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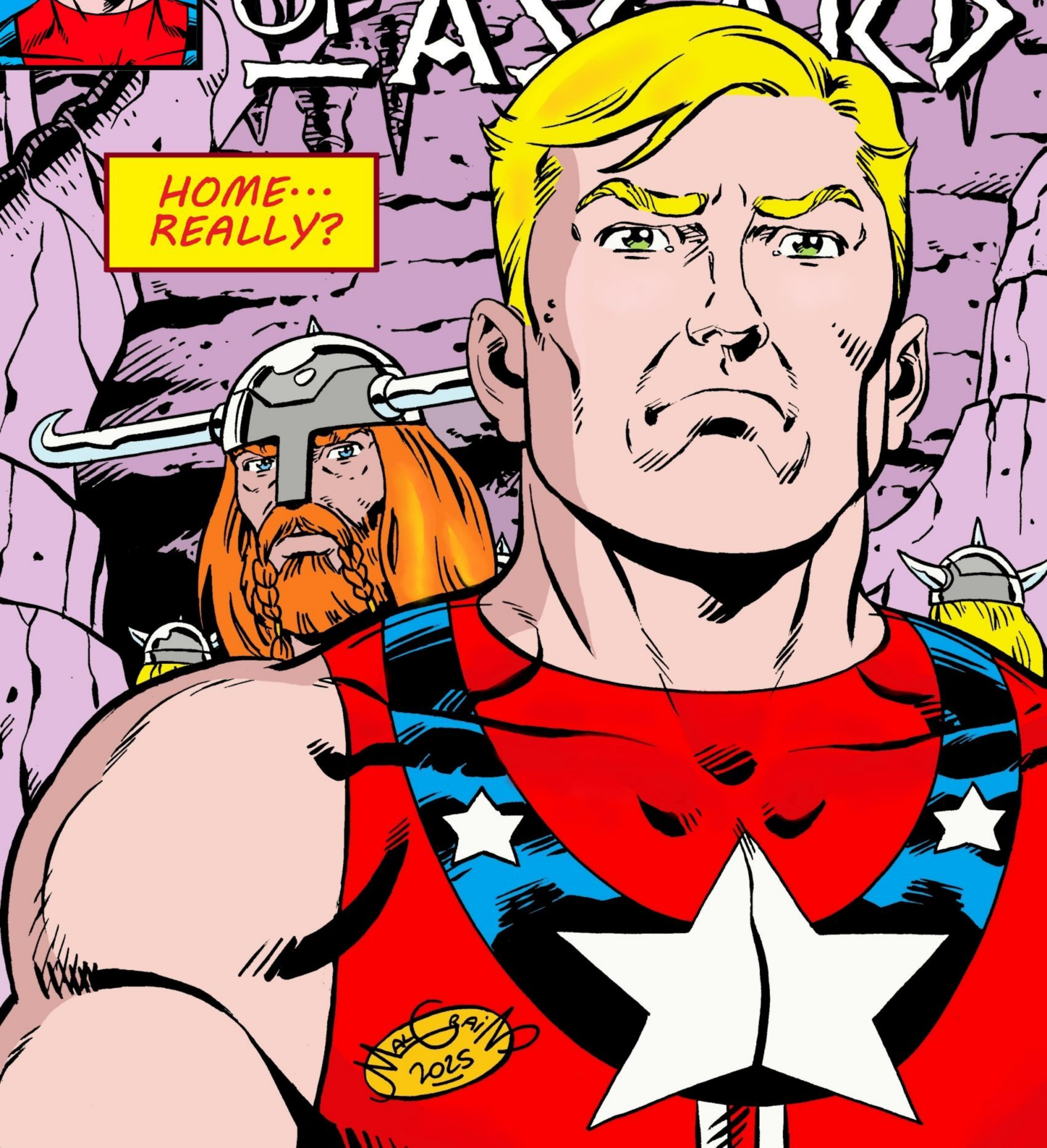
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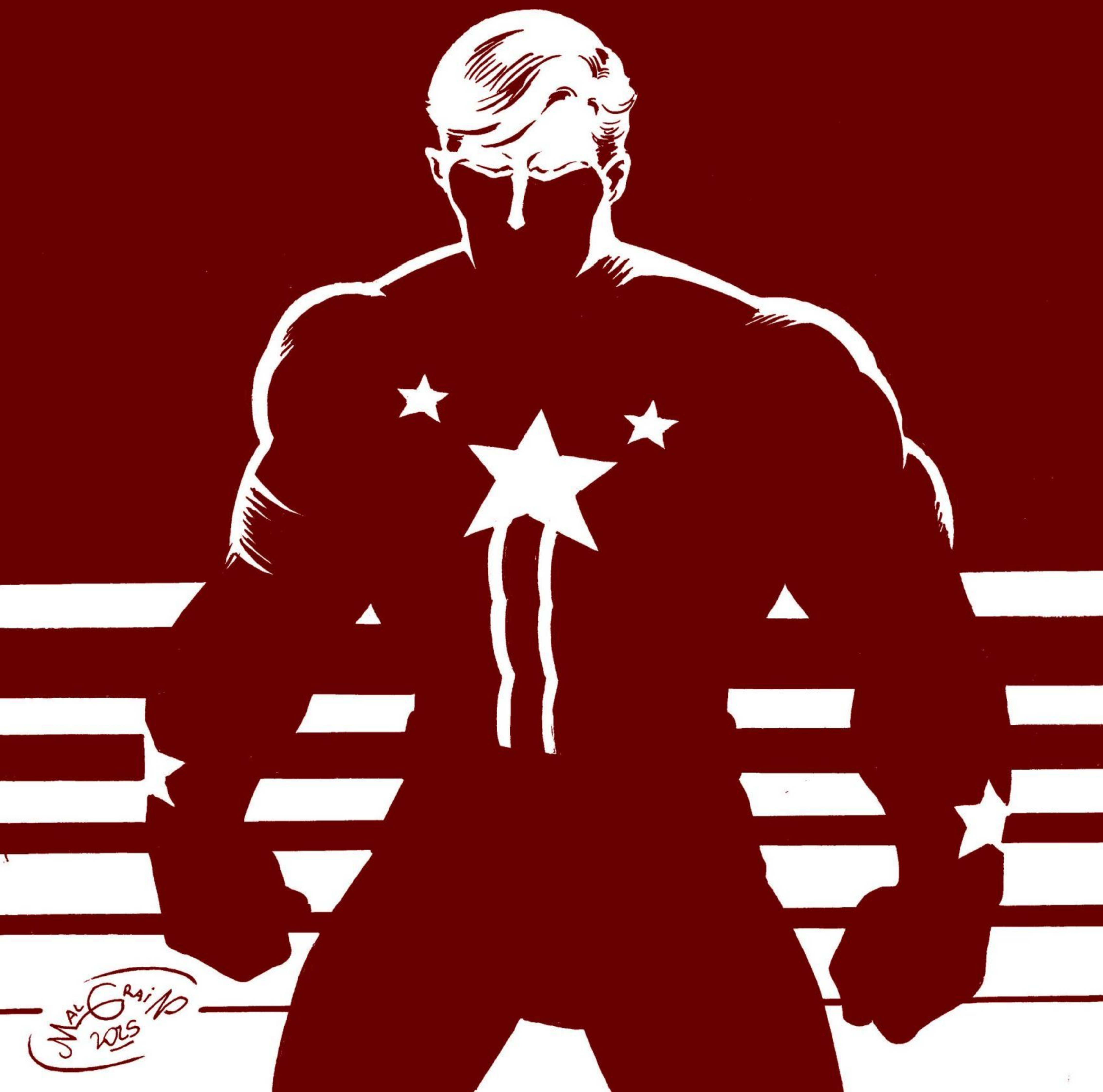
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ALDRIGG OF ASGARD

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ALDRIGG OF ASGARD



CREATED AND WRITTEN BY CHRIS MALGRAIN

This series is a sequel to The Formidables #8 and the Stellar stories published in Tales of the Formidables #5-8.

ALDRIGG OF ASGARD

PART TWO

Thor and Aldrigg instantly emerged from the portal, over a clearing in a forest. Aldrigg landed among Thor's soldiers while his father continued his erratic flight, unable to control his transformation into a being of pure electricity.

"My Lord, over here!" shouted the warrior to whom Thor had entrusted his hammer, holding it high in the air for his king to catch as he passed.

"Get closer to me!" roared the formidable energy entity, which had almost entirely lost its human form.

In a final effort, Thor managed to slightly adjust his trajectory as his soldier rushed toward him, and grabbed his hammer—thanks to which he immediately regained his physical solidity and usual appearance.

"One more second, and I would have been nothing more than a wandering lightning bolt for all eternity!" growled the King of Asgard. His warriors then expressed their relief by raising their weapons to salute their king.

Aldrigg was stunned by everything he had witnessed since arriving on Asgard, his home planet. Thor advanced toward him, and with a furious look, confronted him.

"You've just seen what happens if my hammer leaves my hand for more than a minute. Asgard nearly lost its king because of your foolish recklessness! It would seem Earth has turned the son I searched for so long into a thoughtless crybaby! Charging the enemy troops in a fit of rage and without a plan was a suicide attack we cannot afford!"

"Do you want to know how I imagined my real father all those years? Certainly not as a cold, unfeeling jerk, capable of sacrificing his wife without any qualms!" Aldrigg shot back.

At these words, Thor froze for an instant. During this brief silence, Aldrigg was surprised to catch a glimmer of emotion in his father's eyes.

“I will explain everything to you,” said Thor in a softened tone, “but first we must hide in the nearby caves to rest and devise a counterattack.”

“Where exactly are we?” Aldrigg asked.

“Neither too near nor too far from our royal city. Our planet abounds in forests and mountains filled with caves. Loki will not find us anytime soon. Besides, he cannot be completely certain that we are still on Asgard, even though our galactic empire has collapsed under the revolt. I might have teleported us to allies unknown to him. He has been away from Asgard for a long time and is unaware of all my political activity since the beginning of my reign. What we can be sure of is that, until we reveal ourselves, the royal city will be a fortress heavily guarded day and night. Reclaiming it seems impossible given our small numbers, but the power we hold must be guided by intelligence.”

Despite the resentment and anger his father had stirred in him since his mother’s death, Aldrigg felt, at that moment, a certain respect for Thor’s obvious leadership qualities, and he realized how foolish he had been to rush into attacking the enemy on impulse—before his father risked losing his human form by bringing him back through the teleportation portal.

Thor then resumed his commanding tone and ordered his loyal warriors to march toward the nearby mountain. Several caves soon came into view.

“This one will do. Everyone inside!” Thor commanded.

“You seem to know this place well,” Aldrigg remarked.

“Yes, indeed. Your mother and I used to meet here, far from prying eyes, at the beginning of our love. I know each of these caves, and this one is large enough to shelter us all.”

As the weary soldiers sat down, father and son stepped aside.

“Son, do not believe that I sacrificed Sigrid without any qualms, as you said. My heart and soul bled under the blackmail Loki forced upon me, and they’ve been bleeding even more since the love of my life was murdered by that madman. And in truth, I did not sacrifice your mother. She was doomed from the start. Loki would never have released her had I surrendered. His only intent was to play upon your emotions and turn you against me.

Indeed, the Asgardian code binds me to live until the end—even if it means being the last of our race, the most powerful among us with a chance to strike down our mortal foe. But I would have given my life for Sigrid if there had been even the faintest hope that she could survive.”

“How can you be so sure she had no chance?”

“Have you forgotten that before leaving Earth, Loki swore he would kill Sigrid before my eyes upon my return to Asgard? Have you forgotten my tale before the heroes of your adoptive world, when I confessed to having stabbed that villain’s true father to death? When his attempt to murder Odin failed because of my intervention—and when my father later died of natural causes—Loki’s obsessive thirst

for vengeance turned against Sigrid. In killing her, he fulfilled his vengeance while making me appear a monster in your eyes. No, I did not weep before my men, for I must show myself unyielding and strong to continue inspiring them. And I shall not shed a tear until I have slain that vermin. My hatred will keep my eyes dry until that day.”

Thor’s steely blue eyes reflected his strength of character while betraying a glimmer of sorrow. Confounded by this singular figure, Aldrigg said nothing, overwhelmed by the need to rest after the harrowing chain of events he had endured over the past few days.

He went to sit apart from the Asgardian warriors, his arms wrapped around his knees. He wondered what he was doing here. All his life on Earth, he had dreamed of the day he would be reunited with his parents and his people, but now he longed for Earth. For his people, his customs, his friends. Here, on Asgard, everything seemed strange and frightening. Even his true name—Aldrigg—sounded too harsh to him.

He told himself that this feeling of not belonging was natural, and that it would take time to adapt to this new world. Yet the prospects ahead were far from bright. Asgard was occupied by a genocidal alien army, and he was part of a remnant of survivors whose chances of defeating the enemy were, at first glance, nonexistent. His destiny was apparently to finally find his people again and die. Die fighting. All his life he had fought, and he had triumphed over every tyrant. His faith whispered to him to keep hope alive, despite everything. He lay down and fell asleep.

He was awakened by the cry of one of the guards posted at the cave’s entrance.

“Lord Thor! Up there in the sky! A flying sorcerer! He is no enemy—we know him!”

Thor and the soldiers who were awake rushed to the entrance, while the others stirred from sleep. Aldrigg leapt to his feet, and Thor turned toward him.

“Aldrigg, one of your Earth friends is flying above us! How can this be?”

“I can’t believe it!” Aldrigg exclaimed. “It’s Mr. Infinity! He’s come to help us!”

Aldrigg raised his arm, but before he could call out to the mystic, Thor held him back.

“Wait! What if this is one of Loki’s spells to flush us out?”

“In your place, I’d take the risk, given our situation. Decide quickly—he’s moving away!”

“Call him, son!”

“Mr. Infinity, over here!” Aldrigg shouted, waving his arms.

The sorcerer turned and smiled at the sight of his old companion-in-arms.

“At last, I have found them!” he uttered, turning around to guide his flight toward the astonished Asgardians.

He landed before them. Beaming, Aldrigg placed his hand on his friend's shoulder.

"Infinity? Is it really you? But how did you get here?"

"I'm overjoyed to see you safe and sound, my friend! I'll explain, but first—I have a surprise. I didn't come alone."

Just as Thor could open technological portals with his hammer, Mr. Infinity possessed the power to open mystic gateways, allowing him to travel anywhere in the universe and across all dimensions. With a deft movement of his fingers, he conjured a circle of light, from which seven figures emerged.

Five of these people were unknown to Aldrigg. Among them were clearly four sorcerers, their garb leaving no doubt as to their mystical nature. For a moment, Thor's son was intrigued by the blue skin of the only woman among these mystics, but his attention naturally settled on the two men he knew well—two dear friends whose sight filled him with joy.

"Frank! Stellar! I never thought I'd see you again!" he exclaimed, stepping forward to shake their hands.

"We're just as surprised to find you again so soon!" said Frank Foster with a broad smile.

"And just as delighted!" added Stellar, who, despite his smile, seemed intimidated or ill at ease.

"Well now, old comrade-in-arms, here you are on the legendary Asgard! It does make an impression, I know," Aldrigg joked, seeming for an instant to forget the tragic weight of the situation.

"Uh, yeah... it's crazy," Stellar replied evasively. Only Mr. Infinity knew the true reason for his discomfort.

Beside Frank Foster stood a Black woman in her sixties, staring wide-eyed at everyone. Aldrigg immediately realized who she was.

"Madam? You're Selma, aren't you? How can this be?" Aldrigg also looked at Frank, bewildered by this incomprehensible situation.

"I'm so honored to meet you, Steel Patriot," Selma said timidly, "even if you're not the one from the Earth I come from."

"I understand everything now. Good old Frank found a way to explore the multiverse! It wasn't just a theory—it truly exists!"

"Indeed, Patriot," Frank confirmed. "I left our Earth for Selma's world, to live out the rest of my life with her."

"I'm no longer the Steel Patriot here. My true name is Aldrigg. I'm trying to get used to it. But what are you both doing here when you still have a life to catch up on—especially you, Selma? It's far too dangerous here!"

"We won't be staying long... Aldrigg. Mr. Infinity's plan requires more my power than me. You'll understand when he unfolds it. He and I have remained in contact across realities, and when he proposed this plan, I of course accepted. But Selma insisted on coming with me, for the brief time I'll be here," Frank explained.

"I don't want to lose Frank again. If he were to die here, I would die with him," Selma declared.

Mr. Infinity then spoke. "We must waste no time so Frank and Selma may return home as soon as possible, while there are no enemies nearby. Allow me to introduce my colleagues."

"We shall introduce ourselves, dear friend," said one of the mystics—a tall, slender man with long black hair. "I am Rav'n, and like the other sorcerers here, I come from another dimension."

The blue-skinned woman with pointed ears spoke next. "I am Kaela, High Priestess of the Upper Realms of Jaldorr."

"Kurn the Red," simply said a red-haired man wrapped in a scarlet cloak.

"As for me, I am called Moordan, and like my companions, I had the honor of fighting alongside Mr. Infinity during the Great Astral War," declared the last sorcerer, his forehead and cheeks marked with greenish tattoos.

Thor, who, like his warriors, had remained silent during these reunions and introductions, stepped forward to address Mr. Infinity.

"I thank you, man of magic, for assembling this company to aid us. You are not many, but I can sense your might. Tell me—what is your plan?"

"You told us back in Archer City that your enemies, the Sparns, were mystics allied with frost giants to launch raids upon Asgard," began the Earth sorcerer. "This was confirmed to me when I reached your royal city in my astral form. Seeing no trace of your forces or of Aldrigg, I understood that you had withdrawn to rest and devise a counterattack. I therefore flew across the planet in my physical form, hoping to be spotted by you. When that happened, I summoned my allies—chosen for their ability to defeat your enemies. My fellow sorcerers are champions of their own dimensions, and though fewer in number than the Sparns, they are far more powerful. Thus we can match the enemy's mystical might. As for the brute strength of the giants, Stellar is the perfect asset to confront them—being invulnerable, like Aldrigg, and gifted with super-strength as well as the ability to unleash blasts of cosmic energy. He will be aided in this task by Frank, whose astonishing power to assemble atoms into mechanical constructs you already know..."

"Let me guess," Aldrigg said eagerly. "You're going to build us self-guided airships, Frank?"

"Almost," replied the former leader of the Formidables. "They will be colossal robots, capable of overcoming the frost giants—and yes, they will also fly, in order to battle the Sparns' mystical vessels, should those prove vulnerable to cosmic blasts."

“What you propose is so unexpected, and so promising,” declared Thor, “that the hope of seeing Asgard triumph against all odds is reborn in my heart!”

“And in ours as well, O king!” cried one of the Asgardian warriors. “No weariness shall keep us from fighting like dawaks to reclaim our world!!!”

“Yeahhhhhh!” roared all the soldiers, raising their weapons high.

“I suppose dawaks are the equivalent of our lions,” Frank remarked with amusement, turning to Aldrigg—who answered with a smile.

“Good—it's very good that you are ready to fight, Asgardians,” Mr. Infinity said, “for once Frank begins his constructions, the risk of being noticed will increase. If these preparations go unnoticed, striking immediately will take our enemies by surprise. They expect you to rest and take time to conceive a battle plan, and the war they just waged here has worn them down as well. It must have felt to you like we arrived here almost immediately after your departure from Earth, but time running faster on our world, several days have passed for us and we've had time to regain strength since the ‘Armageddon War.’ Frank, it's your move!”

“Very well. Everyone go into the cave, because I'll need room. The robots I'm going to create will be laid down so they won't be seen from afar,” Frank said. “Selma, you're about to witness a spectacle far more impressive than building battery packs at home!”

Once everyone was sheltered inside, Frank began to move his hands, and very quickly tiny elements appeared, assembling themselves into small metallic parts here and there around him. Soon an ever-growing number of pieces flew together to form larger and more complex components. The spectators in the cave soon saw pipes, plates, rivets. Though they had already seen Frank create a giant gun on Earth, the fantastic power of this peerless scientist left them speechless, like children watching a magic show.

Aldrigg turned to Selma, who stood nearby.

“Frank is an extraordinary man, Selma. I have great admiration for him.”

“It's mutual, you know, Patriot. The version of him I knew when I was younger often spoke to me of your exploits on the battlefields of the Great War. He was so proud to have fought at your side!”

“What happened in your reality?” Aldrigg asked. “Forgive my curiosity, but it seems you were not killed in an attack by the Ku Klux Klan, as you were on our Earth. Did you live with the other Frank? What became of him?”

“The KKK attack happened on my Earth too, but it was Frank who died at the hands of those bastards. They panicked and fled afterward. I spent my life believing it had been some intimidation attempt from Frank's father, and mourning my lost love. When he reappeared before me a few days ago, I nearly had a heart attack. He explained this whole story of the Multiverse. I know he is another Frank, but he is

exactly like mine—kind and attentive. In truth, for me, he is the same. And he feels the same about me. Our love, which had never truly died, flared up again in an instant!”

Selma’s eyes shone with happiness and unspilled tears.

“I’m so happy for you both...” Aldrigg began, before starting in surprise at the cheers and applause of the cave’s occupants. Frank had just completed his first robot! Stretched out on the grass, it was enormous and futuristic, more than capable of giving the frost giants a hard fight.

“On to the next!” Frank exclaimed with a laugh.

“I’ll leave you, Selma,” Aldrigg said. “There are others I must speak with.”

He took a few steps to join Mr. Infinity and Stellar, who were gazing at Frank’s creation.

“So tell me, friends, how did you manage to find Asgard in the vastness of the universe?”

Mr. Infinity answered first. “Well, it so happens that our good Stellar truly lives up to his name. Back in Archer City, before Thor’s portal completely dissipated when you all left Earth, it had already reopened onto Asgard—and in a split second Stellar perceived the location of this world. He gave me the coordinates.”

“You can do that?! What, do you have a computer in your head or something?” Aldrigg asked in astonishment.

“Uh, actually...” the caped hero hesitated, “I’m not a human who acquired cosmic powers, as everyone believes. I crossed a large part of the universe before arriving on Earth, and I am intimately bound to it. Just like you, I am... an alien.”

Aldrigg’s eyes widened. “I can’t believe it! So I wasn’t the only one carrying such a heavy secret!”

Before Aldrigg could press him with awkward questions about his past, Mr. Infinity steered the conversation away.

“And who knows if there aren’t more superheroes from other planets on Earth?” he said to Aldrigg. “Since the visit of the Asgardians and the revelation of your otherworldly nature, a kind of paranoia has seized humanity. Everyone is suspicious of their neighbors and of superheroes—and Stellar was the first to be suspected.”

“My God!” exclaimed Aldrigg. “If other aliens less powerful than Stellar are discovered, they’ll be lynched for their difference! Not all extraterrestrials are evil—we’re living proof of that!”

At these words, Stellar grew even more uneasy. He knew that soon he would have to break his friend’s heart. Only Mr. Infinity knew the truth about him, and Stellar dared not meet the mystic’s eyes.

Aldrigg noticed the discomfort of the colossus from the planet Vildara. Laying a hand on his friend’s shoulder, he asked with concern, “What’s wrong, Stellar? You’ve seemed absent since you arrived

here...”

“It’s just that all this brings back painful memories,” Stellar replied. “But don’t worry—for once the battle begins, I’ll fight with all my strength!”

“Very well. If you want, we’ll talk about it later,” Aldrigg concluded.

The son of Asgard returned to watching Frank’s work in silence.

When Frank’s task was finished, a dozen impressive robots lay upon the ground, already operational. The scientist added the final touch to his creations through vocal programming.

“You will obey the voice of Mr. Infinity. When he commands you, you will rise and go forth to battle the army of sorcerers and frost giants that occupy the royal city of Asgard!”

Frank then motioned for Mr. Infinity to step forward. Guessing the reason, the mystic addressed the machines.

“I am Mr. Infinity. Wait until I give the signal to act!”

The Earth sorcerer turned to Frank.

“All has gone well, and we have not been noticed. You and Selma must now leave while all is still quiet. Thank you for your help—it will, I am sure, prove decisive.”

“Let me know how this war ends,” Frank said softly, feeling guilty for not staying to fight alongside his friends.

“If I contact you, it will surely be a sign of our victory! Until we meet again, my friend,” said the mystic with a smile.

Aldrigg stepped forward and clasped Frank’s hand with emotion.

“Thank you for your help, which goes straight to my heart, my brother-in-arms. I don’t know what the future holds, but if we never meet again, I wish you and Selma all the happiness in the world.”

“And I thank you, dear Patriot,” replied Frank, “for inspiring me so deeply, by showing me the beauty that can dwell within any soul—whether from Earth or beyond.”

Aldrigg was moved by these words. The two men looked into each other’s eyes for a few seconds, exchanged a firm pat on the back, then Aldrigg stepped aside for Thor, who warmly thanked Frank as his warriors saluted the old scientist with thunderous cheers.

After Stellar, too, had bid Frank farewell, Mr. Infinity opened a mystic portal through which Frank and Selma vanished.

“They are home now, with a happy life awaiting them. As for us—it’s time for war!” declared Mr. Infinity, raising his fist.

All the warriors raised their fists or weapons in response, the Asgardians roaring above them, “YEAHHHHH!”

“Robots, rise!” Mr. Infinity commanded. “Come with us, and strike down the enemy!”

The mechanical warriors rose in unison and stood tall—a most awe-inspiring sight for their allies, who drew renewed confidence that their enemies would soon share in that awe as well, once the element of surprise made its effect.

With his hammer, Thor opened a vast portal that would instantly hurl every warrior of flesh and steel against Loki’s mighty army. The sun was beginning to sink, and the sky would soon not be the only thing red, thought the king of Asgard. Blood would flow in every corner of the royal city, and by nightfall, victory would be absolute and final—for one side or the other.

To be continued...

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