to know if the ottoman was still hers and if she could still sleep on the bed. She is the best canine companion. She lounged on the bed as I packed my clothes, Eira's things, and the few personal things that I had--I'd gotten used to living pretty sparsely in Valhalla and hadn't returned to my prior life's ways with a lot of clothing or other things. It didn't take long, and we made two trips to Damian's--no, our--apartment. Eira inspected everything carefully and approved of the arrangements, pausing for a long drink out of her new water bowl and a snack from her food bowl. Damian had devoted an entire cupboard to her food and treats; I added her grooming tools. On the way back to my soon to be old apartment, I stopped by the store and bought enough food to fill the pantry and fridge, restocked some cleaning supplies that were running low, and added a bouquet of Peruvian lilies (wealth, prosperity, fortune) as well as some other extras that I thought Becca might like. Back at the apartment, I cleaned the refrigerator, wiping the shelves and arranging everything nicely, stocking the pantry the same way. Eira and I took a break for lunch, and I stripped the bed and washed that and the towels, making the bed almost as well as Alfred could.

Dagny arrived and it wasn't long before we had the place sparkling. I called Becca and she was going to be done with what she was working on soon, in an area not far from the apartment, and agreed to meet me for a break. Dagny came with us, curious about my auntie and agreeing that it would be nice for her to know a neighbor. Eira pranced along, her gorgeous fur and happy face drawing appreciative glances. One child raced up and hugged her, to the dismay of her dad who was unsure about the friendliness of a strange dog, but he was quickly reassured by Eira's wagging tail. Eira gently headbutted the kid to the enjoyment of both, and they parted ways, mutually pleased. Becca was waiting for us, coffee in hand, sipping in pleasure. We hugged, careful of the coffee, she greeted Eira with an ear skritch and kiss on the head, and I introduced Dagny.

"I wanted you to meet Dagny, Auntie, because she's going to be one of your new neighbors."

"My new neighbors?" Becca asked.

"Yep. I'm moving in with Damian and my apartment's vacant. The landlord" (Daniel, and I was certain that he'd agree with me) "said I could sublet for the rest of my lease, so it's yours if you want it." I held up the key.

Her expression eased and she carefully rubbed her eyes. "Oh, Alex, honey, thank you. It will be so nice to get out of the tent and have some privacy. And my heater died last night, I was going to go shopping for a new one after work." She hugged me tight, and what I suspected was confirmed, that she didn't like living in the tent city but didn't want us to fuss and had been putting a good face on her situation.

"I even washed the sheets, so you're ready to go," I said, returning the hug. "There's groceries, so
you won't have to go out tonight unless you want to."

"I can't wait to have my own home again," she said, sighing in pleasure, and released me with an extra squeeze. "Thank you, honey."

"You're very welcome. There was an article in the news that said the new construction had hit a snag, so your wait on the list would have been even longer. This way I'll be happier knowing that you have a real roof over your head."

"If you'd like, I could meet you after work," Dagny offered. "We could have a drink, then I could help you reconfigure the biometric access to your building." I wanted to slap myself. I'd forgotten about the security. Becca accepted with pleasure, and we separated with everybody much more cheerful. Dagny peeled off after a hug to do shopping of her own, and I had to get to therapy.

My therapist was pleased with my progress. "I know it's not a cure, and certainly the nightmares won't be gone permanently," I acknowledged, "but I really feel like reconciling with my husband will be good for me. I truly believe that he's making an effort to change and he's not as obsessive as he used to be, so I believe his promises. I want to work hard during this period where everything is going well, try to beat down the PTSD more." We continued to work on my PTSD and I felt better after the session, like all the work I was putting in was really starting to pay off.

I took a few minutes to call Daniel, telling him that Damian and I had reconciled and that I'd just moved into his apartment. He was thrilled by the news. I admitted that I had illegally sublet my apartment to my aunt, and he promised to call the management company himself and ensure that it wouldn't be a problem. Since Wayne Enterprises owned the buildings and employed the company, I expected that there wouldn't be a hint of a problem. I thanked him and we chatted briefly before he went back to his work.

Eira and I walked quickly to the office, where we found everybody in the lab space, looking at tanks of dead algae. Tony was cursing. He saw me, got a final torrent of obscenities out of his system, and gestured me over with a swing of his arm.

"You know more about this than I do," he said, harassed. "Why does the algae keep dying?"

"I'm not the algae whisperer, Tony," I said peaceably. Ann snickered and Damian covered his smirk with his hand. "What's your protocol?"

With exaggerated patience, Tony walked me through the whole procedure. I made him clarify small details, not to make him crazy (although that was kind of a side benefit) but to understand every step in the protocol. "Well, the cleanser you use on the tanks could have a negative effect; there's a compound in there that could cause die off even if you think you got it all out, you probably didn't. I'd switch cleanser anyway. And of course, there's the possibility that the move either killed it or was responsible for the uncontrolled confounding effect. In either case, your algae are going to be too delicate to work in the wild." Ann's face lost its amusement and Tony swore again. "Start with the cleanser, then do everything by hand for awhile," I advised. "Automation is not your friend this early in the game. First, develop the algae to do what you want, then make it robust enough for the conditions you envision, then let automated processes take over to produce the quantities you want. Even if there's a problem making your organisms tough enough for the ocean--and wait a minute, why are you developing this in fresh water? Oceans are saline, guys."

There was dead silence.

Tony paced and swore, and Ann sagged against the big tanks. "That was a major oversight," she said, underplaying it quite a lot. "It was the most promising algae I found."
"Well, you hadn't advanced very far," I said, attempting to console her. "Only fifty or so
generations, right? So you haven't lost much. Get an ocean algae, that will help keep it sturdy, or
start investigating bacteria. You might have to change your approach to the process; you might
need to collect the garbage and treat it in an enclosed space. Doesn't have to be in land; you could
get bots to scoop up the rubbish, hold it in something like the hold of a ship, then discharge the
cleaned water back into the ocean. A lot depends on how your organisms work and what they do
with the metals and plastics they consume."

Tony shut up, finally, turned back, and rubbed his face. "Can you give us some time here, Tiger?
Help us figure this out? Because without the organisms, we have nothing."

"I can give you some time until classes start," I said. "Subject to my therapy sessions."

"Fine," he said, waving his hand. "It's your investment at stake." I narrowed my eyes at him and he
backed down, flapping his hand in apology. "Sorry. Of course your mental health is a priority." I
rolled my eyes but let the pro forma apology slide.

"I'll start tomorrow," I said. "Have the tanks emptied and ready so I can get started." He cocked an
eyebrow at me and I smiled serenely. "Your mess, your cleanup." I looked at my husband. "Ready
to go?"


"Damian and I have reconciled," I told him. He saw the advantage there at once.

"Great, means you'll be more amenable to spending time here," he said. "Lab rules, though, no
nookie in the office."

"Sparky," I said, rubbing my forehead.

"Congratulations, Alex, Damian," Ann said, smiling at us. "You go on, we'll have everything ready
tomorrow."

"Great, thanks, Ann. See you tomorrow," Damian said, and whisked me away. Eira was amused.

A light snowfall started as we exited the building, and by the time we got home, it was heavy.
"Good thing Aunt Becca's out of the tent city," I said, shivering as I towed Eira off. Damian
turned on the living room fireplace and she flopped down in front of it, letting her fur dry
completely in the warmth. Damian and I curled up on the couch and talked about the day; I'd seen
the highlight of his, and he listened as I described how I'd gotten things set up for my aunt, the
results of my therapy session.

"That's nice of Dagny to befriend Rebecca," he said, and I agreed.

"That's Dagny, though," I said. "She always goes the extra mile for a friend. I think that they'll get
along really well."

After a bit, we got up and fixed some dinner. The cupboard was pretty spare; I'd have to go
shopping tomorrow. I'd been too focused on Aunt Becca to consider our refrigerator. We ate
dinner, then returned to cuddling on the couch. I was a little sore, so no erotic romps tonight. This
was just as good, in its way, though. We each made phone calls or sent texts to our family and
friends to let them know about our reconciliation and that we were living together again. My
parents were cautiously pleased, J said it was about time, Martha and Xander were happy to hear it,
although Martha said I should have let him twist a bit more. She's vindictive when she or
somebody she loves is hurt. Grandma was pleased for me and told me that it was definite that she
was coming for Christmas. Grandpa was approving and asked to talk to Damian; I didn't know what he said, but Damian was as warm and polite as always and he agreed completely with whatever my granddad was saying. Uncle Steve and Emma were pleased; Steve is traditional enough that broken marriages disturb him on principle and especially for someone he regarded as a niece. Uncle Bucky congratulated me. "I know you're a grownup, sweetie, but if he dicks you over again, I'm just giving you fair warning now that nobody will ever find his body." Before I could draw breath, he asked for a favor. "Do you have some time to spare? I could really use some short term help with the brats at the tower."

"I just agreed to help Tony out of a mess with his algae--" Bucky laughed--"but yeah, I can start in a couple of days. Once we get a few things figured out, there won't be much for me to do, actually." I said I'd let him know tomorrow when I could start, and next I conferenced in my friends to tell them. They were all enthusiastic, and Dagny had had a good time with Aunt Becca and had gotten her settled. After I finished with that conversation, I made a quick order of chocolates for her help, and settled in to listen to Damian's responses to his grandfather and grandmother's lecture. He was certainly chastened when he hung up. I enjoyed that a moment.

"I forgot to tell you, Grandma is coming over from England for Christmas," I said, putting my head on his shoulder. He brightened; he loved my grandma.

"So now I'm thinking, Petal, that maybe we renew our vows at Christmastime," he said slowly. "It could be a fun surprise. Maybe Christmas Eve, everybody will be there and we can invite our friends to the crowd. Since it's a renewal of vows, we don't need a real officiant." He played with my hair. "We could use the ones from our first wedding. I still feel that what's between us is not to be shared with anybody else." I smiled.

"That would be nice," I said. "Everybody will already be dressed up for the occasion. We'll have to coordinate with Alfred, but I think everybody else will be pleased for the ceremony."

"Cake," he said immediately, and we made plans to check out bakeries over the weekend. That was all we really wanted, to recommit to each other in front of the people who meant the most to us and hadn't been to either of our weddings. The ceremony and a cake, and Christmas. We didn't need anything in the way of gifts; Daniel had already offered us any of the furniture and/or furnishings not currently in use by an inhabitant in the manor. We thought we'd take him up on the offer; the attic was stuffed and we still needed a few pieces of furniture. It would be lovely to have a few pieces from the family. "Maybe some kind of favor, to commemorate the occasion."

"I saw this little doodad in the store the other day when I was buying sheets," I said thoughtfully. "It's about the size of a matchbox, silvertoned, and what it is is a small holographic projector that holds photographs. You can set it to display a single one or slowly cycle through a series, you can download them from whatever device you have, you just touch a button."

"I like that," he said instantly. "We can have somebody take pictures, and download the best one before giving them out. I'll go check them out tomorrow, Sweet pea." We talked a bit more before flicking off the fireplace and going to bed. Damian snorted in laughter as Eira nudged him to the side so she could snuggle between us.
When we woke up the next morning, the top news story was that the heavy snow had collapsed several tents in the tent city. Four were dead from suffocation. I felt that Aunt Becca had gotten out just in time.

The next few days were busy. When I went to the lab with Damian, I studied the tanks. They had been formed from a single sheet of glass, slumped or blown that way, so there were no seams or lip around the top where contaminants could hide. I scrubbed them again, then wet a new sponge and saturated it with methanol, coating the first tank, then set it on fire. I should have alerted everybody. They were very upset at first, thinking that I was burning down the lab. "Oh," said Ann. "Flame sterilization." I nodded and went on to the next one after all the alcohol had burned off. The other three stayed to enjoy the show as each tank was treated, and then I cleaned and put the covers on to prevent anything falling in before we had anything to put in them. Ann had a couple of likely strains of algae and one of bacteria, so we ordered enough to start with.

"We might want to consider using both algae and bacteria in conjunction," I said, and that opened a whole new area of consideration. I got the specs for the water the organisms thrived in and started the calculations for producing the correct amount for our tanks. Eventually, they should just be chucked into any old seawater, but until we were ready to test, I wanted the organisms to not be stressed.

As I'd thought, I had afternoons free, so when I wasn't at my twice-weekly therapy appointments, I was at the tower. Bucky was right, the current crop of Avengers were kind of bratty, very impressed with themselves and easily convinced that Bucky was an outmoded old guy.

They didn't stand a chance against the both of us.

We surveyed the six Avengers who were on the floor, wheezing or groaning, or both. "Geeze, Uncle Bucky, it doesn't seem really fair. Maybe next time it should be either you or me against all of them. I barely got warmed up," I complained.

His eyes twinkled at me. "I admit it was harder to beat Stevie or Natasha," he said blandly. "Even Stark... bless him." I snorted as Tony chose that moment to stroll in, hands in pockets, surveying the carnage.

"I guess it's true, the Avengers aren't what they used to be," he said crisply, and Wildfire raised her head and shot him a pure poisonous glare. "But to be fair, you're a valkyrie who took on Sutr's army. That kind of experience is invaluable." He flicked his hand.

"Who the fuck are you?" Puck snarled.

"Tony Stark. You may have heard of me," he said dismissively. Daniel, walking in behind him, smirked. We nodded to each other.

"Up and at 'em, Avengers," he commanded pleasantly. "These two might be some of the finest fighters on earth, but there are six of you. Fortunately Stark has agreed to work as your mentor, showing you how to form a cohesive team and use your tech better. Our good luck continues, as Captain America has agreed to teach you strategy and teamwork. And finally, you thought training was hard now? Well, I have acquired a couple more tutors for you." And in hustled Steve, short of breath like he was late, and behind him strode Natasha and Hawkeye. I slapped my hand over my mouth and bounced on my toes. "I have the pleasure of introducing Black Widow and Hawkeye.
Now that the excitement is over from Ragnarok, we expect more from you. General Clark and the director of Homeland Security await you upstairs. Clean up and get to the meeting. Now." The Avengers were silent as they pried themselves off the floor and trudged to the elevator that would take them to their quarters. When the elevator doors closed, I gave my grandson a hug and kiss on the cheek. Steve got the same treatment, and Natasha got a long hug. I waved at Hawkeye over her shoulder and he grinned at me before going over to talk to Daniel, Tony, and Bucky.

"Glad to see you," I said, giving her an extra squeeze before letting her go.

"Me too," she said. "I had to track Clint down; he'd turned into a hermit at the end of his life and moved to Montana."

"So that's where he went," I said, exasperated.

She grinned. "Yeah, he said he just up and left one day. Felt a little bad about just disappearing, a few people like you kept contact, but..."

"I did look for him, but he was pretty good at the disappearing act. He sold his farm, so I knew his leaving was his idea, or I'd have looked harder."

"He learned from the best," she pointed out. "And here's another piece of fun. Nick Fury's back, and those kids upstairs are getting a new boss. You never knew Nick, you'll have to, soon, but he's tough and he'll whip those kids into shape." She smirked. I did too. "There's a ballet performance I was thinking of going to just before Thanksgiving. Do you want to come?" she asked a little diffidently.

I grinned, excited. "Of course!"

She relaxed. "I was a little worried that you might be upset that I didn't get in touch after returning."

I smiled wryly. "I had a few things of my own to worry about."

"So I've heard." Daniel broke up the reunion, but Natasha and I exchanged numbers first. Steve, Hawkeye, and Natasha went upstairs to the meeting to terrorize some Avengers.

"The city's given Steve permission to set up an obstacle course in one of the abandoned subway lines," Bucky told me. My eyes got big, and he laughed. "He'll be happy that there's one person who wants to run it with him," he said indulgently. We discussed strategies for training the team before I left. I had to make a run to the grocery store.

I ended up having to take a cab home, there was so much to buy for the pantry and refrigerator. And then Eira and I made a run to the pet store for an extra bag of food, some protective booties for her feet when the ice got bad, and some new toys. I had a nice stew and some bakery rolls ready to pop into the oven to warm when my husband got home. He took Eira out for a walk and we ate when they got back. When he went out with Nightwing, I picked up one of my new textbooks and read until bedtime. When I woke up the next morning, somehow he'd managed to outfox Eira and was snuggled against me.

We quickly settled into a routine: we walked to the lab together, had lunch, I left and went to beat up some Avengers. Sometimes he brought dinner home, so it was nice not to have to cook much. The kitchen was small; adequate, but it made cooking less of a pleasure. Then we talked and read until he left on the nights he patrolled. Sometimes he woke me up when he got back; his new suit seemed to increase his libido.
This happy state of affairs lasted a week.

I was woken up one night by a call from Nightwing. "We need your help," he said tersely with no preamble.

"What happened?" I was instantly awake.

"We were surprised by a bunch of thugs. The warehouse was supposed to be empty of people. Hurry. Nightfall needs medical assistance."

I cursed. I hadn't restocked my med kit after Ragnarok, it had slipped my mind. "I don't have equipment here. Call your pod and I'll meet you in the med suite--or do you need help with Nightfall?"

"I can manage." He clicked off and I leaped out of bed, threw on some clothes, told Eira where I was going, and blipped over to the med suite off the batcave, getting everything turned on and prepared. I regretted Alfred's absence; bat-related emergencies always seemed more under control with his unflappable presence.

"Good evening, Miss. Alex," the AI said. Somebody had reprogrammed it with Alfred's voice. "What is the nature of this evening's emergency?"

"Damian's been beat up again. Dick's bringing him in."

"Very good, Miss. Alex. How is Master. Dick. arriving?"

"By pod."

"Excellent. There is a landing spot outside. the complex. I will direct the pod there. Bring Master. Damian. inside and begin the treatment protocol."

I waited at outside door. There was a beep from a pressure sensor outside the door, so I hustled out with the wheelchair. I winced as Dick placed Damian in it and ran ahead of Dick. He put Damian on the table and I hit the scan button. It seemed to take ages for the scan to complete, but in reality it was done in just under a minute.

"Master. Damian. has a mild concussion, a lacerated kidney, a ruptured appendix, blunt-force trauma to the liver, and extensive contusions," Al Alfred said. "Nothing, save the appendix, that is new and exciting." I rolled my eyes at the AI's attempt at humor and pushed the table over to the surgical setup. It hadn't changed much in its arrangement over time, although the components had been upgraded, of course. Dick whisked off Damian's domino and put the medical mask on, starting the anesthetic gas flow as I used a new tool to easily slice through the tough tac fabric of his suit and swiftly settled a drape over his lower body. It reminded me of the first time I had seen this suite, and Dick acted as my assistant this time as I had done for Alfred. The stakes were higher, though, if I screwed up, there was no hyper-competent Alfred to save Damian. I drew a vial of blood and stuck into an automated analyzer before I stuck my hands in a sterilizer and snapped on gloves.

I had to retrieve three trays of supplies and instruments, one for each area of surgery and slotted them in the holder by the table. The contents of each were arranged in a very precise manner, and a light was shined on whatever was needed for the next step, making it easy for the surgery to progress slowly. Al Alfred coached me as I gripped the first scalpel and took a deep breath. Even for my paramedic training, I hadn't done surgery.

I sterilized Damian's abdomen and made the first small incision, another light showing the exact
placement. Dick was instructed to do the same thing with his hands and the gloves, and the AI changed voices to a more neutral American accent to avoid the two of us getting confused. It talked him through setting up an IV with fluids as I retracted tissue. He wasn't comfortable administering medication through the line, though, but that could wait until I was done. The kidney was bleeding the worst, but there was a new material to be applied to the exterior to stop the bleeding and promote healing. It was also coated in a medication that assisted clotting and was antiseptic and antibacterial. The surrounding tissues were cleaned, the tissue accelerator wand used and the incision closed, and I moved on to the liver, which received the same treatment.

"How are you doing, Dick?" I asked, eyes on the liver as I manipulated a strip of the material onto the organ, carefully placing it over the worst of the damage. I took a quick glance at him; his green face clashed a little with the blue design on his suit.

"Not so good," he managed.

"Throw up in the sink if you need to," I instructed briskly. The liver had an area that had been squashed and was leaking blood, although the AI assured me that it didn't have to be removed. Dick lurched away and I half-smiled. I cleaned and closed that incision, then straightened up and shook out my hands before turning my attention to the appendix. It was red and angry-looking, and it was leaking. Gross. Water ran in the sink, then Dick returned.

"Sorry," he muttered.

"Nothing to be sorry for," I said absently as I sealed off blood vessels and separated it from the colon. "I threw up my first time too."

"When was that?" a puzzled voice said from the door, and I looked up to see Daniel and Bruce hovering in the doorway.

"We were still in high school. Damian had been beaten up in a garage by the League of Assassins," I said concisely. "He had me bring him here rather than a hospital." Then I shut up as AI Alfred talked me through my first appendectomy. I placed the organ on the table beside my husband and began suturing with dissolvable stitches before using the healing wand again. "I lost it, I think, when Alfred took out his gallbladder." Dick lurched away again.

"Sorry," I called. Then I snickered. "Damian was going commando then too." Daniel snorted a laugh. I spent extra time cleaning this wound; the spread of gut bacteria outside the intestines would be a serious problem, and I was picky and proprietary about Damian. Not wanting to risk peritonitis, I finally closed the incision and straightened up. Dick took off the gas mask as instructed, and I retrieved the medications from the drug cabinet, adding the concussion medication, healing factors that were new to me, painkillers, and antibiotics to Damian's IV. Without being asked, Bruce pushed the bed in through the door and Daniel helped him resettle Damian on the clean linen. Dick was still pale and clammy, his hands shaking.

"Are you ok?" I asked him quietly as Damian was pushed away to the recovery room.

"I'm fine with blood, but everything else..." His pallor increased.

"Why don't you go have a shower," I suggested. "I felt a lot better after I got cleaned up that first time." His eyes were a little wild. "Come out after you've gotten cleaned up," I directed, and gave him a little push out the door. I got everything cleaned up quickly; unlike my first experience, I'd been ready and waiting, and there were no surprise fountains of blood. The medical waste went down a chute to be incinerated in a highly controlled process, so there was very little cleanup. I sprayed the table and counters down with disinfectant and made sure everything was put back into
place or placed in a gizmo that cleaned and sterilized the instruments.

When Dick returned, I had him lie on the table for a scan of his own. He was just bruised and freaked out by the surgery on his brother, so I gave him a very small dose of a drug that had been developed to aid calming a person in mental distress, gave him a blanket and a hug, and sent him to the tissue accelerator. Daniel, having seen for himself that his granddad was going to be ok, gave me a hug and went back to bed. I double-checked the placement of sensitive pads which would monitor Damian's condition and the calibration of the instrument, adjusted the IV bag, then touched his cheek. His golden skin was pale and sallow. Bruce stood at the other side of the bed.

"The criminals have been pretty quiet since the return; at least, there hasn't been a high incidence of physical violence. I think the tide is turning, though, and this is the beginning of something big. The cream of generations of villainy is rising to the top," he said quietly.

That's an image.

I brought over the newest generation of tissue accelerators and positioned it over Damian's face. "Thing is, Bruce, there's always going to be an apex predator and a swarm of criminals struggling to take over," I said, checking the placement of the top plate before turning it on and hearing the hum. "I'm not saying the struggle to control the evil isn't necessary or worthwhile, but it isn't possible for one person, or even a small band of people, to stem the tide. You might want to meditate on the toll that crime-fighting has taken on generations of this family. This is your son laying here after surgery, and not for the first time. It could have easily been any of your other Robins--your children, or your grandchildren. You might want to reflect on the cost of your obsession."

I slipped out of the room before he could come up with a good retort and went in search of Dick, bringing him some cocoa with extra mini marshmallows. Sugar is good for shock. We talked while he sipped at the mug, and then I sent him home to Barbara. I took the mug upstairs to put into the dishwasher, then returned to the recovery suite, where I pulled up a chair and dozed.

I woke, groggy and confused, when I heard movement. In the half light, I could see Damian's eyes looking around hazily, evaluating his environment. The swelling around his left eye had gone down considerably. "How do you feel?" I asked gently, then yawned.

"Sweet pea," he said rustily. "I feel like shit, but better than I did the last time I was conscious."

"Not surprising," I said, getting up and checking the monitor and IV bag. I pinched the back of his hand gently to check his hydration level. "You could use some more fluids," I said. "Do you have to go to the bathroom?"

"It's a good time for it," he said, and I carefully helped him into the wheelchair and rolled him into the bathroom. There was blood in his urine, which was to be expected, but freaked him out. I soothed him and told him what I'd done.

"The advancements for medicine have been extraordinary," I said as I got him settled again. "But you're still going to have to take it easy and let the repairs to your body complete. I will strap you to the bed, my darling, and tell everybody I've taken you home so they won't come looking for you if I have to."

"I'll be good," he promised, and winced. I hung another bag of fluids and added the second dose of the appropriate medications, leveling the pain medication down a bit. Then I turned on the accelerator again and smoothed his hair back. "I'm sorry, Petal," he said, holding my hand.
"I know," I said, and traced the worst bruise on his abdomen with a light brush of my fingertips. It extended over half of his midsection and had been inflicted with a pipe. Too thin for a baseball bat. I changed the subject. "Do you need me to get you some underwear?" I inquired.

"There's not enough room in that suit for me and my boxers," he said, closing his eyes. "It fits like a glove."

"I know," I said appreciatively, and he drifted off to sleep again.

I slept lightly for a few more hours and went back to the surgical suite to consult with AI Alfred about what Damian could have to eat (not much for a few days, just the full liquid diet) and to check the automated blood analysis. I went back to the recovery room and checked the readouts from the monitor, which were all satisfactory. I checked the wound sites for bleeding and removed the IV gently, which woke Damian anyway.

"Would you like something to eat?" I asked.

"What can I have?"

"Anything that doesn't involve chewing for a few days," I said. "No solid food, fatty foods, or sugary foods." I smiled slightly. "So all the cookies at home are mine." He smirked slightly. "But what I'm really wondering about is why I had to remove your appendix at all. There was no bruising to that area that might suggest it was somehow ruptured."

"Ah," he said. "Well, I didn't know that anything was really wrong or I wouldn't have gone patrolling," he assured me. "I felt kind of a niggling little ache there, but nothing big, and then it stopped right before the attack."

"Well, you had appendicitis," I said. "Your white blood cell count was elevated. You were hot and sweaty when Dick brought you in, I assumed initially that it was because you'd just been in a fight but you were running a fever, low grade. Medicine has advanced a lot, but you'll still be out for a week with no physical exertion, then you can start gradually doing more. But there's a lot that you need to be checked on, like peritonitis and abscess, so you're staying here for a couple of days in case you need intervention. But I can't stay, we've got the bacteria and algae arriving today and I need to introduce them to the tanks. I can blip back almost instantly if there's a problem though."

"You go ahead, Sweet pea," he said, closing his eyes. "I'm going to be fine. If I sleep through it, maybe I'll heal faster. I'm not hungry fight now."

"You need to eat, though." I frowned at him.

"I will later, I promise." He smiled. "I'm just not that enthusiastic about gruel."

"If you haven't eaten by the time I get back, I'll sit on you and force feed you," I threatened.

"I'll be good. There's a buzzer here on the bed where I can get help if I need it."

"Call me if you need anything, though." He promised, and I blipped home to take Eira out. We had breakfast, I showered and changed, and went to the lab early. Then I twiddled my thumbs and called Bucky, explaining the situation. He was concerned about Damian, and told me that he could handle the Avengers that afternoon. By that time, Tony and Ann had showed up, and I said that Damian had had an emergency appendectomy and would be out for a bit. They expressed their sympathy, and we were still talking when our delivery arrived. The man carefully brought in three canisters, two larger than the third, and as I checked the contents, he looked around appraisingly.
"Something caught your eye?" Tony asked, not quite frowning, but not welcoming, either.

The man laughed. "I usually don't get to see the places I make deliveries," he said. "Usually there's a secretary." Tony signed the bill when I nodded, and the man left. I took the canisters over to the tanks and carefully released the contents into each tank. Two large tanks for algae, one for bacteria.

"Give them a couple of days to acclimate," I said to Ann, and showed her the nutrients I'd made up for each tank. "Feed them according to the schedule, call if there's trouble."

"I can do that," she said, flipping through the pages and smiling. "Go on, I know you're anxious to get back to your husband."

That was easy. Eira and I left, and I made a stop at a medical supply house, showed my paramedic license, and filled the deficiencies in my emergency kit. And then some; I made a much more extensive one for our home. But then I was stuck; I had a lot of stuff to carry and I couldn't move that much stuff, Eira, and me, even supposing I could find a discreet place to blip around from. I hailed a cab and we made a stop. It wasn't hard to find a suitable vehicle; there wasn't much of a market in the city because of all the pedestrian traffic and models that had limited aerial capabilities were expensive. But thanks to Daniel's initial generosity, I could afford it, and I zipped out in a nifty little number with two seats and a generous area on the floor behind where Eira could stretch out. It was ample enough that she should still be able to fit when she was fully grown and because I paid cash, the dealership kicked in a travel blanket for Eira and a few other branded accessories, including a self-warming travel mug. On the drive home, however, she sat in the other seat, with my supplies and equipment in the back. I hauled it up, and packed enough clothing and effects for Eira, Damian, and myself for a few days.

From the apartment, we hopped up into the air for the short flight out to the town nearest the mansion, from where we set down and drove out. I took a couple of pictures when we got there, Eira clearly visible inside, and when she got out, she rocketed off to run around the grounds. She'd come in when she was ready. I snagged the carryalls and went downstairs. Dick was reading in the chair in the recovery room. "How are you doing?" I asked him quietly, messing up his hair. He grinned and swatted my hand away.

"Nothing some sleep couldn't cure," he said. "I made him eat some cream of wheat."

I suppressed a laugh with difficulty; Damian hated mushy cereals. "I brought some things for us; I'm moving in for a few days."

"Excellent," he said. "He's not nearly as whiny when you're around." He got up and stretched. "Thanks for last night," he said more seriously. "I appreciate you taking care of me when there were more pressing problems."

"You're important too," I said, taking the chair. "It's always a fraught situation when you're in a fight and somebody gets hurt."

He nodded. "I'll bring you down some lunch. I can't wait for Alfred to get back. Poor guy takes his first vacation in forever and the place goes to hell." I snorted and he left. I put my head back and went to sleep. It had been an exciting night.
When I woke up again, Eira was nosing my hand and Damian was awake too. I automatically checked his readouts, dressings, and bowel sounds and things looked good. I helped him to the bathroom and then made him lay still for another scan, which could detect developing abscesses or peritonitis, but he looked fine and I started to feel better. I rolled him back to bed and went up to the kitchen to feed Eira. I found some of Alfred's delicious chicken stock in the freezer, thawing enough for a small meal in the microwave and adding a little finely shredded chicken and a few noodles for garnish. There wasn't any apple juice, but I found some cider instead, which seemed close enough and had some flavor, and took the tray down to my husband.

"How much longer do I have to eat the baby food?" he asked, the edge of a whine on his voice, which I decided to ignore. For now.

"A few days, then we can start to add more robust foods to your diet," I said implacably. "Once I'm convinced that the surgery was without complications, I'll use the accelerator to heal the incisions and we'll go home." He looked interested. "And just remember, patients who are docile and don't complain too much can have a milkshake later." He grinned.

"I remember when I was sick when we first moved into the manor," he said. "I've learned my lesson." He scooted over carefully and patted the bed next to him. "I'm pretty sure that if you were to take a nap with me I'd heal a lot faster." I laughed and crawled onto the bed next to him, glad it was a full-sized bed. I put my head on his shoulder and he took my hand as I told him that the organisms had been delivered. Then I yawned, making him and Eira yawn. When I woke up again, I felt better for the nap, but there were a couple of men I didn't recognize in the door. Instantly, I was at the end of the bed with Eira, who'd joined us some time for the nap and who was growling, my wings snapped out to add another layer of protection between Damian and the strangers.

"Who are you and what do you want?" I asked the men, who were looking askance at the wings.

The red-haired one raised his hands. "Sorry to startle you. We've met before, back when Damian was still a kid. I'm Jason, Jason Todd. This is Tim Drake." The one with the black hair waved at me, a little uncertainly. I sat back and combed my memory, then I remembered the man sitting at Damian's bedside the first time I saw him get a beating. And there was something about his predecessor Robin. Red Robin. Right, Tim Drake. Ok. I packed the wings away, although it had felt really good to have them out again. Maybe I could fly around the estate some before we went home.

"Sorry, but you did startle me." It was a good thing I wasn't going around armed these days. Eira let her snarl fade and she stopped growling, although she was still alert. "How'd you get in?"

"Through the batcave," Tim said. I liked his voice even though it was a tenor; it was like smooth caramel. Maybe I needed something to eat.

"Ah," I said. "That's how I got in the first time too."

"Where's Alfred?" Jason asked. "I'm kind of surprised he didn't catch us."

"On vacation, believe it or not," I said, smiling. "Exploring the Aztec ruins."

"What are you guys doing here?" Damian mumbled, waking up and rubbing his eyes, then looking around.
"Hey, Dork," Jason said cheerfully, walking over and giving him a noogie. Damian swatted at him.

"Todd. Took you long enough," he said. "Drake?"

"Hey, brat," Tim said. "Who's the babe?"

"You can address her directly," Damian said testily.

"I thought she and the dog were going to take us apart," Tim said, looking at me warily. "She's kind of... extra."

"This is my wife, Alex Barnes," Damian said in a tone that was simultaneously proud and gloating, squeezing my hand. I smiled at him. "She's tough in ways that will require a lengthy explanation, so it is best if you remain respectful."

"I still can't believe you got her to marry you, punk," Jason said, shaking his head. "And that you're still together. I thought for certain she would have done better the second time around."

Damian's face lost its amusement. "Undoubtedly she could, but fortunately for me, she has not." I slid off the bed.

"I just had a more exciting afterlife than most. Damian is recovering from appendicitis and a beating, so don't get him riled up and you can visit," I directed, bringing in another chair for the guests. I went upstairs, Eira electing to stay with Damian. I took my time, rooting around in the kitchen, slicing frozen cookie dough and doing a little baking. I left a plate of cookies for anyone who wandered in and took some downstairs.

"You can have two," I told my husband. He grabbed the two biggest ones off the plate, and I rolled my eyes, smiling, before offering the rest to the visitors, taking one for myself and giving Eira a Greenie, settling next to Damian again.

"I've never seen a dog like that," Jason said to me. "It makes sense that Dork would have a dog, but it is weird that you guys only have one pet."

"Her name is Eira, and she doesn't actually have a breed. She's like a dog, but different. The god Baldur developed them and has been overseeing their development for millennia. She's still a puppy, but she'll be big when she is fully grown; her mom's head comes up to here on me." I held my hand to my sternum, just above my breasts. "And she's intelligent, she actually does understand everything you say and we can communicate."


"No, you entertain her."

"So how does this work?" Jason asked, leaning forward. "How did you get her?"

"She chose me," I said, grinning at her, letting my fondness for her roll through our communication. "She was tiny when I saw her first, about the size of a smallish Keeshond. But quite determined." She made a happy sound. "I met her parents, and while they weren't happy about her leaving Asgard, she does get to visit them when she wants."

"She doesn't look like an alien," Jason said, looking at her carefully.

"No, but then Thor doesn't either."
"Huh." After Jason's response, I could feel Damian suppressing a yawn.

"Thanks for dropping by, fellas, but it's time to go now," I said cheerfully. They got up without protest and I gave them key cards that would give them access through the doors, having gotten in contact with Daniel for approval when I was baking the cookies. After they left, all three of us went back to sleep. It had been a long night for Eira and me too. We woke up when Martha Sr poked her head in to see how her grandson was doing and to offer dinner. Eira went with her to have her own dinner and a good run outside. Martha had turned down my help, telling me to take it easy, and she and Bruce brought down more chicken soup for Damian and the meatloaf, mashed potatoes, and veggies that was the family dinner for me. I felt ravenous and polished it off quickly. People popped in to see Damian as we ate and afterward, while we had the news on. Martha called from London, still up, ironing out a problem in a new Wayne Enterprises acquisition over there. J came over and double-checked my work, giving me a begrudging approval. I felt a lot better having somebody competent checking Damian.

The next day I was scheduled to go into therapy early, then to work to check the tanks, then I planned to do some advanced reading. Alfred was due back that afternoon, thank heavens, and with Thanksgiving the next week, I wanted to be on hand to offer any small help he could use.

Apparently getting my marriage straightened out added stability to my mental state; I was making great progress with my PTSD and we cut my therapy back to once a week. I felt pretty good as I walked up the street toward the lab.

There was some kind of disturbance in the building, I saw as I approached. There was an ambulance and a crew in hazmat suits going inside. I went up to a police officer who was stationed at crime scene tape. "I'm a partner in a business in this building," I said. "What's going on?" The officer looked at me carefully.

"May I see some identification, please?" She was polite, but it was still an order. I showed my drivers license to her and after studying it, summoned over someone in plain clothes.

Detective Jimenez asked my name and business, then nodded. "We're investigating a break in at your lab," she said. "You said you're a partner? You can either give us permission to look at the security footage from your cameras last night or we can get a court order."

"I'll give you immediate access if I can watch them with you," I said, and after a moment of hesitation, she agreed. I pulled up the footage through an app on my communicator and we fastforwarded through several hours of no activity, beginning when Tony and Ann left for the night. I identified them absently for the police officer. Around 3 am, the door opened and two figures entered the room.

"That first man is the guy who delivered the tanks of algae and bacteria," I said, puzzled, as the man stepped into the streetlight shining through the windows. I winced as he took a pipe and smashed all of our tanks, the water and organisms slopping out onto the floor. The second man stayed back the whole time, but as he turned to go, light from the hall lit his face.

"You know that guy?" the detective asked, and I nodded.

"That's the Joker," I said, pissed. "A returned crime lord. But why would he be in the lab, and why would he want the tanks smashed?" I rubbed my face.

"That's the trillion dollar question," the detective said dryly. "As near as the folks from the crime lab can tell, there was something toxic in the stuff in the tanks. When your partners walked in, they were affected immediately. They started to laugh uncontrollably, then collapsed on the stairs as
"They tried to get away."

"Joker venom," I said grimly. "Are they ok?"

"They're being treated at one of the hospitals. It seemed to come from those tanks."

"Those are common strains of bacteria and algae that were slated to be modified to consume old plastics and metal garbage in the oceans," I said, mystified. "Ann hasn't even started to modify them. When the place is safe to enter, I'll get you the invoices for them." She nodded and continued to question me until she had a good idea about the scope of the business, what we were trying to accomplish, how I knew the Joker, and where my husband was. At the ancestral home, recovering from a beating--from a mugging, I implied. I didn't mention the surgery, not wanting to get into trouble for a surgery that I really wasn't qualified to perform, or reveal the surgical suite.

The detective told me to stick around and went back to supervising the situation. I moved away and called Bruce. He was pissed to find out that the Joker was up to his old tricks, and said he'd start to investigate, feeling like this was a direct attack on my husband. And possibly me, since if the Joker had a watcher on the building, I'd have been seen going in and out a lot more. I called Damian reluctantly, but while he was disturbed about what had happened, he seemed glad to have something to work on. He directed me to cooperate fully with the police as I'd planned to do and said he'd call the insurance agency.

It was almost an hour later when things started to show signs of being wrapped up. I was cold despite my coat and gloves, and grateful when the detective summoned me. "The hospital reports that your business partners are recovering," she said with no preamble. "Apparently they had files on this stuff from before and they found it hasn't changed much. The chemical spills team has completed the cleanup, so I want you to go up with me, get those invoices, see if anything else is damaged or disturbed, and call the security company to get them to send us a copy of the footage from last night." In the lab, the only change that I could see was that the tanks were gone. One of the windows had been damaged from a chunk of tank cracking it, but that was the only damage I noted. I found the invoices where Damian said they'd be, made copies for the business, and handed the originals to the detective, who wrote me a receipt for them. I phoned the security company, went through the identity process, and authorized them to release the footage from our security camera to the police, and Detective Jimenez said she'd be in touch before leaving.

I waited for the insurance adjuster, who was supposed to be on his way, and put things that the hazmat cleaners had moved back into place. I'd retreated to my office and was playing solitaire on my communicator when I got a call from the lawyers; they'd filed the lawsuit over the documentary. I'd been expecting it and wanted them to hurry so we could get this thing settled, but somehow the formal notification made it game on. I wanted to suit up for battle, but unfortunately, my swords weren't going to be any help here. Mr Black arrived while I was contemplating this, tutted over the increase in crime, watched the security footage, noted the damage to the window and the door lock where somebody had clumsily forced it--I'd overlooked that, recommended a locksmith, and said that he'd process the claim quickly. We shook hands and I made the call for an emergency locksmith. While I was waiting, I called the company we'd used to supply our organisms and blasted them. They were horrified by what had happened and looked up their records, locating the deliveryman. They checked their timekeeping and found that the man had never returned after the afternoon when he'd made our delivery and told me they'd notify the police. Furthermore, when we got our new tanks, they would replace our organisms free of charge. I mellowed with their reasonableness, which was all I could wish for, and said that one of us would pick it up. Then I called the scientific apparatus company we'd gotten the tanks from, explained that our tanks had been destroyed in a break-in, and placed an order for new ones as well as the system that would agitate the water gently like a tide and splurged on an upgraded monitoring
system that would keep the oxygen, pH, and turbidity within a set range. Then the locksmith arrived with a few locksets to choose from; I got the one that was sturdiest and hardest to circumvent. I asked if he had one that would electrocute somebody who was trying to diddle with it, but he thought I was joking and laughed it off.

After that was taken care of, I called Tony, who picked up to my surprise. He and Ann had been treated and released and were ok. He swore quite a lot to get it out of his system, then told me that they'd retreated immediately when they caught the odor in the lab. The hospital staff thought that this limited exposure saved their lives. I caught him up with the progress I'd made, and we agreed that they should take time off until the tanks were shipped. "I'm sorry, Sparky, this is my fault," I said miserably. "It was the Joker, he was captured on the security recording."

"It's not your fault," he said sternly. "Whoever did this is whose fault it is." We took a moment each to work through this convolution.

"I've involved my father-in-law," I said with a sigh. I knew Bruce was probably already all over it since the Joker had shown up.

"That's good," Tony said. "We can use all the help we can get." After telling him to let me know if there was anything he or Ann needed, I hung up.

And then, because there was time and I was tense, I went to the tower and helped my uncle with lessons, getting in on the last two. Afterward, I told him my troubles as I stretched. It felt good, both the stretching in the familiar environment, and getting advice from my uncle. There wasn't much he could do, but I felt better for having told him anyway. "There isn't much you can do right now, but if you see the Joker again, sweetie, don't hesitate. Put him down first, call a lawyer second. Given your history and this latest thing, there shouldn't be any trouble over it." I went in for a hug, enjoying his new plum-colored flannel shirt. Then we went upstairs together, and he said that he knew what he wanted to do now. My ears perked up.

"I want to be a zookeeper," he said.

"Wow," I said. "I did not expect that." He grinned.

"I like animals, and after the life I've led, even big animals are more peaceful," he said placidly, and I smiled. "The clinic ran tests on my arm after we returned, and it's part natural, part Emma's alloy from the last arm she made me. It has a hefty chunk of vibranium, so it's still damage-resistant. I need a bachelors degree in zoology, ecology, something like that and experience working with animals, but there are several zoos around here and they offer internships too."

"That sounds cool," I said.

"I may be joining you at Columbia," he said as we walked onto the the street. "They have a degree in environmental biology that provides courses on animals, the environment, physiology, and conservation."

"You might want to be a zoo vet," I mused, and he looked surprised. I shrugged. "It would be a way to really help the animals and sick or injured animals can be dangerous. You could take additional coursework just to lay a foundation for that if you want to consider it in the future after you've gotten some experience. I could tutor if you need help in the biology or chemistry, at least the lower level stuff. Who knows what advances have been made since the last time I studied." We walked for half a block.

"I might," Bucky said finally. "It's something to consider." We separated at the corner after a hug
and I faded into an alley where I poofed back home. Well, to Damian anyway; wherever he was was home for me.

I was just in time to bundle him into the wheelchair to get a scan done before J arrived. He looked at the new scan carefully and thought that it would be ok to get everything healed up as there was no signs of infection. He took care of it himself, but I hovered. He was annoyed, but I didn't care. The patient was precious to me. As a reward for not being snarky, I told him about our uncle's plans.

"Huh," he said. "I can see him working with animals. After what he's been through, it would probably be pretty soothing." Eira had been listening too, and I laughed.

"She likes the idea of having a personal vet," I said, and both J and Damian laughed too.

After that, I went upstairs to help Martha with dinner and we discussed the goings on at the lab. "I don't know what this world is coming to," she said, shaking her head. Since people have been saying that for at least as long as I've been around, there really wasn't much to say to that. Instead, I asked how her job was going; she was working in the sales department at Wayne. "Learning all the products we're selling in my unit is a challenge," she said. She was assigned to the pharmaceutical sales group. She'd done this before having Bruce, but she said that the process had changed considerably, and of course there was so much to know about all the new drugs too. It was very interesting, and I asked a lot of questions.

"How lovely to see two of my favorite people," a voice said from the door, and I turned to see the return of Alfred. I grinned, put my knife down, and hustled over for a hug.

"How was your vacation?" I asked, letting go and returning to my vegetables. He described eight days of exploring the fascinating ruins and joining a team of British archaeologists on a dig in the jungle. He seemed energized by the adventure, which included an encounter with tomb raiders hoping to loot the site; the archaeologists had uncovered the base of a monument of some kind that had been dismantled, possibly to reuse the stone in another project.

"And how were your days?" he asked us, quickly checking the pots Martha had going and shooting a swift glance at my chopping. I felt self-conscious about my less-than-perfect dice.

"Damian was hurt in a beating and Alex performed an appendectomy," Martha said. "The Joker broke into her lab last night and destroyed the tanks, and there was a release of that gas he used. But otherwise, it's been very calm." Alfred's eyes opened wide.

"Damian's downstairs still," I chimed in, and he murmured something and hustled off. Martha and I looked at each other and held off until we heard the door to the batcave close softly before laughing. "He finally takes a vacation and the place goes to hell," I said, setting us off again.

Martha threw a couple of baguettes Alfred had made and frozen into the oven, and we press ganged Thomas into setting the table. J had said that Damian could come up to dinner and eat lightly, so we had a full table, forcing Alfred to sit with us and tell us about his adventures in more detail. I smiled as I listened intently to the story he was telling; only Alfred could go out doing touristy things and end up capturing several of a gang of archaeological heritage looters. "It is good to be home, however," he said.

He insisted on retaking his role of postprandial libation dispenser in the library, doling out coffee, tea, and brandy as we preferred. After that, Eira herded him to a chair and put her head on his knee for skritches. Damian and I would spend one more night at the mansion because I was being paranoid and wanted another clean scan before going home. "Eira doesn't mind," I said, looking at
her and Alfred and smiling. "She loves running around." After another couple hours of
discussion, I insisted that Damian make an early evening of it and took him up to our former
suite. I found Alfred had somehow beaten me to it and brought up our things from the recovery
room. I was beginning to suspect him of magic. I got Damian settled; he was more tired than he
wanted to admit, and after he went to sleep, I went back downstairs for a little. It was nice to chat
with the family. Damian had had an almost constant flow of visitors, I’d found out, which
accounted for his fatigue. He thought he shouldn't be that tired, but was overlooking the serious
nature of his injuries and illness.

Daniel waited until everybody else was drifting away before asking if I could stay for a talk. I
moved over and we talked a little about the lawsuit, then Uncle Bucky's plans to be a zookeeper.
He was in awe of Bucky; I think Bucky was a personal hero to him. He was always a little shy and
deferential when they met. When everybody had left the library, Daniel went to his desk and
unrolled a large piece of projective film, spreading it flat on the desk. I went over to look. It was a
topographical map of the estate. You could also explore the cave system underneath by adjusting
the projection, and make it more or less opaque as you pleased. Daniel poked his finger into a
place on the other side of the batcave. "I wanted to offer you and Grandpa this site to build your
own house on," he said. "A gift. It would be far enough away from the main house that you could
have your privacy, but close enough that you could drop by for meals sometimes, and Eira would
have the run of the grounds." He looked at me through his lashes; like Damian's, they were
ridiculously long and plush. "I've been thinking about it for awhile, but with Grandpa's injury and
the Joker on the loose again, I thought I'd finally discuss it with you. See what you thought. The
estate is about 6000 acres, give or take, so a little over nine square miles. Lots of room." He
hesitated. "It would take time to build, even if we hired workers from the crews that the company
employs."

"It's such a generous offer, Daniel," I said warmly. "I'll talk to Damian about it tomorrow when
he's awake. But if we take you up on this, we'll be paying for the construction. That would be non-
negotiable." There was a little argument about that, but I suspected it was pro forma, something
that Daniel had already decided to yield on to make the offer more attractive. He was Damian's
heir in more ways than one. I took a flight after we talked; the conservatory windows opened wide
so I didn't have to scramble around on the roof. I'd forgotten how soothing and wonderful flying
was, feeling the air stroking my feathers and cooling my face.

I told Damian about the offer when we woke up the next morning and we talked about it
extensively. There was a lot going for it--proximity to the batcave, a fair amount of isolation and
peace, access to Alfred, lots of space for Eira to run around in by herself. In the city, she always
had to be accompanied and/or on a leash. And we could design a house that was big enough that
we could squeeze in a kid or two and some cats. In the end, the pros outweighed the cons, which
were mostly the fun and convenience of living in the city. We'd be looking at plans a couple of
years out, which suited us both just fine, and we hunted up Daniel before breakfast to accept his
generous offer.

After everybody else had left for work--I didn't have anywhere I needed to go that day so decided
to spend it with Damian--we went to the library after his last scan (still clean) and curled up in the
tete a tete seat, reading and talking. It was cozy with snow falling outside, books all around, a fire
in the fireplace. Alfred came in mid-morning with coffee and Damian's tea.

"Miss Alex, I noticed a new vehicle in the garage. Do you know who owns it?" he asked, setting
down a plate of croissants with hibiscus jam.

"In all the fuss, I completely forgot," I said ruefully. "It's mine."
"What?" Damian asked, so we all trooped out to see it.

"I had to restock my paramedic kit," I explained. "And there was so much stuff to carry and sometimes cabbies don't want to pick up Eira"--who frisked up, covered in snow, having a great time--"and I'd just had it. It has limited aerial capabilities, so I can use the launching decks to get in and out of the city and avoid traffic, and it's not a bad ride when it's on the ground. They even kicked in a nice blanket for Eira." I reconsidered. "Actually, you can borrow it, so it's 'we' can use the launching decks." Damian grinned.

"That's quite a lovely vehicle, Miss Alex," Alfred said. "Not as elegant as your first Jaguar roadster, but then times have changed, and it has its own charm."

"That's good, because Daniel offered us a site to build our own home on. It'll be nice to have our own transportation too," Damian told him. Alfred perked up, and knew the site when we said it was on the other side of the batcave. He rewarded our decision to accept Daniel's offer with a lunch of unusual splendor, complete with cupcakes. That afternoon, Damian and I talked about what we wanted in our ideal house. We had so many ideas that we'd need to sit down with an architect, but one thing we were in agreement on was the need for gardens. Looking at the topographical film, we could have a driveway swoop in off the main drive. On the other side of the driveway we wanted a fountain and a formal garden of some sort, extending around the sides and across the front of the house. In the back, a patio and informal garden beds, with a special covered spot for Eira. The dog in question loved the idea of moving out here in awhile and being able to go outside whenever she wanted, and had some ideas about her special spot; she envisioned an elevated platform, slatted for the summer, covered to keep the shade on her thick fur, with a drinking fountain nearby. Possibly with some nice flowering vines climbing up the supports for the roof.

"That seems reasonable," Damian said, and so progress was made.
The next day we moved back to our apartment. It was still lovely, but now that my imagination had been captured by a house in the countryside, built to Damian and my taste, with room for Eira to run and me to fly, it seemed cramped. Damian went into the office for a half day to see where we were after the disturbance and came back with the name of an architect. We had an appointment the next day.

"I know we agreed not to rush it," he said, abashed, "but we have such a wonderful opportunity..."

"I was thinking the same thing," I admitted. He grinned, and we spent the night making Pinterest boards for the house and grounds. We both liked the English cottage exterior aesthetic, wanting to blend in with the other structures on the grounds; which were mostly neo-Gothic or Victorian. Inside, though, we could have whatever we wanted, and wanted to make it more modern than the main mansion. Not jarringly so, however; neither of us wanted to approach a charming country house and step into the latest and greatest interior design, which seemed to be more like a clean room than a living space. I wanted Eira to be able to shed in peace. "I'm very spoiled," I admitted.

"We have options others don't," he said as we sat down to eat. "But there's nothing wrong with that, and to think of it another way, once we get our house built, this apartment can go to others."

The next day we went to our appointment, fairly vibrating with excitement. The architect took some time to get to know us first, smiling when I said that I'd be starting the historic preservation program in the spring. "Your skills will be in high demand, Ms Wayne," he said. "Globally, not just locally, either, once you get some experience." Damian beamed. What we thought was a jumble of ideas turned out to be not so difficult under the expert questioning of our architect, Benjamin Lacoste. He scrolled through our Pinterest boards, nodding, and showed us some pictures and architectural renderings of similar buildings. By the time we left, he'd sketched out a preliminary two-story dwelling with a basement and attic, a cross between an English cottage and a small manor, which kind of cracked me up. A huge turret dominated the back, which was where our library/living room would be, with our suite above it. By the kitchen would be a mud room where Eira would be able to come and go as she pleased. There was technology, originally developed for humans, that would allow her to wash herself off if she came in muddy or dirty, and a warm dryer that she could activate. She woofed and her tail wagged when she heard this, and Lacoste smiled at her.

"One thing to consider is that while we can get your project slated for construction, quality crews are in short supply. However, road crews are not, and landscapers aren't in as high demand--yet. What we can do to get started is put in the driveway and get started with the formal garden that you want across the driveway, so by the time the house is built, the gardens will be a year or two old and starting to fill in."

"Yes, please," Damian and I said in chorus after a quick look at each other. We made an appointment to take Lacoste and some surveyors over to the building site to get started. After the meeting, Damian went to work and I stopped by Wayne. Daniel was in a meeting, so Eira and I waited, going down to the cafeteria for a little snack in the interim. I apologized when the meeting ended for just dropping in, but he assured me that he was always glad to see us. He sat on the floor of his office to rub Eira's tummy as I explained what our architect had proposed and grinned at me.

"Off like a shot," he said. "Just let Alfred know what days that the surveyors are there so he can let them in." He asked many questions about the house we were designing and the gardens.
"Depending on the footprint of the house, either a rectangular or circular maze in front with a fountain, made from different varieties of lavender," I said. "And different bushes up by the front of the house, some flowers. Trees. That part depends more on the style of the house, what it looks like. And in the back, a stone patio, grass and a shaded area for Eira, and informal, kind of riotous flower beds." He grinned and kissed my cheek.

"I'm looking forward to having you closer, Grandma. And I know Alfred will like it, too. You and Grandpa are his two favorite people, I think. Bruce used to be up there too, but that mess with Alexander demoted him a bit." I sighed.

"Bruce is so single-minded," I said. "I was kind of hoping that his afterlife would have relaxed him some, but it seems just to have been an extended vacation, and now he's back with a vengeance."

Daniel paused in his attention to Eira. "Uh, speaking of afterlives, the lawsuit has hit the news cycle. It's, ah, kind of blown up. Commentators are speculating about the movie and what's in it." I cursed. That repellent woman was probably overjoyed, all the information was supposed to be covered by the gag order. He flicked on the screen and we came in the middle of someone pontificating about it. The gist--he was very long-winded-- was that although no details about the movie were known, it sounded like an important historical document and the public good should prevent its suppression.

"It's probably what the courts are going to say," I said morosely. Another channel fretted about the impact of a judgment for defendant if Thor got pissy about it. And he might; he was furious that someone snuck into the embassy and onto Asgard. And recording the battle was beyond the pale, in his opinion. They didn't have media like Earth did, and virtually everybody had friends or family at the citadel or in the battle. Nobody was paying any attention to A, B, C, and D Doe, which was nice. But then, the complaint was sealed and those details shouldn't get out. I snorted. Nothing should have gotten out. My communicator rang; it was the law firm handling our complaint. Kim Lee controlled her temper well but the edge was in her voice as she assured me that Andrews was even then in court protesting the leak.

"The response to our complaint has been filed and he was going to be appearing in front of the judge anyway to set the trial date and get some procedural items worked out, including whether you and the other valkyries can obscure your faces in court. The leak is good only in the sense that it gives us ammunition to argue that your privacy is a priority, given that despite the gag order news about the movie leaked. The leak puts the judge in a difficult position," she said more gently. "The possibility of getting the movie entirely suppressed just got a lot lower; the lawyers are arguing that there's a strong public interest in understanding the events of the return, which, according to mythology, is linked to Ragnarok. It's my feeling that the movie will be released and you'll have to settle for having your identity and any identifying marks obscured."

"I figured," I said gloomily. "This is why it's really important to have the frames that show me at all removed from the film. I don't trust the filmmaker to completely disguise my identity." We talked a little more, her trying to buck me up some, then hung up. The news put a damper on things, even the fun of planning a new house, and after a bit, I gave Daniel a kiss on the cheek and Eira and I went home. To sulk, let's be frank. And worry. Until the first meeting with the lawyers, when they gaped at my wings, I'd never felt like a freak. Different, yes, but not circus-sideshow-weird. And I was worried about how people would react if it was known that I still had them.

"If the worst happens, we'll deal with it," my husband said calmly. "I'm sure that Thor would help you out; you could relocate to Asgard for a bit until the fuss died down; he would help you establish a new identity if necessary. But let's not get ahead of ourselves. Let's see what happens first."
The next day I went up to Columbia to talk with Loki. "Thor has something up his sleeve in case he
doesn't get what he wants, the destruction of all the footage, but he won't tell me what it is yet," he
said. "So rest assured that the verdict will not be the final word on the matter. As one who fought
for Asgard and one of our honored valkyries, it is my brother's pleasure to pledge whatever
assistance he can give you in this matter or the aftermath," he assured me. Then we talked about
Bucky's application to the university. "I pulled some strings there and he'll be admitted. He still has
to complete the same remedial courses you did, but I suspect he won't have much trouble with
that."

"His math skills are excellent," I said, and he smiled. We talked a little more about general things;
the human embassy staff were having a Thanksgiving celebration, turkey, all the trimmings, and a
historically accurate explanation of the holiday.

"How is Torunn?" I asked. "I haven't seen her for quite some time and she didn't answer my
message."

"Thor has reassigned her to the citadel for additional training," was all Loki said, and I respected
his reticence and didn't push. I suspected it had something to do with the lawsuit.

The new tanks arrived just before Thanksgiving and Tony went out to our supplier to personally
pick up the new algae and bacteria. We set up the tanks again and left them over the long holiday
weekend. Ann made sure that the security system was armed, the cameras recording, and the doors
locked.

My daughter came in from London for the holiday and it was wonderful to have her back, even for
a few days. She was energized by the challenges she encountered in London and I was pleased to
see her doing so well. "I'm glad Dad made it up to you," she said as we walked over to the site
where Damian and I would be building. The architect had come out the day before Thanksgiving
with a couple of surveyors, and Damian, Daniel and I had met them, determining just where the
house would be sited, where it would be facing, and Daniel took the data from the surveyors in
order to put into the deed. The driveway would go in early in December, weather permitting, and
the gardens would be started in the spring. We needed to get a landscape architect soon. "You're
under no obligation to stay together for the kids," she bathed her eyelashes at me and I laughed,
"but you guys are pretty much a dream team."

"Well, he'll never make that particular mistake again," I said. She smiled, then listened as I
described which way the house would face and our ideas for the gardens as Eira inspected the area.

I was regretful when she went back, but she was coming over with Grandma for Christmas.

After Thanksgiving, I had a lot to do. I was focusing on the renewal of my vows with Damian and
wanted a pretty dress to wear. We always dressed for Christmas dinner, so a party dress wouldn't
stand out, and I found a lovely tea length dress in misty dark green. It had a fluffy (but not too
fluffy) skirt in tulle with wrap sleeves and silver lace applique over the bodice. The double strand
of pearls Damian had given me would look wonderful with it. I arranged to take some red roses
with me, just tied with a ribbon that could be put into a vase afterward, and a sprig of holly
(domestic happiness) for my hair and one for Damian's lapel. Everything was on track with the
cake we'd chosen, and I had a surprise for my husband. I'd gotten him a new wedding ring. It was a
wide band, with a thin strand of yellow gold about a third of the way in from one edge. The surface
of the band was brushed to a satin finish, the larger part oxidized black and the smaller part a
lighter gray; it was beautiful and unique, just like Damian. On the inside, they used a laser to
engrave part of my fingerprint (not than I'm possessive or anything) and, in small block letters,
"my love through lifetimes." There was no date on this ring; I knew there was no expiration date
on our union. I'd seen the ring when I went to get the pearls restrung and wanted him to have a more unique ring this time around.

And there were lunches or dinners or drinks with my friends. We were all busy, but keeping up our friendships was important to all of us. Knowing that somebody has your back in a world that isn't as familiar as it seems is precious, and regardless of how much I loved Damian, I couldn't restrict my world just to him. I brought Natasha along after we'd gone to the ballet.

"What did you guys see?" Aslyn asked.

"Swan Lake," I said, straight-faced. Carol, Serena, and Dagny cracked up.

"Are those swans really as bad as Alex says?" Natasha asked them.

"They sure don't seem to like Alex," Serena said, dabbing at her eyes. "The rest of us they pretty much ignore. And it's true, one of them broke her finger once. They have these serrated beaks."

"You always were an unusual child," Aunt Becca said; she'd come along with the other valkyries, a firm friendship having taken root there.

Everybody had a good laugh, and we moved on. Carol was learning a lot and was very happy with her apprenticeship. Serena, like me, was looking forward to starting school in January but was also picking up a lot at the architecture firm where she was working. She'd be working there part time when classes started. That was when Aslyn would be adding first year law classes too. Karen was already managing some small remodels at the company and was set to start her first construction project in a couple of weeks. Margaret was a little frustrated at her city job; there were so many committees and licensing boards and zoning rules to deal with. Dagny had taken an office job until she decided what she wanted to do.

"What are you up to, Alex?" Margaret said.

"Well, the Joker raided the lab and destroyed the tanks of algae and bacteria that Ann was going to be working on. There was Joker venom, and Tony and Ann were affected. The police had to bring in specialists from the CDC and a couple of other federal agencies to put the pieces together. Apparently the organisms that were brought to us were genetically altered to produce the Joker venom, it wasn't something that was released after the tanks were smashed. So there's that." I rubbed my eye. "But I'm looking forward to starting school. Daniel offered Damian and me some land a ways away from the mansion so we could build our own house." That incited a spate of questions and I described what we were doing, the look we were going for. They all smiled at the Eira-specific additions. Dagny had more questions about the landscaping. "And you're all invited to Christmas dinner," I said. Daniel had told us all to bring our friends. "Aunt Becca is already coming, but all of you are welcome. I'm not going to Asgard for Yule, so it's going to be a little weird." The other valkyries nodded.

"What did you guys do for Yule?" Aslyn asked, puzzled. "When is it?"

"Winter solstice," Carol said. "There was a big celebration with a Yule log to be burned, a feast, of course. The great hall in Valhalla would be decorated with holly, mistletoe, and pine boughs, there would be a tree like a Christmas tree, all decorated. There would be baskets of clove-studded apples and oranges. The hall always smelled so good."

"There was a big bonfire outside, and a big feast the night of the solstice, pork, mostly, with cider and apples, fruits, nuts, and special baked goods," Serena said. We sighed in unison. The cooks in Valhalla had been excellent. "It was to honor the god Freyr, who brings light and love back to the
world. You put a pair of boots on the doorstep with hay and sugar and Odin would in turn fill them with gifts." We grinned.

"Why hay and sugar?" Karen asked, baffled.

"Because the Wild Hunt is at its peak then, and they're for Odin's horse Sleipnir," I said, shivering a bit at the memory of the one time I'd ridden with the Wild Hunt.

"And Odin gave you presents," Aslyn said skeptically.

"Oh, yes," Dagny said. "Mostly treats to eat, but after we returned from Helheim, he really made an effort and added more personal things too."

I nodded. "He gave me a set of the most beautiful knitting needles the year we returned. Ash, made from a broken limb of Yggdrasil itself. It really surprised me because I thought I was on his shit list." The valkyries roared.

"Why would you be on his bad side? I thought you were his go-to valkyrie," Natasha asked, and Serena told the story of our labor insurrection. "Troublemaker," she taunted me.

"I'd like to point out that I was the last to quit," I said astringently. "And it was me who got valkyries back in Valhalla."

"So if Yule is for the winter solstice, why aren't you going to Asgard?" Margaret asked me. "It's before Christmas."

"The trial starts the nineteenth, and the judge has ordered us all to stay on Midgard for the duration." I scowled. Sif had invited me to bring Damian for the celebration. Bringing up the trial put a damper on the conversation, but then they started to accept my invitation to come to the mansion for Christmas. Even Natasha agreed, and I told her to bring Hawkeye too. I brightened up. I really wanted Daniel to meet my friends in a social situation, now that they were settled back into the world and back to their splendid selves. Mark too. Daniel's mother hadn't been registered or found.

The next day, Damian and I went out to the mansion to update Alfred on the number of people we'd invited—Tony and Ann were coming as well as my friends. He nodded, completely unfazed. "We can have tables set up in the ballroom, so there is plenty of room for everyone to be comfortable."

"So...what were you planning on having for dessert?" I asked. He looked at me, smiling indulgently.

"I was planning on the little spice cakes you like so much, Miss Alex, as well as a variety of cookies and candies." I grinned at him.

"Do you think you could make room if we brought a cake with us?" At my words, his face became austere. "It's not a comment on the superb quality of your baking, I assure you," I said hastily. "It's just that Damian and I are planning on renewing our marriage vows in front of our family and friends, and we've ordered a wedding cake."

Alfred smiled as broadly as I'd ever seen. "What a lovely idea," he said, beaming. "Of course, Miss Alex."

Damian took my hand. "And we wanted to ask if you'd conduct the little ceremony. We're already legally married still, since Alex didn't divorce me. But I can't think of anybody I'd rather have." We
smiled at him.

Alfred the Unflappable was decidedly flapped by the request. It took him a couple of tries and what looked like a stern internal command to himself before he spoke. "This is a great honor for me, Master Damian, Miss Alex. I would be delighted."

"It's a secret," Damian warned. "We don't want a fuss, just our friends and family with us."

"Of course," he murmured, and we took a moment to discuss logistics, deciding to have the ceremony before dinner, in the library.

"I'm almost certain that your lovely wedding gown is up in the attic, Miss Alex," Alfred said, frowning slightly as he thought.

"It is." I'd seen it in a storage unit with gowns from other Wayne brides when I'd rooted around up there after my big return. "But the renewal of our vows isn't the point of the gathering, we're just taking advantage of it, and I feel like I'd be making too much of it if I showed up in a long white gown. People were disappointed when we got married again at city hall, and this is as much for them as it is for us. Besides, a lot of them were at the original wedding."

"She's got a new pretty dress to wear anyway," Damian smiled at me and kissed my hand. And so our plans were pretty much set. I took the opportunity to fly around a little outside, and Mark and Daniel, arriving home as I landed, invited us to dinner.

"If I'd known we'd get an invitation to one of Alfred's dinners, I wouldn't have eaten so many cookies before," Damian said on a sigh on our way home.

As Christmas approached, we decorated our apartment, including a small tree strung with colored lights and crystal ornaments. It was the first time we'd done our own decorating, I realized; Alfred had always had a firm grip on the mansion, followed by his niece. It was fun, reminding me of doing it with my family when I was growing up. We even put red and white stockings on the mantle--one for each of us and Eira. She got a special red and green holiday collar and leash. I did a fair amount of baking, sending my husband to work with cookies and little cakes while I did studying to get ahead for my first semester. I alternated between old favorites and treats that were reminiscent of the cakes and breads we'd had in Valhalla for Yule. I made sure to send enough for everybody. One of my Christmas presents for Damian was a cookie jar.

All too soon, the nineteenth rolled around. Eira went to work with Damian and I walked through the thickly falling snow to the courthouse. I had a cardigan with a hood to cover my hair and a mask so that I could hide my identity in the courtroom. I walked through the full-body scanners and up to courtroom F, one of the smaller ones since it was a closed trial. I put my hand on the door handle, and, exhaling all the air in my lungs, opened the door and walked in.
Clark Andrews caught sight of me and motioned me over to the table where our lawyers congregated. Thor was there, in Asgardian dress although not in armor, and Serena had beaten me to the room. She too had a hoody and we slipped our masks on. They were products from Wayne Enterprises, opaque from the outside but almost transparent from the inside. I just hoped I didn't have to sneeze or anything that would necessitate taking off the mask in court. The filmmaker and her lawyers were at the other table setting up. Before long, Carol and Dagny came in; Dagny had a veil over her hair similar to the ones really devout women still wore to the most traditional churches, and Carol put her hair up under a hat. We took our seats, knowing what to expect. Precisely on time, the judge entered the courtroom, cleared the room of spectators, and requested that the four of us come up to her, one at a time, to remove our masks and affirm our identities to her. This identification was not part of the record but for the judge's satisfaction that we were who we claimed to be. When it was my turn, I joined Andrews before the judge and lifted my mask long enough for her to compare to a still taken from the film. She nodded and accepted my designation as "Donna Doe" for the purposes of this trial.

Then the bailiff brought in the first group of prospective jurors. Despite our preference for a bench trial, it was the right of defendant to choose a jury trial and she did. It surprised me, though; while most potential jurors were interested in the existence of the film and wanted to see it, few expressed opinions about Asgard or the filmmaker. A few who didn't feel that aliens from another planet had any right to Midgard due processes were challenged by our side and a couple of real law-and-order types who felt that trespass was wrong regardless of the reason were dismissed by defendant. It didn't take very long to seat and swear in a jury, and by the close of the day the judge also subjected the jury to the gag order and dismissed us for the night.

The next morning the opening statements began. Amelia Early stood before the jury; she had a warm, compassionate voice and a talent for connecting with jurors, or so I was told. "You've been selected to the jury of a very unusual case," she said, her voice as thick and smooth as eggnog. Eggnog. That sounded good.

"For the first time, questions about the sovereign rights of an extra-planetary political entity--in this case, the kingdom of Asgard--and how they relate to the United States are being asked in court. Asgard exists on a completely separate planet, shares no boundaries with any country on Earth, and has its own culture and legal system, independent of ours. While it is true that the gods of Asgard used to visit the Nordic region, that was well over a millennia ago and have not been been since, up until fairly recently. Since King Thor's first visit to Earth, much has happened. There is an embassy here and there have been a few limited cultural exchanges through Columbia University, overseen by King Thor's brother, Prince Loki. Some tentative trade agreements have been agreed to, and it appears that we are on the verge of a greater partnership with other worlds.

"But this is more than new case law," she continued. "You're going to hear accounts of events that sound more like a fairy tale, a sword and sorcery epic rather than reality. But I can assure you that the events that we're discussing here did happen. The basic facts are not in question.

"I'm sure you all remember the Great Return, when those who were deceased were returned to life and body." I'm sure they did, especially a few of the jurors who were returned themselves. "It was a shock and a surprise to everybody. What you may not know is that this was one of the first signs of Ragnarok, a Norse version of the apocalypse." She paused to let that sink in, and a the jurors looked at her even more attentively. "There was a prophesy that the dead would be returned to life prior to a great battle on Asgard. The prophesy claimed that Asgard would be invaded and that the
invaders would cause destruction and death across all the worlds, effectively ending our existence. The problem with prophesies, apparently, is that they aren't very specific. It wasn't know until it happened that when the Norse dead returned, the dead from all the other faiths would return as well." Although, come to think of it, perhaps we shouldn't have been so surprised. If all life was to be wiped out, the sea rising, all that, across the Nine Realms, perhaps we should have realized that the dead returning could have a similar wide-reaching effect. I mentally shook my head. We'd all been too intent on the exact prophesy, even those of us who were looking to subvert it. "But they were, and nothing could have stopped it. The next thing we knew, a great wave of fear shook the world." The jurors' faces reflected their memories of that terror, as did mine, under the mask. I didn't like to remember that either. "That was the signal that Ragnarok was beginning. At that point, Asgardians at the embassy and their human associates gathered at the embassy and were returned to Asgard for the battle using the Bifrost." She paused. "I don't really know how to explain the Bifrost, but I'm not sure it matters how it works, just that it does. It's akin to transporter beams like you see in Star Trek movies, but different. The effect is the same, however, it allows people to go to and from Asgard quickly. And it takes a lot of energy to power the Bifrost, so it isn't something that is done on a whim. Access to and use of the Bifrost is controlled strictly on Asgard. It is, for all intents and purposes, a closed kingdom, with access granted to only a few at the directive of its king, which currently is King Thor, the lead plaintiff in this case.

"What happened is this: when warriors and support staff were taken back to Asgard for the battle, someone saw an opportunity to make a name for herself. She grabbed a camera and joined the people going into the embassy and managed to be transported by the Bifrost to Asgard, and hid in a forest, capturing scenes from the battle in a recording from where she concealed herself in a tree. You will be viewing this film as a part of the trial." I stared down at the table, disappointed that they'd been unable to suppress the film, but the judge had ruled that the jurors should see it in order to understand the magnitude of the issues at trial. She had, however, decided that the rough cut, without narration or soundtrack, would be shown. That was slightly better; the filmmaker lost a little bit of influence without the effects of a theater, the swelling music, or any self-serving narration. I felt, however, that even in its stripped-down state, that screening the film meant that it was inevitable that the film would be released. The jurors would talk about it after the trial, and public interest would be high.

"You're being asked to decide several issues here. The first is whether the film, made illegally, should be released to the public. The filmmaker has already pled guilty to misdemeanor criminal trespass, which is a person knowingly entering or remaining in a place where they have no right to be." Yeah, she'd gotten a year of probation, suspended, in lieu of two months in jail. Big whoop. "In this trial, Melanie Kipp is also being sued for civil trespass, which is a tort, a violation of a property owner's right to maintain exclusive control over his property. It is the position of King Thor that Ms Kipp should not profit from her trespass. Life is different on Asgard and they don't have mass media like we do, or movies for entertainment, which is what this film is. They take going to war very seriously. It is not a decision to be entered into lightly, and avoided where possible, but there exists a sacred belief that those who fight and die should be treated with honor. It has never occurred to them to exploit their service and sacrifice for money and a momentary thrill. What is on that film, ladies and gentlemen, is a war against beings we have never seen before. People fight and die, sometimes gruesomely. You will see both Asgardians and humans give their last full measure of devotion to the cause of preserving life as we know it. And among those humans are the valkyries. " She gestured toward us at the plaintiff's table.

"Valkyries are... made, I suppose you could say, in Valhalla, where the honored dead spent the passage of time until they were returned in time for the battle of Ragnarok. They were created by Odin, father of King Thor, to bring the souls of those heroes fallen in battle to Valhalla, and it was always prophesied that they would be by Odin's side in Ragnarok. Their badge of office was a cape
of swansfeathers, which, when they were returned, turned into actual wings that they could use in flight. You will see this on the film. To give you an idea of the brutality of the battle, almost four dozen valkyries took to the sky at Ragarok. You will see them shot down with spears and arrows, pulled out of the air and dashed against the ground, kicked and pummeled. After the battle, less than a dozen remained, all injured, and one of those so gravely wounded that she almost died."

There was a gasp from the jury. "Yes. This is serious business. King Thor is asking that Ms Kipp be prevented from releasing the film due to her criminal and civil trespass, violation of the laws and mores of Asgard, and out of respect for the dead. The four valkyries who remain on Earth are asking that if the film is released, that the frames showing them be removed from the final picture and those images destroyed--in all copies and original materials. For when Odin died, the valkyries lost their wings because of the bond they had with him. I'm sure you've seen the news; older returnees are having trouble accepting mutants as unnatural and there's been a good bit of violence against them. Far more violence in more conservative countries than in America, but there's been enough violence against those who are different that these valkyries want protection. They are asking you not to out them and put their lives at risk. Again." She went on to discuss a little more law, then wrapped up neatly and sat down.

One of Kipp's lawyers, who I would say looked weaselly except that would be an insult to honest members of the weasel family, got to his feet after Early sat down. He had a vastly different approach to the jury than she did. "The facts of this matter are undisputed. The old stories of Ragnarok seem to have been true. There was a big battle on Asgard against horrifying monsters that meant to wipe out life as we know it. These things were defeated by individuals identified as Odin, former king of Asgard, and Thor, the current king, assisted by the armed forces of Asgard and humans who were returned from the Norse afterlives. This will be filled in in more detail during testimony. It is true that Melanie Kipp went to Asgard without getting permission, and that she filmed this great battle. We are not disputing this. However, it is Ms Kipp's contention, one we think you'll share after seeing the film's rough footage, that this is a seminal event in history. It needs to be seen, so that all of us can appreciate the sacrifices that the forces of Asgard made to preserve the way of life in all of what the Asgardians call the "Nine Realms" and to fully appreciate the magnitude of the threat that was faced. We know that not all aliens are like the Asgardians--we've faced and defeated the Skrulls and the Kree, after all-- but this shows something different. This threat didn't just want to exploit the population and resources of Earth, they wanted to end it. So we owe a lot to those men and women, and you will see just how much when you watch the film. Thank you." And he sat down. That was...brief.

The judge inhaled deeply, and started off by reading the law to the jury and giving them instruction that had been agreed to by the lawyers of both parties regarding the interpretation of the law. The bailiff handed each juror a pad of paper and a couple of pens so they could make notes during testimony, no electronic devices being allowed in the courtroom due to the gag order. There was an adjournment for lunch, provided by the court for everybody and for which I had no appetite, then when court was called back in session, Early called Thor to the stand and he was sworn in.

"Thor Odinson, please describe for the record how you came to be the king of Asgard."

"I am the natural son of my father, Odin Borson, king first of Asgard and now Valhalla, and his wife, the Lady Frigga. I succeeded to the kingship by the decision of Odin and took it up upon his death."

"How did you become aware of the story of Ragnarok?"

"It was never a tale, as you suggest by calling it a story," he corrected her. "It was always understood to be a thing that would come to pass. Every child of Asgard grew up knowing of the signs that would herald the battle. Certain outcomes were predicted, including the destruction of
almost all life in the Nine Realms, and hope for the eventual reestablishment of the gods and man."

"It's my understanding that you were not meant to survive the battle yourself."

"This is true. It was foretold that I would perish after slaying the great serpent Jormungandr." Thor shrugged.

"I'm going to ask you to define some terms and make some identifications so that everyone has the same understanding before we go farther." Thor nodded. "Now, what exactly are the Nine Realms?"

"They are nine planets that can be linked by the Bifrost," Thor explained. "There is Asgard, where dwell the Aesir and some of the Vanir, and Midgard, what you call Earth, Alfheimr, the home of the elves, Jotunheim, home of the frost giants, Muspellheim, the place of the fire giants, Nioavellir, where dwell the dwarves, Niflheim, the realm of the dishonored dead, although this place is not accessible to the living, Svartalfar, which was once the place of the dark elves but has since been claimed by groups of returnees from Midgard, and Vanaheim, home of the Vanir gods. What you Midgaridans call gods, anyway."

"And what is the difference between the Aesir and the Vanir?"

"Their planet of origin, mainly. The Aesir are what Midgard followers termed warrior gods but who are just the principle gods found in Norse mythology, and the Vanir took more aspects of the natural world." When pressed, Thor continued, "The Aesir include Odin, the All-Father, me for my control of lightning and thunder, Baldr, beauty, although he is more renowned among our people for the creation and propagation of a race of dogs, Bragi, poetry and eloquence, Forseti, justice, Freya, also fertility, and my brother Loki, who has always been the personification of tricks." The look on his face was mostly fond, but with traces of frustration. "The Vanir were principally wild nature and fertility beings with abilities on the level of those of Asgard. Our two races warred for some time, but eventually there was peace, secured by the exchange of hostages, and some of the Vanir came to Asgard permanently. Freyja, revered for her influence on fertility was of Vanir as was her brother Freyr and their father Njord, associated with the wind and sea."

"And who are the Norn?"

Thor laughed. "There is one among us who can explain that better than I."

Early nodded. "We'll get to that in time. But as an introduction, who are they and what do they do?"

"There are three Norn, originally frost giants, known as Skuld, Urd, and Verdanti. They came to tend the World Tree Yggdrasil and have become... something else by association. They reveal destiny as twined by the flow of time."

"And they're the source of Ragnarok?"

"They provided the basic facts," he said. "It turns out that they were embellished somewhat over the passage of time." She asked him for the prophesy as it had been passed down to him, and he told the whole thing, starting with the subtle signs of fierce battles motivated by greed, where kinship made no difference and mercy was not shown, progressing into Fimbulwinter, followed by the cocks that crowed to release the dead. There had been a massive earthquake, an almost incomprehensible release of energy from tectonic action on Vanaheim that had significantly damaged a mountain range there, the sheer terror that had wrecked the World Tree and affected all beings in the nine realms. How Heimdall was to blow the horn Gjallarhorn to kick off the battle,
the arrival of the fire giants and the destruction of the Bifrost, the arrival of the dishonored dead, how the wolf Fenrir was to kill Odin, the serpent kill Thor, all the deaths of the gods, how Sutr was supposed to destroy worlds with his blazing sword, the land sinking into the seas, steam, smoke, and flame reaching up to the heavens, but how a few gods would survive or be reborn, and the race of man rebuilt by a couple who sheltered in the roots of Yggdrasil. A new, happy age was predicted.

"And how does that differ from what happened?"

Thor smiled slightly. "For one thing, I live."

"Yes. How did the outcome of the battle come to differ so radically from the prophesy?"

"I think it can be best expressed as a change in belief, that the outcome wasn't necessarily set. There were those of us who thought to try to change the outcome. We felt there was nothing to lose; either the prophesy was fixed or it could be altered by judicious changes. Fortunately, the sons of Muspell— the fire giants led by Sutr— apparently felt that the outcome was set and made no changes of their own."

"Can you give us examples of the changes you tried to make?"

"Loki and Heimdall, guardian of the Bifrost, were supposed to kill each other. We attempted to circumvent that by keeping them far apart during the battle. Odin sent Loki and one of his bodyguards to kill the dragon who was chewing on the roots of Yggdrasil. The dragon would have killed the World Tree, which would have assisted the destruction of the Nine Realms. I was supposed to be killed by the great serpent, but I wore protective attire over my armor when I went to battle Jormungandr. My father, on the other hand, did not believe the prophesy could be altered and he met his end by the wolf Fenrir rather than simply changing tactics. "I believe his death could have been prevented had he kept the valkyries with him. They were some of our best warriors, highly skilled and proud of their arts of war. But he sent them away, that they not witness his end." He cleared his throat. "And they provided decisive action. They helped defeat the great serpent, provided effective battlefield leadership, and the last few helped to bring down Sutr. Their sacrifices were great."

"And so here we are." Thor inclined his head. "Can you tell us what your objections are to the film in questions, why you don't want it released?"

"Certainly. Aside from the illegal and immoral actions of the one who made it—"

"Objection to the characterization, Your Honor," the defense attorney spoke up.

"Overruled. The plaintiff was asked for his opinions. Continue."

"Aside from the illegal and immoral actions of the one who made the film by sneaking onto Asgard in violation of our sovereignty, we of Asgard do not use technology to record such events. It is unseemly to sit while others fight and die, and cowardly to cower in a tree." His voice was rich with disgust. "Not everyone on Asgard fought, but most participated and others had their own solemn duties to discharge in the gathering of the dead and arranging their sendings. It dishonors the sacrifice that others may gawk at their endings. Battle has a sacredness about it; when two forces face each other over the swordpoint, it must be treated respectfully and with full acknowledgement of the sacrifice that all are prepared to meet. The pain and suffering and death must not be cheapened. It is not entertainment for the masses!" He bellowed the last sentence and almost everybody in the courtroom flinched.
Defense had no cross for Thor.

Loki was brought in to corroborate aspects of Thor's testimony regarding the difference between prophesy and reality and the views of the morality of the film. He was dressed today as a prince of Asgard in his customary green and black, intricately pieced clothing, leaving behind the suits he usually wore as a department chair of Columbia University and internationally recognized alien expert. The defense did have a few questions for him in cross examination.

"You once led an invading army of Chirauri warriors, did you not?"

Loki nodded serenely. "I did."

"And now you're all friendly toward the people of Earth? How did that come about, and did you manipulate that in any way with your godly powers?"

Loki chuckled. "It is the last part of the question that is amusing, not the invasion, I assure you. At the time of the invasion, I was younger and lacking experience but full of pride and hubris. I am the adopted son of Frigga and Odin. That had been revealed to me just prior to those events and in error I set myself against my brother. Over the decades I have tried to make recompense for my actions and have devoted my time here to increase understanding between our cultures both as the ambassador for my brother and at the university. My loyalty to my brother is absolute. My godly powers, as you put it, are limited to chaos. It is what I am actively trying to prevent here."

One question on redirect: "Why did you stop trying to overthrow your brother, then?"

Loki answered, gently. "I grew up."

And with that, we recessed for the night. The next morning, Dagny, as Ann Doe, was called to the stand. She testified about her life in England during the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, a worker in a textile factory. "I was a Luddite," she said simply.

"I thought Luddites were anti technology," Lee, who was handling this testimony, said.

"It's a mischaracterization," Dagny said. "The war against Napoleon seemed endless, and the ordinary Englishman--and woman--felt the hard pinch of poverty. Food was terribly scarce and when it was found, it was expensive. So in March of 1811, a group of us protested in Nottingham, which was then a textile manufacturing center, demanding more work and better wages. Most of us just wanted to feed and clothe our families. We weren't extravagant; we had none of your electronics or other luxuries available to us. It was simply a matter of food and shelter, providing for our families. Troops broke up the protest, but the idea took hold, and soon there were waves of protest around the area. Thousands of soldiers were brought in to defend the factories, confine the unrest to the area rather than having it spread, and Parliament passed a measure to make machine-breaking illegal. There were few if any worker protection laws at the time; the law favored the owners, who had friends in Parliament and were wealthy. But we weren't organized, or even particularly violent. Machines to assist textile production had been around for some time by then, a knitting machine one of the oldest. We didn't want to abolish the technology, what we wanted were safe conditions and protections for our jobs, training for those of us who operated the machines, apprenticeships, fair wages. We targeted mill owners who operated fraudulently and deceitfully to get around the customary labor practices. We broke their machines. The soldiers were far more violent than we were. They fired into crowds, killing and wounding us. A mill owner, who had bragged about riding up to his britches in Luddite blood, was killed, but for the most part, we weren't interested in killing anybody or even wrecking the machinery. That's not to say we didn't have a little fun, though," she conceded, smiling slightly.
"We invented Ned Ludd to be our General, an imaginary head to the movement. We expressed our anger with a certain amount of what you might term swagger. It captured the public imagination, to a degree. I've been told that it tapped into a vein of anxiety about the increasing importance of machines in the lives of the Englishmen. I didn't care about that. One night, I hit a soldier over the head; he was aiming his rifle at a friend of mine. Another soldier struck me hard with the butt of his rifle and I fell off balance, falling against the corner of the factory, crushing my temple and falling down an incline. It took awhile to die," she said sighing in the silent courtroom. "I found, then, that I was descended from Viking raiders. This ancestry and my actions entitled me to a place in Valhalla, where Odin offered me a place among his valkyries."

"And what did you do as a valkyrie?"

"Our mission was to bring the honored dead to Valhalla or Folkvangr. Folkvangr is an afterlife that was overseen by Frigga, Odin's wife. Almost the same thing as Valhalla, just with less PR, as you would say. Odin told us who was eligible for Valhalla or Folkvangr and we retrieved their souls. We usually used one of the flying horses; it's hard work to retrieve a soul, and quite draining to make our picks from the battlefield. But when we weren't retrieving souls or engaging in the scrimmages between Valhalla and Folkvangr, we were responsible for making cloth, from the shearing of the sheep and preparation of the flax for linen to the weaving. Our highest calling, of course, was to ride at Odin's side at Ragnarok."

"And you fought at Ragnarok, didn't you?"

"Yes, along with all my sisters. I was lucky, though, I made it through with only flesh wounds. It was a terrible battle." The lawyer had her describe her experiences in battle and the aftermath. "And what happened after the battle?"

"Since I was in pretty good shape after having the slashes and punctures healed and getting a meal and water into me, I helped the folk of the citadel collect our dead, discovering a few who were still alive. There were so many dead. The fire giants turned to cinders and ash when they fell, so that was a blessing. I helped to move the dead; ships were built for a version of the traditional funeral. There were so many bodies that larger ships were built and many were placed in each one. The valkyries got their own ship, going on together although we were offered individual small boats for each. After a time, our wings grew insubstantial and disappeared; we believe that it is because we had a bond with Odin, who made us valkyries, and he died at Vigrior."

"How do you feel about the movie? You've seen it, haven't you?"

"Twice," she said, shuddering. It was a mercy not to see her face. "Once in the original showing, then I had to watch it again with all the lawyers present to identify myself. I had such nightmares for weeks. I saw things, horrors, I didn't see during the actual battle. It's disgusting. We never agreed to be filmed and we wouldn't have. To think that a greedy opportunist is exploiting everything that my sisters and companions suffered makes me sick. She's a coward and too weak to ever sacrifice herself." Dagney's voice took on a sneer. "All she could think about was exploiting the situation for her own gain. She's disgusting and should be shunned by any decent person."

There was no cross examination for Dagny.

Carol, as Betty Doe, was up next, and explained how she met her end in campus riots against the Vietnam War as a young professor. She'd slapped a police officer who had pointed a rifle at students, and the officer, on edge and inexperienced, struck her sternum with the butt of the rifle. It was one of those really rare things you hear about; the blow stopped her heart. Because it was dark and no one was looking, he quickly stepped away and the coroner gave a cause of death by misadventure. It wasn't pursued farther.
"But if you were an anti-war protester, why did you join the valkyries, knowing that you'd end up on a battlefield?" Lee asked, sounding genuinely baffled.

"Oh, I'm not against all wars," Carol assured her. "But our presence in Vietnam was illegitimate, immoral, and illegal. Our soldiers were being asked to do horrible things--it was our first big exposure to guerilla warfare, and civilians were killed. The International Criminal Court convicted the US of using banned chemical weapons--napalm and Agent Orange--and accused the military of torturing civilians and captives. It was an utter, if you'll excuse my language, clusterfuck. But I believe that there are times when it is morally justifiable to go to war, and the circumstances of Ragnarok ticked those boxes."

How did the movie affect her? "When you're fighting, your focus is pretty narrow, and for the most part I only saw what I was focused on, my job. So I missed a lot of things. Odin's death, the deaths of my sisters. Seeing them killed and beaten and tormented. Seeing members of the guard subjected to that as well. There were a few fire giants that could spew fire, like a flame thrower, burning people. That brought back memories of the monks who immolated themselves, the use of napalm." You could hear her gagging a moment, then she got herself under control. "I found a therapist to help me deal with the memories, let me sleep at night. I kept feeling the sensation of blood on my hands. I'd been beaten pretty severely and you can see that on the film. Every now and then I felt those blows again. It's really sick that she wants to profit off blood, suffering and death. Not much of a human being, in my estimation."

And that was it for Carol, too. No cross. And then they called Serena, as Cathy Doe, right after lunch.
Serena was sworn in as Cathy Doe and sat down. Her questioning began with her arrival at Valhalla, not what she had done to get there; if this was discussed in direct examination, the defense could ask additional questions that, while not directly revealing her name, could lead to conclusions and the revelation of her identity as a Captain America and thus her name. "Odin waited to see how an individual performed in the scrimmages before making her an offer to become a valkyrie," she explained. "There were women there who were never asked to become valkyries." Andrews came around the counsel table and leaned against it, asking how she happened to become the military leader over valkyries who had been at it longer.

"It was Odin's decision, and I didn't question it," she said crisply. "However, I had advantages in life that the older valkyries did not have. I formally studied warfare in life. I continued this study afterward, talked to the generals, constantly tried new things, worked to develop strategies and tactics that would result in the highest gain for our side and the worst result for the opposition."

Andrews had her explain how she progressed as a valkyrie, choosing her armor, learning the traditional weapons, how she directed the valkyries in the scrimmages and how she prepared us for Ragnarok. "Before we get into Ragnarok, please explain why you want to have your image removed from the film," Andrews asked.

"First of all, I didn't consent to being filmed, and there was no way I would have if I'd been given the option. That lawyer over there" she jerked her chin at the defense attorney who'd given their opening "said that everybody owes us for what we did. That's garbage. We didn't do it to be owed or to be thanked, or to be appreciated, or any of that."

"Why did you do it, then?" Andrews' voice was genuinely curious.

"Because we were the only one who could. We had centuries, some of us over a millennia, to hone our skills in combat, to get used to it. Not just valkyries, all the warriors in Valhalla and Folkvangr. Toughen up. Work as a group. And we did this by continually subjecting ourselves to scrimmages where we could be wounded or killed. Our deaths there weren't permanent, we'd be brought back to existence at the end of the scrimmages, but it wasn't painless. We tried different tactics, different weapons, different combinations of forces and strategies and tactics. We did it because nobody else could do what we did, and after we were returned, we found that we had actual wings, and we had to learn how to use them. It was very different from the wings we had that were entirely a magical construct. Our real wings were born of magic, certainly, but if they were cut, they bled, and they were constructed of bone and muscle and flesh and feathers. We did it so that hopefully we could prevent the destruction of all the worlds. Not many of us have direct descendants left, so it wasn't out of family feeling. We did it because we were uniquely qualified and skilled, and because it was the right thing to do. None of us wants to be famous for that, we don't want adulation or people coming up in the streets to thank us. We also don't want to run the risk of being victimized by anti-mutant sentiment. Everybody's got facial identification software analysis; it would take just seconds to identify us. Then all it would take would be some research, some stalking, an unguarded moment--and nobody, no matter how skilled, can be unceasingly alert for trouble--and it would be back to Valhalla."

"So you think you're going back to Valhalla when you die?"

"Most likely," Serena said, shrugging. "Er--Donna was been told that she will be returned there when she dies, and I can't imagine that the rest of us won't be." Andrews grunted and moved on.
"Where are the rest of the valkyries who lived?"

"Four of us here on Earth, two remained in Asgard, and the remaining five were resettled on Svartalfar, along with other survivors who wanted to live out a simple, low-tech life."

"And this was out of about four dozen women."

"Yes."

"Did you like all of them?"

"No, you're never going to like everybody, but they respected my rank and abilities and I respected them. We worked well enough together, but we didn't have to socialize after work. The four of us returned to Earth in part because we were those who survived out of our particular group of friends and because we wanted to go back to where home had been. The others weren't comfortable with the progress that has occurred since they died."

"Can you be more specific?"

"Certainly. The oldest valkyries, back when we were working at the embassy to help register returnees, were shocked terribly at the changes in morality. Open displays of affection shocked some of them; everybody was surprised that women can legally go topless now. The advertisements that use sex to sell products and services, products and services that they have no understanding of. Technology that was stranger to them than magic. Even women wearing pants. Even in Valhalla, most of us wore trousers only during some types of work, like the sheep shearing, wool preparation, linen processing. When we rode out as valkyries, we had a loose white dress to wear under our armor, and dresses for everyday. "She paused to laugh. "There was almost a riot when Donna showed up to dinner one hot summer night in short sleeves and a tea-length skirt that showed her ankles. It's a very traditional society in most ways, and not everybody could deal with the changes after our return. Those who the most uncomfortable were assigned strictly to work on Asgard."

Andrews looked enlightened and the jury's faces had a blend of surprise, enlightenment, and puzzlement. "So you can see that we didn't fight for the people of the city, county, and state of New York specifically. A lot of valkyries wouldn't have fought to preserve this society. We took up our arms to protect life in general. It was our charge; we had accepted this when we agreed to become valkyries. We went into it knowing full well what the prophesy said, and we were willing to play our part."

"But the ending changed. How did that happen?"

"Donna went to the Norn. They told her that while the battle was fated and would happen regardless of what anybody did, the ending was not set in stone. That we had the chance to avert the ending of almost everything. So we talked to people. Not everybody believed us. But enough did that we were able to make sure some critical parts of the prophesy were prevented. At great cost, not only to the wings of valkyries, but to the rest of the Asgard host."

"How did your role differ from that of Donna Doe, whom we will hear speak later?"

"She was appointed the overall leader of the valkyries by Odin. I was the military leader. I had control over how we fought and trained. I worked with the generals to come up with ways that the valkyries could assist and support the ground troops, and did the same, assisting the wings of valkyries. We use that term, 'wings' in the use of a military aviation unit, not because we had wings," she diverted to explain. "I reported to Odin about our work militarily. Donna maintained
discipline off the field, took over our physical conditioning, reported to Odin regarding our needs and any issues we were having. She kept our spirits up when things were rough, and she stood up to Odin for us when we were being treated unfairly. She kept us focused on our eventual purpose, which was most difficult during Fimbulwinter, and she provided a strong example for the rest of us with her personal discipline and work ethic."

Andrews had her explain how she trained us, then asked for her perspective of Ragnarok. "For our first actions, everything was clear and planned. We executed our orders, although we started losing valkyries from the first action. But things got a lot more chaotic when Fenrir came." She was silent a moment. "Odin's final command was to go where the fighting was the worst and try to remove as many of the sons of Muspell as we could." Another silence, and I knew she was reliving that moment when we left Odin to his death, at his command. "So we did. And we fought to the best of our ability, and finally, the last great moment of the battle was won when Sutr was killed and his bodyguard eliminated. Mop up was pretty quick. There weren't a lot of wounded; almost none on the Muspell side and precious few on ours. But the healers came onto the battlefield and the support staff came out and the long business of clearing the plains of Vigrior began. There were fires to be put out. I rested a bit after having my injuries treated, had a meal and drank a lot of water, then I joined everybody else who could helping to set things right. I helped on the battlefield. Others build the ships to take the dead to their reward, others kept us fed and provided places for us to sleep. Donna was seriously wounded, the worst of all of us who survived, and she was in a coma all through the cleanup, the funerals, the beginning of resumption of life again. When she recovered, Thor gave us the option of remaining in the royal guard in a special unit, staying on Asgard as civilians, going to Svartalfar, or returning to Earth. He arranged for a mustering out bonus to help us get started, since none of us wanted to stay in the guard, and we separated. We've been exploring career options and education here on Earth since."

"What's life been like since the battle?"

Serena exhaled roughly. "It hasn't been easy. Once everything was cleaned up and I made my decision to return to Earth, have a normal life, the stress of what I'd seen and done caught up with me. Trouble sleeping, short temper, crying jags... I went to therapy, then started to to find my way forward. I started applying to colleges and universities. I don't want to dwell in the past, I want to move forward. Left in peace. I want the same freedom to succeed or fail in my career, in my personal life, as anyone else. And then. There's this movie. Even here, in this courtroom, it's being pushed as something heroic. It wasn't. It was bloody and brutal and heroism was in quite short supply. We were fighting for something larger than just us, and we stood on that line and did our best. Now all we want is to move past it, which, if that film is released to the public, is something we won't be able to do. It's brought back nightmares like you can't believe. Even after you see the film, you still won't understand what it was like to be there, to smell the blood, to exhaust yourself trying to kill other beings, hurting from the strain of using your sword and shield and spear with only brief rests here and there to keep going, to have smoke and ash from the fires clogging your lungs, to see everybody you care for hurt, burned, maimed, killed. To feel the injuries again. But I understand it. I relive it. The defense lawyers said in my deposition that I didn't have to see the film again, I could ignore it. But I won't be able to. It'll be all over the media if it's released. Even when it's out of theaters, it'll still be available for purchase and home viewing, showing over the TV, playing in second run theaters. It will be inescapable."

There was a cross for Serena. "So, Ms Doe, what did you do before you died and became a valkyrie?" I knew Serena had discussed this question with the lawyers.

"I was a military veteran."

"Did you see combat?"
"Yes."

"Is it possible that your prior experiences are influencing what you're feeling now, that that stress is influencing your current reaction?"

"Initially, I thought that it might be part of it, but I've thought about it a lot, trying to be fair. I don't think so anymore." The lawyer controlled a start of surprise on her face quickly and smoothly; apparently she'd expected a different answer.

On redirect, Andrews brought that up. "Why don't you think that it your combat experience in the military is affecting you now?"

There was a pause, then Serena answered, her voice low. "Because when I dream, I don't dream of shooting people, working in my military unit. I'm flying, or falling out of the air. My arm holds a sword and hacks at fire giants. Weird blood fountains into my face. The shrieks and moans I hear aren't always human. This battle was far more traumatic than any action I saw in the military. I had time to come to grips with what I saw and did back then. The US military certainly doesn't permit filmmakers to record and release battlefield actions on a whim. They respect those who fight and those who fall. And in any case, what I experienced before doesn't change what that movie is doing to me now. The damage that Ms Kipp has caused me has nothing to do with my prior experiences. It's all about what happened on Vigrior. And she wants to profit off it. It's blood money and she's a parasite."

"Objection!" From the defense.

The judge nodded. "Granted. The jury will disregard what the witness said about Ms Kipp's motivations for releasing the film." But Serena's opinion was out there, ringing in the ears of the jury.

Serena stepped down. It was my turn.

My palms sweated as I swore to tell the truth, and I seated myself.

"Well, Donna Doe, we've been hearing a lot about you recently," Andrews said. "Why don't you tell us about how you came to be a valkyrie." So I told them, speaking very generally, about how my performance during a scrimmage impressed Odin and I was asked if I would become a valkyrie. "I thought it was something that just happened," Andrews said. "But it was your choice?"

I nodded. "Yes. It was explained to me that most of what the valkyries do is retrieve souls from the battlefield and bring them to Valhalla or Folkvangr, Frigga not having valkyries at her disposal. There were the valkyries' other duties, which has been previously described as the production of cloth for the inhabitants of Valhalla--"

"Why did you have to make cloth?" he asked.

"Because on whatever plane we existed in, the laws of physics must be obeyed," I shrugged. "We used energy, therefore we needed energy, so we grew crops and ate. We experienced our afterlife as an extension of the lives we knew, so nobody wanted to go around naked and cold or naked and sunburned, depending on the season. So we needed clothes and shoes. Everybody except maybe the cooks were warriors first, but not warriors only. Everybody did something else to contribute. Crops were grown, animals hunted, shoes made, weapons and armor created, rooms cleaned. We gathered the fibers, spun them, and wove them. I learned a lot there about cloth production and dying. Interestingly, most people didn't knit. I also did some weapons training."
"But it wasn't all smooth sailing. You found yourself banished from Valhalla for a time."

"Yes," I said after a moment. "You have to understand the culture," I said, turning directly to the jury. "Heroes had been piling up in Valhalla for centuries, and it hasn't been that long since women were first allowed to be part of civic life by voting, and gaining other rights--jury duty, equal pay. Simple equality, in the end. We were frequently put at the bottom of any resupply list, and others--men--were added above us. It took forever to get things from the storeroom, including the cloth we made. Access to the storerooms was controlled by men who liked having power over their fellows. Everything we made went into a common store, and theoretically, if they had it, they'd turn it over to you if you requested, but it didn't work out like that in practice. There were a lot fewer women than men and there was a fair amount of resentment that Odin held the valkyries in special regard. The only reason there weren't rapes is that it had been established beforehand that any man who raped a valkyrie would find himself the target of all the valkyries. And we extended this protection to the other women. But I found out when I couldn't get something from stores that if you let one of the men in the storeroom have sex with you that you could get bumped up the list. You wouldn't get the thing outright, or even get moved next in line, but you could move up a few places. We found ourselves getting the last and least of everything. Odin wasn't listening, so we organized a work stoppage. We sat in the Great Hall until we got his attention, and when he wouldn't put a stop to it..." I took a deep breath. "We brought our swansfeather cloaks to the Great Hall and quit. I was the last one to quit, and it wasn't easy." You could hear a pin drop in the courtroom. "He got angry and banished us to Helheim, which is where the vast majority of people in the Norse afterlife found themselves. Overseen by Hella, we found it to be a warm and welcoming place. Eventually Odin thought we'd made our point enough and came to bring us back to Valhalla, but we didn't want to go back when nothing had substantially changed. He said that he'd forbidden the storeroom men from demanding sex for goods and that they had to give us what we requested if it was available.

"But we'd been busy and had come up with a list of demands that had to be met before we'd go back. And I was elected to go back to Valhalla with Odin and retrieve our things. We'd been banished with only the clothes on our back, although Hella had graciously provided us with all we needed. I found that our quarters had been ransacked, looted. And that men had urinated and defecated in the rooms. Our clothing had been ripped up for rags, everything valuable taken, everything else broken. I was infuriated, Odin downplayed what had happened, and I stabbed him with my broken sword. He was angry, as you might expect, and broke the bond that made me a valkyrie. He hadn't done that yet, believing he could bring us back after letting us sulk a bit first. After that, I acted as the negotiator for the others, and inspected the changes to Valhalla that the valkyries demanded, including a separate building that could be barred against intruders. Eventually, the conditions were met, and most valkyries agreed to go back. Some did not, their grievances had gone for too long unacknowledged and their bonds were broken too. Eventually I was brought back too and given a valkyrie bond again."

"And that's when you started more of a leadership role." I nodded.

"We lost a lot of the valkyries," I said. "All those years of experience gone, unavailable. And I evolved into a leadership role."

"Given all that happened, I'm surprised that you were the valkyries' leader," Andrews said. "Or wait. I thought Odin appointed you, but maybe you were elected by the other valkyries."

"No, Odin appointed me. Our relationship was strained for awhile after the labor strike, but eventually it settled down. I respect him tremendously. I don't think that being a god is all that easy. I wasn't the most popular valkyrie. I squared off with some of them who objected to how hard I wanted them to practice--I'd constructed an obstacle course--and they walked. Broke their bonds as valkyries and went to Helheim. And Odin swallowed his pride and brought back some of the
valkyries who hadn't returned after the labor dispute."

"So what was the delineation between you and Cathy Doe in terms of responsibility?"

"Cathy" I almost slipped and called her Serena "was in charge of teaching us tactics and drilling us in armed and unarmed combat. She worked with the generals to make sure that the valkyries would be effective in their ever-evolving plans and contributed a lot to planning for the scrimmages and the final battle. I interfaced with Odin more, handling day-to-day things, and took charge of physical conditioning. Nobody wanted to run the obstacle course in Fimbulwinter because it was so wretched, but there was never certainty about the timing of events when Fimbulwinter was over--the cocks could have crowed, everything could have happened quickly, instead of the more gradual timing we experienced. We needed to be strong and fit. We worked hard, but it still wasn't enough." Serena nodded at me.

"You ran an obstacle course in winter."

"Yeah. The winds were strong, which helped us learn how to use our wings effectively--but this was before they were real wings; they were the constructs from our cloaks. We had to start from scratch when we got real wings. But we couldn't be permanently killed, so fighting the wind, snow, and ice strengthened us even if we slipped and fell."

Andrews let the jury mull that over for a minute. "So. The Norn. How is it that you met them?"

"We wanted to know more specifics about the prophesy. You can see Yggdrasil from the citadel on Asgard, so I went there one day."

"And what did you talk about? Did they object to you just dropping in? What were they like?" I smiled at the spate of questions. He had a hard time with some of the story.

"Well, if you want to talk, you have to go there politely and ask if they'll see you. They don't have communicators. If they didn't want to talk to me, I would have gone away. But they were kind and invited me to ask my questions."

"What exactly are the Norn?"

"They originally came from Jotunheim, I don't know when or how, but they care for the World Tree. It's surprisingly delicate, but maybe it shouldn't be a surprise, given how it stabilizes the Nine Realms. And don't ask, because I don't know how that works. There are three of them, and they're often confused with the Greek Fates, but they don't focus on individuals. Their concern is the tree. The tree is covered in runes that run up and down its trunk; they read them and they can make prophesies based on what's going on in the Nine Realms. They explained to me that there are certain events, like Ragnarok, that are fixed and unchangeable. Everybody understands that, but the second part--that just because an event is fixed, the outcome is not--tends to get overlooked in the excitement surrounding the first part. They told me quite plainly that Ragnarok was going to happen, but the destruction of the prophesy didn't have to occur. So after that, I went back to the valkyries and we approached some key people, of which the most important was Thor. He listened to what we had to say and thought it was worth a try to change the outcome of the prophesy. He spoke to his father, who didn't think it could. But he got himself a Tyvek suit that would fit over his armor, and it worked. He managed to avoid the Midgard serpent's venom. Odin did not try to alter his approach to Ragnarok, and... he died." I frowned. "I wonder, though..."


"It's hard to be a god, the All-Father. I wonder if he might not have wanted to go back to Valhalla,
where the responsibilities are now fewer. Thor is well-liked by the Asgardians, and has shown himself to be a fine leader. If he went with the prophesy, he wouldn't have been around, providing a challenge to Thor's leadership. He certainly never spoke out against us trying to change the outcome of the battle." I tapped my mask since I couldn't touch my face.

"Huh," Andrews said, then got me back on track. "After that crippling fear, you returned to Asgard, didn't you? What happened then?"

"I reported straight to the embassy," I said, nodding. "And we went back to Asgard, where we dressed for battle and put on our armor. We reported to the Great Hall, where the elite forces were gathering, and from there we went to Vigrior to await the sons of Muspell. It was a warm day, but not hot, for which I was grateful. The weather could have been anything. We stood in ranks, waiting. Odin on his steed Sleipnir was at the front, and we valkyries were right behind him. Everybody else were behind us. Then they arrived, but the Bifrost held. It was supposed to break, you see, in the prophesy. But it didn't, and I started to have hope that we could win this thing. In that moment I didn't care that I might not live through the battle, but I was content that we had a shot at averting an apocalypse." I shrugged. "After that, we fought. I gave it everything I had and I did almost die, but I was brought back to the healers in time. And... here we are." Andrews nodded.

"And how did seeing that film affect you?"

"It makes me sick to think about it still," I said honestly. "When you're fighting, you're focused on what's right before you. There was a lot I didn't see at the time but did in the film. Like Odin's death. She sure went in and showed all of that," I said spitefully. "Ghoul. I was willing to die to save the Nine Realms, but it would have been a lot harder to do knowing that there was somebody who was so disrespectful, who dishonored us like she did. Nobody gave consent to be filmed. Nobody wanted that. What I did--killing sentient beings, as many as I could, was bad enough, but they were trying to kill me too. That was enough for nightmares. But seeing a broader view... I've also found a therapist. It's... I don't have the words to explain how profoundly it upsets me." I looked at the jury. "Once it's out there, it can never be brought back. It's always going to be there, ambushing me unexpectedly. I'll be suffering, seeing my friends and comrades die and be wounded, for the rest of my life. There will always be nightmares, although I hope that they'll taper off. You see that thing in a theater, there are chairs that shake at the approach of the fire giants, they pump sound and smells in at you, but I'm here to tell you that those effects are cheap and inaccurate. The blood doesn't smell right, and the smell of the smoke is wrong. They puff air at you like a breeze, but the temperatures aren't right. You're sitting down when you should be on your feet and ready to pull your sword." I shake my head. "It's just wrong, seeing it from that perspective. She didn't even try to help anybody. She just sat on a tree limb, an avaricious coward." I turned my head enough to see Kipp. She looked furious. Then I looked at the jury again. "Please don't let that film out. If you think you owe us anything after Ragnarok, you can pay it by not allowing the release of that film."

Andrews let that hang in the air for a few minutes, then sat down.

The lead defense attorney got up and folded his arms, looking at me. "So you're a troublemaker. You stir the pot. And now you're here, trying to destroy a woman's career."

I sat there a moment. "Was there a question in there?" He reddened slightly.

"I guess I just want to know why you think we should believe you, when by your own admission you're trouble."

"I don't care what you think of me," I said evenly. I looked to the jury box. "The jury are the ones who have to determine my credibility. And I've been honest in everything I've said. I'm not trying to destroy a career; I just want a picture that was made illegally to not be released. The filmmaker is
free to make any number of other pictures. Just not ones with me in them." The lawyer sat down.

With that, the plaintiffs’ case rested. We took a break, and when we came back, the defense opened their case by setting up the projector in the courtroom.
The judge excused us for the movie portion of the trial, so we went to a room that juries used for deliberations and waited, dinking around on our communicators. I called Damian, wanting to hear the reassuring warmth of his voice. We didn't talk about the trial but he told me how things were going in the lab and we talked about normal things for a bit. Then the four of us started talking, which led to remembering some stories about our time in Valhalla. Funny and sad, they helped me to remember that there had been a lot more to our time there than labor disputes and preparing for The End. "Honestly, I'm looking forward to taking a break for Christmas," Carol said. "Thanks for inviting us for Christmas Eve, A-- I mean, Donna. I missed celebrating Yule this year." The others agreed.

"I told Alfred once that I was going to miss the celebration, so I wouldn't be surprised if there are touches in the decorating," I said thoughtfully. "But what's most important is that we spend the day--whatever religious or cultural flavor you prefer--with loved ones, knowing that the light is returning." Dagny patted my hand. Then we caught up on things; all my friends were enjoying getting to know my aunt better, which made me happy. I kind of worried about Aunt Becca. She put a good face on everything, a legacy of the Depression, but I knew that returning was difficult at times for me and I had people to talk it out with.

"I hope I'm not pinning too much on going back to school." Serena said pensively. "I kind of have it in my head that it'll be a new start, and I think that maybe I'm building it up too much in my head. I mean, I know I'm still going to have to deal with everything, it's not a completely new start. I just want to leave all this behind." I nodded.

"I feel the same," I said, moving my head around to stretch my neck and shoulders. "I just want to fit into a new normal."

"Be careful what you wish for," Dagny said, poking me. "Your normal would sometimes turn my hair white." We laughed, and Carol, accompanied by a bailiff, went to a shop a couple of doors down and brought us back milkshakes. We spent the run time of the film having a much better time than the jurors. Or Thor, for that matter. He was livid when we were brought back into the courtroom. Livid, but quite controlled. The jury looked seasonal; their faces were shades of red, white, and green, depending on how the film affected them.

The defense called Melanie Kipp to the stand. After she was sworn in and she identified herself as the photographer and filmmaker, the questions started. "What gave you the idea to go up to Asgard?"

"Well, something big was obviously going on. I was pretty flattened by the wave of fear, but I was in a restaurant near the embassy and I saw people running toward it. I was curious, so I joined the crowd. I'd just finished an assignment for film school. When I saw the Bifrost beam, I saw an opportunity to go up and see Asgard for myself. Everybody is at least slightly curious about it, and very few people get to go there." I was watching the jury; most of them cut their eyes to Thor to gauge his (nonexistent) reaction to this.

"What did you do when you got there?"

"I saw people passing out weapons and talking about Vigrior. One man gestured when he said the name, so I went outside and saw a forest by a big open meadow. I figured that's where the action was going to be, so I went and climbed a tree. There was one that had a great view of both the meadow and this isolated golden dome, linked to the land by what I've since learned is the Bifrost.
I got my camera ready, put on my best lens, and waited."

The lawyer took her briefly through the shooting of the film and how she got back to Midgard (by waiting for a group of healed returnees to be returned). "Why did you decide to make this a feature-length documentary?"

"Because it's a hugely important battle, and people deserve to see what happened. The landings at Normandy were filmed, Vietnam, all the rest. This isn't substantially different."

"And why did you choose to add the sensory effects? That could be viewed as exploitative."

"I want people to see what I saw, feel what I felt. It provides a context. I think it will help them to feel like they really are there."

"Some of the plaintiffs accuse you of doing this for money. How do you respond?"

"First, my goal is to make the events on Asgard accessible to everyone. We were all affected by it, one way or another. I mean, without that prophesy, there would be no returnees. Everybody I've ever talked with felt that paralyzing fear. And the end of the world was at stake. So yeah, it's historically important. I'm sorry for trespassing, but there's the public good to think of. Second, yeah, there will most likely be profits. The plaintiffs themselves expect this documentary to be huge. But I ran big risks to get this film made, and now I have lawyers fees to pay as well. I ran the risks, I should have some reward." After a few followup questions, the lawyer sat down. Early leaned over to us.

"In case you were wondering, he limited his questioning so that the cross would be limited too. We can only ask about things that were brought up on direct." I scowled behind my mask.

Andrews got up. "So you admit you knew you were trespassing," he said.

"Yes, but--" she said.

"So you knew that what you were doing was illegal, and you've been convicted of that."

"Yes," she bit off.

"And now you're looking to make money from your illegal activities."

"Yes."

"And the trauma you're exposing people to doesn't bother you."

"I can add a trigger warning before the title card," she said. Dagny snorted. I don't think she knew what a trigger warning was exactly, but she got the gist.

"And you don't care what it's doing to veterans of that battle, who have real problems with this film. You don't care that the sovereign of the world you trespassed on has asked that you not release the film."

"Look, I understand where they're coming from, but this is just too big. There's real interest in what happened and in Asgard. People have a right to know. And you heard them. They signed up for that. I don't understand why they're making such a fuss. They've all got therapists."

"And this will make your name in film making, at least in documentaries."

"I hope so," she admitted. Kipp looked at the jury. "Look, you've seen it. It affected you. It's a good
work. I deserve to be recognized for the quality of the film."

"I see," Andrews said slowly. "One final question. How do you sleep at night?"

"Objection!" snapped the defense lawyer.

"Withdrawn," Andrews murmured, with a wave of his hand.

The court was recessed until the next morning. The defense closed their case. In the morning, the lawyers would make their closing arguments, the judge would instruct the jury, and they would begin deliberations. I was hoping that this would be finished by Christmas. I was sick of the mask and tired of the whole mess.

Ms Lee got up and addressed the jury the next morning. "What a couple of days it's been, right? We've heard some very emotional testimony and seen the footage in question. I know you've taken notes about what you've heard and seen, so I'm going to be brief. The heart of this trial is whether a film that was made illegally should be released. There are competing concerns, including the right of King Thor to control access to Asgard. The defendant pointed out that other important battles in history were filmed. This is true, but what she failed to mention is that those journalists got permission from the government and military to do so. Ms Kipp exploited the battle for her own gain.

"Now, Ms Kipp has admitted that she trespassed and referenced her criminal conviction for trespass. She's admitted that she committed civil trespass. You've heard from some of the precious few valkyries who survived the battle, explaining, without an attempt to manipulate your emotions, why they are counting on you to do the right thing and keep this film from being released. Put yourselves in their place. They lived up to their promises and fought this war at a very high cost to themselves. They did not consent to being filmed, nobody did, and there was no expectation that it would or was being recorded. Against this is a woman who has stated that she did it for money and reputation. It seemed to me that public interest took a far distant third place in her motivations.

"So we've come to the end of the trial and it's getting time for your decision," she said, talking over the defense attorney, who looked like he was going to object to this characterization of his client's motives. "Do you side with the people who fought for your continued existence without the expectation or even the desire to be thanked or known? Or do you side with an opportunist? Think carefully," she said, and sat down. The defense attorney rolled his eyes and got to his feet.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, the plaintiff's lawyer is correct when she says it's been an emotional few days. That's where I've got to stop agreeing with her, however. They've made this big emotionally manipulative argument, full of hearts and flowers, why this documentary should be repressed. We're not denying that the plaintiffs suffered in the battle, but by their own admission, they accepted the commission to fight it. My client didn't force them to do anything. And against the trauma of a few who are getting help for what they did, is the right of the public to know what happened, to know what could have happened if they'd failed. This historical event, ladies and gentlemen, is important, and this is probably the only way we'd ever get to hear about it, since the plaintiffs plainly aren't going be talking about it. And with respect to King Thor, he hasn't shown that he or Asgard was damaged in any way from Ms Kipp's presence.

"Now you've got to make your decision. Does everybody get the right to see what you've seen, or will you allow the film to be censored? If you say that the plaintiffs are right, the film will be destroyed. Not shelved and hidden for later generations, but destroyed. You and I and the rest of the court will be among the few who have seen it and know the truth of what happened. The only record will be lost. And you will still be bound by the gag order of the court and you won't be able to talk about what you've seen, you won't be able to leave a trace of documentation. Think of the
greater good and permit the public to see this crucial battle."

He sat down. I said an obscenity in my head. That lawyer was canny. The judge took over and gave them rules for their deliberation. Andrews said afterward that in about 2050, a rule had been passed to abolish hung juries. Now they had to deliberate until they found a solution, and part of that horsetrading was that the jury would return their verdict with the penalties they agreed on. Well, we'd be getting the trespassing charge for sure, but that didn't seem like much on its own. The judge finished just after 11 am and sent the jury to deliberate.

"Nobody knows how long it will take the jury in the deliberations," the judge said. "So all parties and their lawyers are released until we receive notice that the verdict has been reached. It might not happen until after Christmas. The jury will receive that day off, after which they will reconvene if necessary. I must remind you all not to leave this planet until the verdict has been read." So we were dismissed, and we left the courtroom stoically.

Serena and I went over to Columbia to acquaint ourselves with the campus and kind of just unwind, remind us that we had a lot to look forward to. We stopped in at the bookstores, purchased electronic or printed copies of our textbooks, and loaded up on other learners' stuff, like programs for 3D rendering of projects, and a speech to text program to help us take notes. We bought university sweatshirts while we were there too.

"This is sure different from the bags of books and notebook paper I remember from the last time I was in college," she said to me as we left, happy with our acquisitions. We'd found that we had an overlapping class, the first course in the architecture program.

"I kind of miss it," I said, laughing. "You had a lot of tangible evidence of what you'd spent your money on." She laughed too. We had lunch on campus, then separated. I went to the tower in good time to put the hurt on some slightly less snotty Avengers, and finally met the famous (or notorious, depended on your viewpoint) Nick Fury. Very attractive. He refused to get his eye replaced or fixed using modern medical technology, adding a certain je ne sais quoi to his rakish appearance. Steve was watching. He actually had popcorn as he watched the Avengers go down. Tony came down toward the end and stole some popcorn before ordering the Avengers upstairs to class.

"How'd it go, sweetie?" Bucky asked, handing me a bottle of water.

"I think we're screwed," I said moodily. "The lawyer gave them feel-good reasons that they could use to justify releasing the movie without feeling like they screwed us over." I growled in frustration.

"Well, you got the opportunity to show them the right decision," Tony said practically. "That's all you can do." He threw me a towel. "The algae are doing great, by the way, even without your tender care." I snapped the towel at him. He laughed and went to torment some superheroes.

"I've got to go too," Steve said brightly. "We're doing trust exercises." Then he surprised me by cackling. "We did that one where somebody falls and everybody else catches them. They didn't know the exercise and the kid went splat." I started to laugh and he grinned at me. "So we've got some work to do. We'll see you Christmas Eve, Alex."

"Oh, Uncle Steve, I was wondering if you and Emma would mind taking Eira home with Torburn and Sigurd after Christmas Eve for a couple of days? I think she misses them specifically, and other dogs like them in general. I can't leave the planet until after the case has been decided."

Steve smiled at me. "Be happy too. The boys like having a little sister around." He gave me a hug--
almost but not quite as good as a Flannel Special--and left.

Bucky and I took time for some hand to hand practice, which we hadn't done for ages, and it showed. It diverted my attention and lessened the frustration I had with the case. Then Hawkeye showed up and offered to shoot with me. Bucky gave me a big hug--no flannel, he was still in his workout clothes, but it was still an awesome hug--and I trotted after Hawkeye. He had a brand new bow, customized to his draw, looking deadly and sleek but still graceful. I found a bow and selected a thigh quiver with green-fletched arrows. I put up the target he handed me--it was much bigger than the one he was using-- and we stood on the firing line. I enjoyed the opportunity to relax and narrow my focus to two small gold rings. We shot for about an hour before I called it quits.

"You should get your own bow and keep it here," Hawkeye told me. "You could get a lot better, maybe pick up competition archery." I was interested, so he gave me the names of a couple of equipment suppliers he recommended.

When I got home, it was snowing again and I flicked on the fireplace before sorting and opening my mail. All this time and there was still junk mail. I shook my head and slit open an envelope addressed to me and Damian. It was from the Smithsonian, Dr Matthews, the curator we'd met when we visited. It was the formal request to have a special exhibit of my jewelry. Since they had pretty much everything I'd owned, it was a simple matter to put it together. They wanted us to come down to have a few photos taken of us now; each piece that was selected would be put into a context with a photograph or other accessories, if I had them. Dresses that I wore, if I still had them. And they wanted to borrow my wedding ring since they wanted to open the exhibit on Valentine's Day. I shook my head again. With all the fuss over Bruce, Damian, and Alexander's poor decision making and Ragnarok, I'd completely forgotten that they'd mentioned a special display. I set aside the letter for Damian to read. That reminded me; I double-checked my dress and shoes, the double strand of pearls and the matching pearl earrings I was going to wear for the vow renewal. I wanted to make sure I had everything. I didn't. I needed hose for the polished look I wanted. I'd have to hit the store tomorrow. I had Damian's new ring with my jewelry as well as a new set of shirt studs and cufflinks; white gold set with moonstones. I grinned. Perfect for a nightcrawling superhero of a husband. We'd also gotten Alfred a thank you gift.

What do you get your butler/family retainer who is also a second father and one of the most capable, trustworthy people on the planet? That's a hard call, because there really isn't anything to express how highly Damian and I regard him. We had to settle for something small that he could be persuaded to accept and came up with custom made cufflinks, platinum, oval, with a ring of polished black onyx around the outside and luscious dark red star garnets on the inside. It had been a bugger to find the right color garnet with center-oriented stars, and two of them to boot. We might have had to go with a faceted stone instead. But we'd wanted something unique, memorable, and subtle for the man who probably was in the dictionary as a synonym for all those qualities.

Damian came home with carryout and Eira, both of them shaking the snow off before coming to join me in the living room. Eira immediately flopped down in front of the fire. Damian pulled me up, gave me a hello kiss that curled my toes, and we ate our dinner. After drying off, Eira had a bite too, and we all reconvened in front of the fire.

"We need to make sure that there are plenty of fireplaces in our new house," I said, snuggling up to Damian.

"Big fireplaces," he amended. "So that when Eira is laying in front of it there's still warmth that can get around her." Eira opened one baleful eye to look at Damian, then rolled over, pointedly, to get her tummy warm.
We talked a little about our days, minus the trial, and I handed him the letter from Dr Matthews. He read it and we discussed the proposal. We agreed that it was a shame for the pretty things to be locked away where nobody could see them and decided to go along with it. I had a few favorite pieces that I would like to be included, and Damian said he'd go through the family archives to see if he could find pictures or other ephemera for the context of each piece. "I don't have a lot of the dresses," I said. "I borrowed most of them, but that red and fuschia one I wore to the New Year's Eve party after we were engaged is up in the attic. Those earrings are spectacular."

Damian said he'd call the curator the next day, then groaned. "I forgot to tell you. The bakery called, there was some sort of disaster that started with a pissed off baker and ended in the destruction of several cakes in progress. Ours was one of them. There isn't time to get the flowers made again, but they said they'd come up with something good to replace it, and they'll work with Alfred to coordinate the delivery."

"Didn't that happen last time?" I asked. "There seems to be a conspiracy to prevent us from having the cakes we want. But I'm sure it'll be ok, even if it's a little plain. The cake itself is delicious." We left Eira to enjoy the fire in the living room and went to the bedroom, where I flicked on the fire there. Damian gave me a full body massage that squeezed the tension caused by the trial out of my muscles.

"I'll be grateful when we get the verdict, one way or another," I mumbled as his skilled hands gently but firmly relaxed me.

"I will too, Petal. I just want you to be able to move forward. The plans for your life are going to be spectacular," he said, and I smiled slightly.

"With you by my side, I think I can handle anything," I said, and blew a kiss at him. I was too relaxed to do anything else. And just because he's a complete and utter peach, he had me extend my wings, gently massaging the muscles there and in my back, stroking the sails of the wings. It felt really good to have them out, even better to have Damian gently pet the feathers like it wasn't weird at all for his wife to have them.

There was no verdict on the 22nd.

Or the 23rd.

Lee messaged me that the jury had a half day on the 24th. That was fine with me; that afternoon I could primp to my heart's content that afternoon without worrying about bad news from the jury. And I did primp; after helping my uncle at the tower, I showered, went to have a massage, (more professional, less caring, no wings), then had my hair and nails done. I held off on having makeup done until the last second, then went home in the early dusk to get dressed. New lingerie went on under the pretty dress, and I slipped my feet into the matching satin pumps. Damian caught me twisting from the hips, watching the moderately fluffy skirt sway.

"My glorious wife," he said, putting his arms around me carefully and kissing the back of my neck before letting me go reluctantly and clasping my pearls around my neck. Our presents were already under the tree at the mansion, so all we needed to bring was Eira, ourselves, our rings (I had Damian's new one securely in my pocket), and the cufflinks for Alfred, which we would give him in private.

"Damn," I said, looking at him. He always looks so handsome, but evening dress looks even better on him than his skin tight Nightfall costume. I rummaged around in my drawer and handed a box to my puzzled husband. I'd forgotten to give him his cufflinks and shirt studs.
"Ooh, Alex, my sweet," he said, tipping the box and watching the light catch in the moonstones. He'd been wearing his usual onyx set, but immediately pulled them out of his cuffs and shirt front, and I helped with the new ones.

"You usually don't let me buy you anything snappy," I said. "But I thought you couldn't refuse such a special occasion."

"We don't go out much anymore," he said, stroking the shirt studs as I placed the cufflinks in his French cuffs. "That should change though. I look magnificent, and I have the most beautiful woman in the city on my arm." I laughed, and he grinned, producing a small box. I rolled my eyes. "It's a special occasion, Sweet pea," he protested. I had to concede that, and opened the box to see little lacy white gold snowflake earrings, the points of each arm of the snow flake and each center set with tiny diamonds.

"Oh, so pretty!" I said, and immediately swapped the single pearls for the dainty earrings. Damian grinned, kissed me lightly, and draped a wrap over my shoulders before Eira joined us on the way out. She was dressed up too; Damian had taken her to the groomers, where she was instantly adored by the staff, washed, blown dry, had her nails trimmed professionally, and a deep green satin bow tied around her neck in lieu of a collar. She liked being the center of attention, and I promised her we'd make it a regular thing. When we got to the sidewalk, Damian picked me up and carried me the few steps to the car so the melting snow wouldn't stain my shoes, tucking me in carefully before going around to the other side. Eira snuggled into her blankie in the back, and we drove to a launching pad so that we could use the flight capabilities and get to the mansion in good time. We still had a few things to check with Alfred on, and wanted to do it before everybody assembled for the festivities.
Renewal

Our timing could not be better. We got to the house while everybody who lived there was still upstairs getting dressed and nobody else had arrived yet. We shared a crisp high five when we walked in and discovered this. Alfred smiled at us conspiratorially. "The cake was delivered an hour ago," he told us. "And your flowers, Miss Alex, are in the library by the fireplace."

"Thank you, Alfred," we chorused, and Eira yipped agreement.

"It looks wonderful," I said, looking around as he took my wrap. As usual, there were pine boughs on the stair rails, ornamented with small blown glass balls and ribbons, with a wreath on the door. This year it was made from pine and holly, with a deep crimson velvet bow. I could smell spiced cider and bayberry candles as we moved into the library. We took the opportunity to present Alfred's cufflinks.

"Good heavens," he said, brushing them lightly with his fingers. "Thank you, Master Damian, Miss Alex. These are extraordinary."

"Just like you, Alfred," Damian said. "They're just the smallest token of our esteem for you," and we beamed at him. He looked momentarily stunned. We had a choice between the cider and mulled wine; we both chose the cider, and we quickly pressed our rings into Alfred's hand as we heard quick, light footsteps on the stairs. I smiled as my grandma walked into the library, accompanied by a man I didn't recognize. He knew me, though. He smiled and held out his arms, and all of a sudden I did know him. My grandpa, who had died when I was just starting grade school.

"Lexie, lass," he said, his dimly remembered but instantly familiar voice said as I charged over for a hug. "It's so good to see you again. You look lovely." A teasing note came into his voice. "Last time I saw you you had scabby knees and were just losing your baby teeth. Your hair was in pigtails," Damian laughed, and I let go long enough to introduce him.

"Grandpa, this is my husband, Damian Wayne. Darling, this is my grandpa, Alexander Baird." My grandpa took Damian's measure quickly but thoroughly, and I gave my grandma a hug. She admired my dress as the men chatted, and I asked how their flight had been.

"Oh, it's always nice, thanks to your family, dear," she said briskly. She looked lovely, wearing flowing bronze palazzo pants and a lacy blue sweater that set off her blonde hair beautifully. We talked a little, then my children and J thudded down the stairs. After that, the floodgates opened. Mark and Daniel and my parents came down, followed by Bruce, Martha Sr and Thomas, and guests began to arrive: Uncle Bucky came with Aunt Becca and Grandpa George, my fellow valkyries, Karen, Aslyn, and Margaret, Steve and Emma, Ann and Tony, Bruce Banner, Thor, Sif, Magni, Modi, and Torunn, Loki, Barbara and Dick, Tim and Jason, Hawkeye and Natasha. Sigurd and Torburn found Eira and started a mumbly sort of conversation. Damian and I worked the crowd, making introductions when necessary. It was wonderful to see everybody. I heard Damian thanking Modi and Magni for getting me to the healers in time. My mom and Sif got along like a house afire, having been slightly acquainted with each other the first time around. Barbara had some book ideas for me based on new releases that were coming out. I was having a great time, so much fun that I was as startled as everybody else when Alfred rang a little bell. We looked around, surprised, to see him standing by the fireplace. Oh, right. I wound my way through the guests to quickly pluck the bright red roses and calla lilies out of the vase and stand at Alfred's right hand. Damian situated himself at Alfred's left, and I quickly fastened the holly sprig to his lapel. Oops. I'd meant to do that earlier but forgot. Oh, well.
"With the family and their friends, another family, present, Miss Alex and Master Damian wished to renew their wedding vows. Almost all of us missed their second marriage, since it was a rather spur of the moment affair at the courthouse." His voice carried just a whiff of censure as he spoke over the excited murmur.

"As Theodore Parker said, 'it takes years to marry completely two hearts, even the most loving and well assorted. A happy wedlock is a falling in love. Young persons think love belongs to the brown-haired and crimson cheeked. So it does for its beginning. But the golden marriage is part of love which the bridal day knows nothing of... Such a large and sweet fruit is marriage that is needs a long summer to ripen, and then a long winter to mellow and season it.' And so has it been with Miss Alex and Master Damian.

"I have known Master Damian since he was ten years old, newly introduced to his father, and it has been my pleasure to observe him grow into an overall wise and thoughtful man, perhaps best known for his love of animals, generosity, and sheer abilities. I made the acquaintance of Miss Alex as Master Damian was growing out of his bratty phase, and recognized from the beginning that she was quite a special young lady, one of the few people on this earth for whom he exerted himself. Charming, smart, and strong, she was his equal even then. And when they returned to the city from the institutions from which they were educated, they found in each other their ideal match, their strengths complimentary and their weakness supported by the other. In Master Damian, Miss Alex found someone who would treasure her for her excellent qualities, of which skill, compassion and a lively mind are crown jewels, as well as someone who provided unceasing love and support as an anchor. And that love and support was returned in full, as Miss Alex tempered Master Damian's... most assertive personality traits and saw within him a man I believe that not even he believed he could be. They had two lovely and gifted children together and a charmed and rich life until they were parted by death.

"And when they were reunited by the Great Return, their love was as deep and full as it had been before. Then there was...an incident, of which nothing more needs to be said, since they have mended their estrangement, their love stronger and more encompassing for having been tested. On their wedding day, they pledged to love each other in sickness and in health, and for better or worse. The past year has tested those vows, but their eternal, enduring love for one another has prevailed. Before this company, they renew their vows of love and honor through times of triumph and despair, in health and injury, in peace and war, for the rest of their lives and thereafter." He smiled at us and handed Damian a ring. Damian took my hand, warm in mine. When we first got married, it was a little chilly from his nerves.

"Do you, Damian Wayne, pledge to love and support this woman to the best of your ability, to provide a shield from the storm and a sword in her defense, through times of bounty and privation, through everything that fate puts in your path?"

"Upon my soul," Damian said, his deep voice resonant. His eyes sparkled warmly as he slid the ring on my hand. My brows drew together; it was a lot heavier than I was used to. I did a double-take as I glanced at it; he'd given me a whole new set, engagement ring and all.

"Do you, Alixandryia Barnes, pledge to love and support this man to the best of your ability, to provide a shield from the storm and a sword in his defense--although hopefully not literally--through times of bounty and privation, through everything that fate puts in your path?"

"With all my heart," I managed to say, my eyes filling. Damian's bright blue eyes blurred too as I slid his new band onto his finger and kissed it. He lifted his hand to my face and smoothed away a joyful tear, sniffing deeply himself.
"Victor Hugo wrote, "The future belongs far more to the heart than to the mind. Love is the one thing that can fill and fulfill eternity. The infinite calls for the inexhaustible.

Love partakes of the soul, being of the same nature. Like the soul, it is the divine spark, incorruptible, indivisible, imperishable. It is the fiery particle that dwells in us, immortal and infinite, which nothing can confine and nothing extinguish. We feel its glow in the marrow of our bones and see its brightness reaching to the depths of heaven.

Oh, love, adoration, the rapture of two spirits which know each other, two hearts which are exchanged, two looks which interpenetrate! You will come to me, will you not, this happiness! To walk together in solitude! Blessed and radiant days! I have sometimes thought that now and then moments my be detached from the lives of angels to enrich the lives of men.

God can add nothing to the happiness of those who love except to make it unending. After a lifetime of love an eternity of love is indeed an increase."

"And in that spirit, in the fullness of the love that animates the one for the other, it is my profound pleasure to ask you to seal your vows with a kiss, to acknowledge your union before this wealth of family and friends." Finally. A little laugh escaped me, and I turned my face up to Damian, like a sunflower following the sun. We shared a light kiss, then beamed at each other.

"Ladies and gentlemen, Alex and Damian."

And the room exploded with applause and laughter. I kissed Alfred's cheek and Damian gave him a hearty hug before he slipped away, then everyone came forward with congratulations and to express their surprise and delight at our unexpected ceremony. We all got a look at the new rings; Damian had chosen for me quite a glorious set; an inner and outer band for each ring, the inner being a warm rose gold and the outer a sheath of icy white gold set with diamonds. The edges of both bands were milgrained and tiny diamonds set at intervals between them, connecting them. Up at the top, below the center diamond, dainty scrollwork filled the space between the two bands. Tiny pave diamonds ran up the shank and around two small side diamonds and up the outside of the setting for the center diamond, which looked to be larger than a half carat and less than a carat. A little large, but it was exquisite. Snuggled up to the side was a thin wedding band with little winking diamonds on the top half; I could see that it was a little different but didn't want to investigate it just then. I wanted to see the inscription I was sure was there but I didn't want to discover it in a crowd.

Then the bell rang again, this time for dinner, and we all trooped upstairs to the ballroom. Off to the side was a generous dinner for each of the dogs, the bowls set on little pedestals for ease of eating, nicely arranged so that each dog had some distance from the others. For the humans, several round tables were set up, with a seating chart near the door so that we could find our places easily. Alfred, a stickler for the rules, had separated Damian and me even though we'd just renewed our vows. Oh, well. I was at a table with Uncle Steve, Dagny, Mark, Grandpa Alex, and Aslyn. I got to the table first and switched a place card quickly, placing Mark between my friends. Neither of them had met him, I didn't think. I caught Alfred's beady eye as he observed this shenanagan and smiled blandly. The others got to the table too quickly for him to do anything about it. I smiled cheerily at my tablemates. My switch put Steve and Grandpa Alex by each other, upsetting the boy-girl seating arrangement, but that was ok. They seemed to strike up an immediate camaraderie. But Grandpa diverted his attention to me.

"That was a lovely surprise," he said to me as we passed dishes around the table. "Especially since I missed your first wedding. You make a lovely bride, Lexie." As I'd expected, Grandma had given him a summary of Damian and me, but he wanted more detail to satisfy himself about the
worthiness of my husband. Aslyn, across the table, was happy to share some stories from when we were teenagers, to the amusement of all. Even I laughed at them; there's no friend like an old friend. I heard Steve say to Grandpa that he'd missed all of this too, and they took to a few comparisons of their respective afterlives; Grandpa had gone to a C of E approved heaven. I barely spoke to Dagny; she and Mark spent a lot of time in conversation. I smirked. Dinner was delicious. Grandpa remarked on it.

"It was spectacular, even for Alfred," I agreed, and explained his background concisely as the waiters he'd engaged for the evening whisked away our plates. "I suspect him of having house elves." Grandpa looked a little confused, and I explained the reference.

"Ah," he said, satisfied. "I'm almost done with Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone. That must come up later."

Alfred cleared his throat, and conversation hushed. A table with our wedding cake was wheeled in and I inhaled sharply. We'd asked for pale flowers on the cake to make up for the ones that had been left off our first cake, but this was so much better. It was a four tiered cake, but small, more for the height than the amount of cake involved. White roses and laurel leaves, silvered with an edible dust, rose from a small cluster of silvered pinecones to form a U at the front of the cake. On the sides of the tiers was a scene I recognized immediately: Fisherman's Bastion at night, the dome of the castle centered in one of the arches, glowing brightly. Just to the side was placed a silhouette of a man on one knee and a woman in a long coat leaning down to him, extending her hand. She even had her hair up, managing to suggest the hairstyle I'd had the night he had proposed marriage. On the flat top of the smallest layer was our monogram, picked out in silver. My dad immediately jumped up and took a couple of pictures of it. People got up for a closer look, and Grandpa and Steve wanted to know more about the image.

"Damian had to take a business trip to Europe and I went with him. Our last stop on the trip was Budapest, and I just adored the Bastion, so we'd gone to a concert on our last night there and went back after a late dinner, which was when he asked me to marry him." I shook my head, smiling at the memory. "He's quite romantic."

"It's amazing," Grandpa said. "The things they can do with cakes these days."

"It's beautiful," Steve said. "I wonder if Emma would like to go there."

"You should," I said. "It's such a romantic city." I waited for the crowd around the cake to thin out a bit before finding my husband and taking his hand.

"So was there really a bakery accident?"

"No," he said. "But I came up with the idea and wanted to surprise you."

"Mission: accomplished," I told him. "It's stunning and so romantic." Dad herded us over so he could take pictures of us with the cake, and then the top layer was whisked away by Alfred, to be frozen so we could have it on our next anniversary (right. We'd eat it the next time we felt especially romantic) and we cut the cake (from the back, I was reluctant to mess up the front) and fed each other little bites. This was an almond and orange cake, the flavors light and complementary, the cake moist and tender. Delicious. Then Alfred shooed us away and the cake was sliced and distributed, there being a choice between the almond/orange flavor and chocolate with a caramel buttercream filling. And champagne was served, not too dry.

When everybody was finished, we went downstairs again. Damian had gotten my Dad's communicator and we chose a couple of images, one from the ceremony and one from the cake
cutting that we uploaded to the little projectors we'd gotten for favors. They were made so photos could be uploaded to the whole group of them at once, so it was quick and easy to close the boxes, stick on little bows, and take them in to everybody for distribution. Then there was a present exchange; those of us who were coming back the next day for Christmas reserved the bulk of our presents for then and opened ones from friends and those who had other plans. Then we moved around, chatting, and more champagne and a table with cookies and small cakes was brought in. There were small bags in green, gold, and red, so that everybody could take some home if they wanted, and the party broke up around midnight. Eira pranced off with Torburn and Sigurd, and she sent me an image of all three dogs sleeping in a pile, nice and warm and comfortable. She makes me laugh.

At home, Damian and I celebrated our vows at length. Taking a break, he opened a bottle of demi-sec Prosecco and brought in a dish of strawberries, feeding them to me as we sat up in bed, me leaning back against him, his arms around me. "You're such a good sport about the wine," I murmured around a bite of berry. "I know you like it dry."

He kissed my temple. "I've grown to like it over the years," he said. "I like giving you what you like, anyway, and a sweeter wine is nothing. I barely notice it, anyway. What's wine compared to the banquet that is you?" He tenderly stroked his fingers over my skin. "Your mouth is more intoxicating than the finest spirit, your skin velvety and soft. Your body is a paradise I crave losing myself in. Your mind and spirit draw me closer and more enchantingly than a siren's call."

"Damn," I said after I'd luxuriated in the warmth of his words a moment. "I'm never as eloquent, my darling." He laughed a little, soft puffs of air warming the nape of my neck. "I'll have to show you how much I treasure you." And I took our glasses, putting them and the dish of strawberries on the bedside table, before pushing my hands into his thick silky hair and drawing his face down for a deep, drugging kiss before straddling him and welcoming him inside me. We pressed together, moving very little, making it last.

Fortunately, we weren't expected at the house for brunch until late morning, which meant that we got more than a few hours of sleep and had time for a fun, soapy shower together before dressing more casually and heading out. In the air, I remembered something and took off my rings. The thicker band of the engagement ring had a heart with an A on one side and a D on the other. The thin wedding band had an infinity symbol. "Petal," he said, his voice low and warm, as he examined his ring. "This is wonderful. I love it. And look, a fingerprint, so you're always with me."

"My intent was to sort of brand you as mine, but your interpretation sounds better," I said, examining my rings more carefully, noting all the detail. "This is stunning."

"Look here," he said, taking the set from me. "They embedded tiny strong magnets in two places on the shank, so they don't have to be soldered together anymore." He gently parted them. "You can wear them singly or together as you please, but the wedding band won't slip around or knock against the engagement ring now."

"That's so clever," I said. "Now that I won't be wearing gloves in the lab regularly, I'll be wearing my engagement ring. It's so beautiful, Damian."

"It's as intricate and impressive and strong and dazzling as you are, Alixzandryia," he said, and slid the joined rings on my finger again. "And this way, nobody can miss that you're mine. Once you get going, everybody's going to want you. But I have first claim." He smirked.

I laughed. "The only claim," I said, and kissed him gently. Then the car landed and we drove the short distance to the manor.
The kids, J, Bucky, Dick and Barbara, Mark, and Daniel went skiing after brunch and the joy of unwrapping packages. That left Damian and me with Bruce, his parents, my folks, the rest of my grandparents, and Aunt Becca. We insisted that Alfred sit down and join the rest of the family. He did, once he placed a reasonably-sized log of ashwood in the fireplace and arranged holly, mistletoe, and pine boughs on and around it before sprinkling it with cider and some cloves. I sat up with a big grin on my face.

"King Thor brought this last night," he told me.

"A Yule log!" I exclaimed.

"Is it important?" asked Bruce.

"It's traditional," I temporized. It was important to me. "It's used to celebrate the return of the sun--remember, these days are the shortest of the year--and provide light and heat. It's part of the general celebration, and the last little bit of the log is saved to light the next Yule log. During the rest of the year, this fragment is used to ward off misfortune like fire and lightning in the house. You should harvest it yourself or have it given to you, never buy it. Ash, which is what this log is, means protection, prosperity, and health."

"The King said that a person named Skuld sent it to you; it was harvested earlier in the year from their tree." Alfred frowned slightly. "I might not have that right."

"Oh, you do," I said absently. "This will be a piece of the World Tree, Yggdrasil, that supports the Nine Realms. We are honored."

"No shit?"

"Damian! Language," Bruce remonstrated, and Damian rolled his eyes.

I knelt in front of the fireplace and turned the log so he could see the cut end; the other one was splintered from being broken and was dry and splintery. The growth rings were fine and numerous, and Damian gave up counting after a bit. "There are hundreds of years of rings on that one branch," he said. "And you propose to burn it?"

"That's its purpose," I said, getting up and ducking into the half bath just down the hall to wash my hands as others got up to see for themselves. The Yule log must be lit with clean hands. When I got back, Alfred handed me a long match. I struck it and carefully lit the greens around the base; the log caught fire easily and I smiled again. That was a sign of good luck.

"I didn't know you were superstitious, honey," my grandma said.

"I wouldn't say that I am," I said, smiling at her. "But I know for a fact that the Norse gods exist and that they have an effect on the world around them. What I don't know is whether they still have an effect on Midgard, though they might because of the connection provided by Yggdrasil. I prefer to err on the side of caution. Besides, even if it's only a tradition now, it's a nice one."

"I like it," Bruce said unexpectedly. "It ties in with a greater tradition performed by generations, and that can continue long after we're gone. And it's a nice bright fire, warm and relaxing." That got everybody talking about traditions they remembered from their childhoods, and that took us to an early dinner, after which the party broke up. A winter storm that had threatened was boiling in, and we all wanted to get home, those of us not living in the mansion, anyway. Alfred sent us home with a heap of leftovers, a jug of spiced cider, and the top layer of our wedding cake.

As gusts of wind drove snow hard before it, we turned on the fire in the living room and cuddled
on the couch. "What was Christmas like for you growing up?" I asked curiously.

"Talia and R'as" he pronounced it Ray-sh "didn't celebrate it, not any holiday, really. Once I went to live with Dad, Alfred always decked the halls, we ticked off the boxes--tree, gifts, parties, feasts--but it always kind of felt like a cover story, what we did to promote the idea that we were the idle rich, not our real life. What we did at night."

"That's kind of sad," I said, and he hugged me tighter.

"I know your family did things differently. One of the great benefits of marrying you was that celebrations, holidays started to have real meaning. The first time we helped Alfred with the tree. Wrangling the kids when they were young, telling them to go wake up Dad first." He grinned. That was a fun memory. "Remembering these things provides a context and meaning to things that otherwise were just done because they were expected. I always look forward to them because I share them with you."

"It hasn't been a lot of fun this year for the most part, I'm afraid. I've been irritated and grim, a lot."

"It's been a difficult year, Sweet pea," he said, nuzzling my hair. "And some of that was my doing. Don't apologize. You also got used to a slower pace during the winter, a certain progression of time, and this year's certainly upset that habit. And the trial is naturally upsetting. Next year will be better. I'm thinking that next year we poke around the old homestead and find ourselves a Yule log for our own home. I like the symbolism, and I think it's important for you to keep faith with traditions you've embraced. I'm kind of jealous, I think. My afterlife wasn't nearly as interesting as yours."

"Just wait til Thrimilcy," I told him, feeling good at the thought. "We'll have to go up for Asgard's celebration."

"What's that?"

"It's a fertility ritual," I said cheerfully.

"I already approve," he said, grinning, and after we finished our cider, turned off the fire and went to bed.
Verdict

The next day the snow was still coming down, so Damian indulged himself and worked from home. There was no word from the courthouse, but Alfred brought me a box with a piece of charred wood in it. A piece of the Yule log, to be saved until next year. The next day I picked up Eira at the tower, happy with the sleepover she'd had with the big dogs. Still no word. On the 28th, Natasha and I started an adult ballet class together. We were so rusty it was like the Tin Man left out in a monsoon. Still no word. And none on the 29th, either. Or the 30th.

But at 9:28 in the morning on December 31, I got the call. I'd been halfway through a late breakfast, but I immediately lost interest. I threw on some appropriate clothes, grabbed my mask and hoodie, and beat feet to the courthouse.

It looked like everybody was similarly anxious. We all assembled in a remarkably short time, and the tension in the courtroom was palpable. While we were waiting, I thanked Thor for the Yule log, and he managed a smile. "I was specifically instructed to bring it to you," he said.

"I appreciated it," I said. "I missed the Yule celebrations this year." But we were all too on edge to talk more. The judge entered the courtroom and we stood. Then the jury filed in. I looked at them, trying to divine who they'd voted for, but nobody was looking at either table.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, have you reached a verdict?" the judge asked formally.

"We have, Your Honor," the jury forewoman said, standing and shifting her weight nervously. She handed a piece of paper to the bailiff, who carried it over to the judge. The judge read it, blinked, and read it again before handing it back to the bailiff, who returned it to the forewoman. We stood for the reading of the verdict.

"What is the verdict on the count of civil trespass?"

"Guilty."

"And the negligent infliction of emotional distress?"

"Guilty."

"And the intentional infliction of emotional distress?"

"Not guilty, your honor."

"And illegal entry into a sovereign nation?"

"Guilty, your honor."

"And invasion of privacy?"

"Guilty."

"And what have you decided regarding whether the film of the battle at Vigrior should be released?" I was so tense I nearly cracked into pieces.

"It is the determination of the jury that the film should be released, due to the importance and implications of the battle."
The courtroom exploded. Thor shot to his feet, his face grim. Andrews and Early started talking to him rapidly. Dagny put her face in her hands. Carol dropped her head back and looked at the ceiling. Or I assumed she did, what with the mask and all. Serena started swearing, a monotone of obscenities regarding the jury and Kipp. Over at the other table, Kipp was laughing. Bitch. Lee insisted on polling the jury. Each of them affirmed how they voted, and most of the votes were unanimous. The vote was closest on whether to release the film, but it had passed with a comfortable majority. Kipp's lead attorney was texting furiously.

The judge had to rap her gavel for some time before order was restored. "And what are the penalties that the jury has decided on?"

"We advocate requiring that the defendant pay all attorney fees for the plaintiffs, that all profits from the film are to be turned over to the plaintiffs, and that all of the frames of the film that show identifying features of the valkyries be excised and destroyed from the original film and all copies prior to distribution. The defendant is not to be permitted to profit from the release of the film, including but not limited to fees for speaking or writing about the creation and/or production of the film, this lawsuit, or the release and/or reaction to the film. The backers of the film may make back their initial investments plus up to but no more than five percent. And if the defendant fails to comply with these terms in any way, we advocate jail time. We further advocate the maximum fines allowable by law for the charges of trespass, emotional distress, illegal entry, and invasion of privacy." The remedies given by the jury at least wiped the grin off Kipp's face.

"So ordered. All parties are reminded that with the adjudication of the claims and the finding in favor of the defendant that the court records of this trial and related proceedings will no longer be sealed, although any mention of the true names and/or identities of Ann, Betty, Cathy, and Donna Doe will be expunged." The judge tapped her gavel, and that was that.

Or was it?

Thor got up, shaking off the lawyers, and strode to the doors, which were opened before him. He was gone for less than a minute, and when he returned, he was at the head of a company of six of the Royal guard.

"What is the meaning of this?" the judge asked him sharply.

"According to the agreement of alliance and treaty that I signed with your United Nations, I have the right to have persons who have been convicted in your courts returned to Asgard for punishment not to exceed the maximum penalties permitted by law of the jurisdiction in which they were sentenced." Two of the guards seized Kipp by the arms, lifting her to her feet as her lawyers protested.

"Here is the relevant part of the agreement," Lee said helpfully, handing the bailiff a copy. The judge flicked through it carefully. I saw her suppress a small smile.

"This appears to be in order. Court is adjourned," she said, and nodded. The guards marched Kipp out, and Andrews went across the aisle to arrange for the forfeiture of the profits and payment of the legal fees. Thor nodded austerely at the court, turned, shot us a wink, and strode out behind his guards.

"Well shit," Dagny said in awe. It was rare for her to swear, and I giggled a little from nerves. "I did not expect that."

We sat for a few minutes to absorb this. Then Andrews told us that they'd be in touch and to be sure to contact them if we had any questions or concerns, and the lawyers packed it in. We got up
and walked to the doors, removing our masks and tossing them into the nearest trash can on the way out of the courthouse.

"What's going to happen to her on Asgard?" Serena asked me as we made our way downstairs.

"She received a suspended sentence of two months in jail for the criminal trespass," I said thoughtfully. "So she'll be in the citadel's cells for two months, most likely in a cell of her own. Loki told me once what his imprisonment there was like. They'll feed her--Loki said that the food was good--and she'll actually be able to keep her own clothes. The walls of the main part of the cell, barring the little bathroom, are transparent, using energy to keep the prisoners contained. So she'll be able to see and be seen, but nobody will talk to her. The cells can be made soundproof, so unless she has a cellmate, she won't hear another person for those two months." I frowned as I remembered what Loki had said. Or hadn't, which was more telling. "It's psychologically damaging to be isolated like that. It is more of a punishment that she'd get here, and more than she's expecting, I think."

"She deserves it," Dagny said in a hard voice, and we all agreed with that. "She wants to see Asgard? Let her see it from the inside of the jail." I had no doubt that the forfeiture of the movie profits and the other fines would hit Kipp hard, but the publicity would help her launch her film-making career. If she was any good--and I kind of thought she might be--in the long haul she wouldn't be hurt by any of the court proceedings. But the exercise of Thor's rights would provide the actual punishment.

Carol and Dagny left by a different door to get back to work. Serena and I walked down the front steps, pausing at the edge of the crowd surrounding a microphone, into which the jury forewoman was speaking. "Because the law prevents hung juries anymore, we had to come to an agreement on all the charges, and there was some horse trading going on. Half of the jury wouldn't budge on the release of the film. They wanted it released, so in order to secure that verdict, they agreed to the payment of the profits to the plaintiffs. It wasn't that we didn't sympathize with the plaintiffs, especially the valkyries, but we felt that everybody should see the film. It's... the impact is tremendous."

"I knew when the lawyer made his closing speech that he'd just given them a way out," I said in disgust as we turned away and went down the remaining steps onto the street.

"I agree," Serena said with a sigh. "But at least it's over, and thanks to Thor, there's some real justice." We parted on the corner, reaffirming our plan to go to the university's orientation session together on the third.

I trudged to the tower. If no Avengers were handy, I could spend some time on the big bag before going to ballet class. And there were no Avengers, but there were uncles. "It's hit the news cycle, sweetie," Bucky said, concern in his voice.

"The lawyers for that woman prepared background and context in a press release," Steve said in disgust. "They're appearing later on some of the news programs. That film is an instant sensation. But there's some confusion about what happened after the verdict."

I smiled slightly and told them about Thor's tour de force justice smackdown. Bucky smiled and Steve chuckled.

And I got to work out my aggression on both uncles. They didn't come at me full tilt, because I'm good, but not that good, and I did have to have complete focus. It took about forty minutes of fighting before I felt appeased. I held up my hands and backed away, and Steve and Bucky also dropped out of their fighting stances.
"Feel better, sweetie?" Bucky asked, giving me a hug.

"Yeah," I said. "Thanks, both of you." We'd acquired an audience while I hadn't been looking; Damian and Daniel were watching, leaning against the wall by the door, together with Tony and Hawkeye and a couple of the Avengers. Tony pushed off the wall and patted my shoulder.

"You'll be ok, Tiger," was all he said. Hawkeye just shook his head. The Avengers looked a little mousy, but I didn't know why. They've seen us fight before.

Daniel was disappointed that I had a ballet class to go to, but we arranged a lunch later in the new year. Damian waited while I went to change and step inside the tissue accelerator, coming back with my dance bag and no bruises, and fell into step with me. We walked to the studio in companionable silence and arranged to have lunch after my class. Inside, Natasha just said, "Good for Thor," and we stepped up to the barre. I was grateful for the mental discipline required for the exercises, and gladly forgot everything but turnout, pointed toes, and arm positions.

I showered after class and felt like a new woman. At least the uncertainty over the verdict was removed and I could get on with my life. My identity would be protected. Damian took me for a late leisurely lunch, and then we spent the afternoon at the Met until their early closing. We picked up takeout on the way home and returned to Eira, sprawled on her ottoman. Damian took her out for a walk and I flicked on the fire and refilled her food bowls, changing the water. We ate when they returned, and we had some cuddle time before it was time to be ready for the party we'd RSVPed for. It was being held at the top of the Empire State Building, so the view would be good. I did simple makeup aside from smoky eyes (always a classic look), drew my hair back into a complicated knot, and put on a glorious dark crimson silk charmeuse dress, plain front with a V neckline, that plunged to my waist in back. The back was edged in black velvet that gathered into a bow over my butt. The skirt flared out in back, giving the impression of a train although the hem skimmed the floor. The only jewelry I wore were my new rings and the snowflake earrings Damian had given me.

"Less is more," Damian said approvingly when he saw me. "I'm dazzled by the glorious woman, wearing... something sexy." He wore his new moonstone set in his tuxedo shirt, and looked handsomely austere. As he draped a shawl over my shoulders, he kissed the back of my neck. "We're sticking with the plan, right? We go, meet people and dazzle them, be social, drink some champagne at midnight, kiss, and come back here so that we can ravish each other, right?"

I laughed. "That's a plan I can definitely get behind."

And that's what we did. With the force of habit, we worked the room, meeting new people, making contacts. It wasn't like it was work, I enjoyed meeting new people, and there was a good mix of returnees representing many eras of the city's history. The Wayne name had been notable since the 1800's, so there were many who were interested in meeting Damian. All in all, though, it was a pleasant time. We did see people we knew: Tony and Ann were also in attendance. Tony looked handsome in his tuxedo too (although not as divine as Damian) and Ann was lovely in a black velvet sheath. She was glowing, and after the greetings, she put out her hand so we could see the magnificent diamond on her finger. A solitaire setting, the diamond was a princess cut, set so that the points of the stone were turned out, looking more like a kite than a square. We congratulated them, and Tony looked smug. Damian asked Ann to dance to hear more about the engagement, which left me with Tony.

"When you renewed your vows, I thought that it might just be time to make that move myself," he said.

"You're a good match for each other, Sparky," I said. "She gets you as an individual, and let's be
frank, you're quirky as hell sometimes, but with her there's also a meeting of the minds, which you need." We grinned at each other. "I wish you lifetimes of happiness together."

"Me too," he said. "It's nervewracking, though. Any advice?"

"Get yourselves some binders," I said, and we burst out laughing.

"She's ok with Iron Man too, which, frankly, would have been a deal breaker if she hadn't been," he said, sobering slightly. "Which reminds me. Guess who I bumped into?" I shook my head, mystified.

"Rhodey," he said, grinning from ear to ear. "And with none of his spinal damage."

"That's fantastic news," I said. "What's he doing these days?"

"Back in the military. He's going to be their every day liaison with the Avengers. It was just offered to him yesterday. I don't think even Daniel knows yet." I grinned; it wasn't often that somebody was one up on Daniel in the knowledge department.

After the dance, they drifted away and Damian and I sipped the sparkling wine, nibbled a bit on some canapes, and took in the spectacular view. You could see the massive construction cranes all over, everywhere you looked. At midnight, confetti was thrown, noisemakers added to the cheering, and we kissed. I rubbed my rings absently; they still felt different and would take some getting used to. We stayed slightly longer, a good twenty minutes, before going home for the promised ravishing.

On the third, I went to Columbia with Bucky and Serena for the orientation session. For all the time that had passed, education hadn't changed all that much. The professor who'd been roped into leading the section about classes mentioned that reforms to higher education had been tried, but had always reverted back to the semester model, using tests and written assignments to gauge competency. There was additional information about student services, the structure of the university (so you'd know approximately where to go if you had questions), student organizations, and we concluded with a walking tour of the campus, led by a student ambassador. She was peppy despite the frigid temperature and gave us an engaging blend of facts and campus legends as she showed us the buildings. After the tour, we took our bags of information, promotions, and goodies and retreated to a cafe on campus for lunch, talking about the session.

"I'm really looking forward to it," Serena said, trying a hearty vegetable soup. "I was looking forward to it before, but now I'm actually eager," she corrected herself. I nodded, enjoying my gyro. Valhalla had had really good cooks, but a real shortage of cross-cultural fare and I still felt like I was catching up.

"It's a new beginning," Bucky said, taking out the frilled toothpick from his BLT. "Nobody seems to care what you did in the past, just what you're studying and hope to do. I like it," he mumbled around his first mouthful.

"That is a relief, particularly since the trial," Serena nodded. We veered away from that topic and compared schedules; they'd been printed out and placed in a folder with other important information like contact lists for the faculty in our majors and our faculty advisors. I was meeting mine again after lunch; he wanted to make sure I was ready for classes and prepared to hit the ground running. We discovered that on Friday, we were all on campus in the afternoon, so we made a standing date to meet after classes in the Student Union building where they had a craft brewery operated by hospitality students who were learning how to become brewmasters.
Just before classes, the shank of my Brass Rat sheared through, as if broken by the knowledge that I was attending Columbia. I took it to three jewelers, who all said the ring was too old and worn to fix enough to wear. So I contacted the alumni services of MIT, who said that this was far from the first problem like this that they'd heard about and that I could order a new ring that would have a similar design to my old one, down to the year and the other personalization. I couldn't give them my account number fast enough. Take my money, MIT.

We had a surprise at the end of one practice session at the tower. Daniel showed up with an Air Force Brigadier General and a woman. "Col-- General Rhodes," I said with a smile, correcting myself and holding out my hand.

"Alex," he said, smiling and shaking my hand. "Good to see you. Tony said you were around." He and Bucky greeted each other warmly.

"And this is Malia Hughes," Daniel said, introducing the small Latina. "She was a Marine drill sergeant and later taught hand to hand for the Corps. She's taking over the training for the Avengers." Bucky looked relieved.

"Ms Barnes, Mr Barnes, I may be taking over the program here, but be assured that you're still welcome here at any time and I would like to arrange for you to be guest instructors from time to time. You have institutional knowledge that cannot be replaced and it's always good for students to have changing opponents. Also, please drop by whenever you want to work out. I understand that you shoot sometimes with Hawkeye, Ms Barnes."

"Please, call me Alex," I said, putting out my hand. She had a strong grip and a sunny smile.

"I'm Bucky," my uncle said, and they started talking about the program immediately, Bucky offering her a tour. I joined Daniel and Rhodes. We hadn't been close the first time around, but the absence of pain and the difficulties he'd dealt with as part of the accident at Leipzig had contributed to his distance. Now he was still alert and sharp, but smiled more easily and seemed more engaged. We talked for awhile about the changes, then I went to shower and change.

"How's Bucky taking it?" Damian asked over dinner.

"He's hugely relieved," I said. "He wants to focus on classes, and he was worried about the effect of splitting his attention. He's always felt that you have to totally commit to the work because the students' lives depend on what you teach them and the habits you instill. If you miss something, they could die. So removing that is kind of a godsend. Let somebody else bear the burden now."

"Is she nice?"

"I thought so, we're going to meet later so I can give her my notes and impressions too. But Bucky handed over the next class to her." I laughed. "It was just as I was leaving, and you could sure tell she'd been a drill sergeant."

I started classes the next week; I was taking the recommended number of hours this semester but planned to ramp it up after I got used to being back in the classroom. I was able to keep up with the ballet class with Natasha, but when the beginner class ended, the instructor offered us a more challenging and advanced class that was in the morning, before my classes started and before Natasha went to work. She was heading up intelligence analysis for the Avengers. I was glad we could continue dancing; I was kind of worried that we'd fade out of each others' lives now that I wasn't at the tower much.

Picking up studies again was hard at first, mentally exhausting. Eira went to work with Damian
rather than to campus with me. I was winding down the therapy and couldn't justify her as a therapy dog anymore. But I had plenty of company, and at least Serena and I had a class together. I made sure to continue talking to my other friends and family to help keep me balanced, and I put the books away each night to spend quality time with Damian and Eira. I met my uncle a couple of times a week to provide tutoring. It wasn't that he wasn't bright enough to succeed, it was just that he'd been away longer than I had and we both liked the opportunity to spend some time together. I also learned a lot; there had been new discoveries in both biology and chemistry since the last time I'd studied them. We'd just completed midterms when Thor told us that he'd had Melanie Kipp returned to Midgard.

She was on the news that night. She seemed squilrelly than usual, jumpy, but even she admitted that she hadn't been mistreated. Her lawyer had been allowed to visit her three times. But now that she was back, she was getting ready to recut the film to abide by the jury's dictate, and then it would be released, at the end of April. Crap. Just before finals. The story lit up the news cycles; the jury--those who wanted to speak about the trial, anyway--were frequent guests on new and newsmagazine shows, talking about their impressions from the trial. It was fantastic free publicity for the film.

Well. Shit, as Dagny said when we met to discuss it.
"Those jurors, though," Carol said, sipping her Long Island Ice Tea after work. She'd gone for the cocktail--she's usually a beer gal--because it was potent and there was a lot of it. "I get the feeling that they're enjoying their time in the spotlight. They seem to be paying a lot of lip service to acknowledging how damaging it is, but they're really creative about why they voted to allow its release. 'The film is important', 'there are only a few plaintiffs versus all the people who will want to see it,' 'it's such a powerful movie that I think everybody should see it.'"

"Same thing as when I got my discharge from the military," Serena said moodily. "I got a lot of 'thank you for your service' comments but nobody cared when veteran services were cut or that we had to wait a month to get an appointment at a VA hospital."

"Did you see the demonstration in Washington last night?" Dagny spoke quietly. "I don't have wings any more or any mutations, but I'm still worried about the anti-mutant protests. They're saying that people like Serena and Alex's uncle, anybody with biomech replacements are abominations, that mutants are putting regular people out of jobs."

"Don't forget the other group that said that returnees should be returned to their afterlives," Serena said dryly. "Those of us who didn't go to Christian afterlives, anyway."

"And the old-fashioned, regressive people--men and women--who think that women should know their place, which is submission to their husbands or the kitchen." Carol rolled her eyes. "There are women who do want to devote themselves to their homes and family, and if it's their idea, who cares? But not everybody wants to do that. And I heard a couple of people talking on the subway, apparently last night there was a piece in one of the main New Right websites on how to make your disapproval with all the civil rights gains 'clear without being offensive.' Right. It's a shame. People who are conservative in the old-fashioned political sense, you know, fiscal responsibility, like that, are being unfairly bunched in there."

"There was a couple at the New Years Eve party that Damian and I went to, very starchy. We were introduced, the man started talking to Damian and the woman could not have been more disapproving. She was in a dress that looked like an authentic Edwardian gown, and she actually said that my dress was indecent. It was a slip dress."

"What did you say?" Dagny wanted to know.

"I shrugged and said that it covered my groin, which is the last zone on the body that has to be clothed for both men and women. She got a little mean then and said I looked like a harlot. I said she should loosen up the corset so that blood could get to her brain and she could think for herself. I'm getting really tired of being disapproved of. There is literally nothing about me that some of these people approve of. My clothes are too revealing, education has made me an unnatural woman, I'm too outspoken, ect., ad nauseam. Damian got flack because he doesn't keep me in line. He said that only an inferior man has to repress his woman and that ability has nothing to do with what's between your legs." I shook my head. "So gross to have to deal with. But there are signs that the fossils are being squeezed out of business opportunities. There was a big rush to sign up returnees with big names, mostly from the turn of the 20th century, therabouts, to boards of directors, remember? They didn't think how far business has come. I mean, historically, Henry Ford was an active anti-semite, most of the robber barons were absolutely ruthless to labor, exploited minorities like the Chinese during the building of the great railroads, and employed illegal or immoral tactics to acquire business assets. JP Morgan escaped service in the Civil War by paying somebody else to go, and he was a war profiteer--sold $3.50 rifles to the Army for $22, and
on top of that, they were defective, blowing off user's thumbs. The working class was suppressed, at times violently, paid miserable wages. Rockefeller, Vanderbilt, and Carnegie, for example, were horrible to their workers but they could also be extraordinary philanthropists, which is what they're primarily remembered for today. And the Waynes weren't lily-white in their labor practices of the time, but they did come around sooner than most.

"Most companies aren't doing business with companies that treat female employees differently--and word does get around about who's doing that but there are some who do business, a buck's a buck, right? But I heard from Emma, who ran into a few of her friends from back in the day who are reentering business, that the companies where these men got high positions because they were historically very successful are starting to fail because they are misjudging the markets and they don't understand the relationship between capital and labor. The markets that these companies had before the new hires are closing themselves off. One of the biggest banking firms and that last big steel corporation have apparently told the fossils that they have to get with the new program or they're out. Their business ideas are way out of date, they don't understand labor laws at all, and they're costing their firms business, but they still have name recognition. Rockefeller Center, Carnegie libraries, Stanford, Vanderbilt and Duke Universities, all of it. Damian and I told our architect that we need to check the sources for the materials going into our home. We're not going to patronize companies who are so outdated. It'll cost a little more; companies who are losing business are dropping their prices, but it's worth it."

"So you're getting ready to build?" Carol asked.

"Yeah," I said, getting a dopey grin on my face. "The plans are wonderful. The driveway's in, the front garden is about to break ground, and Daniel told us that the dairy operation, which was ended a couple of generations ago, fell into disrepair and Mark tore it down for safety reasons. He's offered us the stone to reuse on the exterior. There's not quite enough, but the architect has places where a contrasting material could be used and we made some windows bigger. The main house is made of the same material, so it'll provide continuity."

"I helped prepare the ground for the lavender maze," Dagny said. "Thanks for choosing my company. I know it's smaller than some of the ones that put in bids."

"It may be smaller, but you guys do really good work," I said. "And it's a local company employing local people. A couple of the lowest bids promised perfection in the layout of the maze, but they use computers and machines. It looks a little weird when it's too precise. Human work isn't as perfect, but it turns out that the little irregularities make the gardens more lovely."

"Yeah, there's one person who sets up a machine, inputs a program, and stands back while the machine cuts trenches in the ground, then a second machine goes over the trenches, dropping plants in at intervals and pushing the dirt back in. A third machine drops mulch. We use a digger to break up the ground and enrich it with compost before digging the trenches and putting in the watering system, but we use people like me to position the plants just so before planting them. And not to tell you what to do, but there are a couple places where you could use some different plants for emphasis."

"Oh?" I was interested.

"Yeah." Dagny drew a rough sketch of the maze on a cocktail napkin. "Here in the center, and by the entrances. Rosemary doesn't grow as large but it's still a bushy sort of plant, the leaves are similar, the scent is complementary to the lavender and it should enhance what you've already planned visually, adding another scent for depth."

"I like it," said Serena, looking at the sketch.
"I do too," I said. "I can just picture it. I'll talk to Damian, but I'm sure he'll agree. I'll call your boss tomorrow."

"Are you thinking about garden design as a career?" Carol asked, and Dagny flushed.

"Yeah, but more than that. I'm thinking about landscape architecture. There are a lot of public parks going in or planned for the next decade, plus there are individuals like Alex who want gardens too. Lots of opportunity. There's a really good program at City College; it's become one of the top programs in the country," she said shyly.

"Where do you see yourself in ten years?" I wanted to know.

"Owning my own company. Something smaller, where each client gets individualized attention. Probably focused on large scale public projects, though, because homeowners tend to be difficult. They change their minds a lot." She flashed a smile at me.

I grinned back. "Damian and I had planned to do the back gardens the way we did the initial ones at the big house the first time around, but perhaps we could use some guidance. And definitely some help digging the flower beds. We're a little haphazard."

"Yeah, I took a look at the plans you talked about with my boss," she said diffidently. "They're a little... odd."

"A lot of the flowers are chosen because they have special meanings," I said, just as Aslyn plopped down with her drink, followed by Margaret and Karen. After hellos and some shifting around, Aslyn poked me.

"Damian sends her flowers that have meanings, there's this whole crazy language of flowers. I remember once he sent her a cactus when he was on a business trip. It meant patience or something. Tenacity, wasn't it?"

"I think so," I said, laughing. "And he sends me photos of plants that have the meaning he wants but can't find in a florist shop."

"Aw, that's cute. But it could be organized better to make more visual sense," Dagny said.

"Great. By the time the house is built and it's go time for the back gardens, you'll have learned more and you can do it," I said briskly. Then I asked Aslyn, Margaret, and Karen what was new with them before Dagny could protest. She was very self confident as a valkyrie, but this new place and era made her tentative and unsure a lot of the time. The rest of us too, sometimes, but we just covered it better. We spent the next hour and a half unwinding and having fun, then split up. Serena was going back to campus to put in more time with the building simulator for our final project in the architecture class, Dagny wanted to research the rosemary proposal and put it on her boss's desk, Aslyn was studying for finals--with classes in both the MBA and law programs, she couldn't start early enough--Karen and Carol had dates, Margaret was beat and going to bed early, and I was going to go home to Damian.

Damian loved the idea of the rosemary and offered to call the landscaper the next day.

In the middle of April, we were shocked and dismayed to find out that Kipp's Ragnarok film, now titled "Triumph," had been submitted to the Tribeca Film Festival and had snagged a coveted screening on the final night of the festival. A live orchestra would play the score, and Kipp would read the narration herself, answering questions after the screening. The festival organizers had also commissioned a huge modern "RomPop" musical group to compose and premiere an original song
for the movie.

"RomPop?" Carol asked in distaste. "It sounds like some bizarro candy."

Serena snorted a laugh. "Romantic Popular. It's some kind of new genre in pop music. I dunno. I'm too busy to follow new trends in music. Besides, it all sounds weird to me."

"I've heard it," Dagny said unexpectedly. "I like it. It is kind of romantic. But I have no idea why romance is considered appropriate for this film."

"It's probably just a ploy to boost interest in the film and make money for the musicians," Carol said derisively.

We kept our heads down through all the hype, and as the screening drew closer, the hype was very hard to avoid. The night of the screening, I was studying in the library with Serena. Dagny was with us, working on her college application essay; we were proofreading it for her and providing occasional feedback. I got a call from Daniel; he was panicked.

"The film has just been screened," he said rapidly. "It's a disaster. Somehow they got a print of the film that still has your faces in it." Dagny and Serena were looking at me.

"Call Carol. We've got a problem," I said, and told Daniel that we'd meet him at the lab, Tony and Ann being gone on a test run of our organisms in the Pacific. Dagny got hold of Carol while Serena and I stuffed everything into our bags. We ran.

I waited impatiently for the biometrics reader to recognize me at our improved door security, and we burst in. We paced impatiently, waiting for Carol to arrive. Daniel was the last one to show up, and he was highly agitated. That spelled trouble, a lot of it, as he almost always had a calm expression. Andrews was hard on his heels, and that's when I knew there was real trouble. He was spitting mad.

"I recorded it," Andrews said, projecting his communicator's recording of the film. "She did a lot of work on it in places." We watched as a brief prologue scrolled across the screen giving the date in Midgard years, mentioning the Great Return as a preceding event, and concluding with the statement "Odin led his forces from the citadel on Asgard to the plains of Vigrior." The film started with the same view of the sky through the trees that panned down to the grasses and the first view of Odin's army. This part is very stylized, and it looks kind of Art Deco, for some reason. The ranks are clear and sharply defined, and we look to have a simply massive force, the lines and columns emphasized, the film bleeding from old-fashioned 2D to true 3D. There's a long, lingering view of all this, in almost utter silence. You can hear breathing from the guards. Mist that I don't remember is being burned off by the sun but still lingers around the trees. Detail becomes so crisp that I feel like I could reach out and touch the bark of the tree limb Kipp is perched on, even through this inferior copy. Then the rending of space at the Observatory, the boiling, seething blackness oversetting the dark opal appearance of the Bifrost bridge.

"Oh, Jesus," Serena has gone the palest I've ever seen her. "This is lifted almost straight from "The Triumph of the Will."

"What's that?" Dagny asked, puzzled.

"A Nazi propaganda film of the Nuremberg rally sometime in the 1930's," Carol said grimly. "Are you sure, Serena? I've never seen it, just heard descriptions of it."

"I'm sure," she said grimly. "I did see it in a propaganda course. We were studying psyops. There's
the brief statement at the beginning, the shot of the sky that tracks down, the stylized, precise depiction of the masses and their leader. There's the themes of religion, power, and unity."

"That's deliberate," Andrews said furiously. "It wasn't that way in the original screening." From there the film reverts to what I remember, until the combat gets fierce. Then there's additional footage inserted. The camera clings like a voyeur to the berserkers, the valkyries dying, and enhanced clarity of Odin's wounds and death, Baldr's dogs, savage on the battlefield. The footage has been made crisper and clearer, detail is heightened. The gore seems... more. I have to turn away and step over to the door to call first Thor and then Damian. Lee and Early arrive before they do. Damian is just in time to see the arrow go through my wing and my spectacular crash landing and he goes as pale as Serena. His eyes are glued to the projection, his hand absenty touching my back where my wings come out.

I hear Early calling the judge and Lee talking to the owner of a theater that is set to start screening the film for the nationwide opening the next day. "The theater owner I just spoke to said he's already seen the film, he had a special showing for his employees tonight, and apparently the film that's being distributed is different from the one at the festival," Lee said. "I've sent some of the associates and one of the paralegals over; the owner will show it to them so they can see for themselves and take notes."

"We're due in court tomorrow at 8 am," Early said stonily, rejoining the group. "As soon as we can get injunctions against the festival from any additional viewings of this film prepared and any other paper we can think of, I'll take them over and she'll sign them. Our process servers will leave immediately with the signed orders. She's issuing a bench warrant for Kipp's arrest."

"But the damage is done," I said numbly. There were plenty of shots of the four of us that clearly showed our faces. I rested my head gently on my husband's shoulder.

Carol started scrolling through news on her communicator. "The film is a sensation," she said hoarsely. "The press was there in bulk and they're all filing stories like crazy. It's got 100% on Rotten Tomatoes. Audience members are gushing about it and it's won the top award of the festival. It's been submitted to other festivals, including Cannes, Sundance, others. Oh, god." Damian gently detached me and enabled Early to have access to the computer setup here so that she could draft the paper for the court and print it all out. There will be a lot of it, they added summons for the festival directors since the court ruled well in advance of the screening. Lee joined her, then Andrews.

Thor sat in his chair, looking blankly at the table where the communicator is sitting. "I cannot believe this," he said when I touched his shoulder. I retreated and called Loki.

"She assured me and the other backer that the film would be suitably edited for release," Daniel said. "Cal Strouse said he'd follow up with that."

"What was that name?" Lee yelled at him from the office. Daniel repeated it. Guess the investors were going to get paper too. Daniel walked over numbly to give contact information for the people who had originally invested in the film.

The office became a hive of activity, the lawyers using the verdict from the trial as a spear. The gloves were off. Loki arrived and had quiet words with his brother before coming over to the four of us.

"My brother is closing the embassy after this hearing is over," he said softly. "I don't have any classes this semester, so it's a matter of handing off my duties at the university for awhile. We'll engage human guards to protect the property and the staff will continue to report, fielding inquiries,
until Thor decides what is to be done."

"I don't suppose Asgardian justice involves single combat," Carol said, trying for a smile.

"Sorry, no," Loki said, touching her shoulder. "But before, the conditions of her imprisonment were reasonable. When she goes back--and she will, one way or another--she will be completely isolated. She will be able to see out of her cell, but no one will see in. She will interact with no one for the entire term of her incarceration. Thor was gracious in allowing her lawyer to visit, but that will not be permitted this time. There will be no diversions available to her--no books, and of course, no mass media. She will be changed when she is released." He left to begin his preparations, and Carol, Dagny, Serena and I looked at each other hopelessly. A headache was pounding through my skull. My mood swung to enraged.

"Why are we wailing?" I demanded to know, shifting restlessly. My voice was a growl. "The fact is that we've been outed, but this bitch doesn't know what she's done." I started to pace around my friends. "We are valkyries of Valhalla, aren't we? We hid behind masks at the trial, afraid of being identified. But everybody is going to know who we are. You can count on other people having recorded the film and it'll be all over the internet if it isn't."

"So let's go on the offensive, take the fight to her," Dagny said, and I nodded. Carol started to smile. We put our heads together, and after some conversation, brought Thor into the huddle. By the time Bucky and Steve arrived--their faces had been seen clearly too--we had a plan. Steve looked at us cautiously.

"You look like you've got a plan."

"We do," Serena grinned, cold and predatory. "She's fucked with the wrong people."

Bucky grinned. "Give 'em hell." He looked around at all the activity. "Facial recognition was used, as you thought. Captain America and the Winter Soldier have been identified too. Iron Man was visible, so I called Stark. The internet has officially broken. Several sites that hosted bootleg copies of the movies or stills, or reviews, or anything related, actually, have crashed. It's going to be a circus at the courthouse tomorrow. The filmmaker was arrested at the festival." He looked around at us. "Whatever you're going to do, go full tilt."

Carols smiled. "Oh, it will be spectacular. She will not be prepared for us. We're going balls to the wall."

"Ovaries out," Serena corrected. "It's tougher." Steve laughed, which made the rest of us chuckle.

I went to tell the lawyers we were leaving and that we'd see them tomorrow. Damian was quiet until we got home, and then I told him what my plan was. He started to grin. "I've got to see this."

The next morning, Damian drove and we collected my comrades. He dropped us off at the corner of the courthouse; the street was blocked off due to all the media. That was fine, though. We were going to add to the spectacle.

We held our heads high as we strode toward the courthouse steps. Magically, the crowd parted before us, but I guess that four angry women in full battle dress with swansfeather capes will make people draw back. No weapons, though. But who needs steel when you've got our rep?

Some brave idiot stopped us about halfway up the stairs. Before he could speak, there was another stir and we all turned to look. It was Thor, in his full armor, accompanied by seven other women. Our armor was torn and dented, our uniforms stained, but the metal was bright and the tears of our
uniforms mended. The feathers of our cloaks shone slightly in the weak sun. As if a cinematographer had commanded it, a beam of light broke free of the clouds and touched us gently before the clouds veiled the sun again. A light rain began to fall and I was grateful for my cloak as the rain rolled right off.

"Melanie Kipp said that she wanted to face her accusers last night before she was arrested," I said to the reporter, who still hadn't managed to get a question out. "We're here. We are the valkyries of Asgard, and we will have justice if we cannot have battle." Thor brushed past the reporter and the way cleared for him. Serena fell in on his right hand side, and I did the same on his left. Dagny, Carol, Eir, Kata, Asa, Staeina, Visna, Dora, and Runa picked up the formation. We walked into the courthouse in utter silence.
Our impressive display hit a little snag when we entered the courthouse and were confronted with the metal detectors. The guards, while suitable impressed, were unbending, but finally they let us go through the x ray screener. It was a waste of time, though. Even I hadn't brought weapons with me, and I never went out without a blade. Besides, if we were there to cause mayhem, we didn't need weapons to do so.

We entered the courtroom without fanfare, although if it had been a movie, there would have been dramatic music and better lighting and stuff. The judge looked weary but intrigued, and on Kipp's face was a trace of dawning realization that she might be in over her head. Sort of a "these are not the cowering wretches that we were promised" look. Bwahaha. Her lawyer looked unimpressed, but he was just hired for the occasion. He wouldn't be paying the piper. Behind us came a crowd of people. There wasn't any point to a closed hearing. More chairs were brought for the unexpected increase in valkyries at our table; they had to sit behind us but they were ok with that. There was another stir. I turned to see Bucky and Steve coming down the aisle. They sat behind us, saving a place for Damian. The room was abuzz; apparently the press had done their homework.

The judge looked at us all and shook her head, tapping her gavel. "For all you new people, I run a tight ship. Any outbursts from the onlookers will result in immediate expulsion. This is a court of law, not a circus. Since the defendant's movie has created this situation, media will be permitted to record the proceedings despite defendant's objections. Now. It looks like we have some new plaintiffs. Counselor?"

"The new plaintiffs are all who remain of the valkyries who fought at Ragnarok. They have come from Asgard and Svartalfar to testify and join the lawsuit," Andrews said.

"Your clients are dressed most colorfully."

"I can have them explain." She nodded, and I stood.

"We covered our faces for the trial because we wanted to be left in peace. But our hopes for an anonymous life have been trashed by the malicious actions of Ms Kipp, and she stated in the press last night that she wanted to confront her accusers in court. So here we are." I smiled at the judge. "We are the valkyries, created in Valhalla and we are of Asgard. In accordance with the treaty signed by Thor with the UN, we have dual citizenship, given that courts have ruled that returnees can claim citizenship in their first country of birth as well as where they were returned. We are wearing the traditional battle dress of the valkyries, as seen in the film."

She studied me. "There's significant damage to your armor."

"Yes. It was torn and punctured when I fought first for everyone's lives, then specifically mine. I was in a coma for a long time, and when I came out, I was too weak to fix it. And since I thought my battle days were over, I didn't fix it after. I wanted to move on."

"You're a blacksmith?" she asked me.

"Yes, although mostly I made blades. But this is my personal armor and I'm fussy about who works on it. I could return it to the smiths on Asgard; Reginn made it originally, they have the commission to make the armor and initial weapons for the valkyries. If I want the embossing and repousse to match, it'll have to go back to them."
"But you didn't bring any of your weapons."

"No. We're committed to the legal process to get some justice. If I were to have brought my blades, it would be vengeance. Although I don't necessarily feel that vengeance is out of place here, there's no point to calling for single combat as I could do on Asgard. She has no training and there would be no honor to killing her outright. I am done with slaughter." I sat down.

"I admire your restraint," the judge said acerbically after a moment of silence. "Counselor, please explain why we're here."

Ms Lee rose to her feet. "Yesterday at the Tribeca Film Festival, a version of Ms Kipp's documentary on Ragnarok was aired that not only didn't remove the frames showing the identities of the original four valkyrie plaintiffs but expanded the film to show additional scenes. The opening was changed to mirror the opening of the Nazi propaganda film "Triumph of the Will," made by Leni Riefenstahl in 1935. My clients object to this defamation. The court order was disregarded both by the filmmaker and the film festival, which is why the organizers have been joined as parties. Information given to us by one of the initial backers indicated that another backer had agreed to supervise the edits required by this court. Given that these edits were not made, we have amended our complaint to include him."

"What a mess," the judge muttered. "And what about these new women?"

"They are the rest of the surviving valkyries. They have asked to join the action against the defendant to enforce removal of their images as well. Several of them have additional concerns."

"Fine," the judge said. "This is what's going to happen. I have issued a preliminary injunction against further showings of the film in question. The defendant is ordered to surrender all materials related to the festival print of the film and affidavits regarding the form of the film that was submitted to other festivals. If this version was submitted to other festivals, theaters, or made available for any public viewing, the defendant must withdraw the film immediately. Ms Kipp is in contempt of court and will be taken directly to jail following this proceeding. The original court order was public well before the film festival and was covered extensively in the media. The organizers of the film festival and the backer who failed to ensure the edits, this Cal Strouse, are also in contempt and will be jailed at least until their lawyers are ready to defend their actions. Now, what about the version of the film that is set to open in theaters in a wide release?"

"The owner of one of the theaters very kindly allowed our associates to view the film early this morning. It appears that this film, which the owner assured me was the copy that everybody got, had the necessary edits made. We are not asking that these theaters be prevented from showing the film on schedule, since to do so would be contrary to the verdict that the jury returned in the first case." She put a slight stress on the 'we'.

"All right. I want your motions filed by noon," the judge said to our attorneys. "And your responses by five pm tonight," she said to the defense team. "We will reconvene here tomorrow at 8 am. Be ready to go." She tapped the gavel with a little more force than was really necessary, we stood, and she left the courtroom. I watched with satisfaction as Kipp was placed in manacles and removed from the courtroom.

"I've been thinking about your dog," she said. I'd asked her about the possibility of getting Eira legal rights of her own as a sentient citizen of Asgard who just happened to be dog-shaped. "Thor said that it has never been a question on Asgard that these beings think for themselves and are treated as such. We think that it would be a good time to tack recognition for her onto this lawsuit since people will be afraid of her after seeing that festival version of the film." I nodded. "Bring her tomorrow. We'll arrange some sort of test to show that she understands what's said around her and
can respond. Thor has said he'll explain about this 'All-Speech' thing."

Then we left the courtroom, again as a group, our heads high. We commanded a certain air of respect. Conveyances were present to take all the valkyries to their next destinations. Serena and I changed in the car and he dropped us off at school. I'd only missed one class. In a break between classes, I tracked down my Intro to Conservation prof and explained the situation. He stared at me, then rubbed his eyes. "You're kidding," he said.

"Wish I was," I said, a little bitter. "It's not my intent--at all--to cause disruption or problems. I am here strictly to get an education, and up until the festival, I thought that I'd be able to leave the past in the past." I waited patiently as he checked the news feed.

"Well, Ms Barnes, I can see where this will be a problem for you and I'm willing to work with you regarding any absences you might have regarding court appearances. Do you have any idea how long this will take?"

"It shouldn't take too long, actually," I said thoughtfully. "The initial trial was just a few days. This hearing is all about the violation of the jury verdict, contempt of court. We've got a few witnesses--I'll be testifying for the four of us and there will be testimony of one of the valkyries who lives on Asgard now. Thor will probably testify, and that's it for our side, I think. The filmmaker, the backers, and somebody from the festival will have to testify in defense, and then it's down to the judge to determine penalties. I would be surprised if I missed more than one additional class."

"That's not as bad as I thought, then," he said, then handed me a piece of paper and a pencil. "We had a pop quiz. You have the twenty minutes I permitted the class to have."

So I took a pop quiz after a dramatic court appearance about people now knowing I killed a bunch of fire giants. My professor didn't seem to care.

He did let me hang around while he graded it. 97%. I got partial credit for a two-part question.

This state of placid acceptance didn't last, though. All students got a text that the university was restricting access to the campus due to the media who had been swarming the place looking for valkyries and interviews. Admission to the campus would require a valid student ID. And some of my classmates either subtly or pointedly kept their distance from me. Others wanted me to dish dirt about the whole thing. I have never been more grateful for my professors, who said that anybody who didn't want to focus on architecture or historic preservation material needed to leave the class until they could focus. I spent the rest of the day tracking them down--along with my faculty advisor, who additionally took me to the head of the department--to explain and apologize for the disruption. They weren't all as accepting as the first professor had been, but the head of the department, supported by the president of the university, assured me that any prejudice against me or any of the Asgard forces (basically Serena and Bucky) who were enrolled in classes would not be tolerated and that if I experienced any problems to report them immediately. I really appreciated the support. I didn't want to admit that having people turn away was hurtful. The state had anti-discrimination laws that specifically prevented anti-mutant discrimination; it wasn't clear that the wings qualified since they were more mystically induced (not that I admitted to still having mine) but I still had the mutations that had been induced in the lab experiment. Odd, you'd think that the return would have taken care of that, but apparently resurrection wasn't as perfect as was commonly thought. But at least you couldn't see them.

I did get support, though. One of the workers in the school cafe where I got a late lunch gave me a large helping of potato salad on the house, and other people treated me normally. I called Damian to tell him about the closed campus and arranged to meet him at one of the least used campus entrances. We dropped off Bucky and Serena before going home ourselves, and as Damian put a
casserole that Alfred had brought by for us into the oven, I sat down with Eira to explain why I wanted a court determination that she was intelligent and she immediately understood the advantage. She liked people and didn't want them to be afraid of her.

After dinner, though, we had some fun. Our architect had sent over the plans for our house; unless we wanted revisions, these would be the final plans and we could have the house built whenever we wanted. The house outwardly looked pretty modest, a stone exterior where we could train up ivy or Virginia creeper for color and to soften the stone. On one side of the house there were little niches where birds could nest; we had a lot of song birds in the area. Solar technology had come a long way and the roof panels looked exactly like slate tiles. There was an arched covered breezeway connecting the exterior door of the library with the back yard that ran down one side. Inside was a welcoming entryway with walk-in coat closet. Visible from this was the great library, a wood paneled two-story round room with a large fireplace, lined with bookcases and a walkway that circled the upper floor. A stained glass dome crowned it all. Down the hall to the right was a dining room to seat twelve (big parties would still have to up at the main house) and the kitchen, a spacious, high-tech homage to the culinary arts that terminated in a turret-shaped glass room with a less formal table for regular meals. The accompanying drawing showed potted plants and a set up for Eira. A closet for cleaning and maintenance supplies was tucked in between the kitchen and the glass room and a butler's pantry between the kitchen and the formal dining room. Down the hall to the left was a living room where we could keep the viewing screen, and it was shown with a pool table. There was a mudroom to the side of that which included the Eira-activated grooming station and laundry facilities. A chute from the upper floor allowed laundry to be dropped right by the washer. A palatial guest suite completed the rooms on this floor. There was a staircase to the right if the entryway that had a half-bath underneath.

Upstairs, glass paneled doors showed off the glorious library and allowed a discreet entrance to the second floor walkway. To the right was our luxurious master suite with a walk-in closet similar to the one we'd had at the main house and spacious bathroom. There were fireplaces in both the bedroom and the bathroom. To the left were two additional large bedrooms that shared a bathroom, with small fireplaces in each bedroom. Above all this was an attic that didn't run the length of the house because of the library for storage, and, beneath it in the basement was a room for a purpose we hadn't settled on yet that occupied half of it. In the other half was an underground saltwater swimming pool. It had an arched ceiling, uplit with niches along the sides, and in a touch that was both over the top and awesome, little fires, one on each side of the stairs into the pool. It had a feature that provided a current if you wanted to swim against resistance but otherwise permitted 25 yards for lap swim.

The next morning I got up early and gave Eira a good brushing, trimming her claws and brushing her teeth, something we were supposed to do regularly but Eira hated it so we didn't. She selected a green leather collar for her court appearance. I was in the shower, washing all of me in a sort of symbolic preparation, when I felt the water creep up over my feet. I looked down and saw some feathers clogging the drain. Right on cue, my wings started to itch. Of all the times for a molt to begin... Damian peered in, attracted by my sigh of disgust, and grinned. He hopped in after I cleared the drain and washed my wings with a soap with oatmeal colloids to help with the itch, gently removing a few other feathers as he worked. We had to hurry to get ready for court.

The next day, we still apparently looked impressive going up the marble steps to the courthouse, but Eira kind of spoiled the dangerous look of things. Which was kind of the point. She pranced along beside me, fluffy, friendly, and adorable. To my surprise, partway up the steps, Tony in a stylish suit was being interviewed. "Nah, nobody has to be afraid of them," he said in an engaging way that nevertheless blew off the concern that we'd start rampaging down Fifth Avenue. "They trained to become skilled fighters, it's true, but they are much more than that. In Valhalla, they did a lot of things, but they were responsible for providing cloth we used, made textile artworks. They
spun the thread and wove the cloth. They like to read and pursue their own interests. Now that the battle is over, they've moved on to other things. We all have. Things that have absolutely nothing to do with war." He nodded to me. "Hey, T-- Alex." I nodded back. He smirked and crouched down. "Eira! Aren't you lovely today!" She pranced over and greeted Tony with a head bonk and he skritched her ears, her tail wagging madly before she shook herself out and rejoined me. We continued up the stairs and into the courthouse.

We rose when the judge came in and she tapped her gavel immediately. The spectators quieted instantly. She surveyed her courtoom, eyes lingering on Eira, laying on the floor at the end of the table. "Let's start today with this thing about the dog. How do you propose to demonstrate that she is an intelligent, sentient being?"

Early stood. "We would like King Thor to demonstrate that she can understand human speech through a series of commands."

"Objection," the defense lawyer said immediately. "They could have rehearsed it." I rolled my eyes. The judge looked at me. "Her name is Eira?" I nodded. "Eira, come over and sit in front of the filmmaker." Eira got to her feet and ambled over to the defense table, where she pointedly scanned the faces and located Kipp. She turned around and sat with her back to the filmmaker, farting as she did so. The judge managed to keep a straight face, but the spectators laughed. Kipp flushed. "Is there anybody who can...translate for Eira?" the judge asked. "Anybody who is not a party to the trial?"

"It would have to be someone with All-Speech," Thor said, chewing his lip thoughtfully. He turned and scanned the spectators. "My brother Loki could do it."

Over the objection of Kipp's lawyer, Loki was sworn in and stated for the record that nobody had contacted him about Eira or suggested testimony. "What is All-Speech, Ambassador?" Andrews asked.

"It's an ability, magically granted, that allows the recipient to understand any language. Not many have it; the royal family mainly, the members of the royal guard who are embassy guards, although notable others have been given the ability as well. Alex has it, as does Emma Harrington-Rogers since she has two of the dogs herself. Anyone with this gift can understand any language so far encountered. Even now, I am speaking in the Asgard tongue but you understand it as English. It is both projective and receptive."

"And what kind of creature is Eira?"

"The god Baldur envied humans their dogs. We know wolves on Asgard, but we had no domesticated variants. So over a couple millennia, he developed these. Their lifespan is about half of an Asgardian, which is to say, about 2500 years. She's still a puppy, but she found Alex during on the battlefield and sort of adopted her there. Her parents weren't too pleased, but she knows her own mind. They look like very large dogs, yet there is not the genetic overlap you would expect. He created the dogs to be large and strong, but also compassionate and empathetic. They communicate through mental images and have distinctive personalities."

"So if anyone asked her a question you could relate the sense of the images."

"Yes."

Andrews turned to Eira, who looked at him alertly, flipping the hair out of her eyes. I'd wanted to trim that, but she thought that it was a cute mannerism that would make her look like a slacker
rather than a killer. From the "aws" from the spectators, she accomplished her mission. "Eira, what do you think of your... person, Alixandryia Barnes?"

Loki looked intently at her and laughed. "She loves Alex, who gives her love and attention, the adventure of a whole new planet, and many new people to pet and admire her." The spectators laughed and the judge smiled. "But she also feels sorry for the grief Alex has suffered since Ragnarok." Eira padded over to Andrews and put her front paws up on his knees, looking down at him. I hadn't realized she was having another growth spurt. "She wants you to know that although she understands that the harm that the defendant has caused Alex and her friends isn't punishable with lethal force, she wants to go on record as not approving this. But she will comply." Eira put all four feet down and walked back to the center of the space between the parties and the judge. She sat again, looking attentively at the judge.

The judge considered her for a moment. "This court recognizes that Asgardians have beings that look like dogs but who are intelligent and we extend to them the same rights of residency as long as they are registered with the Asgardian embassy." Damian leaned over the rail and handed me my wallet, from which I took Eira's ID card. Andrews took it up to the judge, who examined it and nodded. "During the next break, the bailiff will have this copied for the court records. I may refer to her as a dog, but that is a convenient designation based on her appearance rather than her ability. Any Asgardian dog will have the rights of any member of the diplomatic mission, including the right to move independently as long as she has an Asgardian ID on her at all times. This identification can be in any form used by a humanoid on Earth, such as a microchip or some sort of an official tag on her collar." Eira got up and danced in place, waving her tail and whoofing. The judge smiled at her. "You may step down, Ambassador. Eira, you may rejoin the plaintiffs." Eira pranced over and I kissed her head before she sat down again.

"Now I want to see the film that the plaintiffs allege violates the court order. Because the film has been publicly screened, the spectators may remain, but no notes will be permitted and no one is permitted to record any portion of the work in question. Violators will join Ms Kipp in jail for contempt. Is that clear?" She surveyed the spectators. Nobody made a peep. Three projectors were brought in and set up against the white wall. Glasses were provided to all parties, and Andrews passed back a box to Damian, Emma, Bucky, Steve, Loki, Tony, Grandpa George and Aunt Becca. Serena's hand closed over mine as the lights were dimmed so that the 3D projectors could work most effectively. I squeezed back as the sky above Asgard appeared.

Oh, man, that sucked. The projectors played, one with the film as it had originally been screened in court, one with the version that had gone out to the theaters, and the festival version. The projectors were synced so that where footage was added in one film, the other two paused so that they all moved through the material together. Some of the valkyries, including all of the ones from the other worlds, left while the films were showing. I didn't, and neither did Serena. We were the only two who watched through to the credits, but it was hard work and I used techniques my therapists had taught me. A few of the spectators threw up and more left the room. And this was without the 'enhanced sensory experience.'

There was silence in the courtroom as a bailiff left to retrieve the valkyries who had left. Some, but not all, of the spectators who had left returned. Lee called me to the stand to testify on the effect the festival version had on me.

"I think you understand why I have nightmares," I said dryly to the judge. "But since this film was shown, it's affected me in other ways too. The night and day after, I couldn't get online to do research for class or to catch up on the regular news because sites kept crashing due to the heavy internet traffic. Since my identity was released to the public, the way people have treated me has changed. For every individual who is kind or doesn't show a reaction, there's at least one person
who moves away from me in class. Access to the campus has been restricted to students, staff, and faculty, and you have to show your ID to get entrance, which is a nuisance and creates lines at the entry points to campus. Anti-mutant groups are mentioning me and the other valkyries specifically as people should be sent back to Valhalla. A man I've never seen before called me a jackbooted thug on the street a few days ago. It's... really unpleasant."

There were a few more questions to clarify, then the defense lawyer got his shot. "Alixzandryia Barnes. Alex. But it's not like you're a stranger to notoriety, is it? At least by association. You married Damian Wayne, a member of one of the richest families on the Eastern seaboard, and in your first lifetime, you were a well-known socialite. You left your jewelry to the Smithsonian, who recently put together a rather fawning exhibit of pieces from that collection with some ephemera. And you're the niece of the infamous Winter Soldier, a legendary HYDRA assassin. Killing runs in your blood."

Lee leaped to her feet to protest, and I felt paralyzed by an attack I hadn't anticipated would be so personal. Then I saw Tony frowning in the spectator session and stiffened my spine. Damian would charm the crap out of everybody, but I couldn't do that. Not that charming. Tony would go on the offensive, though. I could do that.

"You can call me Ms Barnes." I stared at him until he flushed. "You forgot that I'm also an MIT graduate and scientist who has her name on several patents in bioluminescent technology and ran the labs at Stark Industries for many years," I said faux-humbly. "Yes, I married Damian, and I married him again once we were returned. Yes, he enjoyed giving me jewelry and I enjoyed going to parties and functions with him. Not so much after he was killed, though. And yes, I left an extensive collection of the gems he gave me to the nation's museum. You forgot that some time ago that there was a mini-series that was made about our romance. Apparently its ratings were spectacular, although there were inaccuracies. And yes, we did cooperate with the new exhibition. The curator emailed us that it's increased foot traffic in that single museum by 53% so people continue to be interested. In us or in beautiful sparkly things, I really can't say. And yes, Bucky Barnes is my uncle. You should have done your research. If you did, you'd have run across a book written about a century ago, in continuous publication since, that used then-newly-discovered HYDRA documents to explore the creation of the Winter Soldier, which involved years of brainwashing and torture, interspersed with years of cryogenic freezing because he always showed signs of breaking his conditioning. He was a war hero before that, a friend and comrade in arms to Captain America, and an Avenger afterward. As an Avenger, he helped to safeguard the rest of us from superpowered criminals and took over the combat training program. In his personal life he was a patron of several important causes, supporting veterans' organizations, foster children, and animal shelters. I'm proud to be his niece."

"He was the first teacher to show you how to kill," the lawyer pressed, regrouping.

"He taught me hand to hand, for self defense. Systema. I'm really good at it, and I became his assistant trainer for the Avengers and later took over for him. I also taught Thor's children hand to hand and weapons work, as well as some of the valkyries. In the blink of an eye," I blinked, then counted on my fingers "I could think of six ways to kill you with things that are right at hand, including my hands. But knowledge isn't behavior, and my first reaction to an attack is always threat assessment, not violence. Good thing, in your case." Snorts of laughter and snickers from the spectators. The judge tapped her gavel idly, and I was dismissed.

Whew.

Damian smiled at me as I sat down.
Tony smirked.
Eir was the next to testify. She was tense, a stress response to a new and unpleasant situation. She was sworn in, and Early started her questioning. "Do you have a surname?"

Eir gave her a Look I remembered well from when I had asked dumb questions. "Later in my afterlife, I did some work with a new valkyrie and we dated my death to 866 of the common era, when the Vikings invaded Eoforwic, which I believe is now called York. I was twenty-three. Since then I have existed for centuries using a valkyrie use name that Odin gave me. I haven't so much as thought about my birth name in over a thousand years."

Early let everybody mull that over. "If Odin gave you all valkyrie names, why don't you all go by them?"

Eir smiled at me. "As of late, Odin's attitude was changing and he was not as... rigid about the form of things as he used to be. Everyone got a formal name that was used when a valkyrie was tasked to retrieve souls. Carol was called Bodil, meaning 'battle will cure', Alex was Thyra, which means 'like thunder.' And it takes time for one to become accustomed to the new name, but a valkyrie decides how she will be addressed in informal conversations." She paused and her expression turned mischievous. "Although Alex's name is quite apt. Her actions were often like a clap of thunder, a signal of great change to come." The other valkyries laughed and I grinned at her. Eir sobered, looking at the judge. "It says much about her that Odin elevated her to lead the valkyries despite their history of disagreements. Alex does not bend to the will of others when doing so would cause harm and Odin did respect that. He kept her as leader even when the older valkyries returned to prepare for Ragnarok."

"Valhalla sounds like a complicated place," Early commented.

"It was, and most likely still is," Eir acknowledged. "But Valhalla is an honored afterlife for warriors, not a paradise where all may loll about at their ease and accomplishing nothing with their time. We work, always." I smirked at the charge that everyone else were slackers.

"So you believe that it still exists?"

"Of course. Odin created it while he was the King of Asgard and was able to travel freely between Valhalla and this plane of existence while he lived. He is confined to Valhalla when he is not alive, and I have no doubt that my sisters who fell at Ragnarok have found their place there once more, as will we all, most likely, barring an attack of shameful cowardice. There will be other apocalypses, after all. But it is also possible that they will fall to someone else to avert." That caused an uproar, and the judge had trouble quieting the gallery.

"What do you mean by that?" Early asked urgently.

"History is cyclical. You have seen it in your own sciences, with the great extinctions your scientists have found and studied. The time of humanity is not infinite, and most likely we will bring about our end ourselves. We are a troublesome species. And as we prepared for Ragnarok, we found that the idea of cycles, where the world is destroyed and remade, is not uncommon across world religions. If the Norn have glimpsed the next apocalypse yet, they have not given word of it." Only somebody who knew Eir would know that she was holding back a lot of personal opinion and commentary, but she also firmly believed in keeping things in the family, which the court was not.
"Do you want to fight another battle like that?" Early was struggling with this.

"Of course not," Eir said impatiently. "But it might as well come to us. We have, as you say..." Her brow furrowed as she searched for the correct terminology. It took a couple of minutes for her frown to ease. "We have a proven 'track record' of success, we have the will and the ability to succeed. Better it befal us than others who might not be as well prepared or capable." I covered my mouth and my shoulders shook with the laughter I was suppressing. The courtroom started to buzz, and again it took the judge time to restore order.

"So why are you here, in this courtroom, joining this trial?" Early asked.

"Because I was appalled when it was explained to us what had happened. I did not consent for my image to be captured. This... woman" she said the word distastefully "I believe has torn away a part of my soul by recording my person and actions."

Kipp's lawyer got up. "You realize that it's an old wives tale, that taking a picture of someone doesn't actually capture your soul? It's not part of you in the image, just a picture." He spoke slowly and patronizingly, as if Eir was stupid.

"I know nothing of the sort," she said crisply. "I know what you believe. But isn't this court about what is fact? Prove it."

We all craned around to look at the lawyer, who was sputtering incoherently, but he pulled himself together. "Your honor!" he protested. "It's been long established that there's no evidence that anybody's soul is in a photograph!"

Early stood. "Actually, your honor, I don't think that it's been proven. It's been labeled as superstition, but I don't know that it's been proven. It wouldn't have to be a big piece of soul, in fact it would probably be pretty tiny. But you can see where somebody would object to part of their soul being ripped away. This plaintiff believes that she has been materially harmed by the defendant and there isn't any actual evidence to say she's wrong."

The lawyers spatted back and forth for a bit until the judge put a stop to it and had Eir step down. Thor was called to the stand. His testimony was brief and quite pointed, saying that his faith that humans would adhere to the rule of law as outlined in the treaty he'd signed was in serious doubt and that he was closing the embassy until the situation was made right. That made the judge frown; the first delivery of rare and novel raw materials from Alfheimr was set for the next week, and it wouldn't happen if the Bifrost was closed. The other lawyer suggested that Thor was overreacting. Thor's freezing glare was almost physical, something he had to have learned from Loki, but all he said was that he would not ally himself with people without honor. "What do you want the court to do?" Andrews said. "We can't make people unsee the documentary."

"I want the full breadth and weight of human law to be applied to these people." He gestured to the defense table. "I want every available punishment to be applied to their limits. I think the term is "throw the book at them.""

Thor then stepped down and a recess for lunch was called.

Damian had made reservations for us, the other valkyries, Eira, Thor, Steve, Emma, Tony, and Bucky in a private room at a nearby restaurant, which is where we adjourned. "I thought you were still testing in the Pacific, Sparky," I said to Tony. "Not that I'm not glad to see you."

"Ann is busy with the algae, although the bacteria is showing more promise in the warmer water," he said. "I was literally sitting on the beach, of no use. I've got ideas for bots to disperse our
organisms later in our trials. So I came back, with Ann's support. I think she was glad to get me out of her hair, actually. Good job, Tiger. Take the offensive, don't roll over and show your belly."

Bucky didn't say anything, but he gave me one of his special hugs before we were seated. Damian waited until we had ordered and were left alone before saying, "I thought you were going to leap to your feet, snap out your wings, and give that lawyer hell for implying that you were a vapid killer."

I sipped my water primly. "The wings are molting, you know that. It wouldn't be impressive. You know I'm vain about them." The table burst out laughing, relaxing the tension. After the excellent lunch, we went back to the courthouse, Emma falling into step beside me.

"I always appreciate it when somebody makes sure that the record is straight where Bucky is concerned," she said quietly. "It bothers me that people are still trying to label him as a killer, full stop. After all this time and all the good he's done. Nobody wants to talk about his intelligence, gentleness, his big heart." I nodded, in total agreement. "Sigurd and Torburn are going to be thrilled by the recognition of them as intelligent people," she said in a normal tone as Staeina joined us.

"They will most likely enjoy being freed from the restraint of leashes," Staeina observed, and we chatted about that until we had to stand in line for the x ray machine again. I was going to be glad to put the armor away again. It got hot under it in the spring sun.

To my surprise, Daniel was called as a defense witness to account for his participation as a backer of the film.

"How did you come to be involved with the project?" the defense lawyer asked.

"My grandma is in it," Daniel said steadily. "It was my intention to become a backer in order to keep Ms Kipp honest in her portrayal of the events and not exploitative. I never thought she would defy the court order."

"Your grandma?" the lawyer said, cutting him off.

"Alex Barnes is my grandma," he said, and I grinned at him. "We've never sat down to figure out how many 'greats' there are in there. It would be kind of depressing."

"She doesn't look like a grandmother, especially in that costume."

Daniel sighed and adopted the tone he used with willful, obstreperous board members. "She's Returned, so of course she doesn't look like an old woman. But there's no template for a grandmother, anyway. I can assure you that she's baked me cookies, if that's the kind of activity you're looking for. And her 'costume,' as you put it, is her battle armor, not an affectation."

"Do you feel responsible for the controversy surrounding the film?"

"Yes," Daniel said immediately. "I did not accomplish my goal, which was to prevent the battle at Asgard from becoming sensationalized. And I should have insisted on more control, but I thought Cal was going to live up to his promise to make sure the film was edited to the court's specifications."

Andrews had some questions about the agreement Daniel thought he had with Cal Strouse, the other major financial backer, establishing that Daniel had trusted Strouse, who had volunteered to work with Kipp, and believed that Kipp would comply with the verdict. Daniel produced recordings and texts to support his assertions, to which the defense objected. The judge ruled that he'd opened the door to that questioning by asking about Daniel's responsibility.
My mind wandered a bit during the testimony of the festival officials; our lawyers had gone after
the organizer who was responsible for the timely submission of the films and the one who had
actually viewed the film when it was submitted. Because the deadline was early December, the
film that had been submitted was the one we'd sued over initially. Both of the officials were aware
of the court order and produced documentation that Kipp had said she intended to comply. Her
incarceration on Asgard had put her behind on the edits, and the live orchestra and the in-person
narration were used because they weren't finished at the time she'd submitted the final work to the
festival, three days before it was screened. And there is where they fell off the moral high ground.
They'd seen the film when Kipp had hand-delivered it and had been blown away. They realized
that it violated the court order, but they wanted the sensation the film would bring and allowed it
to be shown anyway.

By the time Cal Strouse was called to testify, I was tired (hadn't slept very well the night before),
irritated by the show of the hearing since Kipp had plainly violated the will of the court, I'd had too
much water at lunch and needed to use the bathroom, and my wings were itching something fierce.
I leaned around Serena to ask Lee if we could have a bathroom break, and the judge agreed with
the request. So I got to do something about one of my problems anyway, and another problem was
addressed when I was stumping back to the courtroom. My daughter appeared and gave me a big
hug before handing me a venti white chocolate mocha with two extra shots, which cut the
sweetness perfectly and added caffeine. Bliss. My husband came up and scratched my back, which
provided a small relief somehow.

"Gotta say, Mom, you look completely badass." Xander came down the hall too, having paused to
greet Eira. He was working on a short-term project in the Stockholm branch and gave both his
father and me a hug and peck on the cheek. He punched his sister lightly on the arm. He made me
smile, he reminded me so much of J.

We went back into the courtroom. Two more witnesses and we were done. Strouse was called. He
admitted to misleading Daniel about the edits, but he said that the footage was too good to be
destroyed and that once you were in for a penny, you were in for a pound. He'd encouraged Kipp to
make the extended festival edit and gave her more money for the orchestration, original song, new
narration, to clean up the print by stabilizing some of the jumpy images and making everything
sharper, and to improve the odors they used for the enhanced viewings. I scowled at him and he
looked away from the plaintiffs' table.

Then it was down to Kipp. She looked pretty composed as she took the stand. "You knew that
failing to edit the film to the court's specifications would lead to... well, this. Why did you do it?"
her lawyer asked.

"Because that battle is too important to be mutilated because a few people don't want their feelings
hurt," she said passionately. I wanted to slap the sanctimonious smirk off her face. "The film is an
important historical record. If the order hadn't been to destroy the footage, I could have complied,
because after the plaintiffs dies, their objections would have been void and the full story could
have been revealed." Serena grasped the arms of her chair so tightly you could hear the wood
creak. There were more of these bullshit justifications as her testimony went on. She laid some of
the blame on Strouse for encouraging her and providing the money. I had to stop listening because
my wings wanted to come out and I really had to focus to control myself.

Early sat in her chair long enough to make Kipp uneasy, then she got slowly to her feet. "This is
very interesting," she observed mildly. "You and your lawyer never made the argument that the
footage could be retained for future use, when you were appealing to the jury the first time. Why
not?"
Kipp looked like she wanted to swear. "I didn't think of that."
"Never thought to appeal the order at any time?"
"No." Her face was purpling now.
"You didn't see the whole battle," Early pointed out. "Nobody could. You only saw where you
were looking. So by definition the whole story can't be told, only the part you caught during your
illegal trespass. Why don't you just be honest?"
"I caught the most important parts!" Kipp shouted.
"According to you," Early said, unimpressed. "You certainly filmed the most showy, dramatic
moments, but who's to say they were the most important?" She continued to bait Kipp until she was
so red-faced that I thought she might pop a blood vessel, and my mind wandered as I wondered if,
since I had medical training, I'd have to try to save her if she did. After Kipp had completely lost
her composure and her justifications had been worn through, Early ended her questioning and sat
down. Then it was time for both sides to give their closing arguments to the judge.
"Your Honor, there's not a jury to play to, so I'm just going to state the facts and what we want for
our remedy," Lee said, standing up. "The filmmaker, Melanie Kipp, has freely admitted that she
defied your original order to recut the film to remove the valkyries' identities. She did it for
recognition, for fame, trampling over the rights of others so that she could get what she wanted,
and apparently to hurt the people who objected to her work. She came up with a lot of self-serving
justifications for why she did so, never seeking to appeal any of the ruling, so all I can conclude is
that her justifications were probably spun out of thin air before she had to take the stand. One of
the backers has admitted to misleading the other backer and funding the violation of the court
order very handsomely. The other backer failed to pay attention to the editing. The two organizers
admit that their desire for a sensation overrode their respect for the law.
"There's nothing to be done now that the film has been released. You can't put the genie back into
the bottle, and illegal downloads of the film are all over the internet. It's not possible to have them
all taken down or removed from the people who saved copies to their personal computers." She
sighed. "The damage to my clients is real and severe and personal. They've been threatened and
their right to live in peace and build new lives has been substantially compromised. There is
absolutely nothing that any of the defendants can do to make up for this. But in lieu of ways to
make the plaintiffs whole, we have remedies that we are asking the court to impose. First of all,
Daniel Wayne should pay damages. He has a reputation for being an astute businessman, and he
should have used his acumen better here. Cal Strouse should also pay a much larger fine and we
additionally ask for jail time. For the two organizers of the festival, we ask that they should donate
the profits from the film festival to the two best national film schools at USC and NYU Tisch to
fund ethics classes. Additionally, we ask for jail time for them as well since they knowingly
violated the court order too, and that they revoke the prize that was awarded to the film and Ms
Kipp. For Ms Kipp... this is difficult because she so thoroughly trampled the concerns and rights of
the plaintiffs and shrugged off the order like it meant nothing. We want the film to be withdrawn
from the festivals where we know it has been submitted, which is Cannes, Sundance, Toronto,
Venice, Berlin, SXSW, AFI, BFI, and Chicago, as well as any other film festivals or venues that
the defendants have neglected to disclose in this hearing. We want a substantial fine for Ms Kipp
and garnishment of her wages until the fine is repaid, we want a professional to edit the film so that
the opening no longer resembles Nazi propaganda, paid for by Strouse, and we want jail time. This
is hardly sufficient, but it's the best we can do. Kipp knew what it meant to the plaintiffs to be
identified, and instead of complying with a few judicious edits, she spitefully added footage to
make it as damaging as possible."


Lee sat down. Kipp's lawyer stood up, and I felt a small niggle of sympathy for him, having to defend the indefensible. His closing was brief and pretty ineffectual, but then, he didn't have a leg to stand on. He portrayed Kipp as a talented young woman who had been tempted beyond her reason and noted the priceless historical worth of the footage.

The court took a break that lasted a little over an hour, then we reconvened to hear the judge's decision. There was no real doubt that a can of whoop ass was going to opened on the defendants, the question was just how much.

"First of all, I have been in contact with the mayor and city council and the state government regarding the Asgardian dog-like beings to inform them of this court's decision, and I have been assured that my order will be upheld; Eira and any other Asgardian dogs not party to this suit will receive legal protections that may surpass the earlier order of this court." I smiled and stroked Eira's soft fur when she walked over to me.

"After some deliberation, I find the defendants guilty for the violation of my earlier order concerning the film. Here are my orders. First, concerning Daniel Wayne: given that you were misled regarding the editing of the film and given that your experience with film making is limited, your fine is a million dollars, to be distributed equally among the plaintiffs because you failed to use your position to ensure that the order was being complied with." Daniel nodded without complaint. "For Cal Strouse, because you actively disregarded the order and encouraged additional violations, your fine is ten million dollars. Half of that sum is to be set up as donations to USC and NYU Tisch for education in ethics and law in filmmaking and the other half to be distributed equally to the plaintiffs. You are to be jailed for two years, the maximum sentence for contempt. For Edwin Lafitte and Sherice Scott, the profits of the film are to be given to any other accredited film schools that want to educate their students in ethics and law, you are to rescind the prize for best film that was awarded to Ms Kipp, and a sentence of a year in jail for each of you. Ms Kipp."

The judge's voice was heavy and flat. "Your greed and spite are remarkable, and I say that as someone who has been a judge in this city for twenty-three years. Your lawyer will withdraw your film from all festivals where it has been submitted and any other venues that you might have made agreements to show the festival cut. The version that was edited suitably can continue to be shown and sold. He will turn over all materials to a professional editor, who will recut the opening to remove the resemblance to "Triumph of the Will." Following this editing, all frames of the unused material are to be turned over to the court." She paused. "The defendants are correct in saying that this footage has incredible historic importance. We order it held, until such a time as all plaintiffs are dead, at which time arguments for releasing more or all of the footage can be made. Ms Kipp will forfeit all profits of the film to the plaintiffs in perpetuity and she will also be imprisoned for two years. Given that she will not be working during that period, it will not be necessary to garnish her wages. She will forfeit all prizes and awards that the documentary may receive. The defendants have two days during which they are to get their affairs in order, and then those who are facing jail time will be surrendered to King Thor for incarceration on Asgard. He is to permit international observers to visit four times during the two years that he will be incarcerating the defendants so that they can ascertain that they are being held in safe, clean cells, given access to sanitation, fed three times a day, and receiving appropriate medical care. Strouse, Lafitte, and Scott are to pay the plaintiff's legal fees and expenses." The judge slapped the gavel down and that was that.

The courtroom buzzed loudly as the spectators discussed the verdict and I rubbed my eyes before standing to shake our lawyers' hands. Early left to take questions from the journalists on the courthouse steps, and the rest of us filed out of the courtroom and down the stairs. We avoided the melee surrounded Ms Early, but a few reporters broke away and shoved microphones in our faces.

"No comment," I said, pushing my past and down to the street where my family was waiting for me. Eira trotted along beside me, pleased not to be on a leash. I turned when I heard Eir.
"Keep your distance and ask your questions in a respectful manner," she barked, knocking the recorder out of her face. I grinned. The reporters, scared of her by their expressions, asked a couple of questions about how she felt, then hastily returned to the safety of the larger fold of reporters still asking our lawyer questions.

There was plenty of transportation and we parted. Thor was hosting a dinner that night for all of us before the other valkyries returned to their homes. I went home with Damian where he gently scratched my wings for me, and we relaxed until it was time for the dinner.

When Eira and I returned later, she had a new collar, made for her by the embassy, that had a tiny holographic projector of her credentials that could be placed on other collars. Daniel had been incredibly prompt with the payment of his fine, sending credit chips to the embassy for Serena, Carol, Dagny, Thor, and me with our portions, and little ingots of gold and silver for the other valkyries that could be used in payment or trade on their worlds where US currency was worthless. We'd signed the receipts for the court, and found, to our surprise, that he'd doubled the fine of his own accord and provided handwritten apologies to each of us. When it was time for the others to return to their homes, I was sad they were going but glad to have seen them again. "It's not like I won't see them again; we'll meet in Valhalla," I pointed out to Damian, who had forgotten about that.

After the excitement, I was glad to go back to class and prepare for finals. It took considerably longer for the other defendants to pony up their fines to us; in fact, finals were over before they hit my bank account.
Classes

Thor had his guards transfer Kipp, that backer, and the festival organizers up to Asgard and the dungeons in the citadel as soon as possible. I'd seen them once and the cells weren't as dire as you'd expect for a dungeon; clean and well lit, with reasonable furniture and good food and nary a rack in sight. But the only privacy was in the bathroom, there weren't separate facilities for men and women, no face to face contact, and no sound entered or left the cells. They were placed in individual cells, and the only time they'd be allowed to speak to somebody was on the visits from the lawyers--four for those there for two years, two for those there for one year. I put them out of my mind once Loki said they'd been settled in. I had other things to think about. My classes, for one thing. And my feathers finally came in, the pretty dark gray I liked. It was a relief both to stop itching and to get rid of the white feathers. I'd been literally carrying reminders of Vigrior on my back for a year.

Just after finals, I was contacted by MIT for a piece they were doing for the alumni magazine on notable returnees. Tony had also been contacted and we agreed to be interviewed. I had a week free where I was waiting for my grades. I went to the lab one day and talked about the findings from the research trip with Ann. She'd brought back a couple of 55 gallon drums with seawater and plastic trash for experiments in controlled conditions and I spent another day helping her set those up. We acquired an office just down the hall that we converted to a robotics lab for Tony. The data indicated that currently, our organisms worked better in a static environment to keep them clustered around the plastic, so we had a solution that had self-propelled scoops that would corral a certain amount of trash and seawater, douse it with the organisms, and let the organisms do their work before being released back into the sea. There were a lot of variables to consider: the bacteria worked best in this application but the algae would stay together better, there were possibilities of two stage treatment, maybe three, depending on what we could get the organisms to do. Ideally, the organisms could be crafted to be sprayed over a clump of garbage by a ship, drone, or plane and that would be the extent of human action (and cost). The organisms would take it from there. There were several plastic bottle manufacturers who were waiting impatiently for results and water conservancy groups who were volunteering to run more extensive tests themselves. The four of us got together to discuss hiring some help.

I got my grades back and wasn't best pleased. Two As and two Bs. Serena got three As and one B and graduated with her bachelors. We had a party. My uncle got four As and a B. I was just going to have to work harder. Aslyn was amused by my dissatisfaction, but she'd seen this every semester for years. I was taking two classes this summer, now that I'd gotten back into the discipline of school. Serena was too, but Bucky had gotten a summer internship at the Central Park zoo. He'd be doing most of the grunt work, including a lot of poop shoveling, but such was the lot of a zookeeper. If he was lucky and there was time, they'd let him work with some of the smaller, more placid animals toward the end.

The week after we got our grades, a writer for the alumni magazine came down for the interview. There were a few of us in the city who'd consented to be interviewed, and they were going to get us in one go. Tony and I did ours together at the office. The writer met our very significant others and had a look around before asking some softball questions about how we were adjusting to being back, what we were doing now, then fewer questions than I expected about Ragnarok and the trial. "You don't seem too worried that the recording was saved from destruction," the writer said to me, and I shrugged.

"The court said that the issue could be revisited once all the plaintiffs were dead. Thor was a plaintiff, and he's got a few thousand years of life expectancy yet. So I expect that after all that time
there won't be a huge demand for the footage." The writer looked enlightened, and I knew that Thor would insist on this term being honored. Tony was asked about his Iron Man emeritus gig, the writer took a few pictures of us, and that was it. Of course, it doesn't do to be too controversial when you're trying to get alumni to part with their money, so it wasn't surprising that it wasn't a hard-hitting interview. I wouldn't have participated in one of those; I'd had enough of that with the trial. One thing that my new infamy did was propel Damian and me to get on the list to get our home built faster than we'd originally planned. If people weren't looking like they expected me to flap around, cutting them down with a sword, they wanted to talk or to take a selfie with me. I rather thought that would die down over time, but it was irritating and sometimes unpleasant. Eira was an even bigger celebrity, especially with children. She was nice to everybody but it wore on her too. She's not a fame-seeking kind of pup. When Daniel got wind that we were ready to start building at a dinner we had with him, he immediately bumped us up a few places with a Wayne-owned construction company. The upside to having money to spend on luxuries was that they were in less demand and therefore easier to get, so when enough construction materials were available, we'd be ready to go. When we signed the contract with the company, we added some bonus money for early completion at all stages, so that even if there was a glitch somewhere in the process, workers could still try for bonuses. Bonuses make people happy, and happy people do their best work. And there was a lot of work to be done on our proposed home.

The summer was hotter than usual, and at the end of the summer term (two As!) Damian took me upstate for a week and we camped. It was the first time that Damian had ever camped, which astonished me, but he seemed to really enjoy it. I liked being able to disconnect some and relax away from crowds in the wilderness. We brought a large hammock and lazed around in that plenty, reading, talking, and napping. Eira loved camping, romping after squirrels and chipmunks, flinging herself into streams, and everything else she could do.

Then it was back to school. I was taking five classes which included studio work and a seminar on nineteenth century building trades. I’d decided that my thesis would be about historic preservation challenges with Beaux Arts buildings and was starting the research. Thor had given permission for me to examine his embassy, so I had an excellent case study. Serena was starting the Masters in Architecture program and had a head start since she'd been allowed to take two courses spring semester for graduate credit. Aslyn was entering her second year of her MBA program and the second semester of law school, complaining heavily about the Socratic method but enjoying the challenges. Bucky had loved his internship and was looking into becoming a zoo vet. He'd been allowed to help the zookeepers with the penguins and the Children's Zoo. The goats were very curious about his arm. Margaret was finally getting more interesting projects in urban planning now that she'd studied enough to catch up and was a lot happier. Karen was so busy with construction management that we hardly ever saw her, but we all texted a lot. Carol had a real gift for finish carpentry and her master was talking about giving her a test to advance her to journeyman status if she continued to progress so rapidly. And Dagny had been accepted to the landscape architecture program for the fall while working part time at her job. She couldn't test out of many classes and was nervous about the academic challenge, but she was highly motivated and everybody promised to tutor her if she needed help. Well, we were going to be useless with the art and landscape architecture, but where we could help, we would.

Aunt Becca had been accepted at flight school before she told anybody what she was planning. I wasn't terribly surprised; she always was an adventure seeker and I'd wondered when I was a kid what she could have done in a more permissive society with funding. She'd been going to pay with loans and financial aid, but Bucky and I ganged up on her and played the family card, so she caved. My uncle and I exchanged a high five after she left. We could afford to help our family out and it was a pleasure to do so. She wanted to make the flights up to the orbital and sub-orbital stations. So cool. Grandpa George wanted to be a CPA like Dad; they were planning to go into business
together once Grandpa was credentialed. Mom's coffee shop was a huge success; she had hired enough help so that she could focus on managing the business rather than the counter and they were open twenty-four hours a day due to all the night shifts in businesses in the area.

Toward the end of the fall, the intense interest in the valkyries generated by that damned movie and the lawsuits finally started to die away and I started to relax a little. Eira was still a minor celebrity, though; people either couldn't equate her with the fierce dogs of war from the movie or they thought she was too cute or something, but she did love the attention. She never took treats from anybody, though, after someone had laced a jerky-style treat with a sedative. After the police questioned him, it was discovered that he'd wanted to examine her, take tissue samples with a view to using her DNA. Maybe other things too, but the police didn't say and I didn't ask. She'd sniffed that something was wrong with the treat, knocked the guy down and sat on him until the police I called arrived. It made the news, and such was public attachment to Eira that there was a lot of outrage and people stopped offering her anything except head skritches or hugs.

The holidays were a lot less exciting this year. Thanksgiving was peaceful, Damian and I went to the Wayne Enterprises Christmas party, we had a little Stark Industry party, we went to a few parties that were good for business, and then it was Christmas. Daniel had gone out on the estate with Damian and me and we'd found a nice fir that had been felled several years ago, apparently by a storm, and we'd cut it up for Yule logs. One for the main house, one for our apartment, and enough for gifts to the other valkyries and family. I brought the piece that Alfred had preserved for me from Skuld's gift the previous year, and lit the log at the mansion as well as the one in our apartment. This year I went up to Asgard for the main festival, taking Damian so he could see why I was so attached. It was the first time that I'd seen Sif, the boys, and Torunn in far too long, but they were busy too. It was a good time to catch up with Eir and Kata, too, and I brought gifts for the Norn and the swans, including a Yule log. The swans didn't like my pretty gray feathers any more than they'd liked the white ones.

Grades were posted after Christmas, and I got four As and one B. Better. We went to a New Years Eve party that was uneventful, like the last one, and I hoped that the new year would be more peaceful than the last one.

Toward the end of January, we got the word from our contractor that the work was ready to begin on our house. Alfred assured us that he'd be happy to work with the contractors to provide limited-use gate keys to their vehicles that would permit access during working hours, so we didn't have to worry about being there to let them in and out. It was exciting, and I felt like we were building our future too. I hoped that we would fill our house with as many good memories as the mansion had.

I had lunch with Steve; he was getting to participate in the student showcase for design later that semester and he asked if I'd model his designs for him. Surprised, I asked why he didn't get someone with experience, or his wife. Emma had the perfect figure for modeling, and I knew that he had the money; Thor hadn't compensated the Ragnarok generals as generously as the valkyries, but they weren't far behind us. He flushed. "Emma isn't comfortable with people evaluating her on how she looks. I'm not saying you enjoy it, but I saw those old clips that the news showed during the trial, of you and Damian arriving for social events. You have exactly the attitude I want--confident, cool, you wear the clothes, they don't wear you. You don't walk in such an exaggerated way. You're lovely, but you look like a normal woman, which is who I'm designing for. And yeah, you're recognized, and I don't think that could hurt. I need to set myself apart from the competition."

I couldn't help it, I burst out laughing. "Uncle Steve, you've already had a museum exhibit of your work."
He waved that off. "That was superhero costume design, not clothes that anybody can wear. It's a whole new ballgame." He looked terrified. I thought he was being a nervous Nellie, his work was really good, but I agreed to it anyway. He looked relieved and I stifled a laugh. Then we went for ice cream.

"Ice cream is such an uncle thing," I said as we walked to the nearest parlor. He looked amused and I elaborated. "Bucky and I went for ice cream a lot, for celebrations and comfort, everything in between. Still do, actually, there's a place on campus that sells house-made ice cream. Lots of good associations."

"I'm grateful you think of me that way," he said after a bit. I shrugged.

"You're my uncle's best friend, and I've come around to seeing you as less than a pest," I said, and he laughed hard enough that people on the street stared at us.

"Well, I do have an ulterior motive," he said as he held the door for me. I saw Emma, Bucky, and a strange man at a table, both of them chowing down on generous servings. The strange man just had a single scoop. It was interesting how our mutations persisted in this second life. J was taking a class on that topic in catch up med school, in fact. Prudently, he hadn't asked me for DNA samples this time. I had volunteered them, however, once he'd promised to keep the source anonymous. The clinic still had my sequenced genome, before and after the mutations took hold, in their old database, plus my new one. In my case it was a good thing, since they still burned off more calories than a normal physiology. I paid before Steve could.

"You paid for lunch," I pointed out. He rolled his eyes and we joined the others.

"Sweetie, this is Colin James," Bucky said, introducing me. I sized him up.

"You wrote the book on the Avengers," I said. It was hard not to remember who he was; I'd been a little too young when I read it and the parts about my uncle had made a lasting impact. He nodded, and we all did a little chatting about the Big Return and life before and after.

"I'm sure you've got an idea why I'm here," Mr James said after a bit.

"There are a lot of journalists around," I said, spooning up some of the rich, delicious chocolate ice cream. Bernstein and Woodward, Hannah Arendt, Margaret Bourke-White, Ed Bradlee, Robert Capa, Walter Cronkite, Ida B Wells, Dorothy Thompson, Ernie Pyle, Gordon Parks, Edward R Murrow, Ida Tarbell, and Seymour Hersh were among those trying to reestablish themselves. "Are you updating your book?"

He nodded. "I'm working on a couple of projects," he said. "One is to update the Avengers book. In all the time since it was published and updated, it's only been out of print twice, for a total of about forty years. There's renewed interest. And then I'm working on histories of the city's superheroes and street-level heroes. I'm interested in interviewing you both to add dimension to Bucky's story and in your own right, as a trainer for the Avengers. I've got the original Avengers on board, including Dr Banner, which is something I didn't have before." I knew Bruce was still working in radiation, but his focus had changed from creating superheroes to solar radiation for space travel.

"You don't have to do it if you don't want," Emma said to me. "And I realize that this meeting seems rather pressurizing, but Steve said he was taking you to lunch, and you guys always seem to end up getting ice cream. I like ice cream too." She smiled. "So if you don't want to participate, nobody's going to push you."

I shoveled a big spoonful of ice cream into my mouth as I thought. "What are you going to do with
Bucky's chapter?" I asked Mr James after I swallowed.

"You've obviously heard of the HYDRA document cache that detailed his captivity and... treatment," he said, and I nodded. "I have access to the totality of those records, and I'll be summarizing them. Basically, what I want from you--and I've asked to speak to your grandfather too--is your story with Barnes here. I understand you tracked him down. What was that like and why did you do it? It's very clear that the two of you are close. How did your relationship develop? And in regard to information about you in the other book, I would be asking questions about the lab accident, how you found out that your DNA had mutated, how you reacted, how you discovered what you could do, what led you to becoming the Avengers' trainer. That book will only cover that time frame, up to your death. If you want to talk about anything after that, it's up to you."

"Even if I don't cooperate, I'll still be in your books," I said. He nodded.

"Yes. But I can promise you that your decision to participate with interviews or not won't prevent me from writing a fair and balanced account." He thought a moment. "And I'm very good about keeping things off the record if you specifically ask."

"He is," Emma confirmed. "And he didn't use some stuff Tony said because he was drinking during the interview." I rolled my eyes.

"At least Tony's not that big a mess anymore," I said. "Well, let me think about it." James nodded and gave me a business card.

"It surprises me that in some respects life has changed so little," I said to James, smiling. "Business cards. Texts. I thought by now we'd all have chips in our brains that would provide instant communications, memory so I wouldn't have to take notes in class."

"There was a period when cyborg implants were the rage," James said unexpectedly. I looked at him with interest. "The brain's a remarkable organ, and in a burst of optimism, researchers tested that kind of technology, implants of all kinds. But it turns out that messing with the brain is not good. Some of the lower classes of animals did ok, but it made people nuts. Like padded cell, straitjacket nuts. Not being able to turn off technology isn't good or even the small electrical current that the chips used even when they were shut off for sleep. Some people got really violent, and the chips weren't designed to be removable. So the legacy is basically that some chips are still in use, but they're for monitoring purposes, like telling doctors they have an estimated time frame to grow a new organ for someone." I thought about my little tracker device and decided not to mention it. It had been tested the last time I'd had a physical and didn't need to be replaced yet. "People have pivoted, using advances in cloning to alter their appearance rather than surgery or artificial substances. Cells from the patient can be induced to grow new organs or missing limbs. These days Bucky wouldn't have to rely even on Emma's craftsmanship, and that's all covered by the national health plan. And if you don't like the color of your eyes, the shape of your nose, there are genetic therapies. They're still elective, still cost quite a bit, so they're for those who can afford them." We talked about this interesting topic for a bit, then the ice cream was all gone and we all picked up our things.

Bucky walked back to campus with me. "If you don't want to, don't agree to the interviews," he said after a bit. "Colin will be ok. We're just agreeing in order to help him out. You were right, it's a tough job market out there for journalists, and he did us a favor by making us more human when we needed public support."

"I'm going to think about it. I'm kind of tired of public attention, though." Bucky nodded and we talked about other things. I was submitting applications to firms to get a summer internship at a
firm doing historic preservation. Bucky was going to go back to the zoo.

"I like animals more than people, a lot," he said, and I nodded.

"I'm just glad I have only two more semesters after this. I never thought I'd say this, but I'm glad to be getting out of school."

Bucky laughed. "You want to be doing, not studying. You've got a lot of education already."

"Are you free for lunch this week?" I asked, and he considered before nodding. "There's this woman I met who I want you to meet."

"Are you setting me up, sweetie?" His expression was guarded, a nice blend of aghast and a hint of interest.

"Yes. Her name is Abigail, she's studying actuarial science, and she's pretty awesome. Also a Returnee." I was able to cajole him into agreeing without too much trouble. I set up the lunch for Friday. My good deed done, I scuttled off to class, then to home, where I talked with Damian about the request for interviews. It wasn't about getting permission, but a fresh eye. After we talked it out, I decided that as long as James could assure me that there wouldn't be special emphasis on my parts, I'd go ahead. I could get behind helping a friend.

On Friday, I met Abigail and we went to the nicest campus cafe, meeting Bucky there. I saw that he'd worn a dress shirt and shaved. I smiled in appreciation. I liked my uncle scruffy and in flannel, but this made a better first impression. You always like knowing that somebody has made an effort for you. I introduced Abigail, a pretty woman with long dark hair, a smooth cafe au lait complexion, and blue-green eyes. He smiled, she smiled, and they slid into a nice conversation. I helped out by sitting back and saying little. When Bucky went to get more napkins, she turned to me and grinned. We'd met in the weight room and become workout buddies, although I still practiced once a week with Bucky at the tower, shot with Hawkeye, and took dance with Natasha.

"He's nice," she said. "Cuter than I expected, too."

"He's surprisingly cuddly," I said, and she laughed. My lunch was cut short by some sort of screwup with the blueprint printer and I had to get back and fix it if I wanted to turn in my work on time. On the one hand it was good to get the text message so that there wouldn't be last-second panic, on the other, I wanted to see if they were going to go out on a date. I'd have to ask later.

And they did have several dates, but it didn't grow into a relationship. I started to look around again, meeting more people. I had relatives to set up. Not just my uncle, but also Mark, Daniel, and Xander. Martha was doing well for herself in London and had an active social life, as did my grandpa and Becca.

The weeks slid by, productive and interesting. I was offered two internships and chose the one at the more avant-garde firm. They were more focused on what I wanted to do, which was careful renovation of the exterior and interior while radically overhauling the space between walls and addressing how to deal with the aftereffects of climate change. Fimbulwinter had largely reset the climate, but there was a lot of damage to overcome, environmentally and to cities, especially coastal structures. Plus the weather could still be a little wild, so protecting the historic buildings we still had was a concern. It was exciting; I was going to drop the architecture program once I got the classes I wanted to take in that area since I didn't want to be an architect. The lab was continuing to grow; Ann and the two scientists we'd hired had developed a two-step process that had enormous promise, and they were going out for a two week trial. Damian was busy, happy, and focused. And he'd just gotten an offer to sit on the board of directors for an up-and-coming tech company. It wasn't uncommon for people to sit on multiple boards, and it was a good
indication of how valued his acumen was becoming. His after-hours activities with Nightwing continued, and I had to patch them up more than I'd like. The second bedroom had become our default medical suite where I could patch them up, with the suite in the batcave reserved for serious situations. Fortunately, we hadn't had one of those for awhile.

I showed up for fittings. Steve was incredibly fussy and meticulous, but it paid off; his construction was superb and he received first prize in the showcase. He got some good press out of it too, and it looked like he'd be able to launch his own line after he graduated. And he very generously let me keep the clothes I'd worn for the showcase. It was pretty canny, turns out, because I got stopped on the street by women asking where I'd gotten the pieces.

It was a fine spring afternoon when I turned in my final project for acoustics, and I felt relieved that the semester was over. I'd extended my degree program, even after dropping the Masters in Architecture, by taking so many courses in building science and technology, but I felt it was well worth it. I didn't start my internship for a week, so I'd get to sleep in, take it easy. The interviews with Mr James were scheduled then as well. I was deciding what I'd make for dinner and assembling a shopping list in my mind when I was bumped into on the street and looked up. "Excuse me," the man murmured, looking at me intently, and I smiled absently and walked on. It wasn't until I was weighing the comparative merits of two different baking chocolates, that I realized why the man had looked vaguely familiar. It was Damian's grandpa. The one we didn't talk about.
Grandfather

I hastily and discreetly looked at my clothes to make sure that R'as hadn't put anything on them but couldn't see anything. I thought the risk was low, though; Ra's had to know I'd be suspicious and I had every intention of taking off my clothes and examining them more closely. In private. Aside from that, I had no idea what was going on, but I was pretty certain that it was deliberate.

As dinner was cooking, I changed and laid the clothes out on the living room floor. Eira joined me in looking them over and neither of us could detect anything. Regardless, I bundled them up and placed them first in a bag, then a box. I waited until Damian had eaten his dinner and told me about his day before mentioning Ra's. He didn't like it. His eyes narrowed and looked at the clothes and my hair but agreed that nothing was there. Still, he tossed them in the washer and asked me to take a shower.

"You're sure he recognized you?" he asked, combing my hair after I'd gotten out.

"Yeah," I'd had time to think about it. "He looked at me for my reaction, I'm sure of it. Maybe to see if I recognized him. I didn't, not then. You don't have a strong resemblance to him besides the skin tone, and even then, yours is nicer. Richer." I stroked his cheek, and he grinned. "Well, Talia did ensure that your phenotype was the best available from the material." He guffawed and grabbed me in a hug.

"The old man's up to something," he said, kissing my temple. "I'll need to check this out." I nodded and gave him a light kiss before he stood up, scratching Eira's ears before going out for his extracurricular work. I picked up a book on Belle Epoch architecture in order to get more information for my thesis. I was going to examine the embassy in detail that summer and Loki had introduced me to the building manager, who had agreed to talk to me about the challenges of maintaining a historic property and what they'd had to do to make it into the embassy. Of course Ms Nelson was going to talk to me because both Loki and Thor had asked her to, but she seemed pleased by the opportunity to talk about her work to an appreciative audience.

A week later, Damian was no closer to the information he was seeking, and Ra's had seemed to go to ground after our encounter. "Something's up, though," he said, stripping off his domino as I eyed him appreciatively. "Something's up, though," he said, stripping off his domino as I eyed him appreciatively. "The lower-level crooks are still out in force, but the kingpins are nowhere to be seen." He frowned, unsatisfied with the conference that he'd had with Nightwing and the Batmen.

There wasn't anything I could do but keep my eyes open and stay sharp. I'd been alert during the run up to Ragnarok, but this was different; I hadn't worried about anybody coming up and stabbing me in the back in a crowd, for example. This was an unwelcome reversion to the days when I was afraid of the Joker. Who'd also gone to ground somewhere. I started taking my physical training more seriously. Bucky noticed, of course, and he was silent after I'd told him my worries.

"Damian's a good guy, sweetie, but none of this could have happened if you'd never met him," he finally said, blocking my attack with effort. "Too late now to change anything." I was a little stung on Damian's behalf, but I understood where he was coming from. If I'd never met Damian in high school, the Joker would never have known about me. Of course, without Damian, there'd be no Martha or Xander, and therefore no Mark or Daniel either. And I wouldn't be as happy as I was.

Instead of tracking down what-ifs, I focused on my new internship. I was doing a lot of scut work, but there was value to that too. Putting away blueprints showed me how they were stored and maintained in a real-world environment. And if I had to get coffee for a meeting, I was also
allowed to attend the meeting. I could sit in on project meetings and observe the conservators, interior designers, and architects in action. I watched and started to learn how they considered what materials to use in a project and how to select the craftsmen. How to talk with clients to determine what they wanted and whether it was possible to provide it. How to explain why what the client wanted wasn't going to work in a protected building. How to prepare a budget, where to look to stay current in new technology and materials. "Your best asset can be your connections," one preservation professional told me. "Not just in terms of attracting new clientele, but also keeping track of trends. With buildings that are just old but not on the registry, you have considerably more scope in how you approach retaining that period character. A rising sculptor might like the challenge of making appropriate art or might like to dabble in plasterwork, creating new art out of traditional materials, like a subtle frieze or fresco. And it's crucial that you understand the building trades and how the way people use their spaces has changed over time. It will help you to reframe a neo-Classical monstrosity into a livable place that allows the least signal loss throughout the building, with enough electrical outlets and power for whatever the client wants to do. And always overplan the electrical needs of your clients; they never really realize how much they'll use when they have more access to the power grid. And they always acquire more ways to use it."

I worked really hard at being as sponge-like as possible, absorbing everything I could from the hours I spent in the office. It was immensely fulfilling, and by the end, I had been able to make a few small contributions to one of the projects. One was the suggestion of a music student I'd met in the fencing club to compose music for the lobby of the public building; I'd heard her noodle around and she'd had a modern take on baroque music that I really liked. I'd also proposed floor to ceiling speakers in the largest room that could make presentations or parties really something special with that much capability for good sound; the fabric could be painted with a new special acoustic paint that wouldn't change sound. My acoustics professor had been provided with small samples of the paints prior to its release so we'd all had a chance to test it for ourselves. The marble of the room could be duplicated easily in trompe l'oeil and the pores of the acoustical fabric were minuscule, adding to the effect. The client responded favorably to these suggestions that would add luxurious touches to their renovation; a lot would come down to cost, and my internship ended before they made the decisions.

But I was glad to be back in school; the end was in sight and I was really eager to be out and doing, rather than studying. I'd met a couple at one of the parties Damian and I attended who were renovating their mansion, and they invited me to have a look at the work in progress. There were different choices being made for a residence rather than an embassy, and they were able to introduce me to a couple more people who were doing the same thing. I got to see a variety of approaches to common problem, everything from state of the art pest control to mold remediation and refurbishing ornate details. I started to write my thesis before I could forget anything.

In the lab, Damian was busier than ever. We'd had a successful test run out in the Pacific and our Phase One product was good enough to go to market with. Ann and her team had been able to show that when the organisms ran out of plastic to eat, they just died off and the plastics that they had consumed were converted to organics that biodegraded just like anything else. The two major beverage companies were chomping at the bit to try it, and Tony was busy creating the bots that would deliver the organisms. Damian was looking at properties to begin manufacturing in conjunction with Wayne Enterprises as part of the agreement Stark had with them. I was starting to wonder what their next projects would be.

I borrowed a very high resolution camera from the department and trudged through the city, getting pictures of architectural features in need of repair and details that had been repaired or replaced. My tour included St. Patrick's Cathedral, Trinity, the Woolworth Building, the Flatiron Building, Grand Central Terminal, The Met, and the Brooklyn Bridge. I was frowning at the crumbling facade of the main branch of the New York City library when someone stopped beside me at the
"Quite ornate," a cultured voice said. I snapped a picture of the top of a column.

"Rash," I acknowledged, raising the camera again.

"Raysh," he corrected, with only the slightest edge to his voice.

Click. I started up the stairs, Ra's following me. I went over to the information desk, delighted to see Barbara sitting there. She stood up and would have hugged me, but I cut my eyes to the right and she saw my shadow. She settled for a smile and I explained that I wanted to take some pictures for my thesis, and she said that anything public was fair game. In the main reading room, I raised the camera and flinched at a few spiderwebs and the paint flaking. It looked a lot better from the floor. Click, click.

"And how is Damian?" Ra's asked, a little impatiently.

I gave him a sly smile. "He's been looking for you. You could just ask him yourself," I said, then set off again. I needed pictures of the woodwork and ironwork too.

"Irritating woman," he muttered as he set off after me. His voice was lighter than Damian's, but carried power.

"What do you want? Damian's not coming back to the family fold," I said absently as I smiled at the wealth of architectural detail before me. Ra's huffed. "Blame Talia, she's the one who dumped him on Bruce. She had to have known that he wouldn't put up with having his son taking over the Junior League."

"League of Assassins!" Ra's snapped. I smiled. "Perhaps he would be more amenable to meeting if I had something he wanted." His voice turned supple and dangerous, like a serpent.

I transferred the camera to my left hand; my right shot out with precision, placing the blade of my knife right over one of the large vessels in his neck. "Perhaps not."

He shot me a look, then leaned back far enough to get a glimpse of the blade. "That is a fine weapon. Where did you get it?"

"In my afterlife," I said easily. I wasn't going to tell him I'd made it myself although internally I preened at the compliment.

"Will you carry a message to my grandson?" he asked with a sigh.

"Depends on what you want. If you intend to harm him, well, hell no. Maybe, for anything else."

"I want a meeting."

"You may not get one," I said honestly. "Not unless you've given up the ecoterrorism business."

Ra's frowned. "So many perished during the long winter. It was a good start. But then all those people returned, and the Earth is is trembling at its limits."

I just gave him a Look.

He took a handkerchief from his coat pocket and wrote on it in an exceedingly retro fountain pen. "Here," he said, extending it. "Have him call me. It is a flag of truce." My lips turned up unwillingly. Then I grinned as ink leaked from the pen nib, staining Ra's' fingers. He glared at me and I laughed, taking the handkerchief and putting it in the camera bag.
"I'll tell him," I said, and turned away. This time he didn't try to follow me.

I gave the hankie to Damian when he got home from work. He frowned at it and laughed when I related my conversation with his grandpa, and we had dinner and settled into the living room comfortably. I pulled out my schoolwork and got to work. Damian scratched Eira's ears, then after a furtive glance at me, got up. I put my earphones on, smiled at him, and returned to my work. And asked Eira to follow him as he went to the farthest room, the bedroom we used as a clinic for beat up superheroes.

She followed happily, she was curious herself, and she wanted him to continue with the ear skritches. Possibly add some tummy rubs. And that is how I knew that Damian was going to go meet Ra's at a warehouse, that old staple of bad guy haunts. I heard him grunting as he put on his costume, and quickly texted Nightwing that Nightie was going off on a solo mission. I was back at my reading when Damian tapped me on the shoulder. I looked up at him and frowned, pulling down the headphones. Then I spoke.

"If rehabilitation isn't particularly sensitive, should you still advocate that original materials be used? We can do so much better than lathe and plaster, for example, let alone horsehair insulation. Where do you draw the line between being true to the character of the building and being enslaved by the past?"

Initially startled, Damian laughed and kissed me lightly. "No idea, Petal. That's your problem. I'm going out tonight, but hopefully I won't be too late." He yawned. "I've got meetings tomorrow."

"I saw Barbara today at the library," I said. "She looks stunning, all glowy. Is she pregnant?" She had, too, I realized. It wasn't just a distraction.

Damian looked confounded. "I don't know. I don't think so."

"Oh, I thought Dick might have said. Ask him, will you? If she is, I've got to get knitting." I gave him a kiss and he discreetly exited the apartment, a little flummoxed. But more importantly, diverted from any suspicions he might have been harboring. My communicator lit up and I talked with Nightwing, then changed to dark gray clothes, geared up, and trotted out the door.

I met Nightwing a couple of blocks away from the warehouse in question and followed him in. Skulking was his specialty, not mine. I'm more of a full-frontal assault kind of gal.

We found access through a small window in the roof and quickly moved into the shadows. On the main floor, Damian was sitting across a table from Ra's, nicely illuminated by a spotlight. I listened absently as Ra's tried a blend of cajoling and threatening out on his grandson and Nightwing and I looked around for Ra's back up. I didn't know Ra's but he didn't seem the type to risk Damian just getting up and walking away. Nightwing melted into the shadows as he went to do reconnaissance and I stayed put, as we'd agreed. I got my weapons ready. I hoped not to have to use them, but it's unprofessional not to be prepared. I saw several men in the shadows behind Ra's and planned how to eliminate them if necessary. Bruce might think that Arkham was a no-kill shelter for any criminals who could put together an insanity defense, but I hadn't been as profoundly affected by Bruce's creed as the Robins had been. I wasn't going to try to kill anybody--this time--but if I didn't have a choice, my conscience was clear. My husband or a criminal? No choice. Even the courts would agree with me.

My interest perked up when a shadow detached itself and joined the table. Talia. Oh, yay. I mouthed a bad word. I've never gotten along with my mother-in-law. My eyebrows raised as I saw yet another shadow move and Bruce take a seat on the last unoccupied seat. I saw movement up on my level, but it was just Nightwing. He jerked his head toward the table and raised his eyebrows. I
shook my head and silently asked him the same question. He also shook his head. It must have been Talia or Damian who invited Bruce. Nightwing showed me numbers with his fingers and pointed out positions where the hired help lurked before vanishing to take up his position where we could provide the best coverage. Then I tuned into the conversation but kept my eyes on the shadows.

"But surely you understand the appeal of a family business, Detective," Ra's... appealed to Bruce? He must be desperate.

"Certainly," Bruce said equably. "I felt fortunate that Damian succeeded me at Wayne Enterprises. But that is a legitimate business. Ra's, the best that you can claim is that some of your businesses were legal enough to launder money or provide a cover for illegal activities. Damian's an ethical businessman. Besides, he's creating his own business opportunities."

"And it's legal to run around in costumes, risking yourself in a vigilante situation, beloved?" Talia asked Bruce pointedly. He shrugged, unconcerned.

"I protect the city, as does Damian. We operate by a code."

"Ah, yes, your no killing doctrine." Talia sighed. "So tiresome. But as it happens, Damian, we are branching out into legal businesses. If you're squeamish... you could direct those enterprises. I am certain that they would flourish under your expert hand. You could relocate to our base in North Africa, where we have a complex with every comfort. I've met a woman who would be an ideal mate for you, beautiful and intelligent, she can give you strong sons. A new chapter in the book of the al Ghuls."

"Oh, Jesus, Mother," Damian finally spoke, leaning back and looking at the ceiling. "Enough. I'm happy in this city, one of the major nerve centers of the world. I'm not going to exile myself to the desert wastes. I'm going my own way in this lifetime. I'm not dependent on you or Father. Or Grandfather. And as for me leaving Alex, that's never going to happen. She is my life's blood, prize of the gods, my heart's delight and my soul's completion. We have had children--the natural way, made in love--from which descended the family of my choice. Which is not the al Ghul legacy."

"Accidents happen," Talia said silkily.

"Listen to my words, Mother, and understand my intent. Should anything happen to my wife, I will come after you with every art and every trick that I've learned in two lifetimes and an afterlife. I will not rest until you and Grandfather are dead and burned and left to blow away in an indifferent wind, your enterprises torn down and ground away to nothing, your legacy nothing but a tainted memory. For that alone I would kill you with my own hands without the slightest trace of mercy, and no words would stay my hand." Damian's velvet baritone was kind of a scary growl.

"Enough, Talia," Ra's spoke sharply. "The woman has a certain animal vitality and she's bright enough. A certain level of fighting skill, even if it's crude battlefield brawling. The wings were an abomination although they served her well enough, and it seems that she no longer has them. Do not let your antipathy toward her blind you to her qualities. She may be common, but she's not the worst choice the boy could have made."

"You don't like her because she can beat you in a fair fight and you blame her for diverting Damian's devotion," Bruce observed. Talia snarled at him.

"Enough." This time it was Damian who laid down the word. "I don't know what I have to say to make you believe me, but I have no intention of associating myself with the al Ghuls," he said impatiently. "I'm not a terrorist and I have no intention of becoming one or associating with any.
You have your philosophical principles, Grandfather, but the ones that guide my path are not yours. Threats against my Alixzandrya will be met with extreme prejudice. I will not give up my life here, doing work that I choose, in my home, with the woman I prize above all else. Do not attempt to divert me from my choices." His voice was cold and hard, and he stood up.

"Your participation is not requested, Damian," Ra's said, standing as well. His voice was as unbending as rock. "You will accompany us back to our stronghold. If you comply, you have my word that your wife will be unharmed."

"If not," a horribly familiar voice said from the dark margin of the room. "I'll be happy to show her the error of her ways." The Joker ambled into the light. My lip curled.

"You'll come willingly or not, my son," Talia said. "You may have a moment to say farewell to your father, and then you will be brought along with us. Beloved, know that you may visit him in time," she said as Bruce surged to his feet. She opened a black kit and two men pounced out of the black to grab Damian's arms.

Oh, hell no.

I let my fingertips roll off the bowstring as Hawkeye had taught me and nailed Talia in the shoulder with an arrow. My next targets were the men holding Damian; I only got one because Damian was struggling and I didn't want to hit him by accident. But the one went down with an arrow in the butt. My third arrow also wasn't where I wanted it; I got Ra's in the chest rather than his shoulder. It might have pierced his lung, but that was survivable, with medical care. The Joker flinched, crouching slightly, and the arrow I'd aimed for his junk went through his side instead. I cursed and jumped to my feet, facing the goons coming toward me.

The thing about goons is that they're usually not very good and they might know how to throw a haymaker or have some rudimentary karate, but they're not serious threats unless they have some sort of weapon. And these didn't. I went through the three of them easily, then looked around. Nightwing stood on the rail and fell backward, dramatically and gracefully, tucking at the last instant and landing on his feet. Showboat.

"No idea why people want you so bad, Nightgown," he said, patting Damian on the shoulder. I grinned and trotted down the stairs.

"Petal," Damian said in resignation when he saw me. He shook his head. "So did you answer your question?"

"Yeah. My duty is to comply with the rules and regulations concerning historic structures and designations and to provide my clients with a full and balanced explanation of their options." I trod over to him for a hug and light kiss.

I looked over with a frown when there was a tearing sound followed by an agonized grunt and a sucking sound. Ra's had torn out the arrow and it had indeed punctured his lung. "Dumbass," I complained as I looked around. Bruce was bending over Talia and Nightwing had his foot on the goon with the arrow in his butt. Everybody else, including the Joker, damn him, had vacated. I saw a plastic bag by the door that proved to contain somebody's dinner and dumped this out. I slapped the bag over Ra's' wound and placed his opposite hand over it, temporarily sealing the lung. "You don't remove a penetrating object yourself, you wait for medical attention," I lectured him. I picked up the arrow and saw that Damian was breaking the shafts of the arrows as carefully as he could to avoid the weight of the arrow tearing the flesh more as they moved, but they were aluminum so it caused a certain amount of pain for the goon and Talia. Then he wiped the remaining shaft stump to remove any of my fingerprints and handed me the rest.
"I'll see you later, Sweet pea," Damian said. "Batman's calling for an ambulance." I nodded and headed for the door. As I left, I heard him warn his mother against identifying me as the archer. When I got home, I popped my clothes into the washer and got back to studying.

When Damian got home, I was working on my thesis and looked up after I finished my sentence. "They were picked up and taken to the hospital," he said. "They'll be ok, and the police are guarding them. Hopefully they won't escape." He settled beside me and put his arm around me.

"I'm getting tired of them not taking no for an answer," I said, saving my file and shutting off the computer. "And I won't be used as a weapon against you."

"I understand, Petal," he said.

"The next time I put them down, they may not get back up again," I warned, and he nodded.

"I really don't like the idea of the Joker being in on this," he said with a scowl. "Dad said he'd start tracking him down, but I'll be doing my own work too." He snuggled me to him. "You were right, though. Barbara is pregnant. They haven't announced it yet. Dick's a bit irritated that you figured it out." He smirked, and I laughed.

'I'll have to get some patterns for baby gear," I said. "And some nice soft yarn."

"Tomorrow," he said. "I'm tired and cold and it's been a rather crappy evening and I'd like to warm up wrapped around you under the covers."

"As long as you put on some socks," I said, and we got up and walked to the bedroom. His feet can be just icy cold. As we were getting settled, Eira hopped up on the bed and put her head on Damian's feet. I laughed and snuggled back against him.
There'd been a couple of postponements, but I finally sat down to have an interview with Colin James. We met in the tower; it was private and he had another interview scheduled after mine. I'd brought doughnuts. The first part of my interview was Bucky-centered, my relationship with my uncle.

Colin James: How did you find out that you were related to Bucky Barnes?

Alex Barnes: I grew up knowing. His sister was still alive when I was a kid and she used to tell us stories. Our family pride took a bit of a hit when it came out that he'd been an international assassin, but when the story came out about why that had happened, things changed for me. And I read your book. Your book made me sick, by the way.

CJ: Me too, actually. So how did you meet him?

AB: I tracked down where he lived and just showed up.

CJ: How old were you?

AB: I was in high school.

CJ: What did you think?

AB: I was terrified. I didn't know if he'd want to reconnect with any of the family, but I think it's always best to know, even if it's the worst case answer. At least then you know.

CJ: And--- how did it go?

AB: He was surprised but friendly. I was really relieved.

CJ: What made you want to meet him?

AB: I was going to high school, living with a host family. They are terrific people, very supportive and encouraging, but I wanted... family.

CJ: What happened as a result of that meeting?

AB: The meeting turned into kind of a circus. I met his wife Emma first, she invited me in and I showed her my proof that I was related to her husband, then Bucky came home, and then Tony turned up. It got kind of out of control.

CJ: What kind of proof?

AB: I'd made copies of family documents--birth and death certificates, marriage licenses. And there was a photo of Bucky with his sister and brothers. I didn't want to just show up with unsubstantiated claims.

CJ: Then what happened?

AB: Tony encouraged me to apply for a part time job at his company, which I did, and Bucky took an interest in me. He's very family oriented, and started teaching me self-defense, which I actually had to use not long after we started. A guy at school was hassling me, actually assaulted me.
CJ: That sounds kind of scary.

AB: It was, but the guy had done it to other girls and he was going to be kicked out of school when my host family made a fuss. My parents piled on and the kid went to another school before he could be expelled. But as a result, I met my first best friend in the city and we've been friends ever since.

CJ: What did Bucky do?

AB: Stepped up my training. I'm a pretty good athlete, I was in ballet for years before I came to the city. Bucky's a great teacher, and I progressed with the lessons pretty quickly. Over time, I started helping him in demonstrations of Systema, and we did a lot together. He's the world's best uncle, gives Olympic-caliber hugs.

CJ: (Laughs) That's surprising.

AB: He's very reassuring. I feel like I can do anything because he's always got my back. It's like hugging a brick wall, but snugglier because he usually has a flannel shirt on except in summer.

CJ: The arm never bothered you?

AB: No, as far as I'm concerned, it's always been a part of him. I've never known him without it. And to me it's proof of what he went through, a reminder that he should be respected for all he endured and suffered. It pisses me off when people disrespect him.

I told Mr James some stories from my training with Bucky, including the practice bouts, then how I became Bucky's assistant, ultimately taking over the hand to hand program for the Avengers. Then some stories about how supportive Bucky was, not just with me but with my brother and parents too. "But I had an edge because I lived in the same city with him. J has a strong relationship with him too, but he never trained with our uncle." James asked me questions about Emma. I acknowledged that our relationship had been strained at the beginning, but that it had gotten better and had gotten a lot stronger in our afterlives. I didn't provide specifics, preferring to let Emma explain that for herself.

CJ: Steve Rogers says that when he first me you you thought he was a pest.

I laughed. "That's true. We'd met on the battlefield and nobody introduces themselves there. It took some time for him to grow on me after Uncle Bucky introduced us. But he's my uncle's best friend and I wanted to like him too. He's a really good guy, and I've come to think of him as an uncle too.

CJ: (teasing) Is he as good an uncle as Bucky?

AB: Bucky had a considerable head start and got over the learning curve fast. (Looking around, lowering voice) Confidentially, no. Bucky's the best.

CJ: What do you think about his current plans?

AB: Couldn't be more proud of him. I feel like this is finally his time. His turn to decide what he's going to study, what he's going to do, where he's going to go. He's finally free to do what he wants. And he's great with animals. Whether it's as a zoo keeper or a vet, I'm convinced he'll be successful. Eira wants him to be a vet so that she has a personal vet who makes house calls. She adores him.

CJ: Eira's your Asgardian dog-person, isn't she?
AB: Yeah. She's still a puppy. She's about 40, 45 human years, but she's just growing out of her puppy phase. She's going to be a big dog. The long lifespan means that although she's still quite young for one of her kind, she's had a lot of time to develop her personality and intelligence and experience. Even with all of that, her parents weren't happy she adopted me and would be living here. They don't have many litters, which means that every puppy is precious. (pause) I think that the knowledge that human lives are short and she can visit them is what reconciled them.

There were some additional questions to fill in about meeting and getting to know my uncle, then we moved on to my work with the Avengers.

CJ: You've got some mutations, is that correct?

AB: Yes. There was an accident in the chemical storeroom here in the tower when I was a lab assistant. I was splashed with a variety of solvents and chemicals and electrocuted. Not my favorite moment.

CJ: What are your mutations, if I may ask? There's nothing really clear about them.

AB: For publication, I don't discuss them because there's no point in telling a potential enemy what they're up against.

CJ: Privately, off the record?

AB: Strength that isn't as great as superhuman strength, what's been called 'dance combat' which makes me more graceful and kind of eel-like in my movement are the main ones.

I smiled. James was amused and dropped it, moving on with other questions about how I'd taken over from Bucky and how I ran things. And how we occasionally helped the current combat instructor.

CJ: You're a very interesting woman, really. There's kind of a duality to your life: the side where you're a noted scientist and hand to hand instructor, with a very public marriage. There was a miniseries long ago about your love story, and that Smithsonian exhibition lately. Then there's everything else. Two kids, who were noted for their abilities but who weren't the public figures as you and your husband. An afterlife that was pretty exciting that led to your return and Ragnarok and that trial, but you don't talk about it. The most interesting things are the things you don't want to talk about.

AB: I really don't like talking about myself.

CJ: (laughs) I'm getting that.

AB: I just don't think there's much to say, really. My marriage is a matter of public record and obviously I love my husband, but what's between us is simply between us, not for anyone else to share. We have good kids, who are competent and successful in their own right. Overall, my afterlife wasn't that exciting, actually. It was, for the most part, routine and only occasionally punctuated by excitement. And if you're interested in Ragnarok, I'm the last person who you should talk to about it. After the legal issues with that documentary, I'm done talking about it. (frowns) I didn't see the first episode of that miniseries, but they downplayed Damian shamefully. Also, the actor wasn't nearly handsome enough.

CJ: (smiling) You're a tough nut to crack.

AB: (shrugs) I'm just not comfortable with people knowing much about me.
CJ: I have to ask. Did your abduction and treatment by the Joker have an effect on you continuing your training?

AB: Yes.

CJ: Would you like to elaborate on that?

AB: Just that if I never see the Joker again, it will be too soon.

James turned the conversation toward my current studies and plans, keeping it to public matters. He doesn't ask if I want to have more children, anything about Damian, nothing that's too personal. I get a couple of questions about the trial and he concludes.

CJ: Obviously your feelings about the Ragnarok documentary are well know, but I saw it in the theater and I've just got to say thank you. It was horrifying. I'm grateful that there were people, including you, who were willing to stand between us and the end. It still amazes me that the stories about the outcome were changed.

AB: Uh, thanks.

CJ: Anything you'd like to say off the record?

AB: Not really. No offense, Mr James, you're an excellent journalist. I just don't know you and I'm not comfortable telling too much.

James smiled and stopped the recording. "I appreciate your time and your candor. Your direct approach is refreshing." He handed me his card. "Call me if there's anything you'd like to add or if you have any questions."

I took his card, shook his hand, and bumped into Steve in the corridor. I gave and got a big hug. "I think there are a couple of doughnuts left," I told him and he grinned. Steve called later to tell me that Mr James had been both impressed by me and frustrated by my lack of candor.

"I agreed to an interview," I said. "I never promised that it would be terrific." He laughed and we talked about school. He was doing an internship in a fabric store to learn more about textiles and make contacts in that industry. Then I was head down in studying until about a week later when Mr James called me up with some follow up questions.

"I've talked to Tony, and he was quite expansive," he said.

"Tony likes to talk," I agreed.

"He told me about your relationship in Valhalla, and I wanted to give you an opportunity to comment on it if you wanted."

I rolled my eyes because Mr James couldn't see. "All I'll say about that is that it was good while it lasted, he dumped me, and we've converted our relationship back to a strong friendship."

"Any chance that will flare up again?"

"Nope, that ship has sailed. The romance is over. And anyway, now Damian is back and we are committed to each other. And Tony is together with Ann. I am going to claim the credit for setting them up, though. That was my idea."

"Why?"
"Because Tony is my friend and deserves to be happy and I thought that Ann would be a good match for him. Score!" He laughed, asked for clarification on a few points, and that was that.

I spent some time in yarn stores and made a trip to the fabric store Steve was working at in order to lay in supplies for ambitious baby preparations for Barbara and Dick. I thought to knit some baby booties and caps and make a quilt. I hadn't done that for literally ages. Steve was doing customer service that day and we chatted as he cut my yardage. Then I went back and got fabric for a quilt for Damian's and my bed. I'd never made a quilt and I might get it done by our anniversary if the pattern wasn't too complex and I focused and worked on it regularly. Damian looked at my pile of stuff with a raised eyebrow but was enthusiastic about all my projects when I explained, sure that his brother and sister-in-law would like the baby gifts and excited about a quilt for our bed too. Eira looked at all this covetously, and I decided to make her a special quilt too so she wouldn't feel left out.

That weekend we went out to the estate to check on the progress of the house; construction had started and we were eager to see. There wasn't a lot to observe; concrete had been poured for the basement and the house was framed, but that was about it. The formal garden at the front had been planted and would look wonderful when it grew in. The fountain wasn't quite complete yet, but there wasn't a rush. We amused ourselves by following the maze to the center, then we sat on the edge of the dry fountain, looked things over, and talked about the future. Eira carefully hopped over the bushes and tore after a squirrel. "The location is great," I said. "All you can see of the mansion is the roof, but it's still close enough by."

"Private, but close to family," Damian agreed. His fingers traced down my arm. "I'm looking forward to the time when we can try to make our own family."

"The trying's the best part," I said flippantly, then leaned against him. "The really good thing about the new medicine, though, is that because the drug therapy starts before we start trying, we'll know if it's effective before we get our hopes up." I'd done more reading. I really wanted a normal pregnancy, able to enjoy making a child with my husband. Bringing a new life into the world is one of the most profound things that I could do, and I wanted the intimacy of that with Damian again, but without the terror and muscle relaxants.

"That is a highlight," Damian agreed. "Because if it doesn't work, we will be happy with the two kids we have. Also, when the house is done, I'd like more pets. Cats."

I asked Eira what she thought, and she came back, a terrified rabbit in her mouth. She set it down gently and it staggered off. Her eyes were bright and she sent images of curling up with cats. A lot of them. I sent back an image of the cats taking over her bed, based on what had happened with our pets in the past, but she shrugged that off. "She's in. She wants a lot of cats. Many, many." Eira barked and waved her tail.

"Girl after my own heart," he said affectionately and held out his other hand to scratch her.

"You can have as many cats as you're willing to clean up after," I said peaceably. Damian sighed.

"Always with the restrictions," he said sadly and I poked him.

"Think about the hairballs and the drifts of fur you'll have to clean up," I said brutally, although of course I'd be on cleanup duty too. "And there's feeding and watering and litterbox cleanup to think about too." He sighed again. It was starting to get a little chilly there, even cozied up to my nice warm husband, so we got ready to leave. Eira came bounding up, soaking wet and smelling like she'd rolled in something awful.
"It's your turn to wash her, I believe," I said immediately to Damian, who nodded unenthusiastically.

"Really looking forward to the automatic Eira cleaner," he said, and I nodded. Eira just looked at us like 'what?' Damian dropped me off at home and went to a DIY dog washing business, neither of us wanting to clean the bathroom after Eira's bath. I took the time to cut out the pieces for our quilt. I'd decided on a classic pattern, the log cabin. The center of each one is supposed to be red, to symbolize the hearth fire, but I used a deep raspberry pink instead. Close enough, and it worked better with the palette of greens, golds, blues, and violets that I'd chosen. I worked quickly; Eira liked to supervise and she always had a lot of questions. I was happy to answer them, but there was no doubt that I worked faster without them. I saved the quilt I was making for the Grayson's impending kid for later, not wanting Eira to miss out.

I checked the clock when I was done and bundling up the pieces. It usually didn't take that long for Eira to be washed and groomed. Once whatever it was started to dry, she wanted to be clean. She loved having fluffy fur and especially liked the blowdryer unless we were in the high heat of summer. About an hour later, I was deciding whether to call Damian to see if I should wait to make dinner when there was a banging on the door. When I opened it, I beheld my beloved with Eira, who was carrying bags of stuff from the pet store over her back and in her mouth. Damian himself had two cat carrys. I held the door open silently as they came in.

"I know what you're thinking, Sweet pea," Damian said immediately. Eira dropped the bags and sat expectantly, facing the carrys that Damian placed gently on the floor. "We didn't talk about this as a thing for right now, but when Eira and I were at the groomers, there was this kid selling kittens to anybody. Didn't even ask for references. You never know what kind of a psycho is going to take a baby cat." In this context, 'psycho' meant to Damian anyone who who wasn't extravagantly into cats. I placed my hand to my lips, hiding my smile. "We stopped and had them checked out at a vet, they're a little thin but healthy." Eira pushed a bag over to me and I looked in to see what had to be half the store's supply of toys.

Everybody's attention was diverted when one of the kittens nudged the door, ready to come out and do some exploring. Damian gently unlatched the doors of both carrys so the cats could come out when they wanted. I watched in bemusement as a tiny lithe pocket panther crept out from one of them. It looked around warily from peridot-green eyes. "My, Serena would love this one," I said involuntarily.

"No," Damian said possessively. "I'm not giving her any more of my cats." I grinned at him and knelt down, extending my fingers. The little cat came over cautiously, brushed my fingertips quickly with its head, then moved off to explore a little. Eira stayed back, laying down so as not to scare the kittens but watched the one's progress eagerly. She couldn't wait to begin snuggling. "They're two boys," Damian added, watching the kitten pad over to the kitchen, then handed me a bag of kitten chow as he went into the kitchen to wash new bowls for water and food. I tore open the bag and took it into the kitchen before returning and sorting out the bags. The first kitten had on a silver-colored collar with a tag, and there was packaging in one of the bags for another, for the kitten who hadn't emerged yet. There was a bag of canned kitten food too, which I took into the kitchen, and grooming tools in addition to all the toys. I started to take the toys out of their packaging. There was an object labeled a "Kitty Kup," which was a round cat bed, lined in fleece, with sides, that plugged into the wall for a gentle heating pad to warm the resident. Damian put down the dry food, a small bowl of water, and a can of the kitten food in another bowl a small distance away and we watched as the more precocious kitten beelined over for a snack. The other kitten, smelling food, came out too. Not a bit reluctantly; the door to the carry banged open and the other black kitten, wearing a gold colored collar, strutted out like he owned the place, locating his brother and the food, and joining him. Damian grinned and went to set up the litter boxes. I went
back to work with the toys after plugging the cat bed in by the TV. After the snack, the kitten in the silver collar explored his way back into the living room and discovered the cat bed. He put a dubious paw on it, testing it for softness, apparently, before standing in it and abruptly toppling over. Well, it had been a long day. The other kitten strolled over, poked around some, and curled up between Eira's paws. She was thrilled. I bundled up the trash for recycling and scattered some toys on the floor but kept most of them in another bag. We didn't need to have them all out at once; we had a little window of time where we could toss out more toys before we ran out and had to start retrieving them from under furniture and the refrigerator.

When Damian came out, I gave him a hug and went to fix our dinner. Damian refilled Eira's bowls, and we were in for the night.
The kittens fit nicely into our life, I had to admit. In the way of cats, they irritated Eira by not snuggling with her sufficiently, but integrated into the family seamlessly by more or less taking over. We named them Frank and Joe, after the Hardy Boys.

In early November, I turned in the first draft of my thesis to my advisor. He had a number of excellent comments about my analysis and the content, but his final one was the most upsetting when I spoke with him. "You've got to trim it down," he said flatly. "Two hundred pages is too long, even considering that there are graphics in there."

I was crushed. "But I need all those pages!" I objected. "I have a lot to say."

"Yes, I see that," he said. "But this is a thesis, not a book for publication. You need to cut out content. The focus is fine, it's nice and tight."

I agonized, and before finals, I managed to cut out twenty-five pages altogether. The other seventy-five pages I stuffed into appendices--the same content, just arranged differently, and I saved some space by not having to double-space in the appendices. I managed to work in a little of the cut out information into the extensive endnotes, as well. I sent it to my advisor on Christmas Eve and had a great holiday with my family. We took everybody down the drive to our house to show it off. It had walls inside and out. The stone cladding had been completed just before it got too cold for the mortar but there was still trim that needed to be installed and other finishing touches on the exterior. Inside, the floors were all stranded wood product, awaiting the installation of hardwoods and the wall was bare techboard, awaiting sealing between the panels and the application of the coating that would allow us to change "paint" colors with the manipulation of a circuit that ran through each panel. Additionally, it had a very low static charge, just enough to repel dust, keeping the house cleaner. None of the finish work had started, but you could definitely tell what we were going for. The library would take the longest to complete due to all the woodwork we wanted; art nouveau-like carving on handrails, fireplace mantels, and the exterior of the bookcases, inlaid floors. The ceiling had been changed to a stained glass dome in clear, textured glass as well as our preferred greens, blues, and purples; enough to differentiate the sky but not be too distracting. We were having custom crown molding made and plasterwork for ceiling roses and additional panel moldings where appropriate. And an impressive front door.

"It's ok that it will take the longest, though," Damian explained over dinner. "We need to repopulate our book collection." Predictably, Daniel offered us books from the manor's library.

"We've got boxes of books in storage," he said thoughtfully. "There hasn't been enough room, what with so many generations of Waynes depositing their own additions. Some more than others, of course. You have plenty of time to think about it, but I wanted to make the offer. Seriously, your building a house might be the best thing that's ever happened to this one; I'm hoping to free up some space by offloading some furniture and stuff. We're at about at capacity here, even with the furniture I've been able to give to our extended returned family."

"Are you looking forward to being done with your studies, Alex?" Thomas asked. I smiled.

"Oh, yeah. I want to be out working, doing, getting hands on experience. At the same time, I worry that I'm not taking full advantage of all that the school has to offer in terms of coursework."

"There'll always be more to learn," Bruce pointed out.

"Alex has always been a high achiever," my mom said with pride.

Then Daniel asked Damian some questions about the manufacturing process for Stark Industries' first project, the plastic-consuming organisms and the robotics to apply them, and the conversation turned to timetables for delivery. I knew that Tony was already looking for new projects, having finalized his design. He'd asked me for a meeting after Christmas, so I suspected he had something up his sleeve already.

Then the conversation broke into smaller groups, and Damian joined me talking to my parents. My mom's coffeeshop was making money hand over fist and she was looking into opening a second location at the other end of the industrial park. Wait times for customers was getting prohibitive and she didn't want to lose any. There wasn't much that could be done about the coffee end--it still took the same amount of time to brew regardless of the technology--but a second location would relieve pressure. Expansion always had its own worries, though. My dad's furniture business was going gangbusters, and we'd asked him to make a custom desk for our library, reserving our space in his queue early although we had nowhere to put it as of yet. He had some designs for us to look at and he was sourcing some exotic woods. There was a lot of reclaimed wood around from buildings that were being torn down as well as that from buildings that had been damaged or destroyed by the alien invasions. Tree plantations were still recovering from Fimbulwinter and their output was low right now. Some species had responded to a genetic enhancement to allow them to grow bigger, faster, but most of these weren't good for furniture; the growth rings were so big that there was a lot of tearout. The pine species, if given enough water during growth, were fine if you didn't care about looks and were used mainly in construction. Oak had moderate success with the manipulation, but cherry and walnut did not. Both Damian and I liked one design we immediately dubbed "The Butterfly." It was a partners desk, but each side of the desk curved, sort of like two shallow C shapes being joined in the middle. It was stunning and different, and each of us could personalize our side to a certain extent with our choice of woods and/or veneers or other inlays.

We broke off our discussion when the doorbell rang. Alfred got up to answer it, and his face had an almost concealed perturbation to it when he returned, escorting a strange man for Daniel.

"You're Daniel Wayne?" the man asked, sizing him up.

"I am."

"You're served." He shoved one of the crystal chips that allowed for holographic delivery of messages and documents and turned, leaving quickly. The crystals logged fingerprints, so that a record of who had touched it was maintained, proving service. Daniel sighed and placed in the player on his desk. To my surprise, Howard Stark's portrait appeared over the shoulder of an attorney, who read the complaint that challenged the transfer of the "Stark Industries" name and trademarks to Tony on the basis that I had leaned on Daniel to sell it to Tony based on our past sexual relationship and that Daniel had done it to please me. Damian rolled his eyes, and my communicator chirped. It was Tony, and he'd been served as well. I made soothing noises at his tirade and handed it to Daniel, who assured him that the board of Wayne had supported the decision to sell the name precisely because Howard was pursuing weapons development again and Tony was focused on improving the world. Daniel left the library to conference Tony and one of Wayne Enterprises' lead lawyers, but he viewed this more as an inconvenience than a real threat. Tony was the one who was most upset, and had the most right to be, I thought. Once again I was grateful for my own parents, who were ambitious but not willing to chuck their offspring to the wolves to obtain their goals. And not psycho, either. That benefit couldn't be overstated.
For Tony, though, this lawsuit was kind of the last straw. When his mother weighed in on her husband's side, saying that since Howard had built the company, he should have the rights to the name, he had Had Enough, saying that he was the one who had built it into a multinational empire, the biggest name in tech during his tenure, and besides, a poll conducted by some news magazine when news of the lawsuit showed that most people were familiar with Tony's larger-than-life persona and face (largely due to Iron Man and the Avengers) and were more 'Howard who?' He'd asked her why she couldn't stand up for him just once, and cut off the call. And he started a PR campaign, playing up his proven track record of good intentions and desire to benefit humanity and the planet, how he specifically shut down the weapons division, and his goals for the future. He owned up to his mistakes unflinchingly, like Ultron, and his personal popularity skyrocketed. Online, he had a lot of defenders, including those who applauded his ability to stay friends with his exes to the point of getting them to invest in his new company. Daniel had granted one interview on the subject to the leading financial news publication, in which he laid out his reasons for wanting to sell to Tony, which included his estimation that Tony Stark would be a success again and his thinking that strong competition was good for the family business. This steamrolling, plus the depositions of the Wayne board of directors where they explained in detail why they'd supported selling the name and trademarks to son rather than father, led Howard's lawyers urging him to drop the suit. Reluctantly, Howard did so. Apparently his weapons company wasn't succeeding the way he'd expected, and rather than having access to the Stark name and legacy, had to build up from the ground, branding his company HS Technologies. Tony was ready to aggressively defend his trademarks, but so far he didn't need to. More dirt was rubbed into open wounds when Tony and Ann were honored by MIT for their new technologies (patents pending) and awarded honorary doctorates. As if Tony needed more, I thought fondly. It was well publicized.

Tony and Ann had considerately scheduled their wedding for after my graduation, so I could have fun too. I was one of Tony's groomsmen and would be wearing a long black silk A line skirt and tailored jacket with a white chiffon blouse with French cuffs. To balance this out, Ann had one of her brothers as a bridesmaid; he was stuck with a light blue tuxedo. I definitely got the better end of that deal. For a wedding present, I gave them eight percent of my shares in the company, giving them them more ownership in the company that they were building. (I wanted to keep a hold of most of my shares, though--Stark Tech was going places. I also took the opportunity to transfer a further five percent of my shares to Damian, giving him more stake in the company as well.) I successfully defended my thesis in April, after which it was all over but a few finals. Huge relief. I accepted a job offer at Architectural Conservation, a well-established city firm that was willing to put me on projects immediately. The other offer I'd received had me hanging back more, observing and learning, more like my internship. I wanted a more aggressive approach, even though my role would be small in the overall picture. Graduation was awesome. My class in the program was small and we'd developed into a tightly knit group; it was sad to part. Some of us were going overseas, one was going down to DC to work on the monuments, and the few others were scattering around the country, but we recognized that aside from our friendships, we all had different skills to draw on, different areas of interest, knowledge and expertise, and we were committed to keeping in touch. Damian held a graduation party for us after the ceremony (there's nothing better than moving the tassel across), dinner and dancing at the Waldorf Astoria. He took a few days off from work to help me celebrate, then it was back to work. I had a few more days off before I started work at my new firm.

A few days before Tony and Ann's wedding, we had what passed for a bachelor party. Mostly it was drinks while relaxing; the other groomsmen were playing an involved game on Tony's VR simulator. I took the opportunity to talk with him, just the two of us, the way we used to, and we toasted his wedding. 'I couldn't be happier for you, Sparky. Ann is terrific, she's your match in so
many ways."

"I got lucky there," he acknowledged with a grin, then turned his whiskey glass around in his hands. "No matter what I said at the time, Tiger, I didn't break up with you because you weren't smart enough." My eyebrows shot up. "We had a good thing, and you gave me everything you had. But you'd already given part of your heart to Wayne, for keeps. I wanted to use something you couldn't argue with to break up with you. But the real reason is that I wanted you to love me the way you love Wayne, and that just never was going to happen, even if we'd just stayed in Valhalla forever. I'm not saying that I didn't love you and you didn't love me," he said, looking at me intently. "It's just that I never had your whole heart and I was really insecure, in general, and about that specifically. I don't blame you, and I don't regret anything about the time we had together. You're magnificent. You showed me what it was to truly love and made me feel like I deserved it." He sighed. "I'd heard you coming down the path when I was talking to Banner. It was a chicken-shit thing to do, and I'm sorrier than I can articulate for that. I gave it another go during Fimbulwinter because I loved you and missed you, but nothing had fundamentally changed and I knew I needed to end things."

I took a moment to process this. I couldn't even say he was wrong to have ended it the way he did, because if he'd told me the truth, I would have argued and pleaded and drawn things out trying to change, which would have damaged our friendship. The break, as hurtful as it had been, had been better. "Ann's not you, but she's amazing too, we have a really good thing, and I'm it for her. I want what you have with Wayne--a home, a family. Kids, too."

I managed a grin, small but heartfelt. "You're well off with her," I said. "I'm surprised, but you were right. You know I want you to be happy. And I'm putting you on notice now that I expect to be a godmother whenever your first kid shows up."

He smiled too. "Deal."

I discovered that being a groomsman was much more relaxing than being a bridesmaid. I didn't have anything else to do except show up at the wedding well groomed. No fuss, no drama. I got to wear comfortable, lower-heeled pumps of my choice, and Tony didn't care what kind of blouse I wore as long as it was white. Instead of a colored cummerbund like the other groomsmen, I wore a light blue sash instead. His present to the groomsmen were cufflinks, small light blue sapphires in silver. Not too small for the men, not too large for me, and my blouse had French cuffs. I had a little corsage on my lapel instead of a bouquet to fuss with, and my role was standing in support of the groom and smiling a lot. Ann's brother the bridesmaid had a much more exciting time than I did and was envious about my outfit. "The photographs," he groaned as we were posed together for shots of the wedding party. "I'll never be able to forget it. Only for Ann."

"I like Ann a lot, but I'm just as glad to miss out on all the goings on in the bridal party," I said. "And I could conceivably wear this again." Sam burst out laughing.

"This goes right back to the rental place," he said.

I had the chance to chat with Ann for a moment. "Tony invited his parents," she said quietly. "His dad declined and I have the feeling he prevented his mom from coming." I shook my head.

"Just as well, Howard probably would have been an ass, but it's kind of a dick move to prevent his mom from coming. She should have insisted." Ann nodded, then we talked a bit about the lovely service and reception instead. She was truly a beautiful bride, her dress a warm off-white that lit up her complexion and flaming hair. They were going on a working honeymoon in the South Pacific, overseeing the last test before the organism system was available for commercial purchase.
I settled into work pretty easily. I was placed on a team that was responsible for a lot of small jobs and told that I would be given opportunities to work up to larger responsibilities. It was nice to have more time for family and my friends. Serena was entering her last semester in the fall and was working on her thesis nervously. Work on the house was coming along well; it was almost to the point where we could move in if we wanted--and didn't mind continued construction on the library and the swimming pool. There was a hold up on the tiles for the house all around, which meant that the bathrooms, kitchen backsplash, and pool couldn't be completed until they arrived. It was ok, though, our lease didn't expire until October.

Aslyn had been talking about a guy she'd met and really liked, and finally we were able to coordinate schedules so I could meet him. Damian and I met them for drinks one night after work. Niko proved to be quite tall, a good six inches taller than Aslyn, who wasn't short herself. Reddish brown hair and brown eyes, he was quite muscular, which I guess he'd need since he worked in personal security. He was friendly and had a trace of an accent. Turkish, he said, when I asked. He'd lived there for awhile during his first life and had loved it. He told us some stories and I came away really liking the man. Margaret had also met him and liked him. We did a few more things as couples, as Damian got along with him too.

So summer passed into autumn. Bucky was so determined in college and so formidably focused that he was going to graduate in three and a half years. He was going to spend a year as a zoo keeper at the Central Park zoo, getting experience, then see if he wanted to apply to vet school. I pointed out that there was on timeline he had to follow, but he felt like he'd have a better idea of whether he wanted to be a vet or not and could proceed accordingly. Serena successfully defended her thesis and Aslyn was gearing up for her graduation and studying for the bar. She'd already accepted a place in a firm on Wall Street; she wasn't going to be working as a lawyer, but she wanted the credential and the options it had.

In early December--in time for Christmas sales--the first of Colin James' books came out, the history of superheroes. I bought a copy, of course, and was relieved to find that I was on one page, and not the complete page at that. It summarized how Bucky had taught me and I'd taken over for him, followed by a few quotations from my former students, including Serena and Quicksilver, who had just rejoined the team. Wanda had not, and I couldn't help but feel that her last mission had something to do with that decision. It had for Pietro; he'd joined in order to be able to personally prevent a screw up of that magnitude. It ended with a concise account of how I got my big dirt nap.

Steve was getting ready for New York Fashion Week and the launch of his very own atelier. Fashion Week had somehow migrated to February over the years, so there was less time than usual. He was jittery and Emma cut off his caffeine. His collection was geared to the working woman, post-Return. That meant not just sleek and stylish for the more modern gal, but clothing that women from older eras could wear and not feel too immodest. That turned out to be a surprisingly large group; he riffed on the Edwardian style that had been going out of fashion when he was born and focused on ankle-length skirts and soft blouses with full or three-quarter-length sleeves. This style nodded to the past, but was sufficiently updated so that the clothes fit in on the fashion scene without looking dowdy. There were cocktail suits and dresses, and a few formal gowns, softly draped, that made his models look like goddesses. And I don't say that lightly. Within this collection was a small capsule collection for summer: a one-piece bathing suit and a bikini, cute shorts and halter top that harkened back to the '40's, and three fun and flirty dresses. The valkyries, Emma, Bucky, Damian, Loki, and Torunn scored seats at the front by the runway. Because of Steve's name, there was intense interest in his collection, but it was also his first collection, so he was given the first slot. Nine a.m. on Thursday, and he would be showing at the main branch of the public library, which was possibly my favorite building in the whole world. Emma was providing jewelry for the most important looks.
Christmas was good as usual, with the touches that I liked, like the Yule Log, along with older family traditions. Damian and I answered questions about the holdup on our house—mainly tiles again—we were going month to month on our apartment lease while tiles were slowly delivered. We were waiting on the ones for our bathroom, which would be in the final delivery. I'd worked hard and gotten my quilt done for the first anniversary of Damian and my vow renewal ceremony, which we decided would be our anniversary since it had been so special. I presented it to my husband, who was thrilled with it and when I wasn't around would wrap up in it as he sat on the couch reading or working. I mentioned that if he was that cold, he could turn up the heat. "It literally feels like I'm wrapped up in your love," he'd said bashfully, looking at me through his dark lashes. Barbara had produced her infant, a boy that they named Bruce. When I heard what they'd named him, I hurried up and knitted baby booties in black.

After Christmas, Damian and I sat down with Tony and Ann. First we toasted the success of our first product; our first sale had just occurred; Coke/PepsiCo had placed a billion-dollar order to be spread out over two years, and Wayne had started construction of the bots and culturing the organisms as soon as the ink was dry on the lucrative contracts. We enjoyed some Champagne and basked in the glow for a whole twenty minutes.

"So I'm looking into bioremediation; Fimbulwinter halted ongoing cleanup efforts of Superfund sites and funds are still tight. So by the time there's enough money, we want to have organisms for nuclear materials as well as mine waste and petroleum cleanup—it hasn't been a viable fuel for centuries, but there are still sites where there were spills, leaks, or other contamination. It's all highly weathered now, which presents its own problems," Ann said, and we discussed her goals and projections, including the investment of more capital for more work space and personnel.

Tony, to no one's surprise, had a couple of things up his sleeve. One was work on non-lethal weaponry for police and park rangers. Over the years, our national parks had become a greater national treasure than ever before and restoration of these sites to pristine conditions was huge. Congress had passed legislation allowing the rangers to detain and fine visitors for smaller offenses like littering and permitted the construction of holding facilities for those who committed more serious offenses, like defacing any aspect of the sites or luring and/or feeding the animals, which so often ended badly for the animals. All offenders were required to complete either a short or long interactive class that educated them on why they shouldn't be such dunces. Wayne had the contracts for the Avengers, but there wasn't anything that said we couldn't design and sell to other superhero groups and/or individuals. He also wanted to get into transportation. Specifically, hot-looking cars that would run on a proprietary energy source. I burst out laughing.

"You just want a flashy vehicle," I said. He flushed slightly.

"You can't tell me that you'd rather have your little flying pod over a car that has old-school power and can fly. And real aesthetic appeal," he defended himself, and I had to nod.

"Can we have stick shifts?" I asked, and it was his turn to laugh. Not surprisingly, the car thing, with the development of a novel energy source that could perform the way he wanted, was going to be hugely expensive. The non-lethal weaponry would be easier to devise and improve and would be profitable sooner. Damian jumped in and I listened as they talked time tables for everybody's projects, how much would need to be invested, and the stakes in terms of personnel and equipment. While they were talking, I checked my investments.

I tuned in again when I heard them talking about the site for future expansion. Ann and Tony felt that our current site would suffice for now since our first project was being offloaded to Wayne Enterprise for the production. Our two project-specific employees were going over to the manufacturing site and would continue to refine the work from there. Ann got the first publication
out of it, but they could publish as they continued to make the organisms better and more efficient. Subject to our patents, of course. Tony was fiddling with his stylus in a familiar way.

"You wouldn't mind, a little way down the road, and after the first wave of interest has worn off, to sell that enterprise," I said to him. He jolted and dropped his stylus.

"It would be a way to raise capital for our next step," he said, but Ann looked a little upset. Well, it was her baby, really.

"We can get money from other sources," Damian objected. "We spin off the company into different divisions; life sciences, and... the other stuff. We don't have to sell off the whole success. If we approach Daniel, we could probably enter into a partnership with him and Wayne. They have resources for marketing that we don't have, and this is just our first sale. I saw Alex poking around, she's probably seen what she can afford to invest, which is something that I can do too. And there are business loans too; I'd rather not seek more investors at this time." We all agreed to that. After a couple more hours, we had a game plan: a multi-year development plan for both Ann and Tony's projects. Damian was practically rubbing his hands together in glee: finally his real abilities to run a growing and important business would be brought out fully with all that he needed to accomplish.

And so we entered the New Year with what seemed like a vast horizon of opportunities for all of us.
Mid-January, Colin James' new edition of his Avengers bio came out. I read this one with more trepidation. Deservedly so, it turned out. Bucky's chapter had been expanded to include his rediscovery of his brother's family with special emphasis about our relationship. And there was a whole big chapter about Valhalla/Folkvangr and everybody's time there. My presence in this chapter was more prominent than I would like, even though it was in relation to my uncle and Tony. That chapter ended with a discussion of Ragnarok that focused on what the Avengers had done in the war--I'd been too busy to note much of that at the time and it was interesting to see their accounts.

Less exciting was Tony's account of his relationship with me. He didn't go into detail, but he had told James why he'd broken up with me. I hoped he'd prepared Ann for this so she didn't feel like second place; Damian really didn't care that we'd had the relationship and he knew there was no chance that it would rekindle down the line, but he was glad that I'd had somebody to give me support and love during the time we were parted. Interest in the book was lively; the documentary had finally been made available for people to download for themselves and the release of the book drove sales of the film and vice versa. There was some lively commentary about my relationships with Tony and Damian, and I caught some heavy criticism from Iron Man fans for toying with Tony's heart, as they chose to see it.

So that was unpleasant, a few people even accosted me on the street over it.

But there were other repercussions. My first time being included in a team with a new big exciting project with a new client blew up right away. "Alex Barnes? You're one of those valkyrie freaks, aren't you?" one of their team said, dropping my hand like it was poisonous. We made our presentation, but the junior members of the team were dismissed right after. Later that afternoon I was pulled into the office of the conservator who was in charge of our proposal and told that I wasn't going to be allowed to work on it because the client objected to my presence. It was me or the client, so... And I'd pissed off the other people who'd been dismissed from the meeting to save my face since they'd missed out on the opportunity to contribute and impress the client.

Damian was livid when he drew the story out of me, his radar for trouble triggered when I was mopy. And I started to get hints at work that my future there wasn't good; I wasn't put on any new projects and I did not attend meetings with clients. So it wasn't a huge surprise a couple weeks later when I was called into the hiring partner's office and, as nicely as possible, canned. Word had gotten around and a few clients--not even many, but the firm was nervous--had objections to working with me. For various reasons, it turned out. And one of those reasons was that relationship I'd had with Tony. They looked at my marriage to Damian in both lifetimes and thought it was wrong of me to while away my afterlife with somebody else. It wasn't illegal for clients to act on their prejudices, and it turned out that the firm's lawyer said it was legal to fire me if it was clear that I could cost the business clients and money. Half an hour later, I was escorted to the curb by the hiring partner and left, holding a box with my things in them. I felt as frozen as the slush on the road. Finally I walked mechanically to the garage with our car, dumped the box where Eira usually sat, and went out to the manor. Alfred found me in the kitchen looking for cookies. He got the story out of me, and for the first time, I saw him really angry. His loyalties weren't divided as in a family dispute, and he was really pissed at my firm. My former firm. And I remembered that he'd been a member of the SAS and probably knew how to take people apart as well as he could put them back together.

He cut himself off mid-tirade, banging my coffee cup and sauce on the counter with a good deal
more force than usual. "I apologize, Miss Alex," he said, still angry. Bright red spots burned high on his cheeks and his eyes were hard slits. "This does nothing to soothe you." I reached over and squeezed his fisted hand.

"It's nice to know you're on my side," I said, managing a smile.

"Always." He pulled out a block of butter from the refrigerator and slapped it down on the counter before bringing out the stand mixer and assembling other components. Peanut butter oatmeal cookies, looked like. And a bag of Hershey's kisses was thrown onto the counter as well. My heart lifted a little.

Taking advantage of this momentary boost, I called Damian to tell him where I was and why. There was a pause, then he swore in Arabic for a good solid three minutes and change. He said he'd come in with Daniel, Mark, Bruce, and Eira, who was still going to work with him.

Alfred had worked out some of his mad on the butter, whacking it with a rolling pin to soften it up enough for cookies. "Are you all right, Miss Alex?"

"No, but I will be," I said, dejected. "It's just that I really liked working there. Being part of the team, learning things."

"They will regret their actions, I am convinced of that. You are capable of great things," he said crisply. "I forgot to mention that the remaining tile in your new residence has been installed," he said more tranquilly. "I inspected it this morning. It looks lovely," he volunteered, and I took myself down the road to see for myself.

And it was lovely. Ok, freaking stunning. The ceilings throughout the house were fourteen feet high, allowing for a feeling of spaciousness even in the smallest spaces. The bathroom wasn't one of those. A large bathtub for two sat in front of almost floor to ceiling windows that had an arch at the tip. It gave a view of the woods behind the house, but eventually would overlook our backyard gardens. The walls were currently an assertive violet and panels were created with molding painted silver-gilt. The ceiling shaded quickly to white at the center. Above the tub was a chandelier on a dimmer switch. To the left was a shelf with his and her sinks, oval mirrors echoing the shape of the tub, a discreet towel warmer, and task lighting. To the right was a set of cubbyholes running full length up the wall for towels and things. On the other side of that wall was the shower, big enough for two with water jets everywhere and a glass door. The toilet was also in that part of the L shaped room. The heated floors were a ceramic tile that looked like wood to match the floor through the rest of the house and molded glass tiles that looked like undulating silk had been placed on a special board that provided backlighting that brought out the texture of the tiles in the shower. Unilluminated tiles provided a backsplash for the sinks and caught the light from the outside.

I forgot my personal problems as I wandered around the house, empty of workers for once. The floors were perfect and smooth underfoot, beautiful cherry. Fumed oak provided a pleasing contrast as an inlay in the entrance to the house, and the big, thick door had been installed. It had black iron brackets for both looks and to add strength and support to the hinges. The effect was charming and gave me the feeling of shelter and home, the ability to shut out the outside world most definitely.

We didn't have appliances in the kitchen, or any furniture, actually, and there was a huge amount of work to be done in the library, as expected. The calm helped me cool off and reminded me that work wasn't everything. If I needed to, I could always work at Stark until I found another job. Financially, I didn't have to work, what with the money Daniel had given me, my payout for mustering out from Asgard's military, and the proceeds from that documentary that had set me up solidly, even with the cash for the new Stark business. I needed to work for my own self-esteem, to make my contributions to society, not just be some rich woman piddling around. I went downstairs
and noted the pool was filled, the chemicals and equipment needed for the saltwater were ready to be added. The rest of the basement was set up partly as the pantry, with the rest unfinished. This part was the shortest route to the bat cave, but the tunnel access would be handled in-house, so to speak. Wayne had one-person tunneling equipment that would make short work of it and we wouldn't have to explain or hide anything. I got calmer and happier as I wandered through the house, seeing how it would shape our lives as the years passed. The house was under construction, the home is what we would build.

That's where Damian caught up with me. By then he was a lot more agitated than I was. I was leaning against the main doorway to the library, and turned to him with a smile, which took him aback and cut off whatever he was about to say. Instead he offered a hug, which I was glad to accept, and a question. "What are you going to do now?" he asked, sounding genuinely curious.

"Well, first, I think we should move in here. We can probably bum meals off Alfred until we select kitchen appliances," I said, burrowing into him. He chuckled a little. "Then I'm going to start my own firm. Valkyrie Preservation. Fuck anybody who doesn't want to do business with a freak." I smiled fiercely. "I'm going to make AC wish they hadn't listened to a few balky clients, and the people who feel that way are really going to rue it when they see what I can do on my own," I said with confidence. Damian's body lost its tension.

"These are sentiments I can get behind completely," he said. "Daniel invited us to dinner. So let's go tell them your plans for a forward assault on architectural conservation and preservation and throw ourselves on Alfred's mercy. Then we can go up to the attic, select some furniture, and then we'll know what we need to go shopping for." He sighed. "I thought this was going to be horrible, but I'm actually excited to see what you'll do first."

"First, I'm going to go see my faculty advisor and other professors, get some input about forming my own firm," I said practically. "Then get the legal stuff going, find office space, figure out a PR plan, then launch myself on the unsuspecting public."

"They won't know what hit them," Damian said, starting to laugh. A squeeze and a kiss, then we walked up the road to the mansion. The family's reaction was pretty much what Damian's had been, albeit all in English, but they too were genuinely curious. Daniel and Bruce joined Damian in offering any help I might need on the business end of things. Everybody went up to the attic with us when we announced our intention to move into the house, and everybody had ideas about what we should take. The only thing I really *needed* was the bed my dad had made for me as a kid; I had the idea to use it in a guest room or for a kid should we have another. But there was also a spectacular 20's vanity with the big round mirror and drawers to either side, the corners fluted, a black walnut rocking chair, a long, low rosewood bureau, and a stunning cherry dining table with eight chairs. The upholstery would have to be redone, as would the bench for the vanity, but that was fine. There was a mahogany cedar chest, and a few occasional tables. Everybody seemed more cheerful when we emerged, and Daniel offered us the tete a tete couch from the library as well. We had no reservation about accepting. Alfred, at least outwardly recovered, said that he would arrange the transfer of the furniture, and served the oatmeal cookies with our coffee. I went home feeling a lot more solid.

The next day I went into work with Damian and appraised Tony and Ann about my change of status. "Oh, for fuck's sake," Ann said, scowling. "That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard." They heard my plans with approval.

"So what can I do for you, Tiger?" Tony asked. His eyes were hard, but I knew who he was pissed at.
I smiled at him. "I was getting to that, actually." He grinned. "I know one of the most creative men on the planet, yeah, I'm going to lean on you," I told him, and everybody laughed. "I want a kick ass product that I can use exclusively in my work. It's got to be pretty awesome, Sparky," I warned, and he made a face and rolled his eyes.

"Well, yeah, that's what I'm here for," he said, and patted my hand. "Get me some ideas of things that you use in your work that will make the most impact and I'll get to work." After that, I had appointments. I was at Columbia all afternoon, meeting with several of my professors. They thought that AC had made a big mistake, which warmed my heart, and had warnings about pitfalls to avoid in starting my own firm. They gave me reference materials and open doors to ask questions. Before that, though, I met Bucky for lunch. He made his displeasure clear, but was, as I suspected, behind me 100%. He said he'd tell Steve and Emma, as the former was on the verge of a meltdown over Fashion Week.

When Damian and I got home that night, we started to pack up our things. Neither of us had a lot, so it would be easy to move. Eira was thrilled at the thought of running around the estate at will, but the kittens were nervous. They'd be ok, though. We let Alfred know when we were boxed up and he took care of the move with his typical efficiency.

It was the weekend before I got my friends together for brunch. After we ordered, I cleared my throat pointedly and everybody looked at me attentively. "We're gathered here today--"

"Sounds like we're at a wedding," Karen joked.

I smiled. "Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today... so I can tell you I got fired." Way to kill the fun mood. There was a silence so encompassing it actually seemed to deaden the sound of the other diners. Then they exploded with questions, and I explained why I was fired.

"So what are you going to do now?" Aslyn asked. I grinned fiercely and flicked business cards out like playing cards. I'd only gotten a hundred of them because I didn't have premises yet. One said "Watch this space" and the reverse said "Valkyrie Preservation."

I let them examine the cards. "Your own company, huh?" Dagny said, her face losing its shocked expression. "Valkyrie Preservation. That's.. upfront."

I smiled a little. "It's a big two middle fingers way up and a couple of bare butt cheeks reflecting on those who think I have something to be ashamed of. I thought of naming it Valkyrie: historic preservation on a wing and a prayer, but that seemed a little flippant. Also kind of haphazard." Chuckles from around the table.

"So what are you going to do?" Carol wanted to know.

"I'm going to buy a building that really needs renovation, I'm going to do the work, record it, put in on a website so people can see me work as it happens, and when it's complete, I'll be open for business."

Margaret fanned her face with her card. "Geeze, Alex. That's... I don't know what. Amazing? Risky? Crazy?"

"All of the above," I said modestly, and that drew a few startled laughs.

"What's the long game?" Serena asked.

"I want to buy a bunch of old buildings, renovate, lease it as a mixed-use, mixed income development. After doing a few other projects to make sure I can handle it," I said. "And then
expand into work nationally and internationally. Some of that might be just submitting the design, not overseeing the work too."

"You don't plan by half," Carol said. "That's the valkyrie I know and love." We beamed at each other.

We talked about it in more detail. "Yeah, it was humiliated to be fired," I finally admitted. It was something I wasn't willing to admit to my blood family yet until my accomplishments were enough to banish that feeling. My pals nodded and there was understanding and sympathy, interrupted by the delivery of our meals.

"So what are you going to do if you run into unexpected problems?" Serena asked.

"Hire," I said. Then I smiled slyly at her. "You want in on this?"

She flushed a little. "Actually, yeah. I've had some interviews, but they're mostly interested in the PR that they could do from having a former Captain America on staff than my work. There are a lot of architects out there right now and it seems like being a former hero is all that differentiates me from other promising architects. But I really want to leave that in my past."

"Oh my god, Alex, you really should," Dagny said. "The things you guys could do if you could combine new work with restoration and conservation."

There was silence as we contemplated this and chewed.

"If you're hiring, Alex, I'd like to put my resume in too." This came, surprisingly, from Aslyn. "The reason that the firm wants me on board is so that when they skate over the line they can point at me and say that I'd said it was ok; they do this a lot to junior staff, I've found out. I'm not comfortable with how close to the edge of legality they're pushing some of their transactions." She smiled slightly before it faded away. "I could do the same job for you as Damian does for Stark, plus be an in-house lawyer. I had real property in law school, of course, and I also took a class in real estate law, so I know where to start. I could start with the other stuff after I sit for the bar." I sat back and sipped my Bellini before looking around.

"Anybody else want in?"

Turned out, yeah. Carol was up for her Mastery exam. If she passed--and she should, she'd done some of the work for our library and it was gorgeous--she'd have to sign a new employment contract, so why not Valkyrie instead of Wayne? We could offer landscaping services if Dagny came on board. Karen could be our project manager. Margaret was involved in a long-term project that would take almost a year to complete, but an urban planner would be invaluable in terms of the development I wanted to do. All four of us valkyries had money to put in from the trial and Thor's payout. Karen, Margaret, and Aslyn had less, but that wasn't a real drawback. And everybody knew people we could draw on, from labor crews to structural engineers to interior decorators to craftspeople.

We left the brunch with a firm sense of purpose. It would take time for things to get off the ground, allowing everybody to wind up employment, and Dagny still had the rest of a semester of college left. And we had the beginning of a plan. And a new name. Now it was "Valkyrie Conceptualization." The tagline: Adventures in Architecture. Since I was moving (Damian and I were going to look for furniture for the few rooms we'd use immediately after this brunch), Serena would start the search for a suitable building. While we didn't want to drag our feet, there wasn't a rush, either. I wanted everybody to really think about what they what to offer and where they wanted to go with their careers. Then I'd call another meeting and make sure nobody had second
thoughts, then we'd start planning in earnest.

And let the fun begin.
After brunch, Damian picked me up and we did go furniture shopping. We’d made arrangements with an upholsterer to take care of the dining room chairs and the vanity bench, easy, quick fixes, but we had other things to buy. Most of the furniture we’d had in the apartment was too small for the new rooms, and my friends had volunteered to take it off our hands. There was no rush to furnish everything at once, so we started with bedroom furniture and one room we’d use as the main public room until the library was finished—we needed a couch so we could watch the news and the few programs we followed and a coffee table. Eira’s ottoman would be in here as well, and the rosewood bureau from the mansion was perfect as a place to dump keys and mail and to store incidentals.

I loved the vanity for our bedroom; it was big enough that it held its own against the high ceilings. We found an extraordinary bed; the headboard was a huge round circle of highly figured wood that looked like rays erupting from the center. Around that was a narrow black circle of ebony, and an eighteen inch edge beyond that of the same wood, just stained a lighter color. And it wasn’t just a flat slab of wood, either; the center part was the most prominent, with the ebony rounded and inset between the two elements as the lowest area; the outer rim was slightly less prominent than the center part. Extensions to either side integrated bedside tables of the same woods for a seamless, stunning look. The mattress itself would rest on a platform with the space underneath the bed closed in with more of the wood, and the foot had a curve to it with the darker wood inset to echo the headboard. The two pieces of furniture were placed on opposite walls for maximum impact, and we had the vanity and the bench set out to be refinished to match the bed. Aside from draperies on the windows and discreet area rugs by the bed sides, that was it for the bedroom. We didn’t need a sitting room in our bedroom and the walk in closet had everything organized perfectly. Alfred had been itching to take care of it, so we asked him to plan the closet. It should go without saying that it was impeccable, a blend of drawers and open storage and hanging space for each of us, and one larger personal safe instead of two smaller ones. And a special touch—a small refrigerator that had a bottle of sparkling wine chilling and a shelf with two beautiful crystal flutes above it. For the time being, we put the rest of the furniture in the other unused rooms.

We also sought Alfred’s input in the selection of the appliances for the kitchen and the washer and dryer. He came with us and explained and suggested. We went with his top choices. Eira’s grooming station had been installed and she gave it the first real test that weekend. We watched as she was wetted down with warm water to combat the chill from the cold water she’d gotten into, then sudsed up, massaged, and rinsed. A special conditioner for her unique fur followed with another rinse, then she shook her fur, stepped out of the water enclosure, stood on a mat that activated the dryer, and trotted out, happy and beautiful. We had to comb out a couple of knots, but overall the setup was extremely impressive. The appliances wouldn’t be delivered for several days, so we had dinner at the mansion and roughed it for the rest. “Roughing it” had a much less independent reality since Alfred dropped off picnic hampers with breakfasts. Damian’s Corell plates and bowls disappeared quietly and were replaced with a classic white stoneware. Then a spare set of china appeared in the butler’s pantry; I flipped over a saucer. “Darley Abbey” by Royal Crown Derby. Silver appeared in the tarnish-proof drawers. Crystal glasses in different but harmonizing shapes and patterns apparated behind the glass upper cabinet drawers and fine linen tablecloths and napkins rested in the linen press. One night at dinner Alfred remarked that we had forgotten to get a table and chairs for the kitchen. Damian and I exchanged guilty glances. We’d been eating in the living room and running the automatic vacuum cleaner on the rug each night. It was like a Roomba had been, but on steroids and could be programmed to go up stairs to attend to each rug in the place. There was an integrated vacuum through the house for the hard surface floors; three minutes and all the pet fur, crumbs, and unlucky lint were sucked away. A glitch in
the pool lighting had been fixed and we'd learned how to check the automatic pool monitor and maintenance equipment. We'd started getting up early for a morning swim.

I was still feeling stung and angry from my firing, but at least it had happened before I'd really settled in and started making big contributions. The second week after, Serena called me to come look at a building.

"Holy cow," I said involuntarily, looking up. And up.

"Nine stories," she said briskly, then pushed me forward to meet the realtor. It wasn't a historic building on any registry, but it was old, had good bones, and a lot of really nice detail, an original Art Deco monument that had been spectacular in its day. Bit of a monstrosity right now, though. The realtor was frank about the damage and what it would take to get it up to code. Outside, I stared up at the sad facade.

"So are you really committed here, Serena? I understand if you've had second thoughts. It's both a risky and slightly insane idea."

"My specialty," she said flippantly. "But no, I'm in."

I stared awhile longer, ideas popping into my imagination like flowers. "So I'm thinking that the exterior can be preserved, missing elements replaced, that sort of thing. But inside we preserve the best and integrate fresh, modern design to compliment it. We can call it Hybrid Building, trademark it, and use it as a selling point for clients who have old but unlisted buildings or those buying structures that have been unlisted due to damage. Save what we can, kick ass with new ideas for the rest. Contrasting but harmonizing. I've got Tony working on a few things that will be exclusive to our business. A stabilizing agent that can be applied to old, damaged timbers, plaster, and brick. Cut costs by not having to replace them and preserve historic characteristics. An unbreakable "slate" for flooring. An insulated glass that looks like wavy old glass. And the thing I want most is a riff on techboard for the walls. But instead of just being able to manipulate color, I want it to be able to manipulate texture from smooth up to a rough plaster."

Serena looked at me, her mouth hanging open a little. "Wow."

"Nine stories is too much for us, even if everybody gets on board. So retail on the first few floors. Maybe we invite people whose services we can recommend to set up little showcases, like interior decorators. I think most of our clients will line up their own choices, we don't need to have one on staff, but we can seek out and recommend the best." I tapped my lips with my finger thoughtfully.

"We can aim to be one stop shopping," Serena said, her thoughts catching up to mine. We grinned at each other.

"We'll take it," I said briskly to the realtor, who blinked but joined in the group grin.

We went back to her office where we also put an offer in on the building behind our one. It was totally trashed and priced just at the cost of the land. We planned to demolish the structure and have Dagny design a little park for the area, whether or not she joined the firm. Leaving the office, excited and feeling a lot of determination, I said, "We should have businesses that we want to shop at in our retail space."

"Definitely a good coffee shop," Serena said, and I laughed. "Maybe a small grocery store. There are other businesses in the area, and it would be convenient to be able to pick a few things up on the way home." I nodded, and we spitballed a bit before separating. I was deep in thought when my communicator chimed. I looked at the number and answered.
"Hi, Uncle Steve," I said.

"Hi, Alex." He sounded completely tense, slightly panicked, and spoke rapidly. But then Fashion Week started in a few days. "I wondered if you'd be able to do me an enormous favor. Three of my models have been lured away by a bigger house and I'm in big trouble. There's nobody available. I've already press-ganged Emma into stepping up, and I can get by with one more model. Otherwise I'll have to cut some of my looks from the show. Your measurements are just about the same as one of the departed models. Your waist is twelve millimeters smaller, but I can work with that." I grinned; he had my measurements from when I'd helped him with his student showcases.

"Yeah, no problem." I altered my trajectory and told him I was on my way.

It wasn't utter chaos in his workroom, but there was sure a lot of activity.

"Thank god," he said devoutly, hurrying over to me and giving me a quick hug. "You're a life saver." He hustled me over to one of the clothes racks and changed the name on one section of the garments. "Try these on and I'll make adjustments. Hems, definitely, you're a little shorter." I took the first dress and stepped over to the fitting area. Nobody's street shoes were allowed in this area to avoid getting the clothes stained or damaged; a lot of snow melt was being tracked in from the street. There weren't any dressing rooms; I'd learned during the showcases that models didn't have a lot of personal modesty on the job, what with all the designers and people doing hair and makeup running around. I dropped my street clothes on an empty chair and pulled on the first garment, waiting until Steve had a moment, chatting with Emma while I waited. Steve wasn't sleeping much, two or three hours a night out of sheer nerves. He called me over, checked the fit with a practiced eye, and tried a belt to cinch in the waist. It wasn't perfect, and Steve wanted perfection for this collection above all else. He had me turn the dress inside out, put it on again, and nipped in the waist smoothly.

"I'm so grateful, Alex honey," he said, pinning the hem of the dress. "Did your work put up much of a fuss?"

"Er... no." Bucky must not have wanted to stress his buddy out any more right now. "I've actually got all the time you need."

"Great," he said on a sigh. He looked like crap, eyes bloodshot, with huge bags underneath. Forget bags, actually; he blew right past the smaller luggage and right into antique steamer trunk territory. It looked like he was subsisting on coffee and sheer nerves, and probably not the coffee because Emma had switched him to decaf. It wasn't til the third garment that his brain started ticking over on the subject. "But you're still fairly new there. I'd imagine that it's a little unusual to be able to take time off without warning."

"Er... they fired me a couple weeks ago." He kept pinning madly for a moment, then it sunk in.

"What?" he said, louder than I think he intended, sitting back and actually stopping his movement. Everybody turned to look at us and Emma hustled over.

"What's wrong?" she asked, looking worried and a little worn herself.

"They fired Alex," he said around the pins in his mouth.

"What?" she said.

"Didn't want you to worry what with all this," I said meekly. "A client was upset that I was one of those freaks from the documentary," I went on, still sour about it. "But I'm going to open my own
business. Just put an offer on a new building this morning, actually. I'm going to renovate it, post the progress on a website, then launch the business. Some of my other friends are interested in joining me too, so we'll get the bills paid." We'd be able to take on individual clients as well as big joint projects that involved all of us.

"Wow," Steve and Emma said at the same time.

My smile was cold. "The freaks are going to kick everybody's asses. And it's going to be my great pleasure to grind AC into the dirt in terms of the quality of work product and the innovation we can offer."

"You go, Alex," Emma said approvingly, recovering first.

I winked at Steve. "If you want to open your atelier in a truly magnificent building, you know who to call."

He snorted, then went back to pinning, picking up speed as he went. "I'm sorry that you were let go, Alex, but I'm really grateful. Can you come back tomorrow for the final fitting? Then there's a walkthrough on Wednesday, and we're showing on Thursday at noon. I need you at the library at ten." I agreed to this, and after the fitting was over, left quickly to free up space and lessen the crowd.

Damian listened in bemusement to the news, but Eira was interested and wanted to come to the show too. After dinner, we went to the building so he could see it for himself. This time I took pictures to share with my family. Two edged sword, that; when they saw the building they might think I'm either a genius or consider me for involuntary commitment. The front of the building was square, made of light stone, and featuring two large stylized sculptures of women that ran from the street almost to the roofline on either side of the entryway. Above that area was a smaller structure that would be our conference room, mostly glass between strong stone pillars, adding a little importance to the roof. The sides wrapped around smoothly and angled back slightly. The rear of the building had round structures, almost like turrets, on each corner and another shaped structure in the middle that housed the elevator. The windows back here were actually French doors that opened onto tiny balconies. Our offices were going to be a-freakin'-mazing. And the rear would overlook the garden space.

"Wow," he said. "Petal, this is going to be extraordinary."

"I've been kind of waiting for somebody to question my sanity," I said, just blurtling it out.

Damian just smiled. "The thing is, there's no reason why this shouldn't work. It's novel, to show your work as it progresses, it'll create buzz, generate a lot of publicity. You have resources to help you avoid the pitfalls of a new business in this trade, and you'll be entering it gradually thanks to your plan. By planning to use some of it as retail space, you'll be generating income even during periods between your clients' paychecks, and opening it to your talented friends ensures a boutique firm that can serve a wide range of clientele. If you plan right, you can remodel the ground floor in such a way as to allow you to rent out the space for parties. Businesses are always looking for beautiful spaces to host holiday parties in, for example. Wedding receptions, maybe."

"That's a great idea," I said, adding it to my list. "But a higher floor. I want the ground floor for drop in businesses with a lot of foot traffic, like a coffee shop. Serena suggested a corner grocery."

We talked about it more on the way home, then when we got home there were other things to do. He was happy and engaged in creating the framework for Stark Industries to expand and thrive, telling me that Tony and Ann were starting to interview applicants for the new positions, and we
talked about that over breakfast. We were going to go shopping for a kitchen table over the weekend but were thoroughly enjoying the guilty pleasure of eating in the living room.

The next day I showed up at Steve's workshop, right on time. I nearly recoiled; his eyes were sunken and bloodshot, black circles on the bags under them like they'd been smudged there with charcoal, and his cheeks were hollow. I frowned. Emma was frowning too, and shook her head. "He's not taking enough time to eat or sleep," she said softly. "He's put so much pressure on himself."

I discreetly pressed a pill in a blister pack into her hand. "Called J last night, explained. This is an OTC sleep aid, not particularly strong, but he's stretched so thin that it's going to hit him hard. Give him half of that. I suggested putting it into a piece of soft candy, like fudge. It'll send him off to Sleepytown within about ten minutes, then it wears off over an hour or two, no side effects the next day. His own body should keep him asleep for at least a few hours past that, given how tired he is." She smirked at me and drifted to the side where she'd left her coat and bag. I went over to the clothing racks and searched for my outfits. This time there were designated shoes for each look.

There were several new women waiting there, and it turned out that Steve had partnered with a lingerie company to fit us, making sure we had the best foundation for our particular looks. The right bra made all the difference.

"Where is your nearest store?" I asked, looking at myself in the mirror. I'd been totally buying wrong. The fitter smiled and gave me a business card. Then Steve called me over, judging critically, but had only minor adjustments, fortunately. I changed quickly, loving the clothes. Just as soon as Steve got caught up on his sleep, I was going to be tapping at his door, requesting that I be one of his first clients. We went through the other looks quickly, and none of them required much alteration.

The next day was a run through where we practiced changing from look to look quickly and in the order Steve wanted. He looked slightly better and was more peppy, and I caught a wink from Emma. He dictated the speed at which he wanted us to walk, but allowed us discretion about how long to stay at the apex of the runway and what to do while we were there; he wanted us to have some freedom so that we could respond to the crowd's reaction. What was interesting, I thought, was how wearable everything was. The everyday clothes were worn with shoes that had nothing higher than a three inch heel, and the fabrics all started off in solid colors, so there was no cheating to make a design more... oomphy... by using pattern to add interest to an ordinary design. Emma wore the first look out, black slacks with a slightly wide leg and a crease so sharp I probably could have cut myself on it. This was paired with a black jacket, highly sculptural, in raw silk. The pants could be worn during the day as a perfect look for business and transitioning seamlessly into the evening, and the jacket I could see somebody (like me) wearing to an important meeting before going to a cocktail party.

This was followed by an Edwardian-ish dress; it was in a plain cream silk that looked radiant in the light and had elbow-length sleeves and a square neckline with an asymmetrical overdress in navy chiffon, held in place with a fringed sash. Delicate embroidery and discreet beading provided interest. The model took off the overdress at her pivot, revealing that the bodice of the silk gown skimmed the figure, and a smocked detail at the waist--using contrasting navy thread--was the only detail. The dress fell to the ankle and showed off dainty plain pumps. A spontaneous "ooh" swept the workroom, and the parade continued. This first part was all clothing mainly for day and workplaces, but some of the designs were done in luxury fabrics too to show off the versatility of the design. The cream silk gown was followed by an identical one in white and dark green linen; the differences were in color, texture, and ornamentation on the overdress, which on the work version was more assertive, geometric embroidery in bands. I had two looks in this part; a blush
pink cotton sundress with a tailored bodice and full skirt that held its shape with a wide horsehair braid in the hem, and deeper pink alpaca cardigan and a pair of Katherine Hepburn-inspired slacks that shaded from black at the hem to a dark gray at the waist and an aquamarine charmeuse blouse with long full sleeves ending in tight cuffs and a wing collar. My next look kicked off the summer fun part of the collection; three of us wore bikini variations and went out at the same time; one model was a tall, voluptuous woman with the most beautiful dark coffee skin I'd ever seen and an elegant long neck who wore a tiger lily orange top that held her boobs firmly in place without looking painful and tied at the neck with a flirty bow; the bottom curved suggestively over her hips and gentle V shaping provided allure without being vulgar. An Asian woman was the next tallest in our group, with delicate bone structure and fragile-looking bisque skin. She didn't have a clearly defined waist or any bosom, but she was lithe and elegant. The bottom to her suit was a plain cherry red, cut high enough on the hip to draw attention to her long legs and had a textured band along the top edge to highlight her sleekly muscled abdomen; the cropped halter top used red, white, and chameleon fabric in a complex pattern. The chameleon fabric mimicked the color of whatever it was placed on, so it looked like large parts of the pattern were the model's bare skin, but she was completely covered. It was the most arresting look. My suit was a miracle of engineering. The bottom, in an emerald green fabric that looked like heavy satin but was resistant to sand, sun, salt, sunscreen, and chlorine, was shaped just to cover the necessary area in front and about half of my butt. A luxurious twist of fabric connected front and back over my hips, but that was mostly for looks because the fabric stayed where it was put until it was physically lifted away. The top provided a gentle pushup effect without being uncomfortable and flowed over my shoulders to a racer back. The fabric between my shoulderblades had laser-cut flowers.

The last part of the collection was evening looks, a smaller number of garments but I had five of them. A slinky amethyst satin gown cut on the bias, a black faille cocktail suit that was intricately pieced and used the pattern of the weaving as a decorative element, another Edwardian style gown that used several layers of light fabric for the look of the period, but when backlit, slyly showed the wearer's silhouette underneath, a pair of flowing palazzo pants with a clinging wrap top and sash, and, finally, an uncharacteristically frothy concoction. A strapless dark green satin bodice curved around my torso to beneath my shoulder blades. A draped satin panel swooped around the hips and upper legs back over the butt, containing the skirt to about mid-thigh, when the layers of tulle and taffeta fluffed out, shading from light pink on the outside to deep pink in the undermost layer. It was spectacular and refined. "Emma's got appropriate jewelry for the looks," Steve said to me after he'd approved everything, "But I wondered if you could borrow the Wayne pearls for this last gown. I'd have a ticket for Martha if she'd like to come see."

I knew Martha was interested and called her immediately. As expected, she agreed to lend me the pearls and said she'd be at the show.

I hustled to the library the next day with a great deal of anticipation. I wasn't alone; all the models were huddled by the door by 9:30, eager to get in and play. Wearing the garments was fun; they felt good on, and you held your head a bit higher knowing that you were in something special. It wasn't so much fun for Steve, who was betting his future as a designer on the show. He arrived with the director of the NYC library system who let us in and would stay on site as a representative in case there was a problem with the facility. Steve was wound as tight as piano wire and was pale and uncharacteristically rumpled. Emma looked serene, though, so I didn't worry about him. Much.
Steve's show was going to be in the world-famous reading room. As we climbed the stairs, I didn't want to think about what it must have cost to rent the space for two days--it had also been closed the day before to remove the tables, set up the runway and staging area, and arrange the chairs. I didn't know what to expect.

I gaped a bit as we entered; the runway appeared to be constructed of railway sleepers that paid tribute to the city's past as a transportation hub, elevated so that the spectators would be looking up a bit (and negating the need for more expensive risers for the seating). The backdrop was a stylized city backdrop picked out in colored lights. "Won't be turning that on until just before the press and the rest of the audience arrives," he told us as we walked toward it. "The lights give me a headache." Backstage, there was a rack of clothes for each model, a chair, and a lit mirror with a small ledge. Hair and makeup professionals had arrived with us and some of the models were plopped right into their chairs to begin. The rest of us put on our shoes and tried out the runway. I'd been worried that the surface would be uneven, but it was smooth and level, the wood absorbing the sound the shoes made so we didn't clunk around, and the wood had a little give under the heel, making it feel more secure. I looked more closely; the catwalk was lined with cork. You couldn't see it from the seats and it greatly enhanced my sense of security. Now if I just didn't trip, this was going to be fun.

To my surprise, Natasha showed up to guard the jewelry, including Martha's pearls. There wasn't time to talk, but it was fun to see her. And Hawkeye; he'd been pressed into checking each outfit to be sure it was correct and accessorized accurately before the model stepped out onto the runway. He had a binder with a picture of the outfit, shoes, jewelry, and any props the model would carry. Natasha was responsible for handing out the jewelry and collecting it again as soon as the model came off the runway. We did another run through, quickly, to be sure that the order was exactly as Steve wanted and that we could change clothes quickly enough. Some of us had different underwear for different looks and that had to be factored in along with changes to the hairstyles. For example, the Edwardian flavored dress I had required a corset, which I actually didn't hate. But then, I didn't have to wear it for long. Around eleven, the stylists got to me.

"It's fashionable right now for designers to make their models' faces as bland and unremarkable as possible so that all the focus is on the clothes," the makeup artist said as she applied foundation. "A few of them are actually powdering their models' hair to make the person recede as much as possible." The hair stylist snorted.

"It looks ridiculous; women are going to wear the clothes, you should see women wearing them. But they're still far better off than the old couturiers. Worth, Vionnet, Poiret, all that set are having to figure out how to do a runway show and let me tell you, they are lost. The Worths won't employ a makeup artist and their looks are not updated. They must be going for the audience that refuses to change their look. I'm doing hair for them later in the week," she said, and in the mirror I could see her shake her head.

"I like how Steve has taken some design elements from the past and reinterpreted them for a broad class of customers who include a lot of returnees," I mentioned as I stayed still for the mascara.

"Those dresses look charming; not really old-fashioned, like anybody would wear them," was the makeup artist's opinion.

"Thank you, ladies," Steve's voice said pleasantly. I could hear noises now, which meant that people were arriving. His eyes were a little glassy--he'd moved past panic into some sort of
alternate reality overload. The stylists cooed at him, and he smiled, thanked them for their help, and went to the middle of the area where he yelled that we had half an hour left. The makeup artist finished with the wine-colored stain on my lips and moved on. The hair stylist removed the rollers from my hair (apparently some things never changed) and carefully sprayed the curls. My first looks would have my hair in a Lauren Bacall-style pageboy, followed by a ponytail for the swimsuit, and an updo for the rest. The pageboy would be artfully dishevelled for the first look, the sundress and cardigan suggesting a breeze at work, and smooth for the slacks and blouse. There was one more thing--a body painter hustled over, slapped a stencil on my abdomen, and quickly painted a design that circled my navel and went up the midline, flowers and flourishes. The paint had a multicolored shimmer that would look good with all the suits and skin tones and added fun and an unexpected touch of drama. Another stencil on my thigh, and the quick-drying paint was complete.

"It'll wear off in a day or two," the painter told me, and moved on. I carefully touched the paint to make sure it was dry, and slipped into the dress, put on the cardigan, and stepped into the shoes, cute little peep-toe pumps in white with pink embroidery and heels. Natasha gave me a thin bracelet and clean silver hoop earrings, and I took my place in line. My breath caught as the lights dimmed and the chatter in front of the curtain died down.

"Good morning, ladies and gentlemen," Steve said as he stepped out onto the runway. He was trembling a little from the stress but his voice was calm and welcoming. "Thank you for coming to the inaugural show of the Rogers design house. I've prepared a collection for every woman. We have a great number of people living today who have different expectations for their personal style, and the goal has always been to produce designs that look as good as they ware to wear. There are new and updated silhouettes in traditional and cutting edge fabrics that make for an eclectic collection. Some of the models you'll see aren't models by profession. I want everyone to know that you can wear these clothes and look great regardless of your occupation or ability to walk a runway." Chuckles from the audience. "Thank you for coming, and enjoy the show."

The music started, modern swing that added a certain bounce to our step and brightened the atmosphere. One of the professional models who was working a show later in the week said that pompous classical music or screechy ultramodern electronica were the music styles most shows would be using. I was glad I was here instead. Hawkeye gave me a wink and a nod when it was my turn, and I stepped through the backdrop and strolled down the runway, feeling relaxed and having a good time. My pivot made the skirt flip out a little, and I made my return. Then it was backstage, blinking away the spots left from the camera flashes, a quick change of clothes, shoes, jewelry, and the stylist smoothed out my hair. With the bikini, I didn't have shoes; the cork was warm under my feet. I trailea beach towel along behind me, flicking it out for the tallest model to sit on, then she was up, flicking the towel over her shoulder, and we ambled back. Everything went right to plan until the end, when Steve shuffled the order. The dress I wore would be the last one out, and Steve hastily told me that he'd walk out with me, I'd do the pivot, we'd walk back together, and he'd close the show from the runway. I nodded as I clasped the pearls around my neck. The pearls had always been lucky for me and I was glad to be wearing them here. He gave me a once over, critically adjusting the skirt so it was properly fluffed and straight. After the second to last model moved out, he pulled on a double breasted suitcoat and buttoned it, smoothing his tie and nervously running his fingers through his hair, which the stylist had just combed. The mussed hair just added to his appeal. Now that the show was almost over, he brightened and smiled. He stepped out after the model returned and offered me his arm. When I stepped out, the audience's 'ooh' was louder than for the other looks and we walked down the runway, chatting as we went. The dress was really comfortable to wear and the skirt felt fun, I told him.

"Glad you're having fun. You saved my bacon," he said, stopping as I took the last steps to the end of the stage by myself. After my pivot, Steve took my hand and lifted, and I turned, making the
skirt flare out. He grinned and we foxtrotted back a few steps before walking back to the top. He looked enormously relieved as he gave a little speech thanking everybody for coming, then the other models came out to join the applause. Emma was practically limp now that the stress of the show was over and it was such a success. Backstage, some of the reporters had been given access to speak to Steve and the models. Most of the attention was correctly on the designer, so we were able to enjoy glasses of sparkling wine that he'd provided for us. The few reporters who asked us questions wanted to know how the clothes felt and what we thought about them, and I was glad to hear that it wasn't just me raving about them. The models who'd worn the other bikinis couldn't be happier.

"Steve ought to design lingerie," the tall model said. "It's wonderful to have a supportive top that doesn't look dowdy or... industrial."

The other model nodded. "Usually I don't bother with a top, I'm flat as a board, but this was really a fun suit. I felt pretty wearing it." The reporter turned to me.

"What can I say?" I asked. "I want that suit. I'd buy some of those dresses, too." The other models laughed and there was a wave of agreement.

"You're Alex Barnes, aren't you?" one reporter asked, and my mouth flattened. The one who'd asked about the swimsuits stepped to the side to dart a look at my back. Sorry, pal, the wings don't leave marks.

"I am," I said coolly.

"Guess mutants have to be good for something," the reporter muttered, and I just lifted my eyebrows at him.

"A couple of models quit unexpectedly, and she was kind enough to fill in," Emma said factually, coming to my rescue, still in the beautiful beaded 20s inspired dress she'd worn for her last look. "She helped Steve on his student showcases, so he knew that she could fit into the looks that had been sized for one of the models." She patted my arm. After that, the models around me turned a collective cold shoulder to the reporters.

"Will you get my zipper?" one of them asked me, and the reporters got the hint that we were done. We changed, and I went back out where a crew was already disassembling the catwalk. Steve and Emma came with me to see the family.

"The women looked beautiful," I heard my uncle say. "You look like shit, though, Stevie. Take a nap this afternoon. You looked great, doll. Make sure he gets some sleep." Emma laughed and kissed Bucky's cheek.

"I'm afraid once I get to sleep I'll be out for days," Steve told him ruefully. I was getting hugs and compliments and tuned out of that conversation. Daniel, Mark, Thomas and Martha had to get back to work, but the rest of us went to lunch. Steve had employed a crew to clean up and get everything back to the workshop, so he and Emma were able to join us. It was a light-hearted lunch, full of praise for Steve's work. Toward the end, the first reviews started to post.

"The inaugural collection of Steve Rogers' design house is, simply, a smash," I read, scanning the first article. "Stellar use of fabrics, deep exploration of technique and design, and confident exploitation of color started Fashion Week with a bang..."

"Rogers' models were full of praise for the wearability of the clothes and were eager for the pret a porter line to hit the stores--" Damian read.
"Even Emily Moore, a model who is a fixture in Fashion Week and who rarely comments about designers and their shows, raved about both the look and the feel of the garments she showed--"

"A judicious blend of inspiration from the past and forward-thinking, modern looks, this surprising collection from recent FIT grad Steve Rogers was a smash--" Emma read. "Oh, look, honey, they have a picture of you and Alex. They're calling the dress the Rose gown."

"Guess you did ok, punk," Bucky said to Steve affectionately.

"Thank god," he mumbled as he rubbed his face with his hands. "I was worried I'd have the shortest fashion career in history." I rolled my eyes.

At the end of the lunch, Steve said he was going to take a nap. As we disbanded, he gave me a hug and thanked me again for filling in.

"No trouble," I assured him. "It was fun. Congratulations on a big hit, Uncle Steve. Bask in your awesomeness. Really enjoy your success, you've earned it. And let me know when you're ready to take orders. There are a couple of things I'd kill for."

"No death and destruction necessary," he assured me grandly, smiling, and on that note, we went our separate ways. Damian went back to work, but I took Bucky and my daughter, who had come over to see the show, to look at the building I'd bid on. Serena and I agreed that it would be easier to have a single owner for the property. It meant more risk for me, but I was in a better position to assume it.

"Wow, Mom, what a dump," my beloved daughter said critically, looking up.

"The good thing is that it'll be a real showcase of your ability, sweetie," Bucky said. "It doesn't look like a good neighborhood, though." He glanced around. "Let's add another hand-to-hand session each week. Keep you sharp."

"That's a good idea, Uncle Bucky," Martha said. "It must be a breeding ground for crime after dark."

"Crime rate's low here," I said briskly. And it was; I suspected it was a combination of crime not being reported and the fact that this was a pretty deserted area. "But my offer's been accepted, and once people see what's going on, there will be more interest in the neighborhood. Some of the buildings are still on the historic registry and the city doesn't have permission to tear them down. But we will have good security," I conceded.

"How's your schedule for tomorrow around one?" Bucky asked, unimpressed. We set up a practice schedule.

"When do you close, Mom?" Martha wanted to know.

"Three weeks," I said eagerly. "They couldn't accept the offer fast enough, but there was a question about a past owner in the title search, and that has to be cleared up. But Dagny's already been out to measure the park site and do... some other landscape things."

"Have you signed the papers on your corporation yet?" Martha asked as we turned away.

"I have, I wanted to give my friends time to think it over. While I think it's going to be a success, a new business is always risky, and I wanted them to have some time away from the excitement of the moment to consider it rationally. Serena is already at work on the blueprints and elevations for the remodeling, though. The shape of the building is weird, since the sides slope back in a
trapezoid shape. It's going to be tricky. And I'm not sure how to attract the businesses we want for
the first three stores--retail. Or the businesses for the floors under ours, actually. Tony's already
gotten a couple of things on my work list accomplished, bless him, and I'm having acoustical
testing done on the stabilizing agent for the wood and masonry."

"Why, sweetie?" Bucky asked, looking puzzled.

"It won't be important for this project, but when you live in a space long enough, you get used to
how things sound in a room. Replacing wood, in particular, is going to alter the way that sound
reflects around a room. The techboard that's already in use has been tested too; it's pretty null,
sound reflection-wise, less than plaster, about the same as old-fashioned drywall. Little changes to
acoustics mean that people report feeling a little less at home until they get used to the new sounds,
so this sort of smooths the way for them."

"Huh," my daughter said, staring at me. "I would never have thought of that."

"That's why I'm the historic preservationist, dear," I said complacently.

"Who do you have doing legal and the nuts and bolts of the business?" Martha asked, curious.

"Your godmother, Aslyn."

Martha grinned. "I'm scheduled to have lunch with her tomorrow," she said. "I'll have to
congratulate her."

"Do you have any ideas for businesses on the lower level?" Bucky asked as we turned onto a busier
street.

"Yeah, I'm going to ask Mom if she would be interested in opening a branch of her coffee shop. we
need coffee, and hers is the best, plus she's got the best snacks." He grinned. "There's also a
grocery store chain, Oasis, that specializes in compact stores in urban food deserts, which fits the
bill pretty well. Our street and the ones on each side aren't zoned for residences, but a block over
on the west side is, and there's not much there for food options. Plus I bet people working in the
neighborhood and the building, once we start to get tenants, would stop by on their way home
because it would be convenient. Other than that, I'm open. It needs to be a mixed bag, though, I
don't want all of one type of store."

"You need a PR firm, sweetie," Bucky said. I sighed; something else to put on the list. I needed a
meeting to get everybody together and get their decisions. Since Aslyn didn't have her bar results
yet, I'd gone to a firm Mark had recommended and had them draw up the paperwork for the
incorporation of my business and the partnership agreements. I'd be bringing them to the meeting
and getting signatures, hopefully, on all of them. Martha and I said goodbye to Bucky, who had to
go back to campus for class, and we went to a large furniture store. Martha had been disappointed
that we didn't have a guest room ready at the new house, so Damian and I had agreed it was time to
get cracking. He had less interest in a room that he wasn't going to be using, and in the hopes of
luring Martha back a little more often, had proposed that she help pick out furniture and the
mattress for it. She was thrilled that the bed my dad had made me and that she'd used growing up
too was out of the mansion's attic and available for her use, so we got a few things to supplement
that and the cedar chest; a small recliner, a side table and bedside tables, and a vanity, small and
sleek. The closet was much smaller than mine and Damian's, but still a walk-in, and I'd ask Alfred
if he had time to work his organizational magic there too. She chose two area rugs, one by the bed
and one to delineate the seating area, a couple of lamps, and a heavenly soft mattress, and then it
was on to other stores to choose bed linens and towels.
After our shopping excursion, we went home, threw the towels into the laundry, and went up to the main house to talk to Alfred and maybe cadge some cookies. We found him in the kitchen with Daniel and a strange man who resembled Alfred in the appearance of strength and the overall impression of competence.

"Miss Alex, Miss Martha," Alfred said, smiling. "May I introduce Alan Einion. We met while I was on vacation, that little incident in the jungle."

"Pleased to meet you, Mr Einion," I said, extending my hand. His grip was firm but not like he had something to prove and not limp. Martha smiled too and shook his hand after me.

"The pleasure's mine, ma'am. Do you prefer Ms Barnes or Mrs Wayne?"

"Either's fine, but you can call me Alex. There are a lot of Mrs Waynes around here," I said, distracted. Something was up. I suddenly wondered if we'd burned poor Alfred out and he was quitting.

"What brings you to the city?" Martha asked casually. "Love your accent."

Einion smiled. "Thank you, miss. I'm from Wales, originally. I've kept in touch with Alfred since our adventure. There's no room in my old agency, so when Alfred said he might know of a situation over here, I thought I'd investigate further."

Martha looked entertained. "Where did you use to work, if you don't mind me asking?"

"Security Service, miss." Einion's face was bland.

"Didn't that used to be MI-5? Were you an operative?" Martha asked excitedly. "Like James Bond?"

"Ah, yes, Bond," Einion said bemusedly. "Everybody expects us to run around in tuxedos with a martini in one hand and a gun in the other with a beautiful woman on our arm. But really, nobody has a license to kill. They wouldn't do any good in foreign countries, which is where the Security Service operates, since the government has no jurisdiction. Also, it deprives one of due process." I noted that he hadn't said one way or another what his position had been.

"Are you quitting, Alfred?" I asked in a small voice.

"Tut, Miss Alex," Alfred said reprovingly. "I simply need some assistance as there is more to manage on the estate these days." Shit. I should have thought about that. And here I'd been about to ask him to take on another task.

"Actually, I was about to interview Alan," Daniel said to me. "Would you mind sitting in, Grandma? I'd appreciate your input." Martha and I exchanged clueless looks, and I agreed. We went to the library, and Daniel seated himself behind the desk, Einion on the other side, and I pulled up a chair on one of the short sides and sat back. Daniel and Einion chatted a bit about the challenges of running the estate, then Daniel asked if he'd mind submitting to a truth serum.

"I've nothing to hide," Einion said bemusedly.

"That's one of the reasons that I wanted Grandma to be here," Daniel said. "She's a paramedic, in case you have a weird reaction. Nobody ever has, though." He handed me a vial.

"Is this Emma's?" I asked, and he nodded.
"My aunt Emma made this during her first life," I said, carefully uncapping it right by Einion's face and keeping it at arms length. "It's quite effective and has no side effects that were ever noted. It can't make you speak, but if you do, you'll feel compelled to provide the true answers to the questions. I've had it used on me and my experience wasn't unpleasant."

"I can't answer any questions about my former work in detail," Einion said, and Daniel nodded.

"I have a couple of general questions, but if you feel like they would violate security considerations, just mention that." Einion nodded, and took a good snootful of the serum. I capped it and resumed my seat. Daniel started out by ascertaining that Einion was here only in response to the feeler that Alfred had put out and had not competing interests. Or, as he put it, he wasn't serving two masters.

Einion had joined the Security Service in the middle part of the 21st century, a time of great global upheaval. He'd been seriously injured during the course of his employment and had shifted from fieldwork. The government had sent him back to school to study engineering, and put him to work innovating for the field agents. He'd done that until retirement, then had an uncomplicated afterlife. He'd done some bodyguarding, but hadn't found that this kind of work provided enough scope for his interests and abilities.

"Well, hmm. We don't just need a butler here," Daniel said, then seemed to founder a bit.

"Below us, through secured access, is a secret facility," I said. Daniel slid a piece of paper across the desk. Einion signed a confidentiality agreement. "It's not terribly complicated but there's some cloak and dagger going on. Cape and gadgets, more accurately. This is the home of Batman, we actually have three generations of active Batmen and a couple of former Batmans who have gone out on their own. The facility is called the bat cave, and it requires quite a lot of time and attention to maintain. Specialized expertise."

Einion blinked. "I knew something was different about this job, but I wasn't expecting that," he said.

"Want to see?" Daniel asked, and so we trooped downstairs.

"What do you think?" Daniel said as we stood in the computer area.

"This is unexpectedly sophisticated," Einion said, looking around in surprise.

"The family works with Alfred in maintaining the cave and making upgrades. We also have a medical suite, which is operated by Alfred and Alex, but it is straightforward enough that almost anybody can use it." We showed him around to the other areas, and periodically he stopped to look at some of the displays that generations of batmen had added.

"There are actual bats in the cave," I said. "Do you mind them? Once a year we mist the cave so that they get vaccines against diseases, so they're not harmful."

"I don't believe that should be a problem," he murmured. After Einion had seen everything, we went back upstairs into the kitchen, where Daniel and Alfred discussed what would be required.

"You would be mostly responsible for the mansion," Alfred told him. "I plan to focus on the new house with Miss Alex and Master Damian. I would provide extensive training and we would work together concerning the facility downstairs and the estate as a whole and well as any entertaining needs." He looked at me. "If that is acceptable to Miss Alex and Master Damian." I smiled.

"I think we're totally on board with that," I assured him. He relaxed a trifle. "Martha and I actually
came down for cookies. Now we've got Alfred," I gloated, and he smiled. "If you'd like to move
down to the new house, you could have the guest suite."

"That would be quite agreeable, Miss Alex," he said.

"Great," I said, grinning. "What type of furniture do you like?"

"I have no particular leanings beyond comfort," he said. "But extensive furnishings aren't
necessary. I require very little." He looked a little apprehensive, and I smiled.

"Ok, Alfred," I agreed. I kind of tuned out Einion accepting the position, but shook his hand again.
"Welcome to the family," I told him. "And I don't mean that in a Godfather type way, just our
extended family. We're peculiar, but mostly harmless."

Martha burst out laughing. "Mostly," she agreed. "Welcome, Mr Einion."

"Please call me Alan," he requested, and Daniel, Alfred, and he went off to the library to do the
paperwork. I grabbed a couple of cookies and hustled outside. Martha caught up with me peeking
into Alfred's rooms. I'd never go in uninvited, but the draperies were open.

"Wow, it's kind of boring in there," Martha said behind me, making me jump. She smiled and
patted my back before taking a second look. "Furniture store?"

"Yep," I agreed, and we hustled back to the car. She drove back to the city while I called Damian.
He was ecstatic at the news but couldn't get away to help us choose furniture.

"He said once that he prefers a firm mattress, but not too hard," he said, frowning. "I visited him
once when he wasn't feeling well--exactly once in the whole time I knew him--and he had a squishy
recliner that was well used. Other than that, he seems to pay more attention to function over form."
He considered. "His favorite color is red, but I don't think he likes it in large quantities."

"Thanks Dad," Martha said, and I blew him a kiss before hanging up. "Good that you have that
adjustable wallboard, Mom," she said to me. "We can choose mainly neutral things and he can
customize as he pleases."

We picked out a bed with a blocky headboard with an upholstered panel and storage cubbies on the
sides, a mattress that was firm but not hard, a dark stained cedar chest with silver fittings, a
wingback recliner upholstered in a friendly gray chenille, bookshelves for his personal collection,
and lamps. Martha proposed some clean-lined bedside tables from the attic and an elegant side
table for the recliner, also from the attic. We chose a subdued rug in autumn colors and another in
grays with flashes of reds in the pattern, and I paid extra for next-day delivery. Then it was off
for bedding, and we chose thick soft towels and crisp white linen sheets, having seen them on his
current bed. Soft warm blankets and a plain dove gray comforter, and we bought both firm and soft
pillows, reasoning that the unused ones could go up to one of the spare rooms. A few welcoming
touches, like a carafe and glass for water on the nightstand, and we were done. We started the
sheets in the laundry when we got home, following combining procedures I remembered from my
first life and Valhalla: first washing the linen with baking soda and vinegar, using the mild
acid/base reaction to soften the sheets slightly, then following with fabric softener, and a final wash
with just a bit of detergent. Martha helped me iron them while the towels washed, and we dusted
the bedroom and cleaned the bathroom, setting aside the freshly laundered sheets until the next
day. We went up to the main house for dinner and learned that Alan would be starting the next
week. After dinner, Damian and I went home and I made some cookies myself. It didn't seem
sufficiently welcoming to plonk down purchased cookies.
"I understand why Alfred would move down," Dick said, stopping by before he and Damian went out on patrol and snitching a few cookies. "You two are his favorites, not that he'd admit to having favorites. Alex I understand, but you'd think the trauma of trying to civilize you as a kid would have done away with any lingering fondness, Nightgown." Damian rolled his eyes and slugged his brother. I sighed.

"Stay safe out there, you guys," I said, kissing my husband goodbye, then I went back to Alfred's suite to fiddle around with the wall color. Martha showed up with her brother and the tables from the attic. They'd stolen up to the attic and back outside without Alfred seeing them. We wanted everything to be a surprise for him, and we felt that mixing pieces from the attic with the new things, like we'd done for the other rooms, showed that he was part of the family. I made them polish the furniture before placing them along the wall in the suite.

"If Alfred's going to come down here and run things, I kind of want to move back," Xander said, helping himself to a cookie. I left out a few more on a plate then removed the rest to storage.

"Those are for Alfred," I said sternly to my pouty children.

"Do you really want to bring your dates home to Mom, Dad, and Alfred?" Martha said doubtfully as she took a cookie. "If you could get a date, that is." They began to bicker amiably and I took the last cookie. Suddenly I missed J.
After the children left, I called my brother.

"What's up, A?" he asked. I could hear the TV in the background.

"Not much. The kids were down, bickering, and Dick and Damian were insulting each other. It made me miss you." He burst out laughing.

"I was going to call you in the next couple of days anyway," he said, eating a potato chip.

"Do you mind not crunching in my ear?" I asked pointedly. He crunched another small chip, just to irritate me, then stopped eating.

"Well, I'm all certified as a doctor, up on all the latest tech, expanded my vision with new classes, yadda yadda, and I've just accepted a new job in the city. It's working in a clinic, there are a lot of people and not enough facilities." I nodded. "Health care is a lot better than it used to be, but there are still people who are underserved."

"Which clinic?" I asked, and jotted down the name.

"Donation time?" he asked, smiling.

"Yep. You've been officially hired, right? It won't look like I'm trying to bribe them to hire my little brother, will it?"

He bared his teeth at me. "Yeah, I've already signed the contract. Place is bursting at the seams and I'm not quite sure where they'll put me, but I start in just over two weeks."

"You want to stay with us for awhile?" I offered. "We actually have furniture for some of the guest rooms now and Alfred's got some help, so he's moving down here."

"Alfred has help? Amazing." We discussed this surprising turn of events, and J accepted my invitation.

The next morning as Damian and I showered, I told him about J, and he was pleased. He'd always gotten along well with my brother. We had one last guilty breakfast in the living room before going into the city. I was having coffee with my friends. Because the morning rush had passed, we scored the big table in the coffee shop. "So I'm just going to ask, has anybody changed her mind? No hard feelings if you have. But otherwise, I've got the contracts with me. Let's get moving on this."

"You know I'm in," said Serena, and Aslyn poked me affectionately.

"Not only am I in, but I got the news that I passed the bar this morning." Clapping and congratulations interrupted, but in the end everybody was still in. I beamed and briskly handed out everybody's packets. Each one had a pen with "Valkyrie: Adventures in Architecture" printed on them and there were little flags placed where each signature was required.

"Buy in to the partnership's delayed for a year," Dagny observed.

"It's a matter of risk," I said. "Just in case this goes south, I want you guys to be protected."

"Aw, Alex," Karen murmured, and patted my arm.
"I dropped 'Conceptualization' because it sounded pretentious and was irritating to say," I said.

"Good call," Margaret said, scrawling her signature as she made steady progress through the stack of paperwork. Other Valkyrie partners nodded.

They passed their folders to me when they'd read and signed, and I went to replenish our supply of pastries in celebration. Then after we'd all selected one, I pulled out my file, full of lists and assignments.

"Ok, Aslyn. I trust your competence absolutely, but you're also just started out as a lawyer, so if you have questions or would like some help drafting documents or whatever, I've arranged with Barkley, Tester to provide mentoring in addition to whatever you might have lined up." I passed her the cards of the two partners who'd agreed to provide the assistance. "Now, these are at the top of my list. We need a temporary office, we can't keep meeting at coffeeshops. Also, we close on the property soon, so let's hit the ground running. We need to line up an interior design firm, we need tenants. Aslyn, this is kind of in your wheelhouse, along with the HR stuff, so start thinking about how we can attract tenants to the building and who we should pursue. I do want to give my mom first crack at opening a coffeeshop there," I said, only slightly abashed.

"Oh, good," said Carol. "We stop there regularly, it's not far from my workers' complex. Best coffee in the city."

"If there any objections to this nepotism, now's the time to address it," I said, laughing but also serious. There weren't, though.

"As long as the coffee's good I don't care who provides it," Aslyn said. "Plus your mom is nice and easy to work with." She'd met my mom in our first lives but more frequently since the return.

"We were thinking about approaching Oasis to do a little grocery store," Serena said, and Aslyn nodded. Then everybody chipped in with ideas for either specific businesses or the types of stores they'd like to see. We all wanted interesting, innovative businesses in our building. Create some status and a buzz, and Mom's stores had name recognition that would help us too. Then we moved on to Dagny. She wouldn't be able to give the park her full attention until graduation, and it didn't really matter until we could get the decrepit building on the lot demolished (first priority, since it would take the least amount of effort and resources.) While we wanted to leave it open to the public, we also acknowledged that if there was vandalism or a lot of illegal activity taking place there, we'd want to build a fence and open it only during daylight. She had a rough sketch, though, using trees and bushes to subtly block off the back of the park where it opened onto the building to help keep people away from the loading docks. Flowerbeds, paths, and benches looked inviting and pretty, and trees here and there would provide shade on hot days. We discussed having a fountain.

Because getting the building renovated was the fulcrum on which everything else swung, I reported that I was prepared to request bids for the exterior and interior renovation as soon as I closed on the property The exterior mainly needed a good cleaning with some cosmetic repairs to the stone. The steps and the ornate brass doors needed more attention, but were fundamentally sound. Dagny suggested some type of planting to enhance the entrance, and I was glad to hand that off to her. The interior would require stripping to the studs; it looked like the floors were the only things that might be able to be saved, and I'd want to see what the interior designers would have to say before I made final choices on that, with input from the gang.

Aslyn tapped her stylus on the handheld she'd been using for notes. "Alex, it's not that I don't feel that I can't do this, but there's an awful lot of work to be done because we really need to jump on this. I'm going to need some help, particularly on the PR front, and to research the tenant issues. I'd
prefer to focus inward, get somebody to face outward." She wouldn't meet my eyes.

"That's fine, it is a lot of work, and it's all going to be new to you," I said. "Go ahead and find somebody you'd like to work with who can kick ass and put a great face on the company."

"You look squirrelly," Karen said to her. The advantage of long-time friendship.

Aslyn stuck her tongue out. "I want to hire Martha," she said.

"My daughter or my grandma-in-law?" I asked, baffled.

"My goddaughter," she clarified.

"I didn't know she wanted to leave Wayne," I said, flummoxed.

"This is a big, exciting opportunity," Aslyn said. "And Martha's always been drawn to a challenge. She's friendly, outgoing, and driven, and I'm certain that she could do a good job for us."

"She'd be an employee," I warned. "Valkyrie is us. We are its beating heart."

"That's a hard line," Margaret said, surprised.

I shrugged. "We're the principals of the firm, we're building it on what we can do. It's ours. I'm not saying that she--and the other employees we'll acquire--won't be offered shares if we go that route, but ownership is ours."

"I don't really think she'll have a problem with that," Aslyn said. So we had a vote. Everybody knew Martha and realized what a formidable package of abilities and knowledge she brought with her. I was the only nervous one.

"With my mom, she'll be another tenant, free to fail or succeed on her own, just like anybody. I worry about bringing my daughter in."

"She'll be working primarily with me," Aslyn pointed out. "And you know what she's capable of." So Aslyn got the ok to talk to Martha. We also decided to get a design firm in from the beginning since the shape of the building was so weird. It would be most beneficial to figure out how to divide space for retail and offices before walls actually went up, and that would help Serena with her floor plans. We zipped through everything else I had and addressed everybody else's concerns and ideas. I went home after the meeting, feeling like we were making real progress at last. Now the fun part would start.

I was home in time to take care of the furniture delivery, not feeling like Alfred should have to do that. I wanted to present his suite to him when it was all put together. The furniture that Martha had helped pick out was included in the delivery as well, and I'd stuck signs up in both rooms to show where each piece should go; that way I wasn't running up and down the stairs trying to direct traffic. I tipped the movers, and as soon as I closed the door behind them, raced to Alfred's suite to hang the towels, make the bed, and place a vase of daffodils (regard) on the recliner table. It looked nice and welcoming, I hoped. I made sure everything looked good. Eira thought so, she could see the full visible light spectrum.

Eira came with me when I went out to Mom's to talk to her about the coffeeshop. She thought that expansion into my building sounded promising and said she'd consider it. That was all I could ask, and we spent some time getting up to date before we went on to Dad's shop. He was interested in hearing about my progress too, and showed me the carcass of the desk for our library. It had just started to come together but I could tell already that I was going to love it. Then I asked if he'd do
some of the pieces for my office as well as the reception desk and conference table, and he agreed, since those projects were sufficiently in the future. I wanted the best custom furniture, and that was my dad.

Then I had to race home. I'd forgotten to make sure the gas for Alfred's fireplace was turned on. The fireplaces in the individual rooms were gas, but the ones in the public rooms were gas with the option to burn actual wood in them. Perfect for Yule logs and any dead trees on the estate. I set the plate of cookies and the filled water carafe on the bedside table just as Damian got home early.

"You did a great job, Sweet pea," he said, looking around and giving me a squeeze. "Alfred's going to love it." We went up to the mansion and asked if Alfred had the time to look at his new quarters.

"Of course, Miss Alex," he said, and accompanied us down the road. Frank launched himself at Alfred the moment we walked through the door and Alfred calmly detached the kitten from his trousers, tucking him under his arm as we walked down the hall to the suite. I opened the door and stepped back.

"My word," he said, stepping inside and looking around. "This is wonderful, Miss Alex." I put my head on Damian's shoulder and his arm went around my shoulder as we watched him explore. Eira herded him to the bathroom to check things out.

"I wasn't sure whether you'd want a desk or not," I said. "There's room for one if you'd like a personal desk."

"We can get you one or there are several in the attic," Damian added. "There's the one in office off the butler's pantry, but you may like another one."

"No, this will more than suffice for my needs," Alfred said.

"Yes, but what about your wants?" Damian pushed. "We want to make sure you're happy here. You're an important part of our family." Alfred blinked rapidly.

"Thank you, Master Damian." He cleared his throat. "I will be quite happy here."

"If you'd like different colors for anything, let me know," I said at the same Damian said, "You can adjust the wall colors here." He flipped open the discreet cover on the controls.

"Everything is lovely," Alfred said, and smiled at us. "Alan is a quick study, so it shouldn't take long to get him trained up to standard and I can focus more of my attention down here." He sounded pleased.

"Oh, I forgot to tell you that J will be moving back. I told him he could stay here until he finds housing. It might be awhile, the market being as tight as ever," I said to Alfred.

"Excellent," Alfred said. "It will be a pleasure to see Master Jaimez again. Alan is preparing the dinner this evening, if you'd like to join the rest of the family." We were interested in seeing how he did things and said we'd be there. "Excellent," he said again. "Soon I'll have things running properly here." We walked out and unexpectedly Alfred beeped Damian's nose like he was a boy. "No more eating in the living areas."

Busted.

Alfred returned to the main house and we retreated upstairs, taking advantage of our unusual presence here in the afternoon with no agenda. Damian flipped over and put me on top. "Sweet pea, I know we've got one of the bedrooms fixed up, but that bed is a little dainty for a guy."
"Ok, then you can go shopping. They must be tired of me by now," I said concisely. He grunted.

"If you come with me, I'll buy you lunch," he bargained, and I laughed, the sound modulating to a purr as his hands did wonderful things. "How did the meeting go?"

"Really well," I said, starting to move faster. "Everybody signed. Talked to Mom about the coffeeshop and Dad about furniture. Oh. Don't stop doing that, my darling. We got some rough time tables and stuff done. Also Aslyn wants to hire Martha."

Damian stopped. "What?" I wiggled insistently and got his focus back.

"They had lunch the other day, Aslyn thinks Martha wants a new challenge," I said briefly.

Damian focused on us after that and held further questions until I had regretfully released him. He sat up, holding me to him and resettling me on his legs, stroking my back. "I didn't know she was bored. Has she talked to Daniel?"

"I don't know," I sighed, snuggling. "I don't know whether I should talk to him or not. I don't want him to be upset, but this is really between him and Martha. Although it isn't, because Martha will be working for my company."

"Employee?" he said, nibbling kisses on my shoulder. I sighed with pleasure and nodded. "Let Martha deal with it," he advised. "It's up to her to decide where she wants to work. You can talk to him after." We hurried up to get ready for dinner and arrived in time for drinks. Alfred was manning the bar while Alan put the finishing touches on dinner.

We were chatting, catching up on everybody's days when the smoke alarm went off. Alfred quietly placed the tongs next to the ice bucket, handed Xander his beverage, and glided off to the kitchen.

We had soup, salad, and sandwiches for dinner. They were delicious, though, a little different from what Alfred would prepare.

Afterward, I saw Martha and Daniel exit the library. I nudged Damian and we exchanged a look. Then Damian got into the conversation his dad and Mark were having, and Martha and Thomas asked me about J's arrival and job. When Martha came back, she seemed calm but excited. Daniel looked rueful. I grabbed some cookies and ambled over.

"So I guess you heard about Martha," he said, accepting one.

"Aslyn said she wanted to hire her, I haven't talked with Martha about it."

"Well, I'm disappointed she's leaving, but I understand the lure of a new business. It'll let her stretch her abilities, and it's not like she's going over to the competition. You don't seem too keen, though, Grandma."

I sighed. "It would be different if she answered an ad or something, I guess. Martha has so many advantages already, and this one was kind of just handed to her. I'm worried that I'm surrounding myself with too many of my family and friends, not looking at other talent. At the same time, Aslyn needs someone she can work with and Martha is talented and capable."

"I think those are valid concerns," he acknowledged. "But you'll have other positions to fill and you're running out of family members." I laughed. "Martha won't be quitting tomorrow and leaving me in the lurch, so it won't be really disruptive. I already have a replacement in mind. Martha is excellent at what she does, but like you, I like to keep my eyes open for talent and a new perspective. I think we'll both do well with this. And Martha will certainly bring a lot of flair and
style to her work." He brightened. "I hear Tony's got a few patents pending on things for your business, Grandma. We're talking about a manufacturing proposition. I understand that it's for your exclusive use?"

"Well, at least until word gets out and people start working on knockoffs. Once industry rumors start up that somebody's fairly well along the path of replicating them, we'll release it so everybody can use it. By then it will have served its purpose, which is to draw attention to my business and Tony's." We chatted about that; the goal was for everybody to come out on top with these things.

Damian and I were sitting in the living room eating cookies (which Alfred did allow) and laughing about dinner. I'd never known Alfred to burn anything, and Damian couldn't remember an incident. "Alan's a good baker, but he's got a ways to go on the cooking front," was Damian's assessment.

"Indeed, Master Damian," Alfred said, passing by with a valise. "Master Daniel is sending him to cooking school. I will also be attending a few classes to brush up on my skills and try a few new things."

I exchanged a surprised look with my husband. "I can't imagine that your work needs improvement," I said, and Alfred smiled.

"How kind of you to say so, Miss Alex. But as you yourself know, continuing education is important. I can assure you that it will not interfere with the running of this household."

"If you need time, take it," Damian said. "You never take enough personal time, and we can arrange things." Alfred nodded.

"Thank you, Master Damian," he said, and continued on his way to get settled in. Eira got up and accompanied him down the hall to help. The kittens trailed after her. We weren't abandoned for long, though. Martha came down to talk.

"I don't think you're that thrilled that Aslyn wants to hire me," she said.

"It's not the quality of your work that I worry about," I said. "And it's not that I'm not grateful to Daniel for the opportunity to work for him, the opportunity to manage the London branch. But I've been a manager for most of my lives, did HR in the underworld, and I'd like a new challenge. I'm good at sales, and I'm very winsome." She smiled brightly, and her father and I smiled in return. The smile faded. "But I'm ready to leave London. I liked being able to see more of Grandma and Grandpa, but there was this guy... It didn't work out. So I want to come home. Be something other than just a Wayne. It's not that it's not a great family, it's just..."

"That you're that thrilled that Aslyn wants to hire me," she said.

"It's not the quality of your work that I worry about," I said.

She nodded. "I kind of weaseled my way into this," she acknowledged. "And it's not that I'm not grateful to Daniel for the opportunity to work for him, the opportunity to manage the London branch. But I've been a manager for most of my lives, did HR in the underworld, and I'd like a new challenge. I'm good at sales, and I'm very winsome." She smiled brightly, and her father and I smiled in return. The smile faded. "But I'm ready to leave London. I liked being able to see more of Grandma and Grandpa, but there was this guy... It didn't work out. So I want to come home. Be something other than just a Wayne. It's not that it's not a great family, it's just..."

"That it's nice to be known for your own work," Damian said, nodding.

"When you put it like that..." I sighed. "Well, honey, Aslyn wants you and it's important that she has someone to work with who is comfortable, and I want to give her the tools she needs. So apparently, you're one of those tools. But you'll be just an employee," I warned.

"That's fine," she said eagerly. "I've run things a lot, I want at least a break from that. I might split off and form my own PR firm down the road if it's something I like enough," she warned, and I smiled.

"Or we could fire you for ineptitude," I said and we all laughed. "We'll cross that bridge if we come to it. Uncle J has gotten a job in the city and is going to be moving back, staying here for a while. We're going to pick out furniture for the other guest room this weekend. Wanna come
shopping with us?" She agreed eagerly, and we made plans. She'd be returning to London to wind down her employment there on Sunday, so Saturday it was.

We had a good time shopping, going to a few different places, then hitting the attic again for a desk when we couldn't find one we liked. Alfred assured us that the closet would be ready for J's arrival; it was partly done already.

The next week, Aslyn had found us an office suite to use until the Valkyrie building was up and running. We all had small offices and there was a small kitchen and a more generous meeting room.

Not long after that, I closed on the buildings and hot-footed it right on over, carrying the master key. I wanted to go inside by myself, this first time. It was a big deal for me. I stood in the ground floor by the shabby staircase and didn't see the dust and decay and general decrepitude; I saw a rich, Art Deco-inflected lobby, warm wood, golden accents. Accessible and welcoming but grand. The doors for the lift (and it was old-fashioned enough to deserve that title rather than elevator) were splendid. I walked to the back of the building to look at the ugly, crumbling building behind, but I didn't see it. I saw Dagny's trees and heard the burble of the fountain. I wandered around some, hiking to the top. The little room crowning the building had some smashed windows and there was some pigeon poop inside, but the view was nice, and when it was all cleaned up, it would be lovely. I signed with pleasure, again seeing the possibilities, and called Aslyn.

"I've got the building, I'm here, and it's horrible. Let's get those requests for proposals out immediately."

Aslyn burst out laughing. The RFPs were ready, of course, and she emailed them with one swipe of her finger on her screen. Then she asked if she could see the inside too, and I told her to bring anybody who was around.

They showed up with a bottle of sparkling wine, which we passed around because nobody had wanted to bring glasses up nine flights of stairs. "This is going to be amazing," Serena said. "Once we get the bird poop out. And the windows fixed. And the mold gone. And someplace nice to sit. And--"

"We get the idea," Karen said, snickering and passing the bottle.

"It is dismal," Aslyn agreed. "But it's ours, and we're going to make it spectacular."

"Cheers," I said, and took a drink.
The next few weeks were a rush of activity. The demolition of the back building was the first RFP to be decided; it was a pretty straightforward process of knocking down the walls and hauling the debris away. When they had done that (it took only a week, we were left with a huge hole in the ground) Dagny arranged for topsoil to be brought in and worked into the existing soil to enrich it and fill in. Then further progress there had to wait until Dagny graduated. All of us went over to the building, though, and did some exploring as a group. And we took a slew of measurements at Serena's direction so that she could get her ideas firmed up. I trooped around seeing what was good about the historical details that were left, and deciding what I wanted to preserve so that the interior designers could work that into their plans. I took photos and recordings of us at work, the view from several windows, and later figured out how to upload it all to our new website.

J came up during this time and I picked him up at the bullet train station. There wasn't any trouble this time, no stopping on the line, no abductions anywhere. It was nice. We stopped by the building on the way home. "It's a dump right now, but I can see a lot of possibilities, A," he said, looking around. "You guys really should use respirators when you're running around in all this crap." Hadn't thought about that.

When we got home, Alfred was there to greet us and pried J's suitcases away. We went upstairs to show him where he'd be staying. He'd sent up some boxes earlier, which were neatly stacked in the room we'd worked on for him. Then it was down to the kitchen for cookies (a nice buttery shortbread today) and conversation, after which we went through the newly-excavated tunnel in the basement to the bat cave. The entrance was behind a shelving unit that currently held jars of preserves. J checked out the surgical suite and medical equipment, and we talked about some new advances in medicine that we might be able to make use of and some that we would benefit from tracking. We had the family to dinner to celebrate J's arrival that night, giving poor Alan, who was still burning the occasional meal, a night off.

A few weeks later, we had a graduation celebration for Dagny at the office, not wanting to have a party at the possible health hazard that was our project or on the lumpy topsoil of the vacant lot. It was also a warm day and we didn't want to hang around in the unaccustomed hot sunlight, our heels digging into the dirt, with nowhere to put the delicious cake that Alfred had made for the occasion. Then after the party, we had a meeting to go over the results from the RFPs. The exterior was pretty straightforward, since it was simply cleaning and repair, and we selected a low bid--although not the lowest--from a company with excellent recommendations from former clients and a great reputation. The interior was less straightforward. I had the final say, but I certainly wasn't closed to suggestions and ideas, and we debated the merits of the five most promising designs, narrowing the field to three, which we then invited to make more detailed presentations. I edited a video of our party for Dagny and us reviewing proposals for the website. We had increasing traffic from the previous recordings and stills I'd posted, and we were getting a buzz about the company. I posted the names of the firms we engaged as they started work, and with permission, incorporated some footage of their work in the weekly website updates. Never hurts to create goodwill with a little free publicity.

The day after the party, Dagny showed us the plans for the park. She'd added a small shelter where people could get some shade during heat or protection from rain and snow and sensibly kept it out in the open to prevent addicts from using it to shoot up or passers by from having intimate encounters. The highest bushes and many of the trees were at the back, screening the less attractive loading docks and secured entrance from view, but there were pleasant winding paths among fragrant plants like lavender and she's arranged it so that there should be color through most of the
year, from early crocus to autumn color from the Japanese maples and a few late flowers. Even during the winter, there would be interesting things to look at, from the shapes of the trees to conifer and holly bushes. Margaret proposed an arbor of wisteria at the entrance, which we enthusiastically embraced, and Aslyn, guided by a recent court case, advised that we put up a fence from the get-go and post a limitation of liability from things like bee stings and accidental slips on an icy path. We decided on a wrought-iron fence that would allow people to see in but would be harder to climb, a locking gate at night, and motion sensors that would detect someone coming over the fence, turn on a bright light at the appropriate part of the fence, and take pictures of the miscreants that we could turn over to the police, if necessary. Dagny made notes, and the next day a firm was out there to start pouring the concrete paths, lined on the outside with brick. Since she was out there every day, she recorded the progress. First the paths appeared, then a round fountain that had an edge you could sit on. The basin of the fountain was lined with blue glass tiles for easy cleaning and a bit of sparkle. Then the fence and security system, including light and a camera on the fountain, and we all came out on the happy day the plants arrived and we lugged pots around at Dagny's direction.

"This is going to be fantastic," Karen said, wiping her forehead and straightening up. "Maybe we should have had a pergola rather than the little shelter."

"Now you mention that," Dagny said in resignation. As one, we pivoted to look at the new rectangular shelter which suddenly seemed inadequate.

The next day she had a design for a structure that looked similar to the Porte Dauphine Metro station entrance in Paris, with an unbreakable glass and wood roof and metal panels along the side. The panels would take the time to construct; the rest of it was made from stock parts or elements that would need only light modifications. We all liked it a lot better.

During this time, we had the design firms in for their presentations. We had provided them a tour the building (with appropriate safety protection) so they could see what they were up against and get a better feel for what we wanted, and they did not disappoint.

All three designs were innovative and special, but we rejected one simply because it was too modern and not enough of the historic character of the building was preserved in the design. It was tougher to decide between the other two; we had to do a more detailed discussion to come to a decision. Both had strong designs that captured the luxury, energy, and forward-thinking of the Art Deco style, but one design got the edge because of a panel of stained glass in each of the backward facing windows with the balconies and the windows in the conference room. They provided a careful touch of color to the monolithic architecture and would glow beautifully at dusk or if people were working late. The second, and more important, factor was that the designer seemed to be less autocratic than the lead for the other team. There's only room for one boss on a project, and in this case, the boss was me. The other designer had rejected rebuilding the staircase from the lobby with a sweep, as we all wanted, in favor of a blockier set of heavier steps, saying they were more period and was resistant to our concerns in the meeting.

"I don't care how many awards she's won," Serena said. "I don't like her attitude. Not a team player."

"Ditto," said Margaret. So we contracted with Sabine Jones, an up and coming designer at Midmarch and Savil. It would be the first big solo project for her, but she had an established track record with smaller projects, and Serena thought that she'd be easy to work with. The two of them started work.

We weren't the only ones getting property. Stark Industry found a warehouse to remodel which
would provide labs for both Ann and Tony and much more space. Steve found a cute three-story building several streets away from mine. The salon that interfaced with the customers would be on the ground floor and his workshop on the second. It wasn't a historic building, so my services weren't needed, but he hired Serena to make some changes and we made some recommendations based on our experiences for the interior design. He showed me the design he wanted, and it was elegant but cozy and friendly, mostly in shades of warm white but with accents of crimson and midnight blue, which were his favorite colors. A bit of edge was shown in the use of brushed steel rather than the warmth and tradition of gold. Each of the large fitting rooms had a horseshoe of full-length mirrors, a comfortable chair, and a large tray table to set purses, messenger bags, and briefcases. He also went to talk to my dad about making him a desk for his directrice. What was most interesting to me is that he didn't have to advertise for help. He actually got resumes before he was ready for them. And not just from workers in the city. He got applications from Paris. Steve, who had a reverence for the traditional French model of couture, was floored. But not so flabbergasted that he didn't take advantage of it. He hired his directrice—the manager—who jumped ship from Dior, and his vendeuses, the saleswomen, came from Paris haute couture as well as a few New York couturiers. They brought their personal connections and knowledge of the business, bringing letters of introduction from the few specialty artisans still in business—those who did custom embroidery and beadwork, who did featherwork, made buttons, shoes, gloves, and all the extraordinary touches needed for the best designs. They also worked with him to find the best fitters and seamstresses and a specialist who could make perfect dress forms for clients. He found returned premières and seconde for both the flou and tailleur cells in the workshop (dresses and blouses and tailored pieces, respectively) from the houses of Fath, Balmain, and Vionnet. The tales they could tell about designers of that age were scandalous and frequently libelous; Coco Chanel was loathed by the women who had worked before, during and after WWII because she had collaborated with the Nazis. "Her 'Chanel' jacket isn't even an original design," Renee sniffed. "It's a knockoff of a Tyrolean jacket." These women found for him 'petits mains' or hand sewers who sewed almost all of the garments by hand--Steve allowed some of the long seams on skirts, slacks, and sleeves that didn't require shaping to be machine sewn, and ones who specialized in fitting the muslins. He hired not just for skill and ability but for a more friendly, laid-back modern attitude than most of the traditional houses lacked. Every time I talked with him I learned new things, and he permitted me to be his first paying customer. I got a dress form made—a 3D scanner and printer was used, but the final form was refined by hand, and I got the rare treat of being fitted in the workroom, a sunny place with big windows and skylights, as the salon part was still under construction. He took me on the full tour and saw the staff areas as well, which were fitted well for comfort. There was an expansive office for a contracts specialist to take care of the pret-a-porter and a specialist to source the best fabrics and accessories. Steve didn't have an office, preferring a corner of the floor where anybody who had a design question could ask him directly. The workers adored him because he valued their knowledge and permitted changes in construction if they were better than what he’d had in mind. Emma took up the third floor, so it was just a jump up a flight of stairs to see her and buy a set of small cuff links for the French cuffs of a blouse I’d just been fitted for.

Meanwhile, the exterior of my building was spruced up; the granite sparkled in the sun after the removal of accumulated grime and I made a note to keep an eye out for the dulling of the stone. The flecks of quartz gave the stern building a bit of light. And in a huge stroke of luck, the builders ran down the likely quarry for the original stone and were able to make repairs with replacements that matched perfectly. Dagny designed a narrow garden to provide some interest and softened the entrance slightly and the grand entrance doors were repaired. Inside, the demolition was going on. All the floors but the main floor were in good condition and could be refinished, having been made from thick planks of oak, walnut, and cherry. Sabine envisioned an elegant inlaid wood floor, protected with the very best, longest-wearing sealant, and tiled floors for the shops which were expected to have the heaviest traffic. A mat at the entrance to help with water and dirt being
tracked in was on a roller that could be advanced every few hours to keep it dry and clean; there was a feature underneath where the used mat traveled that cleaned and dried it so there was never a problem with a filthy-looking entrance. The lobby would have rich warm woods, pale granite for contrast, and small panels here and there of semi-precious stone--jasper, lapis, malachite--and a bit of gilding for a luxurious, retro feeling. Palm trees for a bit of whimsy and life, a few planters with seasonal flowers, and some elegant benches would complete the lobby. We wanted something that was elegant, period but not stuffy, and slightly frivolous. Some place that people would want to come just because it was fun. We also had Sabine incorporate small panels of stained glass in all the windows to add the color all the way around the building, and SmartBoard was used throughout the ground floor and our offices. Martha had lined up the four shops for the ground floor--Mom had agreed to open a coffeeshop, Oasis had eagerly signed on, and we had an ice cream parlor of our own (yay!!) and a small salon that offered beauty treatments (we checked them out thoroughly to make sure there wasn't any quackery or dubious things going on) as well as hair stylists, nail technicians, and makeup artists. This business was a real coup for us. The second and third floors were also filling up with clothing stores (they served different target customers and included a branch of the store that had done the lingerie for Steve's show), a jeweler, a florist, and a stationers. Since the Return, paper sales were big again, and this also carried luxury pens, blotters, pen stands, inks, and related products like sealing wax and stamps, including some signet rings that could be engraved for a unique stamp, wrapping papers, and a carefully curated selection of cards. They also could do business cards and letterhead.

And I started to get commissions. Several historic homes, which I liked because the homeowners for the most part weren't cheap and went for the bells and whistles, which included Tony's new SmartBoard. And I made some bids, some of which I was awarded, like the ones for the General Motors Building and the Flatiron Building. There was also a neighborhood contract, where the outside of all the buildings were going to be restored in such a manner as to create a cohesive look while respecting original details, and there was the possibility that individual owners would contact me for help with the insides. Everybody was getting work. Margaret got done with her work for the city early and was able to join us, taking over getting licenses, tackling zoning, and looking around for the right property for our first big joint plan after our building. Our website was getting heavy traffic as the renovation was going, and the public garden was a huge hit. We were getting written up in the Times as well as other publications, including specialist magazines like a landscape architects organization house publication that featured Dagny's work in an article featuring new and exciting work. The city newspapers, tabloids, and magazines were referring to our building as the Valkyrie, as much as for us actual valkyries as for the stylized female reliefs on the exterior. Karen came upon me in my office as I was molting (my least favorite part of the year) and gently scratching my wing. She picked up one of the shed primaries and stroked it, suggesting at our next meeting that we use feathers as a motif for our partnership. This was enthusiastically received, and Serena asked me to save some feathers that we could use as actual decorations. Martha was all over that. She was doing wonders promoting our business, and we were getting very well known, even though we'd been in business just under a year. Companies looking for office space were flooding her office with inquiries as it was the new hot address in town, and other neighborhood buildings were being purchased and renovations begun. Everybody wanted the back offices because of the small balconies, but these came with some conditions. There could be no more than two chairs on each one (not hard to agree to because they had small footprints) and there had to be plants on each one after the frost danger was over to after the first hard frost in fall. Once we were up and open for business, we'd have building competitions for things like the best balcony gardens in order to foster a certain sense of community.

It took forever, it seemed, but our library at the house was finally done. It was everything we wanted; warm and welcoming, the wood invited you to touch. Even with books we chose from the stored ones in the main house, we had a lot of ground to make up, and we incorporated personal
mementos, like the shamshir that Damian had won from his grandfather, some of the weapons I'd made (I kept the armor that I'd had repaired on Asgard on stands in the basement), and personal photographs. My husband had one of my prettiest feathers, with the little puff of down at the base, framed. And Dad completed our desk just in time. The stained glass dome was spectacular and made the room one of my favorite places on Earth. We had a round custom carpet made for the main floor and the tete-a-tete couch reupholstered in an elegant black brocade. I waited until I was sure Alfred was out of the house before going up to the second floor and whizzing around on one of the rolling library ladders. Great fun, and there were four windows on that level that looked out over the front and back. Dagny had designed an English country garden that contained our favorite flowers in one specific bed by the trellis that would support wisteria that extended toward the main house; we'd made an informal path that Dagny made a little more formal with gravel and occasional plantings. Our special garden had a bench by it so we could appreciate it over time.

Eira's special hangout was a real treat for her, it was the first thing completed after the patio was laid and she could be found there most mornings before it got too hot and any time anybody was out back. Dagny had also given us a moon garden on the side of the house, romantic, with all-white or very pale flowers that was exquisite in the moonlight. There was also a kitchen garden for Alfred, with herbs arranged in a Celtic knot for looks, with a border of edible flowers. After all the furniture was moved into the library, the house was featured in Architectural Digest. The first real event, though, was a graduation party for Bucky, who'd accepted a position at the Central Park zoo as a keeper. It was a big deal, his first graduation party, he was entering the career of his choice, and Alfred and I and Alan planned it. I don't know that the Normandy invasion was less meticulously detailed. For his graduation present, I found that the Italian business he'd ordered my messenger bag from in our first lives was still in operation, astonishingly, and had one made for him in black with a light blue interior. He was dumbfounded when he found out where it had come from, and touched that I'd remembered.

Around this time, J found an apartment he liked and rather regretfully moved out. Aunt Rebecca got married, but my granddad was content to play the field. Barbara was pregnant again, and they were going to have a little girl. I knitted a new baby blanket, booties, hat, and cardigan in soft fluffy pink yarn. And a black crocheted blanket with a fuzzy pink border.

Dick and Barbara weren't the only ones reproducing. There was a veritable explosion of fertility. My mom was pregnant, and J and I were bemused to have another sibling after all this time. We debated whether the sprout should have a weird name, in order to fit in with us, or a normal one for convenience. Mom and Dad just rolled their eyes. And Ann was expecting, too. It would have been hilarious just to watch Tony, who was filled with button-bursting pride, but he was also haunted by a soul-crushing fear that he'd be no better than his own father, who had not responded to the news that Tony had sent through his mother. I failed to buck him up, so it fell to my beloved husband, successful father of two, to talk him down and offered to be a parenting resource. I sighed and went online to order yarn--from May Parker's alpaca herd. Peter was doing well these days; he'd gone back to school and was pursuing a career in photojournalism. With his webslinging abilities, he could shots like nobody else and improving all the time. I wouldn't be surprised at all if he started winning prizes.

Carol passed her mastery exam at that time and set up her own carpentry shop. Just with the buildings we were working on, they had more than enough work. We only worked with her, so it was good for her shop and helped build her profile. Karen made relationships with the best construction crews in the area and kept everything and on budget, barring unexpected catastrophes. At the Valkyrie building, the priority was to finish the retail spaces first, our office space on the top two floors and the conference room at the tippy top, then the other office space last. That was less labor intensive, anyway, but there were choices for prospective tenants: some offices just had Smart Board, others had exposed wood or brick. One of the drawbacks of the SmartBoard was that
you couldn't put nails or screws through it, so that was one of the restrictions on the office space. That, and they had to keep the wood floors. We hung picture rails so that the tenants could display artwork, though. News of the SmartBoard made a huge splash in the trade and Wayne started full manufacturing to meet my demand and to stockpile for the future, in order to be ready to fulfill orders once we made it available for public sale. Tony found a few scientists to continue to refine it, make it less expensive, did the same for his non-lethal weapons, and focused on cars and, as I'd figured was inevitable, robotics. I did not offer to help with that at all. Meanwhile, Ann hired additional staff for her work on bioremediation and other projects, and Damian was fully engaged in running the company. Dad had finished the receptionists desk, my desk and bookshelves, and the massive, gorgeous table and cabinetry for the conference room and was waiting to deliver it.

Aslyn had a new project to turn an old warehouse into lofts, and she asked me to go with her to look at it. I hadn't gone ahead with the double major with architecture, but I knew wiring and soundproofing better than her and she wanted my input. Fall was under way, the trees turning beautiful colors, and we enjoyed walking to the site. It was my last task for the day, and I was looking forward to going home to Damian, Alfred, Eira and the cats, and my dinner. We pushed open the door and walked in.

"Hello?" Aslyn called. "We're from Valkyrie to talk about renovation." I looked around. It was a typical rundown warehouse, but in pretty good shape. There was a catwalk up higher, which we could use to get a better look. We started making notes, then the owner called out and stepped up to us, grinning.

"Goddamn it," I said, as I looked at the Joker.
"Who were we supposed to be meeting here?" I hissed at Selena.

"Roscoe Arbuckle," she said. "That's him." She gestured to the Joker. I shook my head.

"Roscoe Arbuckle was a silent film star in the 1920s," I said quietly to her. "That's the Joker."

"What?" she said sharply, and the Joker grinned. "We are here on business," she told him calmly. "If you're not interested in the stated purpose of the business, which is the conversion of this warehouse into lofts, we're leaving."

"No, you're not," the Joker said calmly. "Or, more specifically, you're coming along as an incitement for Pretty here to behave herself. I've been patient, I've been good. Well, fairly good. For me. But Pretty owes me for not throwing her spawn to the dogs, and I'm tired of waiting around for my payment."

"I owe you nothing," I said evenly. "I didn't ask for any favors. Your actions are your own." The smile slid greasily off his face and his eyes narrowed. The expression on his face was exactly as it had been in the caves on New Years all those years ago, and I had to forcibly remind myself that I wasn't that girl anymore.

Joker gestured with his cane and his goons started to surround us. I recognized a few of them, even. Two time losers, hooking up with the Joker again. "I saw that movie," he said. "But you're no longer freaks with wings, you don't have any weapons, and you're outnumbered. So come along, Pretty, and I won't have to hurt Captain America there. Not that she looks like a threat anymore. She's a little soft."

"No wonder you think he's an asshole," she said to me conversationally. Admittedly, she'd put on a few pounds since the Return, but part of that was that she was working about ten hours a day, full steam, and wasn't taking the time to eat right. She still worked out, though, and she was still quite strong. And you simply can't discount the experience she had.

"Last chance, Joker," I said. "Back off now, leave me alone forever, and you and your little thugs here can leave." He snarled at me. "Well, the Joker's mine," I said to Serena, and she nodded.

"I haven't had a good fight in quite awhile," she said confidently, and I felt her shift her balance and knew she was ready. "Any time you're ready."

"Let's go," I said, and she threw her briefcase, taking out one of the goons, I left her to it and headed for the Joker, pouncing on him before he could get away.

"I have tried to be reasonable," I said, wrinkling my nose. That peculiar odor still lingered, even after the Return. If I was in the mood to be philosophical, I'd say it was the corruption of his soul, but I didn't care about the condition of that. "Once upon a time, you had your goons kidnap me. I broke my shoulder, you threatened to make me a brain-damaged sex slave, you remember?" I tightened my grip on his collar, twisting it tighter around his throat and shaking. "You seem to forget that I literally beat the shit out of you with one hand behind my back. But since then, I've done a lot of work on my form and what your surveillance has failed to pick up is that I've kept up with my hand-to-hand. Malia, the new Avengers' trainer, is a marvel, and of course, my uncle keeps me sharp."

"Alex!" I turned to see Serena engaged with three of the goons, one getting up off the ground.
"Here!" I barked, and wrenched the Jokers's cane away and tossed it to her. She caught it, smiled, and went to work.

"I'm not the only one who carries grudges," he blurted when I turned back to the Joker. "Your precious uncle hasn't been forgotten."

"Who?" I demanded, and he smiled a little.

"Let me go and I'll tell you," he said.

"You're in no position to bargain. I'm putting you down, no matter what. The only question is not whether I can be stopped, but how many bones I break. I told you once that if you didn't leave me alone, I'd break every bone in your body. I didn't quite achieve that last time." I was interrupted by a blow from behind. It cut my scalp, and immediately I could feel the flow of blood. I turned and flung the Joker into his goon. I joined the main fight; Serena was having some trouble, but then there were eleven goons, one of her, and this wasn't a comic book. I used Joker as a human battering ram, picking him up whenever he looked to crawl away, and I took my share of hits before Serena and I were the only ones left standing.

"Damn," she said, pulling out her communicator, which was broken. "I'm going to find one to borrow, and I'm going to step outside to make the call. Reception's probably better out there."

I waited until the door closed behind her before I went to work.

When she came back inside, the Joker was down on the ground with his goons, barely making squeaks. "I talked to a Captain Gordon," she said, looking at me curiously. "He's apparently in charge of cases involving these old-style villains. He's on his way." She leaned over to look at the Joker a little more carefully. "Alex, it doesn't look like you broke all his bones."

"No time," I said, adrenaline receding. "Besides, with the cops on the way, I had to make it look like injuries that were received during a fight."

"Didn't think about that," she said. "Sorry."

I waved it off. "I think I did enough damage, though." I nudged the Joker's hand. A faint keening emerged from his throat. I leaned over him. "If I so much as see you again, I'll hunt you down myself and there won't be the promise of the police to save you from the rest of your life, which I can promise you will be miserable and painful. My brother tells me there are still things that can't be healed, especially nerve damage, and there are laws against regrowing sex organs for convicted rapists. Which you are. And legal painkillers, the kind you'd get from the medical profession, only block pain receptors. So you won't even have the haze of opioids to help you pass your days. Nothing to help you if I decide that I haven't done enough and find you to finish you. There are still unbroken bones, after all." I nudged his thigh; I hadn't managed to break it. We stepped away as we heard the sirens approaching.

"Don't you have that tracker Tony made for you?" Serena said, making a face as one of her cuts bled through the tissue she'd stuck to it.

"Apparently I wasn't afraid this time," I said. I pulled out my communicator--unbroken--and tried to call Damian. I couldn't get through, so I called Alfred to let him know I probably wouldn't make it to dinner and why.

"You do have the most interesting encounters with the criminal element of any of the family, Miss Alex," Alfred said after a moment. "Are you all right beyond the superficial injuries?"
"Yeah, I think a session with the accelerator will fix me right up. Thanks, Alfred, the police are here." I hung up and went with Serena to meet Captain Gordon.

His eyes roamed the damage, and he asked what had happened. Serena told him how we had come to be in the warehouse, and I explained that I'd objected to the Joker's plans for my person. "I see," he said, eyes moving over the thugs on the floor who were being looked over by the paramedics. One of his officers came over, and at his request I showed my knife. He raised his eyebrows.

"Usually I use it on job sites or to open envelopes," I shrugged. "But the Joker is why I'm never unarmed." Serena scowled.

"I've gotten soft," she said. "I don't carry a weapon these days."

"You did all right," Gordon reassured her. I had to surrender my knife, but Gordon assured me I'd get it back. "Just out of curiosity, do you have other weapons on you?" he asked, and I produced a few shuriken that I hadn't seen fit to use and the bigger knife in my bag.

"I did throw a couple of shuriken, so you should find them in the goons," I said helpfully. "We were outnumbered and not really prepared for a fight. We didn't want to kill anybody, but I didn't want to go and Serena wasn't going to let them take me without a fight."

"I see," Gordon said again, and summoned two officers to take our statements. When I got done, I took a call from Damian, explaining--very briefly--what had happened and where I was. Then, as Gordon came over to release us, I recalled something the Joker said.

"He said that my uncle hadn't been forgotten."

"Who's your uncle?"

"Bucky Barnes." Gordon's eyes sharpened.

"I remember now. When we question the Joker, I'll see what I can get out of him."

After I thanked him, Serena and I walked toward the door.

"I hate to say it, but that fool was right. I have gotten soft," Serena grumbled. "Unprepared."

"You can work out at the tower," I said. "We don't need to be as sharp as we were for Ragnarok, and it would be frankly dangerous for us to go around as hair triggered as we were, but we could both do better. The Joker's not the only scum out there."

Damian raced up as we exited the warehouse and Serena looked with a certain amusement as he hugged me to him, smushing my face in his shirtfront and squeezing me a little too tight.

"Breathe!" I gasped, turning my head, and he reluctantly loosened his grip.

"We were in a meeting," he explained. "Why didn't your tracker go off? Is it broken?"

"I wasn't afraid," I told him, and he stepped back to look me in the eye. "For the first time, I wasn't anxious, scared, terrified, anything. It was just another fight, with somebody who needed extra persuasion." He looked as the paramedics transported the semiconscious Joker to the back of the ambulance. Other patched up thugs, less tenderized, were being escorted to the patrol cars. Damian's eyes found Captain Gordon, and he nodded thoughtfully.

"Can we drop you anywhere, Serena?" Damian asked, and she had us take her to the tower, where, as a former Captain America, she could get patched up and a change of clothes. We lifted and
headed for home.

I wasn't surprised to see a welcoming committee, but I did insist on getting fixed and cleaned up first. Damian went down to the bat cave with me and Alfred, swearing as Alfred deftly sectioned my hair to hold the laceration on my scalp, still bleeding sluggishly, so the accelerator could take care of it. He gave me a treatment, and with this stronger accelerator, I'd only need one treatment instead of the two I'd had to have the first time around. Then I jumped into the shower and put on a pair of the clothes the cave denizens routinely used when they came home battered and bloody, black t shirt, workout pants, and socks. We returned to the house and I studied the group waiting for me. Bruce, of course, Xander, and Daniel as our currently serving Batmen, Martha, because she'd heard from her brother, and my uncle. Dick hustled in just as I sat down and Damian leaned on the couch behind me.

"The library is fantastic," Dick said, looking around.

"It's wonderful, isn't it?" I smiled at him, then the smile went away when I looked at my uncle. "So the Joker engineered a meeting at a warehouse, using the pretext that he was going to renovate the warehouse into lofts."

"Really?" Daniel asked alertly, and I looked at him fondly.

"I have no idea, but it's a great location for it." I gave him the address, knowing he'd check and see if he could move on it. "I went with Serena to talk about the wiring and soundproofing. He used the name 'Roscoe Arbuckle.'" Xander and Martha groaned. My dad loved silent movies, and first J and I, then my kids had been exposed to his love for them. I'm not sure how, but Damian usually managed to avoid the movie marathons. Some of them were silly and really dated, but others still held up. Lon Chaney's performance in Phantom of the Opera, for one.

"What's the significance of the name?" Daniel wanted to know.

"You should spend more time with Alex's dad," Bucky said on a sigh. "Roscoe Arbuckle was a comedian known onscreen as Fatty Arbuckle. He was a huge star for Paramount, making like a million dollars back in the 1920s. To celebrate his new contract, even more lucrative, I think, and the release of a new movie, he had a party in the St Francis Hotel in San Francisco over Labor Day. It was kind of wild, booze despite Prohibition, and at the end of it, a starlet was dead and Arbuckle was accused of manslaughter, that his rape had ruptured her bladder and killed her. It was a huge scandal, all over the papers, led to the institution of the movie censors, the Hays office. He was eventually acquitted after two hung juries, but his career and life were ruined, he was broke from the lawyers' fees, and he died several years later."

"Ew," Daniel said. We nodded.

"To get back to the story....?" Bruce prodded.

"So the Joker says he's lost patience with me, that I owe him for not exposing Xander, and I was going to be coming along with him. I chose not to, and Serena and I beat up his thugs. And him. But the thing is, Uncle Bucky, is that he said you haven't been forgotten. I'm worried about that. Captain Gordon said he'd press the Joker on that when he was in a position to talk again."

"Where'd they take him this time?" Bucky said on a sigh.

"New Atlantic," I told him. "They have those rooms where you can't get out if you have a patient wristband, which are impossible to get off without a special key."
He smirked at me. "Any restrictions on getting in?"

I smirked back. "Nope, they don't even have to guard the rooms because of the security. But the Joker's both nuts and possessed of a certain genius for escape. You might want to drop by sooner rather than later."

"Ok, sweetie," he stood and came over to kiss my forehead. "You're sure you're ok?"

"Yeah." I exchanged a look with him. "I really got him this time." A moment more, and his gorgeous smile broke out.

"That's my girl," he said affectionately, and made his goodbyes to the others. Alfred gave him a boxed dinner as he left the room, I noted.

"Did you just really sic your uncle on the Joker?" Daniel asked after a moment.

"Yep," I said, unconcerned. "Well, no. I didn't tell Bucky to go to the hospital. The Captain has limits to what he can do to get information, but Bucky is not so constrained. If the Joker knows more, he'll tell him."

"I'll talk to Gordon tonight," Bruce said.

"The Joker's been keeping a low profile," Xander said. "I'm going to shake down a few crooks in the know and see what I can find out. Maybe get some intel on who might be after Uncle Bucky."

"If you're sure you're ok, Grandma, I'm going to go out myself," Daniel said, and the three of them took the stairs down to the tunnel.

"You want to go out tonight?" Dick asked his brother, and Damian hesitated.

"You can go if you want," I said. "I really am ok, darling."

"Then yes, we can do our own intelligence gathering," he said. "But I'll try not to be late. I just want to do something myself." I smiled at him.

"After dinner, then. Dick, are you staying for dinner? Martha, honey?" Both of them agreed, and Alfred took himself off to the kitchen.

"Babs is visiting her mom tonight," Dick said as he sat down at the table. "It's always nice to have one of Alfred's meals."

"Thank you, Master Dick," Alfred said as he served. "Miss Martha, would you care for more green beans?" As my daughter accepted with pleasure, I was grateful to have this life, with these people. Eira, a little miffed she didn't get in on the action, brushed by pointedly on her way to her own dinner. Oops. I'd have to suck up later.

The next day I took Eira to work with me; she usually preferred to stay at the estate, where she could run around at her leisure and investigate the goings-on at both our house and the mansion, which had been fitted with a special access door for her. Alan seemed quite fond of her. I think she was hoping for more crooks to try to assault me. Everybody in the office was glad to see her and she wandered around the occupied offices for tummy rubs and ear skritches. She went with me to the home of a prospective client, one of the board of directors for the Westminster Dog Show. Eira was happy to stand and be examined by both dog experts, although I felt a rather shocked amazement from her when they checked her teeth.
"She's gorgeous," Pete McArthur said. Eira preened at the praise, making us all smile.

"But I understand she's not really a dog?" Angela said.

"No; it's more accurate to say she's a person in a dog-shaped body. All her kind are fully intelligent. Their outlook is different from a human's, as you'd expect, and she communicates mostly through mental images and feelings. And an astonishing array of vocalizations, of course."

"Of course," Angela said, and we laughed. Eira shook vigorously. At that point, a Newfoundland wandered in to see what the fuss was. Since Eira wasn't grown yet, this dog was still bigger than she was, and she had a couple of puppies romping in after her. I thought the big black dog looked tired. We watched as Eira ambled over for greetings; she was curious about the puppies.

"All the other puppies have gone on to other homes," Pete said "We're keeping little Stephanie, but Charlie there needs an especially good home, and we haven't found the right one." As he spoke I notice the other puppy had a bit of a limp.

"We'd taken them out to the park," Angela said. "Charlie got excited and ran into traffic." She pressed her hand to her mouth. "I'll never forget it." We watched as Betty, the mother, flopped down and Eira frisked around the large room to play with the puppies. "They saved his life and did a great job with reconstructing the bone and muscles and all, but he'll always have the limp, they say, and there might be additional issues as he gets older." She sighed. "But as you can see, the house is in need of some work. It amazes me that the plaster lasted so long, but it's beginning to crack."

"And the wiring needs to be brought up to speed," Pete added. "That long winter really showed how inadequate the house was in many ways, but we love it." I nodded, and we started discussing their needs. The dogs stayed together as we toured the premises and I heard their particular concerns. When we went back to the main room, the dogs were curled up together and I smiled. I gave them some idea about costs, and they were still interested in a formal proposal, being very interested in the SmartBoard. When it was time to go, I looked at Eira and sighed and dug around in my bag.

"I'd like to talk with you about possibly adopting Charlie," I said, handing over our vet's card. "We have two young cats and Eira, and we have a house out on the Wayne estate, so there's lots of room for dogs to run around. There's a pond, which Eira loves when it's warm. Neufies are water dogs, aren't they? We've got one of those Dog HomeGroom setups, so I can guarantee that Charlie would have lots to do and be well taken care of and loved. I can give you personal references as well." I was pleased to answer questions about the home and my dog-caring abilities, and they'd forgotten that Damian was my husband; he was very well-known in dog circles for his support of shelters and rescue groups. When we left, we had a sweet little black puppy in tow.

Damian was over the moon when we dropped by the new building to say hi, and insisted on keeping the puppy. Eira didn't want to be parted from her new friend, and she stayed too. I was a little out of sorts when I went back to my office. I'd anticipated showing off the new puppy to my friends. But my day was considerably brightened by the inspection reports on my desk, the last ones the Valkyrie needed before we could let our tenants in and move in ourselves. I whooped in joy and sent out a company-wide communication that we needed to move. Then I called my dad and arranged for the delivery of the furniture he'd crafted. At the end of the day, we all met to plan the launch of the Valkyrie building. It wouldn't be hard to arrange to move our offices; none of us had much here, and the office furniture had been supplied by the landlord, so it was a matter of us boxing up our stuff, which we agreed to do over the weekend, and taking it over to the new offices. I gave Martha the plum assignment of planning a party for the official opening of the building, and
Aslyn had already notified our tenants that they could move in. In order to assure quality and compliance with our restrictions, we had put in kitchen fixtures for the ice cream parlor and Mom’s coffeeshop, for example, and met or exceeded the specifications for permanent modifications for all the businesses. It all had to be done to conserve the look of the building, so it fit in with the Art Deco style. The office spaces were a lot less trouble than the retail in that respect.

Alfred and Alan catered a move-in lunch for us that Saturday; Aslyn brought coffee and bagels for breakfast as we got furniture deliveries through the freight elevator. We had to help Dad and his movers carry the heavy furniture up to the conference room, though. And that was some work, but so worth it in the end. "We could really use Uncle Bucky about now," I puffed as we maneuvered the table up the stairs. Dad grunted a laugh.

We'd gotten it positioned perfectly in line with the credenza at the end of the room that we'd brought up first, and we all stopped to admire the beauty of the wood. "Wow, Mr Barnes, that is spectacular," Aslyn said. Dad ran a rag over a smudge and nodded.

"That should hold up," he said with satisfaction, and I gave him a hug.

"It better, Grandpa, my back's killing me," Martha said, half-joking.

"You should do a little more strength training then, kidlet," my dad said, laughing. She snorted, and we all gathered around downstairs as his crew brought up the equally magnificent reception desk and positioned it under the name of our company, elegant brass letters against the paneling.

"This building is really impressive, honey," Dad told me as my desk was brought in. Unlike the butterfly desk in the library at home, this one was a curved rectangle, modern in shape but with Art Deco elements. He'd also made a sturdy low platform with a carved edge that I could place an emerald green dog bed on for Eira. It fit nicely into the weird round corner by the French doors.

"It better be, what with all this gorgeous furniture," I said, and he smiled.

"You're done a great job, and I'm very proud of you," he said, giving me a sideways hug. We took the lift down; the elegant conveyance had a green velvet bench like it would have originally, and the detail restored. I showed him where Mom's coffeeshop was, and we lucked out; her manager and staff for this location were there, the manager conferring with her.

"Pet," Mom said, coming over for hugs from both of us. "This is lovely. It's a real change from the other two locations, but I think I might like this the best." I smiled at her praise. Who doesn't like their parents telling them they did good work? She introduced me to the manager. "Although I might be here more than I planned," she admitted with a smile, and I took both parents on a little tour of the building, telling them who the other retail stores were, showing them the security office on the fourth floor so they'd know Martha and I were safe. Then back to the office so Mom could see the magnificence with Dad's furniture. Everybody from Valkyrie was eager to meet my mom, purveyor of coffee, and Martha floated the idea of a cart going through the building. Mom was interested and promised to look into the idea. They left, and we all got back to work, everybody reconvening when the office chairs were delivered and the computing system was set up. We took a break for the delicious lunch up in the pretty magnificent conference room--Alan's cooking classes were really paying off. The group was a little bemused by the tablecloth, cloth napkins, china and silver that Alfred summoned up, but there was no doubt that it added quite a lot to the ambience, and they were very enthusiastic about the meal itself. After the lunch, I took both family butlers down to my office; I'd snagged one of the rear-facing offices on a corner with a balcony and view of the garden.

"Master Damian will be jealous of the magnificence of your office space," Alfred said jokingly,
then presented me with a new cookie jar. This one was a large ceramic owl. I took off its head to find gingerbread cookies and peanut butter cookies with chocolate drops in the middle.

"Wow," I sighed. "They look delicious, but I'm stuffed from lunch." I immediately hid it behind the door of the bottom shelf of the bookcase. "There will be raiders of the cookie jar," I told Alan matter-of-factly, and he burst out laughing. He'd done all the cookies and the baked goods for the lunch.

"I forgot that we'd need dishes for our kitchen," Aslyn said, popping in.

"There are several partial sets up at the mansion," Alfred said instantly. "I can assemble a collection, and in case of any breakage, replacements can be obtained without concern for pattern."

"That would be fantastic," Aslyn said.

"Certainly, Miss Aslyn," he replied. "Either Alan or I will return on Monday with the items. May I offer my congratulations on your new enterprise?" he said, looking at us both. "You always had promise, even as young ladies, but this exceeds expectations."

"Thanks, Alfred," Aslyn replied. "Alex is a force of nature." She grinned at me.

"We all contribute," I said sternly. "Without one of us, the whole enterprise would falter."

"It's an extraordinary building," Alan said, looking around. "Quite posh."

"Maybe we need a butler ourselves, Alex," Aslyn said, smiling at Alan. Was that flirtation? I smiled. "Any chance we could hire you away from the Waynes?"

"Afraid not, Miss Aslyn," Alan said with a perfectly determined amount of regret and a charming smile.

"Seriously, though, Alex," Aslyn said suddenly. "There are seven of us principals, plus Martha, the receptionist, the possibility--well, probability--of additional support staff. We've got meetings and clients. Plus we've all gotten high end office furniture and that agreement with the Guggenheim to borrow artwork. We could use a specialized caretaker. We should have a butler. Or majordomo, whatever." I looked at her, she was serious. "Maybe part time, but it would be really nice. And it would add to our legend." I rubbed my face.

"Look at the budget," I instructed with a sigh, and she grinned. Alfred's eyes twinkled.

"If I may be of assistance in finding a suitable individual, I would be happy to help," Alan said to me, but he was looking side eye at Aslyn.

"Do you have a moment so I could get your contact information? If you could just step down to my office..." Aslyn said, and they walked out together. I looked skyward and shook my head, grinning. Alfred waited until they were out of earshot before chuckling.

"Master Damian will definitely be jealous," he said. "He dislikes having to make his own tea."
Alfred was joking about Damian's tea. He was actually highly critical of his tea and only Alfred was allowed to brew it for him, and only herbal tea or oolong at that. He had a choice collection of Yixing clay pots, beautifully seasoned from centuries of use for his white and green teas, and an iron pot and all the other trimmings for when he wanted to perform a tea ceremony. It was all very pointless to me; the fanciest I get with my coffee is a French press. But Damian is a connoisseur.

After a little more conversation, Alan reappeared, looking a little dazed by his encounter with Aslyn, and he and Alfred packed up and left. "What happened with Nico?" I asked her. She'd been very into him.

She sighed. "Oh, Nico. He's gone so much; bodyguarding pays really well. I don't want to make an ultimatum, the job or me, so... We see each other occasionally when he's in the city, but that's about it."

"Sorry to hear that," I said.

"Yeah." She gathered herself up. "Well, I want to upgrade my desk tools, so I'm going to go shopping. Martha's working on a building-wide grand opening celebration, so she'll be here awhile. You need to talk to Martha; she said before lunch that she might have a line on a property that will be our first official office-wide dream teamup." We hunted up Margaret; she'd found a promising site but needed to do more research and promised a report when she was done. Some of the company were doing a little more work while they were in the office, but others, including myself, were taking advantage of the weekend. I went through the building floor by floor, seeing that we weren't the only businesses moving in. The freight elevator was in heavy use as well as the lift, with people bringing in boxes and bags of their stuff along with furniture movers. I liked seeing my building bustling with purpose.

Damian was out sailing with some of his friends and had taken Eira, so I went home and, after checking at the mansion to be sure that there were no visitors, took the opportunity to go flying during the day. Normally, I flew before going to bed or getting up early to fly through the fog. I'd kind of slacked off, just flying because it was fun, but after the Joker, I'd been adding discipline, doing drills before flying for the fun of it. I came upon Alfred in the orchard, cleaning up after a storm had damaged some branches of a few of the fruit trees. I took the clippers and followed his instructions, clearing up the highest points. It was kind of fun, and it was work to hover, which was good for me. I landed to give Alfred back the tool and he smoothed the feathers at the edge of one of my wings gently. "Your wings are quite beautiful, Miss Alex. I imagine you're glad to still have them."

"I am," I said, nodding. "I still feel kind of like a freak with them, but I like them, overall." I brought them down and hooked the top claws under my chin so that they formed a barrier against the cold breeze that had sprung up. "I like that link with Valhalla. I'm quite relieved to know that when it's time, I'll go back, but I won't have to worry about the end of the world anymore."

"You know you're returning?" he asked with interest. Poor guy had to depend on his jacket for warmth. Wings are better.

"Unless I disgrace myself with cowardice, yes. One of the Norn who invented the Valkyries told me so on one of my visits."

"Master Damian is unlikely to arrive there."

"Information"
"Well, it essentially takes a splashy heroic action, and Damian's more subtle than that. But it isn't impossible, he's certainly brave enough." I pondered. "But it's looking to be much less separation that I first thought."

"May I ask why you think that?" Alfred asked after a moment.

"Can you keep a secret?" I asked after deliberating a moment of my own. "Of course you can, sorry. It's just that I haven't really said anything about this to a human person." I flipped my hand in apology. It was under the wings, so he couldn't see it, though. "When I was dying after that last action with the fire giants" he winced "it was if I could see the whole of creation, including all these afterlives. Some of which are not good, not good at all. But I saw into Hades. There are several different ways in. So if Damian goes back there, I can go visiting. I can travel through space and time on my own, sort of my own TARDIS, even without the valkyrie abilities. I even saw the Celtic afterlife where you had been, so I could come see you too."

His eyes opened wide and his mouth actually dropped open. "That's astonishing," he said after a pause. "Do you know how you came to have that ability?"

I shook my head. "No, but I'm blaming it on my mutations. It's actually how I met Uncle Steve. We'd run into each other on the battlefield, I'd kill him, he was irritating. It wasn't a big deal because after the battle, everybody was returned to 'life' as we knew it. But one time he was baiting me, I was really irritated, and when I killed him, he disappeared. It was weird, and I did the same thing to Frigga after she came looking for him. She didn't like my answer, that I didn't know what had happened, and wounded me." I decided not to fill in the details. "Turned out that I'd accidentally sent them to Helheim, which is where most of the people in the Norse afterlife end up. She wasn't pleased about it, but that was what led Odin to offer to make me a valkyrie. It's hard work, though, the more mass that has to be moved ramps up the effort."

"You do have the most interesting experiences of anyone I have ever met, Miss Alex," he said finally. I helped him carry equipment and the trimmed branches back to the outbuildings. "If you weren't so kind, you'd be dangerous."

"Damian's not like his dad, he doesn't like the bad girls," I joked. "Keeps me on the straight and narrow." Alfred snorted in amusement.

I dropped my branch when I saw Alan at the outbuilding, though. His eyes were huge when he saw the wings, and I didn't know what to do with them; I settled for holding them close on my back.

"I thought that all your lot's wings went away," Alan said after a short, charged silence. Alfred looked between us; he had a calm expression but I could tell he was tense.

"I'm the only one who still has them. Is that a problem for you?"

"No, I shouldn't think so. I saw that movie, same as everyone. I know what we owe you," he said thoughtfully.

"Even if he had an issue, Miss Alex, he did sign the non-disclosure agreement," Alfred said, reminding me. "In times when anti-mutant sentiment is high, it could be dangerous for others to know of her ability," he said to Alan.

"May I see them, Miss Alex?" Alan asked, and I extended them fully. "Pretty. Is the feather in your offices from your wings?"

"Yes, I saved it from my last molt." He smiled.
"Some members of the Justice League were here a few weeks ago," he said. "Hawkgirl's feathers aren't nearly as nice. They're just white. Of course, they're made from Nth metal, not organic."

"Ours all started out white, but after that first molt, most of us changed colors, from white through gray to black."

"Why not colors?" Alan asked, sounding genuinely curious.

"I think it's because they take their inspiration from swans' feathers, and they're available in a very narrow range of colors. That reminds me. If you see any free-range swans around waddling with a purpose, don't approach them but call me immediately. They may be an emissary from Asgard, and if they are, they're mean little bastards. One of them broke my finger when it bit me." I scowled. Alan started to laugh, then stopped when he saw I was serious. "It's a weird world out there, Alan."

"As you say, Miss Alex," he agreed, and picked up the branch I dropped. I handed my tools to Alfred as Alan went inside the building, then pulled myself up onto the roof, beat my wings, and hopped off.

"I shall see you at home, Miss Alex," Alfred said to me. "Enjoy your flight."

And I did.

The next day I took Damian and Eira in to see the building. Mom was there again, and she treated us to coffee, giving her barista some practice. "It's great to know the owner," Damian said blissfully, sipping his chai, which was a black tea, steamed milk, and a special house blend of spices. I went straight for the mocha, extra shot of espresso.

"The more time I spend here, the more I like it, dear," Mom said to me. "It's so elegant, yet friendly."

"That is exactly what I was going for," I said with satisfaction. I agreed to send out a survey to the other businesses in the building to see if there would be support for having a coffee cart coming through the building twice daily. "Well, I'll have Martha do it. Our occupancy is at about 90%, so we'll get a really good idea about excitement for door to door coffee service," I said complacently. Then Damian told us how the sailing went. Poor Eira hadn't enjoyed it at all; she was strictly a land lubber like me. Damian had been worried when she got seasick, and she felt bad about impacting his fun. And she hadn't like the salt spray in her fur.

"You like mud and smelly things, but you draw the line at salt water?" I said to her incredulously, and she gave the canine equivalent of a shrug. She thought that she'd prefer to spend her day, now that it was getting chilly again, snug at home, romping through the leaves that Alan and Alfred raked up with Charlie or sacked out in front of the library fireplace, also with Charlie. And the cats.

"Oh, god," I said, rolling my eyes.

"What?" my mom asked.

"She wants another cat," I told my husband, rolling my eyes. "A large one, with long fur for warmth. She's as bad as you are, darling."

Damian laughed and scratched behind her ears. "She's got good taste." Then Mom was called away for a problem with the inventory, and we went upstairs in the sumptuous lift. Up at the office, Damian looked around approvingly at the luxurious reception area and I gave him the tour of the floor, ending in my office. Eira trotted over to her new dog bed and flopped down, twisting and rolling to make a little wallow.
"This is stunning, Sweet pea," Damian said, putting his arms around me as we looked out at the Dagny's park. "I've been hearing really good buzz about the building around town. Some people think you're crazy to have sunk money into the building like you did, others point to the employment of so many craftspeople and the creation of an iconic building as positives. And you've only got one space unleased, which is unusual."

"Parents!" Martha said from the doorway. She came over after petting Eira.

"Did you get Uncle J's email, Mom?"

"Haven't checked it, honey. What's up?"

"Well, his clinic was going to do a health fair for low-income or unemployed people before it starts to get really cold, nip problems in the bud, but there were problems getting permits; nearby businesses had objections. But your park is private property." She told me the dates, and I rubbed my face and agreed.

"I'll have to ask whether they might like balloons and some refreshments," Damian said.

"I already asked, Pop," Martha said. "I'll get a balloon arch for the entrance--it's great that the balloons are biodegradable these days--some healthy snacks, get in a face painter for the kids. Make it kind of fun."

"What's kind of fun?" Serena popped her head in. "Hey, Damian. What do you think of our new place?"

"I think I want the name of your designer," he said. "I work in a dump in comparison." We laughed and Martha explained the health fair.

"Oh, that's good," Serena said. "Maybe we could get some news coverage, draw attention to the clinic and also the good works of Valkyrie. And if you've got the nicer side of health care covered, I'll kick in water bottles for the patients, I'm sure I could get some branded with the clinic name and Valkyrie. They've still got that enormous encampment in Central Park and they have to carry water to their tents."

"I'm so glad Aunt Becca got out of there," I said.

"Well, it's the last one in the city, so that's good news," Damian said.

"So this is where the party is," Aslyn said, coming in with Dagny. She listened as we talked about the health fair, and nodded. "Send an email to the tenants when it's firmed up," she told Martha. "Let them know what's going on and also that their employees can attend if they want."

"It's too bad that they didn't do it when the gardens were in bloom," Dagny said. "It's so much prettier. Doesn't really make maximum impact. But if this works out well, maybe we could make it an annual event."

"I like that idea," Aslyn said. "Because, frankly, we could have an image problem. We've got this ultra-posh building, and we don't want to look like a bunch of rich bitches."

"The commission I made on my first project was more than I'd ever earned in my entire first life," Dagny said thoughtfully. "It wouldn't hurt us to start a fund for good works in the company. Maybe 1% of our commissions. That would add up pretty fast."

"But I don't make any profits," Aslyn said, biting her lip.
"You could kick in an amount from your paycheck, then," Dagny said. "We could all structure it the way it makes sense for each individual. There are going to be months where we're not billing as much, or months where there's a bounty. Some of us might prefer to make regular contributions. But it should be a voluntary thing. We might want to just try it out, anyway; since we can start buying into the partnership next year, and we might want to structure things a little differently then."

"I like it," Aslyn said. "Margaret and Karen will too. Karen was talking about us maybe doing a Habitat for Humanity build."

"Carol was talking to her about that," I nodded. "She keeps offcuts and scraps from her jobs that could be used there. Let's bring this up at the next partners meeting."

"Will the staff be able to join in?" Martha asked.

Serena patted her shoulder. "Absolutely. The more the merrier."

"We should get t-shirts if we do the Habitat build," Aslyn said.

"There's a new place down by Uncle Steve's new shop that does custom embroidery and t-shirt printing," I contributed.

"Ooh, we should get dress shirts or polos or something with the company logo, just for every day," Dagny said. Talking among themselves, they filed out. I looked at my husband and laughed.

Martha poked her head back in. "Copy for the grand opening of the building is on your desk, Mom. The sooner you approve it, the sooner we can start publicizing it." She turned around as I nodded, then turned back. "Is Aslyn serious about us getting a butler? On the one hand, I'm spoiled and it would be nice to have a part time butler, but on the other, do we really need one?"

"She's serious," I said with a sigh. "And it would be nice to have somebody wrangling set ups for parties and receptions, but somebody in the office probably could do that."

"Sounds like a job for the PR professional," Damian said, smirking. Martha rolled her eyes at her dad.

"Right. We can also put the butler in charge of the flowers for the office. We're still going with fresh flowers for the reception area, aren't we, with individuals taking care of their own offices? Dagny's providing plants to keep the air good," she muttered, and walked off, still talking to herself. Damian examined my new office as I quickly approved the copy for the grand opening--it was exactly what we'd agreed to--and we dropped it off in her office on her way out. I heard her talking to Aslyn about the requirements for a butler and how they'd frame it for publicity by calling the individual our majordomo and making it sound charmingly eccentric rather than spoiled. We tiptoed away. It was the weekend, after all--and what was everybody doing here, anyway?

We ran some errands and got home mid-afternoon. Just before dinner, I got a call from Bucky.

"Well, I finally had a conversation with our mutual acquaintance," he said.

"That took longer than I expected," I admitted.

"Well, he wasn't conscious the first couple times I dropped in."

"Did he have any interesting news?" I asked.
"He said that he was aware that someone is looking for me, but he didn't have a name for me," Bucky said, sounding disgusted. "It was mostly a lure to draw you to him."

"Darn it," I said. "I was hoping for answers."

"Well, I gave him some information, free of charge. I reminded him that you felt constrained by the approach of the police, but if you saw him again, all bets were off, and he hadn't seen everything you can do. I think he took the hint. I also told him that all bets were off if anything happened to your husband, and that your wrath would make what happened look like a schoolyard fight. So there's that," he offered, and I smiled.

"Don't suppose he's feeling better after your visit," I remarked.

"Well, if he isn't, there aren't any marks on him," Bucky observed grimly. "He's got an overactive imagination, everybody knows that. He made a libelous remark about our relationship and I told him that I wouldn't have him slandering you like that. I don't think he'll do it again."

"What did Bucky have to say?" Damian asked after I hung up.

"The Joker doesn't know who's after him, just that somebody is," I said with disgust. "He also apparently said that my relationship with my uncle is incestuous."

Damian sat up suddenly, his eyes glaring. "What hospital is he in again?"

"Relax, darling, Bucky made sure there aren't any marks on him." He sat back slowly.

"I'll start asking around to see if I can find out any more information about Bucky's stalker," he volunteered, and I accepted that.

The next day there was a report on the morning show that the Joker's sanity had taken a turn for the worse, gibbering in fear of a black-clad man, according to the police. "It's just laying the ground for an insanity plea," one of the anchors said in disgust. "He's being held in a secure room. He's got nothing to be afraid of. Well, aside from Alex Barnes, but she's not on any of the security footage."

I smiled as the other anchor moved on to reporting traffic snarls. The Joker had ample reason to fear the things that went bump in the night. Which was mostly me, I did better in at least low-light conditions.

But he should fear the surveillance of the things you never saw coming even more.
Advancements

A few days later, Damian went home early. He assured me that he was feeling fine, when I inquired, but he had something to do. I went home precisely on time to find out what exactly he was being slippery about. Eira and I found him in the library; we passed Alfred, who was laughing. When we walked in, Damian was just putting down a hex wrench and staring up proudly at his creation. It was an enormous cat tree, with comfortable perches lined with beige shag carpet and the posts wrapped in sisal rope. "You could work for Serena," I said of his architectural skills. "Frank and Joe will love it."

He turned to me, smiling brightly, and I just KNEW.

"Oh, damn, Damian. You brought home another cat."

His response was preempted by a smallish long haired cat who climbed one of the posts like a linesman for the electric company and peered at us over the edge of topmost perch. This cat had coppery brown fur, white markings like it was wearing a shirt under a tuxedo jacket, white paws, elegant long white whiskers, big dark amber eyes, black tail tip and bracelets, and an extravagant ruff. Eira got on her hind legs, bracing against a post, to get a better view. Her tail began to wag in excitement over how furry this new cat was. I sighed.

"No more pets without preapproval," I said sternly. Damian tried to look meek but failed spectacularly.

"It's a good sized cat," I said, sighing. "How old is it?"

"Actually, she's a kitten," he said, and I goggled. "She's a skogkatt, a Norwegian Forest Cat, or Weegie. I got her from a rescue group, she doesn't really have a name." He showed me pictures of huge, fluffy cats and read me descriptions. I was a little despairing when we got to the part where the author said that the breed loves to climb so much they can and will climb rock. I thought of all the nice curtains in the house and what a really large cat could do to them and pulled out my communicator and called Carol. She laughed as I explained my new issue, cooed over the picture I sent, and promised to make a taller cat tree that would fit in with the library. A mere seven foot cat tree wasn't going to cut it, apparently.

The kitten hadn't come down yet by the time Alfred served dinner although Eira was positively longing to examine her new acquisition. The new addition was everything she could want in a cat except too small, and that would be remedied with time; it apparently took up to five years for Weegies to achieve their full growth. Other facts about the cats peppered the conversation; they shed their thick soft undercoat in spring and weren't big shedders the rest of the year, which was nice. They have double coats, with coarser guard fur that is waterproof. They're intelligent and homebodies, but independent, deciding when and where to snuggle. We sat in the library afterward, trying out names on the kitten. She came down when I tried "Signy," so that was that.

"Means 'victory,'" I told Damian as we watched her progress with interest. "That was also the name of one of the older valkyries, an excellent leader and someone I respected a lot. She's got a lot to live up to." We watched in fascination as the cats sidled up to her. She firmly established the pecking order by whapping Sam lightly on the head, cowing him. Frank edged away, and she sat down and washed her paw, tail twitching slightly. Then she looked around, came over to the sofa, climbed the arm rather than jumping up, and walked over our laps and allowed us to pet in passing before jumping down and heading over to Eira. Charlie sat warily behind the big dog. Signy sniffed Eira, who was lying on her side, then walked around and settled against her tummy behind
her front legs. And so peace in our time was achieved.

The next day I stopped by Steve's studio to pick up the last of the clothes I'd ordered. He was looking more relaxed than he had been the last time I'd seen him, like he'd caught up on his sleep, and both happier and more focused. The press had adored his show and the stores that carried his line couldn't keep his ready-to-wear in stock. His couture designs were also among the most popular of the season, according to RateTheCollection, which surveyed potential and actual customers of the top fifty American, Parisian, and London couturiers. He was more popular than the venerable houses of Worth, Poiriot, Madame Gres, McQueen, Chanel, and Fortuny, landing firmly in the upper third of those houses that were tracked. His competition, according to the source, were the historical houses of Dior, Callot Soeurs, Schiaparelli, James, and Fath, and the newer big guns of Deesseleurs, MacKintosh, and Parson-Tableur. Sonia, my vendeuse, saw on the tag that Steve wanted to talk if I had time, and I had only a short wait for him to finish the final fitting of the client, last year's winner of the Academy Award for Best Actress. It wasn't usual for the designer to supervise the fittings, and usually he left them to his fitters, who were at the top of their game, but there were some designs that were tricky or he was just really possessive about. I got a hug and we chatted about our businesses. His blue eyes, now with 70% less bloodshot, twinkled at me as he drew out another garment bag. I frowned; I knew I hadn't ordered any more new things.

"Bucky told me how you faced down the Joker," he said quietly as he unzipped the bag. "That's a big deal, facing down somebody who's tormented you so much. Congratulations are definitely in order. But I thought that my niece could also use a new dress for the grand opening of her business." He drew out the most glamorous slip dress in a deep green heavy silk satin that used folds in the fabric in an almost origami-like way to create an Art Deco-ish pattern. The thin straps over the shoulders were elegantly shaped, and judicious patterns of beads enhanced the effect. The dress ended several inches above the knee, but a long, jaunty fringe added life and movement while bringing the length down just past the knee. It was a dress for a very modern flapper. He sent me to change, then he and the fitter conferred, deciding that no alterations were necessary.

"Wow," I said reverently, turning in front of the mirrors to see the full effect. Steve and Sonia smiled, and Sonia excused herself to take care of the last payment.

"So Bucky's being pretty silent about that warning the Joker gave you," Steve said, folding his arms. I shook my head.

"All he said was that the Joker didn't know who. I don't know whether to believe him," I said. "It would be like Bucky to try to cut me out from the risk." Steve sighed.

"He would have told me before, I know, but now I'm not sure either. Emma's pregnant," he said shyly. "He won't want to drag me into this now that I'm going to have a kid, I don't think." I clapped my hands excitedly over the news, immediately planning yet more knitting projects. I had a favorite pattern for baby booties by now. "And that's another thing I wanted to ask you about. Emma and I would like you to be the godmother. Bucky for godfather, of course."

"I'd be honored," I said.

"After Ragnarok, everything changed," he said, half to himself. "Buck went off on his own. I miss the closeness we had."

"You understand why he had to, don't you?" I asked gently. "Your relationship would have evolved anyway, even without the war. Jobs, new relationships, marriages. And I think you feel that the way you were before the serum that you never would have gotten married, but you don't know for sure."
"Yeah, and I even agree that he has to make his own way in the world. It's just that... we've always had each other's backs, in it to the end of the line. And now there's distance between us. I worry about him."

"Well, when I was back on campus, I can assure you that he was popular with the other students. We used to meet Friday afternoons to decompress after classes, and he was always bringing friends along. And he was popular with the ladies, he dated a lot." I raised my eyebrows at Steve's surprise. "He may be quieter than you remember, but I've been seeing a return to the Uncle Bucky I recognize from Aunt Becca's stories," I assured him. "He's emerging from the shadow of his past life, is what I think. The legacy of the war and then what happened after with HYDRA is large and powerful, and he continued combat throughout his time in Folkvangr. But now he can be at peace and he can become the person he wants to be, rather than what he's told to be." I clenched my fists. "If only the past would just lay down and leave him alone!"

He studied me. "Growing up, I envied Bucky a lot. How easily things came to him, his charisma. But I think what I envy the most now is his relationship with you. You are always on his side, supporting him without an agenda or expectations. It's a very pure love."

I considered that. "Well, to me he's always been my uncle first. That's a lot different from the legend he acquired as a result of the war. I never related to him as the Winter Soldier or a war hero, really, aside from awhile when I was a kid and didn't really think of him as a person at all."

"You're one of the few people to see him as a person, not his actions," he said quietly. "You feel for what he went through, but you don't see him through the lens of what he did. Even I do that sometimes, but then I've got my own guilt about what happened to him on the train." He shook his head. "It's been good for him to have Rebecca and George back, but they've also had to come to grips with what happened, why he's so different."

"From the time I met him, Bucky's just been family. He's almost always taken me seriously, given me good advice. I can recall precisely once when he downplayed my concerns, and after they were shown to be well founded, he never discounted my opinion again. He's had to reel me in when I've gotten in over my head," I said, laughing, "but he's had my back all along." I studied Steve for a moment. "Through college and grad school and marriage, when I was widowed, everything in Valhalla, everything since the return. The thing is, Uncle Steve, situations change, and it's easy to let the force of that change affect other areas of your life. But it doesn't have to change your relationships unless you allow it to." Steve looked startled.

"I never thought of it like that," he said slowly.

"Uncle Bucky's accustomed to reading the terrain quickly and making judgements based on that. He might have felt a distance, thought you were easing into a new life, and widened the gap to make it easier," I suggested. "He's accustomed to people moving on." Leaving him, I almost said, but that wasn't fair. "You might try calling more often, doing things together. See if that's what's happened. If not, just ask him what's going on. Neither of you are mind readers."

"That's good advice," he said. "I'll give that a go."

"Also, keep your eyes out to see if you can set him up," I directed. "He deserves somebody special too, and he's frustrated my matchmaking attempts so far." Steve started to laugh. "I'm serious. He deserves somebody special to come home to, and I know that I was a source of friction between Emma and him at times. I can at least remove that this time around."

His expression softened and he patted my shoulder. "I know about that. Emma herself admitted that she got entrenched in her life, comfortable with her roles, and once it was clear that you and Buck
were building a real relationship, she had to acknowledge that she had to share his attention, which she didn't like. And you got along with Natasha, which she didn't like, and other Avengers liked and respected you. She's never really had to share, and she thought of Tony as her personal property in some ways, they had a unique relationship. In many ways, you're similar, and I can see why you'd butt heads. But Buck was definitely the better for getting to know his family, you in particular. It helped him feel normal and needed for himself as a person. I don't think that he talked with Emma about it much, but he didn't like how she was treating you and made her face the consequences of her actions instead of finding out why she felt threatened."

"M'sieur Steve?" One of the other vendeuses stuck her head into the room. "My pardon for interrupting, but you are needed in the atelier." Steve sighed.

"The life of the world famous designer," I said, smiling. "You and Emma are coming to the party, though, aren't you? You'll be able to see my magnificent dress."

"We wouldn't miss it," he assured me, kissing my hair and directing me out. I picked up my clothes, thanked the ladies, and went back to work.

The next few weeks were a rush of activity; I had my own work projects and some joint projects with Serena. In addition, Margaret was gathering information about that neighborhood we might be interested in buying and renovating, all of us working together in the group project. There was planning for the party, which Martha was handling, and we took every opportunity to meet in the conference room because it was so awesome. A few days before the grand opening of the Valkyrie building, she succeeded in hiring a majordomo for the office, a young man whom she'd had Alfred vet. Apparently there was a butlers' professional organization, and Alfred judged whether her choice, one Theodor Bobal, was up to the standard he expected. Additionally, his background check was clean and we borrowed a telepath from the X-Men to make sure he wasn't there to steal information for another party or to discredit our work. The telepath didn't go inside his mind, but worked as a human lie detector. It may sound a little paranoid, what with all the work available and not enough people to do it, but there had been a scandal involving my old firm, which might or might not have been trying to get inside information from a competitor. Litigation was pending.

The grand opening began in the afternoon; all our retail stores did something special for the occasion; for example, the coffee shop had a new drink, the ice cream parlor had a new flavor, other stores had sales or giveaways. As the afternoon sun faded away, the spotlights that Martha had found lit the night sky like a Hollywood premiere and invited guests and the press arrived in addition to curious shoppers. I changed into my supergorgeous dress, sky-high heels, and freshened makeup and hair before collecting my partners. Down in the lobby, I made a short speech about our hopes for the Valkyrie building, thanked everybody for supporting our businesses, and cut into an enormous sheet cake. Each of us took a turn distributing pieces of cake, then Theodor took over and we separated, talking to the press, then moving the party up the stairs, showing off all the lovely attributes of the building before guiding tours around the two floors of Valkyrie's offices and the conference room, where we had sparkling wine for the guests.

Steve and Emma's appearance added wattage to the proceedings, as did Ann and Tony's arrival. Other Avengers made appearances, and although they didn't show up in costume, I noted the arrival of Wonder Woman and Aquaman. My family was also there, and a few Broadway stars and politicians dropped by. Everybody who came seemed to have at least a good time, some seemed to have more fun, and everybody seemed impressed. A hot, up and coming band played a short set and stayed later to shop. And Bucky arrived, escorting pretty brunette who I recognized as the mayor's spokeswoman. She was sharp and lively, her personality providing much of her appeal. He was polite and attentive to her, as I'd expect, but more than that, he seemed into her. Yay! I didn't have much time, but he introduced us and I said I hoped to see her again. When Bucky quickly
proposed a weekend lunch, I knew he was interested. We set it up for the next weekend. I pointed out Steve and Emma, kissed my uncle's cheek, and got back to business with a happier heart.

It was a great night.
The next day I slept in. You'd think that after all this time, somebody would have come up with a way to make high heels keep from hurting your feet, but alas, we're still slaves to our physiology. Damian also slept in and read me some reviews of the party as I snuggled in. "The newly renovated Valkyrie Building is an astonishing Art Deco confection. With the exterior cleaned and restored, the only hints of its transformation from the street are the pencil cypresses marking the elegant entryway, and the glow from stained glass panels in the windows after dusk. Inside, however, Sabine Jones of Midmarch and Savil has bestowed on the building a glamour and grandeur that it may not have possessed when it was new. Jones credits the owner of the building, Alex Barnes of Valkyrie: Adventures in Architecture, with the vision and insistence on luxury. There's a clever mix of retail businesses, including an outpost of the well-respected coffeeshop Barnraising, an old fashioned ice cream parlor, a couple of restaurants with different price points, clothing, a jeweler, and a quality stationer. Office space is available on the higher floors, and the occupancy rate is an astonishing 90%. Shopper Miranda Dunst praised the elegance of the building and said she'd be returning for Christmas shopping because she felt special there. Broadway star Otieno Arendse said he'd worked in theaters less grand and welcoming and enjoyed the special touches like the doorman. Mayor Jun-Seo Han praised Barnes for her vision and pointed out a number of new property sales on the street as a sign of revitalization for this part of Hell's Kitchen."

"Oh, here's one you'll really like, Petal," he said, switching to another publication. "They've got a great picture of you cutting the cake and smiling. "Property owner Alex Barnes wore a stunning Steve Rogers original for the opening of the Valkyrie Building, but all the partners of Valkyrie: Adventures in Architecture looked as beautiful as they are talented at the Grand Opening celebration. Touches of Old Hollywood glamour marked the event, like the giant spotlights outside...' "City legend Damian Wayne, handsome in a tuxedo, accompanied his equally accomplished wife to the opening of her first significant project--"

"That's true, you are quite handsome in a tuxedo," I interrupted, and he laughed. He read a few more excerpts that highlighted not only my role but those of my partners. Everybody got their due: Dagny's public garden was praised, Serena's work with the difficult, oddly spaced interior of the building, Carol's craftsmanship, the way Margaret had shepherded the project through the city permitting and zoning process, Karen's construction management prowess, and Aslyn's work with contracts and leases was mentioned, as well as her role as CFO. Martha's PR efforts were described in glowing terms. One of the journalists was awestruck by the magnificence of our offices, especially the conference room and the view over the garden from the back balconies. My actual valkyrie wing feather was pointed out, as was the fact that the only valkyries on earth were in business together--'as nimble in their thinking and work as they were in the air' Damian read, and I laughed. Karen, Aslyn, and Margaret were characterized as honorary valkyries.

Alfred made a special sit-down breakfast to celebrate--pancakes, thick cut bacon, strawberries, and orange juice in the fine crystal flutes. I stopped for coffee when I got to work, and Lucy, the manager for this location, congratulated me on the party and told me that the coffee cart was going to make its maiden voyage soon; it would go around midmorning and midafternoon and have some pastries that were only sold on the cart. So I had a bonus coffee and a raspberry-filled croissant an hour later. I didn't need lunch.

Our receptionist, a sleek Scottish woman named Agatha, noted an immediate uptick in calls to the business and scheduled more meetings than we'd had in our entire first month. I personally was asked to submit a proposal for the latest restoration of the New York City Public Library.
A couple of weeks later, we hosted the health fair in the garden. We all took turns volunteering and I sprung for lunch for the health professionals performing the exams and diagnostic tests. It was crisp but not too cold, and only partly cloudy. The press provided some coverage of the event, including that we hoped it would be an annual occurrence, and the clinic was pleased; it also received a spike in donations.

Our lunch with Bucky and his new lady had to be postponed, but we had them out to the house the weekend after the health fair. Nessa Richardson turned out to be as sharp and articulate as she appeared on TV, but softened with a lively sense of humor and charm, and she seemed neither overly awed by Bucky's reputation or looking to get something out of their association. Even better, I saw real affection in the way she leaned toward him when he spoke and unconsciously twined her fingers with his as we hung out in the library. She was pleased to meet Eira and laughed at the rest of the menagerie, including Signy, tucked in on the top perch of her new sixteen-foot cat tree. Carol had outdone herself; it worked both as a cat tree and a sinuous abstract artwork. I was effusive about her when I spoke with my uncle the next day and could hear the smile in his voice when he spoke of her. I was relieved; I really wanted to like whoever Bucky got involved with.

The next week, I went to the clinic in the tower and got started on the medication that would enable me to see if I could have a normal pregnancy. Mentally, I crossed my fingers so hard I got a cramp that it would work. Damian was a wonderful father.

Things were going well for my other friends, too. Jarvis, Tony's father figure, turned up after some adventures and assumed control of Tony and Ann's house. Hiring was ongoing at the labs; they were working on projects large and small and Tony Stark was making his name all over again. I gloated; my investment was really starting to pay off, but I was happier about seeing my friends succeed on such a big scale, proud of my husband's innovative business leadership, and a small amount of nose-thumbing in the direction of Howard Stark, whose weapons business was struggling. He was starting to try new avenues of research and development, but he was firmly behind the curve. Emma didn't have much to say about Howard, but Steve told me once that Howard had changed a great deal from the man Steve had known.

Damian and I started to receive more invitations to events in the New Society; too many to accept and still have time at home. There's a certain point of public notice where you start receiving recognition because people know your name rather than anything you actually do, and we'd gone past that tipping point. It was kind of a pain, tell the truth. Designers started to come calling, wanting to dress me for the events, and although Steve was my preferred go-to guy, there was no harm and a lot of benefit to wearing other designers' work. And I cultivated relationships with the jewelers, too, from up and coming individuals to the historically important houses like Faberge, Van Cleef and Arpels, and Harry Winston. It was a way to head off Damian from amassing another collection. In that I wasn't entirely successful, but the gifts of jewelry were a lot less frequent. He understood I'd rather have his time than a shiny thing.

At the beginning of November, the Batmen hosted the senior members of the Justice League who didn't have duties elsewhere for some sort of crime fighting conference, and Daniel asked Damian and me if we could host a few guests in our house. We agreed, of course, and Alfred prepared suites for Wonder Woman, Aquaman, and Flash. Daniel and Bruce had Superman, Green Arrow, Hawkman, Hawkwoman, Black Canary, and Green Lantern. Martian Manhunter was staying up in the fortress in orbit above the eastern US to monitor for threats. And while the Earth hadn't been attacked for decades, there was no point in being too complacent.

Alfred had just left to escort Aquaman and Flash to their rooms when Wonder Woman arrived, so I took her case and showed her up to the room with the my childhood bed in it. She seemed interested to learn it was a family heirloom and complimented the elegance of the room. I showed
her how to play with the wall color and left her to get settled in. She was the first one down, however, and we sat chatting until the boys came down. Damian had been held up a little and would meet us at the main house for dinner. Wonder Woman told me to call her Diana and asked questions about Valhalla and Ragnarok. She was functionally immortal, being a person who didn't have to bother with evolution but was the defining example of creationism, and as such she'd seen the world change during the time I'd been dead. She was an excellent conversationalist. By the time Flash and Aquaman sauntered in, we were well on our way to becoming friends. As we started up the path to the main house, I thanked her and Aquaman for coming to the opening of the Valkyrie Building. They both said they'd had a good time, that they liked the building. Aquaman said additionally that he'd found his wife a pretty pair of earrings. We found everyone else gathering in the library and Alfred working with Alan to serve drinks and pass canapes. I looked around; as fond as I was of this library, I liked the one in my own house better.

Diana introduced me to Black Canary before taking me on a tour of the other Justice League power hitters. Hawkman and Hawkwoman were a little standoffish, but Green Lantern was pretty relaxed and Green Arrow and Superman were nice. Bruce came over with Damian, who had a kiss for me, and my drink. Superman surprised me when he told me that the Justice League would be making an announcement shortly that they were going to pull the Hall of Justice out of mothballs, so to speak, and invited Valkyrie to put in a bid. Flash was really excited about the advances in technology, "When I was active before the Return, we couldn't get a decent WiFi signal throughout the whole hall. I'm really hoping that I'll be able to text now."

I grinned as Hawkman sighed. "You're supposed to be working when you're in the hall, Flash, not goofing off. Sometimes I fear you don't take your responsibilities seriously."

"Just because I don't have a stick up my ass and my sense of humor is intact doesn't mean that I'm not serious, Hawkman," Flash fired back.

Bruce sighed too. "Knock it off, you two," he directed, wading in to the disagreement between his peers. I was diverted from the squabble by the arrival of Dick and Barbara. Damian joined me as I drifted over.

"They're at it all ready?" Dick asked sotto voice as he accepted a glass of juice from Alan after Barbara was served hers. She was lovely, all glowing in her pregnancy. Damian rolled his eyes.

"Just like old times," he grumbled. Alfred allowed them a little time to drink their juice before Alan came in and announced dinner. Alfred walked Barbara in to dinner, catching up with her. Dick offered me his arm, and Damian snagged Diana. I didn't get to spend enough time with Barbara and Dick anymore.

After dinner, all the heroes prepared to go down to the bat cave and I told Damian that I'd see him at home. "You should come with us," Black Canary said to me. "You may not be League, but you are a hero."

"This is League business," Hawkman objected. "Socialize on your own time." Superman frowned.

"We are here to work to strengthen the League, physically, mentally, and emotionally," he said thoughtfully. "Incorporate the new heroes into the League, expand our protection and assistance. To do that we need information and experience. And Alex could teach us much."

"She's not even a super," Hawkwoman sniffed. I decided I didn't like her either.

"Well, while I was fighting to save this world and everything in the Nine Realms, you were doing what, exactly?" I said, feigning pleasantry. She scowled at me.
"You lack the dedication to the heroes' way," she snapped.

"Oh, please," I said. "I was the hand to hand instructor for the Avengers for decades, preparing them for combat. I spent my afterlife as a hero in the fabled Valhalla with Ragnarok always on my mind. Daily scrimmages, frequent fights with the other afterlife of heroes. I was a valkyrie because of my skill and gifts. I was a chooser of the slain, Odin's chosen battlemaid. I taught Thor's children and mastered many weapons, forging some of the finest blades in the Nine Realms. And Odin chose me to lead the valkyries. I fight with sword, spear, javelin, bow and arrow, knives, anything that comes to hand, and my bare hands. Weapons that take skill to wield. In Valhalla I would have had the right and the duty to kill you for questioning my merits, and it is only your status as a guest in this house that prevents me from doing so," I said evenly. And I snapped out my wings, fully extending them so that everybody could view their magnificence. (If I say so myself.) Neither she nor Hawkman could repress their gasps. "And my wings are real, not a metal construct," I snapped. Their wings were made of Nth metal, which had anti-grav properties. "They are a symbol of my status as a valkyrie, given by Odin but maintained through a bond with the World Tree, that which supports the Nine Realms. So don't stand there and tell me I'm not worthy to be in your company because my mutations only make me enhanced, not super." I crossed my arms, staring her down, and scoffed. "You couldn't keep up with me. Either of you." I folded my wings around me, hooking the claws, and narrowed my eyes at both Hawk-people. Hawkwoman dropped her eyes first, so I focused on Hawkman. He blinked first and flushed a dull, thwarted red.

"We're wasting time," he said shortly.

"That is so cool!" Flash said, coming forward to look. "I thought you'd all lost them."

"Others did... I just didn't say anything different." I shrugged under my nice wings and felt Damian's hand on my back, rubbing gently.

"League members all have their own gifts and strengths," he said. "But you should never discount somebody just because they make different choices. You have no idea the breadth of her gifts or the extent of her strengths. Or the sacrifices that she's made."

"Indeed," Superman said. "I would appreciate your input and thoughts." Bruce nodded and gestured me toward the elevator. Daniel held the door for me and we were joined by the first group of heroes.

Aquaman struck a conversation comparing flight to riding the great currents of the oceans as we waited for everyone to come down. And when the group walked into the conference room (honestly, mine was much nicer) Diana took the seat beside me. The group listened as I began to reply to Superman's questions about conditioning and training exercises.
The next evening, I was approached over coffee by the Hawk jerks. Sorry, Hawk people. Aquaman himself had said that Thanagarians weren't the most empathetic or polite people in the universe, and that was saying something because he was quite blunt. They didn't apologize for their rudeness the previous day, but they did challenge me to a flying competition. I could tell that they saw this as an opportunity to put me in my place: either to shame me if I refused, or to embarrass me by beating me. Screw that. I accepted immediately. Daniel smiled and put his hand on Bruce's shoulder when he would have protested. The protest would have been to help the Hawks to save face. They were a little taken aback when I popped up and started stretching my back and shoulders. We adjourned outside, where they sneered at me for climbing up the corner of the mansion and hopping off the roof. They took off from the ground, their Nth metal wings providing lift and thrust. We kind of played tag for a bit as I learned what their abilities were without fully revealing my own. They had more power, but I had more acrobatic maneuverability.

I took out Hawkman by allowing him to think he'd get me on a shallow dive. I turned on a wingtip and hovered. Hawkman blew by me and crashed into the side of the mansion. As he slid down the wall, I gained altitude and tried the same thing on Hawkwoman, although my goal was different. I crossed the T, and as I flew past, wrenched out one of the straps on the harness that held her wings on. Her flight was immediately impacted, and she had to make a disorderly landing. I flew a lap, (not really a victory lap) checking on Hawkman, who was receiving medical assistance from Alfred, and saw Hawkwoman removing her wing assembly, pissed off. They might be part of the Justice League, but they were not the most popular members. Superman was smiling slightly, Diana looked resigned as her offer of assistance to Hawkwoman was brushed off, Green Lantern smirked, and Flash was outright laughing. I landed gently, and Aquaman thumped my back in approval. I was ready, though, and had braced myself so I didn't stagger.

After the Hawks had been seen to, we trooped down to the bat cave and I finished my suggestions for training and physical conditioning. I took the passage back home and engaged the biometric lock--only family members could bypass the lock, so I didn't want to have to worry about pissed off aliens. Damian found me in the library a couple hours later, curled up on my part of the tete a tete couch, Eira on the other part, the cats adorning the cat trees, and Charlie on my lap. Alfred was right behind him with mugs of cocoa with homemade marshmallows on top. My reward. Eira vacated the couch to flop in front of the fire and Charlie hopped down to curl up with her. Damian grinned at me and told me that the Thanagarians had been reminded that my wings had been revealed to them as members of the League, and all League members would keep the knowledge to themselves or be expelled from the Justice League.

"Flash put in a little dig about how they probably wouldn't want anybody to know that they'd both been grounded by a single unarmed human, and that shut them up." He smiled devilishly at me, and I smiled, thanking Alfred for the treat.

"I am pleased to see you meeting challenges rather than shrugging them off, Miss Alex," he said to my surprise. "Before, you would have simply dismissed the challenge and the League members would have had their opinions shaped by that, perhaps thinking that Masters Bruce and Damian allowed their fondness for you to color their opinions of your skill. Now they know that you are at least their equal even if you choose a different path than they do. Your leadership of the valkyries has made you more assertive."

Damian nodded, licking foam off his lips. "Diana admired that you shrugged off the provocation from last night but responded decisively to a direct challenge. Green Lantern appreciated that you
didn't use more force than you needed to, although Aquaman would have liked to see the full extent of your aerial combat abilities."

I shrugged. "He can see the documentary, the festival cut, if he wants to see what I can do." Damian squeezed my hand with his free one.

"Daniel pointed that out. Turns out that they haven't seen it, or they might have been more cautious in challenging you. Superman was not displeased that someone had put the Thanagarians in their places," he went on. "They tend to feel superior to just about anybody in the League. Dad appreciated the time you took to see how you could most easily put them down without excessive force. I, of course, love to see you shine. Your magnificence reflects on me, and they wonder what I've got that attracted you." He preened.

"Beyond your devotion, your romantic soul, your unending love?" I raised my eyebrows at him and sipped my cocoa. Alfred snorted as he adjusted the flame in the fireplace to optimal Eira levels. Damian beamed at me.

"Well, when you put it like that, it makes more sense," he said, and I laughed. After the cocoa, we said goodnight to Alfred and went to bed. "Superman said that he was going to put the notice that the Hall of Justice is requesting proposals for renovation on the website tomorrow," he said as we got ready for sleep. I quickly texted Serena the news, having forgotten to tell her earlier today. She responded instantly, and I knew that she'd be thinking of ideas. We couldn't do much without the specifics from the request, but she'd get a little head start creatively and be ready to hit the ground when we knew what the problems were and what the League was asking for.

Sure enough, the next morning she had some sketches and we discussed what was known about the existing structure. The request went live at noon, and by then we had some firm ideas and spent the afternoon looking over the 3D blueprint projections that were included. They showed damage that would have to be repaired, listed the restrictions mandated by the historic listing of the building, and there was an extensive wish list. We had to change some of our ideas based on this, but our strongest ideas remained intact, and Serena started to create the 3D model that we'd submit. She'd do the first rendering, I'd come in to correct for the historic considerations as well as addressing power and soundproofing, we'd make refinements to the final design together, and we'd work up the costs last.

And I had the pitch for the public library proposal to prepare and polish. It helped me that I had a reliable, talented construction manager who could give me a realistic timeline for my proposal and a gifted craftsman who could replicate the wooden elements that needed replacement or repair. A Valkyrie proposal was a guarantee of quality and reliability, I mused to myself as I calculated costs.

"I like that, Mom," my daughter said from the doorway, startling me. "I'm going to use it in our promotional materials. Sorry, didn't mean to scare you." Eira raised her head from her dog bed and woofed reprovingly.

"What's up, honey?" I asked, and she detailed a proposal she'd had. A gym had contacted her. They specialized in high-intensity weight circuits and brutal, half-hour aerobic/weight workouts for people on their lunch breaks, and they wanted to lease space. They'd made contact with the leaseholders on either side of the one retail space we had open, and they were willing to buy out these leases for the privilege of a location in the Valkyrie Building.

"Let me get Serena in on this," Martha said, and dashed off. I shook my head. Martha had two speeds, full and stop. Serena looked bemused as she was towed in. Martha recapped for Serena, who nodded. "So on the four floors that are dedicated to office space, we have twenty-four spaces, about 90% of which--21 of them--are leased. The parent company of one of our tenants has just
failed--it was in the news today--and they're shutting down, and two more seem to be rather shaky financially. Valkyrie has two whole floors, of which we are using only about half. Now, you, Serena, and Dagny might need more staff down the road, but that's not now. So what I'm proposing is to consolidate our offices more, offer to move the struggling businesses up to the empty offices on the eighth floor, and turn the fourth floor into more retail space. Business ebbs and flows, so we could adjust this floor between office and retail as our tenants fluctuate. Right now we have more people wanting retail space. We could accommodate the gym and achieve almost 100% occupancy, because I've got a waiting list of people for the smaller units."

Serena looked thoughtful. "I did a student project that featured moveable walls to make subdividing space easier. They locked in place and could be removed, so if we put the gym on the fourth floor, we could expand their premises and if they moved out it would be easy to divide the space again with minimal work and no construction beyond the installation of the initial system."

"It would be nice to be able to get a workout during the day," I said. "Martha, let's schedule a meeting and get everybody in on this."

By the end of the week, we'd decided to consolidate our offices; we had four offices in the back and five on the front of each floor. We anticipated adding staff within a year because business was booming, so we kept the four back offices on the eighth floor for Valkyrie use and did a few changes to permit other businesses to lease those five offices at the front of the building. They were scooped up immediately by individuals with small solo businesses. We offered incentives to the businesses that remained on the fourth floor to allow a mix of retail and office space and put the gym on the third floor because it was a high-traffic area, relocating the jeweler and stationer up to the fourth. It worked out for everybody. In a couple of months, we had the moveable walls installed and everybody relocated with a minimum of fuss.

Just in time for New Years, I got word that my proposal for the public library had been accepted, so Valkyrie would be working on one of the city's most beloved buildings. Stark Industry spun off the construction materials business into a separate division and Tony hired a staff to continue innovating in that field. And there was news for just Damian and me. The clinic reported that the medication was successful, and that, if we chose, I could have a normal pregnancy. This news was both terrifying and exciting. Both of us were still affected by the memories of all those miscarriages and the extremely difficult pregnancy I'd had with the twins, but we discussed it and cautiously decided to have our birth control methods reversed and let nature take its course. I don't think either of us entirely believed that a pregnancy of mine could really be normal; the best I was hoping for was not having to go on bed rest until the late stages. I continued with the medication and the clinic gave me a daily tester to check and see whether I was pregnant; as soon as a pregnancy was detected I would increase the dose of the medication to keep the uterine muscles supple and flexible. It still took about a week for hormones to change enough to signify a pregnancy.

Spring was glorious. Dagny's garden behind the building sprang into life, and the garden at home exploded in a riot of color. Eira and Charlie loved running around outside in the new grass, chasing squirrels and rabbits.

Three things happened in March.

The first week, the Joker was sentenced to ten years in the secure wing of the upstate penitentiary. No parole, and they'd monitor his conversations and mail. He wasn't completely healed yet, and they also had the most secure medical facilities.

On the Ides of March, the winner of the contract for the Hall of Justice was announced: Valkyrie.
And they'd decided that they wanted the landscaping renovated as well, so Dagny had added a design to our proposal. We had a bottle of champagne with strawberries (so handy to have a grocery store downstairs) to celebrate.

That night, the blood tester pinged. I spat out my toothpaste and studied the tester. It had never done that before and I wondered if it needed maintenance. But no. It was a positive result. Damian and I celebrated that night and the next day went in to have the test confirmed. As promised, the medication was increased and weekly checkups were scheduled. It was pointed out that we didn't need them that frequently, but they were willing to accommodate our paranoia after my old records were reviewed. They'd never seen that difficult a pregnancy. We sat on the news for a week, adjusting to it, enjoying our secret. One morning at breakfast, we told Alfred. He sat in silence a moment before grinning hugely and congratulating us. Then came the questions. Which room did we want to use as a nursery? When was I due? Other, more practical questions, like whether my diet needed to be adjusted. We went to work, leaving Alfred happily planning how to baby-proof the place. Eira was excited at the thought of a new puppy.

On the way home, we stopped at my dad's workshop and put in orders for credenzas like we'd had for the twins, with the sleeping stations that could be retracted when not in use and later converted into regular storage. Dad was excited to be a grandpa again, but it was kind of mindboggling that my kid's aunt or uncle would be about the same age as my baby. Mom was due any time, and she was thrilled for my news too once she was reminded that things would be different this time. After dinner, we let the rest of our relatives know, and the next day, we each informed our offices. Ann had just given birth, so Tony and Damian made plans to convert a store room into a nursery and future toddler corral.

It was a little different at my office. Karen and Aslyn had been witness to the miscarriages and the perilous pregnancy and were worried, even after learning about the medication.

"How bad could it have been?" Dagny wondered, eating grapes, and they told her. In detail, ignoring my scowls. By the end of their recitation, everybody was worried and Martha was absolutely white.

"I think you held out information from Xander and me," she managed to say.

I reached out and took her hand, rubbing it gently.

"You didn't need to know all the details," I said, glaring at my friends, who had the decency to look abashed. "It wasn't your fault. I was absolutely determined that the pregnancy would succeed so I did exactly what the doctors told me too. And the doctors have promised that this one will be normal. Even if it isn't, it won't be nearly as hard because the drugs have changed so much. And they're proven effective in even tough cases like mine." Well, not quite like mine. My first pregnancy was one of the most hazardous ones in mutant history. But Martha didn't need to know that. Martha relaxed some, but she was still upset, and afterward, I made Aslyn go fix things with her goddaughter. She was more cheerful after that conversation and seemed to be looking forward to a much younger sibling. I had a more in-depth chat with Karen and Aslyn about discretion and not freaking out my kids. I never wanted them to feel like a burden.

Damian and I had to have a heart to heart with our son, though. Martha had remembered that when you're pregnant, you do everything you can to make sure your babies will be born healthy, but Xander obviously hadn't had that experience of carrying a life within you. It's a very serious responsibility, and I think he realized what that really could mean. Damian finally concluded the conversation. "Your mom would have done anything to have kids," he said simply. "It was all a sacrifice she was willing to make." He kissed his son's head and ruffled his hair, and we went to the
kitchen to find out if Alfred had any cookies. No cookies, but he was making apple cobbler, so we waited patiently for the delicious, gooey treat to come out of the oven.

Things were going well. At the end of April, we went down to DC to inspect the Hall of Justice carefully so that we could begin with our work. I had started knitting baby sweaters and blankets and hats and booties in lavender and soft green and white, amusing my husband. So far, so good. My blood pressure was normal, I was feeling energetic and not much else, not even morning sickness. Yay! And Uncle Steve was working on a christening dress for my infant. He wouldn't let me see the design but promised I'd love it. Everything was going really well. So I had a brief moment of being pissed off as I was jerked into an alley on my way back to work from lunch outside of the building and hit over the head.
When I woke up, I was nauseated, which puzzled me because I hadn't been having morning sickness. But then I was slapped into greater awareness and I remembered the brief bit of alley and I was not happy. I looked around; I was in an empty room, there was a slight fuzzing to my vision which, with the nausea, indicated a concussion, and I seemed to be tied to a chair. I focused on the slapper. Nico Constantin, Aslyn's old flame.

"What's going on here, Nico?" I asked in a hard voice

The look he gave me was not friendly, and there was nothing about the gregarious nice guy Aslyn thought she'd dated. "Nothing to do with you," he said shortly. His accent was no longer faintly Turkish, but heavily Russian. Shit.

"So I suppose you're not a bodyguard," I said. He snorted.

"Hardly. No, I have my own interests to look after. Some scores to settle."

"So Aslyn was simply a means to an end."

"She's a nice woman, much more adventurous than I'd thought, so our time together was fun. But she was mainly a source of information." He held up my switchblade. "For example, she mentioned once that you're always armed. It puzzles her why you do this, the great battle is over. She thinks you're paranoid, that perhaps you need more therapy." I rolled my eyes. I was going to have to give Aslyn another talking to about discretion. For heavens' sake, she was a lawyer, she ought to understand the concept.

"So you're after Bucky." His eyes widened for a split second before he got control over his expression. "What did he do to you?"

"In the end, it's less about what the asset did and more about who wants him back." For the first time I felt a cold stab of fear.

"HYDRA's back?" I asked, and he grinned.

"HYDRA never went away," he said dismissively. "They want their assets back, they have better ways of controlling them these days. And the first one they want is the Winter Soldier." He cursed, briefly but heartfelt. Thanks to the All Speech I'd been granted, I understood the Russian words for bastard. With variations. "His conditioning made him follow orders, which he did, but only as far as the orders specifically stated. 'Take out the target.' The asset would shoot them. There was never any embellishment, a message for others, unless his handlers specifically included that instruction. He never took pride in his work, always fought his conditioning. Because of that he provided a bad example to those of us in allied programs. The women were more compliant, they had been brought up in the system from an early age and their loyalty was easy to secure. They endured everything, even the special training, for what they thought was for the benefit of the fatherland." He growled. "I simply wanted to show that my training was superior, that the same results could be obtained with loyalty rather than brainwashing and control, but they said I couldn't be controlled, that I was unreliable." He started to pace. "I ended up in the gulag, my abilities and drive wasted, until I died. But they've given me a second chance. I just know that if I do things differently, they will see the strength, the truth of my arguments."

"So I'm the bait to bring Bucky to you."
"Of course. It's well known, and confirmed by your friend Aslyn, how close you are to your uncle. The one person he would drop everything for, no risk is too great." I felt frozen with fear. I was pretty sure Bucky didn't know that HYDRA was out again, let alone that they wanted him back, because he would have warned me. I hoped that Nico didn't know I was pregnant; the information might deter others, but Nico would use it. I forced myself to calm down enough to process information as he chatted at me, talking about the new HYDRA. What I could see of the room without being obvious was that it was a large room, empty except for use and the chair. The drywall was up and waiting for coats of primer and paint, so either a new building or one that was in the late stage of a rehab. It wasn't one of Valkyrie's projects, we didn't have anything at this stage of development. Obviously Nico had searched me if he had my switchblade, but I also had a few things, well hidden, that I didn't talk about to anyone, not even Bucky. If I could get out of the restraints, I could access my holdout weapons. And there was my tracker. My response to this nutjob should have set it off by now. He needed to be taken down and the alarm spread. If HYDRA was after its past operatives, it wasn't just my uncle at risk, they'd want to reacquire the Black Widow as well.

"So what now?" I asked. "How are you going to get Bucky here, wherever here is?"

"I'm glad you asked," he said, amused, and activated the camera on his communications device. He spoke in Russian, telling Bucky that he had his niece and that if he wanted to see me alive again, he'd come to this address, blah, blah, standard message. Then he showed me tied to the chair, and gave me a mighty backhand before sending the message. I tasted blood where the blow had cut the inside of my cheek on my teeth and spit. Yuck. He grabbed my hair and brought my head up so we were face to face, almost nose to nose. "HYDRA was curious about you too, but they found signs that that stupid 'documentary' had been manipulated. Their assessment is that your lawsuit was a publicity stunt to drum up interest in the film, and it's so convenient that your wings 'went away' after the battle. You're of no interest to them except as a way to obtain their asset." He grinned, and my nose wrinkled. He'd had something with onions for lunch, apparently. "So that means I can do anything that I want with you. How do you think your dear uncle will react when he sees an example of my creativity? Knowing that but for him, you'd be piddling around with blueprints, trying to make yourself important?" He laughed.

Then he held my knife in front of my eyes before quickly cutting me. He made a random series of small cuts all over my body, none more than a centimeter long. Some were shallow slices, others were punctures. Periodically he'd hit me with a closed fist, for variety, I guess. Where the hell was everybody? I screamed a lot on the off chance that a passer-by would hear, but apparently not. My struggles made it easier to conceal the work I was doing to weaken the plastic restraints, and as soon as I got one hand free, I caught his hand with the knife and drove the tip into him instead. He roared, unprepared for the pain or my resistance, and fell back a couple of paces. I used that moment to lean forward, get my weight on my feet, and fling myself backward with all the force I could generate. Way back when, during my first life, Natasha had told me of a way she'd terminated an interrogation by smashing the chair she'd been tied to. Luck was with me and this was a cheap brittle plastic chair rather than one of those ones for outdoors that lasted for freaking ever. Even so, it didn't break completely, and Nico was on me before I could completely extricate myself. But I did have a foot free, and in the tussle managed to break the rest of the chair when he broke my nose. I slid the push knife out of my fashionable belt buckle and buried it in his gut, aiming for the liver. He was pretty muscular, though, and I doubt that the two-inch blade had hit anything important.

I blinked against the blood running into my eye and Nico fell back. Not from the force of my glare, alas, but because of my mightily pissed-off uncle. His arm isn't strictly metal anymore but an organometallic synthesis, very cool, that still packs one hell of a wallop. Nico slipped, going down, and I whipped off my pretty silk scarf and used it as a garotte as Bucky kept swinging. We only
backed off when the room exploded with the arrival of the reinforcements through a wall. Iron Man, who'd made the hole, led in an array of forces that was disproportionate to the pile of meat on the floor. Natasha and Hawkeye, Uncle Steve, Serena, and of course my Damian piled in, looking for a fight and being sadly disappointed in that regard. Natasha joined Bucky, who didn't look like he was ready to quit pummeling Nico yet.

"Is that... that's the Wolf Spider," she said, sounding puzzled. "What's he doing here?" Both my uncle and I gave her 'are you kidding' looks. I let Damian fuss over me a bit, and he held my shoulders as Hawkeye straightened my nose as gently as he could. Uncle Steve looked at me and winced.

"Hey, Buck, that's enough," he said sternly as Bucky kicked Nico one final time. "What happened-- no,' he corrected himself. "Why did this happen?" he asked me, absently handing me his handkerchief.

Everybody came close to hear what I had to say. "HYDRA's back and looking to reacquire its assets," I said, frowning. One handkerchief wasn't going to be enough. "In this location, that's you and Bucky, Natasha," I specified. "They apparently have some really effective new methods of brainwashing and controlling people, and evidently they don't want to waste time training new people when there are those with the necessary skillset already out there. You two have got to be careful," I stressed.

"HYDRA," Steve spat. Serena took the bloody handkerchief from me and pressed it against the worst of my head wounds, while Tony swore.

"All right," Steve said. "The first thing we need is more information. We'll take this guy to the tower, get his injuries fixed, then we'll interrogate him." He raised his voice over Bucky's growl. "And if you can control yourself, you can help, Buck, but not if you're just going to pound on him." Bucky shot his best friend an unfriendly look.

"I'll get the information out of him," he said flatly.

Steve looked at him dubiously. "Nat, Clint, we need information from more than one source." They nodded and turned, Natasha giving me a little wave as they left. "Tony. You--"

"Computers," Tony said briskly.

"Serena, do you have time?" Steve asked, and she nodded. "All right, people, let's get to work. Bucky, you report into the clinic, get cleaned up. Stark and I will transport the prisoner. Alex, you need medical attention."

"I'm going home," I said. Alfred would fix me up just fine. "But I expect to be kept fully informed. I'm not a one-trick pony, beating up people is not my only specialty." I held Steve's gaze until he nodded, and I let my husband take me out to the car, where he whisked me home. The first thing Alfred did was confirm that my pregnancy was still fine, then gave me concussion medication, a newer medication to help with bruises, and stuffed me into the accelerator to heal my cuts and skin bruising. Then Damian came with me to shower, making sure that all the cuts were healed up and that all the blood was washed away. We went downstairs, where Alfred was assembling a highly nutritional snack for me and Eira was waiting anxiously. We told him what had happened, and he shook his head.

"By attacking Master Bucky's niece, I feel that HYDRA has stirred up a hornet's nest," he said. "What will happen now, Miss Alex?"
"I'm fairly certain that we've just seen the Avengers recalled to active duty," I said. I'd work with Serena to make sure her work for Valkyrie could go forward when she needed to be absent.

"Information first, action later. I won't be doing anything really active while I'm pregnant, and probably not while the kid is young, but after this, I'm going to want my pound of flesh." I looked at Damian; he didn't like it, but he understood. "But I'll have to be smart. Eira, I want you on watchdog status." She woofed enthusiastically, feeling bad about having missed her opportunity for action with Nico. I looked at Damian again. "Maybe you could talk to Daniel about this, see if the batmen can help somehow."

"Beloved, of course we will. We'll gather intelligence," Damian said, nuzzling me.

"I'll speak to the Justice League as well, see what aid we can offer," Bruce said briskly as he came into the kitchen. He gently patted my shoulder and Daniel, right behind him, carefully hugged me.

"Steve's taking charge of the Avengers for this particular op," he told me, taking a seat at the table. "I'll be reaching out to other retired Avengers, seeing if they want in on this too. Since we can't do anything without a plan, and we can't have a plan without intelligence, there's no rush to action here. We need to take enough time to rip the corruption out completely this time, but not take so much time that HYDRA can flourish. The Avengers will take the lead on this matter because they know the organization better than the Justice League and understand the threats and the goals better. I'll be keeping the Senators on the oversight committee in the loop, but vague about the details, just in case they've been corrupted. I don't think that they have, but there's no point in not being prudent."

After everybody had had the opportunity to talk and to calm down, I had Damian take me and Eira back to work. I talked with Serena on the way in; tracking down HYDRA wasn't going to be a full-time job for anybody, but free time was going to be severely curtailed. I could help her out with existing projects, enough to keep things moving, at least, and Karen could send questions and requests in concentrated bursts rather than one at a time so that we could keep everything in motion and help protect her growing professional reputation. When I got back to the office, I went directly to Aslyn and let her know what had happened. Despite the accelerator, my nose was still tender and I'd have to keep treating the swelling and bruising for a few days. I had to tell her about Nico and find out what else she had told him about me and my uncle. She was devastated that Nico had used her to hurt me and she couldn't recall telling him much. We talked a bit about what kind of things she could say to outsiders, then I changed the topic and asked her about security. She was glad to have something that she could do to help, and we decided to require passcodes to access the top floor and any Valkyrie office. I put her in touch with Bruce for suggestions, then went to Martha to tell her what had happened. Then a Valkyrie team meeting, to let everybody know what had happened and why, explaining why Serena would be out of the office more and that we needed to provide organized questions for issues, and Aslyn talked about the new biometric readers that would be installed on our offices and the elevators. Additionally, she was getting information from a company that specialized in challenges like this and additional safeguards were possible. She'd keep us in the loop.

There was nothing immediate that needed my attention, so I got ready to go. I was running on fumes now. A tap on the door alerted me, and I looked up to see Loki. I smiled, and he came in to say hello to Eira and smooth my hair. "Stark sent a message to be included in the diplomatic pouch to go to my brother," he explained. "Thor is unlikely to be able to respond personally, but he will send down Modi to assist. I also personally requested Torunn, to act as your bodyguard until such a time as this is resolved. Better now than later; this way you can accustom yourself to the bodyguard while you still have mobility." His green eyes twinkled and I smiled at his baiting. He had a point; in the later months of my pregnancy, there was no way I'd be agile and quick, and there was no way of knowing now whether Nico was the only one who had been sent after my uncle. It was
publicly known we were close.

"So when will she be arriving?"

"Tomorrow morning," he said promptly. "I will bring her here when Heimdall opens the Bifrost."

"Bring her luggage," I directed. "We've got room in the house for her." Loki smiled.

"Modi will be housed in the embassy or the tower, but I know he will wish to see you." We chatted a bit until Damian called up. We dropped Loki off at the embassy and he explained to Damian, who thought a bodyguard was a great idea. We also stopped by the tower after dropping off Loki so they could just double-check my pregnancy. I was relieved when they said that the kid and I were ok. When we got home, I took a little pre-dinner nap. Eira curled up with me and Damian went to talk to Alfred.

When I woke up, the room was shadowed with dusk and Damian was tucking hair behind my ear. "Dinner's ready, Petal," he said tenderly, stroking my cheek. I turned my face a little so I could press a kiss to his fingertips and sat up. Eira stretched and yawned, and I took a few moments to de-rumple. My nose still hurt like the dickens and a little residual blood had pooled around my eyes. I'd get another accelerator session after dinner and that should be it for the swelling and bruising. The nose would just have to heal on its own. The meal was delicious as always, and Alfred was interested in my new bodyguard, whom he'd met before but only briefly.

"I am not surprised that you realize the benefit of a bodyguard, Miss Alex," he said as we ate. "I am somewhat surprised that you are willing to house her here, however."

"I might not have done so if it was a stranger," I acknowledged, "but I've known Torunn since her birth and I helped to train her. Her parents are my friends too, so it's the least I can do. She used to be her uncle's bodyguard, so I'm privileged to have such a fine guard." I thought about it. "She doesn't have any food allergies, but as an Asgardian, she does eat more than a human does."

I went on to tell some stories about Torunn, nothing too embarrassing, and her brothers as well. "You definitely had a more interesting afterlife than I did, Sweet pea," Damian said, and Alfred agreed.

"It is interesting to hear of your experiences, Miss Alex," Alfred agreed. "And it is pleasing to see that others have properly valued your skills and loyalty." I flushed; I hadn't been telling the stories to brag.

"I just wanted to kind of introduce her as a person," I protested, and both men smiled.

"And I look forward to getting to know her better," my husband assured me, and Alfred shooed us out to the library where we took to our tete a tete couch and Eira settled onto the rug in front of the fireplace. It was too warm for a fire now, but she thought of that as her spot. Signe flowed down the cat tree and settled into a meatloaf configuration against Eira's back. I felt Eira's contentment before she went to sleep. Alfred brought in chamomile tea for Damian (he was stressed about the afternoon's events and could use the soothing) and decaf for me along with a plate of brown sugar madeleines and strong black tea for himself. It was pleasant to sit and talk with my family, but I made it an early night. I was just sodden with fatigue, despite my nap.

The next morning, we got a slightly late start; it was so pleasant to cuddle with my nice warm husband in our very comfortable bed, and I felt loved and safe. We were just sitting down to a hearty breakfast when the Bifrost slammed into the slate patio in the back. "Damn it, Heimdall," I muttered. The Bifrost would burn a pattern into the stone. But I got up and we went outside to find
all three royal siblings and Torunn's luggage. They waited patiently for hugs, then I introduced my husband and Alfred to the boys; they knew Torunn already. Naturally, they were invited to breakfast, and as Alfred displayed his virtuosity in the kitchen, we learned that Magni was just down here to assess the situation and report back to his parents; Modi would be stationed here until the HYDRA threat was dealt with. He was pleased with this; like his father and siblings, he liked Earth. Magni was a little jealous, but Thor was giving his heir real responsibilities and duties and he couldn't be spared. Alfred reappeared and told Torunn that he'd taken her bags up to her room. Then all of them wanted to see the room, which was the one J had stayed in; we were beginning a slow conversion of the other room to the nursery. Damian showed her how to adjust the wall color to her liking, and her brothers looked around enviously.

"Father and Uncle Loki expect you to stay at the embassy," Magni told his brother, squashing, I suspect, a request to stay here. Modi looked downcast and I understood; the embassy was nice but not luxurious, and the cook wasn't as good as Alfred. Torunn smirked, especially when she saw the bathroom. Modi would have to share; only the Ambassador had a private bath. I saw that Torunn had brought her armor, and when we went back downstairs, I quietly asked Alfred to take one of my armor stands up to her room. I'd moved an assortment of small arms up to the nursery in progress; I didn't want Damian to be upset by them, but I was upping my personal defense even though I had Torunn now. Alfred drove us into the city in one of Daniel's big cars and we dropped the boys at the embassy. Loki was waiting at the gate; we'd called him on the way in, and he greeted his niece and nephews affectionately before inviting us to dinner later that week. Torunn and I were let out at the Valkyrie Building, which Torunn regarded in wonder. We poked around a little and I bought us some coffee and a snack. Didn't need the snack, but the pastries were too delicious to pass up, and Torunn had an active metabolism. She looked around in approval.

"The architecture on Asgard is quite grand, but it very different from this," she commented. "This much detail and color should be fussy and oppressive, but it's striking and vibrant." I smiled, pleased. When we got to the office, I offered her one of the unused offices, but they were all on the floor below us, so she elected to stay in my office. When we went inside, she was drawn to the windows and the view of the public garden which was greening up nicely and showing how beautiful it would be when all the plants were mature and had filled in. Aslyn came in, towing in a comfortable desk chair and a small computer desk for Torunn. She plugged the desk in the corner where Torunn could view the garden, and swung the chair in behind. Eira got settled in her dog bed, and I followed Aslyn to her office to thank her for her thoughtfulness.

"I'm really sorry, Alex," she said, not looking at me. "I'm making awful mistakes, telling Martha about how dangerous your pregnancy was, telling Nico things about you. I swear, I had no idea he was just using me." I went over and hugged her.

"I know you didn't," I said affectionately. "He said that the only things that he found out were that I carry a knife with me and a confirmation that my uncle and I are close. One was something that's widely known, the other couldn't have been much of a surprise. And I'm sorry if I came down too hard on you yesterday. I was upset."

"I just thought he wanted to find out about the people who were important to me," she mumbled. I patted he back.

"It's not your fault, but I'd just appreciate it if others don't know about my training or habits," I explained. She nodded. "Hey, did I tell you that they think the documentary was faked and the trials were for publicity?" I asked, and successfully diverted her. She burst out laughing.

"That woman admitted that she'd sharpened the color, omitted some fuzziness, eliminated some of the shakiness, but everybody said it was accurate to the best of their recollection," she said, and I
"It's an interpretation I had not considered," I admitted. "But I like it. Never hurts for people to underestimate you." We discussed that and a couple other matters, and I went back to my office, where Torunn was surfing the net.

We had a partners meeting later that afternoon. I introduced everybody to Torunn, and Aslyn told us that the biometric readers--fingerprint scanners that also read information like temperature and blood pressure--would be installed over the weekend and passed around the instructions for adding ours when we came in on Monday. We also had a new cleaning crew, who would sweep the entire building nightly for any unauthorized devices. "It's a reasonable precaution," she said, shrugging. "We've got Alex and Serena, who are what the security firm calls 'higher-risk targets' and we all want to be protected. They're adding a phone to the elevator so that we can let clients into the offices. Let's not forget that there are always anti-mutant factions out there, and they're sporadically violent. We've publicly aligned ourselves as something some might deem unnatural, and the building is pretty well secured after business hours. And surprisingly, they don't cost much more than our old cleaning crew, but then we had a few complaints from our retail tenants that the cleaners cut corners so it's a good time to make a change."

Serena said apologetically that she wasn't sure what her schedule would be, but that she'd let us know about absences in advance if she could. She looked tired and a little worried, so after the meeting, I followed her into her office. They'd been able to do some interrogation of Nico late last night, which was why she was tired, but she was nervous about her ability to juggle the necessary task of going after HYDRA and her business. I sat back and thought. "Well, why not hire yourself a junior architect?" I asked reasonably. "Somebody who could make sure that you're covered during your absences, someone you can trust to execute your designs. You remember Tony Dupree, don't you? He wasn't creative at all, but he knew everything else cold. Somebody like that, who won't be tempted to screw with your designs but has the technical knowledge to be sure that any problems are taken care of." She rubbed her eyes and thought.

"You think it'll work?" she asked, and I nodded.

"I could answer some questions, but not all, and I'm not an architect. We have to consider your business, which is just starting to take off. We don't want anything to interfere with that, and there's also Valkyrie as a whole to consider. If your business is damaged, it would reflect on us all. This way you'd be covered. Plus this way you'd have a strong technician to bounce ideas off and who might have valuable contributions to make. Look at Carol--she has her own shop with journeymen and apprentices and she's interviewing other masters to add someone whose work will compliment her own. Dagny has a foreman for her landscaping crew and she's looking to add a second crew. Karen's got an ad running for a couple of assistants, Margaret is advertising for a part-time assistant, Aslyn has Martha, and they're planning to hire somebody. The two of us are the last holdouts." She laughed.

"When you put it like that..." she said. "What about you?"

"Right now I don't need to," I said. "Once I get the bid and work up my ideas, I mostly hand it over to the architects and interior designers. I answer questions and work around unexpected problems, but I don't have many on-site visits, especially with the residences. Technology has made it easier to identify problem areas in a structure and the solutions Tony's worked up for me help make sure that surprises are few. He's working on a gizmo that will provide scans of the space inside the walls so I'll know if there are insect infestations, problems with the plumbing, unpleasantries like that. I never want to go through an experience like the Carroll residence, where because they thought the plumbing would do, they didn't update and when the pipes burst, it ruined the entire
west wall of the house.” I shook my head. They'd been warned the pipes were iffy, but they'd preferred to spend the money on the stuff that showed. That much water had ruined the SmartBoard and caused other damages. The repair bills had been huge and we were having trouble getting paid for the work we'd done.

"After the library and the Hall of Justice, you're going to be internationally known," she said confidently. "You're going to get people and organizations requesting that you bid on their projects. Wouldn't hurt for you to get an assistant too. Teach them how to understand and apply the goodies Tony's group comes up with. You could offload some of the more tedious tasks once you get the right person trained. Cover for you during your maternity leave."

"I'm not planning much time off," I said. "My dad is making me a credenza that has a pop-up bassinet and the soundproofing up here is really good." She grinned. "And Damian is making adjustments at his office too. I'll have to share anyway. Plus Alfred really liked babysitting Martha and Xander."

"If you want to work, that's one thing," she said. "But why not make it easier? Get somebody to hold the fort." I thought about it.

"You've got a point," I said grudgingly, but as the day wore on, the idea really started to grow on me. Get somebody who was good with difficult clients, that's the ticket. Maybe with plumbing expertise. I started drafting notices for a couple of historic preservation journals that afternoon.
The next day when I went in to work, Margaret's door stayed closed, as did Aslyn's. It wasn't until mid-morning that Aslyn came in. She looked tired but she was laughing. "Guess what happened to Margaret last night," she said, snorting a laugh. Well, if she was laughing, Margaret wasn't in the hospital.

"With Margaret, anything is possible," I replied. "C'mon, just tell me."

"I had to bail her out of jail."

"What?" I sat up straight, and across the room, Torunn looked interested, putting down her book.

"She was on a date with that guy she's interested in," she said, and I nodded. "She saw Vanilla at the bar," Aslyn continued. I sucked in a breath. "She was so pissed that she forgot she was angling to bed her date that night and charged over, swinging. " I snorted a laugh. "She was yelling at him about being responsible for getting her killed and putting us through hell and how he wasn't fit to be alive again. She inflicted a lot of superficial damage on him and gave him a concussion when she smashed his beer bottle over his head, but the bastard is going to be fine. So she got nicked for battery and I got her out this morning. She has a hearing tomorrow morning, so she'll be out from work too. I told her to take the day off if she had nothing pressing and calm down. She's a real fire-breather," she said fondly, starting to laugh again. I did too.

"I shouldn't be laughing," I said, wiping my eyes. "She could have really hurt him which would make things worse for her. But I bet it was cathartic." That set us off again. A brief explanation to Torunn was in order because she was looking at us like we were loony tunes.

The next day, I pounced when they came in after the hearing. "What happened?" I wanted to know.

"Vanilla declined to press charges," Aslyn said briskly. "And given the circumstances, the prosecutor wasn't too zealous and the judge was lenient."

"I got a fifteen day restraining order and a sternly-worded warning not to do it again," Margaret said philosophically, although she was still seething. "So it could have been worse, and I would have accepted more punishment without complaint. It was worth it. All he had was prison for theft of the building plans and accessory. He got off light. Even a concussion wasn't enough." She bared her teeth.

"Well, it's over now," Aslyn said, and after a supportive hug, went to her office. I waited until Margaret went into her office before adding some advice. "If you want to pummel somebody, you ought to take up boxing. If you really want to inflict some damage, take Krav Maga classes. And if you need help hiding a body, call me." I winked, and Margaret huffed out a laugh.

"I forget how practical you can be."

I rolled my eyes. "Just because I'm knitting baby booties doesn't mean my brain's gone soft. And I absorbed a lot more from Uncle Bucky's stories than even he realizes. So don't threaten him in front of witnesses and try not to make a mess, because bloodstains are not only an incriminating tip-off but it's harder to make a clean disposal."

Margaret's anger cooled. "Ok," she said after a moment. "Thanks for the tip." We looked at each other and burst out laughing. "Yeah, I think I'll be satisfied with giving him a concussion." My work was done. I went back to my office; I had things to accomplish before my doctor's
My weekly wellness check went well, I was well, the kid was well, and the doctors had a new gizmo that they wanted to try. It was some kind of highly specialized ultrasound, as near as I could figure out, that could be used to diagnose very small tumors or abnormalities. And as near as I could tell, they were excited to try it out and could justify using it on my pregnancy because my other had been risky. But I knew they just wanted to play with their toy. That was ok, I was really interested in the offspring. It was too bad Damian wasn't here for it, but he'd come next time for the show. "Well, Alex, see that spot there, about the size of a blueberry? That's the next Barnes-Wayne. Way too soon to tell what sex it is just yet, though."

I chuckled. "It's ok, we're decorating using lavender and green." He laughed too, and scanned the rest of the uterus to make sure that everything was good with the muscle. The wand hesitated.

"You must be a hyperovulator," he said. "It's more common with women in their thirties but not unheard of in women in their mid to late twenties, which is where you're estimated to be since the time of the Return."

"Doctor," I said again. Well, more like barked.

"Congratulations, Alex, you're having another set of twins." I looked at the holographic display again and kind of goggled.

"Wow," I managed, surprised. "Damian's going to be sad he missed the big reveal." Then I thought about it. "Why am I having all these twins? Nobody else in my family has them." The doctor shrugged, finished the check after checking the fallopian tubes, and put down the wand.

"Even with all the advances in medical science, there are still things we don't know. And we checked your DNA; it's not something you're predisposed to have. Apparently you just ovulate very generously." I had to laugh at that and he printed out the images of my two little blueberries. Some sharpening of the images showed the little nubs of arms and legs and the little tail.

I recoiled a little. "Lord, they're ugly," I said involuntarily. And looked around. "Don't tell anybody I said that."

He smiled. "Doctor/patient confidentiality," he said. "You weren't much to look at at that stage either. I laughed, and took the printouts.

Before going back to the office, I went by the lab. Ann was due in a few weeks, and Tony was as nervous as she was serene. After a little conversation, I hunted up my husband, who was on a call that involved him getting his way over the construction of a manufacturing plant in Germany. After he hung up, he beamed at me. "How was the appointment?"

"Really good, actually," I said brightly. "They have this new thing that allows imaging of the fetus from a really early time." I handed him a set of images. "The first one is life size, the other is a closeup."

"That's really small," he said, peering at it, and like me, recoiled from the more detailed image. I nodded.

"I know, it's not much to look at now." He chuckled a little, and I passed him the second set. He frowned at them, comparing, and then the light bulb clicked on.

"One of the things I love about you, Alex, is that you're so practical. Why have two pregnancies
when one will do?" He came around his desk and tugged me to my feet for a hug, holding me tight to him and lifting me off my feet.

"It's really about the diapers," I said. "One round is better than two, even if there's more work in round one."

He put me back on my feet although he kept his arms around me. "Oh, my dearest love. Just when I thought I couldn't be any more excited."

Tony poked his head in and frowned. Damian wiped the tears off his cheeks, but he kept one arm around me. "Don't tell me there's trouble," he said grimly. I beamed at him.

"Twins again. And I'd like you to be a godfather to these ones, too. Just getting my bid in early," I said fondly, and his face relaxed.

"Overachieving much, Barnes?" he said, leaning against the doorframe. "I suppose I have to be a godfather. Somebody's got to provide bail money," he said flippantly, standing up straight. That made me laugh, and I told them about Margaret's brush with vengeance. Tony came over for a hug and patted Damian on the shoulder. "Congratulations," he said sincerely. "I'm glad that things are going better this time around, Alex," he added.

Damian and I decided to leave work early and make the rounds of family before telling the rest of our friends. I told Torunn when I got back into the car and headed back to the office, and asked if she'd be a godmother. Damian and I had discussed candidates, wanting a wide variety of people to give our kid(s) a broad outlook on life and also responsible adults they could trust. Normally, I'd have waited longer to do this, but I wanted to get everybody lined up before they realized how much work twins actually were. When I explained what godparents were, she was delighted to accept.

We picked Damian up later and made the Wayne Enterprises building our first stop. We could hit a bunch of relatives there. Martha was visiting her husband just then, before they went to dinner and the symphony, so we got Damian's grandparents, his dad, and Mark and Daniel all in one go. Group notifications are definitely the way to go. Our grown kids and J were coming out to the house for dinner, so our next stop was the zoo, where we tracked Bucky down in the penguin exhibit. He had so much fun with the birds, and it really pissed me off the HYDRA wanted to take that away from him. Since penguins were an animal that visitors could interact with, we got to go back in the exhibit. I hung back a bit; since I couldn't clean the cats' litter boxes anymore I wasn't sure that I couldn't pick up something from zoo critters.

"What did the zoo say about you rejoining the Avengers for special assignment?" I asked. I was worried that his employment would be in jeopardy.

"They accept it," he said after giving me my hug. "They're treating it like I'm in the National Guard, so I don't have to worry about losing my position here. But they were going to start training me to work with the big cats, and now that's going to have to wait. I like the penguins a lot, though. And I've applied for a vet tech training program that will allow me to help the zoo's vets with the animals, see if that's something I really want to do, and if I get that, I'll probably have to postpone it for a bit." He saw my face and gave me an extra hug. "It's ok, sweetie. It's a postponement rather than a denial." I nodded, then remembered why we came.

"So I've got news too, Uncle Bucky," I said, brightening. "I found out today that I'm having twins again." He looked surprised, then happiness spread over his face. This time Damian got a hug too and we chatted briefly, inviting him over for a family dinner later that week. We collected Torunn on the way out. We'd have to come back; she'd never been to the zoo, it turned out. A stop at Mom
and Dad's, where they were thrilled to hear about their new bonus grandchild, and home. Eira had been excited to learn that there would be two puppies for her to play with, but she was tired and headed immediately for the library. We found Alfred in the kitchen, working on dinner. He gave us heartfelt congratulations on hearing the news.

"We'd like you to be one of their godfathers," Damian said to him. He squeezed my hand as we watched Alfred process the request, and we beamed at him as he choked up a little before assenting.

"It would be a very great privilege and a pleasure, Master Damian," he said finally, and gave him a hug. Then Alfred held a chair for me at the kitchen table so we could talk as he worked, and he asked what the doctors were recommending for me. I wasn't the only one slightly haunted by that first pregnancy.

"Eat a lot of good stuff--which is so easy thanks to your menus--and they want me to try yoga for preggos," I said, snapping into a celery stick that he had quickly prepared, and handing over the information that they'd copied for me. Alfred raised an eyebrow.

"I fail to see how you will fit a new class in with the dance classes, the boxing, and your self-defense classes," he said, looking over the nutritional information.

"Well, they want me to suspend the hand to hand classes and restrict boxing to just hitting the bag," I said. "It makes sense, injuries can happen unintentionally and Bucky would be devastated if he accidentally hurt me, but I just don't think that I'm a yoga type of person. And farther along, I'll have to really cut back on weight lifting when the hormones start to loosen everything up. I like to be active." I pondered as Damian laughed. "Maybe I'll be bored enough to do the yoga when I'm too big to do anything else." Then a thought hit me. "Shoot. I'll have to give up flying for awhile."

Alfred turned from the stove, an expression of concern on his face. "I know you love your flights through the orchards as much as you enjoy the grace and discipline of ballet and the joy of hitting something, but it will only be temporary, Miss Alex."

"Yeah, and I don't have to stop right now," I said, selecting a slice of bell pepper next. "They said I could keep flying until I got too heavy to get off the ground as long as I don't do anything challenging." So there was that as well. If I ran into Hawkman or Hawkwoman, any corrections to their world view would have to wait until I delivered and got back into shape.

Everybody was excited by our news, but I got maybe my favorite reaction when I stopped by Steve's. He heard the news with a great deal of pleasure, and immediately started thinking of a second christening gown. The premieres of the workroom immediately offered their congratulations and hurried off to look at the fabrics they had. "I wondered if you'd be a godfather," I asked him. "Everybody should have an Uncle Steve."

His twinkling blue eyes filled. "That means so much to me," he said, swiping his cheeks. "I always planned to be around for Bucky's kids, and I missed out entirely on you."

I sniffed too, and patted his hand. "And the fun thing will be that your kid will have some playmates too. Emma's due soon, so there will only be a few months in between them." Steve's smile was bright, and he jumped up to escort his wife as she appeared in the door. She was puffing a bit from the stairs. Emma didn't enjoy working out much, but she looked great. She gave me a hug and was thrilled to hear my news.

"They've asked me to be a godfather too," he said proudly, and Emma smiled at him.
"And we'd like you to be a godmother," I said to her.

"Are you sure?" she asked me, and I knew she was remembering that we hadn't always been close.

"Absolutely. The godfathers are probably going to be overly indulgent. I need somebody who is clear-sighted and firm as well as loving," I said earnestly, and she accepted with pleasure. She put her hand to the small of her back and groaned.

"I don't know how you can do twins," she said. "One is hard enough."

"I don't expect it will be too bad until the last couple of months, when I might take maternity leave a little early and lounge around at home." She laughed.

"That sounds so good. But at least I get to sit a lot at work. I was going to call you, but since you're here, I wondered if I could impose on you and have you take Sigurd and Torburn for awhile. They're such good boys, but but I just don't have enough energy to keep up with them, and Steve's here or at the tower a lot."

"I'd be happy to. They can run around on the estate and I know Eira will love to have them stay for awhile." Eira did perk up and wag her tail. Emma smiled at her.

"I'm also sure that the boys would be fine with taking turns on guard duty," she said. "They like to keep busy, and that will give them more time to play with Eira." They came down at her mental call, and she explained her plan, making sure to let them know that they weren't being punished or exiled, just being given a more high-energy environment than she could provide right now. They were pleased at the change in routine, and since Emma was only a couple of weeks away from delivery, knew that it wouldn't be for long. They also were interested in the prospect of a human puppy. When I left, I had two additional dogs in tow. The effect of all three beautiful dogs was stunning, and they were thrilled to see Torunn.

It was a tight squeeze in the car, and Damien asked if we could borrow one of Daniel's bigger cars for a bit. Damian looked thoughtful after the call. "We should probably get one for ourselves; after all, even after HYDRA is brought down and Torunn goes on to her next step, we'll still have us, the two kids, and often Eira, just at a minimum." So we started looking in to family vehicles. Maybe I wasn't in the mood, but the options were unexciting.

"How's Tony doing on his cars, anyway?" I asked, frowning. "I haven't kept up; conversations have mostly been about HYDRA or babies."

Damian sat up straight. "He's got models pretty close to prototyping," he said, and brought up some files from work on the projector.

The first one was a hot little number, a two-seater sports car that I instantly coveted, but which would only fit me and one child. I'd hate to have to play favorites from the start. The next model was a four seater, still good looking, but we could take one child and Eira. The last one wasn't the minivan I was expecting but an interesting elongated sedan; there was a forward compartment for the adults and a rear compartment that had four seats that faced each other, a small pull-up table between the four seats, and room for a large dog. Huh. It even had a cutting-edge entertainment and information package, the AI driving option, so many airbags, and safety glass that automatically tinted to keep the light in the vehicle to optimal levels. The four rear doors opened elegantly from the sides so that there was no center pillar to impede access. It was styled nicely, giving the impression more of a limousine than a family car. Damien looked at my face, smiled indulgently, and got an open line.
"Tony? Listen, I know you said you were going to prototype the sports car first, but how would you feel about starting with the family car?" He listened intently; I could hear the tone of Tony's voice as he shot questions at Damian and smiled. "Well, Alex is interested. There's room for two kids, the dog, and Torunn, and later there's space for the kids' friends." There was a pause, Tony said something fairly brief, and they hung up. "Tony's agreed to switch priorities," was all Damian said, smiling.

I was tired from the joy of spreading my news around, so I went up to bed early; Damian was going out. The bat family was trying to shake loose information on HYDRA, but so far our scum didn't intersect much with that scum.

The next morning, Damian chuckled as we got ready. My waistbands were tightening up already even though I was only just starting to show a slight roundness and the doctors said my weight was fine. If anything, they said I could stand to put on a little weight. I'd have to put away some of my favorite clothes and start investigating maternity clothing so I'd have something when all the waistbands were too tight. He distracted me from my thoughts. "When I got in last night, you were sound asleep, Eira was taking up my spot, Charlie was sacked out on his back between you, and Signe was curled up on your stomach. It's a good thing Frank and Sam sleep on Alfred's bed. As it was, Eira wasn't pleased about having to shift." I laughed too.

"I dreamed that I was caught in a very comfortable, warm cocoon," I told him. "I was being fed fudge and champagne, which sounds gross right now but in the dream was sublime." He took my brush and stroked it through my hair a few more times before twisting it up and securing it with a few hair pins, then kissed the nape of my neck.

"Well, no champagne for awhile, but I bet Alfred has something delicious for breakfast."

"Of course, it's Alfred," I said. We had French toast, bacon, and fresh fruit. And coffee. Thank heaven the doctors weren't cutting that out, I'd never survive. At the door, he handed us each a boxed lunch, and I got a bonus box of brownies for the office and quietly gloated. Damian looked at Alfred pathetically.

"Miss Alex is eating for three," he said sternly. "You're only eating for one, Master Damian, and if you overindulge you won't be able to fit in your Nightfall suit. Not to mention what Master Dick will say about love handles or a muffin top." Damian rolled his eyes, I thanked Alfred, and we went off to work. I gave Damian a brownie for later once we were on the road. Torunn kept silent about that; I'd share with her once we got to work. And Eira too; chocolate wasn't poisonous to the Asgardian dogs and she enjoyed it occasionally.

To my surprise, I already had six resumes in my inbox in response to my ads. I made a happy noise and started reading. Midmorning, Serena came in at the same time the coffee cart came around. After refreshing our beverages, I offered her a brownie and told her to keep it a secret. There were only five left; Alfred was definitely a small-batch baker to ensure quality, and I didn't have enough for everybody. She agreed; violation would result in a temporary cut-off from the source, and nobody wanted that. "I got good news at the doctor's visit yesterday," I said, and she looked interested. "Another set of twins." Serena whooped and came around the desk for a hug.

"Congratulations!" she said enthusiastically.

"I'm glad you are excited, because Damian and I would like you to be one of the godmothers."

"Aw, Alex, I'd love to. Who else are you lining up?"

"You, Torunn, and Emma for godmothers, you all survived Ragnarok, so you've had good training
for twins. Steve, Tony, and Alfred for godfathers, but I think I'm going to add in Daniel too. He dates, but he's not finding anybody," I fretted. "The boy needs family, and maybe this will be a bigger nudge to making his own." Both Torunn and Serena laughed.

"I"m kind of surprised about Tony, though," Serena said. "I'm not in love with him anymore, but he's always going to be special to me and this is a way to show it without embarrassing him. And he and Damian are good friends too. Plus Tony can be childlike sometimes, in the best possible way; he's never lost the sense of wonder when he encounters something new and interesting, and he's fun. Martha and Xander adore him, always have, and he also provides an additional connection between the sets of twins. Steve, because he missed out on a lot and he'll be a great example, and Alfred, because...well, Alfred." Serena and Torunn nodded. That was enough of an explanation. "You should see the Pinterest board he's got going for the nursery." It was extraordinary.

We chatted about that, then I mentioned I had several responses for the ad for an assistant. Serena smiled. She'd had a similar response, and she was warming more to the idea. "I initially dropped by to tell you that I'm taking a business trip next week to Portugal. The Avengers put out feelers to known and trusted superhero groups overseas, and the one in Portugal contacted us with suspicions of their own regarding their business and political leaders. So officially, I'm going over to get information to bid on a new visitor center for Monserrate Palace, but I'll be doing some Avengers business as well." She'd be gone for eight days, which was perfectly doable.

"That's one of the most beautiful palaces in the world," I said enviously.

"Portugal does allow tourists," she teased me, and after a little more conversation, she went back to her own work. I puttered around until it was time for lunch, which featured thick-cut rare roast beef sandwiches and a delicious salad. After that, we walked to the library, where I had some work to inspect and to meet with Carol and the director who was our connection with the library. Torunn had questions about the city, the buildings, and the people although she was primarily absorbed in watching for threats. Eira brought up the rear, guarding me from behind. Sure enough, Barbara was on duty, and after we chatted a bit and Eira inconspicuously consumed her treat, Eira ambled toward the children's room where she was a known and beloved presence, and I went up to my meeting. Barbara offered to show Torunn around the library, so everybody was happy.

The directors were being sticky about the replacement of some of the ornaments which, to be fair, weren't awfully bad, but Carol produced a new architectural carving she'd done and held it up to one of the ornaments in question. The difference in quality was clear, and the director caved and said she'd go back to the board with a request for the additional funds. But we pointed out that the budget included a whole new floor, and Carol said that we could replace the most damaged portions of the parquet and sand and refinish the rest, which would free up quite a bit of funds. Carol had some tricks up her sleeve, so the newer wood would look like the old. That made the director a lot happier, and we discussed some other issues before everybody was happy. The director had selected the artist to touch up the mural on the ceiling, and he was set to begin after the repair work on the ceiling and near the top of the walls was complete so that our restoration wouldn't damage newly restored images. It was all looking good.

Back at the office, I had five more applications. I thought I'd let the ads run a couple more days before cancelling them as I had some promising candidates, and made my first cut, sending out emails to seven of the applicants that thanked them for their interest but at this time I would not be asking them for an interview. I'd keep some of the resumes on file, though. I sent the remaining four to Aslyn with a request to do a general background check.
The next few weeks passed peacefully. Damian was enthralled with the images of the developing kids and came with me to the appointments where he got new pictures each time that he showed to anyone he could corner. The kids were about the size of grapes now and I was still enjoying no morning sickness. I was getting mood swings, though, from laughing wildly, filled with joy to my normal equilibrium. I knew I could do the parenting thing, and I had strong support from my medical team, so I was keeping my promise to myself and enjoying the hell out of this pregnancy.

Serena came back with proof that HYDRA had insinuated itself into governments and businesses in Europe, and more specific information was sought, not just from Europe but all the continents. Nico somehow broke out and vanished. I knew something was up, because Uncle Bucky wasn't particularly concerned. All he'd say was that he hadn't been assigned to the retrieval. Natasha looked shifty, though, and Hawkeye just changed the subject when I asked him. He'd invited me to take up archery again since hand-to-hand was out, and I enjoyed the concentration it required. Steve said that they'd extracted all the information he had, anyway.

And finally, we were ready to get moving on the renovation of the Hall of Justice after having finally gotten all the permitting straight. Dagny, Serena, Torunn and I took an air car down to DC where we were due to meet with members of the League. This was going to be fun.
Developments

The next morning, there was a formal meeting with several senior members of the Justice League and the press. We smiled for the camera with Superman, Batman, Flash, Wonder Woman, Black Canary, and Martian Manhunter. We made a presentation for the press of how the public areas would be restored and improved, and after that was over, we went to the private area and the plans got less grand, more practical, and more tech driven. Each full member of the League would have permanent quarters and there would be guest rooms for probationary and adjunct members. This part of the building—it was a complex, actually, but most of it was off limit to the public—didn't have historic status, so what I was doing back here was taking care of the power requirements and soundproofing. Each full member would be working with the interior designer from Kreiner, Lastori, and Houlan (a DC firm) for their quarters and overall they had chosen a practical, no-nonsense (bland) design for all the common areas. Out in the public area we had to deal with restorations that had altered the clean, grand lines of the original plan. We couldn't get rid of all of it since the historic designation had been conferred after a good many of the changes had been made. It was currently, unfortunately, a monstrosity, and there was a lot of damage to fix. It was going to take a couple of years to accomplish, but the League areas were the priority. We broke ground that afternoon. No ceremony, no cameras.

We went back to the city after we had gotten the ball rolling, and Karen would be coming down every other week for regular inspection. She had a submanager on site at all times. This was a big deal for Valkyrie, and we all wanted to get it right.

Weeks passed, and Damian and I watched the kids grow with a great deal of interest. We had decided not to ask about the sex of the babies, but the imaging revealed that we were having another girl/boy pair, and we started to think about names. We kept Sigurd and Torburn longer than expected due to Emma's serious post-partum depression. There were good treatments available, but they had to be undertaken carefully to avoid the medications affecting her son. Steve was torn between being over the moon and deeply concerned about his wife. Because of Steve's physical challenges before the serum, they'd had to clean up his genome once it was discovered that he'd be passing some dangerous genes to his child, so this was one less thing he had to worry about. We took the boy, whom they named Christopher Robert, for a couple of nights to help them out. It was good practice, kind of a refresher course on infants. It took about a month, but Emma's depression passed, and it was soon a joy to see their family. Everybody had had their baby by this point—a girl named Joy Robin Grayson, a girl named Carolyn Alexa Stark, and I had a new sister, Kathryn Annabelle Barnes.

One morning we woke up to the news that Bruce had eloped with Selina. About time. And Nessa Richardson moved in with Uncle Bucky. We made an effort to get to know each other; I really wanted to like the woman my uncle chose, and I did. She was not only sharp, articulate and classy as she appeared to be in her public role as the mayor's spokeswoman, but kind, funny, and soft and loving with Bucky. She didn't seem threatened by my closeness with my uncle, which was a huge relief. And in other good news, Aslyn and Alan had taken the next step into an exclusive relationship. At work, after I had Tony run a very comprehensive background check, we hired Theodor full time. He was one of the unfortunate Returnees who hadn't been able to find any family and he had no signs of any HYDRA ties. The clients loved it when he brought them tea or coffee and in the dark gray suit he preferred and his friendly face he made an great impression. He'd been a concierge in one of the best hotels in Europe before, and we were lucky to have him. He was a favorite with all of us at Valkyrie as well.

Summer faded away, fortunately—I hated being pregnant in the heat. Steve sent over a delivery of
the most stylish maternity clothes known to womankind, and after the photographs in the media created a clamor, created a mass-market line of well-designed but not overly expensive maternity wear. The initial collection was small, but he'd add pieces to it periodically.

As the fall wore on, I began to think I'd been lucky to miss out on this part with my first pregnancy. The kids seemed enormous and my back was always killing me. Still, it beat the hell out of being drugged and curled up in a fetal position praying for each day of continued pregnancy, so I kept my mouth mostly closed on my complaints. I actually did do the yoga for expecting mothers because my back hurt too much else. Alfred doted on me and Damian made sure I wanted for nothing. I finally found a good match for an associate, a recent graduate from Georgia Tech's new program who had a solid grasp of the essentials of historic preservation and had different interests, which would compliment my own. Maya Thompson joined the firm in early October. Serena had hired a guy named Jackson Cooper to work as her associate. It was an excellent choice, because he'd been a street level hero in Chicago before retiring and going back to school. He understood the needs of her dual identity and could pick up the slack when she needed to go out on a mission. The creative direction of her office remained firmly in Serena's hands, but he made valuable contributions.

I went on maternity leave right after Thanksgiving. The kids were enormous and it was exhausting to cart them around. Damian promptly established a home office and only went in for meetings and one day a week on site. I felt kind of bad about dropping Maya in the soup so fast, but I was only a call away if anybody had questions. It turned out to be a good call. I went into labor a couple of weeks early and delivered the twins on December 4th, National Cookie Day. It was a good omen. I was only in labor for a bit over three hours before Iris Violet (faith, hope, wisdom and valor; watchfulness) made her appearance, followed shortly by Miles Faris (merciful, knight). Miles was breech, but they were able to move him around without any trouble. Then the best part of all--I got to hold my babies right after the doctors checked them out thoroughly. Damian and I checked--four limbs, one head, two eyes, nose, mouth, two ears, ten fingers, ten toes, no tail (just checking.) I adored them, but they were still wrinkly and red and not terribly attractive. They'd be a little better when they reached the Winston Churchill stage of babyhood, but I couldn't wait for them to start revealing their personalities. Then everything was cleaned up and our families came into the room to meet the newest members.

"I've finally got a little sister," Xander said, kissing Iris on her head and smirking at his big sister, who was impatiently waiting for her chance to hold a child. Bruce had Miles, who also had a crowd of people waiting for a crack at a baby. Martha cooed at Iris, cuddling her briefly before passing her on to Bucky as my mother rather forcibly took hold of Miles. Damian smoothed my hair as we watched Bucky with Iris; she rather sleepily waved at him and her little hand bumped his. It looked for all the world like she gave him a fist bump. And as I'd said, while everybody should have an Uncle Steve, an Uncle Bucky was a necessity. With Bucky also in his late 20s, there would be plenty of time for my babies to know and love him too.

The nurses took them away soon for additional tests and to let them rest. The family trailed out after them after congratulating Damian and me. When we went home a couple of days later, we found a present from Tony in the nursery: special metal rails had been attached on the floor and ceiling right next to the walls with a scrim attached. A new control was in the wall; when this was turned on, images appeared on the scrim. Right now it was set with a woodland mural; it allowed the wall color behind to be seen still and provided a prettier effect than a projection. A note said that this was the first installation of the new technology, which I could make available to my clients. Eira raced into the nursery to see the new puppies; she wagged her tail hesitantly and thought that they were quite small and... she hid it fast, but they didn't look very promising in terms of fun to her. I gave her ears a good skritch as I cradled sleeping Miles and assured her that it would take some time, but she'd have fun with them. She bolted out when Miles let out the most ear-piercing screech in a demand for a snack. I saw her peeking in later as he nursed.
Fairly quickly our babies' personality began to manifest. Iris was exceptionally laid back for a baby and seemed disposed to be happy; she cooed and burbled and was happy with everybody who showed up. Miles was a bit tetchy and more demanding and it seemed he could bellow pretty well in a short amount of time. Alfred adored them, as he adored Martha and Xander. I found him in the kitchen once, taste-testing baby foods so he'd be ready once the kids were ready for solids.

I stayed at home into January, gradually picking up my work again. Mid-month, I had a call from the director of the library who I worked with, apologizing for disturbing me during my maternity leave, but she felt that I should be aware that Maya had recommended changing some of the work that was being done in the library. I headed off to the Valkyrie and asked Maya for an explanation. It had been her judgment that another method should be used to stabilize a portion of the ceiling. When I asked her why she felt that she had the right to alter the plan, she said that her method was better. I had to explain to her why it wasn't and had to speak sternly about not screwing with my decision. She was embarrassed, I think, which made her mouthy, accusing me of being threatened by her expertise, and I wasn't in the mood. I was disappointed in her, and after increasingly tense conversation, fired her and escorted her to Aslyn so she could process the termination. Then I went to my other clients to make sure that Maya hadn't messed up those projects as well. Karen reported that she'd tried something down at the Hall of Justice, but that she'd shut down Maya, and a couple other clients reported that she'd made suggestions but they had preferred to stay with my plans. I apologized to everyone affected, and sighed when I was done. I was open to different perspectives and knowledge, but the time for that was in the offices, not behind my back with the clients. I'd have to search for a new assistant. Dammit.

So I came back from maternity leave sooner than I wanted, but Dad had the credenza ready with two bassinets. Damian and I worked out a schedule with Alfred. Sometimes each of us had both babies, sometimes only one, and sometimes none. I did get a slight majority of time with the sprouts, seeing as how I was also mealtime. I wasn't producing enough milk, so we had to supplement, and I was determined not to be upset by this. At least I could nurse this time. My office experienced higher-than-normal traffic on the days I had one or two babies, and Damian reported with amusement that the nursery setup at his workplace was busy too, although he liked to keep the babies in with him whenever he wasn't in a meeting. Mom worked at the Valkyrie location of her business more and often came up with my little sister and to see her grandbabies. She got to keep Kitty during the day, making the argument that a woodshop, with its dust and sharp tools, wasn't the best place for an infant. My dad couldn't argue, but he did sulk. At home, while Miles could still make everybody cringe with his wails, the dogs had come around to the babies and although Frank and Sam still preferred Alfred over the twins, Signe was made from stouter stuff and could often be found in their cribs, with or without the babies. I couldn't blame her. Babies smelled good.

So winter passed into spring. It was a beautiful spring, and our house hosted frequent gathering of all the other babies and their parents as well as everybody else who wanted to be part of the parties. Uncle Steve delivered the christening gowns, and they were exquisite, every stitch hand sewn, with soft, delicate handmade silk lace. Not that either Iris or Miles cared, they hated the christening, apparently, particularly the part with the water. Even the priest winced at Miles. But the garden part afterward was lovely. Steve's son, like all the babies, especially liked Bucky, it was like he was the infant whisperer. Young Christopher was a fussy kid, and both Steve and Emma looked worn out and fraught. Bucky scooped him up and the lad quickly quieted, then smiled at him confidently. Bucky smirked, and Steve didn't know whether to kiss his feet for the quiet or punch him. Gratitude won out.

New medical technology helped my body recover from delivering my babies much faster than the first time, and because I'd kept up my strength and fitness as well as I could during pregnancy, I was back to my preferred activities by the beginning of summer. Flight had been my first priority; I
always felt calm and peaceful in flight. Well, unless I was on a battlefield. Which I wasn't, these
days. I'd cautiously started the hiring process for a new associate, and provided very clear
guidelines about what the associate could and could not do, what the responsibilities of the job
were. I actually ended up with two, Callahan Archer from the Imperial College London and Mei
Wu from Tsinghua University in Beijing. They brought with them international contacts and
experience and I immediately put them in charge of supervising the projects we were doing in
residences.

I felt like I was settling into a good groove. The anniversary of the creation of Valkyrie was about
this time, and we had a party up in the conference room. All of my partners had completed the buy
in, and Valkyrie was a booming business. For the anniversary and also the beginning of our first
truly joint project: we closed on a parcel of eight city blocks and we would be renovating some
buildings, demolishing and rebuilding others, and turning it into a mixed-use community.
Something special, like the Valkyrie building, but with residences too. We were still debating
whether we wanted to rent everything to maintain control or sell the buildings. Renting was more
attractive to us all, but then we'd have to find someone trustworthy to manage the properties, and
that was a whole other can of worms.

One evening in September, I got a call from Nessa as I was getting ready to pick up Damian and
the kids at his office. "Alex, have you heard from Bucky at all today?" she said tensely, and I
frowned.

"No. What's up? He should be at the zoo."

"He didn't show up. I just got home and there's a call from the zoo, asking if he's ok. He's not
answering his communicator. Our building security footage shows him leaving today, just like
every work day."

"Ok. Call the hospitals, see if he's been admitted. I'll make some other calls," I said, and we hung
up. I didn't expect him to be in the hospital; it was something for her to do. I called Tony and
explained the situation. He said he'd get to the tower and start searching the street cameras.
Damian came on the line and told me to go to the tower, that he'd take the kids home and wait for
my word. I love that man. So that's what I did. When I got to the tower, Tony had traced him to the
subway and was in the process of getting hold of the transit security footage. The good thing was
that the Avengers' name made it easy to cut through red tape. The bad thing was that we saw,
barely, one man hit Bucky over the head from behind as a surge of people left a train and boarded.
They moved back, out of the range of that camera, but another one picked up two men, wearing
EMT jackets, pushing a gurney with a sheet over the occupant. Up on the street, they loaded it into
an ambulance, and Tony tracked the ambulance with traffic cameras to a private airfield in New
Jersey, where the gurney was quickly wheeled out to a small jet. The ambulance (stolen, we found
out, not a surprise) was abandoned, and the jet took off at about 10 am, headed for Europe.

Tony said a lot of bad words and I called Daniel. Within an hour, the Avengers had assembled with
Daniel, and the oversight committee Senators conferenced in. They heard what we'd discovered,
and the discussion began. The obvious step was to track the plane, and Daniel stepped out to call
the Avengers' lawyer and get the ball rolling to get information on flight plans. One Senator said
he'd lean on the military to provide tracking information on the flight. Another hour, and this
information was ours. The plane had landed in Belgium as the flight plan had stated, and gone into
a private hanger, where it was still parked after service. Then there would be more tracking through
cameras on streets and security feeds, and that would take time. Tony snapped that he'd call when
they had real data, and he and a couple of newer Avengers with great hacking--I mean computer--
skills got to work. The rest of us left the building. Daniel gave me a ride home. There was nothing
to be said at this point, and when I got home, Alfred reheated my dinner as I told him and Damian
what had happened.

"HYDRA?" Damian asked eventually as I finished. I nodded.

"Who else? If HYDRA never really went away, the resources they command now would be stunning. Nico said that HYDRA was hot to reacquire him, and this was a meticulously planned operation."

"Are you going after him?" he asked quietly, covering my hand. I flipped mine over and laced our fingers.

"No, the Avengers have more resources and bodies. They can crash whatever facility he's at and bring him home most effectively." And there were the kids to consider. At that point, Bruce came into the kitchen from the cellar and the tunnel to the bat cave.

"Daniel told me the news," he said immediately. "I'm sorry, Alex. The Justice League will be offering assistance gathering intelligence."

"Thanks, Bruce, I really appreciate it." Bruce patted Damian's back and kissed my cheek.

"We'll keep you informed," he said, and I nodded.

Eventually we adjourned to the library with the pet herd and the babies, then it was time to go to bed. I got up once in the night to feed the babies, but I did sleep, even if my dreams were uneasy. It wasn't until almost nine the next night that I was told to go back to the tower. This time there weren't just the Avengers; we had members of the League as well as Loki as a representative for Thor.

Tony, who didn't look like he had slept at all, showed us a map of Europe, then focused on the Dinaric Alps. "We've traced them to these mountains so far and we're working on more precise data as we speak. The geology of this range is Mesozoic and Cenozoic limestone, dolomite, sand, and conglomerates. It's not granite like other mountains, which will be helpful if we have to go in hard." He clicked on the projection once more, and a cursor jumped around as the analysts evaluated different areas in the mountain range. Periodically, a chime indicated more information that had been uncovered and the search had narrowed down to one country. Then we struck a motherload of data that showed big shipments of highly specialized components and equipment through customs. There were a few gaps in the regular shipments, though, that indicated that either there were inexplicable delays in delivery (possible) or covert imports/officials paid to bugger the data and look the other way (probable.) The current government of this country was known for its corruption. By the end of our import trail, we had a good idea of an extensive complex, underground, judging from the number of excavators, and with large barracks. The Justice League provided a series of satellite images from the Watchtower that showed a complex small from space but large from the ground, under construction for over a year, and they began the delicate process of relocating the Watchtower to geosynchronous orbit over the location so that they could use their scanners on the installation. I went home to update Nessa, sleep a little and spend time with my family.

The next morning, the League produced images that showed a large subterranean complex, about what we'd deduced, and the Avengers started to plan immediately. I sat and listened, chewing on my nails. They had a good plan going when one of the Senators actually arrived. He looked around at the plan, then sighed. "Shut it down."

"What?" Steve snapped. The way he glared at the Senator was ferocious.
"Stand down. We have not been able to secure permission from their government to mount an extraction."

"We can go without permission," Natasha said flatly, and the Senator glared.

"No, you can't! That is not how things are done anymore, and why the Avengers and groups like the Justice League are still permitted to operate!" And there was a yelling match. Even the newer Avengers, who didn't really get along with the classic Avengers were pissed and kind of aghast. After all, this could happen to them some time too.

"So you're just going to abandon him to be tortured by HYDRA. Again," I said, rage making my voice shake. I'm sure that my face was red too.

"Nobody's being abandoned, Ms Barnes," the Senator said testily.

"Bullshit." I jumped to my feet.

"We're working with the government, leaning on them heavily, and we will get permission. It will not be immediate, however. But we are doing everything we can." I listened as he laid out what the military and government were doing, but the process was slow, we'd already lost a lot of time, and Nico said that HYDRA had more effective ways of brainwashing than they used to. I waited until they called a break and started out the door. There was a hand on my arm, and I looked up at the Senator, curling my lip.

"Take your hand off me," I said coldly, and after a moment, he did so.

"You're not planning anything stupid, are you?" he asked stiffly, and I rolled my eyes.

"Look at that complex," I said, gritting my teeth so hard my jaw ached. "It's huge. It's an operation for a team, not one person. And I'm not a hero."

"Good," he said after another pause. "Because you would be killed if you tried. You just had twins, didn't you?"

My lip curled as that man tried to tell me what to do. I pushed past him, then turned. "Anything that happens to my uncle is on your incompetent hands," I snarled, so enraged that even I could barely understand what I was saying. "You could have acted, but you held back. But then, caution is your byword, isn't it?" I was hitting low and hard. Before his election to the US Senate, Fitzgerald had been an Army colonel, and there were rumors that his failure to send a rescue mission for an op had wiped out most of a platoon. It hit home; the Senator was as enraged as I was.

"That was never proven," he said. "There was an investigation." I looked him in the eyes for a long moment.

"If you hadn't done it, you'd have said so, rather than hiding behind what was proven," I said softly. "There were some witnesses who couldn't be spared to testify, weren't there?" I couldn't help myself although I wasn't trying too hard.

"I didn't do it," he spit back. "There was no cover up. It was a horrible mistake, and we are all working to ensure that there isn't another one," he said, also through gritted teeth. "Go home, Ms Barnes, you have no business being here. As you say, it's for heroes." And he gave me a little push, closing the door after me.

I stomped off down the corridor. The door opened behind me and I looked over as Emma caught up with me. She was as pissed as I was.
"What do you need?" she asked quietly. I looked at her. She rolled her eyes. "I know you're going after Bucky," she said impatiently. "We can't both go, they'll be watching us. So what can I do?"

I took a deep breath and told her.
"I'm going to Prague at the end of the week," I said once we were out on the street. "There's a meeting for people who want to bid on the renovation of the Clementinum, which houses the national library. I wasn't going to bid, originally, it's a massive contract and I've got enough to do. But it's not an RSVP thing and I can use it for a cover." She heard the rest of the plan and nodded.

"I can do that," she said.

I went home and explained things to Damian. He nodded, listened to my plans, and made a few very helpful suggestions. We went to bed early. We had work to do and not much time to do it in.

Midmorning, I got a call from Loki. "The Security Council of the United Nations has warned my brother officially that his embassy will be closed if he attempts a rescue of Barnes," he said grimly. "'We cannot sanction invasion of a sovereign nation,'" he said prissily. "'You are not to subvert the peaceful negotiations.' They did say that they would add international pressure." He snorted.

"What?" I exploded. "That's such bullshit! Their history is littered with invasions and assassinations and spying!"

"Indeed. It is hypocritical, but they are trying to preserve peace in the Balkans. They are ignoring what we know is being done to him and what the consequences for everyone will be if the Winter Soldier is resurrected," he said grimly. "My brother wishes that you had time to visit." He stared at me expectantly, willing me to get it. And finally I did.

"It's a shame that I can't," I said. "I'm sure I'm being watched. There's a black vehicle in front of the building filled with big men in black suits. They followed me in to work today. And I've got a bid to put in; I have to go to Prague at the end of the week. I will have ten days to submit it."

Loki's brow wrinkled. "Are you serious? Is that a condition? Why did they do that?"

"I think they really want the contract to go to a national, which I can understand. They'll have much more familiarity with the building. But winning this bid would be huge for Valkyrie." I blew out a sigh. "I'll see if I can return afterward."

We disconnected and Torunn looked up from her book. "Tell Daddy hi from me," she said absently, and turned the page. I smiled, took off my suitcoat (there's no point in shifting more mass than I have to,) and popped to Asgard. I blotted my forehead when I got there; it's a lot of work to move so much.

"Alex!" I looked around and the Asgardians in the Great Hall made a path for me to the throne, where Thor was standing. He trotted down the steps when I would have taken a knee in respect. (It would have been difficult in a straight skirt, so I was grateful.) He gave me a brief hug.

"Torunn says hi," I mumbled. He smiled slightly.

"How is she?"

"Bored, I think. But that's better from my perspective." He nodded.

"After this is over, you must return and we can speak properly. I have some things that will help you in your rescue." I loved how he just knew I'd be doing it. "First, Heimdall has located Barnes. He is on the third sublevel of the complex." He produced an image of the floorplan, letting me
look at it until I had it memorized, and pointed out a few places that would be helpful. For the first
time, I felt a surge of hope that this would actually work. Then his face got stern and solemn.
"Magni." Magni stepped forward, also unsmiling.

"Alex, I am providing you with a weapon to assist your recovery of one of my generals from
torture and illegal experimentation," he said formally. He took the spear from his son's hands.
"This is Gungnir, the weapon of the AllFather, glorious in battle. As one of his valkyries, the only
one with her full capabilities left in the Nine Realms, you should be able to wield it." He presented
it to me, and my hand closed on the ash staff. I looked at Thor. "Can you feel the energy?" I
nodded. The spear was practically dripping with it. "Let us see if you can use it. Summon the
energy to the point and make it spark."

We all jumped back as the energy released in a larger crack than I'd been trying for. "That's good,"
Magni said, smoothing his hair down. Thor grinned at his son for a second.

"Indeed." He sobered again. "Return it when you have achieved your goal, not before. Once you
have recovered General Barnes, remember that our healers are prepared to assist his recovery." I
nodded.

"It looks different than when Odin used it," I said, looking at it carefully.

"It is," Thor confirmed. "I had the shaft replaced. First, the original shaft, which will be restored
when you return the spear, has too much power stored. You would be consumed by the energy.
Second, the change makes it look different from the one Odin was using in that... that film." His lip
drew back and I nodded. And smiled. It wasn't a nice smile. "And one final thing. I have a ship, we
took it from some pirates. It is alien in design and composition, but intuitive to fly. It appears to be
designed so that beings without extensive training can use it. It does not have weapons, nor will
there be time to fit any to it. I will have it flown to Earth and hidden here." He showed me on a
map of the area and handed me a small knobby black stick. "This will allow you entry." It took
some effort not to crack up. Alien ships using keyless entry?

"How will I get it back to you?"

Thor shrugged. "You can conceal it and we can retrieve it later, or if necessary, it can be left for
authorities to discover. It's fairly primitive in design." Thor stopped and considered. "I will have
our pilot remove the drive that permits interstellar travel. That way if it is discovered, it will not be
obvious that I have assisted your quest." We nodded at each other.

"Good luck, Alex," Magni said softly, and Thor nodded. I took a deep breath, bowed to them both,
and popped back to my office. Wow, even just bringing the spear with me was a significant drain. I
wouldn't be able to move Bucky that way when I found him.

Torunn looked up when I popped back, and her jaw dropped a little. She stood up and looked at the
spear. "Is that Gungnir? It looks different." She held up a little gizmo. "I checked, there's not any
listening devices in here, and this also keeps anybody from using parabolic microphones on the
windows. We can talk frankly."

"Thor is loaning it to me," I said. "It's got a different shaft is all. I can use it enough as a weapon."

"So the rescue is on?" Despite her assurances, her voice dropped to a whisper, and I nodded. I put
Gungnir in the closet for the time being. How was I going to get it home?

I called Daniel to verify that I could still use the training facilities in the tower and then Alfred,
asking if he could bring my practice bag with poles and javelins for a workout. Within an hour he'd
dropped it off. One of the men in black stopped him and searched the bag. Without a warrant, I noted, filming it from the reception area windows. Alfred looked like he was bristling, but he winked when he brought the bag up to me.

I made my reservations for Prague, at a hotel on the outskirts of town where they had the main hotel and cabins with kitchens for more privacy. I got the largest one, the farthest away from the main hotel, with two bedrooms, for a twelve-day stay.

Three hours later, Alfred called me with the news that our house had been raided, my armor and swords taken away. I called our lawyers. By the end of the day, the media had the story that the government was persecuting me, a private citizen, because my uncle had been kidnapped by a foreign power and they thought that I'd do something. When I walked out of the Valkyrie Building, I blinked at the flashes from the cameras and listened to the questions that the reporter peppered me with. "Yes, my uncle was kidnapped.. yes, the government said they're negotiating for his release... no, they won't let the Avengers or any other group go in for a rescue... they raided my house and took the swords and armor I used during Ragnarok, what on earth do they think one woman alone can do? I have quarterstaffs and javelins, is this supposed to be effective against modern weaponry?... Yes, I'm going to Prague, I'll be submitting a bid on an important restoration project for my business... Why don't you ask the government why they think one woman alone is a threat to an entire HYDRA facility?"

There was dead silence, then a gasp as they all drew breath. With that, I let Torunn and Eira clear a path to the curb, where Damian was waiting. He pulled away and we went to the tower. Malia was also waiting.

"You certainly have a way of livening things up," she said as we worked with quarterstaffs.

"Would you do things differently?" I asked, curiously.

"Probably. I'm military, so I wouldn't have called out the entire chain of command during delicate negotiations."

She had a point. "It will make their job harder," I acknowledged. "But it also forces them to actually do something."

"We are doing something, Ms Barnes," the Senator said behind me, his voice hard. I stepped back from Malia and turned to face him.

"Really. Because it doesn't look like talking is doing anything. And frankly, the American people deserve to know about the existence of a terrorist organization that threatens our form of government. So do people in other countries, for that matter. It doesn't look good for you folks that you've allowed HYDRA to go unchecked all these years. And frankly, I don't appreciate you turning the screws on me. I'm just the niece of the sergeant who's even now being subjected to torture and brainwashing in an attempt to remake one of the best assassins in history. You'd think that the threat of the asset unleashed again would add some impetus to your whole process. Let alone that Bucky is an American citizen, a war hero. Nice."

"You're a bitch, Ms Barnes."

"You say that like it's news, Senator. The Avengers, even the Justice League, could have extracted Bucky by now. Instead, you subjected my butler to a warrantless search, searched my home, and stole my armor. Why, exactly, should I have a good opinion of you? How in the world do you propose that a lone woman penetrate a HYDRA installation, with a knife and good intentions? All I'd be doing if I tried that would be to give HYDRA leverage to use against my uncle. So how,
"When you put it like that, it does seem ridiculous to think you're a threat to the process. I thought valkyries were supposed to be tough," he said witheringly.

I turned around in front of him. "See any wings, Senator?" He snorted. "Do you have any idea what this is doing to my family, especially to my Aunt Rebecca and my grandpa? It's their brother. My uncle. Nessa's significant other. I bet if it was a member of your family, you'd have pushed things faster. Call off your dogs--" Eira barked. "Sorry, Eira. You back off, leave us alone, apologize publicly for your searches, and I'll drop my lawsuit. I'm going to Prague in a few days, which obviously you know about. You have until I come back to recover my uncle. If he's not free by the time I get back, then I'll be taking off the gloves." I stared into his eyes. He turned away before he blinked. "And I expect the return of my arms and armor."

"You'll get them back, Ms Barnes," he said icily. "Not immediately, but you'll get them back. In the meantime, get out of here. Private citizens have no right to use Avengers facilities or personnel."

"I've got an agreement, signed by the oversight committee, that states otherwise, but I don't want to be around you any more than you want to be around me. I hope your pettiness makes you feel better," I said as I put my quarterstaff in the bag and zipped it up. "Because I mean what I said. If Bucky's not back by the time I get back, I will make your life a living hell."

I picked up my bag, nodded to Malia, and started for the door with Eira and Torunn. By the time we got home, the news had a spokesman for the Senator apologizing for overzealousness in their attempt to control the situation and get Bucky back. He had no comment on the news about HYDRA.

The next day I promptly had Mei and Callahan in my office and dumped all my current projects on them. "I know you haven't been with me long," I acknowledged, "but I have confidence in your abilities. And there shouldn't be any major catastrophes anyway. If there are, notify me for those, but if not, use your best judgment." We had a talk about the projects and where they were in terms of the timeline. "The one I'm most concerned with is the Hall of Justice, parts of it are just hanging in there with bubble gum and baling wire." Callahan snorted in amusement. We went through their projects as well and they also promised to research the sources and companies that I could use in my quote for the Prague project.

"I'm sorry to hear about your uncle, Alex," Mei said softly. "I hope he's rescued soon."

"Are you sure about HYDRA?" Callahan asked, and I nodded.

"I wish I weren't. But how governments respond to this should give a pretty good idea about how far HYDRA has penetrated into governments or how sympathetic they might be."

I spent the next few days hard at work, making preparations, sleeping a few hours a night and cutting out an hour a day to spend with my family. Then I borrowed the family's sub-orbital vehicle and Torunn and I went to Prague. We checked into the hotel and were shown down a path that just admitted the golf cart we were riding in to our cabin. We brought in our luggage, and Torunn left to go grocery shopping as I settled in. I'd moved heaven and Earth to get most of the proposal done before I went to Prague, but there were things I wouldn't know until I went to the meeting and got the official packet of information and saw the structures for myself.

The next day I went to the presentation and Torunn took the opportunity to see some of Prague. I was hugely relieved at the provided information; they hadn't identified trouble spots beyond what I
suspected. There was bound to be more damage than they had found, but that was the nature of the gig and I'd accounted for emergencies. I also had Tony's gizmo that enabled me to check what was behind a wall before tearing in, which would help if I won the job. I was surprised to realize how much I wanted the contract. I went to the hotel, stopping by the desk on the way to ask that housekeeping not disturb me for the rest of my stay because I needed to concentrate on the proposal, which would be more difficult because I would have to figure out how to use local crews for the work and the costs. The man assured me that he understood, and I went down to the cabin. And that was all anybody saw of me until the ninth day of my stay, when authorities knocked on the door, demanded to speak to me, and told me that my uncle had been rescued from the HYDRA facility and did I know anything about it? I invited them in, showed them all the stuff strewn everywhere--paper, computer projections, everything, and told them to look around to satisfy themselves that I'd just been working. I further offered to have Torunn show them the sub-orbital vehicle and see the logbook, which would verify that it had stayed in place since we'd arrived. I spread my hands.

"You can check everywhere. I haven't rented a vehicle here. We took public transportation to get to the presentation, and I don't know how you figure that I could have dropped down there by walking. This commission is important and would mean a huge deal to my business, gentlemen, and I'm taking it seriously." They murmured, said that they had to check, and off they went with Torunn. I called Steve to find out how Bucky was; he was resting comfortably while they figured out what HYDRA had tried to do to him and there was no point in hurrying back since he wasn't cleared for visitors yet anyway.

"He was in bad shape, Alex," he said gently. "But the medical team is working hard. He's going to be ok."

"Ok," I said, blinking back some tears. "I trust you. It's just really hard not knowing more now that I know he's been recovered. Do you know how? I haven't had the news on since I got here. I thought somebody would have called."

"Everybody's tried, Alex," he said with commendable patience, and I hunted up my communicator. Dead. I swore, and Steve smiled slightly.

"Language," he chided gently.

"It is language," I agreed. "I'm going to see if I can get this done early and come home. I'll charge my communicator. You'll let me know if anything changes?"

"Take your time, Alex," he said. "I'll call you when there's an update." We hung up, and I got serious about the work. My ribs were still killing me, but it was a small price to pay. Torunn came back, reported that the investigators had literally ticked off boxes on their forms, and settled down with a 3D projection game of chess.

"You really sold it, Alex, you look like you've been hard at work."

"I have been hard at work," I said, rolling my eyes, and we grinned at each other. Then I sat down, propped my foot up to take pressure off the ankle, and got to the paperwork. We packed up the next day, settled the account at the hotel, and had the hotel car detour to the office where I submitted my bid, and then it was to the outskirts of the city where we could board the sub-orbital. We put on our pressure suits and activated the automatic system. We'd be home in a couple of hours. I slept on the brief flight, and tripped coming down the stairs, picking myself up off tarmac with a curse.

Damian tutted, helping me up and welcoming me home with a hug and kiss. "Sweet pea, do you
want to stop by the clinic and get your ankle looked at?" he asked anxiously as I hobbled toward the car. I noticed a big man in black and rolled my eyes.

"I think so, darling. I tripped over a pile of reference material and hurt it, I just made it worse back there."

"That's good," he said. "After you're seen, we can go upstairs. They just cleared Bucky for visitors about an hour ago."

So that's what we did. I watched as the doctor diagnosed a severe ankle sprain, tapping the information into my file on the pad, healed what they could, then the pad was put away and the rest of my injuries were diagnosed and treated. Then they wrapped my ankle and sent me upstairs.

My uncle looked so much better than the last time I'd seen him, and I had to force myself not to cling like a limpet. I sat by his bedside and peppered him with questions about how he was feeling and if he remembered anything about his rescue.

He shook his head. "Armor, wings. Don't know whether they were real or mechanical, but they were dark. Reddish. I think I passed out, then woke up here. I'm grateful," he said quietly. "I was coming to the end of my ability to hold out." I bit my lip, clutched his hand, and scooted my chair closer to the bed. "It's going to be ok, sweetie," he said, patting my hand with his other one. "How did your bid go?"

"Yes, Ms Barnes, how did your work in Prague go?" The Senator was in the corner, watching the whole thing.

I curled my lip at him. "You're lucky. Bucky's back, so I won't have to go after you."

"And how were you going to do that?" he asked. "Academic information, of course." Out of the corner of my eye I could see Torunn shaking her head fractionally. The room was either bugged or there were observers I couldn't see.

"You called me a bitch before, Senator," I said calmly. "But I'm a rich bitch. I would have funneled my money and everybody else's that I could talk them into into opposing your reelection bid next year. Donations to candidates to the fullest extent allowable by law. Contributions to PACs.Appearances at fundraising activities and campaign stops. It's really quite a savings for me." His lips thinned. It wasn't an inconsiderable threat, and I think we both knew that there were things that I'd do that I wasn't going to admit to. He left the room, and I talked to Bucky until he got tired--not long--and we went home, where I had some quality time with my babies and a celebratory dinner with Alfred. When we turned out the lights that night, we went down instead of up, and went to the conference room in the bat cave., passing the display cases as we did. There was a new one, with a fantastical set of quite stylish armor inside. There was a full table waiting for me.

"I think we'd all like to know just how you pulled that off," Bruce said as I sank into the chair Damian held for me and sighed. Alfred poured me a cup of coffee and placed a small plate of spice cakes by the saucer before passing around a larger plate to everybody else. I took a bite, savoring the delicate cake, before speaking.

"Well, it wasn't easy," I began.
There was a brief delay as the baby monitor squawked and Damian galloped off. Steve and Emma had brought Christopher, who was sleeping quietly. Steve picked him up out of his carrier and cuddled as Damian returned, an infant in each arm. I held Iris, grateful for the privilege after so many days of deprivation, as Bruce allowed Damian a brief cuddle with Miles before taking him. I wasn't the only one grinning at Batman doting on a baby. Flash was smirking and I knew he was saving up jokes for later. I reluctantly passed Iris to Diana, who was itching to hold a baby but too polite to ask. I noticed Steve arranging his communicator, and I waved at Bucky and Tony. "It's a secured line," Steve said.

"Well, the day after I got to Prague, I went to the presentation for the library, then told the hotel that I'd be working and I didn't want housekeeping disturbing me. I'd gotten most of the work done before I left, it was a little pro forma, so I probably won't get the contract." I sighed, then focused. "I poofed myself to the site of the HYDRA facility around 3 am local. Thor had an airship waiting for me, so I stayed there and did recon for almost three days to see the routine. Then I relieved a HYDRA minion of his rain gear--a poncho over a water resistant jumpsuit and boots--and put it on over my armor."

"What armor?" Superman asked. "I thought the government had confiscated your armor."

"They did." My smile shifted from him to Emma. "Emma outfitted me, made me a new suit of extremely light-weight metal, the kind of work only she can do. It's in the case over there." I inclined my head toward it. My neck was still stiff. "She also made me an EMP, a portable electromagnetic pulse generator."

"That doesn't look anything like real Valkyrie armor," Serena said, grinning. "Looks like something from a really high-budget fantasy movie." My eyes went involuntarily to Steve, who blushed sheepishly.

"Well, Emma made the armor, probably from someone else's design, and she also had a new wrinkle on the liquid she made me to help protect my wings." I nodded to her.

"I used different metals and a new polymer Tony had mentioned," she said. "It stiffened Alex's feathers more than before, but it made them a lot stronger."

"And it turned them a reddish color." I carefully extended my wings, and Serena came over to look.

"Wow. That's really different. Kind of ominous looking. Our feathers never shaded toward red." I nodded and she hissed as she cut her finger on the edge of one. "I bet you're actually looking forward to a molt."

"I am," I acknowledged. "They make me a little nervous."

"You've got a couple of damaged ones anyway," she observed. "I don't think we'll be able to imp them in." Emma offered to see if she could come up with a way to remove the coating safely, which I gladly accepted. The wings as they were now were kind of a smoking gun and they weren't really safe for everyday use. Everybody wanted to see them. In the light of the cave, they also had a kind of silvery glitter. I relished the quiet, the soft task lighting, the calm, the lack of blood and exploding things.

"The guy I grabbed was a scout, they came and went at irregular intervals, and their passkeys were
embedded in their gloves, so there wasn't any worry about a discrepancy between a photo badge and me."

"What did you do with the scout?" Flash asked.

"I tied him to a tree, covered him with an emergency blanket weighted down by a branch of leaves. So I took a bag with my stuff in it and went into the main entrance near what is a hangar, although they had just started to manufacture small aircraft, by the looks of them." I placed a pad on the table and activated it; schematics for what seemed to be a very agile little plane with sophisticated guns were projected. I grabbed this on the way out. Heimdall had located Bucky for me, but the intelligence was about a week old at that point. I bypassed the first two sublevels entirely; it was all administration and absolutely packed with people I didn't want to see. I took the stairs instead of the elevators or escalators." I shook my head. "Didn't see a single person on the stairs. An opportunity for cardio lost." Steve smiled in triumph and Emma looked nauseated. "The medical part of the complex took up the whole third level but only part of it was in use. I think they were planning on having a sickbay large enough to accommodate as many as a third of the garrison's soldiers for when they went public with their existence. But fortunately, it meant that most of it was empty. The base wasn't fully staffed anyway. I located Bucky, then went down, bypassing the next two levels which were the barracks, the gym, cafeteria, all that kind of thing. On the lowest level was the power facilities. I placed plastic explosives at two pillars which Serena and I felt would be most likely to damage the facility substantially but not cause a collapse that would pancake the layers. Then I went back upstairs." I failed to mention that I was sweating like a pig from terror. It was a good plan, as far as it went, but it was insane to do by myself, and I knew then that if I was captured, HYDRA could use me to force Bucky into compliance and also try to condition me to embrace the dark side. I might not have assassin's training as such, but I had enough skills that I could be made into one. Any way I looked at it, being captured would not end up good for me.

"I went back up to the medical bay. I called an elevator and kept the doors open, breaking the lights so nobody would come to investigate. Then I went into the suite where Bucky was being held. There wasn't anybody there; they were all at a nurses' station on a coffee break, and one doctor was setting a broken bone on the other side of the floor. Bucky's suite was isolated from any other patients." I swallowed. Bucky had been a mess when I found him. They'd been furious to find out that their prior conditioning had been reversed entirely; they'd been counting on reactivating buried protocols. They'd beaten him severely, both to decrease his resistance as much as possible and in retaliation. They'd gone too far, actually; the records showed that they'd had to revive him once. "It was obvious that he wasn't walking out of there on his own power, so I brought in an air gurney and used the sheet to slide him onto it as painlessly as possible. I wrapped him in as many blankets as I could find, because it was cold and raining and the heater in the ship isn't all that good, which I found surprising, frankly, and used the poncho to help keep the rain off. I needed to secure him to the gurney, so I strapped him down with the jumpsuit, which I cut up." I also omitted how it felt to be done with the subterfuge, and how I'd placed my helmet on my head with pride. If I went down, I'd go down fighting, and as myself, not a pretend HYDRA tool.

"I arranged the rest of my stuff on the gurney with Bucky, and started toward the elevator. I saw a couple of pads on the counter near the door, so I took those, tucking them in my backpack for safekeeping. I thought they might help understand what was done to him if they were medpads. We made it to the elevator undetected and got up to the main floor, where I took a moment to make sure everything was set and my weapons were where I needed them. The instant I took a gurney out, I was going to be a target, it didn't matter if I'd still been in the HYDRA gear, so I needed to be prepared for anything and still execute my plan. When the elevator opened, there was a crowd of soldiers who'd been waiting all this time for the elevator. They couldn't see well because the lights in the elevator were out, so I used the gurney as a ram and bowled through them. One of them
activated an emergency alarm. The most annoying alarm known to humankind blared and the lights switched to red. There were integrated weapons in the hangar, which I hadn't seen. The distance from the elevator to the door was about a hundred meters, and there were a lot of people there. So I set off the explosives early and gained about a third of the way to the door before I met the first serious resistance. I set off the EMP next; that took out the weapons system, the lights, everything on an electrical circuit.

"At that point, the structure started to collapse, and I got about another thirty meters closer to the door out of that. Then it turned out that enough people had personal lights on their helmets, and the fight was on." I paused a moment, recalling feeling a savagery I couldn't quite regret as I broke rib cages, cracked skulls, dislocated joints, and fractured bones. I didn't escape unscathed myself; I tripped over someone and rolled my ankle; while I was down on the floor, I found a couple more pads and a few HYDRA hand weapons which I snapped up and dropped on the gurney. Somebody else swung something at me that broke three ribs despite the excellence of Emma's armor; if I hadn't been wearing it I probably would have been killed. Another soldier tried to snap my neck but couldn't get a good enough grip on my helmet to do so. "I needed to get out of there as fast as possible. The structure was collapsing, which it shouldn't have done." I looked at Serena and she shook her head.

"Probably substandard concrete," she said. "The floorplans looked good when we reviewed them." I nodded.

"So I brought out the wings, got the altitude I needed, and used Gungnir to blast a hole through the thinner big hangar door."

"Wait, Gungnir?" Steve asked, looking stunned. The Justice League heroes looked puzzled, joined by everybody else who hadn't been at Ragnarok.

"Odin's spear," I confirmed. "Well, the spearhead, anyway. Use of the whole thing would have killed me because the metal shaft stores energy, apparently. And use of the whole thing would have been a strong indicator that the Asgardians were involved, which we hoped to avoid."

"I'm kind of shocked that the old man let you use it," Tony said from the communicator.

"It was Dad's decision," Torunn said. "He said that Grandpa wasn't too thrilled, but the rules have always been that if you can wield one of the special weapons, you can use it, at least for the short term."

"Wait," said Superman in confusion. "I thought Odin died in Ragnarok."

"He did," Torunn agreed. "But the ruling family has the limited ability to go to Valhalla. It's mostly reserved for the king and others of the bloodline in that generation. That means that Dad and Uncle Loki can go, and they can occasionally bring Magni, Modi, or me, but not often, and we can't visit by ourselves. Dad said that Odin doesn't really like anybody using his signature weapon but he had to agree that the retrieval of one of Frigga's generals was a priority and that Alex was the best choice, given the restrictions that the Earth governments placed on Dad." She paused, then turned to me. "Dad said that Grandpa is impatient for your return. Says the valkyries need a strong leader, but not to hurry back." I smiled, genuinely touched, and Serena threw me a "V for victory" sign.

"Right. Where was I? Right. I blasted the door open and dove, knocking aside HYDRA troops and using momentum to speed the air gurney toward the hole. If it had been a traditional gurney, with the wheels, we'd never have made it. As it was, I still had to stop a couple of times to take out pursuit. One person had this." I tossed a little box-type thingie on a strap onto the table. "I'm not sure what it is, but I thought you guys could examine it."
"Rogers," Tony said instantly. "Bring it to me, Banner and I can study it." Steve picked it up and agreed, but there was some dissent from the Justice League. A quick compromise was reached where the Avengers would share the information on the device, either about the device itself or any information it might contain.

"So we got to the plane, and I got Bucky off the gurney and inside as quickly as I could and took off immediately. It doesn't have an autopilot, but you can set it to cruise at a certain altitude and direction, so I aimed right for the city and used the time on the way back to use the tissue accelerator on Bucky's worst injuries." I'd also used the time to inventory my own damage. Every weak point in the armor had been exposed in the fighting. I stretched to help keep the bruised muscles from seizing up, which was the best I could do for myself. I'd have liked to have taped the ribs and my ankle, used the accelerator on myself, but I didn't want to leave any traces of my presence behind. I rested as much as I could.

"So I was worried about Bucky's condition, and flew straight to the tower, setting it down on the quinjet landing pad. I left most of the stuff I'd collected and unlocked the door before poofing back to Prague." I was completely wiped out when I got there, and Torunn had taken charge of Gungnir, removing the spearhead and burning the shaft in the fireplace. She put the spearhead, totally out of juice, into our luggage along with the items I hadn't turned over. "I went straight to bed after a shower, slept a solid eight hours, and had just had a good breakfast when the authorities showed up. The rest you know."

Everybody was silent as they digested my story. Except Bucky. "Alixzandrya," he said, his voice not quite a growl, and I knew I was in trouble because he used my full first name. He continued in Russian; Natasha understood the language and Emma and Serena also had AllSpeech, but nobody else knew precisely what he said as he chewed me out. And that was just the preview. "We will speak more later," he threatened, and Diana gave Iris back to me as a consolation. Possibly also to remind my uncle that I had kids and not to dismember me because they could still use me. Alfred quietly refilled my coffee cup, doctored with cream and sugar the way I liked it, and set a glass of water beside it. I was still dehydrated, despite the bag of fluids they'd put in me at the clinic. I ate the last of my spice cakes as I was chewed out.

"Where's Gungnir now?" Steve asked, changing the subject after Bucky ran down.

"I took it to the embassy," Torunn said. "Uncle Loki should have gotten it back to Dad by now."

"The Senator had the craft swept for DNA as soon as he was informed about Bucky's return," Daniel said. "How did you prevent transfer, Grandma? He was pretty frustrated that you couldn't be tied to the aircraft. There's Bucky's DNA and alien DNA only."

"I had a costume that concealed every inch of me. Once I put it on, Torunn ran a sanitizing beam over me to destroy any DNA or incriminating trace evidence, and I didn't take it off until I returned. It was an extruded synthetic fabric, impervious to water and wind, dappled in an exciting range of color from near black to dark gray, pants that tucked into knee-high boots with grippy, almost silent soles, a long tunic that had attached tight gloves and a weighted sash, and a balaclava that covered everything but my eyes, which were concealed with integrated goggles with a dark finish. When I got back to Prague, Torunn treated all of it with a reagent that dried out the fabric and made it brittle, then she tossed it into the fireplace and it burned clean away with no odor or residue. The backpack was also destroyed, but it was impossible to do that to the armor, which we put in the luggage and hustled home before anybody could come up with a warrant to search it."

There was silence as everybody thought about what I'd told them. Finally, Flash spoke up, for once
"I'd personally put the odds at less than ten percent," I said calmly. Superman's cup crashed into its saucer. "And it wasn't just about retrieving my uncle. HYDRA has had decades, if not centuries, to continue its infiltration and research. Whatever they did to Bucky would have been turned up to eleven. He was already one of the greatest, if I can refer to his abilities that way, assassins in history. Certainly the most notorious. And they could have kept him on ice indefinitely, unleashing him when most of the world had forgotten he existed. Look at this." I picked up the pad I'd put on the table and brought up a projection of two files side by side. "I poked around in the limited time I had on the flight back to the city. The first file is composed of case studies, advances they made in creating assassins. Their brainwashing destroyed the memories of the subjects, actually damaging the parts of the brain beyond repair with a high degree of accuracy. All they were left with were their skills and whatever information HYDRA deemed necessary for their training and missions. The second file is on a storage technique they had, which is where they would have kept him. They have developed true suspended animation. Indefinite storage, metabolism begins immediately upon revival, stops instantly when the process is done. No damage to the subject at all. They only had one cradle at the facility, it turns out, and I hope that it was destroyed but I can't be sure. I know that I was taking a terrible risk, but I had decided that if I couldn't rescue Bucky, that I personally would have killed him and myself before allowing us to be captured. I knew from Nico Constantin that I was on HYDRA's radar." There was dead silence around the table. Damian squeezed my hand; I'd talked about it with him before I left. I brought up the last file I wanted to discuss. "This is the file that they had on me. If you read it, it says that with or without wings, I was a high-priority target for acquisition, right behind my uncle and Black Widow. Nico might have thought that they dismissed my abilities based on the documentary, but they hadn't. They wanted my skills, because my uncle has trained me extensively, planned to use us in a tandem. They were not convinced that my wings were gone, and they planned so see if I couldn't be made to grow new ones or induce them somehow if they were really gone. They thought I might be using magic to conceal them. They planned biopsies, drug therapies, vivisection, torture to see if I couldn't be forced to reveal them, get samples to see if they could be grown and grafted onto someone else. And I've passed some of my mutations on to my kids. They have plans for how to use that as well." I could hear from the communicator that Tony was gagging, probably trying not to throw up. "So even though I didn't know the whole story at the time, I knew that something had to be done. And now that I know what HYDRA was thinking, I really must decline their plans."

"I think that HYDRA has also just become a League matter as well," Diana said. Superman nodded, white to the lips. "This level of malevolence and technology is unacceptable and is a threat to the peace of the world."

Steve sighed. "The help will be welcome," he said. 'We don't know for sure yet how strong HYDRA has grown or to what extent it's infiltrated governments, but this looks worse than when I thought we'd brought down HYDRA the last time." He studied the new HYDRA seal imprinted on the pad. It had been changed; instead of a pissed-off-looking octopus, it was now a stylized hydra with many heads. "We need to forget about cutting off its heads and go after the heart."

"Hercules killed the hydra by cutting off its heads and having his friend cauterize the stumps," Diana said, puzzled. Steve exhaled forcefully.

"There's got to be more than one way to kill a hydra, we just have to be creative," he said patiently.

"I think we should keep the fact that we have independent access to HYDRA files to ourselves," Tony said. "In case the government doesn't feel like sharing everything. This is a high-level access. I don't know if the other pads have this depth of information." His image looked around to lock
eyes with Steve. "The safest hands are our own." Steve snorted.

"Never thought I'd hear you say that," he said affectionately. "Get together with a representative from the League and examine every byte of information on this thing. We need to know as much as we can." I listened as they started planning their next steps. There were recordings on the pad that discussed how they would try to force compliance from Bucky, Natasha, me, and other targets from all over the world. They were brutal and almost unbelievable and made me want to curl up in a ball in a corner of a secured room, and I wasn't looking forward to having anyone else hearing it, but the extent of the threat had to be known. The others had to be warned. They decided to copy all the information from the pad and the little box that they could, then arrange for it to mysteriously find its way to the government. The government had the alien ship and the other pads, this could be our little secret for now.

After that, the meeting broke up and I headed to the full-body accelerator. Damian came with me, and we talked about anything but the meeting or my mission. Afterward, all the visible damage was repaired, and the injuries to my ankle, ribs, and my stiff neck would just have to heal naturally. We reclaimed the babies from Bruce and Daniel, and Alfred accompanied us back home, where I went to bed. When I woke up the next morning, I was cuddled in close to Damian, who was already awake. We talked about the previous night's meeting, getting everything out in the open between us. We had time for a shower together, then Miles alerted us that he, and therefore Iris as well, were up. It was time for breakfast for us all.

I went to work, getting the babies since I had been gone so long, and we had bagels and coffee up in the conference room. My partners and me, not the babies. Miles isn't going to be introduced to caffeine or sugar until he calms down some. And neither of the kids could have a bagel yet, with or without schmear. I told them about the proposal, that it hadn't been my best work. Torunn swept the room for listening devices and set up the little jammer discreetly before she snagged a bagel and left.

"News said your uncle has been returned under mysterious circumstances," Aslyn said shrewdly as Theodor placed a fresh carafe of coffee on the table and withdrew.

"Yeah, I got the news in Prague and hurried back." The door closed.

"So how'd you do it?" Dagny and Karen asked at the same time. I raised my eyebrows at them as I sipped coffee.

"As far as anyone can prove, I was in Prague the whole time," I said primly. "Why does everybody assume I had something to do with it?"

"I dunno, maybe the fact that you were beyond pissed that the government wouldn't authorize a covert mission to rescue your uncle?" Margaret asked pointedly. "You've got the skills."

"I don't want to tell anybody everything," I said after a moment. "But I did get him out, it was pretty close, and I found out that HYDRA is serious about acquiring me as an asset. I don't know if they know I know, but they have to figure that I learned something. It could be really dangerous to be around me for awhile." I looked around at them. "If you want, I can sell you my share of the partnership."

"That's ridiculous," Aslyn said into the shocked silence. "Valkyrie is literally your baby. If you need to, you can take a sabbatical or something, but there's no question of you leaving."

"Of course not," Margaret said, bristling. "For fuck's sake, Alex." The others agreed with no hesitation, and I promised myself that they wouldn't need to regret that decision.
Martha bustled in and dropped the clear glass TV screen down at the end of the table. "You guys should watch this, it broke about twenty minutes ago," she said, and placed my favorite chocolate-almond croissant at my seat, putting her hand on my shoulder. I patted it and picked up the croissant as a harassed-looking State department official confirmed international reports that a HYDRA facility was destroyed by persons unknown.

"Persons?" Serena said archly, looking at me. I shrugged modestly.

"I did do the work of at least another person." They snickered, and the feed switched to an empty podium in the lobby of the tower. We waited, listening to the crowd of reporters rustle and murmur until a spokeswoman came out with a prepared statement.

"I am pleased to be able to report that Mr James "Bucky" Buchanan Barnes has been rescued from a HYDRA facility and returned to the Avengers," she said. "He has suffered extensive injuries. We do not know who was responsible for his liberation. He literally showed up here in a strange aircar. The pilot was not present when our personnel entered the vessel and no identification has been made from the DNA recovered. That is all the information I have."

"Where was Alex Barnes?" one reporter shouted.

"She was in Prague," the woman answered. "The authorities verified her presence in a hotel where she was preparing a bid for a historic restoration project and there are no records of any vehicle rentals or purchase in Prague for her or her bodyguard, no tickets purchased, no security feed that shows that she was anywhere but where she said she was. Furthermore, satellites show no orbital, sub-orbital, or direct air transport to the region the day the facility was destroyed or for three days prior. And believe me, this information has been checked by the government and verified." There were more questions about the involvement of the Avengers which she was able to deny completely, but she didn't have any additional information and the feed switched back to the studio where the anchors showed footage from a Balkan TV station showing crews responding.

Translations from the audio described a large collapse of an extensive underground structure, evidence of an EMP that fried the electronics, so far nobody found alive, four bodies apparently killed from falling debris, and signs of life farther down. Rescuers were working to find survivors. I should feel bad about the dead people, but I just couldn't. The rest of the people in the hangar and the top few levels must have bugged out. A military expert was brought in to speculate on the operation that produced such decisive results, and he thought that a team of three would be needed to plant the explosives and rescue Bucky. "Cheers," Serena said to me, raising her coffee mug.

We watched until the information started to repeat, started to clean up after ourselves. There was an urgent tone and one of the anchors pressed a finger to her earbug and brightened. "Ladies and gentlemen, I've just gotten word that some footage from that rescue mission has been leaked on the internet and that this provides our first look at the people who brought down this HYDRA facility." We were all engaged now. I leaned forward as they showed footage of me pushing Bucky's gurney through the fighting and weapons discharge, the rattle and 'crump' sounds made by the detonation of the explosives, then my party trick when I launched into the sky. The operator of the device recording the events said "what the fuck?" in some language I didn't recognize when my wings shot out. You couldn't see from that angle where the wings came from, and the coating on the feathers glittered savagely in the red light. There was a momentary loss of feed, that would be when I used the EMP. Then, amazingly, the recorder came back on. The increased fighting, which looked like much more of a brawl than I remembered. I saw my wings cutting people, which I hadn't realized had happened. The use of Gungnir, which didn't resolve clearly through the smoke and the motion from the hand held recorder. Then my dive and how I pushed the gurney out into the night. The person with the device ran after me, almost catching up to me until I stopped
suddenly and swung at the bearer of the device. The device dropped and the recording stopped.

Then the anchor and the experts that were being interviewed started to review their impressions of the footage. The military expert felt certain that my wings were a construct, a much more advanced pair than the ones Sam Wilson had used as Falcon, and his certain knowledge that the military was not developing wing sets like that made the discussion perk right up. "And we now have Tony Stark, the famous inventor and Avenger, with us by phone. Thank you for speaking with us, Mr Stark." I could imagine Tony's smirk.

"Happy to be here, Nancy," he said genially.

"Have you seen the footage that is said to be the destruction of the HYDRA facility and shows the mysterious figure who rescued Bucky Barnes?"

"I have. It's pretty incredible to believe that one person could cause all that... ruckus."

"Do the Avengers have wings like that in any stage of development?"

"I can confirm that we do not, and we have had no plans to work on a project like that. However, I have to acknowledge that those wings show a lot of promise. I've never seen wings like that. I wonder what metal they're made from."

"How is Mr Barnes doing?"

"He was hurt pretty badly," Tony said after a moment. "But he's being treated and he's expected to make a full recovery."

"Does the public have anything to worry about in terms of him being brainwashed again?" The anchor sounded nervous.

"No," he said immediately. "The damage is physical. They hadn't gotten to modifying his brain. And you would know if they had, because they developed a method to destroy the parts of the brain with memory permanently. No repair possible. Then they would have gotten around to implanting the protocols they would have required to ensure his continued loyalty to HYDRA and its goals. He recognized his family, he's got no missing time that he can't account for. He's ok."

"Thank you for your time, Mr Stark. I'm sure I speak for everybody when I wish a speedy recovery to Mr Barnes." Tony thanked her and there was speculation about what other groups, maybe the Justice League, might be doing in their research.

"The League already has flyers like Hawkman and Hawkwoman," one of the experts disagreed. "They don't need new tech. Maybe we're looking at lone vigilantes." Before a squabble could develop, they cut to commercial, and we all went back to work.
After work, Damian picked me up and we had dinner at a family-friendly restaurant. He came up with me to say hi to Bucky, who was pleased to see him and the babies. After a brief conversation, Damian took the babies and left. He was going to hunt up Uncle Steve and Emma while I had my chat with my uncle. I kind of regretted him taking both babies with him; I had no compunction about using one or both as a human shield.

Bucky looked a lot better than from the conference the night before and was hugely improved from when I found him; the bruises and swelling had been so extensive I hadn't been able to recognize his face. Those at least were gone; he still couldn't move on his own. Even supersoldiers with healing factors had to allow for more time for broken bones to repair. He still had an IV, but this was filled with nutrients to support his speed healing. Before he could yell at me, though, a nurse came in with a cup of liquid. Since he couldn't use his arms or fingers yet, he had to be fed, and the nutritious shake-type thing was the best solution. It didn't look very tasty, and Bucky made a face but sucked it down obediently and with no comment. I brought out Torunn's jammer and placed it on the side table, activating it quietly and noting when the light went from blinking as it checked for eavesdropping devices to a solid green. I picked up the medpad from its holster at the end of the bed and noted Bucky's injuries and how he was healing, the supportive therapy they gave him, the treatments with the accelerator to give his body a hand.

After the nurse left, he turned a dark, fulminating look on me. I smiled brightly, my only defense since I couldn't brandish a baby at him. I felt like a mouse faced with a cobra. After a moment, he sighed and the fight ran out of him. Maybe he was just tired. Speed healing took a lot out of him.

"Alex," he started. "I don't think that you should have done that. It was too risky, you've got kids to think of, and frankly, one person wasn't worth it."

"Oh, not this again," I said on a sigh. "Look, Uncle Bucky, I let you chew me out in front of a bunch of people which was frankly embarrassing, and I love you, but frankly, that's a bunch of horseshit." He looked indignant, and I talked over his intake of breath. "First of all, I'm a grown woman, with a lot of experience beyond my physical appearance, so the lecture about risk and reminding me that I have kids is not only unnecessary, it's insulting, as if I'm incapable of making my own decisions. Since I gave birth to all my kids, I'm well aware of their existence. I talked to Damian about the risks and what they mean for the kids, so I can assure you that their interests have been protected. And I didn't go strictly to rescue you. If rescue looked impossible, or they'd already started to brainwash you, I was prepared to kill you rather than let you become the asset again. And part of it is self-interest. You were in the meeting last night and heard about HYDRA's interest in me. I would kill myself before I would let them acquire me because I have no interest in being their tool. And you know that my babies are also of interest to them. I would have preferred to go in as part of a team, but that wasn't possible, so everybody who could worked with me to create the best plan possible. And the intelligence I got is going to be very valuable. So please stop acting like I was unreasonably reckless." Bucky shut his jaw with a click. It was odd to me that HYDRA had left that bone unbroken, but it was nice that they had.

"Well. I do appreciate the rescue, sweetie, and I'm grateful that you had an alternative plan. I never want to go through that hell again." He was silent a moment and I let him have the time to collect his thoughts. "I worry about you is all. You have so much promise. And you've never wanted to be a hero. I don't mean to seem like I'm treating you like an idiot."

I scooted my chair closer. "And I don't, really. All things being equal, I'd rather somebody else do
the heroing. But the reemergence of HYDRA changes things."

"Considering trying to be a superhero, Ms Barnes? Or have you already taken steps in that
direction?" The Senator. I hadn't heard him come in. Shit.

"I've already been a hero, Senator," I said coolly, looking at him like he was an insect I was
considering squashing. "I was at Raganrok, didn't you know? The Asgardian government considers
me a hero, anyway."

"I thought your wings went away."

"There are ways to compensate for that. Just ask Tony, he'd build me a suit if I asked him. Or
maybe I could talk him into creating metal wings like the ones on the news." I let him stew a bit,
then continued when he opened his mouth. "But to do so would mean that I'd have to join the
Avengers, which would place me under your authority. I think we'd both prefer that not happen."

"Uncle Bucky, how are you today?"

"Doing better, kid," Bucky said affectionately. Daniel looked at me.

"He's healing," I said encouragingly. "Look at his chart." He did, the Senator casually approaching
to look over his shoulder.

"No offense, Grandma," Daniel murmured as he scanned the information, "but I don't think you'd
be a good fit on the Avengers. You're not the best team player I've ever seen, and besides, you're
irreplaceable." He smiled at me and put the pad back in the holster.

"Nobody's irreplaceable, honey," I said to him affectionately, but I looked at the Senator.

"Grandma," Daniel said sternly. "Don't antagonize one of my oversight committee, please."
Unspoken was that he was needed, and I knew he was a better choice than any of the alternatives.
The Senator began to smirk. "I'm not quite sure why you're here, though, Senator," he continued.
"Isn't there an appropriations bill coming up for a vote soon? I appreciate your interest in my
relatives, but you have more important things to do than hang around the tower."

"Barnes is a part time member of the Avengers," he said. "I am concerned of course with his
recovery and what must have been a terrible ordeal." Bucky snort-coughed.

"You're looking peaky, Uncle Bucky," I said, a little concerned. He was, too, it wasn't just me
trying to get out of an irritating conversation.

"Bring the babies next time you come, and Damian," he instructed, yawning. "They're growing so
fast."

"That they are," I said, and leaned over to kiss his cheek, very gently. The chart said that some of
his teeth were still a little loose and sore. "Do you want anything tomorrow?"

"Emma's bringing me cookies," he said smugly. "But maybe something to read, a real book? My
hands should be ok in the next day or two."

"I can do that," I said, smiling. Wishing I could break the hands of whomever'd worked my uncle
over. I turned off the little jammer and the Senator raised an eyebrow.

"It's legal," I said coolly. "I've gotten over thirty calls from the media today and there's a bunch of
them camped out with the latest parabolic mikes. I'm sure they don't need to hear that we don't get along, now, do they?"

"An answer for everything, is that right, Ms Barnes?" he asked, biting off the words.

I shrugged. "I'm on my second lifetime after a really educational afterlife, Senator. I have a lot more answers than I used to." I smiled at my uncle. "I'll be by tomorrow and I'll bring the family. I'll see you later, Daniel."

"Can you and Grandpa come to dinner this week?" Daniel asked. I agreed, and he walked me to the door. I nearly slipped on the wet floor outside; one of the custodians was fixing the automatic cleaner which apparently wasn't sucking up the water. I found my family upstairs in the office that Steve shared with Bucky and reclaimed them. We went home and were partaking of coffee and tea and chatting with Alfred as the kids, energized by the break in routine, crawled around on the floor with the dogs. Eira was feeling much better about the human puppies these days. Miles could still be too loud at times for her (really, for everyone--we needed the kid to learn an indoor voice) but Iris was her father's daughter and frankly adored the animals. Somewhat to my surprise, she'd learned how to stroke rather than pat too energetically, and the cats felt pretty good around her. But it was Eira who fascinated her the most; she seemed to enjoy burbling words at her and Eira indulgently relayed images of how Iris saw her to me: enormous, awesome, and fluffy. Torunn took off the evening once we were home and took her brother out to sample some of the city's night life.

Alfred asked questions about Bucky and was pleased that he was recovering so quickly. Then he cleared his throat. "I would like to ask an indulgence of you." I sat up straight. I had never heard him say those words. Before I could say anything, he hurried on. "I would like to request an evening off tomorrow night. Alan would be pleased to serve you dinner. I... er... have a date."

I sucked in a breath and Damian's eyes brightened. "Of course, Alfred, Daniel invited us to dinner this week," he said.

"Oh, Alfred, what's her name? What does she do? Where did you meet her?" I asked raptly. I had also never heard of him dating. Alfred blushed.

"Her name is Fiona McGuinness," he said, and there was just a hint of dreaminess in his tone. "She's a hippotherapist. We met at a 5 k run last month." Now there's two words that don't go together: "fun run". There is nothing more boring than slogging around the city streets at a run with nothing fun to break up the monotony, no fun obstacles to provide a good time. I kept this to myself, however. To each her own.

"When do we get to meet her?" Damian asked. "What's a hippotherapist? Isn't that more in Bucky's line of work in the zoo?"

"Soon, if all goes well," Alfred murmured. "A hippotherapist uses horseback riding as a therapy for people who have physical or neurological disabilities because horses have a pelvis that has a three-dimensional movement that mirrors the physiology of the human walk. It is beneficial for those with physical or occupational disabilities. It used to be useful for conditions like autism or multiple sclerosis, but modern medicine has successfully treated these."

"Whenever you're comfortable," Damian said. I nodded and I think Alfred was relieved when there was a tap on the door and Dick and Barbara walked in. Dick grabbed Damian in a headlock and gave him a brisk noogie before sitting down. Damian scowled at his brother, smoothing his thick hair as Alfred placidly offered them coffee.

"I know that we aren't scheduled to go out tonight, Dami," Dick said as he sipped his coffee. "So I
thought that now would be a good time to let you know that I'm going to be transitioning out of being Nightwing." He sighed. "I don't feel like I've really been accomplishing much lately. There are so many new heroes out there. My backside is more famous than me." He wasn't wrong there, there had been a poll in one of the city newspapers, and Nightwing's butt had won in that category.

"Your abs are also famous," I pointed out. They'd taken second. Barbara laughed. Nightfall had taken best shoulders and second best thighs. It was a little weird to see my husband cut up and polled like that. I had voted him for best overall, but he came in fourth. Probably because he's not as tall as some of the other superheroes. He doesn't need to be tall; he's a fun-sized hero, concentrated.

Dick just rolled his eyes. "And there are the kids to consider. Bab is going to continue her work as Oracle. She gets data to supers all over the world, so it's important that she continue that."

"It's low risk but time-consuming," she shrugged. "How about you, Alex? Was your rescue of your uncle a one-off?"

"Oh, hey, you probably haven't heard," Dick said, brightening and snickering.

"Oh?" I inquired cautiously.

"They've come up with a name for you." Still snickering, he found the remote and a glass screen emerged from behind a few shelves of books. He switched the channel from a sporting event to the most neutral of the 24 hour news stations. We had a bit of a wait and a few commercials before the segment he referred to came back on. There was an image of me from the leaked recording, decking some HYDRA scum. You could almost see the comic book "POW!" off to the side. I sighed. The anchor had a couple of geopolitical guests on, who had been discussing the importance of the recovery of Bucky Barnes, the need to keep HYDRA from creating supersoldiers and assassins.

"So here's the interesting thing," one guest said, gesturing to the freeze frame. You can see part of the air gurney and Bucky's face. Yikes. That'll scare some children. "So out of the clear blue we have this superpowered woman nobody's ever seen before, nobody's heard even a hint of her. Where did she come from, how did she get her skills? These are the obvious questions. The more important one is why and how. Why was the recovery of Barnes so important and how did she learn and plan the rescue?"

"Well, the first answer is obvious," the other guest said. "Keeping Barnes from becoming HYDRA's asset was critical. He's had a long time to learn new skills, and that, combined with a resurgent HYDRA, is enough to scare the pants off anybody sensible and cause a run on the liquor stores. There's been so much societal and political upheaval since the Great Winter and the Return that I think everybody feels a little unstable, hoping that the ground isn't going to be knocked out from under them again. Valkyrie is an apparent white knight who stepped out of the shadows for a crucial, brutal moment, and has faded away again. Who knows if she'll come into the light again?"

"Valkyrie?" questioned the host.

"Alex Barnes may have been in Prague at the time, but there's no doubt in my mind that if she could have, she'd have gotten a team together to rescue her uncle. So, a woman, with those curious wings... it's appropriate, and the woman hasn't named herself."

The other guest chuckled. "You're assuming that she would have needed a team. Alex Barnes was the assassin's apprentice and if you've seen that documentary, you know she has the ruthlessness and abilities to do a lot of damage on her own. The only thing that makes me think that she was in
fact where she said she was is that I don't know how she could have traveled there. There is no hint that she was able to buy, rent, beg, borrow, or steal any conveyance to get her down to the HYDRA installation in time. And Senator Fitzgerald is not her biggest fan and has certainly tried to establish that. Well, also that there's not record or even a story about her learning to use explosives. And she's always been low tech, using her own fighting skills and really anachronistic weapons. She used the guns at the emplacement against the Kree that once, but she wasn't the most skilled user. Valkyrie used an EMP, that replica of Odin's spear, and showed a keen understanding of modern weaponry."

They had a brief discussion about the dislike between me and the Senator, which was pretty accurate. Oil and water personalities, plus both of us were willing to drop the gloves when necessary. It hadn't really been, so far, but that was because people kept intervening. I needed to get a grip. We didn't have to be enemies, and I could keep my distance. Maybe, if I could plan it right, I could call for a truce that gave me the upper hand. No, no. I needed to stop thinking of this as a conflict I should win. I needed to take a draw and be happy about it. I needed him to move his attention over to some other target. I really didn't want him to have power over me.

Then the segment ended, with speculation about what the Avengers were planning next, and Dick turned off the screen. "Well, never say never, but I'm inclined to regard this as a one time thing. Like you said, there are a lot of new heroes out there, and I really don't like to brawl. It hurts."

"I think I'll also take the opportunity to transition out of Nightfall, then," Damian said briskly to his brother. "I've done enough costumed crime-fighting in my time, and I think I'd like to focus on other things as well. Not waking up in the morning sore or with something broken has its appeal. And this time, I want all the time I can get with my wife and kids. See what I can build for myself, instead of just being one in a line of Waynes at the helm of the company." Dick nodded. "Besides, Alex may still have a few missions to help bring down HYDRA. She's of interest to them, and so are the kids. So I think there will be opportunities for support staff."

"Really, Alex?" I nodded at Barbara. "Well, you need to do something, come to me and I'll get you intel," she said briskly. Then Dick and Damian started planning on how to phase out their activities. Who'd they need to tell, the timeline on that as well. Barbara picked up Miles and snuggled him as they talked. I left Iris curled up with Eira and we talked about the restorations and renovations at the library. It was, overall, a good night.

When we were upstairs getting ready for bed, Damian put his arms around me and kissed the side of my neck. "Can I have a pony, beloved?"
I gave Serena some time the next day to settle in, then went and knocked on her door with a bribe of coffee and apple strudel. "What do you want?" she asked, a trifle warily.

I sighed. "I need a design for a stable. Damian wants horses." She started to laugh. "I also thought that perhaps a guesthouse, on the other side of the garden. With twins, we don't have nearly the space for guests that I thought we'd have."

"What's brought this on?" she asked curiously.

"Alfred is seeing a woman who uses horses in therapy, so Damian wants one. Horse, not additional woman. And horses are social, so we need more than one. I took a riding class at MIT and liked it. And there could come a day when Alfred would prefer his own house. So..."

"Gotcha." She nodded, and she asked about particulars. "I'll have to research this one, Alex. I've never been in a stable before."

"Take your time," I said. My eye twitched. "I'm just glad he didn't pull up with a couple of horses in a trailer." She laughed, and we discussed the guesthouse; Damian and I wanted something that would harmonize with our house but not look identical and that would allow our butler and his family scope to put their own stamp on it. The only requirements were that it had to be roomy, high ceilinged, with great bathrooms and the best possible kitchen. I went back to work feeling pretty good.

That afternoon, I got a call from Daniel. Damian had gotten to him, and he was enthusiastic about the idea, offering to build the stable on his land and expand it. I asked him some hard questions about this enthusiasm, worried that the interest would wear off over time and what this would mean for the poor horses. Turned out that it isn't just little girls who dream about having horses. I just shot Serena an email about that. I had lost complete control over the horse issue, not that I'd had a lot to begin with. Daniel and Damian could take charge of this project. I was looking forward to riding again, but I had other projects too.

I knocked off work and went to see Bucky late that afternoon, bringing the kids with me. Damian met us there as we were chatting, brightening as he heard us discussing the plan for horses. "Would you like to come out and ride once we get the horses, Bucky?" he asked eagerly. That's my Damian, enthusiastically spreading the gospel of Animals. "There are a few horse rescue operations around that Daniel and I are planning to adopt from, and horses need their own kind. We'll have several, so that guests can come ride too. And if you want to adopt your own, you could stable it with us."

Years of experience with Damian and his pets should have prepared me, but somehow it hadn't. Bucky was cautiously optimistic and as Miles started to get twitchy, Damian hastily swapped him for his sister, handing Miles to Bucky. His hands and arms were strong enough to cuddle the kids, who were developing excellent taste and adored him. Nessa came in and I turned over the chair to her. She settled in and Miles grabbed her finger.

"He's got quite a grip," she said, a little startled. He did; he had a bit of a strength mutation. One thing that the doctors were noting in the reproduction of Returned enhanced and supers was that mutations were passed from parent to offspring, but they weren't breeding true. Miles was showing more of a superhuman strength enhancement. Iris had something, but they weren't sure what it was.
I just hoped it wasn't going to be something that would make it difficult to parent her, like invisibility, or some mental or psychic power. The people I knew with the mental powers tended to be unstable.

I watched Bucky and Nessa together with Iris and smiled. They stole little glances at each other while playing with the baby, and Nessa volunteered to change Iris. This looked promising for their future.

Equally important, Bucky was healing rapidly and the doctors felt safe in discharging him the next day. Alfred's date had gone well, so things were looking up for everybody. Serena, after doing some research, referred Damian and Daniel to a specialty architect who specialized in building extravagant barns, and they flew down to Virginia to meet with the creative team and get the ball rolling. I worked with Serena in developing the plans for the guesthouse, which were much less technical. We brought Dagny in to design the gardens, and in a month had enough to start with. I wanted construction to start as soon as possible, so my friends were able to get equipment out to grade the parcel in a little over a month from my initial request. We were having a warm fall, and Serena and I wanted to take advantage of that to get the concrete poured. Alfred and I walked over one night to survey the process before the forms were set up. There would be a basement, too, which could be used for storage or any number of activities.

"It seems like this project is happening faster than the house itself," Alfred observed. The smell of asphalt was much fainter today, the road having gone in two days ago so that the heavy equipment would have an easier time getting to the site.

I nodded. "Well, with the babies, now we're down a guest room since each will get his or her own room when they get larger, and Daniel could still use some help hosting League members from time to time. But primarily, we want it for you."

"For me?" Alfred was startled. Ha. I didn't manage to do that much.

"Yep. You may want to have space for yourself as the kids get bigger, kind of a retreat. And if things work out with you and Fiona, there will still be a place for you to live on the estate if you wish, with the privacy that you should have."

"Miss Alex," he said quietly. I held his hand a moment as we observed the bustle as the workers wound up their activities for the day.

"Yeah, so Jackson Cooper, Serena's associate, is going to be calling you in the next few days to get your input on the kitchen, specifically, but if you want to discuss other parts of the design, feel free. This is going to be his first real project; he worked with Serena on the design, but he'll be managing it from here on out. I think you'll find him innovative and easy to work with. Even if you don't anticipate moving in at some point, your input into design elements is welcome. You have a superb eye for detail."

After a moment he cleared his throat. "I appreciate the faith you show in me, Miss Alex."

"Always, Alfred." We turned back to the house and went in. The nights were getting chilly.

We had a Halloween party that year for our friends and family, and the babies all got a chance to interact together, inasmuch as toddlers and infants can. Eira, Sigurd, and Torburn took it in turns to be kid shepherds, switching out as their nerves frayed from all the activity from so many kids, but all the kids loved the dogs. Charlie, getting bigger and steady from Eira's good example, also suffered himself to be loved. The cats did not. They retreated to the second story, where none of the offspring could get yet, and watched the gathering from there. The parents got a break, actually, as
there were enough people around who did not have kids that the kids were played with and cuddled by quite a range of adults. Aquaman came early and presented me with an exquisite pearl on a delicate gold chain and a smaller one for Iris, thanks for having hosted him at the earlier conferences. He explained that his people never opened the oysters until they died, which is why the pearls were so beautiful; the layers of nacre built up in such thickness that no cultured pearls can compare. They weren't perfect, but the imperfections in symmetry were beautiful in themselves.

Alfred also brought Fiona. Finally. She came early enough so that we could meet her and chat, getting to know her. She was calm but enthusiastic, and her personality reminded me for all the world like Jadzia Dax from Deep Space Nine. She was an interesting woman, and had some suggestions for Damian about the design of the stable and other buildings. The horse complex seemed to be growing larger and more feature-stuffed each day.

When Diana arrived, she brought me a spear as a gift. We went downstairs to add it to my stand (I had to clear some space, my armor and weaponry having been FINALLY returned by the government a week before). It deserved a place of honor; she had returned briefly to Themyscira to visit her mother and homeland. Her mother had authorized the gift, a genuine Amazon spear from their armory. "It has no special skill or power," she said almost apologetically.

It was quite beautiful, the shaft straight and smooth to the touch, the end capped with bronze, the spearhead engraved with a foliate pattern and chased in gold. "It's wonderful," I said, setting it in place by my armor. "It's an honor to have a gift like this."

"Do not hesitate to use it," Diana said. "It is a weapon for a warrior, and my mother the queen was intrigued by the valkyries and your history. It is a way of extending a hand in friendship and acknowledging our fundamental joint commitment to love, equality, and virtue. Perhaps one day you will be able to come with me," she said. "I would enjoy showing you the beauty of the islands and my mother would enjoy speaking with you, I believe."

"That would be wonderful," I said hastily, and she smiled.

"Perhaps when Iris is a little older," she suggested. "Martha as well as Iris, the namesake of the goddess, would also be welcomed there. We rarely have infants or small children among us." We rejoined the party, but I was a little staggered by the offer.

Not so stunned, though, that I didn't notice a little delicate flirtation with Daniel, though.

"Danny could do a lot worse," Martha pointed out. Then she poked me. "How would you like to have a legendary superhero for your granddaughter?"

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves," I said peacefully. "They have yet to even have a first date." We watched them covertly a little while longer. Yep, he leaned into her as they spoke and her fingers brushed his.

"I wonder how she keeps her bustier in place all the time," Martha wondered. "She always looks perfect."

"It's an enchantment, she said once," I murmured. "It wouldn't be dignified to have a wardrobe malfunction, and she's one of the most dignified people I know."

Martha went off to find her date (rescue him from her twin, actually) and I circulated among our guests, stopping by Serena, Margaret, and Aslyn, who were snickering. Aslyn handed me a little figure of an old-fashioned gray alien, with the big head, nose slits, tiny mouth, big eyes. "The latest
rumor about the vigilante Valkyrie is that she's an alien," she reported merrily. "Congratulations."
They burst out laughing, and I just shook my head and moved on, but I did place the little figurine
on my desk.

It was a fun party, and people left at a reasonable hour, since the next day was a work day for us
all. The house was strangely quiet, and we helped transport dishes to the kitchen before Alfred
shooed us off.

It was a really good night. When we left for work the next day, we noticed that Fiona's
transportation was still parked by the end of the house. Damian and I exchanged a high five.

After Halloween, the foundation for the stable complex was poured. There would be a huge barn-
like structure in two parts, stone outside, wood inside, a two-story roof with ample natural lights
through windows and strategically-placed skylights, plus a system of lights; chandeliers as well as
sconces made from unbreakable glass to eliminate dark space. The floor was an advanced rubber
system that looked like stone but was easy to clean and comfortable for the horses to stand on and
walk over, non-slip. Each box was four meters by five meters, lined with wood finished with an
impervious coating, had individual French drains, and the dividers between the boxes was high
enough that the horses couldn't jump over them, but they would be able to see each other, provided
they were tall enough, and they could poke their heads over the doors as well. There was ample
ventilation and a hayloft and quarters for a live-in groom on one end of one building. At the end of
the other was a generously sized tack room, a big feed room, and an office for the manager of the
operation, with a small bathroom. There was a stone arch linking the two parts elegantly and
providing a memorable entrance. There was a fountain in the grassy courtyard for looks as well as
troughs for water for the horses, and this all opened up to an extensive pasture where the horses
could be turned out that also had a shelter where the horses could retreat if they didn't want to go
into the barn. There was also an area for the horses to be worked on days no one rode them and a
ring for dressage, which was Damian's passion. And finally, off to the side was a building where
two trucks and trailers could be parked. Feeling a little guilty, Damian and Daniel had contributed
a considerable sum to charities helping the Returnees who were still in the last tent city and
providing food and assistance for struggling city dwellers. They boys huddled frequently,
discussing what kind of personnel they needed and researching area instructors. Daniel, like
Damian, was starting to step back from crimefighting. Bruce and Xander were still fully invested in
Batman and he wasn't really needed. I suspect it was a relief to him.

The serious snow was considerate enough not to start until the structures for the guesthouse and
stables were framed. Then the snow began in earnest. Eira and Charlie loved going out for romps
in the snow, then coming in and using the dog-grooming station (Eira had trained Charlie how to
use it although he still needed her mental nudging to remember to use it when he was wet and/or
dirty). Signe also enjoyed the snow; it was hilarious to see this big floofy cat playing in the snow,
burrowing when it got deep enough, catching snowflakes, then coming in, shaking off her
luxurious coat, and demanding that a fireplace be turned on so she could soak in the heat. She
refused to use the grooming station.

We had Thanksgiving up at the main house with the rest of the family, which was lovely, and not
long after that was the twins' first birthday. Babies not being picky about their presents, there was
no uproar about the functional gifts of clothes that they received, and Bucky's gift was a sleepover
at his place. I was thrilled, both that Damian and I would have a whole night off, and also because
this might mean something significant in the development of his relationship with Nessa. Sure
enough, he proposed on New Years Day, when they had just woken up and were cuddling together.
He asked her with a glorious diamond in a solitaire setting, intending to go shopping with her and
ger something fancier, but she loved the austerity of the setting and refused to exchange it. We met
them later that day for a late lunch, and if she glowed, Bucky was incandescent. They were talking
about a summer wedding, and Damian immediately offered our garden if they wanted an outdoor wedding.

"It's a little overwhelming," Nessa said, holding Bucky's hand. He put his free hand gently over hers as she talked. "Steve offered to design the dress."

"Get binders," Damian and I said in unison, and laughed at each other before explaining why they were helpful. Nessa smiled.

"I think that it should be overwhelming," I said thoughtfully. "Marriage is a big commitment, and planning the wedding is a good indicator of how well you listen to each other and work together."
At the end of the lunch, I hugged her and welcomed her to the family.

We had lunch again the next week, just the two of us, and although she didn't know about the Wayne family's ties to the superhero community other than the superficial, public ones, we talked about what it was like to have someone you love go out heroing and how to cope with the uncertainties of missions and what to do when they returned battered and beat up. In February, she asked me to be a bridesmaid. Bucky asked Damian to be a groomsman. Steve would be his best man, and Tony and my grandpa were the other groomsmen.

In early March, the first horses arrived. Damian liked the look of Friesian horses, and he had four of the large, lovely animals. They were rescue animals, and they needed rehabilitation. They had to put on weight and lose their fear of humans, and it would be our family project. We went down almost every day to spend time with them. We frequently saw Daniel working with his choices, a dark brown Belgian Warmblood and an almost black Selle Francais, who had been similarly abused. I'd never heard of these breeds before and I was learning a lot.

Later in the month, we hosted a summit for the senior members of the Avengers/Justice League who were on the hunt for HYDRA. I was invited as well. We hosted Aquaman and Flash again, but this time we had Superman as well. Diana was welcomed up at the main house. I asked Daniel about the change and enjoyed his blush.

But finally, it was time to learn what had been done, what intelligence had been collected, and what the next step was.
Daniel flicked on a projector and a map of the globe sprang up over the table. Red leached into several countries as the globe spun gently. "As you can see, intelligence from the US and its allies, as well as SHIELD's own work, paints a pretty grim picture. We can verify that about half of the countries on Earth have significant HYDRA infiltration. It was known that something was going on, but not what, and the revelation of HYDRA as a covert influence has led to a lot of dots being connected. Suspected infiltration affects another third of the remaining countries." A paler wash of color, like blood in water, tinged more nations. Including the US.

"You can see where we have a problem." Daniel sighed. "Tomorrow, our oversight committee will meet with the Avengers, very discreetly, for a truth-telling session. Every member of the Avengers is expected to participate and the committee members will too. The trouble is knowing who we can trust. I expect that there will be restrictions on what we can share with the Justice League as a result. The League has manage to avoid terrestrial oversight because, frankly, there are too many nationalities and planets of origin represented to put it under the control of any one nation, and the UN never got the traction it needed to demand control."

Superman drummed his fingers on the table. "You want us to participate as well."

"It would make things easier," Damian said. "I think only the senior members would need to do it, so long as you can guarantee that the information will be held tightly."

"What would it be like?" Flash asked, frowning. "Some of us have secret identities to protect, and the government has tried to unmask us in the past."

"It is a truth serum; it has a very light odor that is a byproduct of the manufacturing process, so you will always know if the gas is present. The government, of course, has tried to deodorize it in the past, but it can't be done. It's a derivative of Emma's original formula. This is stronger and test subjects feel the compulsion to talk when exposed to the gas. It can be defeated, because it doesn't compel you to tell the truth, just talk, but it is very difficult not to tell the truth, and it's easy to tell when someone is evading the question. The secret identities of members of the Justice League are a prime consideration of mine, and the testing will be administered by a trained examiner who has already been cleared. There will be a list of questions that will be presented to anyone who consents to the testing, which you will read before the testing begins. If you have any objections, there will be the opportunity to have the question struck, but there will have to be a good reason for this. Once all negotiations are completed, if there are any, you and the examiner will both sign the document, the gas will be administered, and the questions will be asked. Responses will be short sentences. This will be a problem for some of us--"


"But not for others," he finished, and Bruce smirked. "The questions will be restricted to confirming your superhero identity, your private identity if it is in the public domain, membership in whatever organization you belong to, Avengers or League, and whether you are currently or have ever been a member of HYDRA, if you have ever been approached by someone recruiting you for a secret organization--other than the Avengers or League--and whether you have any weaknesses that would allow HYDRA to pressure you into joining or giving aid, assistance, or information. You pass the examination and you'll be able to share in the intelligence that has been gathered and to participate in obtaining new information. For everyone's safety, only the individual being tested and the examiner will be in the room. A recording will be made for your protection. You will be provided a copy of the questioning from start to finish."
"And if we choose not to participate?" Diana's voice had a sharpness that was unusual.

"You would be excluded from meetings like this," Daniel said soberly.

"It's demeaning to be asked to do this," Diana said. "I do not lie." Daniel looked crushed for a second.

"The intent is not to impugn your character," I said, helping out. "Everybody knows that Wonder Woman tells the truth. I imagine that for you it would be a formality. It would also protect you from a smear campaign."

"You're appeasing me," she stated. I nodded.

"Little bit. But it's also the truth." Daniel nodded too.

"This isn't a trivial request. I have no desire to try to compel anybody to show up for the testing. I expect it to be a formality, but it will prove that we can be trusted. The League will continue to get information, but I can't guarantee it will be the full story." Daniel's eyes swept around the table. "And you, Grandma, are a particularly interesting issue." I raised my eyebrows politely. "I don't want you there, because I don't trust our oversight committee all that far. It's one thing to have these other heroes, who are well known and fit into convenient slots. Valkyrie is the wildest of cards. And I'm not even sure if you would want to put on your armor again." I glanced at Damian; we'd discussed this.

"Since Damian is effectively retiring from all but the biggest things, ops where his particular talents would be necessary, I would be open to doing a job here and there, but not regularly, and I would plan my participation myself. In that case I would need access to all data, no reservations, but I don't think I need access to everything all the time. And I'm wary of allying myself with one group or the other too closely. I don't want anyone to think that Valkyrie is on anybody's payroll."

"It's safer if nobody thinks we know who she is or how to contact her," my uncle said, and heads nodded around the table.

"Well, it would be nice to know that you were ready to pull my ass out of the fire if necessary," Flash said hopefully, and I laughed.

So it was settled that I wouldn't be reporting for a new-fangled polygraph and it was established when Avengers and Justice Leaguers would be showing up the next day, then the meeting adjourned. Tony, Steve, Emma, and Bucky hustled over to me immediately.

"I'm glad you're not getting into this too deep, sweetie," my uncle said. "It's not that I don't know you're capable of great feats, but you're always going to be my niece, and I'm always going to want to protect you." He kissed my cheek and I leaned in for a hug.

Steve offered me a sheaf of papers. "Nessa has several designs for her bridesmaids and she doesn't want to choose, because all of you have different body types. So she's having the bridesmaids in Schiaparelli pink and her maid of honor in a light pink, and you can choose your design. They'll all work together."

"Pink?" I asked my uncle. My face hurt from trying not to smile. He sighed.

"Anything she wants," he said stoically. I had to divert my attention or I was going to bust out laughing at the thought of my uncle with baby pink roses on his lapel and matching cummerbund and bow tie. Or in some horrible pink prom tuxedo. I quickly leafed through the designs and paused at a simple long gown with princess seams, a wide, gracefully curving neckline, fluttery
sheer sleeves, and what looked like a layer of chiffon over satin.

"This one," I said immediately, and Steve smiled.

"I designed that one with you in mind," he said, pleased. He showed me the fabric samples; the satin was shocking pink, the chiffon a slightly lighter pink that was painted with what looked like an abstract floral pattern in shades of pink. Just enough to add interest. "The chiffon isn't a sure thing," he said, frowning slightly. "It has to be hand painted and time is short. The alternative will be to use chiffon that's the same color as the satin and some other embellishment, maybe embroidery. That's not trendy right now, so it will make you all stand out." Bucky rubbed his head.

"Are you ok?" I asked him anxiously.

"The wedding," he said simply, and I nodded. My uncle doesn't do fussy things, and there's not much that's fussier than a wedding.

"Are you wearing a pink tux?" I asked innocently, and he winced.

"Thank god, no. Stevie's doing dark gray suits," he said gratefully.

"Black would be too stark," I agreed, and Steve nodded.

"Now that the clothing choices are settled, I have some ideas for gear for you, Alex," Tony said impatiently. "A backpack that has a removable component so that you can preserve the impression that your wings are constructs, for one thing."

"And some ideas for improved armor," Emma said. "I can do better with more time. I'm thinking increased strength around the ribs and down your back, just to be safe. And I have a new design to protect your wing bones, too. I'm currently testing a new solution for your feathers. I'm sorry I haven't been able to get the previous coating off." We walked over to the display case where my armor shone under a spotlight and I took a minute to reflect that there was finally something of mine on display in the bat cave. Support staff generally don't get trophies. Emma indicated where she wanted to add strength, and Tony took note of the improvements to cover my back. He'd get in touch with Emma so his backpack thingie would integrate. There could be an integrated spine sheath for a sword if I wanted to make another short sword. Lots of possibilities. Emma and Tony both liked the idea of making a copy of Gungnir and using that to deliver an EMP, since it had proven so effective.

The next morning, Damian and I were feeding the twins their breakfast when there was a knock at the kitchen door. It was Diana. "May I speak with you privately?" she asked, and I nodded. Alfred eagerly took the spoon from me and began to feed Iris himself. My husband, wearing an apron to protect his lovely suit from his son, looked a little vexed.

"Of course," I replied, wondering if there was a problem with the whole Valkyrie thing, or maybe the lie detector thing. I led her into the library, where Signe promptly sat, half on, half off-Diana's lap, purring. Diana began stroking the cat's silky fur automatically.

"As one woman of honor to another, I have come to ask if your family would have reservations if Daniel and I were to begin a relationship," she said. Aha! This was much more interesting. I didn't have to feign interest. "At home, of course, there isn't family trouble with liaisons or relationships, but I am unsure of the protocol here in the world of man. I felt that as the matriarch of your clan, I could speak frankly with you. If it was just the sex, I would not have bothered you," she said apologetically. "But I feel that there is more between Daniel and me and I would know your objections before things progressed."
"No objections," I said briskly. "As you say, you're a woman of honor. I adore Daniel, but he's an adult, capable of making his own decisions. I appreciate your thoughtfulness, but there's nothing that could be problematic in your relationship, as far as I'm concerned." Diana relaxed a little. Eira wandered in and put her head on my lap so I'd have something to pet too. She's thoughtful like that. "Even if I did, I would express any reservations to Daniel to let him know my concerns, but I wouldn't interfere; my influence is rightly limited. Of course I'd like to see him in a fulfilling relationship with someone. Having said that, you're a lovely person and I don't have to worry that you'd treat him poorly. He's got excellent instincts for people, which is why I think he's been single so long. I know he wants a family of his own, and speaking as his grandmother, I'm anxious for him to settle down with someone, ideally in a relationship like mine and Damian's, which is based on mutual love and support."

"That's a little daunting," Diana murmured. I shrugged. 

"Obviously no relationship can be a carbon copy of another," I said, "but the love and respect and devotion is there or it isn't. It's up to everyone to nurture what they value in their own relationships. Achieving love is the easy part. It's sustaining and strengthening that over the long term that's the hard part, when there's routine and other distractions to divert your attention."

She nodded, sitting back and thinking. "In any case, I wouldn't dream of interfering in his relationship, but you'd be a welcome member of the family if it gets that far," I assured her. She blushed slightly. "And I know that men can't go to Themyscria, but if your mother would like to meet him and can travel, I'd be honored to host her here." She murmured thanks, and we went back to the kitchen, where she accepted tea from Alfred and Damian and I hastily finished our breakfasts, the twins being fed and ready to go. Damian got to take them today, dropping them off with his dad or Daniel when it was his turn to be truth tested. He wanted to keep his hand in until HYDRA was taken down. Now that the babies were walking, it made looking out for them a little more challenging. We were starting to work Alfred into the rotation periodically; he loved babies, and home was a lot safer than a lab, even if there was a special space set aside for them. Eira still preferred them where she could keep an eye out; she was most content with them in my office, curled up with her in her dog bed since they'd outgrown their bassinets in my credenza. Diana cooed to the twins and Miles finally shut up. He was being fussy, and it tried my patience a bit. I sighed with bliss at the sound of silence and also at the travel cup of coffee that Alfred handed me. We said goodbye to Diana and went out to the car. Tony had promised us our new family car by the end of the month, and I was eager for it. It was a tight fit in the small car, even when Eira stayed at home like she was today.

Damian waited until we were on our way to the city before asking what Diana had wanted to speak with me about, and chortled when I told him. "I like Diana," he said placidly. "I think they're a good match." He tickled me. "I know you want the kid to get a girlfriend."

I laughed and retreated as far as I could while driving. "I think that it has the potential to get serious if she came to talk to me. I can see Diana having discreet affairs, but if she's interested in family interface, she's thinking of the future." I flashed my husband a smile. "Nothing but the best for our grandson."

Damian smiled back, a lifetime of memories and love in his expression. "Seems kind of sudden, but then, it didn't take me long to realize that you were the woman for me. You've got to strike while the iron is hot."

"That could be taken a few ways," I murmured, winking at him. He chortled. "We don't know how long they've been seeing each other. They've certainly been discreet."
"Daniel wears a lot of hats and it's hard for him," Damian said pensively. "It would be nice if he had a help meet." I agreed, and our conversation shifted to our day's plans. He was looking forward to the weekend, where he was going to have his first dressage lesson. The horses finally trusted us enough that it wasn't traumatic for them to be saddled and ridden, and the air was nicely warm. The stables were almost complete, and he and Daniel had hired a manager for the operation and a couple of stable hands. The guesthouse was almost complete as well; Tony's SmartBoard not only allowed for the change of color and texture, but now permitted patterns so that the scrims like the ones he'd installed in the nursery were unnecessary. And as an example of his genius, he'd made the controllers updatable, so it was easy to add the capability throughout our house as well. Wallpaper without the aggravation. Carol was working on the finish carpentry, the appliances had been delivered, and Alfred and I were working on the furnishings. I'd had lunch with Fiona on a couple of occasions and teased out her preferences on style, and I made sure that these were taken into consideration with the furniture without telling Alfred. I didn't want to pressure him to settle down already, but I wanted her to be comfortable. And, like all Wayne houses, it had an attic, so if she wanted to bring in furniture of her own, there wouldn't be a problem.

I went to work and we had a partners meeting where we got caught up on our existing projects and planned the next stage of ValkyrieVille. We finally had decided to hire a management firm and lease everything. Yeah, we were control freaks, but it also enabled us to be sure that the development would be maintained well, upgrades made when necessary, and that it remained safe and vibrant. As our workload expanded, most of us were looking to expand our staffs, and we came to the agreement that we'd be taking over leases on the eight and seventh floors as they came up. A few offices had prematurely terminated their leases; one business had gone out of business and the others needed more room than we had available. We hadn't rented those and would make them available to our existing tenants on our target floors if they wanted to stay in the building. Then there was time for us to discuss new projects or bids.

I put up my hand. "I heard back about the Prague bid for the renovation of the Clementinum," I said. I didn't get it." I waited for the consolations to die down. "But because they want to use SmartBoard and some of the preservation materials that Tony developed for me in it, I've been offered the renovation of the Astronomical Tower in the complex." I grinned as cheering broke out and Aslyn popped a bottle of sparkling wine like we always did when one of us got a particularly prized commission. Then she brought us up to date on the very satisfying state of our company, and we went back to work. I brought Callahan and Mei into my office and told them the good news, and the decision to send Callahan over to Prague to supervise our portion of the work was made. Mei had a project for my attention. The Victoria Memorial in Kolkata was accepting bids for conservation work in the Durbar Hall Gallery and the Queen's Hall Gallery. I looked at the bare bones of the proposal she'd started and told her to work it up for submission. She had more experience than Callahan and I thought she was ready to start developing her own projects. This meant that I needed another couple of assistants, since she'd need to relocate to oversee the work in her bid if she won. Even if she didn't, my new commission in Prague would be the start of international projects we could expect to be in competition for, and there were still a lot of domestic projects. I needed to focus on the Hall of Justice now, since we were getting to the public areas now that the private League areas were proceeding a little faster than usual. And what a mess the public area was. It was going to require a lot of attention. I sighed and drew up another advertisement. I wanted to get interviews done when Mei and Callahan were around to be sure that new hires would fit in well. I went in to Aslyn to see how many people I could afford.

Damian was thrilled with my success, and he opened a split of champagne before dinner, and Alfred took a couple of minutes to toast my success as well. Over dinner, Damian had the unfortunate news that Selina and Bruce were divorcing. Since she'd moved on from Wayne's security division, she'd found the dark side too tempting and returned to her catburgling ways.
Bruce just couldn't take it. "I expect that once things smooth out after the divorce, that they'll resume their relationship," Damian opined. "He's always come back to her, but she just can't seem to keep to the straight and narrow over the long haul, and Father really is devoted to the right."

"Indeed, Master Damian," Alfred said, serving dinner before sitting down. "It is a shame for Master Bruce."

Selina had told me in confidence that she wanted to have a child, but that Bruce kept putting it off, focused as ever on being Batman. I wondered how much of her choices had to do with this, but I couldn't violate this trust. I made a resolution to have lunch or drinks with her. I was fond of my stepmother-in-law. Far more than my mother-in-law, that's for sure.

Daniel and Bruce came down after dinner to talk about the results of the polygraphing. Everyone had passed, including the oversight committee, which was good. The Justice League had gone back to their lives and work. Bruce was quiet and didn't refer to his soon-to-be former wife, and I wasn't sure if I should acknowledge it, so I just let it go for now. He cuddled his grandkids briefly, but didn't say much as Daniel told us about the results from the testing and the data that continued to come in. He couldn't officially sanction people who hadn't done the testing having access to all the information, but I knew that Oracle would have everything necessary and probably more, which would be held by the Justice League at least initially. Barbara was good about sharing with me, and could easily be bribed by a babysitting offer. Both men were pleased to hear my good news. Daniel looked relieved past the results, and I deduced that things were looking up with Diana.

I'd already emailed her a job announcement; the Met was looking for a specialist in ancient Classical history, and the job would enable her to relocate from Paris.

I had an ulterior motive, I had to confess. The more people around who could pacify Miles, the better.

As they left, Daniel gave me two drives, one of which turned out to be from Tony; it contained schematics for new gear for Valkyrie, annotated with suggestions by Emma. And there were sketches from Uncle Steve for a new uniform. The second, requiring several biometric identifiers to unlock, had a treasury of information about suspected HYDRA bases and personnel. I spent the evening learning the information. There were suspected bases by a few places where historical conservation projects were currently or were planning to be accepting bids. Some major cities that were thought to harbor HYDRA installations were also tearing down their slums and updating housing for the influx of Returnees, like Paris, Kyoto, Alexandria, Rio, and Johannesburg. I tapped my chin and thought about how Serena and I could use this information to our advantage in gathering better intelligence. It looked like Valkyrie was going to get a lot more employees.
Observations

Serena and I decided to go in on an employee together: a specialist in the artistic details that defined different architectural styles, an architectural historian. It would be easier to create our plans with that kind of resource, and when we were trying to preserve a building or fit it into an existing neighborhood, that kind of authenticity could make the difference between being awarded the commission or not. It would save time for the rest of us if we didn't have to dig for the information. This individual could also interface with interior designers and clients.

Which, to be honest, was a big part of the draw.

With the rise of HYDRA we were anticipating having to divert from our work for stuff like having to save the world. Again. But we were pros at that. We needed more help and started to talk about hiring employees who would be employed by one or the other of us but would have some overlap, so that if she needed a hand, I could toss her an assistant for a project and vice versa.

We were starting to be noticed for more than Serena and my identities as valkyries, my identity as the wife of one of the powerful Waynes, and and Serena's as the most glamorous Captain America. A joint project on a residence had been written up in Architectural Digest, and a really well-written article in a technical magazine described how I used Tony's innovations in my work. Carol and Dagny joined us in building reputations that extended beyond the city, and although Aslyn, Karen, and Margaret didn't get the press the rest of us did, we made sure to credit their work wherever possible. It wasn't just lip service; everybody in Valkyrie had a big role in our public successes. We began framing and hanging notable pieces on the firm in the conference room. We broke ground on ValkyrieVille after some issues with permitting, another big media day for the firm. We included two small public parks as well as other attractive landscaping throughout.

We'd decided to think ambitiously and were planning on phasing out our office tenants in time, taking over all of the Valkyrie Building office space for ourselves, but that would be a few years down the road and we needed space now. Public attachment to the Valkyrie Building kept growing; it was becoming a prime destination for parents to take their families for ice cream and our retail tenants were hip and unique, always a good thing for increasing foot traffic. We started to get requests for small weddings in the elegant space of our lobby or in our garden. We continued to host J's health fair, which drew attention and other sponsors to the event. The testing and treatment they were able to offer expanded. It felt really good to be helping others on a larger scale. We expanded our outreach and sponsored a Girl Scout troop in our neighborhood, parts of which were not receiving as much benefit from city revitalization. Martha did the training and became one of the troop's leaders, and Mom's coffee shop and the ice cream parlor had discounts for our scouts when they came in wearing their uniforms. We renovated some of our precious space downstairs as a conference room that any tenant could use and let the scouts meet there; it was safe and secure and since it was by public transportation, easy for the scouts to get to. We were also able to attract notable people to help with their badges and the troop was able to create a lot of their own badges too. Tony led the study for the robotics badge, Damian did a badge on finance, and Steve was going to carve out enough time to teach fundamentals of design. Barbara took them on a behind-the-scenes tour of the public library, Bucky did the same thing at the zoo, and we were all relentless about pursuing friends and acquaintances to speak to the girls, arrange field trips, or do badge work. Emma was head down in designing my armor and her regular business, but she'd promised to teach a badge on jewelry, where each girl would make a pendant.

The only thing Bucky didn't like about the wedding was the pink. It was heart-warming to see the care he took in planning it with Nessa, each decision helping to craft the beginning of their life
together. Bucky had been resigned to spending his life fundamentally alone once he'd decided to build a life independent of the Avengers, I think, and I got all gooey to see him with Nessa. They had decided to take us up on our offer to have the wedding in our garden, and the second weekend in June had us hosting. It had to be moved indoors hastily since a big spring storm moved in, but we rearranged the library so they could take their vows under the beautiful stained glass dome as the storm raged outside. It was a small wedding--our family and hers, the Avengers he was close to, and their closest friends. The cats made themselves scarce, and Charlie was shy, but Eira, Torbum, and Sigurd were regular guests. There was a moment when Iris escaped me and toddled speedily to her uncle, who was about to commit himself to Nessa. "Unca Baa--" she cooed. Nessa grinned, and Bucky smiled, stooped to pick up his niece, and put her on his hip as he recited his vows. Nessa took her when it was time for Bucky to slide her wedding ring on her finger, foiling my attempt to recapture my offspring, and was rewarded with Iris giving her a big kiss. Nessa gave Iris a kiss too, and gave her back to me so that she and Bucky could have their kiss. After dinner, Alan presided over the nursery where all the kids were happy to nap, being tired out from the wedding ceremony and having to dress up. I apologized to the newlyweds for my daughter crashing their vows.

"She's family," Nessa said, smiling. "It's too bad she's not a little older. I would have loved for her to be my flower girl. She's so adorable with those big blue eyes."

"I'm a little grateful to have been spared Miles as a ring bearer, no offense, sweetie," Bucky said. I laughed. Miles was proving rather difficult to civilize. I could see him being distracted by an animal or bored and just wandering off, putting down the rings and forgetting where. I adored my son, but it was true that Iris was an easier kid to manage.

It was a beautiful wedding and I was so happy my much-loved uncle had found someone to make his life with. They were going to honeymoon in the Canadian Rockies, staying in a nice lodge and doing some hiking.

In July I added three junior conservationists, all recent grads, to my business. Olivia had double majored in preservation and architecture, so she'd be able to float between my unit and Serena's, and Serena had a newbie who was interested in my side of things too, so things were looking up. I couldn't put bids in on everything I wanted to, partly because there were just too many projects, but also because the Hall of Justice was in worse shape than anybody knew. Some of the detail work was being held together with paint, it turned out, and things that we'd planned to renovate had to be replaced instead. There were continual clashes with the city's historic preservation committee and I ended up just hauling them out to the site to show them that heavy breathing was likely to bring the place down before they lightened up and gave in. Because there would have to be so much new work done, I was able to get rid of some of the worst additions that had been made and restored it to an earlier serene magnificence. We were able to install a hugely improved wiring harness all over that would permit more interactive exhibits and public presentations. Because the enormous, ugly brass scales of justice sculpture fell off the wall and almost crushed a committee member, we were allowed to leave it off and they agreed that a different representation of justice could be used instead. So we tracked down some sculptors. The best idea was a sculpture, to be placed on a Doric column, based on the female figure in the famous painting "Liberty Leading the People," except that she carried a sword instead of a rifle and scales rather than a flag. And she was fully covered in a long white chiton with a zoster worn low on the hips. Her hair and facial features were reminiscent of Wonder Woman, but none of her distinctive symbols were used. The committee, surprisingly, loved it, and we arranged for sigils of the founding members of the Justice League to ring the entryway about a third of the way down from the ceiling, making the link between the idea of justice and the Justice League pretty explicit.

By the time autumn arrived, the Hall was headed in the right direction, to everybody's relief. Diana
had accepted a position at the Met and it became known among their friends, family, coworkers, and superhero groups that she and Daniel entered into a relationship. Yay! Ann was pregnant again and Tony had a dopey grin on his face most of the time. Steve was getting ready to expand his limited pret a porter collection, and made arrangements to lease space in the Valkyrie Building for his first boutique. Unfortunately, the stationer was closing his business, but that did free up space and we were excited about adding Steve's business. And around Halloween, Bucky announced proudly that Nessa was pregnant too.

Emma had taken her time with my armor in order to get it right, but she finished it just before Thanksgiving, and it was frankly magnificent. It was fitted to me to avoid blisters from chafing edges and to make the most of the safety features that would help prevent broken bones. The armor was lightweight and didn't restrict my movement, and it felt good to wear it. It had beautiful knotwork as the design, with ravens decorating the biggest clasps. Steve had taken the idea of our long white valkyrie dresses and made me a long tunic in dark red based on the design, pairing this with bottoms similar to yoga pants that tucked into stylish boots that had the greaves attached, with protection over the top of my foot and on the back of the ankle to help prevent damage to my Achilles tendons. There was a slight shaping over the heel so that if I kicked back at somebody, it would hurt more. I had an equipment belt rather than a sword belt, and I'd gone back to Asgard to make a short sword for the spine sheath. I had gauntlets that would work similarly to my cestuses, and a helmet that shielded my face like Emma's had when she'd been Paladin. My clothes had plenty of places where I could hide throwing knives or something larger, and Tony had designed a backpack that had a rigid base that made it look like my wings popped out, like the ones worn by Hawkman and Hawkwoman, but this also had a real backpack that I could use for equipment for missions or first aid supplies if necessary. It came off easily when I needed it. Emma also had made improved solid protection for my wing bones and a two-part coating for the feathers. The first coat was a light protective layer that was permanent but took a lot of time to cure. The second coat went on more quickly. It made the edges of the feathers stiff enough to cut, resisted breakage, and she'd added a little red tint to it so that it would look similar to the images captured in my big debut. Because it bonded to the protective layer rather than the actual feathers, it could be removed with the right solvent and elbow grease. Bucky and I kept up our training. My relationship with Malia had taken a huge hit over my refusal to accept the chain of command during Bucky's kidnapping, so it was easier just to work with Bucky. My uncle wanted to be ready for anything, never be surprised like he had been, and frankly, only Steve and I could keep up with him. I worked out with Steve and Torunn too in order to keep accustomed to different fighting styles.

This year, we had a bigger party for the twins, and invited not only family and friends--including all godparents--but Thor, Sif, and Magni as well. Torunn was going to go home for a bit with her parents on vacation, so Modi was stepping in as my bodyguard. It was going to be weird to have somebody different. When Torunn got back, he was going to go to the War College and study our military history. He and Magni both wanted him to be his brother's prime advisor, and everybody thought that exposure to different ideas and thinking from different species would benefit him, and this included different theories of warfare as well as other aspects of governance. The idea was that Magni would know Asgard inside and out, and Modi would bring perspectives and knowledge from other cultures.

Things were heating up in the hunt for HYDRA. A couple of possible bases had been identified and the Avengers were planning to check out one site and the League the second. Planning was intense. Christmas and the new year came and went before the ops were ready. Daniel gave me recordings of the planning meetings so that I could assist if necessary. The Avengers moved in on the French base; the legitimacy of the invitation was legally questionable since it was known that HYDRA members occupied key political positions and the request was made by a minority coalition, but it was accepted as enough of an invitation and they raided the base. They turned up
enough evidence to warrant the arrest of key figures in politics and business and public investigations were opened. The second base in Romania was also raided, this time by the Justice League. This was a squishier case; the President had indicated that she wouldn't protest the raid should one take place, but there was no official sanction. The League went in anyway and struck a real gold mine of data. Unlike France's constraints on the Avengers, the League wasn't obligated to share the information with anyone but the Romanians, and their specialists set to work mining the data for all it was worth. The Avengers turned over complete data bases to the French, the US government, and the UN; the League just turned over the information to the Romanians and kept a copy for themselves. Because the League was based in the orbiting Watchtower, it was very difficult to compel them to do anything, and the UN, who wanted the information from their computers too, had to go to the Romanian government to get it and the Romanians decided who got what. They cleaned their own house and led the world in anti-HYDRA legislation, officially outlawing the group and providing stiff penalties for members. I listened in real time, but neither op required the presence of Valkyrie.

The records, once the League had decrypted them--they were a lot faster than the US government--showed that Niko Constantine had rejoined HYDRA and he hadn't fared well because he'd told us about HYDRA. He'd been reassigned to HYDRA's experimental division--as a test case. They were trying to do to him what they'd planned for Bucky, and I wouldn't wish that on my worst enemy. Well, probably not. I wouldn't be too upset if it was the Joker in their clutches, for example. There were also hints that HYDRA was allying itself with other underworld cartels. So yay, something else to watch.

The guesthouse was finally finished, and Damian and I furnished it fairly well, lots of luxurious touches combined with practicalities like the whole-house vacuum and the latest appliances. There was a small patio out back with a firepit and landscaping that would be lush and verdant in a few seasons--Dagny's work, naturally. The English cottage style fit in with our house, even if it wasn't identical--this had a brick exterior rather than stone--and there was a well-concealed entry to the batcave too. There were three bedrooms, two and a half baths, a great kitchen with a dining area marked by small walls and an expansive archway, and a couple of rooms that could be used however the occupants wanted. It was furnished with some new things, some things we gleaned from the attics at the main house--Daniel was most insistent, and was cozy but not stuffy. Alfred accepted our offer to move out two days after it was complete, and after that, we noticed that Fiona's vehicle was tucked into the covered parking on a regular basis. Alfred's suite was converted back to a guest suite.

Damian entered his first dressage competition, looking impossibly elegant on the back of his great black Frisian Toby. They were both learning and while he didn't place highly, the judges had good comments for him and his seat was much admired. He looked even more dashing on horseback than he usually did, and I added new aspects to my daydreams. Daniel was getting into steeplechasing, which made me nervous. Serious accidents could still happen these days, and could be debilitating despite all the marvels of modern medicine, but he was a big boy and capable of making his own decisions, I kept telling myself.

Modi was not as good a bodyguard as his sister was, but he was capable of really effective menacing looming, so there was something to be said for that. I met with Selina for drinks after work, as we did every so often. The divorce had been hard on her; she really loved Bruce, but I honestly didn't think she was capable of staying on the right side of the law even for him, and she wasn't one to use her talents in a group, strictly a lone predator in the night. For his part, her slips were a problem for him but not the dealbreaker. His devotion to Batman had been a little more trying for her, because he was frequently out when she was trying to battle temptation. What ultimately drove the stake into their marriage was the issue of children. Bruce had his natural child Damian plus all the Robins that he'd adopted, and he was pretty much done with fatherhood. He
adored being a grandfather, but he liked being able to hand a child back to its parents and get on with his plans. Selina wanted a baby of her own.

I was slightly late and slid into the booth with an apology. Selina waved it off with feline grace and sipped her drink. Instead of the classic martinis she usually favored, she was drinking something out of a highball glass. "Tough day/night?" I asked, giving the waiter my order and a smile along with an order of a house platter of nibbles.

"No, not really. Yes. I don't know. Maybe," she said, looking uncharacteristically addled. I reached over and took a sip from her glass. Tonic water and lime juice.

"Are you ok?" I asked, concerned.

"I'm pregnant." My eyes shot wide and I turned my lips in between my teeth in surprise. "I don't know how this happened."

"Really?" I had a light tone, trying to tease her into a less grim mood.

She rolled her eyes. "I know how I happened to be inseminated," she said crisply. "It's just that I didn't really think it would happen." She touched her fingertips to her eyes gently. "Bruce is really hit or miss about taking his birth control pill, and while we were married, I had discontinued my birth control method, but nothing happened." She sighed a little unsteadily. "I forgot about it during the divorce, actually. The last few times we've encountered each other in the dark... well, he doesn't really have it in him to turn me over to the police, so other things happen. He's much more primally himself in the suit, you know." I did know. Emma had stories about how the suit made him horny.

"What are you going to do?" I asked gently, placing my hand on hers and squeezing.

"Oh, I'm keeping her," she assured me. "Bruce...wasn't terribly excited." Her beautiful green eyes filled. Damn it, Bruce.

"I can assure you of my support and Damian's," I said. "He'll be thrilled to have a sibling. And there won't be much difference in age with our kids, so that's going to be fun." The waiter returned with my Brandy Alexander. I ordered another while he was there and got to work on my first drink. Delicious. This wasn't going to be a one-drink occasion. We talked about pregnancy and children and I asked if she was going to move. Her current apartment was fine for her and her three black cats, but it might be a little crowded with the baby.

She smiled. "I've leased the penthouse in the first apartment building in Valkyrieville," she said, and I grinned. We had two apartment buildings getting set to open. "I can move in in three months, so there's plenty of time to get settled before my darling arrives. It was a good choice, objectively speaking. The penthouse was level with another building next door and I felt sure that Catwoman would have a way out for her nocturnal activities. There were a couple of floors of retail, including a couple of good restaurants and another outpost of the Oasis grocery store would be in the other building. I thought about the other leases; there were a few spaces open and I thought I might try to get a specific tenant for one of the spaces: there was a new business that was an emergency kid supply type of thing, staffed twenty-four hours; they would bring parents formula or baby food if they ran out, arranged for diaper service or dropped off disposables, and had a small but choice selection of baby accessories for purchase or lease, like strollers, car seats, cribs, all that. And a nurse practitioner on staff for medical emergencies, a nanny registry, and emergency babysitters. I listened to her as she poured out her fears and trepidation, but she was excited to be a mom. I reassured her that Damian and I would be delighted to help and that she should call me for any reason. When we parted, she did seem reassured, hopefully by the assurance that she wasn't going
to be alone, and on my way home, I called the company that did the leasing in Valkyrieville to tell
them to do whatever it took to lure Tots-n-Tykes as a tenant.

I picked up my husband when I got home; we were going up to the mansion for dinner. Alan was
going through a French cuisine phase, not to be missed. I told my husband the news, and as
expected, he was delighted to know that he was going to have a sibling, but less than thrilled at his
father. I accepted club soda from Alfred, not needing another drink, and talked with Daniel and
Diana. Such a delightful couple, such lovely alliteration in their names. She was enjoying her new
job very much, and I felt all warm and fuzzy as I observed the tenderness that Daniel had for her.
The boy had discerning taste and knew how to treat his lady. Of course, it didn't hurt that he had
Damian's example to follow. Now there was a man of extraordinary style and devotion.

"Goddamn it, Dad, you need to man up and accept responsibility!" my beloved bellowed. I jolted
up straight and looked around. I'd missed Bruce when we came in earlier.

"I have made financial arrangements," Bruce snapped.

"That's not good enough!" The two men glared at each other. My husband's jaw was pugnacious.
"That's your daughter or son! You have to be a father!" Miles woke up and added to the kerfuffle. I
cradled Iris, glad I'd gotten the easygoing baby.

"What's this, Bruce?" Thomas barked, and he strode over to his son. Martha came over to me.

"What's going on, Alex?" she asked.

"Selina's pregnant," I said quietly. She looked furious and stomped over to her son.

"I think I'm just going to sit this one out," Daniel said quietly, and I grimaced in agreement. Martha
didn't often raise her voice, but she really lit into her son and ripped him a host of new orifices.
Diana, Daniel, and I sat quietly, huddled together as I rocked Iris. Alfred came in, frowning slightly
as he listened to the fuss. He clapped his hands authoritatively, and the yelling broke off for a
moment.

"Dinner is served. Ladies and gentlemen." His tone made it clear that he expected everybody to
live up to those appellations during the meal, and the three of us scuttled around him and staked out
one corner of the table for ourselves. Everyone else filed in shortly thereafter. Set jaws and blazing
blue eyes were a commonality. There was the bare minimum of conversation to meet Alfred's
standards, and we turned our attention to our dinner, a superlative coq au vin. Alan was doing
wonderful things in the kitchen these days. Diana, Daniel, and I ripped out of the dining room as
soon as we could, but there was coffee and dessert in the library before we could really escape.
Alan had made eclairs. Damn it. I couldn't pass those up. I cursed both my greed and my sweet
tooth. Alfred had a disapproving air as he passed out the coffee and Damian's jasmine tea. He held
out Bruce's coffee stiffly.

"Master Bruce," he said balefully. I cringed. Alfred in a pet was bad enough, but he was
disappointed, a tone he'd adopted only a few times in all my long friendship with him. Bruce
crinkled, and the fight and anger ran out of him. I sighed in relief; Bruce would step up and be a
dad, not just a wallet. Damian knew his father had surrendered, and he drifted over, also relieved. I
stroked a lock of his silky black hair back and he held my hand as we attacked the eclairs with a
better appetite. We made it an early night and Alfred agreed to watch the twins while we went
downstairs and had a swim to relieve the tension from the fight with Bruce. Then we said
goodnight to Alfred and put the kids down for the night. They were sleeping through it for the
most part, and I gave Damian a massage to really relax him, and I told him about Selina's plans. He
nodded and said he'd get in touch with her and we talked about what help we could offer. Selina
was doing quite well for herself financially, completely aside from her divorce settlement, so it wasn't a question of money but support. I fell asleep thinking of all the cute baby things I could knit, including a little hat with cat ears at the corners.

The next day I called my dad to commission a crib--something stylish and sleek--and ducked out on my lunch hour, returning with a bag full of soft and fluffy yarns. I planned for the cap and matching sweater, booties, and blanket, and I had a heavier yarn, but still supple and luxurious, for an afghan for Selina, something to hopefully reassure her that she wasn't alone during the days and nights of her pregnancy. Also called Steve and asked if I could talk him into doing a few baby clothes. I just said that Selina was expecting, with no details, and he said it wouldn't be a problem. He was doing some for Bucky and Tony's new babies too.

Then I'd done all I could for the short term, and I had to focus on work. I'd be going to Prague soon to start work on the Observatory Tower. This was real cultural heritage and the work had to be impeccable. I'd go over for the start of work to make sure that there were a minimum of unpleasant surprises awaiting us, and fly out periodically thereafter. And the first shipment of SmartBoard was going with me for the start of the work on the rest of the Clementinum.

And while I was there, I had a couple of contacts to meet who might have information on HYDRA. I'd be meeting them as myself, not Valkyrie, which was helpful, but it still wasn't going to be without risk. I was glad Modi was going along to watch my back. I'd rather have Torunn, we'd developed a really good working relationship for these sorts of covert activities, but she was still on vacation, and her brother was not unskilled. I just needed to train him.
Enemies

One thing I wasn't expecting in Prague was the work to be so much fun. I was able to get a lot of up-close and personal looks at the structure as the damaged walls were carefully brought down and I demonstrated how to use the substances that Tony had developed for me to stabilize the timbers and mortar in the areas that didn't need extensive reconstruction. Everyone I worked with was professional and focused on the job, as I'd expected, but they were as curious about my methods and materials as I was about their architectural heritage. I had a much better time than the last time I'd been there, and on the weekends Modi and I explored the city. I revisited some places that Damian and I had seen on the trip that had culminated in our engagement and resolved to bring him back for the grand opening of the tower once we were finished. A lot of it had changed and modernized, but the prized historical sites were largely the same. I did miss the kidlets, though, and bought some toys to kind of expunge my guilt. Christmas was coming, anyway. Modi was enjoying the city very much, and since we were seeing it in greater detail, he had one up on his sister.

One afternoon I was considering some water damage at the roofline, and a guy in a hard hat came up the stairs and handed me a roll of blueprints. I hadn't asked for them, and opened my mouth to question this. When I saw his red and black eyes, I shut my mouth with a snap. "You're not the only one interested in HYDRA, but you do have access to the most resources," the guy said rapidly and quietly. "Don't unroll those blueprints in public." His voice sounded kind of weird and I couldn't place the accent. At the sound of others in the stairwell, he winked at me before he turned and trotted casually down the stairs. The foreman came up and we talked about what I wanted to do to repair the damage. I pushed aside my curiosity and waited until we went back to the hotel after work. Modi had made friends with some of the people in the restoration crew, and I told him to go ahead and have some fun. There were plans for dinner and dancing. I was going to be staying in.

I had dinner at the hotel before going upstairs to finally take a look at those mysterious blueprints. It took a bit for me to understand what I was looking at when I unrolled them. I don't know what I expected, but it was not this. There were blueprints for historic preservation projects all over the world, and all the international Valkyrie projects were represented, plus the Hall of Justice in DC. There were red markings on all of them. I tapped my fingers and thought. Some of the markings were on loadbearing walls, and once I started looking, I saw that the spots were places where a building could be brought down or spectacularly damaged.

I muttered obscenities as I pulled up an internet search. Who was the odd-eyed stranger? He was a mutant, for sure--unless he was wearing contacts, maybe--but his physique suggested that he wasn't sitting around on his muscular butt. I went right to a bookmarked fan site that followed past, current, and returned superheroes and did an image search for red and black eyes. There were more than you'd think. The first one that popped up was a guy associated with the X-Men, but up-to-date speculation was that he was taking some time apart to do solo work. Le diable blanc, the white devil, Gambit. No wonder he'd tried to alter his accent. His lush Louisiana accent would be a dead giveaway. I leaned back in my chair and smirked. Tony wasn't going to like this. Gambit had stolen some of his tech once, but now-General Rhodes had helped him when he found out that it was to help save another mutant's life. Quicksilver also had worked with him once, but I didn't know details about it.

I was concerned that all of Valkyrie's international projects were present in these blueprints, and did a check to see who had been awarded the other projects. Seven different firms were included, but none of the others had more than three projects represented. All the firms had many more contracts that were not represented in the blueprints. Valkyrie was the smallest firm targeted. Was somebody out to torpedo my business, and if so, why? Was it related to the simple fact of my
mutations and/or my valkyrie status, my connections with superheroes, random hate, or was it just me? First things first. I researched the other companies, but there was nothing exceptional about any of them or their principals. They were all more established than Valkyrie, with proven track records, well known and respected.

I scanned the room again and went into the bathroom even though the rest of the room checked out, calling Emma on my secure communicator. We caught up briefly on family and our businesses. "Well, that's why I'm calling," I said, speaking to a towel so that my voice wouldn't bounce around the hard surfaces and risk being overheard in the next room. "There I was today, checking out water damage at the roofline, and this guy came up to me, passed me some blueprints, not unusual, but then said not to unroll them in public. So when I got back to my room, I found that they're plans for important historical conservation projects. All of Valkyrie's projects are included, but there are blueprints for seventeen other projects shown, like the Leaning Tower, the Great Wall, the Sidney Opera House, the Museum of Egyptian Antiquities, Notre Dame Basilica in Montreal, and the Blue Mosque. There are markings where all of the buildings could be damaged severely or destroyed with explosives. And the kicker is that I think the guy who gave me the plans was Gambit. What do you know of him?"

There was complete silence on the other end of the line. "Why do these things happen to you?" she asked. I think it was rhetorical.

"Gambit said it was because I have access to the most resources," I said, shrugging.

"How sure are you that it was Gambit?"

"Pretty sure," I said, considering. "I'd give it a solid 98%. I checked him out on that website, SupersStalker. The eyes are the same, general build and height the same, the accent was off, but that's a pretty distinctive identifier."

"Ok," she said after a moment. "I saw Cyclops the other day, he was shopping for a make-up gift for Jean. I have no idea why she keeps going back to him." I agreed. Cyclops was a jerk. "But he did say that the X-Men were somewhat smaller right now, Logan, Gambit, Storm, and Nightcrawler are off on their own. He wasn't really broken up about it." She sighed. "I'll tell Steve, see what the next steps are for the Avengers. When will you be back here?"

"End of the week. I won't be coming back to Prague until February."

"Ok. We'll start reaching out. Will you be talking to your other contacts?"

"Yeah, right after we're done. I wanted your take on Gambit first. Do you think he's trustworthy?"

Emma laughed. "Remy's a master thief. I would trust him to keep his hand in there, but personally, yes, I trust him. Plus he was delivering, not picking up." I smiled. "Let's set up a meeting when you get back." We arranged a meeting at the house the evening I returned and hung up. Then I called my husband. We cooed at each other for a bit--how I missed that man--and finally, reluctantly, I got down to business. Damian listened attentively.

"How reliable do you think Gambit is?"

"I called Emma to ask, she's worked with him off and on in both lifetimes and she thinks he's solid. I think the blueprints are legitimate; they're worn like you see at a construction site and they have the up to the minute restorations marked on them." And I was going to study them before turning them over. It's always good to learn new ways of doing things and to figure out why each company might have won the bids. It wasn't illegal or even unethical; once the projects were complete,
copies of the blueprints would be filed with the cities in which they were located, open to public inspection. Doing it now was convenient and would give me a better understanding of the projects which would help when we discussed dirty tricks.

"Well, Petal, when is the meeting? I'll talk to Dad and Daniel, see what the Justice League can do about this, get them tracking down villains."

"Gambit said this was related to HYDRA."

"Of course," he sighed. "They're proving as hard to stomp out as the mythical one. Well, we'll start working our angles and come to the meeting." His tone warmed. "I miss you, ya habib alby." I grinned at the endearment, which meant love of my heart. I didn't know much Arabic, even after one plus lifetimes with Damian, but I did know a lot of romantic phrases. Business out of the way, we moved on to more pleasurable topics.

"I can't wait to be home, darling. Prague is lovely, but I miss you more than I can say. How are Alfred and the kids?"

His bright blue eyes sparkled. "Fiona is moving in with Alfred."

I grinned and our fingers tapped on the screens of our devices in a virtual high five as we discussed things. He'd sent a huge bouquet, chocolates, and a great bottle of Champagne to the guest house for both of us. Then he updated me on our progeny. "I caught Iris riding Eira like a pony. Bless her; she's so good with the kids." My mouth dropped open.

"I'd have expected it more from Miles."

Damian nodded. "He was too busy trying to climb the cat tree to get to Signy to notice." I started to laugh. "Prague sounds pretty good right now."

"I'll be home soon," I reassured him.

"Thank god. I'm a little frazzled."

"You might want to see if the kids would like to go riding with you," I suggested. "Eira's big, but she's not really meant for transportation. You could hold them while you walk the horses."

"Diana and Daniel came down for dinner, Alan had the night off," he said. "She offered to give riding lessons."

"Wow. That's really generous of her, but I think maybe their dad should get them started, see if it's something they'd really take to or a passing fancy. I'd hate for her to get all revved up about teaching only to have her pupils flake out."

Damian laughed. "I think it was more an excuse to borrow my children," he said indulgently. Then his eyes cut to the side and he looked at me through his plushy black lashes. I got that familiar sinking feeling.

"Oh, Damian, what did you bring home this time?" I asked plaintively. He smiled brightly, a little anxious to put a lid on his latest misdeed.

"Some foxhounds," he said quickly. "There's a rogue hunt around here, animal control busted them for abusing their hounds. I had to help. Daniel's having a kennel built, he likes them too."

"You're taking up foxhunting?" I frowned. That didn't seem like a Damian thing at all. He didn't
approve of hunting unless it was for food.

"No, but the horses seem to like having the dogs around. They really like the barn cats too."

"Just remember we're about full up at the house," I entreated him, and his smile was relieved. I let him distract me with plans for the two of us when I got home, and reluctantly ended the call. Now I wanted to try to wrap things up a little earlier than planned. When Modi got back, he scanned the room again; there was a 'maybe' indicator on one of the windows, indicating the possibility that a parabolic microphone was being used, but it could also be the wind. We moved to the far end of the room and turned away from all the glass, just to be safe. He'd had a good time earlier, but was sharp and focused on the issues before us now. Before we left, we'd check the tower to see if there was any type of device in the places that had been indicated, and if there was, we'd have to deal with it. In the meantime, I removed a couple of staples on the underside of the sofa lining and put the blueprints inside for safekeeping, then hammered the staples back in so that hopefully nobody could tell that they'd been diddled with.

The next day I made the rounds of all the construction in process. Walls were going up again over one of the spots indicated on the blueprints, and I'd thought through some reasons to inspect several places carefully. It was while the foreman and I were inspecting an area treated with Tony's stabilizing agent that I was able to manipulate the foreman into finding the first device. I didn't have to fake my shock; there was a crap ton of explosive, far more than was necessary to bring down the building. We got everybody out immediately and called the cops. Their bomb squad shortly found all four devices and the city council alerted. They called for an emergency meeting that afternoon, which I attended, and the decision was made to up the security, using contractors from two companies since the first one didn't have enough available personnel to double the surveillance. The police, attached to the city's historic buildings, offered an officer for 24 hour protection, and the bomb squad was going to inspect other important buildings irregularly, especially those under construction. A news crew asked me afterward how the bomb came to be discovered, and I outlined a routine inspection before the walls went up again and my shock that the beautiful tower would be targeted like that for no apparent reason.

"It's so disturbing," I said, and I didn't have to fake that emotion. "If the bomb had gone off, who knows how many people would have been hurt? What damage to the building, if it could have damaged the Clementum? It seems so pointless." That night, the late night news anchors reported that a group or someone named Typhon had taken responsibility, but the reasons were unclear. The anchors posited a few possibilities, including distaste that a Returnee was directing the restoration, possibly because I was an American, or someone who wanted to make a political statement by blowing up the tower. They showed a clip from the emergency meeting and my interview afterward, along with one from the mayor and one from the chief of police. I checked the station's website along with other news sites in translation. The reaction from posters was anger and they were glad that the devices had been discovered, but no responses stood out. A text from my uncle checked that I was ok.

My research on Typhon was easy. Another monster from Greek mythology, he was called the father of monsters and was allegedly the most dangerous of all of them, sporting a hundred dragon heads. Huh. Not dissimilar to a hydra. I rubbed my eyes as I thought. Was this a new threat or a rebranding attempt by HYDRA?

I couldn't wait to get home.

Over the next couple of days, the bomb squad checked the structure thoroughly before any walls went up and they assured me that they would continue to do so. I gave them my contact information before Modi and I returned home, but everything continued to go smoothly and
nothing else was found. My husband picked us up at the airfield and dropped Modi off at the embassy so he could chat with his uncle. We continued home, where I got snuggles from my babies and coffee and huckleberry sour cream tarts from Alfred.

After a dinner that I was largely too full to eat, we went down to the batcave where Diana, Superman, Daniel, Tony, Bruce, Bucky, and Steve met me. I spread out the blueprints and acquainted them in detail with the scope of the problem. Diana furthered our understanding of the myth of Typhon.

"His parents were Gaia the earth and Tartarus the depths of hell," she said somberly. "He was said to have been the most ferocious creature ever to roam the earth; when he stood upright, his heads brushed the stars. The lower half of his body consisted of two coiled viper tails and said to have wings that, when spread, could blot out the sun. Fire flashed from his eyes, striking fear into the heart of any living creature, even the Olympians. Only Zeus dared face him in a battle so mighty that the earth quaked and split and tidal waves engulfed the land. Eventually Zeus conquered Typhon by casting a hundred lightning bolts at the dragon heads and cast him into Tartarus, where he was sealed away for all time. Hesiod described him thus in The Theogony: "The hands and arms of him are mighty, and have work in them, and the feet of the powerful god were tireless, and up from his shoulders there grew a hundred snake heads, those of a dreaded drakon, and the heads licked with dark tongues, and from the eyes on the inhuman heads fire glittered from under the eyelids."

"Daunting," I said, frowning, into the silence that followed. "I resent the use of wings."

That made everybody smile. "The hydra was a water snake with nine heads," Bucky said. "This sounds like HYDRA ramped up on steroids. Do we have any intel on Typhon yet?" Not yet, people were still out collecting information and running down leads.

Steve snorted, looking at a web page he'd pulled up. "The hydra's parents were said to be Typhon and Echidna," he said sourly. "I think that we need to be looking at a group made up of current or former HYDRA members, probably ones who don't think HYDRA is doing enough. Either that, or it's somebody completely different, looking to springboard off HYDRA's reputation. But my gut is telling me that it's related somehow to HYDRA."

"Well, if it's your gut telling you, old man..." Tony quipped, and rolled his eyes. Steve cast his heavenward.

"Teh Justice League doesn't have the intelligence-gathering capabilities that the Avengers do," Daniel said, jumping in. "Let's let the Avengers take the lead there, and then perhaps the League can take charge in tracking down Typhon once more information is learned about him, her, or them." There was a little debate, but that was satisfactory to all. I'd already contacted my teams at the other sites where Valkyrie had contracts and they were searching for devices. None had come up yet, but they'd retain vigilance. The League decided to contact the authorities in charge of the other structures represented in the blueprints as well as a few others to obscure our knowledge. Emma would continue trying to locate Gambit to get information on the source of the blueprints. That was about all we could do for now.

I just hoped it would be enough.
I woke up a little early the next morning, feeling oppressed. It's not just the appearance of a new supervillain organization, but also that my trip was cutting things close for Christmas. "Penny for your thoughts, Petal," Damian said sleepily, and he finished his stretch with an arm around my middle.

"They don't make pennies anymore," I yawned.

"Inflation. I'll give you a quarter." He nuzzled my hair.

"I think I just hit a wall," I admitted after a moment. "The bad guys keep popping up no matter how many are put down or locked away. It's like nothing anybody does makes a real difference. And it's almost Christmas and I've done minimal shopping. And people want to blow up these beautiful old buildings."

"And you're jet-lagged," he murmured, turning me slightly so he could snuggle in, spooning me. "When was the last time you flew?"

"Before I left," I said after a moment of trying to remember. It had been really late at night, because Alfred hadn't yet brought Fiona into the family secrets and I'd wanted to not freak her out if she saw me.

"Take a half day," he invited me. "Fly around, loosen up. That'll help. When you get tense, your wings give you headaches."

"They do?" I was surprised.

"Uh-huh. It's better for you if you can take them out, at least, when you're nervous or focuses, it relieves the tension." He kissed the nape of my neck, and that turned into lovemaking. I took the opportunity to shower with him after- he washed the wings for me--and promised a massage when he got home. I kissed him goodbye when he left, reveling in the familiar spicy scent of his aftershave, and went back to sleep. I got to sleep til almost noon, when my kids decided to pile on. So I got up and got dressed and we had lunch. Alfred graciously agreed to watch the kids a little longer and I flew hard for a half hour, then took the kids into work. We had a partners meeting where I told them what was going on with the explosives and we exchanged other news. After the meeting, I called my associates and told them to be very careful; they were already having the buildings swept every day. Mei had the idea to hire explosives experts, one for each of our active sites, to do the searching in case the anonymous bomber/s got more sophisticated and used smaller devices. It sounded like a good idea to me, and before I left work, I drafted an ad and asked Martha to place it somewhere where military veterans would be most likely to see it. After that, I met Bucky at the Tower for a good workout. Tony finished his work on the weights and took charge of his godkids while my uncle and I tried to pound each other into the ground. Then Steve came down and insisted on equal time, so I went to the weapons range with my bow and shot in silence for a half an hour. My nerves calmed down and I felt better, more optimistic. When I went to hunt up the twins to go home, Bucky and Tony were playing hide and seek with Miles, and Steve had braided carnations from the arrangement in the lobby into a little crown for Iris. They were sitting on the floor and he was teaching her an incapacitating hold. With these enticements, the kids were reluctant to go home, but I insisted. We stopped by the embassy where Loki amused them with projections of himself and he, Modi, and I talked about what had happened. There wasn't anything to be done from Asgard's end, but he had a surprise for me.
Torunn was back and happy to be so. "Asgard's stuffy," she said, and I was careful to thank Modi and tell him how much I appreciated his help. He wasn't so glad to see his sister, since it meant that he'd have to go back to Asgard himself.

"It is stuffy," he agreed dourly, and Loki smiled.

"If you finish your application, we can see about getting you started in the mediation and negotiation classes," he said, and Modi brightened. I issued an invitation for them to come out for Christmas if they could, and then Torunn came home with us. The twins were thrilled to see her again. Modi would pack tonight and move back to the embassy tomorrow.

We went home again, Torunn being glad to see the twins again and playing with them on the drive. Then it was the comfortable, comforting routine of dinner, coffee in the library, and putting down the kids. We heard about Torunn's vacation, which she spent with her parents and included visits to other planets of the Nine Realms. She'd thought to bring me a really pretty flower, called star bright, but reconsidered given the problem of invasive species we already had on Earth. She brought me back a dagger from the dwarves instead, elegantly curved and somehow very obvious that it wasn't an Earth weapon. Specifically, not one of mine. I smiled, playing with it. It had perfect balance, and I thought that Valkyrie might just have a signature weapon. She gave Damian a staff six feet long that collapsed into a disk a little over an inch thick for the times when Nightfall might have to come out of retirement, and Alfred a medallion on a beautiful, textured ribbon that came from some highly-regimented society in which the keepers of hospitality were revered more than any individual family member; the medallion was their symbol. There had been soft toys for the twins, which they'd been given before bed.

Damian had some work to finish up then, so I took a nighttime flight. The air was cold but had moisture from an incoming storm system, making it a little harder to fly in. I quickly set down on the roofline of the mansion as I came up on a group outside that included a couple of men I didn't know. I draped my wings around me as I leaned against a chimney, listening to the goodbyes of Daniel and Diana, Bruce, Superman, Flash, and Hawkman. After the car doors closed and the car sped off down the driveway, the group turned for the door. "You can come down now, Grandma," Daniel said, amused. My grin answered his and I hopped off the roof.

"How did you know I was up there?" I asked curiously. My wings were very quiet when I flew.

Daniel hugged me. "We don't have gargoyles," he explained, and everybody laughed with me except for Hawkman.

Diana and I clasped forearms and did cheek kisses, and Bruce patted my shoulder. I draped my wings around me again (Ok, it was ostentatious, but I don't mind poking at Hawkpeople) as Flash and Superman greeted me. Hawkman just grunted. I grunted back.

Flash, not missing it, asked me about it.

"I thought a wordless vocalized exhalation of breath was the greeting of their kind and wanted to reciprocate," I explained, fighting back my grin, and Flash whooped. Hawkman scowled and grunted again, his scowl getting darker as he realize what he'd done.

"What's up?" I asked.

Diana rolled her eyes. "An image consultant," she said. "As if virtue and love are not the best possible images."

Flash's grin quirked. "They want her and anybody else with longer hair to face into any breeze so
that their hair blows fetchingly and toss her hair back a lot. Anybody who comes in for one of those knee-crunching landings is to first look up before standing and is to keep feet shoulder-width or a little less, depending on the width of the shoulders, with arms bent at the elbows and a slightly bent-forward posture if the fight is still going on, and then either fists on hips or arms folded, chest out. Again, if you have a cape, preferably facing into any breeze. And they've got to sell the landing as dramatically as they can. The consultants don't seem to get the reason for the three point landing isn't to look cool but to keep these guys from falling over on their faces."

"Flash!" Bruce growled. I laughed.

"But why?" I asked.

"The Avengers are doing it," Superman said. "Stark recommended them. It's a way to subtly differentiate ourselves from the bad guys. The public is accustomed to a certain demeanor from its heroes, having been conditioned by superhero movies." He sighed. "The consultants would probably like us to employ someone to carry a fan into combat with us so that capes and hair billow appropriately."

"I am the night," Bruce barked. I covered my snort with my hand, but I didn't fool my father-in-law.

"Bats thinks that dressing in black and being broody and emo is enough of an identity," Flash stage whispered. "He doesn't want to be directed."

Even Hawkman cracked a smile at that.

"We're considering what they had to say," Superman said wearily. "But the Avengers have a higher body count than we do, they need it more." My eyebrows lifted as I wondered what they were told. Steve was the Sentinel of Liberty, the original, how much more burnishing did he need? Serena was being branded as Justice; she'd asked me to make her a cool sword and different armor, and I was waiting on an alloy from Emma. Bucky... given how he was still occasionally slandered could use some help in that direction, but I was worried about Tony. He was already larger than life, and I remembered when he was over the top with his Iron Man persona when I was in high school. I needed to talk to him about that.

I was more glad than ever that Valkyrie was a lone wolf and not much was known about her. Given Emma's reaction to the Avengers' publicity team trying to mold her image when she was Paladin, I didn't want to have to deal with that myself. Overall, though, I felt sorry for the consultants if they had to try to make the Hawkpeople media friendly.

I said good night then, and Superman had me step onto his clasped hands to hurtle me into the air so I could use the wings. I flew straight home and found Damian stretching, having just finished with his work. He and Alfred, just arriving with a new pot of rare white tea for Damian, laughed when I told them what the Justice League was up to.

"Thankfully I'll never have to find out what they'd advise for Nightfall," he said. "I don't know how they could have improved on my manly physique." Even Alfred smiled. Our laughter was interrupted by the patter of little feet as Iris arrived, rubbing her eyes, attracted by the noise. Damian snared her and set her on his lap, offering her a sip of tea. Confidently, she took a big mouthful, then I started to laugh again as her little face wrinkled in distaste. She opened her mouth and the tea dribbled down her front.

"Yuck, Daddy," she said clearly, and Damian looked crushed as I wiped my eyes and tried to tone down my laughter. Damian blotted her jammies with his handkerchief until Alfred produced a tea
towel which absorbed the tea much better.

"You think she'll like coffee any better?" my beloved asked with a hint of irritation in his voice.

"I'm not giving either of them caffeine until they're in their thirties," I said. I knew my limits; also, coffee is an acquired taste. Iris clung to her dad and we chatted a little about Christmas, twelve days away now. "The house is gorgeous, Alfred," I said. "I'm looking forward to seeing Fiona again. I haven't seen her lately." Alfred cleared his throat.

"Fiona will be spending the holidays with her family," he said. I frowned.

"We're being awfully selfish," I said, and Damian nodded.

"Why don't you go with her, Alfred?" he asked. "You'll want to get to know them."

"Fiona has decided to go her own way," Alfred said, and it took me a second to realize that she'd chucked him. I looked at him, aghast. "I believe that she did not fully understand the scope of responsibilities that my profession entails."

"Oh, Alfred," I said, shocked. "We can arrange things--"

"It will not be necessary at this time, Miss Alex," he said gently. "I have served six generations of the Waynes, and If Miss Martha and/or Masters Xander and Daniel will bestir themselves, I will serve seven and possibly eight. It is not a trust to be altered lightly, and I am needed here."

Iris squirmed away from her father and clamped onto Alfred's leg.

"Alfred," she said adoringly, looking up at him. His face softened.

"Miss Iris," he said, and gently pried her off, giving her a hug and a chuck under the chin. She cooed at him, then wiggled to be let down, and she toddled off, apparently to go back to bed.

I bit my lip to keep my thoughts to myself. Alfred didn't need to hear them. He had to be hurting, and he was the most dignified man I knew. I brooded as we said goodnight and caught up to Iris, crawling up the stairs determinedly. I picked her up--she was getting to be such a big girl--and we put her back to bed. Miles, for once, was right where he was supposed to be and sleeping like an angel. I savored the moment.

"I don't know what we can do," Damian said sadly as we got ready for bed, "except leave him in peace."

"I'd like to tell him we can manage if he wants to have a life, but I think he needs to be needed," I said after spitting out the toothpaste. "I think he takes pride in keeping the ship sailing smoothly so that we can go out and do our various things. I don't want to hurt his feelings by suggesting that he's dispensable. But I could make my own coffee before bedtime."

"Let's let it ride until after the holidays," Damian said pensively. "He's part of the family and needs to know it. Afterward, though, in January, I'll see if I can talk to him. I don't want him to end up resenting us down the road."

The next day was perfect for chatting with Tony, it turned out; Ann was busy off site and Damian promptly holed up in his office to work his magic. Tony roared with laughter at the account I gave of the Justice League's preliminary meeting with the image consultants but sobered when I told him upfront that I was worried about the extra load of expectations that Iron Man might be saddled with and why, exactly. He heard me out, then smiled slightly and patted my hand.
"Historically, I'm not the most stable guy out there," he admitted. "But I've got a lot to keep me balanced now. And going home to a family of my own is the best thing in the world. I don't need Iron Man as desperately as I did the first time. I don't think it's going to be a problem. But if it is, I know you've got my back, Tiger."

"Absolutely, Sparky," I said, and we smiled at each other.

Feeling better, I kissed my husband goodbye and stopped by Steve's to pick up a dress for Christmas: pine green velvet with a full skirt so I could sit on the floor with the kids and silver embroidery to make it special. He'd fussied pieced the bodice so that the nap of the velvet also created a subtle pattern. It was exquisite as usual, and we talked about the image consultants as I tried on the dress. He nodded when I asked him to give me a head's up if Tony started to derail and we talked about Bucky.

"They're giving him a different costume," Steve said absently as he checked the hem. "White, with some grays." He shuffled paper on his desk and showed me a design.

"Pure as the driven snow, the Winter Soldier?" I asked, and Steve smiled.

"Beats his menacing black," he said, and I had to agree. "No more eyeblack, either."

"Aw, too bad," I said in mock sorrow. "He could be marketed as a panda." Steve broke out laughing and checked off the fit of the dress. Upstairs at Emma's, she showed me the design for Serena's costume—a golden chiton and golden armor, similar to a legionary. We discussed embellishments, deciding on a neoclassic folate design, and she said she'd send over the alloy so I could get to work. The gold would suit her caramel complexion beautifully and make her more approachable.

"If you wanted to make Valkyrie another iteration of armor, I'd recommend white metal. You don't have to worry about the image," she said quietly. "You can do menacing." She gave me an envelope. "See what you think about this, let Steve know about the costume part, and I'll send over some metal for you with Serena's, if you want."

I didn't, really, but it wouldn't hurt to have top-level protection if we had a new Big Bad to deal with.

When I got to work, there was bad news. One of the identified projects that was being done by one of the other firms had largely been flattened by an explosion. The devices had been set off in the tunnels and the structure was badly damaged. The great dome of the Hagia Sophia had collapsed and the tombs buried. My heart fell. Hagia Sophia was beautiful, a jewel of the Byzantine and Ottoman empires. A crude graffiti of Typhon had been slopped onto the largest broken part of the Marble Gates. The paint had still been wet when it was found. Serena and I looked at each other, but there were no words. We'd warned the firm, as strongly as we could, but they'd brushed us off.

Serena looked over the design for her new costume and armor, approved the armor, but had some thoughts to share with Steve about the costume. When I got to my office, Callahan and Mei had checked in. There was a note from Martha saying that the ad for explosives experts had been placed. She'd arranged with the Army to borrow a team to check out the Hall of Justice each day. I pinched the bridge of my nose. Ugh. I hated that this was apparently our new normal.

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And there was more bad news; our Valkyrie butler was quitting after our holiday party to move to San Francisco with his girlfriend. I'd almost forgotten about the party.

I couldn't even lose myself in examining the blueprints for another job I wanted to bid on and was
grateful for the end of the day. Damian, Torunn, and the kids came up to get me. We went out to do some holiday shopping (preceded by an ice cream downstairs as a special treat) before going home for dinner. It was fun to be with my family, looking in store window and getting some gifts. It fluffed up my holiday spirit some. We stopped by a street vendor for some gingerbread and lebkuchen, buying enough for Alfred too since he wasn't with us, and went home. The kid's sugar buzz had worn off and they nodded off just long enough to be bright eyed and bushy tailed when we pulled up to the door. They regaled Alfred with the whole story, and after the dessert which included the cookies we brought, abruptly crashed from all the excitement. I monitored Alfred as stealthily as I was able, and he seemed quiet but not depressed. Torunn took herself off to the main house to use the gym and we gratefully tucked the twins into bed. Alfred came into the library to refresh our libations.

"I wondered if I might move back here," he said diffidently as he popped a cozy onto Damian's teapot.

"You're always welcome, Alfred," I said.

"You might want to keep in mind that the twins know where you live here," Damian warned, and was rewarded with a smile.

"It is always nice to be with family," he said, and that was that. Damian gave him a head start, then gulped the remainder of his tea and went out to help. I brought in a carafe of water and set a plate of cookies on the nightstand, and went upstairs. The last I saw of the cats was the boys hustling down the hall, Signy ambling along behind.
I really wanted to up my holiday cheer quotient, which had taken a hit or two. The next morning, I stopped by the coffee shop early and was able to have a peppermint mocha with my mom. It's true, at least for me (Damian would disagree), that being able to talk things out with my mom makes things better. She was sad to hear about Alfred--I didn't think I knew anybody who didn't adore him, he's probably the most popular family member--but agreed with me that I should control my urge to try to make it better. I remembered how everybody had pretty much left me alone when Damian and I were working through Xander's disaster and I had appreciated it. We traded baby stories and she had a few suggestions for getting the spirit of the season--namely by accepting that I was not responsible for the fate of the world.

"Honey, you've always had a strong sense of responsibility," she said, patting my hand. "But you can't save everybody and everything. Loss happens, and you tried to warn that other company about the threat. You can't make anybody pay attention. You've got to let the stuff that isn't your fault or in your control go. You have a lot to celebrate; it's been a good year for your business, the people around you, and you. You do your best, so relax, enjoy the parties and the season. Mum and Dad will be here in a couple of days, that'll be fun too." I left feeling more cheerful, and swung by Selina's after work. Her new apartment was rather sparsely furnished aside from the nursery, which was warm and nurturing and contained every comfort for a new baby, even though the arrival was still a few months off. I handed her my present, knitted things plus the afghan for her, and wondered guiltily if people were just being nice when they received homemade things. Maybe they'd prefer perfect purchased things? I think I caught the dropped stitch, though.

Selina exclaimed over the things, though. She still looked sleek and elegant even though she was around seven months. She was easily the classiest criminal in Gotham and the most glamorous pregnant woman I'd ever met. She promptly flicked the afghan over her long legs and patted her stomach. "The nurse identified the sex of the kitten by accident," she grumbled. She'd wanted to be surprised. I leaned forward. "I'm having a girl," she said, and I grinned.

"Congratulations, Selina!" I exclaimed, and her irritation slid off her face.

"Damian didn't turn out too badly--your influence, darling--but frankly, I'm hoping for a better result with my kit. In some respects, I regret telling Bruce that she's his. He's great at the whole caped crusader thing and business, but he's not much of a family man." I felt kind of bad for Bruce, but she had a point. A couple, actually.

"Looking toward another generation of elegant second-story women?" I asked, smiling. She surprised me by shaking her head.

"No, I want better for her than that. It's one thing to choose your own path, and another to slink along the midnight rooftops out of desperation." The hand on her stomach stilled. "And I don't want to embarrass her by getting arrested. I need to find another career, pet." Her smile was small.

"Jewelry appraiser? Insurance investigator?" I suggested. "You have more strengths than you think, though. You might want to try something completely different." I sat back. "Stark is getting to the point where they need PR. You'd be fantastic at it. But any way I can help, just let me know. I know Damian will help." Her smile was bright. "I'm sure Emma has connections too."

"He is a gem, that boy. Like an emerald, where the flaws are called the garden and are an important part of the gemstone." Her smile turned affectionate. "Such a lovely, stable man from such a bloodthirsty, arrogant little prick." I laughed.
"Are you coming for Christmas?" I asked, and her smile twisted a bit.

"Yes, Bruce insisted, and the kitten can only benefit from knowing her father. Even if he serves as a bad example, he can still serve."

"He did step up with Damian," I felt compelled to say. "And you'll be a far better mother than Talia."

"I could hardly be worse," she said tartly, and we moved on to other topics. When I left, I noted that the Tots-n-Tykes store was having its grand opening. Excellent. I was glad it would be ready for Selina.

I stopped by St Patrick's before going home, and let the majesty of the cathedral work its magic on my spirit, the faint scent of the incense tickling my nose, and I reflected on the Christmas story--and how it had co-opted pagan winter celebrations--as I enjoyed the serenity and the decorated sanctuary. The choir was practicing; the singers were distracted and the director getting aggravated. I smiled and headed home.

The kids were playing with Eira when I got home, Damian and Alfred chatting. Alfred handed me a glass of mulled wine and I curled up on the sofa by Damian and joined the conversation. Modi had brought by a Yule log sent down by his dad and Alfred was planning how he'd decorate it for me.

"I really appreciate how you've worked some of the Asgardian traditions into our holiday," I said to him.

"The traditions have meaning for you, the experiences and the memories. You deserve to have the things that make you happy, Miss Alex. I enjoy broadening my perspective, and it is quite pleasant to add these elements of quiet celebration into what has become a stressful season, with all the social expectations that are so common. They remind me to enjoy the warmth of family during the darkest part of the year, a notice that dark and light come in their own times, but that everything is cyclical." He gazed around the library, at the fire burning merrily, the kids being indulged by Eira, Damian and me, and smiled. "Dinner will be served in twenty minutes, Miss Alex."

I cuddled with Damian and we exchanged stories about our days. He brightened to learn that he was having a little sister and said he'd stop by to see Selina. "I try to visit every week, but I don't want to bug her," he said, running his fingers through my hair. "I'm glad she's looking ahead, though. She got an excellent settlement in the divorce, Dad wasn't a jerk about it; she doesn't have to work if she doesn't want to, but that would be boring. She needs something that will provide a continual challenge. The problem with most jobs is that there's a fair amount of routine and that's what she's not good at." He sighed. "And of course the divorce has been hard on her. I can't imagine being a single parent, even if Dad's come to his senses and is going to be a dad to his new daughter. It's hair-raising enough even with you, most adored Petal. Does he know she's having a girl, not a boy?" he asked, and I shook my head.

"She didn't say, she was pretty peeved it didn't get to be a surprise at the end," I said, and he nodded.

"I won't mention it then," he said, and we had to intervene as the twins were getting a little rambunctious. Then it was time for dinner.

The next night we had the holiday party for Stark Scientific and Technical, as the umbrella company was now branded since the initial environmental division had been joined by Tony's robotics (he was in heaven at the advances that had taken place while we were dead), Avengers
tech, construction materials, and a new medical unit. And let's not forget the cars. They were more of a vanity project, but ours was spectacular. I'd been kept up to date on how the company was growing, but it was still a surprise to see how much we'd grown in sheer employee numbers. But we had a surprise for everybody too; we'd structured the company with shares—it was still a private company like Stark had been before the acquisition and Wayne still was, but the four of us owners had created a pool of ten percent of our ownership stake and we were awarding small numbers of shares to all the employees. Everybody got five to begin with, then more with each promotion. It wasn't a lot, but the company was already considered valuable by Wall Street standards and the sky was the limit. Ownership stakes would motivate employees, which in turn would help their compensation.

By the end of the week, I'd hired a small security and explosives control team for each of my projects and that weekend was the Valkyrie holiday party. Friday afternoon, we'd had a partners' work session where we reviewed our work on Valkyrieville, discussed the work still to be done, and started to discuss our next joint project. We finished that with a perusal of butler candidates, Champagne, and a tray of delectable desserts from a new French bakery in Valkyrieville. For the holiday party, everyone invited their friends and family. Callahan was stuck on site, but Mei was back and it was nice to meet her family along with those of our other employees. Martha brought her new beau, to the surprise of her family—she hadn't mentioned that she was seeing anybody special. I relaxed into the good cheer of the occasion, our offices being shown off and a nice buffet up in the conference room. Our brag wall showing our work as photographed in important publications was growing significantly. My grandparents had arrived and this was the first time they'd seen the Valkyrie Building themselves; Martha and I enjoyed showing them around, and the family went for coffee at Mom's shop downstairs afterward.

Christmas was wonderful as usual; Alfred and Alan did a fantastic job with the meals and the decor, of course. The present I was most proud of giving was a little marble statue of a kneeling valkyrie for Daniel, because there were no gargoyles at the mansion. I'd commissioned it from one of our master stonemasons at work, and he was able to deliver it right before the holiday. Daniel loved it. After Christmas, Alan and Alfred went on vacation; they were going exploring in India. I was glad that Alan had bullied him into taking the trip and Damian and I hoped that he'd be better for the change of scenery and the opportunity to forget Fiona for awhile. We insisted that they take the suborbital shuttle so they'd have fast, safe, reliable transportation and could go where they wanted. Ostensibly, the butlers worked for us, but they were family, and none of us would be as successful if we couldn't rely on their world-class skills. They protested a bit, but I was firm.

It had to be said that standards went to hell while he was gone. We went out to eat or brought in take out a lot, ate in the library. We had no illusion that Alfred wouldn't find out what we'd done, especially since we couldn't convince the kids to keep quiet. When he got home three weeks later, he looked slightly tanned and reinvigorated. They'd gone to several historical sites throughout the country, including the Red Fort, the Amber Fort, the Golden Temple at Amritsar, the Ajanta caves, Hampi, and Fatehpur Sikri. Standards were reimposed, and I think that Alfred kind of expected our deviation. There were no repercussions, however, beyond perhaps extra starch in the table linens and a bit of a pointed tone when he called us in for meals. I was glad that he'd had a good time and relaxed, and submitted to the established order meekly.

He and Alan interviewed the candidates for the new Valkyrie butler and recommended three for our consideration. After interviews with the partners and staff who worked in the offices, we hired a woman named Delara Attar, who had been the chief concierge in the best hotel in Babylon, the capital of New Persia. Although she hadn't butled before, she had trained at an institute in the Netherlands and belonged to the International Guild of Butlers. Her references were impeccable and stressed her skills and professionalism. She envisioned for herself a role that blended concierge services for the professionals in our businesses as well as butlering responsibilities. She seemed
reserved, not unfriendly, but gracious and knowledgeable, with determination the equal of anybody who worked here. And her background was clean. She arrived for her first day of work in the butler's uniform of white wing collar blouse, lustrous black silk tie, gray vest, black morning coat, white gloves, cufflinks, but in place of the trousers that Alfred and Alan wore, she wore a gray pinstriped knee length skirt with attractive but functional black pumps with a high shine. I didn't ask, but I felt fairly certain that she carried a pocket watch too.

Aslyn roped me into our new butler's orientation, and pretty soon I was dazed by the scope of her ambition for her job. We gave her an office on the floor below so that she could have one of the biggest end units and I took copious notes. Aslyn was responsible for the office equipment for our new hires, so I made my escape when it came time for her to choose her furnishings, and contacted the bank to get her a corporate credit card for the purchases she wanted to make. She was very particular about the services she wanted to provide us with, and I was a little cowed by her, actually. Appearances matter, especially for a firm that was busy ascending to the top, and I was certain that Delara would make sure that in our offices, at least, put forth the image we were looking for. She had very high standards, and I felt that she was going to whip us into shape to meet them. Huh. It was good that business was slower in January, as we all had a little more time to spend one on one with her, getting to know her and vice versa. One thing she requested from all of us was that we bring a change of clothes to keep at the office in case of an accident, and she would be responsible for cleaning and maintaining these clothes and matching footwear. This is also how the firm came to be in possession of a Larastar pressing system. Alfred had given her his contact information in case she had questions or concerns, and it wasn't long before he approached Damian and me and requested training at the institute, admitting that he'd had on the job training and that he felt that he could up his game with a formal course of study. We reassured him that we couldn't imagine him doing any better, but I think he was feeling competitive with Delara and we paid for his enrollment in the next class. Whatever Alfred wants, he gets, as far as I'm concerned.

Before he left in the first week of February, he enjoined us, sternly, not to eat in the library.

Just before I had to go back to Prague, Selena gave birth to her daughter, whom she named Tabitha Antonia Kyle-Wayne. Bruce was there for the birth, made not a peep about the name, and took about twenty pictures of the baby in not quite five minutes. She had black hair like both her parents, and the question was more whether she'd have Bruce's sparkling blue eyes or Selena's darker sapphire. My sister-in-law was red and looked like Winston Churchill, as they all do, but by definition all babies are beautiful and Selina grinned at me. Damian was an old hand with babies and jollied her into cooing, but admitted to me later that he was just as glad our children were out of diapers and sleeping through the night.

Prague was still pretty, with a fresh show coat when I arrived, but I had to admit I was glad the project was almost done. I met with the foreman of the project, who was enjoying the restoration work, both because it was his cultural heritage but also because he got to use the products that Tony produced for us. My security team ran through the tower twice a day, and aside from somebody who was trying to steal a sample of Tony's stabilizing agent for the mortar, had nothing to report. They like the work, though, and we discussed working together on the next project I won. My work was almost complete, and I'd come back the next month for the grand reopening. The rest of the Clementinum would take a couple of years, and I was glad, given the threat of Typhon, that I hadn't gotten that contract.

On my way home, I stopped in the Netherlands and was invited to the institute for lunch and was able to see Alfred. "It doesn't seem like home without you," I said, and he smiled. He was very enthusiastic about all that he was learning about estate management and other aspects of butlering--he had the entertainment aspects and the running of the household, of course, but he was, as always, happy to learn more. More than that, I sensed that he was glad to be receiving formal
training to hone his professional abilities. One of the school's administrators graciously thanked me for coming and seemed pleased to hear how impressed I was with their curriculum. Some of Alfred's fellow students got to try out their abilities with my visit, and seemed more impressed by me than they should be. I was sure to tell the administrator that Delara was making a big impact at work and that we considered ourselves lucky to have her. Before I left, I showed Alfred pictures of the kids and Selena and Bruce's Tabby and said we were looking forward to his return.

We were, too. Advances in housecleaning made it a lot easier than it had been the first time around, but Alfred had a way of putting a sparkle on the place that Damian and I couldn't quite manage. But we did try, and managed most of our meals in the kitchen.

And as we muddled along, we got the welcome news that Alan and Aslyn were engaged. Daniel and I squabbled a bit, but ultimately I won the rights to host the engagement party. Some emails back and forth with Alfred had us setting the date shortly after his graduation. He sent Damian and me worksheets for planning the party and directed us to resources. He would take things in hand after his graduation.

Damian and the twins flew to Prague with me for the ceremony marking the completion of the tower restoration. It was an enormous relief. On the way back, we were able to attend Alfred's graduation ceremony, a formal event. The twins were very well behaved and thrilled to see Alfred again. He said he was grateful for the education, but looking forward to getting back to work.

I was glad to be back home again, resuming my normal schedule--my wings were molting again and the itching was distracting. I couldn't say that Alfred's service improved because I always thought he was amazing, but he had new ideas and ways of doing things that adapted well to our household. He seemed invigorated by the experience, although his enthusiasm got checked when he found some popcorn between the sofa cushions that Damian and I had missed. We gave him a hefty raise to recognize and reward the value of his diploma. The engagement party was lovely and Aslyn looked happier than I'd ever seen her, in either life. I felt better, because at least we knew Alan wasn't undercover HYDRA. He managed to escape a good chunk of wedding planning, having successfully agitated for training at the Institute too. Alfred expanded his sphere to provide basic services for Daniel and Mark during that time. At work, I pitched bids for the restoration of a few private homes in Montreal, Spain, and Portugal, and Valkyrie joined the worldwide effort to rebuild Hagia Sophia with pledges of money and materiel. I was a little surprised when a top official from the Turkish cultural ministry called to thank us for our support. He also asked if we'd consider bidding for some part of the project since we had gotten a reputation for being security-minded. It was the first time we'd been specifically asked to bid on a project of this magnitude. We'd always just submitted proposals when projects were announced. It was a Big Deal for the firm.

And we hosted a gathering of Avengers and Justice League heavy hitters. Their work had uncovered information about Typhon.
After dinner, the family went down to the batcave; Alfred was taking care of the hospitality for us in Alan's absence. Diana hustled over to scoop up Iris, and Miles made a beeline to Flash, who didn't quite look like he knew what to do with a kid. Aquaman snorted and hefted him, making him squeal. I observed this with a smile before my uncles came up. Bucky looked a little worn. Inexplicably, his baby-whispering skills did not work on his own offspring. Steve had the latest photos of Christopher to share, then updated me. "The decision's been made to rebrand Buck," he said, slapping his friend's shoulder heartily. Bucky looked at him balefully. "I don't know why we didn't think of this before. Instead of the Winter Soldier, he's going to be the Winter Knight." My eyebrows rose and I nodded as I thought about it.

"That does sound a lot more awesome," I said, patting my uncle's organometallic arm. "Totally heroic, just like Uncle Bucky." Steve rolled his eyes.

"I was wondering if you'd make him some new armor," Steve said. "Emma's not making on a large scale, but she'll devise the metal for it, and you're the best fabricator we have. We could go to Asgard, though, if you're too busy."

I also turned a baleful look on Steve. "Right. Like Reginn is so much better than me. I can't believe you'd say something like that," I huffed. Steve smiled.

"Anyway, these were my ideas," he said, unfolding some papers. He'd done a colored pencil sketch of a futuristic suit of plate armor that seemed to borrow from Boba Fett's suit but, you know, streamlined and elegant. And cooler. with more armor plating, less fabric. And designs on the metal. And no funky codpiece.

"Is this for public consumption?" I asked, looking it over, and Steve nodded, handing me a second sheet. This was more practical, a tac suit with armored elements that would be more lightweight and easier to move in. "I'll make some plating for the hands, like my cestuses," I said. "Protect your hands when you punch somebody." My mind kicked into gear as I thought about the possibilities and I hugged my uncle's arm as Steve and I tossed out ideas. Bucky contributed his own, and soon I had a clear idea of what we were going to make. Shining white armor with some golden detailing with that Asgardian metal they liked, nothing fussy, and although one of the tac suits would be dark for nighttime stealthiness, the other would be light, and both fit in with the knight in shining armor aesthetic. Easy peasy. That's how I'd always thought of him.

Then Superman finally arrived, and we got down to business.

"Our joint intelligence collection has been quite fruitful," he said, and we all looked at him attentively. "Nobody's going to like what we've come up with, though." He fiddled with the controller for the 3D projector for a moment, then it sprang to life. "Typhon is apparently a joint enterprise between certain HYDRA elements and international criminal undergrounds." He clicked through photos of the known HYDRA agents. Most of them I didn't know, although some, like Red Skull, Armin Zola, Baron von Strucker, Brock Rumlow, and Alexander Pierce, I did. And then there were the criminals. Again, most I didn't know, although from the way the professionals reacted, they were known by reputation at least. A few I did know. R'as al Ghul and Talia al Ghul. Some homegrown scum, too--the Joker, Bane, Deathstroke, Scarecrow, Poison Ivy, Lex Luthor, Brainiac, Black Manta, Dr. Poison, the Mandarin, somebody named Alton Carver who made both Bruce and Damian tense, the Weather Wizard. But not Catwoman, I was glad to note. When his grandfather and mother were shown, Damian swore a little in Arabic, his eyes furious. Bruce didn't like it either, but he hunkered silently in his chair, glowering.
Everybody else at the table groaned as the rogue's gallery flashed by; I thought that almost everybody had a nemesis represented. "I want everybody's notes on anybody you recognize, specifically their weaknesses," Tony said in disgust.

"Past hideouts, too," Superman said with a sigh. "Every scrap of information will help, even if it's outdated. The Avengers are working on finding out current whereabouts, known associates, and assets; the Justice League will also be working on that information."

"Start thinking how we can smash Typhon," Steve directed. "We all know the bad guys we've fought in the past. We maybe can use that knowledge ourselves or mix it up a bit, send somebody they won't be expecting. Just remember that they know us too, and they're probably sharing information as well."

"I'm back in for this," Damian said. "And I know that Dick's going to want in, probably Barbara too."

"What of Valkyrie?" a new voice asked challengingly, and I rolled my eyes when Hawkman left the shadows to sit at the table.

"I imagine there will be things for Valkyrie to do, but I will decide what her use will be," I said firmly.

"If you are not prepared to fully participate, you have no place at this table," he snorted. Then he sneered. "This is work for heroes, anyway, not for someone who never had the courage to take up the mantle, a perhaps-exaggerated reputation and beneficiary of nepotism."

"Hey, now, that's not right," Flash said immediately, but he was immediately drowned out by Damian, bellowing at Hawkman, who was sitting back, smugly enjoying the effect of his pronouncement. Diana stood and took him to task, as did Bruce. Superman had a job restoring order.

"See, even those on the Avengers, her friends, her uncle, do not defend her," Hawkman said, still smug as a bug.

"I can't be bothered to waste my time with idiots," Tony said crisply. "Supes, if we're going to take down Typhon, this moron can't be part of the planning."

"I agree," Steve said. "There isn't an Avenger who doesn't know her worth, and even the ones she trained who could never beat her respect her skill and don't hold grudges because they aren't as talented." Rare contempt leaked into his voice.

Uncle Bucky, who was looking murderous, only said, "Friendly fire isn't."

Miles, reacting to the tension in the room, blew a raspberry. I didn't know he knew how to do that. Aquaman laughed and bounced him on his knee.

"Hawkman, we're going to talk later. Until then, you're relieved of duty. You're not needed here," Superman said sternly, and stood, arms folded across his chest, until Hawkman shoved back and stomped out. "I apologize, Alex," he said. "Hawkman's letting his ego get the better of him." I nodded.

"Well, a lot depends on their goals, but with a good plan, the right plan, I could probably be bait for a couple of these guys," I said briskly, moving on since Hawkman was no threat. "Joker, of course. Talia loathes me, she'd enjoy the opportunity to get rid of me. Rash doesn't despise me, he'd be open to using me to get to Damian." Damian smiled sourly, and the meeting continued.
Damian was still ruffled when we were getting ready for bed. "I'll apply for League membership just so I can vote to kick that asshole out," he fumed. I just laughed.

"He's jealous and can't handle losing to a human," I said dismissively. "Everybody there knows it and he did himself no favors. Steve didn't say anything at the meeting, but Superman is going to have to do something to appease him and the other Avengers or there won't be a cooperative effort. Everybody is just going to have to get a grip and focus on the real threat. I'll be reminding Steve of that, too. We all need to be pointed in the same direction."

"You're too generous," Damian mumbled, losing his anger slowly.

"Not really, but that guy's an irritant. He doesn't watch himself, he's going to be swatted. And if he causes trouble on this joint op, he will be. And it might be by me."

"I'd sell tickets to that, Sweet pea," he said after a moment.

"I wouldn't do it in front of witnesses, darling," I said, and this restored Damian's good nature.

The next day I spoke with both my uncles and got them facing the right direction. It was easier to do than with Damian because they also felt that Hawkman was a troublemaker rather than a serious threat. A couple days later, Daniel assured me that Hawkman had been disciplined by the League and he and Alfred had a surprise for me; in a space off the main bat cave, my own forge, where I could work on my armor and Bucky's as well as any other commission I might take. It was compact and neat, just the way I liked it, and had all the tools I needed. It was created by way of apology by the League, who had paid for everything. Alfred, Daniel, Damian and Bruce had put it all together for me.

I didn't have anything to contribute to the intelligence gathering phase of the operation, so life for me went back pretty much to normal. I had bids to prepare, work to do, and that kept me busy at Valkyrie. Valkyrieville had its grand opening; we threw a big party for residents in the apartments and the business all got in on the fun with specials. I saw Selena, Tabby, and Bruce at the festivities. And Margaret had her eyes on another opportunity for us, which we talked about at a partners meeting and started to make preliminary plans. At home, Miles wandered in one day when I was doing some barre work before dancing. I explained what I was doing.

"Show me, Mama," he said, so I taught him arm and feet positions. Iris tried it too, but ambled off, not engaged. But Miles started showing up more often, and I slowly started to teach him more ballet. Sometimes we went to the tower, where Natasha doted on him. He was mesmerized by the glamorous spy, and always insisted on showing her what he'd learned. Iris was like a lot of little girls, and gravitated to the horses; both Daniel and Damian liked to take her with them when they rode. We indulged their interests as much as we could. They learned how to swim quickly, but they weren't allowed in the pool by themselves yet.

Alsyn and Alan got married. It was a beautiful wedding, and afterward, they moved into the gatehouse.

I enjoyed my new forge and made Valkyrie a new suit of armor with an elaborate, elegant pierced visor that completely concealed my face. Steve made the clothes portion of it, and Magni gave me a red cape that clipped on to the shoulders of the new armor. It hung low enough in back so that the wings could pop out without damaging the cape. It was the same red as the lining of our swansfeather capes. Emma made some new shielding for the bones of the wings, lightweight and engraved with knotwork to match the rest of my armor. Tony had taken over making the solution to protect my feathers. It was still a two part solution, one of which required hand painting and was applied after each molt, and the second part, which made the edges of the feathers hard enough to
cut, could be applied with a spray bottle and dried with a fan. I took special care with the work for the Winter Knight, and grudgingly my uncle had to admit he liked his new persona. The public loved it. Winter Knight fanfic and fan art exploded.

Information on Typhon was hard to come by, even though we knew who many of the principals were. Other plots were foiled, including acts of terrorism as well as damage to other historic buildings, but it wasn't until almost half of the Forbidden City was destroyed that the governments really got off their butts. The Avengers/Justice League got the information that the UN developed, but there was always the concern that Typhon had infiltrated government, so all that information had to be taken with a grain of salt. The twins were getting ready to start kindergarten before the superhero task force felt they had enough to start planning.
Rome

The heroes had information that a major transaction was to be done in Rome; payment for arms for the Typhon organization. Several of the principals were going to be there, and the opportunity to grab that many leaders was irresistible. A mixed team of Avengers and Justice League was going, including my uncles, Bruce, Diana, Superman, both Hawkeyes and Arrow (for some reason, why did we need three archers?), Tony, Quicksilver, and Flash. I was going along as support staff due to my paramedic training, and took the Wayne family suborbital in order to meet with a potential client who wanted her private palazzo restored. There were frescoes by Titian that I wouldn't be touching; some of the world's top art restorers were vying for the chance to work on them, but the crumbling palazzo needed a lot of help. The problem was that Valkyrie was about at the end of our resources; we'd either have to hire and gear up for a major expansion, or start a wait list. Or flat out turn people away. None of these ideas were attractive for me, but the wait list was the best option. I was hoping that we could delay the restoration of the palazzo until after the work on the frescoes was complete.

I had to concentrate to pay attention to the duchessa; concern about the op kept me a little distracted. She hadn't inherited money with her title; it had taken her over twenty years of work as an agricultural consultant and marriage to a wealthy banking family to come up with the cash to renovate her palazzo. I liked her; at Valkyrie we were doing background checks on our potential clients as a matter of course--no point in working for baddies--and she was clean as a whistle. The frescoes, which were the pride of the place, were in dire need, and she agreed with me that they should be taken care of before they fell off the wall and were lost forever. That also allowed her a little more time to add to her finances to pay for the restoration of the building, and she wasn't upset about being on the waiting list. The creative minds at Stark had come up with a really terrific full-scale modeling apparatus that would allow for a building to be scanned perfectly down to a thousandth of a millimeter and then projected in such a way that you can stand in the middle of the scan and it looks identical to the original building. The scanning thing had been around since the late twentieth century; the improvements had been made to the fineness of the resolution and the projection that made it seem like you're right in the building. This would enable me to really closely examine trouble spots and, in this case, provide the client with something tangible if anything happened to those frescoes. I was offering before and after scans to clients free of charge in exchange for the right to show parts of the restorations--approved by the client--to other potential clients. Because my client would approve the use of the most glorious parts of the palazzo, including the frescoes, I was reducing the rates I charged for my work. But half of my attention was on the op, impending. My uncles were going to mass in St. Peter's Square, since they were here. Steve was Catholic, Bucky wasn't, but figured there was no harm in the power of prayer before a significant action. The pope himself was conducting the mass.

The Justice League had anonymously rented houses around Rome for those going on the op, and the pretty little house I'd been assigned wasn't far from the square. I left the duchessa with a good feeling and a lot of pictures and measurements, and I figured I'd go there, assume my costume, double-check my equipment, and read until I either got the all-clear or a call for help. It wasn't my first time in the costume or armor; I'd tried it all on, of course, when Emma and I were fine-tuning the fit of the armor and I'd flown around the estate to test everything. I'd had the second step solution sprayed on my wings, so that if necessary, I could use them as a weapon too. I shouldn't have to, though; I was bristling with blades, from the sword at my hip to the one over my spine and all the little knives at various places all over my costume, I had shuriken in a pouch and the backs of my hands and fingers were plated in a pretty version of my trusty cestuses. I had a couple of energy guns at the back of my shoulders, snuggled up to the spine sheath, so I really couldn't be armed any more than I was without toting bags of gear. My first aid pack was fully stocked and
strapped on my back. I popped in the ear bud that would let me listen in, wiggled a bit to find a comfortable position in the chair, and flicked on my kindle. Radio silence; the heroes would be gearing up and preparing for the op. I discovered, with great joy, that my preorder had been delivered and the brand new Jane Austen was just waiting to be read.

I was both thrilled to see her new work and terrified that it would be disappointing. The woman had been dead for centuries; who knew if she'd retain her old magic? But scarcely had I paged past the title than there was a concussive blast that shook the little house. There was a brief, appalled silence, as if the city had drawn its breath in protest, then the sirens started. I dropped my Kindle, pushed through the door into the tiny backyard that was protected with a high fence, and leaped into the sky, aiming for the column of...what? Fire, dust? My heart sank as I recognized the site as St. Peter's Square. I beat my wings hard and arrowed toward the site, activating my throat mike as I detailed what I saw. I would have slapped my hand over my mouth as I saw the devastation, but my visor was down. Even as I flew, I saw the great dome of the basilica cave in and couldn't repress a moan. I circled the plaza once, seeing from that height where the people who had been too close to the blast were--or at least, where parts of them were--and couldn't be helped, and where those who were hurt but could be helped were. As I landed next to a man who was trying to crawl for cover, his leg having been blown off, I wondered if my uncles were ok, then pushed that aside and ripped off my first aid pack and pulled out the first tourniquet.

It wasn't long before ambulances and the police screeched up and waves of first responders began to flood the square. I helped carry an injured woman to a police car who would take her for treatment, and whipped around as someone put a hand on my shoulder. I nearly melted; my uncles were there, battered but fundamentally ok. I put Steve's shoulder back into place and dusted their cuts and scrapes with antibiotic coagulent powder that would allow their healing factors to take over. Just as I finished treating Bucky's face, another explosion boomed, and my wings snapped out to cover my uncles. It wasn't necessary; this one was at a distance.

And another, from a different direction.

Another. I jumped into the air and looked around when I was high enough. I pulled up a 3D map of Rome and compared the signs of the explosions from where I was in the ruins by the basilica.

I landed by my uncles and activated my throat mike. The ear bug was useless; everybody was demanding intelligence. "St Peter's Basilica is a ruin," I said, even as yet another explosion went off. "Looks like the Colosseum, the Forum, the Altare della Patria, the Spanish Steps, and" I had to clear my throat "the Capitoline Museums. And I think the Campo de Fiori."

And another explosion, this one not far from where we were. "And the Sistine Chapel," I said, barely above a whisper, and had to repeat myself, knocked sideways by the concussive wave. I heard Superman and Iron Man conferring with Steve, and the decision was made to proceed with our primary mission first. Steve and Bucky slipped away and I hopped over to the Sistine Chapel to help out, then flew where one of the police officers told me that the casualties were worst in the Campo de Fiori, the popular public market.

There were a lot of children there with their parents.

Flash and Quicksilver came on a couple of resupply runs for me and helped take the smallest victims to the hospitals. They were deluged with casualties.

It took a couple hours for everybody to be triaged, then I flew off, went to the rented house, and changed into regular clothes, taking a few minutes to contact my husband, who was frantic. Then I
went to the nearest casualty site and helped clear streets. By the time night fell, I was exhausted and trudged to the nearest big street and hailed a cab, riding to a restaurant where the Flash, incognito without his bright red suit, met me. We ordered huge meals, talking to the waiter, who wanted to know what had happened and what we'd seen. It helped to talk about it. Once the waiter moved on, Flash quietly briefed me. The mission had been disrupted by the explosions, which were being claimed by Typhon as a distraction. However, a load of arms coming in at Ostia had been intercepted. Pulse and other energy weapons had been recovered, which were highly dangerous. Most of the people rounded up had been the arms dealers, but our joint commission had snagged Zola, the Weather Wizard, Alexander Pierce, the Riddler, and Dr Faustus, whoever that was. Furthermore, the Mandarin had been seen to be hurt in the fight, but he had escaped. As a preventative measure, Thor had offered the use of his holding cells to prevent a breakout or any other problems with the captured criminals, and they'd been transported immediately by the Bifrost. UN officials would be visiting them soon.

The waiter was just returning with our plates when Flash looked over my shoulder and huffed out an unamused laugh. I turned to see the TV screen showing amateur video of the disaster at the square. People were screaming and praying, and someone was crying over the Holy Father, then there was a brief silence and the recorder jerked skyward. "Bellissimo angioletto!" someone exclaimed, pointing.

No, just me. But I hadn't counted on the effect my pale armor, wings, and red cape would have, especially over a disaster scene at the Vatican.

The camera followed me down, where I reached back to scratch where the spine sheath had irritated my skin. I'd folded in my wings to make an adjustment and ease some cloth underneath, but it looked like the wings retracted at the push of a button. Cool. I'd have to remember that.

The news commentator properly identified me as Valkyrie, and my badass vigilante rep took a hit as I dropped to my knees and pulled out the tourniquet. An Italian official came on, stepping up to a podium in front of the Campo ruins. The earbugs Flash wore translated for him. She explained who was responsible for the bombing, described the role of our superheroes, casting them as dogged defenders who managed under impossible conditions to apprehend several of the terrorists. She justly praised the response of the ambulance crews, hospitals, police, and firefighters, and cleared up the misunderstanding that an angel appeared. Thank you, ma'am. A lot of people had been killed by Typhon, but more had been saved, even through even with modern medicine, healing torn tissues and broken bones would take time. The historical sites were a different matter, however. She said it was too early to tell what, if anything, could be restored. She praised the resilience of Romans, and then brought forth a cardinal, rather battered looking and frail, to pray for the lives lost and those who were suffering. It was sobering, and as I listened to the prayer, I started to cry a little. It was the stress, and pain and suffering all around. Flash put his hand on my shoulder as I dabbed my eyes with my napkin.

After the last bite (neither the Flash or I had dared to have wine, what with being physically depleted from the activity) we paid and split up. I wanted to sleep more than anything. But I wasn't halfway to said bed when I got a buzz on the comm link. I raised my communicator to cover.

"Alex, you need to get over here," Superman said, sounding stressed. "Bruce was hurt today but won't seek help. I need you to fix him or convince him to go to a hospital." I swore to myself.

I backtracked a bit and found a cab, managing a really brief nap. The door of the house opened up and Diana drew me in, quickly updating me on the situation. When I went into the living room, Bruce was arguing with Superman. He didn't want to go to a hospital since they'd been overwhelmed earlier in the day and was convinced that his injuries, whatever they were, weren't serious. His grim face lightened a bit when he saw me. "Alex will fix me," he said confidently.
We had to get him out of his costume first, though, which was as difficult as it ever had been and Bruce was gray by the time this was managed. I saw immediately what the problem was; his abdomen was distended and swollen, and he said he'd taken a hit from a piece of masonry when the buy was taking place in the Forum.

"I can't fix this, Bruce," I said immediately. "Not without the surgical suite. You have internal damage and bleeding, and you must go to the hospital right now, or you're going to die."

"You're exaggerating," he said irritably. I narrowed my eyes and I tried to impress the severity of the situation on him. He didn't want to hear it, mostly because he didn't want to further burden the medical facilities in the city. He proposed going home in the suborbital for treatment.

"You don't have time!" I said, at my wits end. "That will take at least an hour, and it's time you don't have!"

Bruce opened his mouth to argue, then suddenly slumped. I blinked. Superman had knocked him out. "I'll take him for help, Alex. We don't have time for this." I nodded, and Diana held the door as he very carefully picked up Bruce and launched into the sky.

The other Justice Leaguers and I just looked at each other. "I must remember that for the future, when Bruce gets tetchy," I said finally, and the tension was broken. They laughed, and I did patch up a few of the heroes who had less serious damage and no healing factors. I went back to the house, finally, after having stopped at a pharmacy to restock my kit. Then, before I fell into the bed, I updated my husband. He was frazzled and said that he was coming.

"I'll be glad to see you, darling," I said, yawning, and he asked for the address so I didn't have to pick him up at the airport.

I woke up some four hours later from a nightmare of exploding antiquities to find Damian snuggled up to me, also sleeping. Comforted, I put my hand on his and went back to sleep.
Island

When I woke up again, it was because my husband sat on the bed next to me. I cracked open my eyes and squinted at him before smiling. "Sweet pea," he cooed, his hand brushing my cheek below an abrasion. "I went to the hospital and saw Dad; he's going to be there for a bit while they regrow some organs for him. Most of his abdominal organs were pulped by the explosion and only the fact that he's so strong kept him alive for so long. I updated Alfred, who's agreed to be the point of contact to the family for a bit while we're here." I told him about how Superman had conquered resistance, and he laughed. "I'll have to remember that approach," he said.

I grinned. "I thought the same thing." He smiled and picked up my hand, kissing my fingers.

"I'd love to take you for brunch," he said, and I agreed happily. I braided my wet hair after my shower and we set out in search of sustenance, then went to the hospital. Bruce was irritable about the damage he'd taken but meeker than I expected about his extraction to the hospital. I had some news from a text, which I relayed with a certain amount of glee. I was still tired from the exertion the day before and not in the mood to jolly him along.

"Martha and Thomas are on their way over," I said, keeping my amusement to a minimum. Bruce, a little jaundiced from the damage to his liver and kidneys, paled to a light butter-yellow.
"Grandma Martha's concerned about you, as is Grandpa. They're planning on staying until your transplants are complete and you're ready to go home."

"Alex, dear, can't you head them off?" he said a little desperately. I smiled serenely.
"They texted from the airport just before boarding, and they're on their way, so I don't think so. Besides, if you'd gone to the hospital after you were injured, they could have countered a lot of the damage. The transplants are necessary because of the length of time they were damaged before treatment was given." I dropped my smile. "The next time I tell you to go to the hospital, I expect you to go. As it is, you're going to need regular dialysis and you're not going to be able to eat because of the damage to your stomach and intestines. And your liver. All the organs except the intestines could have been saved if you'd gone to the hospital promptly. It wouldn't have even taken much surgery, with the equipment and treatments they have today. You'd have been in surgery an hour, tops, and you could have gone home while you waited for the intestines to be grown from your stem cells. But not even the surgical suite at home is up to the level of care you need now."

Bruce dropped his eyes and stayed silent. "They are, however, bringing a treat with them. They're bringing some things for you from home, plus Selina and Tabby." I was feeling generous with the information. He brightened at the mention of his daughter.

"We're going to go pick them up," Damian said, putting his hand at the small of my back. "So brace for incoming." Bruce's jaw set. I swear, I've seen him treat supervillains with less resolution.

Damian waited until we set off for the airfield before laughing. "What a big baby," he said affectionately. I laughed too, and we had only a brief wait before greeting the grandparents and Selina, who was a little frazzled from keeping Tabby placated. Damian took his little sister and cooed, charming her into what seemed like a welcome silence. We took them to Bruce's rental and got them settled in, then out for a fortifying late lunch before taking them to the hospital. then we told them to call us if they needed anything, picked up my bags, and left immediately for the suborbital. We were home in plenty of time for dinner, which we had up at the main house, and were able to report to the rest of the family.
It was a grim dinner, explaining what had happened in Rome and Bruce's condition, but I was glad to be home again with my family. There was a meeting later that night, a joint commission of both superhero teams. Steve couldn't make it, so he sent Natasha as his proxy, and before the meeting, we made arrangements to go to the ballet and take Miles. Steve got stuck briefing the President. Bucky showed up, though, and I snuggled in for an extra-long hug, grateful that he hadn't been caught too close to that horrific initial blast. There's only so much that his healing factor can do for him. Daniel called the meeting to order.

"The death toll from all the explosions stands over two hundred, and we're lucky it wasn't more," Bucky said grimly. "Wounded, over a thousand, and several hundred still in the hospitals have pushed the city's resources to the maximum."

"I'll head up a New York City relief drive," Tony said immediately, and Damian said he'd work on that too. We discussed other ways we could get resources to the city, and the Justice League volunteered to transport medical personnel who could help out. Daniel would contact the appropriate people in Rome and the Avengers would reach out to hospitals and clinics here to see who they could round up. I suggested they contact J, who might have some good ideas for recruitment. He'd probably want to go if he could swing it at work and came up with the idea of sponsoring a doctor, nurse, or technician. Daniel said he'd get the PR department at Wayne to work on it.

"Damage to the archaeological treasures and historical sites is immense," Serena said. "I'm volunteering to help."

"When you contact the antiquities board, tell them I'm in too and find out what they need," I said immediately, and she nodded. There wasn't going to be a shortage of architects and historic preservationists who were going to want to help; we could provide materials and money if not our personal services.

We moved on to the intelligence collected from the action. The arms dealers were being held and interrogated by the Roman and Italian authorities. They coughed up bank accounts and the location of dead drops for information, but they didn't know to whom they were selling, just that they were getting good prices. They gave up the orders they were in the process of assembling, which suggested that Typhon had a pretty good crowd of foot soldiers attached to their cause.

And what was their cause? The supervillains we had in custody in Asgard's cells weren't talking. The Italians were demanding their return so they could take a crack at them, and Thor was going to comply.

"Press from this has been a mixed bag," Superman reported. "As usual, there's some blowback that we didn't prevent the catastrophe." Not unexpected; supers were always blamed for not being omniscient. "But collecting the arms dealers and the villains that we did, and positively identifying the Mandarin, plus the work that everybody did to help victims of the bombings and stabilize the ruins has been noted and appreciated." He smiled at me. "Despite the initial confusion as to her identity, Valkyrie's appearance was widely reported, and the first responders believe that she saved several lives." Serena patted my shoulder.

There was other data to be sifted and discussed, and Damian updated the group on Bruce's condition. It put a damper on the atmosphere. Bruce could be taciturn and sometimes damned hard to work with, but his insights, knowledge, and ability to play devil's advocate and derive courses of action were crucial to the League's success and his absence would be felt. However, Nightwing and Nightfall were coming back to work for the duration of this... mess. That would help a lot. Everybody liked Dick and Damian, and Dick came closest to filling Bruce's shoes since he'd
The next day, the kids had a fit when I accompanied Eira back to Asgard to visit her family for a couple of weeks. Not that I got to go to Asgard, but that I was taking away one of their favorite people. Didn't matter that she'd be back. I was grateful to escape and Damian was looking a little rattled as I scuttled off. Tony came too and we updated Thor, Sif, and Magni on events. It was nice and peaceful. Thor sent down some healers with us when we returned.

Natasha and I took Miles to the ballet Firebird the next week for a matinee performance, and he was awestruck by the sets and the costumes and the jumping. Damian enrolled him in ballet classes the next day.

Diana dropped by work a few days later. She was surprised to see our new butler, but Delara was almost as good as Alfred, and Diana was a bit bemused as she accepted coffee and a small strawberry tart, thanking her before Delara nodded and quietly closed the door behind her. "I enjoy coming here," Diana said, nibbling on the tart. "Before the Great Return, misogyny had become almost nonexistent, but now the old battles must be refought. It is discouraging in many respects, yet companies like this are proof that women are at least as good as men. Harder to change are the attitudes of women who hew to the idea that women should not intrude on men's work." We chatted a little before she got to the purpose of her visit. "I am returning to Themyscira for a visit," she said, fiddling with her coffee cup. "I would like to extend an invitation for you, your daughters, and Torunn, both in her capacity as your bodyguard but also as a member of the ruling house of Asgard." I exchanged a glance of surprise with Torunn, but she seemed eager and interested. I made a call and Martha joined us; we agreed to a short visit of three days, which was the most that she and I could manage on short notice. Torunn caught my eyes and exited with Martha, both of them chattering happily at the prospect of the visit.

"I'm thrilled and humbled to be asked to go to your homeland," I said gently, "but what's the basis of the visit, so quickly?"

I grinned as Diana pressed her fingertip to some crumbs on her plate and delicately licked them off before placing the plate on the corner of my desk. "I must have the wisdom of the queen my mother," she said. "I need to confer before I bring news to the League and our allies. On a personal level, because Daniel cannot set foot on the islands, my mother cannot meet him. However, he regards you as the matriarch of his family and loves you dearly. I would like to present you to my mother in that capacity as well, and enable her to make a connection between our families. Martha would also be helpful in expanding her understanding of Daniel's family. As for Iris... I was the last child among the Amazons and there is not one who would not like the opportunity to play with a child."

Damian was interested and a little envious of my invitation and he planned to take Miles to another ballet matinee, followed by a visit to the zoo to see Uncle Bucky and a dinner with the three of them and Daniel. I spent the rest of the nights until our departure in my smithy, making a shamshir to take as a presentation gift to the Amazon queen. I didn't have time to inlay a design, so I acid treated the blade to create my fallback folate design. Torunn made a wooden scabbard for it, covered with leather for looks.

We took the suborbital and parked it on the mainland. Waiting for us at a dock was a sailboat guarded by an incognito Amazon. She gripped arms with Diana and introductions waited until we were at sea. Sofia was a woman of few words, but an excellent sailor. She and Diana were good friends and had much to catch up on. We sailed into a thick mist and emerged into a clear blue sea, the sun bright but not hot, and a chain of beautiful green islands ahead of us.
“Behold Themyscira,” Sofia said, flipping her blonde braid over her shoulder and smiling at us. She expertly guided the boat and Diana helped her secure it before we left and walked down the long dock. The air was a little humid, but clear and had a bracing fresh scent. An honor guard awaited us with horses, and I was grateful that someone had sent one for Iris. Philipus, the Amazon chancellor, was the ranking member of the guard and embraced Diana before introductions. As expected, my younger daughter stole the show; she was adorable with her jet hair, big blue eyes, and soft golden skin. The chancellor knelt to address her and was delighted when Iris told her that she knew how to ride. She tossed her up into the saddle of an elegant gray herself as the rest of us mounted and followed her to the palace complex. It was a short ride, and we soon found ourselves before a beautiful woman who wore a more elaborate headpiece than the others in her group. Diana touched her knee to the ground before advancing for a hug from her mother; it must be difficult for the queen to surrender her daughter to the world of man. Diana first introduced Torunn as the daughter of the ruling house of Asgard, then me, Martha, and Iris, who had begun to fidget. We in turn were introduced to the queen's counselors, the astrologer Areto, Castalia, an oracle, Epione, the chief healer, Hessia, a general, Pallas, a weaponsmith, Penelope, the Amazon's archivist, Io, the weapons master, and Ipthime, the Amazon's architect and master sculptor.

Hippolyta smiled and had us shown to our quarters.
We were given rooms close together in what looked like an official building. The rooms were light and airy; sparsely furnished, they were meant for active people who spent their time out and about rather than homebodies. Iris, who had been so interested in everything we'd seen, abruptly keeled over in a nap from exhaustion. I grinned and smoothed her hair back from her face before investigating the suite more thoroughly before refreshing myself and changing and sitting on the bed, opening a book. I was a couple of chapters in when there was a tap at the door and Diana slipped in, smiling when she saw Iris curled up.

"She hasn't sucked her thumb since she was three," I said ruefully, for that digit had found its way back into her mouth. "But it's been a day of adventures."

"She didn't seem unhappy," Diana said, a little worried.

"She's not," I hurried to assure her. "It's just that there's a whole lot of new and not much that's familiar. She'll want to explore--new places have never bothered her, although the big test of that will be school, I think--it's all the new people, and all grownups."

Diana smiled. "She is already popular. Everybody is talking about the lovely little girl and everybody wants to see her for themselves. But I have had a thought. Perhaps we could detail one of the Amazons to be her special friend and take her around sightseeing while we are in meetings."

"Throw in a horse and she won't want to come home," I said. I woke up Iris, who was bright-eyed and energetic again. Damn, I feel old sometimes. We collected Martha and Torunn, and went to a lovely courtyard shaded by trees and brightened with a bounty of flowers, some of which I didn't recognize.

"The white flower is ambrosia," Hessia, the oracle said. "The gods drink the nectar. Each flower provides only a tiny amount, so you'll see it everywhere on the islands." Iris promptly poked her finger in one and licked it. She made a face and Hessia laughed. "It doesn't taste like anything to me, but the gods love it. I don't know how it's harvested, though. The nectar never accumulates and the bees don't bother with it."

We were introduced to more Amazons, and Diana was immediately set up on by her close friends--Cydispe, who had been her aide before she left Themyscira, Hellene, a Senator and historian, Mala, a warrior, Euobea, a champion swimmer, and Kasia, another warrior. After the introductions were complete, we drifted in conversations with groups of Amazons who were curious about us. I found myself chatting with Io, Philippus, and Pallas about arms and armor, specifically, how we made it and I was invited to the smithy before my visit was over. It wasn't long before Diana brought Kasia over and she offered her service as a minder for Iris. Iris had gotten cautious with so many new grown-ups, but after five or so minutes talking, she accepted Kasia as her companion and they left to explore the city. The groups rotated after a bit and I compared treatment methods with Epione and a few of the other healers, then chatted with Oeone, a botanist, who indulged me with plant care tips. The volcanic soil on the islands was very fertile and there was no trouble with horticulture.

Then Diana brought me to her mother, who assessed me thoroughly with a glance. It was pretty intimidating, all in all. Diana explained my skills as a smith and fighter, and her expression lightened with interest. Just then, another woman approached, walking briskly, and made a cursory bow to the queen. She smiled broadly at Diana, who inhaled sharply. First she reported the results of a training session of the army--with live steel--and Hippoyta nodded with satisfaction. Then the
Diana introduced me, wiping her eyes.

"My daughter was there, along with my husband."

Antiope cocked her head with interest and I indicated Martha. Diana brought her over. I knew that she recognized the general as her eyes widened and she looked between us rapidly. "I recognize you," Antiope said, smiling at her, and they clasped arms. "You were interviewing the inhabitants of Elysium for Lord Hades."

"Er... yes," Martha said. "Um, Mom... about Dad..."

"Who is your father?" Antiope asked.

"Damian Wayne," she said. Antiope's gaze sharpened.

"Black hair, blue eyes, beauty reflected inward as well as in his outer appearance?" she asked, and Martha nodded. The general looked at her closely. "I see the resemblance." Then she looked taken aback. "You were his lady wife, then."

"Yes, and I continue to be," I said, mystified. "We were remarried. How do you know him?"

"He spoke of you with great devotion," she said. "I heard of you when we were lovers."

Wow. Was not expecting that. I took a moment to think that through. It's one thing to know that Damian had relationships in the underworld and another to meet one. And, wow. Such an accomplished one at that. And she's a tall, beautiful blonde. I was the only brunette Damian had ever dated. Well, in life, anyway.

"Damian's always had good taste," I said after a brief period of reflection, in which the love I knew he had for me battled with insta-jealousy. Hippolyta's eyebrows shot skyward.

"Does it not bother you, that he was with other women?" she asked.

"Well, we were in different afterlives, and we couldn't be together, so no," I said, shrugging. "I was forbidden from contacting anyone I'd known during life. We talked it over when we were reunited and I knew. And I had a relationship of my own. These relationships are in the past and are precious memories. I've always wanted him to be happy."

"You are a most unusual woman," Antiope said.

"Damian works with my ex," I said matter-of-factly. "If he can manage that, I can certainly handle meeting you. Not going to lie, though, it's a little intimidating to meet you. Your reputation proceeds you."

Diana startled everyone by laughing. "Such modesty! Mother, I was going to tell you later when there was more time for talk. This one is one of Odin's chosen valkyries, an appointed leader."

"Oh, Odin," Antiope said, a little dismissively. I smiled. "I have heard of his Valhalla."
"It was a lot of work," I said reflectively. "There were daily scrimmages, combat with Frigga's domain, all in preparation for Ragnarok."

"What is Ragnarok?" Hippolyta asked.

"Well, it was supposed to be the end of the world, but we managed to prevent that," I said.

"It is why the gates of the underworld were opened," Martha said. "The dead rising was one of the signs."

"By all accounts it was a fierce battle," Diana told her mother and aunt. Others had drifted over as well. "Their afterlife was similar to the Spartan city-state, warriors all, and the valkyries an elite unit even among that company. They had feather capes that turned into wings, and they fought from the air as well as afoot and astride the winged horses. There are sagas about the battle in the realm of Asgard."

"Wings?" Antiope said alertly. "Real wings?"

"Yes, but the ability to manifest them vanished after the battle, with the death of Odin," Diana explained, hewing to the public story.

"What a sight that would be," Philippus said.

"Well, it's not something I usually do, but--" I stepped back and brought out the wings. There was utter silence.

"By the gods..." Antiope murmured.

"I understood that all your wings were gone," Hippolyta said to me, puzzled.

"The nature of my bond is different than the other valkyries," I said. "Their bond was only with Odin. Mine is through Odin, but to the World Tree. And since the Tree lives, so my wings are still with me. It's not something many know about."


"It's not just the men," I said ruefully. "There are a lot of women who would throw stones as well."

"The world of man is a cruel place if they react like that to a gift from the gods like that," Hippolyta said. "Corruption and blasphemy."

"Not everybody has direct experience with a god," Martha shrugged. "And many are intolerant of any god but the one they worship. Everybody likes to think that theirs is the best."

"And you want to stay out in the world of men?" Io asked Diana in bewilderment.

"There are good things to balance the bad," she said. "And I represent a better way."

Amazons gathered around me, entranced by the wings, so I explained the coating on the feathers, which I hadn't removed after the events in Rome. They gently touched the feathers, and Aella, their falconer, asked questions.

"Perhaps I can give you a demonstration," I offered, and she grinned.

"Perhaps with arms?" Hellene asked hopefully. "It is an extraordinary opportunity, to meet a warrior from such a different tradition."
"Not today," Hippolyta chided gently. "After hospitality has been offered and business concluded, perhaps."

"It would be my pleasure," I said. And it would be. Not many can say they've had the privilege of fighting an Amazon, and fewer still can say they've done it on their homeland.

But first, there was a welcoming ceremony where Penelope chanted a history of the Amazons. It was absolutely fascinating. Olympian goddesses had created the Amazons; souls of women who had been killed by men were given new, stronger bodies by Artemis, created from clay and become flesh and blood, their memories gently altered. Aphrodite gave Hippolyta a magic girdle that made her invincible as long as she wore the belt. Athena gave them their immortality—as long as they can regularly drink from a spring on the island—great physical strength, highly acute senses, beauty, wisdom, and love for their kind. They were tasked to teach the merits of virtue, love, and equality to the world of men. Demeter blessed them with eternal bountiful harvests, and Hestia granted them a home.

But Ares, by nature opposed to harmony and peace, goaded his half-brother Heracles into attacking the Amazons with a great host of Greek warriors, stole Hippolyta's girdle using deceit and trickery, and enslaved their sisterhood. Hippolyta had to ask their goddesses for deliverance more than once before the goddesses arranged their deliverance. Typical, I thought. Gods and their snits. Somehow—it wasn't stated just how—Hippolyta managed to steal back the girdle. The Amazons broke their chains, and returned to Themyscira, having commandeered Heracles' entire fleet.

Ha! One for the good guys. So to speak.

The terms of Aphrodite's help was that they remove themselves from the world of man, which was why their nation was so hard to find and protected by the magic mists. The goddess also decreed that those on the island continue to wear the metal bracelets that the Greeks had used to chain and control them.

Kind of a dick move, if you ask me. They were thick and heavy, and I wondered how you could wear them all the time without getting some kind of skin condition. The daily reminder of their degradation must have been difficult to bear, and probably still was sometimes. And also, how were they supposed to carry out their mission of teaching love, equality, and virtue to the wider world when they were confined to their islands? This conundrum was not explained.

They were given a new trust, keepers of the Doors of Doom, which imprison monsters beneath the islands. They built their cities and monuments, and perfected their skills in art and war. It was discovered later that Heracles had been imprisoned in a stone pillar behind the Doors of Doom, tormented by the monsters therein, as a punishment for his transgressions by the Olympian goddesses.

They Amazons lived in peace and prosperity for uncounted years, until the conflict of World War One brought the Germans to their shores in pursuit of a British pilot, and the first battle on Themyscira was fought. The Amazons were immortal against the ravages of time but could still be killed by weapons, and many perished, including General Antiope, but the Germans were driven away. The plane, flown by an American named Steve Trevor, crashed into the ocean to be rescued by Diana. This posed a problem, since the goddesses had forbidden men to set foot on the island.

They got around this by carrying him everywhere, not that he was allowed to really go anyplace, Io whispered to me.

Diana was allowed to leave the island with Trevor and thus promote equality, virtue, and love in the wider world. In wartime, this must have been a hard sell, but all the more necessary. It was
during the crucible of this conflict that she became the hero known as Wonder Woman and came into her powers.

And so the Amazons persisted, minus their princess, until the gates to Hades' domain opened and the Amazons who had perished returned through the mists.

Following this recounting, Iris returned with Kassia, and Hippolyta granted us hospitality. Torunn presented the queen with an Asgardian shield, and I presented her with the sword I'd made, explaining the design and how I'd made it, and crediting Torunn for the scabbard. Following this, the feast. Delicious. After that, there was dancing and a more informal atmosphere. As predicted, the Amazons were enchanted by Iris. Diana might have been the last child on the island, but she was not the only one. Amazons had, very rarely, left the islands briefly for forays into the world of man and sometimes returned with either a little girl or arms--Hephastus took any infant boys in exchange for weapons or armor. But this had not happened for quite some time, and everyone wanted to play with my younger daughter. Martha and Torunn were surrounded by Amazons eager to hear more of their experiences and lives.

Diana unobtrusively separated me from the group and we retreated to Hippolyta's quarters with Antiope. The queen poured a light, delicious wine, and asked her daughter to tell her how her life had been since the last time she'd visited, filling in details for her aunt. I listened as she updated her mother, and I heard the full story of the founding of the Justice League, how Bruce had researched, tracked down, and recruited the other heroes and how others had come to them, recounted to the others who had not known the whole tale. "Aunt Antiope was lucky to meet Damian when she did," Diana said, shooting me a wicked look. "When he was first taken to his father, he was a different person." I grinned, having heard about this, but this necessitated an explanation of his mother, and the Amazons shook their heads, both in exasperation that Talia allowed herself to be commanded by a man and accept his perspective of her inferiority, and her actions in using her child to further her own goals.

"And how did you meet him, then?" Antiope asked in puzzlement. I explained how we'd been set up on a date and a little of our early, contentious relationship, our courtship, and marriage. Then they asked about my afterlife, which was much more exciting to them than a relationship in a world they didn't have much basis for understanding. The fuller account of Ragnarok was met with silence although it had been confirmed by Diana.

"I saw the documentary," she confessed, a little shamed, knowing how set against it I'd been.

I shrugged. "It's not illegal."

"I could understand why you fought so against it. It seemed almost profane to see it. It was not meant for my eyes." I smiled and patted her hand, and then she explained about meeting Daniel and how their relationship had developed.

"And this is why I asked to bring Alex and Martha with me on this voyage," Diana told her mother. "You cannot meet Daniel without leaving the island, and he cannot come here, but I can bring to you his grandmother, many times removed, whom he loves deeply, and her daughter, so that you can judge his family, at least."

Hippolyta was not best pleased to hear of her daughter's feelings for a man and her hope for a long term relationship, but she wanted her daughter's happiness. "How many generations removed?" she asked me.

"Sixteen, if you proceed with the understanding that the women in the family first gave birth around age thirty on average," I said. "I don't like to think of that because so many of my family
were killed in the upset regarding the return and there are so many generations I won't meet, at least until the next resurrection. I adore Daniel, but no one needs to rely on my biased opinions; he has many good qualities that can be evaluated independently. For example, he set all of us returnees in the family up with money and jobs, a place to stay until we got our feet under us, without anyone asking. Our friends too, for that matter. And at each turn, he tried to structure new business opportunities to employ those without jobs and helped to make sure they were fed, clothed, and cared for, and all without the expectation of thanks. He's uncomfortable being thanked for doing what he feels is right. Those years before the Return were difficult ones for him; he had to lead the business, he took up his father's role as Batman when he was killed, his aunt died, and he was all alone. He's quite remarkable in his capacity to open his heart. He's very fond of animals, he's adopted several rescue horses and cats, and he's very protective of those who need help, not just his extended family."

"What does he want with Diana?" Antiope asked me.

"The same thing anybody wants," I shrugged. "Love and intimacy, the support you get from your beloved, the richness in life of that kind of tie, someone to grow old with. Well, Daniel will grow old, anyway."

"And children?" Hippolyta pressed.

"If they come, but no one is guaranteed them. There are therapies now that can be used for sex selection, so if Diana has children, they can assure that they are female if that's something that she chooses. I can assure you that Daniel will love Diana regardless of whether they have offspring. Those he loves he keeps close."

The two other women considered this, and they began asking more about my work, my appearances as Valkyrie, my views of women in contemporary outside society. "What did you think when Diana came to you to inform you of her liaison with your grandson?" Hippolyta asked.

"Well, I've been looking for someone for him for some time, I want him to be happy and cared for, but it never worked out. Obviously I didn't set my sights high enough," I said, smiling at Diana, who smiled back. "She's a person of enormous gifts and talents and is a tremendous catch, in our terminology." I had to explain what that meant. "She knows about his role in the Justice League, as well as his public identity as a leading citizen, and she knew him as a person before their love grew. She is respectful of him, which is important, but she cares about the man under all those identities. So I was very pleased that he'd managed to attract such a woman, but what was most important to me was what she saw in him, why she wanted to pursue this connection with my grandson, and we've spoken of this more than once. When I heard her reasons, there was no reason to be cautious. Daniel doesn't need my permission, he's a grown man who makes a grown man's decisions, but they do have my blessing."

"And what are those reasons, Diana?" her mother asked immediately.

"He knows me as Wonder Woman, but he doesn't expect perfection or miracles," she said quietly. "He knows my work as a historian and respects it. But more than that, he sees the woman I am and loves me, my faults and flaw along with my strengths and graces. He sees me, not the symbol. You don't know what it meant to him, your return and they way you embraced him as your own," she said to me quietly.

"What else would I have done?" I asked blankly. "He's my kid, even if I haven't known him for very long."

All three women smiled.
"And it isn't just Daniel I had to consider," Diana told her mother. "I also looked at his family since he revels in them. Alex and Damian are, I feel, the center of the family. Their parents and extended family are Returned as well, their children, but Daniel relates the most to them and his father. They are a strong and supportive family, and Alex and Damian go out of their way to care for Daniel. Love reciprocated on all sides. And, I felt, to be a part of that family... would be very special. I could be included in that. A real family, for the first time since I left home." Hippolyta's eyes grew bright.

"Well, then, daughter, it seems as though you have found yourself a worthy consort," she said, and stood, extending her arms. Diana went in for the prolonged hug, and I showed Antiope some pictures I'd printed out before coming.

"He doesn't resemble you or Damian," she said, sounding puzzled.

"There are so many generations between us that it's not unexpected," I said. "But his heart may be the best of us."

It took awhile to go through the pictures; I'd brought a lot of Daniel, of course, some of the family, and no few of the Justice League and the museum where Diana worked, so that her family could see some of the choices she'd made. Hippolyta and Diana joined us, and Diana expanded on the photographs with stories. I'd been there for some of them, and we laughed about Hawkman; she explained my running smack down on him and they smiled. She told the story about the miniseries that had been made about Damian and me and the family legend that had arisen we came back to give them hell. The two older Amazons didn't really approve of mass culture, especially when it was used to distort the truth, but they laughed all the same at my visit to my descendants. And Diana had brought some photographs of her own, including one from the security feed that showed Valkyrie in the raid to free my uncle, one at the Vatican in my new armor, and another, also at the Vatican, of me putting a tourniquet on that first frightened man. Antiope said that she looked forward to seeing me fly and fight, and with that, we left the pictures with them and we rejoined the party. Iris was asleep, her head on Martha's lap.

Melia, the Amazon's horse mistress, asked permission to take Iris and Martha riding the next day during the meeting, having heard how enthusiastic Iris was about horses. Martha had struck up friendships with some of the other Amazons, and their next day was planned out, exploring the island while Torunn and I sat in on the meeting Diana wanted to have with her mother and chief counselors, the other reason for the visit. It sounded a lot more fun than my day would be.

I found myself talking to Kasia. After some conversation, she said that she knew Diana's private purpose in bringing me along and asked if Diana was happy with Daniel.

"She seems to be," I said. "And he is certainly happy with her." She nodded.

"We have a courtship ritual here," she said after a bit of reflection. "I believe that Diana would value it if her partner made the effort." There was a silence. "Diana and I were a pair before she left for mans' world. It was not meant to be for us, but I still value her happiness."

"What should he do?"

"It begins with the presentation of a nectarine seed strung as a necklace, as a hoped-for bounty, and a bracelet of thorns bound with red, blue, and gold ribbons. The red signifies danger, the blue signals hope, and the gold is a request for Athena to bless the union. These tokens are displayed to the one being courted and placed on her person, to be worn until a union is agreed to or the courtship ends. Until that determination is made, the couple tests each other physically, emotionally, and mentally to ensure that they can endure life's trials together. The nature of the
trials varies from couple to couple, based on their experiences and expectations. I could show you how they are made, and you could show her beloved. It doesn't take long to do." I smiled.

"Daniel would love to do that for her," I said, certain of his enthusiasm, and we agreed to meet in my room after the next day's activities.

The party was winding down, and Iris, awake again, chattered to me about what she'd seen as we returned to our room. She was invigorated by the nap, and finally I had to tell her I'd agreed to riding lessons for her the next day, but if she wanted to do that, she had to get a good night's sleep first. That did the trick, and I was finally able to go to sleep myself.
Vulnerabilities

We found Hessia in the main temple, a building like a smaller Parthenon made from native stone, gracefully weathered, and open on one side. There were no doors. It was empty aside from a brazier where a fire perpetually burned. Beautifully carved, human-sized sculptures of the five patron goddesses were arranged in an arc. Lovely Hestia sat by the brazier as if tending the flames; its light licked the pale, fine stone gently and made her carved, kind face seem alive. An epiblema covered her hair and shoulders. Next to her stood Demeter, her face tranquil although worn with care. Tiny metal pins, beautifully worked, were set where brooches would have held her peplos on her arms and shoulders and she held a sheaf of wheat and a pomegranate was under the toe of her sandal. Artemis was slightly larger than the other figures, her face stern and focused. Her short chiton was carved so it looked as though she stood in a breeze, and it looked as if she was in the process of drawing her arrow as she brought the bow up to firing position. Unlike veiled Hestia and Athena with her helmet, and Demeter and Aphrodite with their hair up and carefully styled, Artemis was shown with her hair in a slightly unwinding braid. Aphrodite to her other side had a gentle smile on her face, her peplos seeming lighter and more revealing than the others, girdled by a belt not dissimilar to Hippolyta's. She carried an apple in her hand. At the far end of the arc was Athena, her helm set back on her head so that you could see her narrow, knowing gaze. Her shield with a representation of Medusa's head (I suddenly wondered if she was with the other Gorgons behind the Doors of Doom) leaned against her leg, and the butt of a spear rested on the ground, held firmly in her hand. It was a plain weapon but had a beautifully worked point. The skill of the carvers was such that it appeared that the statues could start breathing and moving at any point.

After allowing Torunn and me to wonder at the exquisite sculpture, Diana led us around the grouping, where there was an odd smell in the air. I couldn't keep my nose from wrinkling, and Hessia turned from a crack in the wall that extended down into the floor. "I am not an oracle such as was found in Apollo's Delphi," she said quietly. "I am not struck with ambiguous visions that can be made to fit a variety of circumstances. This part of the temple allows petitioners a place to relax and put themselves into a state where they can hear the words of the goddesses. My role is to give voice to the goddesses when they would speak, but they also take my memories of the words; thus the communication remains strictly with the goddess and the petitioner." We followed Diana's reluctant example and knelt in silence, and after a time, I felt relaxed and open, but with a feeling like my cells buzzed with energy. When Hessia spoke again, her voice held that peculiar resonance that Menalippe's had held too.

"What has been said was not meant to wound," she said sternly. "But the truth has value and should be known." Her voice changed, becoming lighter and alluring. "You should know the depth and source of your powers," she said compassionately. More austerely, "And what your sisters suffered, so that none others must endure." In a husky voice, "You should know the trials of your mother, that she be honored for her sacrifice." The warmer, more beguiling voice: "Let not your heart grow cold and closed, but let it embrace those who bear different burdens." The stern voice: "War is coming. Clear your mind of hurts and face the gathering threat, determining where your part in the knot is and how you can act, swiftly and with the best plans and intent. Stand not upon ceremony. None can stand alone." And the warmest voice, comforting: "None of you is alone. You have love everywhere and comrades by your sides. You must have faith in your purpose and abilities and the love that is in your hearts, for where there is love there is home."

My head started to ache and I rubbed my forehead and temples. When I looked up, Hessia was looking at us with compassion. My companions also seemed to be in discomfort. "There is always a price for communication with the goddesses," she said gently. "Go now into the fresh air and to lunch, to restore yourselves. Your public commitments are not yet over."
Once we were away from the temple and the vapors cleared from my lungs, I said, "It was a lot easier to communicate with Odin. He usually just yelled." Torunn grinned at me for this description of her grandfather, and even Diana managed a small smile. We went to the plaza where meals were commonly taken, and after eating lightly, Diana stood.

"The demonstration of your skill will take place mid-afternoon; you have time to rest and prepare," she said to me. "I will return in time for it." She turned and strode away for some alone time.

"Is Diana well?" Mala said, coming to our sides, a worried expression on her face.

"She unexpectedly had words with her mother," I said, finishing my cup of water. "It upset her." Mala nodded. "But she'll be fine, she just needs a moment by herself."

Mala nodded and her face cleared. She began asking Torunn questions about Asgard, and I excused myself. I hadn't expected any of Hippolyta's story and it had rocked me. The casual misogyny of my youth was nothing compared to what the Amazons had endured, and even the rougher, more malignant treatment of women in Valhalla was better. But what the Joker had tried to do to me was similar. I walked out of the city, smiling back at the curious faces, until I reached the western cliffs. They were deserted, and I sat down, dangling my feet over the edge, letting go of the tensions of the day and emptying my mind.

"Am I intruding?" a voice asked hesitantly, and I opened my eyes to see Hippolyta standing a distance away, her fingers twisting together.

"Not at all," I said, standing and brushing off bits of grass. "Now I understand why Diana wanted to come back before she told our council of her suspicions. It's never easy to battle a god, and every scrap of knowledge will help. This is a wonderful place, and I am grateful that she invited me here," I said conversationally.

"Even after what passed in the council chamber?" she asked, and I nodded.

"There's a feeling of sisterhood here that I haven't felt since before Ragnarok. There's a kind of... resonance, or something, that comes from being around others of your own sex, with the same goals and cause, bound together by more than circumstance, a shared and disciplined goal. I miss it. Out of dozens of us, less than a dozen survived, and of that number, only four of us returned to Midgard, which is what the Asgardians call the outer world here. And while there are four of us, I'm the only one with wings still. It makes a difference, however slight. The others miss their wings."

"I worry about Diana and what she will do," her mother admitted quietly.

I paused, thinking, and choosing my words with some care. "Diana isn't naive, and she knew the basic history of your people. I don't think she knew much of the specifics, though."

"No, no one cares to revisit those dark days." I nodded.

"I was kidnapped and raped by a man who planned to break me, body, mind, and spirit. But I was able to get away, and in doing so, beat him up pretty badly, and I've done it again since, the man can't take no for an answer. So I understand your experiences in a way that Diana does not. I almost envy you your sisters in the ordeal, however."

"Not so they could share the degradation, but because they gave you a reason to persevere, a source of strength, a reason to be strong. It's a lot easier to give up when it's just you. I wonder, not often these days, I have other nightmares, how long I would have lasted myself. But I don't think Diana ever faced that ordeal for herself, and she has been a lone Amazon out in the world. She hasn't carried the burden of
leadership other than in combat with the League, I don't think. She doesn't know how to really understand those sacrifices, and as yet, she isn't a mother. I haven't had to sacrifice one of my children the way you have when she went outside the mist, and all my children were wanted, so I don't have an identical experience to yours, but there are enough similarities that I'm very sympathetic. My older son followed his father and grandfather fighting the criminals of our city, and that can be very dangerous although at least I usually knew where he was. My guess is that Diana's been hit with a lot of stuff she doesn't really know what to do with just yet. I can't claim to know her well because she is a very private person, but she is also the most fair person I have ever met. I think it will take her some time for her to come to grips with what she's learned."

"Do you think that she will forgive me?" The queen sounded uncharacteristically vulnerable. I considered.

"I honestly don't think that there's anything that you need to ask forgiveness for, unless it's for not telling her the entire truth at some point before now. Because you all had valid reasons for what you did, and I can't say that they're still not valid, based on what little I've observed here. Your society isn't perfectly harmonious and peaceful; I've seen differences of opinions and that's natural, as everybody has their own ideas and desires. Your sisterhood is closed and contained, which means that controversy has to be handled very carefully. It's not a responsibility I envy. And once Diana has had time to think about it--and if she wants to speak of it, I will always be available to her--I think she'll understand that. She needs to respect your choice, at the very least," I said firmly.

"I pray that it is so," she said. "That she will understand that there are things I did to protect her, and things that I did to protect my sisters, and I did what I could to reconcile the two responsibilities."

"I think that she will. It's a lot to take in, and it isn't a pleasant history to hear."

She let out an exhalation and looked over the sea to the mist in the difference. "This is the only time I have been grateful for the knowledge that she will depart."

"She'll come back," I said confidently. Hippolyta gave me a side eye but didn't comment. I smiled. "Mothers and daughters often fight and disagree, it's not the end of your relationship, and you're far from the first mother not to tell her daughter a painful truth. She's upset and confused right now, is all."

"Based on my experience, I am. Martha was the more rambunctious of the twins, but Iris' brother Miles is the troublemaker of her set. I've spent plenty of time in the trenches."
light when judging the temperature of metal by color wasn't necessary. It was nice to talk shop; I enjoyed having some commonality with an Amazon, and she came with us when it was time to return to the field.

Martha came back in time to watch, but it had been agreed that Iris would be kept away. For one thing, I didn't want her to know about the wings just yet, until I was sure she could understand why I needed to keep them quiet as long as I could. I honestly didn't think that I could keep them a secret forever back home, but I didn't want to deal with the fuss until I had to. And now I wondered if she and Miles would be hurt that they weren't told before. Well, I never claimed to be a perfect mom, I just did what I thought was right and fair. And secondly, I didn't want her to see me get hurt, which I would, armor or not. Diana was a scary good fighter and she had a lot of emotion that could fuel her for awhile. I wasn't a pushover by any means, but Iris had cried a couple of months ago when I'd cut myself fixing some veggies for her for a snack when Alfred was otherwise engaged. I stretched and listened to the field fill. Somebody dropped to the grass beside me, and I looked over to see Torunn, stretching herself. She gave me a quick smile, and when I got up, she was up to help me.

"I can gear up myself," I offered. "You've got your own to do."

She shook her head. "You're up first," she said, kneeling to deftly fasten my greaves. Martha grinned and handed me my breastplate, fastening it at the back and putting the pauldrons over my shoulders into place before stepping back to allow Torunn to clip the cape into place. Torunn then buckled the vambraces over my forearms.

Martha stepped back and watched approvingly, then frowned a bit. "Mom, the color scheme and general look of the thing, aside from the helmet, and your wings, of course, looks a whole lot like Uncle Bucky's new identity of the Winter Knight." I also frowned. "Not a surprise, really, since Uncle Steve designed the costume and you did the armor. But you might want to think about that if you're going to be a lone vigilante."

I huffed out a breath and thought about it. "You're probably right." Then I grinned back at her. "You don't think the little skirt is enough of a difference?" She laughed, but stopped when she saw Diana enter the field. She looked grim. I sighed and slid my hands into the gauntlets that Torunn and Martha held for me, flexing my fingers to get them settled just so for the fight. "Ok, Torunn, hold off entering the field until I can't stand my ground anymore," I instructed. She met my eyes and nodded. Martha looked inquisitive, but held her question. I shook out my hands, did a last-minute weapons check, and strode out to the middle of the field, my armor causing the Amazons to comment. I reached Diana, saw the anger simmering in her eyes, and mentally heaved a sigh. We clasped arms and turned to salute the queen. Diana sketched a slight bow, and I raised my sword. I don't bow to Odin, so I'm not going to bow to anybody else, but an acknowledgement was appropriate and I like to observe the niceties, be a good guest. I stepped to the side and turned to face Diana.
Origin

Diana had warned me that the Amazons were early risers and came to wake me herself. False dawn was lighting the sky, and Iris was reluctant to get up until I reminded her about the horses. Then she bolted out of bed. Diana and I grinned. After breakfast, Melia came to claim Iris for their ride, and Martha was swept up by what looked like as many Amazons as could manage it for a tour of the islands and swimming in the sea. I sighed mentally. It sucks to be responsible sometimes.

But I was curious and concerned about the counsel Diana wanted from her mother. It had to be significant, to come here and go through all the welcoming and such that she had with every return. The Amazons didn't have the concept of 'low key' and probably would reject it if it was explained to them. Torunn and I went into the council chamber with Diana, Antiope, Hippolyta, and Cydippe, who attached herself to the princess and quickly and quietly brought her up to date as we waited for Philippus, Hellene, Menalippe, the high priestess, Hessia, the chief oracle, and Hupsele, a senator. Since what Diana had come to discuss concerned the exterior world, the full Senate and council were not in session, but these women were among the wisest and most experienced Amazons, and it was thought necessary to include as many so that if this matter touched on the Amazons, the basic information would be there and ready to be shared.

Together, Diana and I gave them a briefing about terrorism, supervillains, and the cadres of defenders, specifically the Avengers and Justice League, in order to lay the groundwork for the revelation of Typhon, the new supergroup of villainous all-stars. We took our time with the explanations and answered questions so that those assembled would have a clear understanding of what was going on. The Amazons were disgusted by these goings-on; evidence, to them, of the corruption of man's world. Then Diana placed a 3D projector on the table, to both my surprise and Torunn's. Diana activated it, and news accounts of the devastation in Rome played. The casualty and fatality count was included in the last report. "I didn't think that the technology would work here, for some reason," Torunn whispered to me, and I nodded.

"I thought that magic would interfere somehow," I whispered back. "We need to be careful about making assumptions." If I'd known that the projectors worked here, I'd have scrapped the paper photographs and put it all in a display. I should have asked.

"One action that was overlooked in the chaos was that the Forum of Augustus had been altered; the site of the temple of Mars Ultor had been swept clean and the monastery that had been built on it simply... removed. And since then, equally quietly, other sites of former temples have been cleared. Significantly, the temple of Ares in the Agora of Athens." There was a great indrawn breath. "I believe that Ares, assisted by Nemesis, the sons of Ares--Deimos and Phobos, and Circe, are at the heart of the organization Typhon. I further believe that their goal is to gain a foothold in the wider world before coming to threaten Themyscira." After a profound silence, Diana asked, "Are the Doors of Doom secure?"

Hippolyta stared at her daughter. "As secure as ever they were."

"I have worked over time to help the world forget the monsters, to think of them as legend instead of flesh and blood, that none search for them. In this I am aided by scholars who see the chthonic monsters as parables and fables, but there are those who would search for them, or at least traces of them, to win recognition," Diana said. "But Ares knows the truths of the stories. And where he may find them."

"We protect the gateways, and the goddesses protect Themyscira," Hippolyta returned.
"Trust not in the actions of the gods." This came, surprisingly, from Antiope. "You know we have been abandoned by them before."

Hippolyta was silent.

"Mother, queen of our kind, I beg you to add guards to the Doors," Diana implored. "Even if the gods betray us, we still have each other and our strength."

"It may not be enough." I looked at Menalippe in alarm at her words. This didn't sound good. She kept staring at the table, and dismissed Cydippe, Hessia, Hupsele, Hellene, and Philippus. After they had left, baffled, she raised her eyes to her queen. "Tell them." Hippolyta went pale. "All of it."

"Mother?" Diana said, confused, after the silence had spun out.

"You know that Heracles came to us and tricked me with his pledge of friendship and thus stole the girdle of invincibility," she said after a moment. "And that we were plunged into slavery as a result. That the goddesses helped us, and we escaped here."

"Yes."

Another silence.

"But this is not the whole of the truth." The queen sighed. Antiope took her hand and squeezed hard. The sound of her manacle as it hit the table was discordant. "The truth is this. Heracles was the son of wandering Zeus and Alcmene, and when Hera learned of him, she hated him as proof of her husband's infidelity. Heracles is not the most stable of the children of Zeus, and his instability and tendencies toward violence made it easy for Hera to warp his mind, resulting in the slaughter of one of his wives and their children. To purify himself of his crimes, he was set to twelve tasks by King Eurystheus. One of those tasks was to obtain the girdle given us by Aphrodite. And so he came to us wearing the false face of a friend, pledging alliance. I was naive and believed him, for he swore an oath. But he captured the girdle and his men poured into our city, bringing with them manacles with chains one pēchys long. And thus we were enslaved, our strength and power obliterated by our chains. They looted the city, and after many hours, left it burning and in ruins, dragging their captives to the boats. Heracles gave our leaders to his boon companions and let his men fight over the rest. There were not enough Amazons for every man.

"He waited until we reached the land and the temple of Artemis, where he forced himself upon me on the altar. His men watched and laughed, to see the Amazons brought so low. And so we were enslaved, our strength and power obliterated by our chains. They looted the city, and after many hours, left it burning and in ruins, dragging their captives to the boats. Heracles gave our leaders to his boon companions and let his men fight over the rest. There were not enough Amazons for every man.

"And thus we suffered in torment. Some of our sisters were broken. Others, too proud to endure, cast themselves from the cliffs. Others were casually slain by those who dared call themselves our masters. But many of us endured. And Heracles was the cause of his own downfall.

"The subjection of our kind to his rule was a thing he was most proud of. He wore the pelt of the Nemean lion constantly; he had refused to be parted from it long enough to have it properly tanned, so it smelled and attracted flies, but he thought nothing of this. He would stroke the pelt and boast how he had conquered us, and lay with me, and how he would make me submit to him in spirit as he had in body. He beat me when I did not demonstrate his virility by bearing him a son. Eventually, Zeus heard his boasts, and, unwilling as he is to be outshone by any body, assumed a
human guise and found me. If I would lay with him and please him, he said, and refrain from killing his son Heracles, he would permit the goddesses to act on our behalf."

She paused to retain control over her emotions. "And so to rescue the sisters who were left to me, I prostituted myself to Zeus, and feigned passion well enough to secure his compliance. Sated, he stated that he would hold to our bargain, and he left.

"It was some time before he redeemed his promise. I was always kept in complete isolation from my sisters, a separate torture. But one night, when he was full of drink, he came to the small chamber where I was restricted, with the girdle around his wrist, and he taunted me with it. I waited until he had thrown his head back to laugh, then plucked it from his wrist and over my own. I gained strength enough to take his sword and sever the chain on my manacles, and then... I did not kill my captor, as I had promised Zeus, but I did exercise... a certain creativity, and left him broken and bleeding on the floor, unable to follow. Or speak.

"Aided by the darkness, I crept from dwelling to dwelling, killing the men within, taking their swords, breaking my sisters' chains, and handing them swords, and so we spread out and liberated those of us as were left. Not all granted their captors a clean death; others chose to mutilate them instead. We did not kill the women or children, but those who tried to prevent our leaving were beaten. And those women who asked were permitted to join us. And we made our way to the boats and took them all. Once upon the ocean, we tended our wounds, and Athena appeared before us and told us where to set our sails to. And at length, the mists parted for our ships, and we found ourselves in this harbor, our new home. We dismantled all but the smallest ships and used them to begin building our city.

"I walked around the main island to learn its contents, what I would be leaving to my sisters, for I had discovered a lump which I thought would eventually kill me. And while I was exploring, Artemis and Aphrodite appeared to me, and I knelt before them to give thanks for their assistance. They warned me against trusting men, and Aphrodite bent and touched my body, and told me that I was with child. I wailed in rejection and begged the goddess to get rid of it. And Artemis, still outraged over Heracles' violation of her temple, would have done so, but Aphrodite stayed her hand.

"'It is the get of Zeus,' she warned. 'You dare not,'" and I begged, and Aphrodite leaned forward again, and at the touch of her hand, I felt tugging and pain, and when it was over, the goddess held the tiniest infant in her hands. My stomach was flat, and I realized then, having had no contact with my sisters who had borne children or having done it myself, only hearing of the fate of the infants from Heracles' taunts, that I had not been afflicted with a tumor at all. And she showed me the babe. "She is the result of your bargain with Zeus," she said. "And she is blameless for the deeds of her father or half-brother, whatever their crimes against you may be." She fell silent, and I looked at the child, who opened her eyes and looked at me. I had not wanted the child, but Aphrodite is the embodiment of all love, not only erotic love, and the love of a mother for her child filled me.

"Then, Menalippe came over the rise and saw us all, seeing for herself the truth, and pointed out to the goddesses that if Hera learned of the child, she would kill her. Artemis summoned Athena, Demeter, and Hestia. By this time, others had been drawn to the place, and Aphrodite claimed that she had created this child as a symbol of our return of our freedom, telling us all that the manacles we wore were to be worn from that day forward as a remembrance of what we had endured and what we had gained and thus I was permitted to keep the child. Demeter blessed us all with the ability to recover strength and health through joining with the earth when the need was greatest, and to you, Diana, specifically, strength that outstrips the rest of us. Athena blessed you with exceptional intelligence, wisdom, and military prowess. Artemis enhanced your senses. Hestia gave you sisterhood with all fire, including the fire that embues your lasso with the ability to
demand the truth, and to withstand burning from flame. And Aphrodite graced you with beauty and a mighty heart. Hermes, drawn by the presence of the goddesses and the last male to stand upon the soil of Themyscria, was charmed by your laugh and bestowed upon you superhuman speed.

"And over time, we prospered, and we healed from our physical wounds, and the passage of years soothed the torment from our minds and spirits. A few of our sisters, plagued by the deaths of their children, ventured forth into the world again until they could return with a child to ease their grief. The gift of Aphrodite to me was that you grew so slowly. The children that the other Amazons brought back were grown before you could lift a sword, and this was put down to your earthly creation rather than a far premature birth. It allowed you to grow and be loved and learn, for the blessings of the goddesses made it inevitable that you would be sent into the world of man. Athena made your bracelets invulnerable to any weapon of man and brought the shield and sword and greaves, forged by Hephaestus himself; Hestia left the lasso of truth for you, and Aphrodite designed your clothing so that you would be protected but still graceful and lovely. And, when Zeus had had his tolerance for his son's temper and murderous ways exceeded, he allowed the goddesses to imprison him in a pillar beneath the islands and create the prison for the monsters of the age, closing him in with them. And so they have remained, behind the doors that we have sealed shut and guarded as a sacred trust to the goddesses. We will not fail in our task."

"And this is the truth of our past that none outside this chamber know," Menalippe said soberly. "You cannot know how high emotions rode; if the others had known that the queen had been impregnated during our slavery, you would have been killed immediately, Diana, goddesses or no. And secrecy served two purposes--your safety from the Amazons and also from Hera. It is not known if Zeus is aware that you are his daughter. I do not believe so. I think our secret is kept. And while our spirits have been soothed by the long passage of time, it is still not wise to allow the circumstances of your birth to be known to all our sisters. There are those Amazons who disagree with the queen on various matters and who would use this knowledge to spread dissent. And to a few of us, whose healing may never be complete, the knowledge that Hippolyta willingly lay with a male who had power over our captivity would not be borne, no matter the reason. I do not know what for their actions might be, but it might end in her death, and yours as well when you returned to take up rule as you must. And that is too much to risk." She looked at Torunn and me, her eyes piercing. "I trust that your companions will not betray you either." I returned her gaze, although it was hard, and turned to Diana. her face leeched of color.

I felt immense sorrow for her; it was a lot to take in, and to find out that your mother and everyone she loved here had kept the truth of something so important about her from her had to be devastating, no matter that there were good reasons for it. "Diana," I said gently; her eyes were wide, unblinking, and fixed on her mother. I patted her hand where it had curled into a fist. It was cold.

"You should have told me," she whispered finally. "I deserved to know that, Queen Hippolyta." Her mother's face went ashy at the words and Diana stood, the movement uncharacteristically jerky, and turned for the door.

"Diana, don't go out there," I said, standing in front of her. "Not like this. I know this is a shock and I don't know how you must be hurting, but if you leave now, so upset, you'll be inviting more questions than you will want to answer now. Don't go out until you can control yourself and your response." Her expression was hard as granite, but then she nodded once, and moved over to the windows that overlooked the sea, turning her back on the table.

I sat down again. "So what I think we need is assurance that the gates are well guarded, and I would like to suggest that it wouldn't hurt to augment your guard and possibly a lookout over the sea, as far as to the mist."
"What's behind those doors?" Torunn asked. "If they escape into the world, we need to know what
we'll be facing. But unless that happens, the knowledge will kept with us alone."

"The creatures that D-- that we understand to be considered myths in your world," Antiope said to
me after a slight pause. "We do not have guardianship over the Titans; that remains with Hades.
And he has custody of Cerberus, but behind the doors with Hercules is the Minotaur, giants,
Cyclopes who refuse to serve their father Hephaestus, the Arae, daemons, Empusa, Enceladus,
Gegenees, Gigantes, gorgons, some of the Dracaenae, drakons, Karkenos--" she broke off. "An
accurate accounting does not exist. Athena appeared periodically, placed a creature within, and the
doors were barred again."

Great. Ok, we needed to track down descriptions of all the mythological creatures we could, and
get ideas how to fight them if they showed up. And this would probably be down to Torunn and
me, in case Diana couldn't help. I had no idea how long she'd need to sort through her feelings, but
I knew that when we needed her she would show up. We could afford to give her this time.

"And what can you tell us of this Ares that does not lay in the land of myth?" Torunn asked.

"He is the god of war; it is his nature and cannot be changed." Torunn and I exchanged a glance;
her uncle Loki, the trickster god, also could not repress his nature indefinitely. He played practical
jokes to bleed it off, but when the pressure of his nature got too much, he went abroad in the Nine
Realms, causing mischief. This method of control freed him from creating widespread and
destructive chaos. "Athena is also a goddess of war, but she is concerned with strategy, the intellect
of combat. Ares is the bloodlust, the chaos of combat. He loves its energy, it feeds him. Eris calls
forth war and Zeus directs it, but Ares revels in its destruction, its savagery and excess. But when
he can be turned, he is the benign side of men at arms: civil order as secured by force. His size
increases on the battlefield and he is known for his kinship with serpents. Yet he is handsome and
Aphrodite finds something within him to love. He can be defeated; Athena did so herself. So it is
not impossible for others to control him, as Diana herself has done in the past. But be aware that the
gods cannot be truly killed."

Torunn and I absorbed this; she was having some difficulty because the gods of the Norse
pantheon--her kin--behaved very differently. "Is there a way for us to signal you from the mainland
if the worse happens and Ares declares himself openly?" I asked.

"We may not be able to spare Diana to come warn you," Torunn said gravely, and Antiope nodded.

"The temple on the Acropolis in what was once Athens was dedicated to Athena," Hippolyta
murmured. "A fire lit on the alter there, if it still exists, will cause a matching one here to flare."

"The Parthenon still exists," I said, then chewed my lip, considering. "It was stripped of the great
ivory statue of the goddess, its treasury, everything, in antiquity. But the government of Greece has
been trying to fund a complete restoration. It's been difficult, because there are so many projects
and a very finite amount of money available. Their will is strong, though, because now everybody
knows that the gods do in fact exist and nobody wants to upset them. Balanced against that is the
reality that there was a huge population boom that is still putting strain on economies. One bad
drought in a major agricultural area and the food supply could be stressed to the breaking point." I
shook my head. Daniel had agricultural scientists working on drought-resistant crops and
conversely also crops that will tolerate more water than usual. "I know that there are some funds
available now. I'll prepare a bid when I go home to start the rebuilding. It may not be soon enough,
though." I looked at Menalippe. "Does the altar have to be consecrated for the fire link to work?"

"I do not know," she said. "I will work with Hessia and see if we can obtain an answer from the
goddess. Presumably she can work through someone in the world of man to get you the answer."
"Fair enough," I said. "If she'll appoint a priestess, it will help things move faster. Maybe she could approve the consecration of the altar before reconstruction and restoration of the ruin of the temple began." Menalippe nodded.

We got the answers to all the questions we could think to ask, then there was an awkward silence. Diana was still rigid by the windows.

Menalippe stood, and when she spoke, her voice was changed and charged with a depth and dimension that it had lacked. The hairs on my arms rose a bit and I felt that she was drawing power from her goddesses. "Go and seek Hessia and hear what she will relate." She turned, gathered Antiope and Hippolyta with a gesture, and they quit the chamber.

Torunn and I exchanged glances, and we went over to Diana. Her face had softened, but her eyes were filled with the pain of what felt to her like a betrayal. "Let's go find Hessia, hear what she has to say, then return to our chambers and you can let it all out. We were talking about that demonstration of my wings this afternoon; why don't you bout with me, and you can work out some of your feelings that way." I hoped I wouldn't regret it. I may be a mutant, stronger and tougher, but Diana was a demigod. Torunn, standing slightly behind Diana, gave me a look that promised that she'd come in on my side if I needed her.

I let out a breath of relief when Diana slumped a bit and agreed. We left the room in search of the oracle.
The Amazon wasted no time and attacked, and I let the first wave of action pass just on the defense. I'd fought with her before, but never squared off against her, and I wasn't sure what her abilities were. Batman called her the best melee fighter he'd ever seen, and I now knew Amazons in general possess various degrees of superhuman strength, speed, stamina, enhanced durability, and that was just the baseline. From Hippolyta's account, I knew she'd been juiced up with gifts directly from the goddesses.

I might not have her gifts, but I have my own. Some, like my dance combat skills and kinetic energy absorption, were mutations from my long-ago lab accident, and I had the benefit of training in several different combat styles over a long period of time. I'd listened to what Professor X had classified as limited tactical precognition and loaded up for this fight with everything that felt right. I had the tactics and strategy of the valkyries, and we fought afoot as well as on the wing. So I let her spend the flare of anger without betraying much of my own abilities (not easy, she was incredibly strong and her blows were heavy), then, when she seemed to feel more confident (her tells were small and subtle) I went on the attack.

Her eyes widened in surprise as I released the stored kinetic energy in my first attack, geared to strength moves, showering her with blows although I wasn't trying to hurt her. Then I switched tactics and focused more on agility; leaning back to let her sword pass over me, dropping to my knees, spinning, and kicking her legs out from under her. I scored a few points against her (nobody was keeping score, it was whoever defeated who that counted) but it just pissed her off and she poured it on. I felt that I was on a dangerous precipice where our friendly bout teetered on the edge of something pretty unfriendly and I backed my intensity off a little to keep the bout from escalating into real combat.

She achieved first blood, her sword cutting through my vambrace, but the cut didn't incapacitate that arm. Her original sword had been destroyed in her first battle with Ares, but her new sword was also called "God Killer" and I was starting to realize what that meant. Maybe I should swallow my pride and look around for a blacksmith god myself.

I struck the sword away with my shield, spun away, and launched a spray of shuriken at her on the last arc of the turn. While researching Gambit, I'd seen how he flicked his kinetic cards out so elegantly, and while I couldn't manage his coverage, grace, or impact, I'd gotten up to launching four shuriken at at time. Two of them she batted away, but two struck her, and her expression darkened.

"Shit," I meeped.

Her next attack was savage and drove me back. God Killer raked through my armor again and again, and I stumbled back, knocking against the spear I'd driven into the ground. I wrenched it out of the ground as Diana raised her arm again and I charged her, jumping up and using her thigh to launch myself into the air. The wings snapped out and I gained some altitude, feeling a slight relief, but my wings weren't as strong as they'd been during Fimbulwinter and the runup to Ragnarok. I just didn't have the time—or the desire, actually— for that kind of training anymore. I'd have to fight on the ground again, but I could use my maneuverability in three axes to my advantage for a bit, give my legs a rest.

I scored on her with my spear a few times, using the spear both for its point and as a bo, which didn't improve her mood any, and scored her shield and also damaged her bracelets, which she only seemed to wear as Wonder Woman or here on the islands. She brought me down to earth by roping
my ankle with her lasso and pulling. The crash landing hurt but I kicked my ankle free before she thought to pull on it and jumped to my feet. God Killer cleaved the shaft of the spear, and she swiftly pulled my sword out of my hand. I took this opportunity to go for hand to hand, wrenching God Killer away and tossing it as far as I could, and this worked a great deal better than I thought it would. The Amazons had a wrestling tradition, but their combat was almost exclusively with weapons. She wasn't successful at defending against my hybrid fighting style although she picked up aspects somewhat as we went. Damn Athena's gifts, anyway. I kept my wings out and used them as weapons, both the treated feathers and the wings themselves to hit her.

I was doing ok until she retrieved her sword and her sword split my breastplate and the tac fabrics beneath it, scraping along a rib. I staggered back, and Torunn leaped into the fray, redirecting her attack, but Diana blew past her.

"I yield!" I said loudly, and the field, which had been silent, swelled with noise again.

But Diana didn't stop. I pulled the short sword out of the spine sheath, but she batted that away too and I pulled out my last weapons, my knives. Three of the throwing knives scored on her, but I was down to my dagger. I attacked, which did nothing, then wrapped my wings around me for protection. The edge of the blade glanced off the reinforced feathers, and she changed her attack and stabbed. The point slid between the feathers and perforated my wing.

Damn, that hurt.

I yanked out a feather—which also hurt-- and slashed, opening a cut on her neck but not hitting a blood vessel, fortunately. Diana rocked back, and at that, the bloodlust and fury left her eyes. She looked shocked, then ashamed, and I turned from her as my daughter hustled up with the emergency kit I kept with my weapons. Amazons came onto the field as Torunn and Martha hastily stripped off my armor. I mopped off my torso and used a wealth of butterfly bandages on the cut to my ribs, then let Torunn do a battlefield dressing on the cut to my arm. Martha swiped at smaller cuts before applying gauze and tape, and the healer Althea dropped her own bag beside me and began applying liniments and powders to slow the bleeding. Torunn held the feathers out of the way, and Althea treated the puncture, through and through, to the wing, stopping the slow trickle of blood dripping off my feathers. I was going to have a new scar to add to my collection. Other Amazons did what they could, and under Martha's direction, placed my arms and armor back in their bags.

There was minimal noise, so it was easy to hear the approach of horses. Martha and I locked eyes, panicked, and an Amazon ran to head them off so that Iris wouldn't see. I had to wait a bit for the treatment to stabilize the wound on my wing, then carefully folded them and put them away. I could feel the injury as an ache on my back, and wearily accepted Antiope's helping hand, letting her pull me to my feet.

I waited until I got to my quarters before groaning as I lowered myself to the bed. "Mom?" Martha asked anxiously.

"Bruised and battered, but I'll live, honey," I said. "What I wouldn't give for a tissue accelerator before your dad sees."

"Will he be upset that you fought?" Antiope said, puzzled.

"No, he just hates to see me banged up," I said, shrugging, then wincing.

"Dad hates to see her in pain," Martha contributed. "Grandpa Thomas said he was a little nuts after Ragnarok, not knowing if she made it through, and until she woke up from the coma, he barely ate
or slept. He'd have done anything to have taken some of her hurts for her."

Althea came in with additional medications and a beverage she swore would help with the healing. It tasted vile, and I figured it was a diversionary tactic; you were so affected by the taste, which lingered, that you neglected to feel your other aches and pains as acutely. I cleaned up, taking a fast shower, and getting rebandaged before dressing. Althea was uncharacteristically a little dithery when it came to my wing, but I pointed out that tissue is tissue, the sail of the wing had no muscle or organs, and she took the opportunity to examine new-to-her anatomy, finishing with a therapeutic massage. I felt a lot better after that, and when we emerged to relax in the plaza, Iris ran up to me and chattered happily about everything she'd seen, cuddling up to my side, and other Amazons looked on indulgently and added their own observations. I was told that she was a good horsewoman. Iris piped up that she'd learned to stand on horseback while the horse was moving, and Melia looked a little panicked. From the wide-eyed look that Iris gave her, I surmised it was meant to be a secret.

"Go slow when you're around your dad and Uncle Daniel, and always be careful," I told her. "There's only one Iris and I like her in the condition she's in." Iris chirped her laugh and wiggled onto my lap. Her little butt hit one of the worst bruises coming up and I winced, but since her head was on my shoulder she didn't see. I put my arms around her and enjoyed the cuddle. She was growing so fast; it would feel like a blink before she felt herself too old for a cuddle from her mom. Those around us weren't talking about the fight, but others, farther away were, apparently, from the way they were looking over at us. Torunn joined us, having had bruises and some smaller cuts of her own treated, and we talked until it was time for dinner.

After the meal, musicians played and Hellene took Iris off to teach her some of the dances. Martha plopped down beside me and grinned. "Cydippe took me out beyond the mist and I made a call to GodPop." I grinned back. "And what did Tony say?" I was always amused at her nickname for her godfather.

"He's sending a tissue accelerator to Athens, so we can get things taken care of before we go home. It's one of the portable ones, so we can bring it home with us." Her smile faded. "He said he'll always bet on the valkyries. And also that you should consider a spin-off business to scan and create 3D renderings of important buildings and antiquities. He'll chip in to help make it a public service. The Sistine Chapel is gone."

"Well, I've been worse off, but I didn't win by any stretch of the imagination." Then I explained what a tissue accelerator was to the healer, who was fascinated by the idea. "I'll talk to him about the scanning. It's a good idea." Martha looked like she was ready to burst with PR ideas and started to mutter about getting grants from impressively wealthy foundations. Looked like I'd be rejoining the social whirl that did business again.

Then I looked up as Hippolyta and Antiope escorted Diana over. The whispers around us increased. The queen was stern and waved me back as I started to get up.

"Diana has something to say," she said pointedly, and the princess gave her mother a look.

"I apologize for my conduct," she said soberly. "You graciously offered to bout with me to provide a demonstration of your different skills and abilities for the benefit of the Amazons, and I brought my emotions that turned a friendly bout into something less."

"I kind of expected it," I said, considering. "We've never squared off, but I've seen you fight and knew you would be formidable. So I enlisted help," I indicated Torunn, who smiled slightly. "I've never fought-- an Amazon before, actually. It was a humbling experience." Antiope puffed up a bit
and I tamped down a laugh. I almost said "a demigod," but managed to switch it to "an Amazon" just in time since Diana's true parentage wasn't known to all. I stood up, my muscles protesting, and offered my hand. Diana clasped my arm, and we embraced. "But never forget to leave emotion on the edge of the battlefield," I said soberly. "It will blind you and get you killed." I thought of the berserkers and shuddered. "Unless you're on a suicide mission, clarity of mind will serve you much better." She held my gaze and nodded.

That relaxed the mood; the other Amazons went back to their own conversations, and the three in front of me sat with us for a recap of the fight. Antiope was impressed by the hand to hand skills and asked why, since I had the edge over Diana there, that I didn't do more with that.

"Well, Diana had her sword for most of the match; she's a lot stronger than I am and has more endurance. Hand to hand is definitely a combat that is close quarters; I can use it when there are smaller blades, no longer than a dagger, but a sword, a gun—I have to get in close to take away the weapon and it was simply too dangerous to do that at first. Diana's mental state gave her an initial wave of energy that I had to just ride out, and it wasn't till the end where it was safe to try it. And if the terrain had been more varied, I have tricks I could use, particularly in water."

"Where did you learn that, Mom?" Martha asked, frowning.

"Ninjutsu. Uncle Bucky folded that into my training, and one of the eighteen facets of study in that discipline is the use of water."

"Your combat with Diana was equal to begin with," Hippolyta observed.

"Not really, I was barely holding my own. I have an ability to absorb kinetic energy from blows. It's theoretically limitless, but it has to bend to the limits of my body, and the longer the combat goes on, the weaker that gets. Lactic acid builds up, injuries mount, muscles and joints are affected, glucose is used up." And some of those terms had to be explained, but they nodded in the end.

"I've seen you fight before, but I failed to recognize how slippery your grace in combat made you," Diana said, and I smiled.

"That's my favorite mutation." And I explained how I'd gotten my special abilities, describing the electricity that had jumpstarted the whole mess as lightning that could be controlled, generated on command, and used. "But when I Returned, the doctors said they felt that the whole accident wouldn't have done more than give me electrical and chemical burns if it wasn't for the fact that I came from Dimmock, where fracking fluid contaminated the drinking water supply. That apparently attacked what we used to call 'junk DNA', altering it in ways that didn't express themselves at all. It kind of primed the pump, so to speak." I'd been pleased to have a mechanism for the accident, a reason for it because I'd never been able to account for it. Lab accidents happen all the time and only rarely do they produce anything spectacular.

"Man's world is a dangerous place," Melia said soberly.

"There are dangers aplenty, but that's true anywhere you go. Strange flora is dangerous until you know what's poisonous or hurtful," I pointed out.

We moved on, the Amazons unconvinced. "I wondered to see you assist Alex with her armor," said Antiope to Torunn. "Are you not of the ruling house of your domain?"

"I am," she acknowledged. "But the opportunity to assist a valkyrie is rare, they rarely accept help from one not of their kind, and it is a substantial honor to be permitted to help. They usually arm
themselves, with minimal help from their sisters, and I took advantage of the opportunity. My father, the god of thunder and lightning and the king of Asgard, would have knelt to assist her. The valkyries are the most prized warriors in Valhalla and Alex is special even for them. She was not the combat leader during Ragnarok since one of the others was highly trained in group combat, strategy, and tactics, but she was the best fighter, she taught my father the basics of boxing, my mother hand to hand, and was given the charge of training my brothers and me with blades and unarmed combat styles. My uncle Loki still twits him about the time that Alex defeated him in her first unarmed bout. She makes her own weapons and armor as well. And she is the only being to ever force Odin, the AllFather, to change his policies regarding the role of women in his domain."

"Oh?" Hippolyta asked, fascinated.

"She led a labor uprising," Torunn said eagerly, and told the story of the work stoppage with great relish. I grimaced and corrected her when she strayed from the truth or puffed things up too much.

"I can't believe you backtalked a god," Diana said, half appalled, half admiring.

I shrugged. "Even gods aren't perfect. They're just a lot more powerful than we are, none of them are omnipotent, and they have their own power struggles. What could Odin do? We were already dead, and he needed our services. Relationships have evolved that each side can accept but there's always an inequality of power. Gods, at least the ones I'm familiar with, derive some of their power from the worship of their followers. There's a lot of juice to be had from the form of the devotions--sacrifices, prayer, even just the belief that they exist and can intervene in some manner in our lives. That also gives the people on the other side of the equation some leverage: withhold the devotions and service."

The Amazons were all deeply shocked. Even Diana was nervous, as if a goddess was expected to pop out and punish them for listening to such blasphemy.

"Every person has a breaking point," I said soberly. "When you have nothing left to lose, you're incredibly dangerous. And the situation was unjust and abusive."

"You've shocked our hosts terribly," Martha chided me. "You lived among your gods too long."

"Long enough to know that there's an image that they project to get what they want and to recognize that what's behind that image isn't always that different from me," I said cynically, then looked around. "But that was my experience with one pantheon. The Olympians may be different."

There was an uneasy silence, then Philippus asked about the valkyries, and I explained how a warrior got to Valhalla, that Odin selected them, and what our duties were. Then I had to explain how I personally qualified, both for Valhalla, then the valkyries, that our sisterhood was formed from souls all over the Nine Realms.

"Why didn't you bring the two swords with you?" Torunn asked suddenly. "I never see you with them anymore."

"Because it's known that Alex Barnes fights with them, they're not common weapons, and Valkyrie needs to be different for as long as I can manage it," I said. "And besides, only Hogun could spar with me, and I haven't seen him since Ragnarok. I'm rusty."

"But Uncle Loki said that he was found, near death as you were," she said. "His recovery took even longer than Mother's, but he's fine now." I smiled, glad to hear that. "I will ask Father if Hogun could use a vacation to Midgard." I smiled.
"That would be awesome," I said, and Torunn explained, without being asked, what the big deal was.

"Two swords at once? No shield?" Sofia asked, puzzled. "I would have to see that to judge its merits fairly."

"Perhaps I could make a recording and Diana could bring it with her the next time she comes," Torunn volunteered, and a slight stiffness left Hippolyta as Diana agreed. Then conversation turned to other subjects; before we left the next day, Iphthime, the master architect and the sculptor who had created the representations of the goddesses in the temple, offered to show me some buildings in the city and explain construction methods. I agreed instantly; first-hand knowledge of ancient construction methods were going to be very important, I felt.

Then Iris returned and insisted on showing Martha a dance she'd learned. I smiled as I watched; Martha was so good with her little sister. "Martha mentioned what you went through to bear her and her brother," Hupsele commented tentatively. "Was it the same with the little one? What is the hardest part of motherhood?"

"No," I said gratefully. "Damian wouldn't have cooperated if it meant more of the same, that pregnancy was so awful, but medicine has advanced and I had a pretty normal pregnancy. There isn't anything I wouldn't do for my kids." Then I sighed. "The hardest part of motherhood was learning when to let the kids fight their own battles. Literally and figuratively. Martha is proficient enough with self defense that I don't worry on that score much, but it's also easier to punch somebody than use social mores and conventions as combat." My hands flexed into fists and I shook them out. "Fortunately she's really good at that. Iris is softer and gentler than Martha was, it's going to be easier for her to be hurt. But she needs to learn how to handle that too, it's a part of life, and I'm not being a good mom if I didn't help her figure out how to cope with adversity. Doesn't mean that I won't bleed inside for her." I didn't miss the little wondering look that Diana darted at her mother. Or Hippolyta's covert surveillance of her daughter.

We talked of other things, then, and soon enough Iris came over, drooping from all her day's activities and ready for bed. Well, that made for two of us. We said our goodnights and left the others, including Martha and Torunn, to enjoy the rest of the evening.
I woke up the next morning feeling as sprightly and supple as a plank of redwood. I managed to get out of bed without waking Iris, who unconsciously oozed into the warm place I’d left. After dressing quickly, I went outside into the gentle dawn light and began stretching. It helped, but it also let me know just where each and every bruise and cut was. I lay down in the grass to stretch my piriformis, and looked over as a footstep caught my attention. It was Antiope. She just came over and wordlessly assisted my stretches, then tugged me to my feet. "I wanted to see how you were," she said. "This has been a rather ugly introduction to our home."

"It's been awhile since I had to fight like that," I acknowledged.

Antiope nodded. "Even here, we rarely practice full out."

"I wasn't going full out," I said. "It was supposed to be a friendly bout, not a fight with serious stakes, and with Diana upset, it wasn't wise to push too much. I wanted to show you some of the valkyrie training. If I'd been serious, the damage I inflicted would be a lot greater. To be honest, I didn't really want to hurt her, not in front of the home crowd, her sisters, who haven't seen her since I don't know when. Not to mention her mom."

"You were holding back?"

"Yes. No mistake, Diana is stronger than me and she has a lot of gifts I lack. But I learned techniques from many different traditions and I'm quite good at what I do. Preferentially I don't fight with a sword and shield, and when the stakes are high, I don't scruple to fight dirty. Diana uses only one system of combat and still might have beat me, but she'd have been the worse for wear." Yeah, I know, I'm not the most gracious loser, but it was true that I hadn't been as fully prepared as I had been going into Ragnarok, for example. And one's approach to combat informed one's action too; I was a lot more ruthless than Diana was. My approach to protection of innocents was to at least severely damage the bad guys, whereas Diana's was to incapacitate in a ...less violent manner. One that would allow them to see the errors of their ways. I wasn't terribly concerned about that. Bruce and Diana shared the strong desire to avoid killing, but my experiences had left me with the understanding that this was a luxury that wasn't always possible. And if I'm truly threatened, it's no contest between my skin and the bad guy's.

Antiope looked interested. "What weapons do you prefer?"

"Two swords when fighting with old-school weapons on the ground. Bow and arrow and javelins for aerial combat. I prefer unarmed combat, though, but when modern weapons are in play, I'll use an energy pistol." She smiled.

"I was going to go to the archery range before breakfast," she said. "Would you care to accompany me? Not for a competition, just practice. I believe that after the meal you are to tour the city before leaving."

I accepted with pleasure, and brought a sleepy Iris with me. The range was near a grove of olive trees, and once Iris got bored, she went back to sleep cuddled among the roots of a tree and Antiope and I chatted about battles we'd fought. Their bows weren't as strong as the ones I was used to, but I didn't embarrass myself. She was a little repulsed when I mentioned how I'd used my spare bow string as a garrotte during Ragnarok but said it was clever. "I begin to see what you mean by fighting dirty," she said.
"Well, I wouldn't say I was fighting dirty," I said, drawing for my next shot and letting the string roll off my fingertips. "That was the use of all my equipment as fully as I could. Stakes couldn't be higher; the destruction of at least the Nine Realms, so I was motivated. Fighting dirty is throwing a rock at somebody to distract them so another person can get in with their weapons. Throwing dirt in somebody's eyes. Scratching, although I prefer to throw a punch." The arrows came close to the target center.

"Do you always talk when you're concentrating?"

"My uncle, who was my first hand-to-hand instructor, always talked when we practiced. It helps me because I'm used to distractions when I fight." She seemed struck by that.

"What did you think of yesterday's... revelations?" she asked quietly before she loosed her arrows in quick succession. "I ask only because Diana is returning to men's world with you and to your grandson."

I thought about that as we walked toward the targets to retrieve our arrows. "I have sympathy for Diana. I'm compassionate because that was upsetting for her to learn, I think the raw explanation of the time the Amazons spent in captivity, even though detail was lacking, was the most upsetting part, but I think once she thinks about it, she'll be fine. Her mother couldn't just think of herself or her during that horrible time, she was also the queen and had to lead her people. She did the best she could in extraordinarily...difficult circumstances, and I'm confident that Diana will understand that perspective after a bit. I'll be available if she wants to talk about it, and I'm sure Torunn will too. Torunn wasn't raised with the expectation of rule, but she understands the sacrifices that entails and has her own perspectives. Asgard is very much a patriarchy although it is changing. My aunt Emma made an initial push and Odin and Thor actually had to start thinking about what it's like for women under the rule of men, and Sif is exerting both overt and covert influence for change. Her sons certainly don't underestimate women, and I have had a small part in that as well. But Torunn has lived in that atmosphere longer than I have and I think can relate to both mother and daughter."

"I am relieved to hear that," she said as we returned to the firing line for a last end. "I worry for her, alone in a hostile world."

"Well, she may not have the Amazons by her side," I said, setting my feet and stretching my neck again. "But she's got a lot of people who have her back. The Justice League, for one, which overlaps with my family. And the public trusts and loves her, more than any other superhero. She is the only one of her kind out there, but she is not alone." Antiope thought about that silently, then showed me the basics of shooting multiple arrows off one bowstring. The Hawkeyes could do that too but I'd never learned. It's a lot harder than it looks.

Iris woke up about then and laughed to see my arrows going everywhere. "Mama always hits the target," she said, laughing,

"Thanks, kid," I said, and sent her off to find and retrieve the arrows. It's nice to have a tiny minion.

Then there was a hearty breakfast, and Iris went for a farewell ride, Martha and Torunn went swimming, and Diana silently joined me on the tour of the city, pointing out a few details that Ipthime didn't. We visited a quarry not far from the city to see how they cut and shaped the stone for building, and I got to try my hand. Then we went down to a beach, broad and gently sloped, where they were building a shrine to the Nereids. "These daughters of Nereus and Doris represent all that is beautiful and kind about the sea," Ipthime said. "There are fifty of them, and they carry Poseidon's trident when they are in his entourage, a position of responsibility. Amphitrite is one of them, wife to Poseidon. They help to keep sailors away from Themyscira, for which we are
grateful. This beach is one where we gather to swim and have picnics, and on occasion, some of the Nereids will join us." She introduced me to the construction crew, who were putting the columns together and showing me how the pieces were stacked and the fit refined. The surf lapped at the sparkling beach enticingly, and when I picked up a sample of the sand, I saw that it had not only lots of small nuggets of quartz but also mica.

"Perhaps next time you visit, there will be more time for fun," Diana said, her voice questioning, as if she wasn't sure I'd want to return.

"That would be nice. This is gorgeous." Both women smiled, and we went back to the city, where we picked up our bags, collected our companions, and said goodbye to the queen and the council.

"I very much appreciate the opportunity to come here," I said as I clasped arms with all of them. "I am grateful for your hospitality."

"Perhaps next time we can do better," Hippolyta murmured.

"I would love the opportunity to return." As my daughters and Torunn thanked our hosts, I walked with Antiope to the horses, and, after rummaging in the bag with my arms and armor, gave her one of the daggers I'd made and carried into Ragnarok, then we rode down to the dock and soon were on the way back to Athens. Sofia and Diana chatted and I listened to how my daughters had passed their time on the island. They had had a great time.

When we got to Athens, we thanked Sofia for the ride and took a cab to a hotel where the accelerator should be waiting for us. It was, accompanied by my husband. "Daddy!" caroled Iris, and she ran over to him to be picked up and hugged. Martha also got a hug and kiss, Torunn and Diana a warm greeting, then it was my turn. It was quickly decided that Martha, Torunn, Iris, and Diana would check out the temple of Ares while I had the worst of my cuts treated, and then we would stop by--briefly--in Rome to check up on Bruce before going home.

Damian just shook his head as I explained the fight, although all I said was that Diana had been at odds with her mother. Even my husband didn't need to know the information that was given to me in confidence. He listened closely as I told him what information I'd learned about Diana's suspicions. He carefully arranged the accelerator over the hole in my wing, holding the feathers back, before he groaned. "The gods, really? Just what we didn't need. And Phobus and Deimos. They're the personification of panic, flight and rout, and terror and dread, respectively. They are Ares' charioteers, and spread panic and fear in their wake along with fear of loss, which is dreadful in battle, and can turn victors into victims if they can't overcome these feelings. I talked with those who had encountered them in battle when I was in the underworld--they may go veiled to the point of invisibility these days but they are always present and their impact is considerable."

"Great," I huffed, depressed. Then I smiled at him. "I met Antiope," I said conversationally, as he put away the accelerator and sat up, dressing. He'd healed the cuts; the bruises could wait until home. I changed to clothes he'd brought with him that didn't have any little bloodstains on them.

"Antiope who?" he said absently, and we were interrupted by Martha, who had come up to see if I was done yet.

"One of your flings in the underworld, Father," she said impatiently. "I can't believe you didn't warn Mom about her. She was caught flatfooted."

"Oh, damn," Damian said, flustered, remembering. "She's an Amazon? She never said. She wasn't forthcoming with the personal information and I didn't press for information she didn't want to give freely. I'm sorry, Sweet pea," he said, turning to me and putting out his hand. I took it, and Martha
rolled her eyes and picked up the equipment case and the small bag that had held my change of clothes as he kissed my fingers. She charged out ahead of us. "I am sorry," he said again, real contrition saturating his voice. "She told me very little about herself and we weren't together long."

"I'm not surprised," I said, thinking about what had happened to the Amazons in captivity.

"What did you think of her?" he asked tentatively.

"Tall, blonde, gorgeous, nice, she's exactly your type," I said a little ruefully.

"Sweet pea, you are precisely my type," he said, stopping me on the stairs and turning me to look at him. "You may not be tall, but you're not stubby. I love the richness of your dark hair, you're beautiful too, and you're nice," he said logically, and I burst out laughing. He smiled too and offered his arm. "You're saved from entire perfection because you're a little stubborn," he teased, and I laughed again. But he stopped me at the foot of the stairs. "If I can't have you, I don't want to be with someone whose hair is not the perfect shade, who is not the correct height, who is not a pale imitation of what I cannot have. She must be a good person, but know this, Alixzandrya, no one can compare in my eyes with you. Your intelligence and goodness have marked my heart as yours in life and beyond. I may have dallied with other women when you were beyond my reach, but none of them have claimed my heart. I was fond of them, but I never felt the inferno of love that I have for you."

I snuggled in briefly. "I wasn't angry," I said, "just taken aback. And she is formidable. And I really have no room to talk. You work with Tony."

He waved off the issue of Tony. "But she was nice to you, right?" He sounded worried.

"Very. She taught me to shoot multiple arrows off one bowstring," I said, and he squeezed me gently. "I was jealous, but she wouldn't stay in the outer world with or without you, so I figured you were safe." I smiled and reluctantly stepped away. He just smiled slightly and touched my face lightly.

In the suborbital, Diana said grimly that construction had begun on several temples but Ares was the farthest along and the restorations looked quite grand. None of the workers could or would say who had commissioned the work. After that, Iris took over and we were glad to let her tell her dad all about what she'd done and seen on the islands. I noted with amusement that she softpedaled the stunt riding that she'd apparently learned. It was a short trip to Rome, where we had lunch before going to the hospital. Iris was delighted to see Tabby again and Selina indulged her interest as we checked in with Bruce. It was odd to me that the niece was older than her aunt. He was irritable about being bedbound, but there was nothing that could be done for that, his own stubbornness had put him there, and he waved us off after a short visit. Selina cut off his impending sulk by handing him his daughter. I smothered a laugh with difficulty to see him cooing and cosseting her as much as she'd allow; she was an active child and wanted to crawl around. Even Diana smiled to see that. Selina accompanied us outside where Tabby could hit the grass, and we took our leave.

When we got to the landing field, Alfred and Alan were waiting for us, and Daniel leaned against the fender of his smaller aircar with a pensive expression that eased as we exited the suborbital. Alfred's eyebrows rose fractionally as he recognized the case for a portable accelerator, but he didn't say anything. Daniel had a hug for me and we managed to find a little bit of time the next day when I could speak privately to him. Martha insisted on getting a cab home, which miffed Alfred a bit. Then the rest of us crowded into our aircar and we all hit the road.

I casually snagged the bag with my armor when we reached our house, and took it as nonchalantly as I could down to my forge, tossing some of it in a bin to be scrapped; the damage was too great to
be repaired. Then I considered, and tossed it all in. I needed a new design to keep a visual distance
from the Winter Knight. Alfred came in while I was on the phone with Uncle Steve, setting up an
appointment with him, and he stared at the bin contents in consternation. I hung up and smiled
ruefully.

"My demonstration was rougher than I'd anticipated," was all I said, and he nodded.

"Will you be require the full accelerator treatment, Miss Alex?" he asked, and smiled sightly when
I agreed. I followed docilely and waited while he programed the instrument. After that, feeling
much less creaky, I went upstairs just in time for Miles to be returned; J had taken him as a treat
overnight while Damian had gone to meet us. Miles was thrilled to see us and I got to hear all about
the ballet he'd seen, the zoo, Uncle J. Iris jealously countered with tales of horseback riding,
climbing trees, and swimming in the ocean. Time with Uncle J was a treat for all my offspring and
much prized. Miles wasn't that interested in the horses, but he was a little sulky over the
swimming. Damian rubbed his face.

"We'll go to the ocean this summer," he said. "Everybody can have fun playing in the surf."

The kids were enthusiastic and we kept them talking, with Alfred chiming in with some
clarifications of what Miles had been up to and a few questions for Iris about her activities. Then
coffee and tea in the library--the kids stayed with us for the cookies before going to do their own
things. Eira was set to come back the next day, and Torunn said she'd bring her home when she
checked in with her uncle. Torunn then left for her own suite, and Miles insisted on telling me
more detail about the ballet and enthused about his new lessons. Some of the girls treated him like
an interloper, but then, they were all still at the stage where they were nervous about cooties. Other
little girls thought he was more of a curiosity--he was the only boy in the class--but were friendly,
and the teacher was thrilled to have a boy student, especially one with as much potential as Miles
had. Then it was time for the kids to go to bed, and after we tucked them in, we went downstairs
and waited for the Alliance members--for the purposes of this threat, the League and the Avengers
had decided to have a formal team-up--to arrive. First up was Steve with Bucky, and as Damian
greeted Superman and updated him about Bruce's condition, I took my uncles to my smithy,
showed them the damage, and then asked for new designs for armor and a costume.

Bucky smacked his head. "I didn't even think of that, sweetie," he said ruefully.

"Martha's right, there is too much similarity," Steve said, disgusted with himself. "It would be a
selling point if you joined the Avengers and your identity was known, but it's not smart now." He
shook his head. "I think I'll try something less traditional with your costume, more cutting edge. I'll
make some designs for your armor that will integrate, and you can tweak them however you'd
like," he promised, and we rejoined the group.
After the update on Bruce, Serena described possible leads on Typhon installations in the Balkans and New Persia. Superman said he'd detail a team to check them out, then it was Diana's turn to discuss what we'd learned about the possibility of some of the Greek gods driving the actions of Typhon. A heavy silence fell over the group as they digested this.

"I'll ask Thor if he'd be able to help us out on this one," Tony said, frowning. I wished Odin was still around; he was the principal Norse god of war, among other things. There was also Tyr, who inspires courage and heroism in battle. I didn't know him at all and wasn't sure if he'd survived the battle. Something to check with Loki about. Huh. And Loki himself might relish the opportunity to cause mischief on the other side. Although I'd personally never seen it, I knew he could be malicious, and he'd worked hard to keep that aspect of his nature contained. I'd need to talk to a few people.

"I need to go up to Asgard myself," I said, volunteering to talk to Thor. A pantheon for a pantheon. And I'd stop by the Norn as well. I made a mental note to pick up some snails from the pet store and chocolates.

After a little more updating, the meeting broke up. I paused in the library to run a program that Tony had written for me to collect information about the Parthenon, its building materials, artistic interpretations of how it may have looked at its height, and had the results copied to my work computer before going upstairs with my husband.

By the time I got to work, I had the information I needed and focused on creating a proposal for the Greek government offering to fund and restore the Parthenon as a working temple to Athena, throwing in a 3D scan of the ruins as well. I included cost projections and had Mei, back in the building after an extended project in China, look it over and refine it while I hustled over to Daniel's office for lunch. I waited until his executive assistant brought in our lunch before asking how things were. He rubbed his eyes.

"Diana told me what happened, what her mom told her," he said. "It's shaken her up a lot, and now she also feels humiliated that she didn't control herself in her bout with you. " He eyed me. "Gotta say, Grandma, that I'm surprised she kind of kicked your ass."

"I didn't exactly let her win," I defended myself. "But I also treated it like a training exercise, an exhibition rather than a serious fight. Or I'd have had more to show for my effort." He grinned suddenly and teased me while we ate. Afterward, I explained that I'd been told of Amazon courting traditions and wanted to know if he'd like to incorporate some of those elements in his own courtship of Diana.

"Depends," he said cautiously. "What do I need to do? I'm not the most skilled Batman in the family lines, if I have to defeat a mythological creature or something." I smiled.

"It's a different feat of strength," I said. "Tokens of the promise and pitfalls of a relationship; she'd agree to wear them until what's between you either ends or goes on to the next stage. There are supposed to be tests that each partner puts the other through to determine whether they're suited for each other and, I suspect, to teach the lessons of trust and faith. I also think that that portion of the thing is at the discretion of the two involved."

"Huh," Daniel said reflectively. "So what would I need to do?" I explained about the seed necklace, that he should say "That thou art full of promise" when putting it around her neck, then I brought
out the ribbons and thorns, showed him how to create the bracelet, then undid it and made him do it himself. The result was... a bit awkward. He wasn't the arts and crafts type, but I helped him by using a needle to flatten out the ribbon and coaxed it into more of a circular shape, directing the points of the thorns more linearly.

"It's truly the thought that counts with this, and the effort," I coached him. "You say "That thou shall know the heart of another" when you tie the bracelet on. If you two decide to go forward, you can always replace it with a different bracelet." His mournful face lit and I gave him a hug and a pep talk before getting back to work.

Back at the Valkyrie, I picked up come coffee from Mom's store for me and Mei. We discussed the proposal and Mei asked what prompted it.

"Ares is abroad in the world again," I said, scowling. "Athena is probably the best bulwark against his influence." Mei scowled too. She also had experience with the Chinese pantheon. The Return, with its undeniable proof of the existence of gods, had also enabled the return of worship of gods who had been squeezed out or marginalized by Christianity and Islam. Their influence in the world was growing. We worked on clarifications and better projections of costs and timelines, and she volunteered to go to Greece herself and present the proposal to the Ministry of Culture. I accepted with enthusiasm and she took herself off to book her flight. "Be sure to get first class," I called after her.

"It's a good thing that I invested in Tony's company so heavily," I said to Damian during a mid-afternoon call. "This project is pretty much going to wipe me out." Damian just smiled.

"Even if Stark's dividends won't keep you afloat, you'll always have me, Petal," he assured me. "At least the house is paid for." He startled me into a laugh. He knew I put all the money I would have drawn as a salary back into my company. "But as your financial advisor, I have to recommend that you start paying yourself for your work. If you'd like, we can discuss it later, take a look at the numbers."

"I know it's not wise to sink so much capital into this project," I said, "but we need it. Athena needs a foothold in this world, and the best way to do it is to revitalize her main temple."

"Don't beat yourself up over it," he advised. "The Greeks will have some funds that they can kick in, and you've said that Mei is a sharp negotiator. Let her do her work and see what happens." He managed to talk me down from the consequences of my impulsivity and I went back to work feeling marginally less dumb. It's just that there isn't really time for prolonged fundraising.

After work, Serena and I trudged over to the embassy and sat down with Loki and Torunn. He listened attentively and he smiled when I asked him what he could do and if he was willing to. "Good old mayhem," he said affectionately. "I've been reining myself in these past centuries out of regard for my brother's peace of mind and security, but it will be good to cause some discord and not get in trouble for it." His smile sharpened and his finely boned face tightened. Cold prickles ran down my spine as a chill whisper of his power snaked through the room before he cut it off. "I'll coordinate with Rogers," he assured us.

"It's a little embarrassing, but I'm not quite sure who survived Ragnarok and my direct experience with gods is limited to you, Thor, Frigga, and Odin," I confessed. "I was wondering if Tyr survived and if he might be amenable to recruitment for a battle against Ares and his boys."

"He did survive," Loki said slowly, thinking about it. "He might be amenable to helping your side, especially since he is not only one of our chief war gods but also of law and justice. This attempt to overthrow the established order will offend him. However," he said merrily, glancing at me, "your
well-known proclivity for causing unrest, even if your cause was just, in the realm of the AllFather is a mark against you. I can plead your cause for you."

"I could as well," Serena volunteered. "Furthermore, I could offer to establish a temple for him on this continent. It will help him get a foothold with new worshippers." She grinned at me. "I have in mind a small space that would be expanded over time, rather than going for the gold all at once." I rolled my eyes, smiling at her.

"That should help," Loki said briskly. "The problem is that the Greeks have so many more gods than virtually any other pantheon, supplemented with spirits and creatures. If Ares is behind this, he has many potential supporters in his own religious system. Somebody should help to recruit some of the others gods who may be supportive of your cause." Torunn and I looked at each other.

"I'll speak to Diana," I said. "The Amazons are Greeks, and I'm buttering up Athena. She can scout around for some other deities." Torunn looked a little apprehensive, but Diana had the best chance of succeeding. I didn't know the pantheon very well, but if we could get somebody like Nike on our side it would help a lot. Eira pranced in and I crouched beside her to give a big hug; I'd really missed her. She kept her head on my lap as I skritchted behind her ears and we wrapped things up.

The kids were thrilled to see Eira too; her tail wagged so hard I thought it would break off, and the three of them bolted outside to play.

We had a nicely domestic dinner and the kids split up to do their own things; Iris took off for the stables and Miles went downstairs to practice his ballet. Alfred filled me in on what I'd missed while I was gone, and I told him many of the highlights of my trip. He clucked over the destruction of my armor, agreed with the benefits of a costume redesign, and departed for the kitchen to make cookies. Damian also had come around to the benefits of cookies in the workplace, so Alfred was benignly making cookies for both of us. Since I had the coffeeshop downstairs, I wasn't eating as many, which was balanced out by Tony's daily raids on Damian's cookie jar.

I was enjoying cuddling up to my husband and hearing about his day when the doorbell rang. Alfred sped out of the kitchen to get the door before we'd done much more than get to our feet and announced the new arrivals. Diana and Daniel stepped into the library. I noted with approval that she was wearing the thorn bracelet and there was a thin chain around her neck that supported a nectarine seed. Damian blinked at this and I realized that I hadn't told him about the Amazonian custom. Diana looked radiant and she kept hold of Daniel's hand as they were seated. For his part, I'd never seen Daniel look so happy. I smiled, Damian smiled, and they never stopped smiling. I was glad to spirits restored.

"The League did a financial analysis this morning," Daniel said. "Even with the restoration of the Hall of Justice, almost done, thank you, Grandma, we have funds that we can use to support the restoration of the Parthenon," he said, and named a sum. It was nearly half of what my bid was.

"Not going to lie, I'm grateful," I said. "I was planning on paying for it myself and it pretty much would have wiped me out. I worked up a bid for the project today and sent one of my associates off to present it. I don't think we have time to waste."

Damian rubbed his forehead. "Grandma--"

"I also stopped by the Asgardian embassy," I said briskly. "Serena and Loki have offered to approach Tyr on our behalf, since I'm a rabblerouser. Loki is also amendable to turning his gifts for chaos onto the other side, so that's another benefit to us. However, he believes, and I agree, that it would be helpful to get more of the Greek gods lined up on our side. There are tons of them, and some could be very useful to us." I sat and looked at Diana expectantly.
"I have no special claim to the worship of any beyond the five who are sacred to the Amazons," she said.

"Well, your voice, petitioning the other four, should help," I encouraged her. "Also, you could find out where other gods are being worshipped and ask their priests to intercede on our behalf."

Diana looked a little resistant. "We are all having to do things we'd rather not," I said sternly. "I was looking forward to some down time after saving the world, and I've never wanted to be a hero. Yet here I am, suiting up, ready to pretty much bankrupt myself in order to achieve our common goal of taking down Typhon. My husband has come out of retirement, and we are putting ourselves at risk despite having two young kids who depend on us. So I expect everybody to step up."

Diana's eyes fell at my words and tone.

"I understand," she said, and Daniel squeezed her hand.

"We'll research and get on it," he promised me, and I nodded.

Alfred came in with a replenished cookie plate and coffee for our guests, and this turned the conversation to more general matters. Damian took Diana to look over at the shamshir he'd won from his grandfather, a treasured family heirloom after all this time, and Daniel plopped down beside me.

"We're ready to do our share," he said quietly, and I nodded. If I saw anybody slacking, I was going to kick some butt. I wanted to get this over with and go back to the comfortable life I had planned with my beloved. "There was something else," he continued, darting a quick glance where Damian was demonstrating how to use the curved blade. "You might have noticed that Diana's wearing the tokens you helped me with." I nodded and he pinked up in pleasure. "I plan to propose soon. I was wondering, and you don't have to agree, but I wondered if you'd come shopping with me, help me pick out the ring."

"I'd be happy to," I said, and squeezed his hand. We cleared out a few hours the next week and I gave him a homework assignment to look at ring styles and get an idea of things he liked.

"Thick as thieves," Damian said lightly, coming over to refresh my coffee before returning with a fresh cup of jasmine tea for himself. He hates cold tea.

"I was just telling him about my visit to the islands. Such a beautiful place, lovely people." Daniel got up, looking a little relieved, and brought a chair closer for Diana before bringing one for himself. Damian snuggled up to me and he and Daniel asked questions about Themyscira. I said nothing about Hippolyta's revelations, but the revelation that Damian had been intimate with Antiope kind of shocked Daniel.

"Geeze, Grandpa," he said, a little reproachfully. "Are you ok with that, Grandma?"

Damian and I shrugged in stereo. "Little jealous, a little intimidated," I admitted, and Damian's arm went around my waist. "But it's water under the bridge. I've snagged him for this lifetime too." My husband beamed at me, and Daniel looked like he didn't quite understand, but then he hadn't been dead yet.

We were chatting as Iris pounded into the room and announced that she wanted her own horse for her birthday, please daddy. "It could be for Christmas too," she said generously, and I laughed as her father rubbed his eye. She greeted our guests and snagged a cookie before pelting out again.

Diana and Daniel got to their feet and said goodnight. Alfred materialized to show them out and
Damian went to his side of our desk to do a little work he'd brought home. I went in search of our son and found him practicing his ballet positions. I corrected his arm position a couple times, but he was doing well and I said so. He beamed, looking very much like his father and described his classes in detail. He held my hand and we chatted as we went upstairs for bedtime. After the kids were in bed, hopefully to stay, I read until Damian was done and we said goodnight to Alfred before going upstairs.
Happiness

A few days later, Mei returned with the signed contract. Furthermore, the Greeks would chip in some money and the man power to restore the exterior of the temple as an archeological site. The interior, however, would be updated and refurbished, and Mei also had the contact information for the priesthood that was currently in authority in Athens. They had given her a wish list and promised to seek advice from their goddess. I told her about the gift from the Justice League, and we went down to Martha's office to discuss the PR. Dagny passed by while we were talking about it and offered to install a grove of olive trees; Mei immediately shot a message to her contact in the Ministry of Culture who would be liaising with us on the project. Her contact immediately called us, and we were introduced. Our contact liked the idea of the olive trees and said he'd shepherd it through the permitting process. After the phone call, Martha reached out to another person who would be handling the publicity over there in order to coordinate our efforts. We wanted our name on the project, but not as a bunch of Americans who were stampeding into such an important historical site. Mei walked back to my office with me.

"I know this is an important project for you," she said, then her back stiffened. "But I'd like to be involved too. I'd like to manage the project."

"I thought you wanted more time back here with your fiance?" I said, frowning.

She sighed and held up her left hand, missing the pretty diamond ring. "Didn't work out after all. So overseas projects aren't a problem anymore and it would be very helpful to have somebody on site. You've got a family, and I really think I'm ready for this level of responsibility."

"Looking to get more experience and move on?"

"Actually no." That surprised me. "If I went out on my own, I couldn't hope to bid for the types of projects we work on here. I'd be stuck with small projects, probably mostly residences. Callahan likes those, but I prefer the bigger projects. I love working here at Valkyrie; there are so many opportunities to improve my skills and there are all those proprietary products that Stark keeps sending over to you. I just want to make my name too." I nodded, considering this.

"Ok, then. Get the timeline worked up and on my desk, then find an apartment in Athens for yourself. Given the tragedy in Rome, we need to have outstanding security of our own, on top of what the Greeks want. That's non-negotiable. I don't want this company linked with death and destruction." Mei nodded. "You can line up a lot before going over there, like getting the order for the cultured ivory in so that the gigantic stature of Athena can be recreated and clad in the ivory like the original. Make sure everything is by the book and our process transparent." Mei nodded again, making notes, and we discussed the project in more detail. Martha reported the preliminary results of her work with the ministry, and then it was time for lunch.

I met Daniel and we grabbed hot dogs from a street vendor before hustling to the first jeweler on his list. But nothing we looked at looked quite right. We ran through several jewelers without success, and I had to shoot down his idea to get an emerald. "Not for an engagement ring, sweetie," I said. "Emeralds are soft, easily chipped and cracked, and they can break if, for example, her ring falls off into snow if she takes off her glove and brings it right into a warm room. If you want green, consider a green sapphire or diamond and save the emerald for something else." The salesman looked daggers at me and I shrugged. "After everything Damian bought me, I learned a lot," I said to him, but the guy still looked snitty. It was his commission I was shooting down, after all, but I wanted Daniel to be sure he was getting the right ring for his intended. Daniel rubbed his face, and he started to get upset as nothing we saw was right. Finally I herded him into a taxi and
we went to Emma.

She usually did modern designs and a pair of beautiful garnet earrings caught my eye, but I tamped that down. We were here for Daniel. I could come back later. She listened closely to what he was looking for--in general terms, it was going to be a case of he'd know the dream ring when he saw it--and skillfully asked questions that drew out more details. She pondered a bit and went back to her safe, returning with a single platinum ring on a gray suede pad. "I did this when I was just starting back up, and it's never really fit in with everything else I was making," she said, as Daniel picked it up curiously. His eyes got big when he really looked at the design, and his mouth made a little O. I smiled, Emma smiled, and I squeezed her hand. Then he showed it to me.

"It's beautiful," I said. And it was. There was a good-sized diamond, about a third of a carat, nothing too big or flashy, set in a deco-style setting that managed to provide elegant detail without being fussy.

"I don't suppose you have her finger size," Emma said. "I could size it while you wait."

Daniel produced a piece of paper with a circle inscribed on it. "I traced the interior diameter of one of her rings a couple days ago."

"I can work with that," she said, and took it over to the work bench, where she measured, confidently sawed out a small piece of the shank, curved the ends to meet with a pair of pliers, and stared at it as her gift took the place of a torch and solder. Then she slid the ring on a mandrel and rounded it with deft taps of a mallet. She polished off the fingerprints and put it into an elegant ebony box lined with raspberry satin. Daniel couldn't pay her fast enough, and when we left, he had a look on his face that was both dazed and fiercely hopeful. "Oh, Alex, I almost forgot. Steve has some drawings for your new look, if you want to stop in downstairs," she called after me, and I smiled at her.

Of course I did; I was going to drop in since I was there anyway. I looked forward to seeing my uncle Steve almost as much as I did Bucky. "You don't have to come," I told Daniel, smiling. "You probably have plans to make."

"Actually, I've done the planning," Daniel said happily. "I want to see your new look too."

The vendeuse greeted me, we exchanged cheek kisses, and she took us back to Steve immediately. He grinned when he saw us and hopped off the high stool at his drafting table to give us hugs. "I left standing orders that you're to be brought straight back," he said when I apologized for just barging in. We chatted as the vendeuse brought in coffee and snacks, and when she'd closed the door behind her, Steve brought out a file from a locked drawer and showed me three looks. The most interesting thing about all of them was the limited use of metal armor. It all looked like tac fabric, although one version had a light knee-length version of the dresses we'd worn in Valhalla over the suit. Viking knotwork was embroidered on the suits for interest. There were three colorways: black, gray, and dark red.

"Ooh, Grandma," Daniel said.

"There's armor, it's just concealed by the suits," Steve said, and showed me an exploded diagram where shaped plates protected my shoulders, upper back, spine, upper arms, forearms, the backs of the gloves, chest, hips, quads, knees, and shins. Tight boots in the same color as the suits stopped just below the knee and there was a heavy cloak for each look. "The cape is also a type of tac fabric and weighted at the bottom so that you can use that as a weapon as well. The plates aren't metal, it's a new polymer that Stark's come up with. He suggested that you use them as they're thinner and lighter than metal but just as strong. They will need to be replaced more frequently, though. There's
a stocking mask to obscure your features if you don't want to wear a visor with your helmet all the
time. And there are slits on the back of the uniform for your wings to come out."

"Wow," I said, impressed. "That looks fantastic. And so different from anything all you heroes are
wearing." Steve beamed, and we started to talk about color, ending up with charcoal gray as the
main color accented with here and there with the dark red and the tonal embroidery had hints of
silver.

"I'll have this made up at Avenger tech," Steve said. "You'll need to go over to Tony's lab to have
the scan done for the protective plating, but nobody at the production facility will know who
Valkyrie is, just that I know her. If you get the scan done in the next couple of days, you'll have the
first suit to try at the end of next week. If you like it, we can make a couple others."

"That's fast," I said. "I'll talk to Tony and see how fast he can fit me in." Steve nodded, then turned
and pulled out a new folder.

"I've also got some designs for you for everyday wear from my latest collection," he said, and
spread out some beautiful looks, lots of fine, flowing fabric.

"I'm sorry I missed your show," I said, touching the fabric samples.

"I'd have gone to Themyscira too," Steve said, brushing it aside, and I made some decisions,
culling my choices to just the ones I adored the absolute most. I smiled ruefully at the couturier.

"Since I've pledged a huge chunk of money for the restoration of the Parthenon, I don't have as
much to spend on clothes this year. And no, I don't want a discount. You already do too much for
me," I said as he opened his mouth. The suits were going to cost a lot.

"Kid, every time you're photographed wearing my work, it's free publicity for me," Steve said.

"I heard you just topped the list of the city's best dressed women in the Style section of the Times
out next Sunday, and you were named one of the five most accomplished women in the Northeast
while you were visiting Diana's home," Daniel said unexpectedly. "Everybody knows that Steve's
your preferred designer."

"And you are, Uncle Steve," I said, "but I don't want a handout."

"Ok," Steve said, nodding. "Let me know if you change your mind." And we talked about other
things, setting up a playdate for our kids, and we left after that. Daniel dropped me off at the lab;
even if Tony couldn't fit me in today I could still drop in on my husband. But Tony paused long
enough to take the scans, which were done in a range of motion so that the articulated pieces over
joints like my shoulders would fit right, then I sat on my husband's lap and fed him cookies as I
related the afternoon's adventures.

"I hope we get some good news from Daniel soon," Damian said, snuggling me close and taking
another bite of the cookie I held.

Then Ann and Tony appeared in the door and announced that they were going to have another
baby. Ann was switching to data analysis for the duration, wanting to avoid any effects of
chemical inhalation or absorption, and after enthusiastic congratulations and hugs all around, I
prepared to depart. Damian got hung up on a call and blew me a kiss as I left his office. Tony
walked me to the door, telling me how the material for the armor had some flexibility, which was
interesting. "I wanted to ask if you guys really liked the baby things I knitted last time or if you
were just being polite," I said as we reached the door. "You can be honest, I won't be offended."
Tony rolled his eyes.

"Of course we liked them," he said impatiently. "It's not often these days that people have ability, inclination, and time to make things by hand and we appreciate it. I thought the kid was going to end up like Linus with that blanket." I grinned at him and his smile softened. "And I'm grateful that you still think enough of me to go to the trouble, Tiger." And it was my turn to roll my eyes. As I went through the door, he told me to wait a second and gave me a chip. "That's my thoughts on providing free scans for historical architectural treasures," he told me. "Finances, all of it. That disaster in Rome destroyed so much, and you know the terrorists aren't going to stop." I nodded, and told him I'd check it out that evening.

Since the afternoon was effectively shot, although more productive than I'd imagined it would be, I stopped in at Miles' ballet class. It was the first time I'd been to the class, and Alfred patted my shoulder as we watched the kids. Miles was so absorbed that he didn't see me, and you could see him soaking up his teacher's instructions and corrections like a sponge. After the class was over, Miles regretfully trudged over to the parents' section of the studio, but his face lit up when he saw us. "Mommy!" he exclaimed, and hustled over. I knelt for his hug and kissed his cheek, and his teacher came over to meet me, saying that he was a great student with a lot of promise. Miles and Alfred both beamed, and we had a cheerful ride home. Iris had a riding lesson at the same time, so we stopped at the stables to collect her, and the siblings traded stories, each convinced that the other's activity was less interesting. My folks were coming over with all my siblings for dinner, and they were going to take my younger kids home for a couple of days. After the dinner, my parents departed with the kids and J stuck around for awhile so we could catch up. I didn't get to see my brother much.

It was a couple of weeks wait before Daniel and Diana announced their engagement at a family dinner. Daniel's ring looked wonderful on Diana's hand, and the two of them were glowing with happiness. Alan brought in Champagne with the dessert to celebrate, and Iris raced over to look at the ring. "A horse would be more useful," she told them, "but it's pretty." I facepalmed and Damian looked heavenward.

"A horse would be useful, but I couldn't take it everywhere," Diana agreed. "And it wouldn't be all sparkly." Even Iris had to agree to that.

Bruce was teleconferenced in; the second surgery to replace the last of his organs was scheduled in two days, and he and Selina congratulated the happy couple too. Mark sidled up to Damian and me as his son and Diana chatted with Bruce and Selina. "So, what went into those binders you got when you were married? Daniel has no idea how to plan a wedding." We burst out laughing.
I had to get head down in work for awhile; we were moving forward on Valkyrie North, another mixed development aimed at lower-income people, mostly studio apartments or one-bedroom units. The sheer number of Returnees was still a problem, so the towers of these smaller residences would help. We were planning on including a health clinic as well as a drug store and grocery store as well as other essential services. The police in the area had inquired about putting in a substation to increase their presence in the area and we were negotiating with them on that. Crime was a problem in densely populated areas, and we wanted our prospective tenants to feel safe. Margaret had the most to do at this stage. Valkyrie North was mostly for my partners; there was a small park in the middle that had two historic structures, one of which was an antique carousel in disrepair, so I didn't have much to do. Callahan was taking charge of the refurbishment of the carousel and replacing missing figures, so I had even less to do. This was all to the good, because I had a lot to do in other areas.

Tony's plan to offer the 3D scanning of important historical monuments was careful and complete; all it needed was my agreement and signature. It was an excellent plan. We would assemble a joint team to do the work; a structure like Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris would take about a month. We would supply the personnel and the technology; the authority in charge of the structure would be responsible for housing the team and providing a per diem. The scans that we produced would be the property of the authority but we would retain a copy as a backup. Tony was already two or three steps ahead of me and had proposed guidelines for assembling the team. I went down the hall to ask Aslyn to start advertising for personnel on the preservation and architecture side of the venture, then to Martha to get her to coordinate with Tony's people. She brightened up and reached for the communicator. "Godpop!" she said as I exited her office, smiling.

At our next partners' meeting, we discussed how big we wanted Valkyrie to get. We all wanted our individual businesses to grow and flourish, but we also didn't want our brand to get too diluted. In the end, we didn't come up with firm answers, but establishing a few guidelines. Our joint projects would always be the top priority, and we would only work on one of them at a time. Since it took a long time to line up these things, it wouldn't be hard to maintain this priority. And although we all had a high degree of attention to detail and pride in our work, we added a clause to our partnership agreement that our work had to be held to the highest standard since if one of us started to turn out iffy work, we'd all be affected. I was for this amendment because it was a way to hold us each accountable to her partners and should help keep us from overextending ourselves.

A couple of days later I met with Callahan and Mei and told them to start forming their own teams. Callahan would focus on residences and smaller businesses and Mei would take on the large, international projects we were becoming increasingly well-known for. I would be supervising, and major projects would need my OK. I could also switch a project from one team to another if needed, and I would get to choose my own projects, a benefit of ownership. I would conduct spot checks, have the final approval for bidding on a project and the numbers had to be run past me first. We talked about their staffing needs, and it turned out that Callahan had been contemplating whether to move on to a position with more responsibility or even to start his own firm, so I was in good time. "I'm a little disappointed that you didn't tell me that you weren't happy," I said, frowning slightly.

"I'm not unhappy," he said crisply. "And I had made no decisions, but I feel like I'm ready for more responsibility. This new arrangement will satisfy that." I studied him.

"In the future, if you're feeling dissatisfied with your role in this business, I expect you to come talk
to me. That goes for you too, Mei. At this stage, it will be difficult to replace you and cause considerable disruption for our clients, and that isn't something that can be really tolerated. I'll do my best to do right by you and help you achieve your goals, but I can't do that if I don't know what you're thinking.” They both agreed, and I had to be content with that. I sent them away to contemplate their new responsibilities and start generating ideas for how they were going to handle them while I went down to Aslyn to discuss new contracts for them. They had to have the freedom to juggle their responsibilities and achieve their goals, but the bottom line was that this was my company, with my name on the paperwork, and my reputation at stake. She listened to my concerns about Callahan, how disappointed I was that he hadn't talked to me, and described an escape route should he decide to move on, after all, one that wouldn't leave me high and dry but would be fair to him and Mei too. I arranged for significant raises in recognition of their new responsibilities, and when the contracts were ready, they were signed with no quibbles.

Valkyrie had been getting good press and magazine covers from the beginning, but now we were joining the heavy hitters in winning awards from organizations and periodicals and official recognition from governmental entities. We got massive recognition for our work on the restoration of the Hall of Justice, awards, articles, and a ceremony where we got the key to the city. That got center positioning on our brag wall. When all the work in Prague was done, I was honored for the work I’d done on the Observatory Tower. When other projects got recognition and somebody had to show up from my company, I went if it was one of my projects, sent Mei or Callahan for the projects they’d led, and if I’d made a significant contribution, accompanied them. I was scrupulous in making sure they got the credit that was due to them, but now I was looking for signs of dissatisfaction and indications that ambitions were growing to work beyond my control of the company. Again, Callahan was the most likely; Mei knew that she couldn't afford to be competitive on the global market on her own, but Callahan could manage it with his focus on smaller projects. But there was only so much I could do; the reputation of the partnership and my specific business was established. None of us had to chase after business, it was coming to us, so all we had to do is settle in and focus on producing the highest quality work we could. This meant that I had to turn away some prospective clients who would have been satisfied with less and didn't want to pay for our standard of quality. We had an office party when Dagny won a bid to help restore one section of Kew Gardens in London and construct another. It was her most prestigious job to date, and reflected the studying she'd done on obscure cultivars.

Tony had come by during this process to say hi and see his god daughter and listened attentively as I described the restructuring we were doing, cautioning me against relying too much on employee loyalty. "Not everybody is like you, Tiger," he said briskly. "Most people leverage what they learn at one company and then move on and up. It isn't personal, so don't take it that way if this Callahan guy wants to do that at some point." He was right, but I was sulking a little anyway. Tony took this as an indicator to examine his own business, and did some restructuring and reorganizing himself. Ann decided to move into the data analysis side of things permanently since she could work from home when she wanted, so that left a big gap to be filled. Damian got a promotion and an expanded selection of underlings to direct. He also started serving on more boards of directors, making the most of his keen mind and experience. And Tony got to gloat--quietly, for once--that his company was in spectacular shape, especially compared to his father's, which was suffering because there wasn't much of a market for advanced weaponry systems right now. Not enough tax dollars anywhere, and by law, he was forbidden from selling to foreign interests.

It took some time--my selections from Steve's collection were delivered first--before Valkyrie's state-of-the-art uniforms were ready. Steve and Bucky had nitpicked them half to death, but I didn't really mind; their attention to detail would keep me better protected. The layers of fabric were cut- and stab-resistant and mostly bulletproof; a sophisticated inner layer also helped to diffuse the impact of energy weapons. The polymer armor that Tony had devised would cushion
blows from pipes, staffs, and swords, and my identity was as protected as it could be short of plastic surgery. And there were concealed sheaths everywhere for my knives. There was a new, cut-proof sword belt and the backpack assembly for my med kit and to conceal the organic nature of my wings. It even came with an awesome thigh quiver for my arrows. The only visible armor I had now was a new, sleek helmet, the metal darkened to match the costume. Even Damian was happy with it.

Bruce finally was able to return, having had to deal with a few complications and a little infection from the transplant of the spleen. Tabby was excited to be back with all her family and familiar surroundings, and things between Selina and Bruce were better, but it didn't look like they'd be getting back together.

Work on the Parthenon began mid-summer, and I went out for the beginning of project and to make sure everything was ready to proceed. The head priestess of Athena was a bit aloof but not unfriendly and performed a ceremony before the first piece of marble was moved. I had a brief worrying moment when the priestess' eyes flashed with a weird light and that unsettling sense that somebody was playing with the body like a puppet, but when the goddess spoke, she affirmed that she was overseeing all the aspects of our endeavors, with a stress on the 'all' that I found reassuring. Mei reported progress each week and also when something out of the ordinary came up. Fortunately, nothing was serious.

During this time, both the Justice League and the Avengers successfully placed moles in the Typhon organization. Most were low-level operatives, but we had a couple of mid-level sources who had access to some plans and dates, and judicious use of the intel helped these people advance in the organization. Damian went on a couple of missions, which I didn't particularly like, but turnabout was fair play. He didn't come back with anything worse than bruises and some abrasions, minor cuts, so that was reassuring.

The twins' birthdays came around and Iris got her horse; we found a rescued Arabian, a pretty light gray mare that she promptly adored. For Miles, we took a chunk of the basement and made him a little dance studio with two mirrored walls, a good chunk of barre, a sound system stocked with music from great ballets, and used the same dehumidifiers that were in the bat cave to keep the wood floor from warping. Dick started teaching him some tumbling; good for strength and agility and the ability to do back and front flips would be useful if Miles decided to branch out to other dance styles.

Between that celebration and Christmas, I went back to Greece for the dedication of the Parthenon sanctuary, after which time would be set aside each day for worship. The artisans finished placing the last of the cultured ivory on the great chryselephantine statue of Athena that dominated the interior of the temple the day before the event. The reflecting pool at the foot of the statue was refurbished and filled, the roof repaired and refitted with cypress and glass. Modern lamps at the foot of each column dramatically illuminated the space. It was impressive as hell, the face of the goddess more beautiful than the replica of the Parthenon that could be found in Nashville, the whole thing more graceful and dynamic. Even the six-foot stature of Nike on the goddess' right hand was delicate and exquisite. The glow of the gold that was used to clad the stature gleamed and the gems in her eyes, enormous labradorite cabochons that flashed as you moved toward the statue, managed to seem both calm and assessing. The goddess still had her left hand on her shield, but her headdress was changed to a helmet. It was both completely badass and utterly magnificent. Diana came with me and we were among the guests permitted to attend the consecration of the temple. Braziers were placed on each corner of the stairs leading to the temple but were not lit. The goddess did not allow security in the sanctuary itself, but the government had set up the best possible system on the outside. Diana told me later that they would be lit only at the goddess's command, a signal that Typhon's big plan was in play. While we were there, we toured other
temples, including Ares'. His temple, I was glad to see, was much smaller than the Parthenon and while it was being fitted out nicely, wasn't nearly the equal of Athena's.

I lost track of her while we were wandering around, but before I could panic, a crack of lightning that appeared, literally, out of the clear blue sky gave me a clue as to her location, so I just sat on one of the new marble benches and waited for her to reappear. It wasn't until we were on the way home again until she confided that she'd gone to Zeus' temple and that the priest there had hosted his god who had acknowledged her as his daughter. Given the temper of his wife, he would not make this information public, nor would he intervene with Ares' plans, but he would make all the gods--not just the Olympians--aware that he disapproved and would look benignly on any actions they chose to take in opposition. "He said that this would free them all to act," she said cautiously. "So I'm not sure if this is really a net gain for us."

"Zeus is kind of a coward, always ducking responsibility," I said with a sigh. "But this does permit us to recruit."

She nodded. "I can do some of that myself, and I know the others will add their appeals," she said with conviction. "I will have more time after the wedding."

"You're taking a honeymoon, though, right?" I asked. "Because that's important."

Diana smiled radiantly. "Yes, we will be touring the Mediterranean, so we can pop into a few temples too." I laughed. Working honeymoon. "But if I bring him close, my mother will come out to see us."

"That will be wonderful," I said. "I'm so pleased that she'll be able to meet him." We discussed this the rest of the short ride back home.

The alliance was building a good database on Typhon, including increasingly accurate locations of their bases, improving estimates of their manpower, their resources, and the names of their key people. An attempt to intervene in the national election in Romania had been thwarted and some important mergers and acquisitions that would have given Typhon principals a great deal of control over communications and manufacturing had been derailed.

A series of attacks all over Greece and related ancient sites rocked the world as we closed in on Christmas. The stadium at Olympia and the new Colossus of Rhodes were destroyed, the Corfu museums, Knossos, and Corinth severely damaged. The newly restored temples of Athena and Apollo and the theater were seriously damaged, but the Pythia warned of the attack and the guards were able to avert total destruction. There was an emergency meeting in the bat cave Christmas Eve; we had a bit of a struggle getting the kids to bed early, but it's amazing what a bribe of Alfred's special Christmas spice cake can accomplish.

"The Greek authorities have reached out to us," Superman said grimly. "They have reason to believe that the Parthenon is going to be attacked by Typhon in a few hours. Their forces are stretched thinly because of all the recent bombings and they want to know if there's any possibility of help."

"Timeline?" Bruce asked briskly. Superman hadn't been kidding when he said that the attacks were expected soon.

"If we take the suborbitals, we can make it in time," Damian said grimly. "But we only have access to three, between us and Tony, and there's a limit to how many we can bring."

"I can fly," Superman said instantly. "If we can catch them red-handed, we can get everything
wrapped up and be home in time for Christmas with our families."

"I can transport myself," I said. "I'm in. I spent a fortune getting that thing rebuilt, and I'm not having it blown up now." There were smiles and some curious looks; not everybody knew I can blip myself around. And with there being so much less now to my uniform, I could bring a lot of my weapons with me.

"We'll bring the rest of your armory with us," Damian said, knowing where my mind was going. I grinned at him. We quickly hashed out a plan. Basically, we get there, bust the bad guys before the temple could be damaged, turn them over to the authorities, and be home in time for Santa. As the first on the line, I was to develop our intelligence and I'd have field command when everybody else arrived.

As the details for the transport and the roster were worked out, I hustled to the smithy where I kept my gear and began the process of assuming my costume. It wasn't easy; it was skin tight so that the fabrics could perform optimally and required a lot of tugging, wiggling, and grunting to get into. I was tired by the time I got it on. I slid all my knives in their sheaths, made sure I could push out the wings before adding the backpack, strapped on my swordbelt, grabbed my bow and quivers, and trotted back to where the meeting was just breaking up.

"How does it feel?" Steve asked anxiously.

"Binding, like justice," I said to him and grinned. Bucky rolled his eyes.

"I'll bring your cape," he promised. Damian, Superman, Wonder Woman, Captain America, Winter Knight, Hawkeye the Elder, Scarlet Witch, Flash, Quicksilver, Falcon, Nightwing, Black Canary, Supergirl, Iron Man, and Batgirl were coming along. Superman, Supergirl, and Iron Man were going to fly themselves, and I'd meet everybody there. I pulled on my mask and helmet, visualized the strongroom of the temple, and dislocated myself through distance.

I was alone in the strongroom, fortunately, and took the time to consume some energy gel; that kind of travel is exhausting even with the lighter costume. When I quit shaking, I quickly examined the room; it contained ritual items, the latest load of offerings to the goddess, and, more importantly, feeds from the security lenses. Nobody was around just presently, and I flicked the switch a few times to simulate a power glitch, then shut off the lights entirely. I knew the temple really well from our work, and moved quickly out into the sanctuary, squeezing under the statue to make sure that nobody had stuffed explosives into the framework, then examined the rest of the building, flying up to check the roof last. Nothing. I dropped to the floor again and crept out. Nothing around the columns, either. Looks like I'd beaten Typhon to the temple. I planted listening devices at each corner of the temple, and synced them to my earbud.

It was a moonless night, and with the temple lights out, I used my wings to help me climb up a pillar; the claw at the top of each wing really helped and it was easier than lifting off from the ground. I put on a pair of glasses with interchangeable anti-reflective binocular lenses and night vision and lay flat near the peak where I could easily observe the approach to the temple. And waited.
It was pretty cold up there on the roof, even though my suit was warmer than the last one had been, and I started to shiver as I crept around the roof watching for trouble to arrive. Where was everybody? I could really use my cape.

As I eased around to check the only road to the Acropolis, I nearly fell off the roof when I heard a stern voice in my head. "They won't be striding through the Propylaia like honest warriors," Athena chided me. The 'idiot' at the end there was implied.

"Depends on how arrogant they are," I muttered. "They're not expecting to be caught."

There was a considering pause before the goddess spoke again. "That is possible. Yet they are climbing the rock over by the Erechthion." I felt a pressure on my jaw as if an impatient hand was turning my head to the right, at the as-yet unrestored building at the edge of the plateau, past the ruins of the old temple of Athena that had been superseded by the Parthenon. That was good, because I didn't really know what all the other buildings on the Acropolis had been and the way the goddess pronounced things was different than the current pronunciation.

"That's stupid," I breathed. It was a lot more difficult to climb the rock--both harder and more dangerous. There was the ancient approach to the temple and a more modern one. I looked around; the olive trees and gardens that Dagny had planted were still young but she'd kill me if anything happened to them. I arranged myself cautiously so that I had the best view of the area that Athena had indicated the Typhon operatives were coming over and waited. I kept listening, though, in case they weren't the only ones. I started to hear faint scrabbling sounds and somebody swore as a handhold or foothold gave way. As soon as I saw movement, I settled an arrow on the bowstring.

Six individuals crept over the edge of the plateau, and I figured that the group was complete when they turned and started hauling on a rope. I held my arrow until a net with bags of equipment was placed on the ground and opened. My vision felt sharper and I let the bowstring hum as I sighted the arrows effortlessly and each found a target.

"Well done," Athena said approvingly in my head.

I was about to modestly thank her when the austere voice I remembered from the temple in Themyscira spoke crisply. "Thank you. This is not a bad vessel." I had to remind myself that this wasn't the time to pick a fight with a pair of goddesses. I saw movement out of the corner of my eye and cut off the backpatting going on in my head. Bold as brass, four figures came up the stairs and strode toward the Parthenon. I grinned and crept over the peak of the roof, sliding down toward the edge, gaining speed. As I slipped off into space, my wings snapped out and I dive-bombed the new group, using my mass to knock them aside. OMG, that was fun.

"Indeed," Athena said approvingly. I bounced up immediately, pulling my sword and my longest dagger as I faced the four who were finding their feet. So slow. Athena kept me focused and dampened my desire to do too much damage. She was worse than Bruce, but on the other hand we did need them for questioning. I took control and cut somebody's hand when they pulled a gun, and then the fun started. I could feel Artemis prowling around in there and it was a little distracting, but with Athena also rattling around in my head, it was like I'd rolled a 20 on a d20. I dodged and ducked and spun as the four went on the attack, my dance combat coming more easily than it ever had. I exploded out of a turn and sank into a lunge, throwing the dagger at one of the goons that had come over the edge and was trying to escape. It struck his middle rather than his shoulder, but then, it wasn't made for throwing, and I heard the two goddesses discussing whether it was my lack
of skill to compensate for this or if it was a legitimate reason.

"Will you two shut up?" I hissed through clenched teeth; I needed my concentration. And while I was actually having fun, it wasn't easy to manage four even if most of them weren't very skilled fighters. I disarmed the last one and slammed him down on his face, holding his arm to dislocate it.

"Talking to yourself?" a familiar voice quipped. "That's not a good sign."

"Took you long enough, Tony," I said as he and the Kryptonians finally showed up. The four I'd been fighting were easily taken into custody. By the time everybody else arrived, all conspirators were collected and restrained, wounds treated and consciousness regained, and we were exploring the contents of the net. Bricks of old-fashioned C-4, easy to make in these days. I frowned. That much explosive would have destroyed a good chunk of the plateau as well as the antiquities on it.

The others looked around in dismay at the lack of anything for them to do, then Damian chuckled and gestured for me to put away the wings, draping my cape around my shoulders. His lips skimmed the back of my neck, and in my head, the two chaste goddesses tutted. I rolled my eyes.

The police showed up and we surrendered custody of six goons, Zara, a pyrotechnics expert known to Wonder Woman, Helmut Zemo, no fan of the Avengers, the Riddler (my lip curled and I wanted another shot at him,) and Talia al Ghul. When her mask was taken off, my snarl turned into a smile. She locked eyes with Damian, but her son just shook his head and turned away. A look equally composed of love, longing, and fury settled on her face. I made sure that I had found all my weapons and restored them to their places (except for the arrows; I'd broken their shafts and left the arrowheads in the goons for more advanced medical care to address) before talking to the highest-ranking police officer who was skeptical about my good work.

I described the search of the temple and how I'd watched from the roof of the temple. "Did you do any damage?" the officer asked. "Because you'll be billed for it. That construction is new and the temple is very important to us." I felt Athena preen and Artemis roll her eyes.

"I read the papers," I said tersely. "I'm not the one who was here to cause damage." Then I smiled. "And how would you bill me, anyway? Valkyrie has no known address." Superman, who'd been listening, waiting for his turn at being questioned, sputtered a laugh.

That brought up a whole bunch more questions about what I was doing there, if I'd joined the Justice League, and a lot more that I thought were more about the man's curiosity rather than this incident. It was getting irritating, and the goddesses started to fume. I wondered why they were still hanging around. I was about ready to give up and poof away when the officer, apparently made bold by the appearance of the press, insinuated that I was in fact one of the villains and for some reason I'd turned on my former colleagues, possibly in order to get myself publicity. I staggered a few paces as first one and then the other goddess erupted from me, glowing faintly, barely seen visages but VERY MUCH present. And pissed off.

Diana gasped and took a knee. The shade of Athena started in on the officer, castigating him, exposing all his petty misdeeds and small abuses of his power and Artemis circled around him. He peed his pants and the other Greeks followed Wonder Woman's lead and knelt. The other heroes weren't quite sure what to do, so they settled for removing their cowls or other headgear, but those keeping a secret identity left their masks on.

"So were you possessed by the goddesses?" one broadcast journalist muttered to me, edging up.

"Not exactly, they didn't take over my body," I said absently, watching the show.
"What was that like?"

"Distracting," I decided. "But also kind of awesome."

"That's pretty irreverent," the reporter said, aghast.

I shrugged. "I've dealt with gods before."

"Nice costume," she said, touching my shoulder. "So are you one of the real Valkyries, Odin's chosen?" I stepped away as she tried to get a better look at my backpack and laughed.

"Wouldn't you like to know?"

"Well, yes."

"Not today," I said, smiling. "By the way, somebody ought to restore the sanctuary of Artemis here, given that both of these goddesses showed up to defend the Acropolis tonight." I turned from the reporter and the goddesses paused in their haranguing of the officer and regarded me.

"Thank you for your help," I said politely. "I'm done here, so I think I'll leave now."

"You did well," Athena allowed, and Artemis nodded. "You have my gratitude for helping to avert the destruction of my temple."

"You have skill," Artemis said with grudging approval. "You need practice, continually, to improve." And with that, the presence of the two goddesses vanished, and whatever they'd used to create their forms spattered on the stone and dirt.

Abruptly they faded, drips of whatever they'd used to make themselves visible pattering down on the stones and soil.

"What is that?" Dick asked in an 'ew' voice.

"Probably mostly blood plasma," I hypothesized, and shrugged. "Later," I said to the heroes and police, and blipped back home. The kitchen, actually, and I chugged a large bottle of Gatorade from the refrigerator, sitting on the floor against the cabinets as I waited for it to work, shivering and depleted.

The lights flickered on, and I opened my eyes, apprehensive, but instead of my kids it was Alfred in his dressing gown. He cast a look over me and crouched beside me. "How did it go, Miss Alex?" he asked as he deftly removed my helmet and mask; I'd only jerked it up enough to drink.

"We got them," I murmured. "Talia was one of them." I quickly hit the highlights as he took off my helmet and mask--I'd only peeled it back enough to drink--and I shucked my gloves, unbuckled my swordbelt, and released the clips on the cape, quiver and the backpack. Even that wore me out. He tutted as he found how dehydrated I was. He set his mouth and picked me up, taking me to the library and tucking a blanket around me before returning with an additional Gatorade. He took my gear away, silent as I drained the electrolyte drink, returning with an IV, which he deftly inserted into the back of my hand, and in his place came Eira. She's nice and warm and was concerned about my depletion. He handed me the plate that had the iced cookies that he and the kids had made for Santa for quick energy. Gradually I stopped shivering and felt better.

He shook his head. "You do have the most extraordinary experiences, Miss Alex." He was about to continue when a feminine voice said, "Is everything well, Alfred?" and Delara came into view, clutching Alfred's apparently spare dressing gown around her. I assumed it was his, it was huge on
her. Alfred looked discombobulated and Delara's eyes widened as she took in the scene in front of her. We blinked at each other, mutually astonished, for a moment.

But my work butler was just as efficient as Alfred, and she quickly set her garment to rights, tying the sash, before briskly moving into the room and inquired what I needed. My work butler was almost as efficient as Alfred and she left quickly, only to return shortly with some soup and some rolls to help restore my blood glucose levels. I yawned. Alfred took the needle out and folded my other hand over a cotton ball. "If you have no plans, Delara, you're invited to Christmas here." She and Alfred exchanged a glance, his mouth crooked in a smile, and she smiled in return.

"Thank you, Ms Barnes, that's most kind of you," she said briskly, folding the blanket efficiently as I sat up.

"You can call me Alex," I said, heaving to my feet.

She was silent a moment as she took in my clothing. "Will you be needing assistance with your... garment, or will your husband help, Ms...Alex?"

"Damian's not here right now," I said. "He'll be back in time for Christmas, though. I could use a hand."

So she and Alfred bundled me into the elevator and Alfred placed the water pitcher and glass on my nightstand before retiring. Delara helped peel me out of the suit and handed me my nightgown, dislodging a cat and turning down the blankets. She picked up my suit and boots before I could say anything. "Good night, Ms Alex," she said discreetly, and shut the door on her way out. Well, I was too tired for this now, so I snuggled under the covers and fell asleep immediately.

I woke up a few hours later and had to use the bathroom. When I returned, the door opened and Damian came in, looking a little tired but none the worse for wear. "Petal," he cooed, and I went in for the snuggle. "We'll talk later," he murmured as he squeezed me, then accompanied me to our bed. "You must be exhausted." I nodded as I drank more water, still feeling thirsty, then cozied up to him before going back to sleep.

I was abruptly jerked awake when the door banged open and two small bodies hit the bed. "Mama! Papa! Get up! It's Christmas!" Miles commanded. Damian grunted.

"Santa came!" Iris insisted.

"Are you sure about that?" Damian grumbled, and I managed to pry my eyes open in time to see my daughter swat her father. "See, that's what I'm talking about. Naughty kids, assaulting their parents."

"Daaaaaad," she moaned, and I smiled, then sat up.

"Ok, give us a minute. You kids need your robes, it will be chilly down in the library yet. What time is it, anyway?" It was hard to tell in the dim light.

"Six thirty!" my daughter said triumphantly. "It's snowing!"

"We've been waiting FOREVER,' my son groaned.

"Get slippers and robes and your mother and I will be down shortly," Damian instructed his offspring, and they bolted for the door. He let me have a head start on the bathroom, and I hit the highlights of last night's action and my afteraction report.
"Delara, huh?" he mused, brushing my hair and pulling it back into a ponytail as I finished brushing my teeth. I nodded.

"Let's see how that goes," Damian said, shrugging. "At least she understands what it means to be a butler and she won't be surprised at Alfred's position in the family. You're sure you feel ok, Sweet pea?"

"Just tired," I assured him, and we put on our own robes and slippers before following the sound of the kids downstairs where they were circling the tree and poking at the presents, discussing their possible contents with animation. Torunn ambled in too, stopping to rub Eira's tummy.

Alfred, fully dressed and ready for action, summoned us to breakfast; it was a french toast casserole with sausage, the kids' favorite, and a lovely fruit salad. And lots of life-giving coffee. Alfred rose once and escorted Martha, Xander, and J in.

"You're late," Iris said critically. "You'll have to eat fast to catch up." J grinned and tickled her until she giggled, and they did eat fast. Of course, it was really good, and that helped. After breakfast, we trooped back to the library and I passed out stockings to everybody before settling on the sofa between Damian and J.

"Oh, nice," J said, investigating the contents of his. "Santa gave me a new stethoscope. Just what I need, I can keep the other one in my travel kit for when I go to satellite clinics." Then, after looking around and seeing everybody absorbed in their presents, he lowered his voice. "You look like shit, sis. I saw that Valkyrie was out and about, very unusual situation."

"Just really tired. That kind of travel takes it out of me," I assured him, also sotto voice, and promised to see my doctor if I wasn't feeling better after a good night's sleep and also to talk about the depletion I felt from shifting myself around; maybe he could help. Damian claimed my attention with a kiss for a custom-made stock pin for his dressage outfit and riding gloves and urged me to investigate my stocking; it had tickets for two to Budapest after the new year.

"Somehow I think you came out on the short end there," I said ruefully, and he kissed my hair.

"No, I love the pin and I needed a new one, I bent the old one. The gloves are wonderful. And you need a nice, relaxing vacation. We'll do touristy stuff, stay in a lot, sleep in, watch the snow. Your brother said he'd watch the kids."

"It's sad how cheaply I can be bought," my brother grumbled. I looked at him and he smiled. "Alfred's catering the event." I poked him with my finger. He just rolled his eyes and swatted my hand away. Then Damian made Xander distribute the rest of the presents, and we enjoyed ripping through pretty paper into our gifts. Afterward, I had Iris and Miles clean up the mess since they'd made most of it it, and the group dispersed a bit. Alfred brought around glasses of eggnog for everyone; mine was a little paler than my husband's. I didn't get the spike of rum this year. Well, it would probably put me out anyway. Then we trooped up to the main house after the rest of us got dressed, and exchanged presents with everybody there. After that, I escaped for a few hours and got a power nap in before dinner. Delara joined us for that, and Alfred introduced her to the family who didn't know her. Aslyn raised her eyebrows and smiled as we huddled.

"How long's that been going on?" she asked quietly.

"No idea," I said. "I got home last night and there she was."

"You ok?"
"Yeah, it's just going to be an early night. They look cute together." She agreed, and we all went in to dinner.

"There's a mission debriefing tomorrow night," Uncle Bucky murmured afterward. "Can you make it? You look peaky, sweetie." I reassured him, and as soon as was practical, we collected our kids and went home; we lit the Yule log and the kids went downstairs to play in the pool with my brother. I relished the time with my two older kids; it was rare because everybody was so busy. I went up to bed not long after Martha and Xander said goodbye and Miles and Iris were packed off to sleep. J and Damian stayed up to chat with Alfred; I woke only once, briefly, when Damian came to bed.
I slept in a little the next morning and felt great when I woke up. After breakfast, we took a family horseback ride, then the kids had a playdate at my parents' that would be an overnight thing. Damian and I spend much of the afternoon canoodling, then after dinner, our superhero friends came for a present exchange and dessert before the meeting. Then I related my adventure; Serena was the only one who laughed when I described sliding down the roof and crashing the Typhon principals, but then, she knew the joy of the wings, of flight herself and how satisfying it was to use in combat. Predictably, Hawkman had a fit over my 'flippancy' with the goddesses, as he called it.

"You can be respectful without groveling," I said firmly.

"You're going to push someone too far with your lack of awe at the power of the gods," he snapped back. "Don't come crying to me if a god punishes you for your pride."

"You are probably the last person in the world I would go to cry with," I shot back. Superman coughed. "Athena and Artemis were fine with me. It isn't your place to tell me how to interact with anybody, flyboy." He gathered his breath for a bellow, and Diana stood.

"Alex is correct. She pleased them well enough that the goddesses assisted her in combat," she said sternly. "If the gods do not protest, who are you to cry blasphemy?"

"Sit down and shut up," Tony said testily to Hawkman, who was practically purple with rage. "I promised my pregnant wife ice cream on the way home and we need to move this along."

Steve cleared his throat. "The Athenian police are still questioning the would-be demolitions crew. The underlings don't know much, but they've given up the location of a small base in the Aegean and the identities of their immediate superiors. The big four aren't talking, and I suspect that it's only a matter of time before they're broken out." Then there were discussions about how to get more information about the new base and what the next steps would be. By the time they left, we had a workable plan.

I love the week between Christmas and New Years; it's kind of a lazy week and I like to use it to get things caught up. I also put out feelers to see what kind of personnel were out there to see if there were enough to pad our teams, maybe start another one. My parents wanted the kids for New Years, so Damian and I were going to a party where we could dress up and dance and keep the business to a minimum. I'd borrowed a green velvet and satin evening dress from Steve, so I looked as good as I felt. The next day when Miles and Iris returned, we gave them new books to read and spent some time reading out loud as a family; we'd done the same thing with Martha and Xander and had sent them books too.

After that, the holidays were over and it was back to the grind. With the agreement with Callahan and Mei, I'd kind of boxed myself out of doing a lot of the work and into figurehead status where I was the face of the company and did the initial interviews for the more complex projects, and I was ambivalent about that. It freed up time I needed to be Valkyrie, but I wasn't doing much of what I wanted to do when I started my company.

I decided to bide my time and wait until we took out Typhon before making any changes. Serena agreed, over a dim sum lunch one day, that now was a good time to be grateful that we had people working for us that we could rely on. "You can't be everything to everybody, and without our staffs, we couldn't do Valkyrie and the superhero stuff. I fell into the trap of thinking that I was irreplaceable, that nobody could do what I do, and to a certain extent that's true, but new heroes are
coming up all the time and they can do things that I can't. So after this, I'm going to let go of the superhero biz and have what I haven't had for a long time--a job where nobody's trying to kill me, maybe time for a family. Travel, just for fun. Get a hobby." We smiled wryly at each other.

"Honestly, I'm not sure what it would be like to leave the superhero biz behind completely," I confessed. "Damian is ready to give it up after Typhon too. I'm not quite sure how it will be, not having to conceal secret identities, explain away inconvenient absences and injuries... Come to think about it, I've been involved at least peripherally in the superhero game since I knocked on my uncle's front door. I think the only time I haven't been concerned about heroes was during grad school when I was out in California, and that was pretty much because I was head down in studies, getting the background I needed for the business my brother and I had planned, getting that EMT credential, because my uncle was not in the field anymore. So I'm not quite sure what I'll do with all that time."

Serena laughed. "I dunno, time with your kids, husband that you don't have to schedule? I get your point, though. And you have that little secret in the basement, so it's not like you'll be getting away from it entirely." I nodded. "I have a love/hate relationship with the adrenaline rush from a mission. I think I'll miss that the most. Maybe I'll take up skydiving to compensate." We both hooted at the idea of jumping out of a perfectly good airplane on purpose and finished lunch.

That weekend, we had a family outing: our little bunch, plus Bruce, Selina, and Tabby, Tony, Ann, Steve, Emma, and Nessa and all their kids went to the zoo; Bucky was working. He'd recently gotten a new assignment in the Temperate Territory with the adorable red pandas and he'd told us when the pandas were most active. He came out to explain some interesting facts and details about the animals in this area and told us in confidence that the zoo was going to be announcing that they were getting giant pandas, which would be placed in this area in a new exhibit. And he was being trained to care for them too. So exciting! Who doesn't love the big black and white pandas? But they can be dangerous too, so my uncle was an excellent choice of keeper. We ate at a cafe in the zoo and afterward went out into Central Park, played in the snow, had fun.

After that, Damian and I went to Budapest. It was exactly as much fun as I'd hoped for; I had my husband's undivided attention and he had mine. Although I loved the city and how much it had to offer, I most valued the time I had with Damian to stroll through streets and favorite places like the Bastion hand in hand, not in a hurry, and with very minimal planning. "We'll have to do this more once Typhon is brought down," he murmured one night. "We'll just have to be careful not to fill the spare time with more work. And once the kids are older we can bring them along. We ought to go to Disneyland next year." And so we started expanding our horizons.

Toward the end of summer, we thought we knew where Typhon's headquarters was based and we thought we had an inkling of when and where their first big strike to announce themselves as a global power would take, so I started putting a lot more effort into training. Hogun was posted to Midgard for the duration so I could brush off the rust with the two swords. I intended this to be the last mission for Valkyrie, so it didn't matter if my cover was blown. I wanted my best weapons with me. I kept up the training with my other weapons, of course, bouting with Diana with the sword and shield, practicing archery with the Hawkeyes or Green Arrow, throwing spears and javelins, keeping up my knifework, practicing with energy pistols. And flying practice. There was nobody I could spar with in the air--the Hawkpeople flatly refused--so I did the best I could. It was mostly about building wing strength and maneuverability anyway.

Diana and Daniel were married Labor Day weekend; it was a fairly small event, all things considered. Larger than they wanted, smaller than the people who would have liked and invitation would have wanted. The family was there, of course, friends of the couple, some unavoidable business acquaintances and friends of the extended family, and a massive contingent of incognito
superheroes. Even the Hawkpeople were there, less dour and superior than usual. A banner day all around. Diana wore the simplest of white silk gowns with a whisper of lace here and there; her long dark hair was dressed beautifully and she wore flowers in her hair rather than a veil. The couple had chosen sky blue and a color right between pink and red for their colors and these colors were reflected in the flowers that were everywhere except in Diana's bouquet. She was entirely in white, and Daniel was in black and white. Emma had created thin platinum bands that curved around each side of the beautiful engagement ring to provide protection for the edges and Daniel had asked for and gotten just a plain shining band of gold. Everything was simple and elegant, and it was a very moving ceremony and a joyous reception. They went on their honeymoon, and one evening they went sailing in the Aegean and met Hippolyta in the mist. She had brought along Antiope as well, so both of them could meet Diana's new husband, as well as the priestess Menalippe. Daniel said later that while he was intimidated by them, they were very pleasant to him and Menalippe had blessed their union. They had asked after me and my daughters, which was very nice of them, and extended an open invitation for me to visit when I pleased.

Halloween, there was a special event at the zoo. Members of the Avengers and Justice League came in costume for an event to benefit children's charities. There was trick or treating at stations throughout the zoo, zookeepers talked to the kids and their families about the animals and their habitats, and you could meet all the superheroes who came. The event was open to the public and was packed. Kids all got in free, thanks to a grant from the Justice League, and parents and guardians got in with donations for food pantries. Donations could be in the form of shelf-stable food items, cash donations of any size, or signing up to put in an hour or two at a food pantry or soup kitchen, so almost everybody could join the fun. We had a chat with our kids about how some heroes might look like somebody they knew, aside from Tony, Uncle Bucky and Uncle Steve, it was probably just a resemblance, and in any case, unless they were invited to chat, they should treat all costumed adults as people on the job. They'd known from an early age to wait for a grown-up who was talking or doing business to talk first. Iris went as a ninja and Miles as Nureyev. We were going to a matinee of Swan Lake featuring Nureyev and Fonteyn just before Christmas. The heroes were very popular, and given the size of the crowds around them, the kids just waved to their uncles, but they waited in line to meet Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, the Flash, Wolverine (who was minded by Professor X), Spiderman, Zatanna, Supergirl, and Black Widow. Natasha was a surprise, and the kids both got hugs and chatted with her. Apparently what we told the kids didn't quite resonate truth with them, and I caught them squinting suspiciously after having met Wonder Woman and whispering. We distracted them by having them take some water bottles over to Steve, Bucky, and Tony, who were mobbed and wilting.

"You lied to us, Papa," Miles said accusingly as we headed back to the house after the fun. Damian's face was blank as he tried to figure out what he'd lied about. He is usually very careful to avoid an outright lie. "Auntie Diana is Wonder Woman."

"And we saw Flash and Superman and Supergirl at Uncle Daniel's wedding," Iris said. "And Batman looks familiar."

So we had to explain to our kids why some superheroes wanted to keep their personal and professional lives separate and prudently added praise for the kids not outing anybody. Alfred and Delara were waiting when we got home and served how spiced cider all around while the kids told them all about the fun they'd had. They did not say much about the superheroes who weren't already out, but they'd run into family and a few friends from school and chatted about that as Damian and I quickly searched their treat bags just to be sure all the candy was on the up and up. We removed a few with torn wrappers, then sat back and watched as the twins started trading candy. There were some types of candy that nobody liked, so either Damian or I would take them to work and put them out. Each kid was allowed two pieces, then sent off to bed.
"They're a little more perceptive than Martha and Xander were at that age," Damian remarked, rubbing his eyes. "You might want to be more cautious when you're flying, Sweet Pea. Keep away from their windows." I nodded.

Soon after this, we got information that Typhon's main base was said to be in Egypt, near either Luxor or Karnak. "It makes sense," Superman said slowly. "The Egyptian monuments aren't being restored for some reason, and their pantheon has been silent since the Return. No that many Returned, actually. I was surprised by that, actually."

"Add to the Greek conquest in antiquity, and the gods that Ares has recruited to their cause aren't exactly foreign," Diana said thoughtfully. "It makes sense."

"It is blasphemy!" Hawkman exploded. Hawkwoman was rigid in surprise. I suppressed my sigh at his... persnickityness. He was red with rage and lurched to his feet. I looked at him with more interest. This was something different from his usual behavior.

"How do you know?" I asked, frowning slightly. Hawkman drew a deep breath, but instead of bellowing as I expected, he let it go and looked at Hawkwoman, who met his gaze gravely.

"It is time," she said. Hawkman's fists relaxed and he felt for the chair he'd pushed back before sinking into it.

"Many lifetimes ago, I was known as Khufu."
"Khnum-Khufu?" Bruce said skeptically. He looked around at our blank faces and elaborated. "Pharaoh who ruled during the Fourth Dynasty in the first half of the Old Kingdom period? Khufu was the second ruler of the Fourth dynasty; he followed his probable father, Sneferu, to the throne and is accepted as having commissioned the Great Pyramid at Giza." Our heads swiveled as one to look at Hawkman. This would go a long way in explaining his hauteur.

"No, I was not the king," he said quietly. "I was but a prince, one of scores, son of Ramesses II, now known as Ramesses the Great, third pharaoh of the Nineteenth Dynasty. My mother was Maathorneferure, a Hittite princess who died not long after my birth. I was my father's twenty-seventh son."

My mouth actually hung open as I listened to this. If he was right, this was an exceptional opportunity to learn about ancient Egypt firsthand but somehow I doubted that he'd indulge my curiosity. That didn't stop the others from bombarding him with questions. "What about Hawkwoman?" Green Arrow finally broke through the babble. "And where did you get the Nth metal? I thought you were aliens."

"I was his consort, Chay-Ara," Hawkwoman said in her cool voice. "The prince was engaged in a feud with a priest of Set, who killed us both. We continually reincarnate, sometimes remembering our past lives, sometimes not, sometimes continuing our relationship, sometimes not. This is one of the lives where we remember our past selves and it is a mark of the noble nature of the prince that he remembers his responsibilities to the people. Noblesse oblige, you would call it. The metal that negates the effect of gravity was a gift from the gods, meant to help us through our endless reincarnations." I almost gagged at that. My impression from history was that the pharaohs excelled in their building projects/vanity projects and war, were practically deified, and had a taste for incest as a way to keep the bloodline pure and minimize the possibility of outsiders claiming the throne. Not that that really stopped it; there were thirty-one separate dynasties beginning with the unification of upper and lower Egypt to the last independent pharaoh before Egypt was conquered by Alexander the Great and thereafter under Roman rule. And the metal? Unless it was handed off directly from a god, I'd bet it was from a meteorite, like vibranium. But the source probably didn't matter much; the fact that the pair believed it to be from the gods was likely a great comfort to them. And it might have been a direct gift; didn't I receive the symbols of the valkyrie directly from Odin?

It was as if Hawkman could read my mind. His eyes flashed as he looked at me. "The pharaoh performed many functions vital to the safekeeping of the upper and lower kingdoms and wellbeing of his people, and the power of the gods was palpable in that time, strong and vital from thousands of years of rightful worship. In certain sacred sites, their power charged the air, thick as honey."

"I didn't say a word," I protested, holding up my hands. Who am I to rain on somebody else's pantheon?

"I'd like to know more," Diana remarked, leaning forward. "I am familiar with the kingdom after the conquest by Alexander and the installment of the Ptolemies, but not before that time."

"Interlopers!" Hawkman hissed, and Hawkwoman placed her hand on his arm to calm him. Not that it had a lot of effect. "The principal responsibility of the king was to maintain balance, ma'at, in all things. Balance is the first goal of the gods and therefore the king, leading to prosperity for all. He was the heir of Horus, ruler of the world, and the son of mighty Re, Lord of the Sun. He had to keep his people safe, dispense justice, ensure the adequate rising of the Nile, care for the continued
existence of those in the beyond by bringing them offerings to feed on. He had to uphold the divine order, truth, and justice—ma'at—and fight isfret—chaos, evil, injustice. His ka, his lifeforce, was not regarded as equal with the gods, but as a representative on earth of the divine. Mediators between the people and the gods."

"They sure had a nice life," Flash said cynically. "All the gold, all those wives, all that power, the best of everything, those tombs and all the monuments."

"The king was the embodiment of all aspects of the kingdom," Hawkman shot back. "He was the chief arbiter over all his subjects, protecting the weak from the powerful, the head of what is now known as church and state, the representative of the kingdom to foreign powers, and the commander-in-chief of the army, often leading his armies in person, taking part in the fighting. And the temples often caused intrigue. As the representative of the gods, leader of the people, he was entitled to splendors to balance out his duties, which were a heavy responsibilities. What are the wives and concubines, the fine trappings of life in comparison to the wellbeing of all under his rule and the cosmic burdens of ma'at? He was a great personage, and my father the greatest of all. Why should the people not abase themselves before him, in return for all the good he did, and revere him as the favored of the gods? Why should he not, having fought through the afterlife to his reward, repose in comfort in paradise with others to do his work? Is that not the purpose of the shabtis?"

Tony's gaze flickered across mine and I saw him fight to keep a straight face. Likewise, I had to hold myself back, but this was how the guy was raised. It made sense that he'd toe the company line. And it did make sense, from a certain point of view.

"What was Ramesses really like?" Damian asked, leaning forward. Like all of us in the family, he always wanted to add to his knowledge.

Hawkman softened. "My father, Userma'atre-setepenre, which means 'Keeper of Harmony and Balance, Strong in Right, Elect of Ra'. The Greeks called him Ozymandias. He lived to be 96 years of age." He paused for a reverential moment to consider this. "Understand, life expectancy for was in general 19 years for death from accidents and disease was common. However, women could live to an average of 30 years at that time, those who did not die in childbirth, and scarcely more for men, 34 years. Generations of the people knew no other but their king Ramesses the Great and there was widespread panic that when he would at last die that the world would end with him. His name and accomplishments were known from one end of Egypt to the other and there is scarcely a monument in the country that does not mention his might. He was accompanying his father, Seti I, into battle at the age of 14 and going into battle in Nubia with his sons at 22, co-regent with his father. By the time Seti died, he had begun massive restoration projects, had set about restoring our borders, ensure our trade routes, and was engaged in reclaiming what had been taken from us by the Hittites. He defeated the Sea People and his crowning military achievement was the victory at Kadesh, where he outwitted the larger Hittite forces. The victory was possible because of his courage, calm, cleverness, and favor of the gods as he fought to retain the balance, a dazzling victory. He constructed the magnificent city Per-Ramesses that rivaled the ancient city of Thebes in its greatness. He improved the country's infrastructure and commissioned monuments of his accomplishments that all might know of them. He loved his wife Nefertari above all others, but treated his second great wife, Isenefret, and his secondary wives and consorts with regard and respect. His reign was very stable and prosperous. He was one of the few rulers to live and rule long enough to take part in two Heb Sed festivals which were held every thirty years to rejuvenate the pharaoh. He secured the country's borders, increased its wealth, and widened its scope of trade and, if he boasted of his accomplishments in his inscriptions and monuments, it is because he had good reason to be proud.
"He was over six feet tall, had more than 200 wives and concubines, 96 sons, and 60 daughters. His appearance was nothing in comparison to his greatness, but he had a strong face. And red hair, as does the god Set, but I have always considered my father to be a perfect balance to the chaos and destruction of that god. A keeper of the balance in deed and truth."

"Formidable," Damian acknowledged. But I'd Googled it under the table and found a less biased account that took some of the puffery away and noted that other pharaohs had actually been better kings, like Ramesses III, but none were as well-known. "Were you buried in KV 5? Have you visited the tomb?"

"Yes, many of us, sons as well as daughters, were laid to rest there. As expected, at least the closer burial chambers were robbed in antiquity, including mine, and have been heavily damaged by the flash floods, the idiotic practice of parking tour buses too close to the necropolis, and from a leaky sewer line from a rest stop. It is blasphemous that money is made from allowing goggle-eyed and ignorant tourists to tramp through sacred spaces! Their breath and their sweat raises the humidity in the tombs too much, further endangering the delicate art on the walls, creating opportunities for bacteria to grow and destroy the images as well. And the art isn't decorative, it is necessary to help the ka of those within through the underworld. It is blasphemous to open the tombs to any who wish to gawk and do not display the proper reverence--"

"So please explain why it's so bad that Typhon is setting up camp in Egypt, if you will," Steve requested, getting us back on track by cutting off Hawkman's rant. "I thought that the Egyptian gods hadn't shown up, even though some of the dead have returned." He frowned. "Although now that I think about it, there wasn't a great population who were Returned, and none of the pharaohs-- or at least none have come forward."

Both Hawkpeople looked smug. "Because the way to paradise is long and difficult to fight through to, the gods allowed those within to make their choice to return or not; the balance would be disturbed if they had Returned. Some did, and they will have to account for their choices eventually. But most, accustomed to their roles and, like my father, intimately aware of the need to retain the balance, did not. The gods are not dead," Hawkman warned passionately. "They are present and observe the land closely. They choose not to interfere, as most people in the country have abandoned their traditional worship and ways to follow Mohammad or Jesus. Without a populace interested in keeping the balance, there is little they can do," he admitted.

"There are small bands of believers," Hawkwoman said. "They have restored a few temples, although the government will not permit them to work on the major temples in sites like Luxor or Thebes. Or even Tel el-Armarna," she sniffed. "Or even worship there." Her voice was condemning and contemptuous. "And they warn that the gods will act if the balance is shifted too much. The presence of Typhon threatens much."

Tony sat back, a look of calculation on his face. "So what's the problem? It sounds like if Typhon gets too busy, the gods of the land will beat them back."

"They may not have the strength," Hawkman said after a pregnant pause. "Or they may act in a way that will be detrimental to those currently living there. The people may fail to worship properly, but they do not deserve to be slaughtered. Typhon will not care about the damage they incur, and the gods may not count the lives of blasphemers as dearly as those who do follow the traditional ways, who are few in number. They may use the opportunity to restore their worship. Currently they watch from the shadows and they wait."

"So it is imperative that we keep Typhon contained," Hawkwoman said urgently. "The gods are not merciful in their pursuit of the balance."
"What do you propose we do?" Superman asked.

"Root out Typhon as quickly as possible," Hawkman responded instantly. In his agitation, he stood again, and this time I noticed that he had a khopesh by his side. Tony noticed it too.

"That wouldn't happen to be from the Met's collection, would it?" he asked, pointing to it, his voice rising.

"The swords were created to be used," Hawkman said sternly.

Tony looked like he was going to blow a gasket. "Those are archaeological treasures now," he said. "Ask somebody to make you a new one, of modern, stronger materials, rather than divert antiquities that you have no right to! How did you get your hands on it?" he demanded. Tony sat on the board of directors for the museum and was passionate about its holdings.

"If the great colonial powers and tomb robbers had left our caches in peace, I would have no need of using the collection at work," Hawkman retorted, then immediately looked like he wished he hadn't said anything. In the shouting that followed, it turned out that Hawkman was a curator of Egyptology at the museum in his modern identity as Carter Hall, although his position was not secure now. Tony threatened to have him arrested. I quickly Googled the archaeologist and found that he was considered the pre-eminent scholar for his specific knowledge of the reign of Ramesses II and personal opinions were that he was aloof but passionate about his work. I guess he was more personable at the museum.

The upshot was that Emma agreed to make the Hawkpeople weapons in the Egyptian style they preferred and that Hall would refrain from stealing from the collection of the museum.

"Reclaiming," Hawkman said mulishly.

"Borrowing," Hawkwoman said hastily.

"Whatever," Tony snapped. "No more, or I'll turn you in and you can ponder the balance from the inside of a prison cell." Hawkman sulked, but it was agreed to turn our intelligence gathering operation to focus on Egypt.
After that meeting, all assets of the Justice League and Avengers were turned toward Egypt. Tony knew somebody with a private satellite used for combing the Earth for precious minerals, and got that satellite in geosynchronous orbit over Egypt, mapping sites (including some possible undiscovered ruins for exploration), and producing multispectral and hyperspectral images. Hawkman analyzed the images and pinpointed a site around the Aswan High Dam. The area is rich in important ruins like the northern and western quarries, Kalabsha, the tombs of the nobles, Philae temple, and, of course, the great temple complex of Abu Simbel up the river a bit. Disturbances in the ground and traffic in the area at a distance behind Abu Simbel indicated that an underground base was being either constructed or used, and an otherwise inexplicable drop in the water level at the dam indicated that water was being diverted.

Hawkman, predictably, was furious and Hawkwoman tense and concerned. He was cursing quite proficiently in ancient Egyptian. Tony spent a few weeks coming up with tiny cameras that looked and behaved like big flies and sent them into the installation for a closer look. Underground was a highly modern military installation buzzing (sorry) with Typhon employees and some of the principals were seen in the images. A terrifyingly impressive arsenal was being built, and what looked like an antique Greek war chariot was glimpsed briefly before somebody swatted our fly. It was on a conspicuously elevated dais and actually roped off so that the peons couldn't touch it.

It was decided by the council that it was time to act before the arsenal could get any larger, and there was a six day period where nothing but the op was planned. February in New York was cold and slushy, so I couldn't say that I minded a brief visit to the warm sands of Egypt. I loaded up with as many weapons I could lay my hands on, including my two swords. If I was outed because of it, so be it. I was planning on quitting being Valkyrie anyway. Damian helped me carry my personal weapons cache into one of the quinjets and the taskforce set off for Aswan. Well, not Aswan directly, we flew to Lake Nasser, where special boats were waiting for us. They had hulls of wood and the mechanics were shielded and sound-protected so that our approach would be as unremarkable as possible. We pulled to shore just past midnight about half a kilometer away from the temple compound and Quicksilver and Flash went ahead to scout the terrain and report back. I felt oddly uneasy. The Norse gods had declined to intervene directly; this was nowhere near their centers of influence, and even the Norn, who had been burned when their Ragnarok prophesy was blown up out of proportion, declined to provide me with anything helpful. Although the swans had left me alone this time. Apparently the bribes of snails and swan chow were having an effect. Not even a ten pound box of luxury chocolates could pry information from the Norn, however. Loki had visited other Typhon installations and worked his magic; reports were that the fabric of the organization was fraying badly. This strike might just do them in.

I edged over to the Hawkpeople while we waited. "I don't suppose you could could pray to the gods, could you?" They looked at me, taken aback. "I have a bad feeling that this is going to blow up in our faces and we may not have time for it later. It wouldn't hurt, would it?"

"You're serious, aren't you?" Hawkman asked slowly. I nodded.

"Yeah. And whatever animosity there is between us doesn't mean that I don't take your gods seriously if you say they're watching and waiting. I just feel that we should do everything possible to help favor our side. I'm ready to believe in their existence and power even if I'm not prepared to worship them." The Hawkpeople looked at each other and nodded. They peeled off and moved rapidly toward the temple complex, where great statues of four major gods could still be found. I hunkered down next to my husband for comfort.
It took awhile to get the ball rolling. We were all silent and waiting. I nervously checked and rechecked my armament and counted my arrows, but at length our speedsters returned with information about shift changes, which would be happening in just over an hour, while it was still dark outside so as to keep the public from noticing people coming and going from a facility that wasn't supposed to exist. Our field leaders, Cap and Superman, made assignments. Because I wasn't trained in their group tactics, I was going to be stationed outside to pick off people if they escaped the facility, and let's face it, they would. You don't build a war chariot just for the aesthetics of it. About twenty minutes before we were go, the Hawkpeople came back. They'd made devotions to the gods and asked for their help in keeping the lands outside of foreign control, and that's all that could be done. Then it was time.

We took several different approaches so that there wasn't a solid mass of people on the move. I found a convenient low outcropping of rock off to the side that would provide me with some cover and set up shop, carefully arranging my javelins and bundles of arrows. Hawkeye had lost the toss and was stuck out here with me, but on the other side of the opening. Damian knelt beside me until it was almost time. "Keep yourself safe," I murmured to him. "You're precious to me."

He bent his forehead to me so that our heads touched. "My world revolves around you, Petal. I won't take unnecessary risks if you don't." I smiled and stuck out my hand. He grinned, shook it, and faded off. I drew the energy pistols from their holsters by my spine and concentrated as dark shapes silently entered the facility.

I had a longer wait than I'd thought; then I heard the first boom. I grinned with the prospect of action. Soon after, a few people ran out, headed to where a concealed parking structure held a small fleet of vehicles equipped to go over sand more easily. Hawkeye and I took care of them easily, then it became more difficult as more people emerged, panicked and motivated to get out while they could. Soon the trickle became a flood of underlings who'd lost their nerve. We let the ones who looked like they just wanted to get out leave, but those who looked more disciplined were brought down. Doing that drew fire, and I was glad for my rock. Then I sensed more than saw the passage of a speedster, and Flash took a breather beside me as the garage blew up. I handed him a big pack of specialty energy gel that was designed specifically for speedsters. Their energy needs were enormous.

"It's going well in there," he said. I hadn't heard anything alarming over coms but the reassurance was welcome. "Quicksilver and Kid Flash should be almost done mining the supports for the facility; Liberty told them where to place them once she got a look at the place. Then everybody will fall back and the serious fighting will start." We bumped fists, and right on time, our team started running from the building. The three of us counted so that everybody would know if anybody was still inside, and as the last person --Uncle Bucky, as it turned out--exited, the explosives detonated. The concussive force literally made the sand around us roll and I fell forward onto my rock, clinging until the shaking subsided somewhat, then joined the others in picking off the Typhon foot soldiers. The difference in philosophies between the Avengers and the Justice League was clear: the Avengers were playing for keeps and the League shot to disable. As I drew on a bad guy who was aiming at my husband, I firmly aligned myself with the Avengers.

I was beginning to feel pretty good about things when the ruined doors to the Typhon complex blew outward, hitting the sand and continuing to slide along it, taking out more of the Typhon fighters. Steve was clipped by one, but he had that healing factor; he'd be fine in a couple of minutes. Then we started to see individuals in deep red uniforms stream out of the doors through the smoke; they were disciplined and started sighting on our people with their weapons. Others shouted orders to the soldiers in black; if they couldn't conquer their panic, their own people shot them.
Then I heard a new sound that I couldn't quite place; then two panicked horses plunged through the doors, pulling a chariot behind them. There were three men in the chariot--a young man handling the reins of the horses, a lion-headed man facing back out of the chariot, firing as they moved, and a confident man in the middle who could be none other than Ares. His armor was shining white and he wore no helmet. One hand lightly gripped the rail along the top of the chariot and the other held a sword. The red-garbed troops cheered as the chariot raced forward.

But their joy was short-lived: the horses, maddened by the explosions and smoke, broke free as the chariot mired in softer, thicker sand. The chariot lost a wheel and it tipped its occupants onto the sand. I barked a laugh; it looked like a farce.

Then waves of terror and dread rolled out from Deimos and Phobos as they stood, glaring malevolently. It took everything I had to stand my ground, but I was trembling.

Then Ares roared, and he began growing until he was about three times as big. I started to shake. We were fucked.

Then a hand fell on my shoulder. I looked around to see Diana. "See past the fear, my sister," she said. "Look, we are not alone." I looked to the north as she nodded, and saw a woman in a chiton, her face indistinct under the helmet she wore, carrying a spear and shield. I felt resolve strengthen me, grabbing onto the intellect of strategy as Athena strode toward us.

"Athena," Ares greeted her mockingly. "Your forces are pathetic. It's barely worth my time to be here."

"Yes, I noticed your grand entrance," she said mockingly. Ares snarled and he and his sons stalked toward the goddess. Artemis faded into being beside Athena, and a winged woman appeared as well, bright as the smile on her face. I felt an instant kinship with her. The wings, you know. She carried a shining shield in her left hand and a palm branch and laurel wreath in her right.

"Nike," Diana breathed. "Goddess of speed, strength, and victory. She bears a palm branch for peace and is prepared to crown the victors of the combat." Her hand squeezed my shoulder and we stood straighter. It helped that the focus of Deimos and Phobos was distracted from the rest of us.

As the gods walked toward each other, the red-clad soldiers showed that they hadn't forgotten us. The combat started, fast and fierce. The charge in my energy pistols ran out; I called for Tony.

"Give me a boost, Sparky?" I asked him, and he picked me up as he flew by and tossed me into the air. My wings snapped out, and I flew just above the range of energy pistols as I shot arrows at the people in red uniforms. It wasn't easy because of the dark, but just then, the top curve of the sun broke the horizon and I was heartened; Apollo was the god of archers, even if I knew that the sun was a giant gas ball rather than a blazing chariot.

But damn me if the light didn't get more intense. And headed our way. A magnificent chariot, shining with the light of the sun and drawn by massive white horses licked with flame, touched down behind the goddesses and circled behind the gods. Fiery arrows found their marks in Ares' sons, and they snarled and turned to pursue the god.

The distraction was bad for me; my lack of attention cost me when a bolt from an energy rifle hit my wing, punching a hole through the sail just under the bone, shredding things there. I was going down, and I'd only shot one quiver. I landed not too hard and persuaded my wings to fold away; I'd wrenched the muscles in the hurt wing some. The benefit to energy weapons was at least that they cauterized the wounds they made. After that, I drew my swords and went to work. The tip of one sword caught one of the red masks that concealed the identities of Typhon's elite soldiers, and I
found myself looking into the face of the Riddler. I cut down and severed the hand that was holding his gun. He howled and grabbed his forearm. I smiled, even though he didn't see it, and turned away.

I searched through the crowd and caught sight of a familiar silhouette. The smell of just-rotting meat made the identification certain, and I grabbed the Joker's shoulder, throwing him off balance. He staggered as he turned, and the pistol that was coming up paused.

"Ah, Pretty," he crooned.

"Joker." I studied him. "Tell me why I shouldn't kill you right here." His lunatic grin lit his face.

"Because you can't," he said smugly. "Your association with the Bat means that you won't kill."

I pushed back my helmet and pulled up the mask so he could see my face. "You're wrong about that," I said softly, putting our faces close together. Ew. "I owe you for so many things. What you did to me. Breaking every bone in your body, as I promised I would do if you bothered me again, will take too much time here. Killing Bruce. I told you I would if you hurt anybody I cared about but you scuttled away like a cockroach before I could. You're nothing but a pain in my ass and you're too stupid to take the hint when I tell you to leave me alone." He grinned as his pistol started to rise again, and I drove my sword through his gut, feeling the point push through his back. His face froze in shock and he began to sag. "And I think Barbara Gordon deserves some payback."

He'd shot her once, paralyzing her until an experimental treatment restored her ability to walk. I pulled the sword out and slashed as he turned, severing his spine.

I turned away from the mess and took stock. There were more Typhon soldiers than heroes, and not all of them were the principals we were looking for, but we were holding our own. I turned when I heard Ares roar. "This land will be mine," he taunted Athena, who had taken some cuts. "And when I rule here, you will bend your knee to me in defeat... and after that, we will see."

There was an immediate silence, just for a moment, and a feeling of pressure pushing me back. "Look!" somebody shouted, and all heads turned to the back of Abu Simbel.

Uncanny figures, part human and part animal, stepped out of nowhere, pacing toward us. I saw Hawkman--couldn't see Hawkwoman--prostrate himself, blood from a cut on his arm staining the sand. The robe of one who looked just humanoid brushed him as he passed, and when I saw Hawkman next, his wounds were healed.

"You do not belong here," one of these newcomers said coldly, addressing not just Ares and his sons but the goddesses and Apollo. He carried snakes in his hands.

"Heka," a voice said in my ear, and I jumped to see Hawkwoman. "God of magic and medicine. Look, there is Pakhet, the lioness, a hunting goddess known as 'She Who Scratches.' She is the vengeful side of Sekhmet. And Mekhit, the roaring lioness, a war goddess, the vengeful aspect of Ra. Sobek, the crocodile-headed god, god of unexpected death. Maahes, the Lord of Slaughter, the Scarlet Lord, that lion-headed man carrying a long knife. The falcon-headed man, Horus. Neith, Mistress of the Bow and mediator of the gods' disputes. Over there--" She broke off as another set of gods appeared from the mist, opposing the group led by Horus. "Set," she whispered. "God of war, chaos, storms, pestilence. 'Destroyer.' It takes both Osirus and Horus to balance him. Reshep, another god of war and pestilence, Apophis, the serpent, a destructive force--" She broke off as the battle resumed.

These gods felt different than any I'd met before, and it was disquieting to look at them; not only the half-human, half-animal forms and animal forms, but there was a mummy in there, and they all,
even the ones who looked human, radiated an undefinable force that seemed to warp the air around them. I understood immediately and completely why Hawkman was so cautious. The Greeks faced off and the Egyptian gods were joined by others, their numbers roughly the same. I remembered what the Hawkpeople said about the crucial importance of balance. The humans focused on each other, and I turned my attention as much as I could to those in the red uniforms. It wasn't easy; the fighting the gods engaged in disturbed more than just sight; sound and perception were affected as well, and a feeling that I interpreted as wrong mingled with a sense of incredible age. I shook my head to clear it and threw my last javelin at somebody who looked to attack my husband from behind his back. I was down to my swords and blades now. I reeled as my suit turned aside a blade, and my head snapped back as I was punched. I tripped during a wave of that terrible distortion pulsed past and grabbed a khopesh from the ground. Waste not, want not, and it denied the enemy a weapon. I looked around as I scrambled to my feet.

My attacker was R'as. "Rash," I acknowledged, and his lip curled back.

"You will pay for your disrespect," he snarled, and attacked. He was in his prime and I had my hands full defending against him. I had to wait for the next disrupting wave before I could attack; I launched a flight of throwing knives before following with the khopesh. It was a bad choice; it felt odd. Apparently Typhon also invested in some protective technologies; R'as' suit protected him some, but mine was better and turned aside his attacks. The next chance I got, I stuck the khopesh between the straps on my back and drew the two swords, grateful that my suit turned aside a cut from R'as. My blades felt natural to me and I was immediately more formidable. R'as recognized this and stopped toying with me. We went full out and I brought out my wings; I couldn't fly right how, but the feathers had been treated and they were integrated shields. The claw on the unharmed wing ripped through his uniform and snagged on his collarbone. He screamed and tried to get away, but what he did just broke his collarbone and hurt my claw. I took advantage and snapped my swords forward, gutting him. It was a terrible wound, but not necessarily fatal. I looked down at him thoughtfully, flicked my blades clean, then picked up his shamshir--newer than the one Damian had claimed in victory as a child-- and added it to the collection on my back.

When I turned back to the fight, it seemed like more of the Egyptian deities were appearing on the battlefield all the time, but the supply of red-suited opponents was virtually nil. I recognized the strength of the gods and that I had no place in their battle. Awkwardly, I put the wings away, took off my backpack and turned to look for the fallen, helping my own team first. Quicksilver had a broken leg that I popped a quick-inflate air cast on and helped him hop away from the fighting. There was a line of some sort of low bushes and grasses near where we arrived on the scene, and I decided to use this as a place to park our wounded, convenient for getting out. Scanning the skies, I saw only winged gods in combat. I helped a few more wounded good guys over to Quicksilver, then some of the less badly hurt heroes--including Damian, my uncles, and Tony, I was thrilled to see--started bringing ones who needed more treatment to me, and I stayed at my staging area, patching people up. Damian and Tony brought Bruce in last; he was suffering a severe laceration that I managed to close up with a suture gun and slapped an antibacterial dressing on it. Then those of us still on our feet looked at each other.

"How are you fixed for supplies, sweetie?" Bucky asked, and I reported that I still had some. Steve looked at me, and I nodded grudgingly. The heroes spread out, looking for Typhon principals who could be helped. Wanda was afraid to use her abilities in this environment and I couldn't blame her; I sent her down to the boats for our supplies of water. All of our speedsters were injured or I'd have sent them with her, but Superman went with her. His damage was mostly to his costume. She was really freaked out and I figured she could use the distance more than anyone else. As I watched Steve haul in the Riddler, who'd managed somehow to slow the blood loss with an inadequate tourniquet, I saw a red-robed figure lunge toward Damian, sword upraised. Before I could do anything more than open my mouth to scream a warning, the oddest thing happened. A small black
cat shot through the chaos, past my husband, and in an instant transformed to a woman with the head of the cat. I slapped a hand over my mouth as Damian turned, seeing both the threat and the goddess, but my vision was disrupted by another uncanny wave. When it passed, the red-clad figure was on the sand, not moving. I sagged to my knees in utter relief and Damian bowed to the goddess. Cats don't have human expression, but I gathered that she was pleased; she looked at him and her eyes squeezed shut the way that Signy's do when you're petting her and she's happy.

Then I started to work on the villains. I registered that I had help, but I didn't look up until I'd depleted my supplies and looked over to see a kindly older man in a white garment tending to Scarecrow. The man hadn't taken off the burlap bag that his patient used as a mask, but he'd apparently frisked him because a pile of vials that Scarecrow could use on his victims was a distance away. I knelt beside him, handing him a bandage after he finished smearing an unguent from an alabaster jar over a wicked burn. "Thank you for your help," I said after the individual had finished bandaging the Scarecrow and picked up his pot. I bowed my head in respect, wanting to know who was helping, but felt it best not to question these gods in any way.

"I am Imhotep," he said, smiling slightly before rising to his feet and moving toward the fighting. I knew who he was: one of only two humans to be deified, Imhotep had been the vizier to the pharaoh Djoser and was originally a skilled polymath credited with the invention of the step pyramid and the use of columns in building but who later was worshipped as a healing god.

A disruption on the battlefield drew my attention. Athena, Artemis, Apollo, and Nike had Ares and his sons down on their knees and Athena was speaking to Ares. He nodded, refusing to look at her, then he and his sons got to their feet, walked away, and vanished. Athena surveyed the battling Egyptian gods, then looked over at us. Diana was helping the injured drink water, and she lifted her head in time to see her goddess salute her with her sword. Athena looked over at me then and inclined her head slightly. Nike tossed the laurel wreath in our direction, landing just shy of our wounded, and that group of gods vanished as well.

With their departure, the pitched battle among the Egyptian pantheon eased, and the two sides ultimately ceased their antagonism. Neith stood between them and spoke. She seemed to adjudicating something as other gods spoke. Unspeakable creatures faded away. Arms went around me and I leaned back against Damian. "Are you ok?" I asked quietly. "Who was that?"

"In order, nothing that the accelerator can't fix, the cat-woman was Bastet, as I think you guessed, and the person who was trying to kill me... was Talia." I twisted around to look at him.

"Are you ok?" I repeated my question.

Damian was silent a moment. "I don't know. She was trying to kill me, but she was my mother." I nodded and slipped my arms around him. "Did you see R'as in all of this?" I nodded again and told him what had happened, including that I'd left it up to fate whether he survived or lived. He sighed and looked around, over my head, at the injured Typhon principals. "I don't see him."

"For the life of me, I can't decide whether that's good or bad."

Things were evolving over at the gods. An enormous cobra who looked unsettlingly benign moved unhurriedly between the two groups of gods, coiling up and resting as it seemed to speak. It was joined by a woman wearing a crown with an ostrich feather, then jackal-headed Anubis, and hawk-headed Ra wearing the solar disk and serpent. After a time, the sun beating down on us, things seemed to relax. The group in the center was joined by a well-fed green god wearing a pharaoh's false beard and a headdress of water plants and a ram-headed man. The center group turned, followed by the rest of the gods, toward the Nile. The pudgy green god laughed and clapped his hands, and falcon-headed Horus beat the end of his spear on the ground. The earth shook as what
sounded like an enormous explosion occurred. We heard the sound of rushing water.

Aswan Dam had been burst.

Those of us who were mobile ran for the edge of the cliff, and even as we got there, the level of the river had dropped so much that we could look down and see the original location of Abu Simbel, before it had been extracted from the cliff and placed on top to save it from the flooding caused by the construction of the dam. My mind was kind of stuck and I couldn't imagine what would happen as the full might of the river returned to Egypt. We began the walk back to our companions in time to see Osiris summon Hawkman and Hawkwoman. They approached the gods cautiously before prostrating themselves. The god spoke to them, after which they backed away toward us, and the gods dismissed us entirely, turning with anticipation to follow the water, moving with unmistakable authority down toward to the former dam, and probably, I felt, down to Thebes and Memphis and the other great sites of their authority.

I wondered what was going to happen now.
"We need to leave now," Hawkman said immediately as he and Hawkwoman rejoined us. "The gods are on their way to regain possession of the land. Unless you want to be subject to their power, it is time to go."

Tony nodded and used his suit's communication system to summon the quinjets. It took some time, but when they arrived, still dripping water from the release of the Nile, we picked up our wounded and boarded quickly, leaving behind the Typhon principals to the jurisdiction of the gods. Hawkman assured us that the authorities were on the way.

It was a quiet ride back; Bruce did enough research to identify the gods who'd been conferencing; the pudgy god was Hapi, lord of the Nile's inundation whose cult center had been at Aswan, the gigantic cobra was Shai, god of destiny and fortune. The goddess with the ostrich plume was Ma'at, truth, justice, and harmony, and the ram-headed man was Khnum, god of the river's cataracts and keeper of its source.

When we landed, the news was reporting the appearance of the Egyptian pantheon and the bursting of the dam, which caused a lot of damage and casualties, although numbers were unknown. Farther down, there was enough time to call for evacuations so that fewer lives were lost. A camera had caught the appearance of several major deities--Ra, Ma'at, Osirus, Thoth, Horus, Isis, Sekmet, and Hathor--and thus the proclamation that the gods had returned to reclaim their lands and exert their rule. They issued orders summoning the country's leaders, and the world was waiting to see what happened next.

Among the news coming out of the country was a list of identified Typhon principals who had been found dead at Abu Simbel or captured. They were all taken to Thebes; the dishonored dead were abandoned in the desert and the live ones were jailed. Talia had been killed by Bastet, but R'as was taken to Thebes. He killed himself in jail before going to trial; the trials were expected to be a formality since Typhon had intended to take over the county and use it as their base, out in the open.

Before too long, the gods had appointed a new pharaoh, a young man who had gone to the temple of Hathor in Dendera when the first alarms sounded and begged the old gods to spare the people, and Ramesses-Ra, as he was known, was charged with the task of setting up a theocracy, expelling anyone who would not convert to the worship of the pantheon and razing their houses of worship. The civil service was to be maintained, as was the armed forces, but a whole new system of governance would be needed. The gods inhabited their temples, or what was left of them, and their disquieting presence did much to keep a lid on unrest, if only because the fear of the gods outweighed the desire to benefit from the chaos. The gods allowed aid workers to come help and continued tourism because it was a benefit for the people, but it was made clear that things would be changing. It came out that the reason so few people had Returned was that to get to their destination, a soul had to pass through twelve gates, each with its own trials. The most important moment was in the Hall of Judgment, where the soul recited a defense against any wrongdoings in life to forty-two divine judges and his or her heart was weighted against Ma'at's Feather of Truth. If the soul was heavier than the feather, the heart was fed to Annat, "Devourer," and that soul was cast into darkness, really cutting down on the number of people who could potentially return. If the scales balanced, Osiris welcomed them to the Field of Reeds, which was a reflection of the life they had known. The gods were to be worshiped, travel was possible, and each soul was responsible for working a plot of land, either in person or using shabtis, small statuettes of workers that were supplied to the burials of the pharaohs in superabundance. This was why grave goods
were so important in their burials. Whatever they'd been buried with could come with them. Because existence in the Field of Reeds was a direct reflection of this world, the vast majority of those who were there had seen no need to return. If people wanted to accept the pantheon, immigration would be encouraged. Thinking about how freaky everything had been around the gods, I resolved not to return. I much preferred the gods I knew.

Ares and his sons disappeared from the face of the earth, and the other Greek gods retreated to Olympus and their temples. Word got through from Themyscira that Athena and Artemis were pleased. But this was an interval of peace, nothing more; these gods were immortal and could not be killed. Ares was just licking his wounds somewhere. We heard about an attack on Themyscira; during what Typhon had thought would be their big breakout in Egypt, a force of women were sent to liberate the monsters under the islands that were guarded by the Amazons, but the Amazons defeated them. Soundly.

Word didn't get out about my identity as Valkyrie, probably because there weren't any recordings of the event, but that was her final appearance. Damian continued as Nightfall for a little longer, then that identity was retired for good as well. Finally, we were a normal family, although each of us in our own ways continued to support the heroes. Steve, Bucky, and Tony promptly changed their status to Avengers Emeritus, and mostly just did publicity appearances and provided guidance for the new team. Serena never could quite give up the life although she cut way back. She was in her mid 50's when she was killed in action.

I led a good life. We all worked hard, and my company became recognized as one of the best in the world. Replacing Serena, when we had to, was not easy, but we promoted her most trusted associate. It had been set up in the beginning that ownership of any of our individual businesses reverted to the company when we retired or died, with the woman or her heirs getting a payment in lieu of ownership. Eventually, it was all mine. Serena was the only one who had died; the rest of us retired. I retired in my early 60's, and I appointed Iris along with J's daughter, Clarity Barnes, to run the business. They had exciting and interesting plans, and I felt that my legacy was in good hands.

This time around, there was more time for vacations with my family, and later, just my husband. Alfred and Delara married and moved into the guest house, raising their own kids there. Two of the three followed their parents into the butlering business, and the third found a very satisfying career in education and as an entrepreneur. They were family too; Iris and Miles used to babysit them. My kids all found lives that suited them; Miles became a principal dancer at ABT and their chief choreographer after he retired. Iris took on my company. Martha worked at Valkyrie before moving out on her own, and Xander... he subsumed himself so far into Batman that I felt he had lost some crucial sense of self in service of the Dark Knight. But that was his decision, and nothing anybody could say turned his feet from his path, although he had a short-lived marriage that produced the next generation for the batcave. Damian and I told Iris and Miles about the shadow side of the family when they found the Batcave. They thought it was cool but had no interest in continuing it, and they were most interested in my wings. Miles in particular felt cheated that they weren't genetic. He would have loved to fly. Selina published her memoirs, which caused a huge stir of interest, particularly her accounts of her run-ins with Batman, who was never identified in the work. Tabby was her father's daughter and went to work for Wayne. Daniel and Diana had a pair of girls; once a year the family went to the Aegean. Daniel would sail a boat into the mist, he and Hippolyta and Antiope would chat for a bit, Diana and the girls would spend a week or two on Themyscira, and when it was time, Daniel would come pick them up and they would have a full family vacation after that. When the girls were bigger, they spent summers on the island.

Damian was a lot more laid-back this time around, less driven, although the new Stark Industries looked to be as titanic as it had been when Tony was running the first one, neither he nor Tony were so focused on work. Tony's kids were interested in taking over the business, and so he had the
continuity he treasured. Damian and I spent a lot more time together, to the delight of both of us. It was our second chance together, and we did not waste it. We made the most of our time with family and friends too.

I'd only been retired a couple of years when I was killed; a new group of baddies had attacked the city as I was heading into the city for an interview. My instinct was to defend my fellow citizens, but I was rusty, and before I knew it, I was standing, looking at my body. Eira, my faithful companion, was keening, but when I moved, she saw me. I felt a hand on my shoulder and turned, smiling when I saw Serena in a white dress and red cape. A winged horse stood behind her, and I recognized it. We nodded to each other. I turned back to Eira. "Don't hurry," I told her. "I want you to have a great life. I love you. You know where I'll be." The Norn had yet to prophesy another apocalypse. She whined softly, then turned and picked her way toward the Asgardian embassy.

Odin welcomed me back to Valhalla by clasping my shoulders. I blinked; he was never demonstrative. He had Serena show me back to my old quarters. Valhalla had changed; there were still scrimmages with Folkvangr, but it wasn't the driving force it had been and life was more relaxed and lovely. And the women were treated better than ever. My red cape and weapons were waiting for me on the stand that Uncle Steve had made for me. I visited Hela periodically. I stayed away from the living this time, but I did find my way into other afterlives when I wasn't working.

Some time later, I was sent out again; another mass casualty event on Earth. Damned villains. I hopped off my horse and approached my soul from the back as it stood, looking around. I placed my hand on his right shoulder, and Damian turned around.

******************

Thanks for hanging in there with Alex and her adventures!

There's an epilogue of sorts in Poppies, in the chapter "Interviews", and Alex and Damian are also features as supporting characters in the final trilogy, which begins with "The Descendant."

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