

Thor Meets Captain America

a novella by David Brin

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1.

Loki's dwarf rolled its eyes and moaned pitifully as the sub leveled off at periscope depth. With stubby fingers the gnarled, neckless creature pulled its yellow-stained beard and stared up at the creaking pipes.

A thing of dark forest depths and hidden caves, Chris Turing thought as he watched the dwarf.

It wasn't meant for this place.

Only men would choose such a way to die, in a leaking steel coffin, on a hopeless attempt to blow up Valhalla.

But then, it wasn't likely that Loki's dwarf had been given much choice in being here.

Why, Chris wondered suddenly -- not for the first time.

Why do such creatures exist? Wasn't evil doing well enough in the world before they came to help it along?

The submarine's engines rumbled and Chris shrugged aside the thought. Imagining a world without Aesir and their servants in it was as hard as remembering a time without war. He sat strapped in a crash seat listening to the swishing of icy Baltic water just behind a tissue-thin bulkhead -- and watched the gnome huddle atop a crate of hydrogen bomb parts. It drew its clublike feet up away from the sloshing brine on the deck, scrunching higher on the black box. Another moan escaped the dwarf as the Razorfin's periscope went up, and more water gurgled in through pressure relief lines.

Major Marlowe looked up from the assault rifle he was reassembling for the thirtieth time. "What's eating the damn dwarf now?" the marine officer asked.

Chris shook his head.

"Search me. The fact that he's out of his element, maybe? After all, the ancient Norse thought of the deep as a place for sunken boats and fishes."

"I thought you were some sort of expert on the Aesir. And you aren't sure why the thing is foaming at the mouth?"

"I said I don't know. Why don't you go over and ask him yourself?"

Marlowe gave Chris a sour glance. "Sidle up to that stench and ask Loki's damn *dwarf* to explain its *feelings*? Hmph. I'd rather spit in an Aesir's eye."

From the left side of the cabin, Zap O'Leary leaned out and grinned at Marlowe.

"Dig it, daddyo. There's an Aes over by the scope, dope. Be my guest. Write him runes in his spittoon."

The eccentric technician gestured toward the Navy men clustered around the sub's periscope. Next to the Skipper stood a hulking figure clad in furs and leather, towering over the submariners.

Marlowe blinked back at O'Leary in bewilderment. The marine seemed less offended than confused. "What did he say?" he asked Chris.

Chris wished he weren't seated between the two.

"Zap suggests that you test it by spitting in *Loki's* eye."

Marlowe grimaced. O'Leary might as well have suggested he stick his hand into a scram-jet engine. One of the marines crammed into the passageway behind them made the mistake of dropping a cartridge into the foul water. Marlowe vented his frustration on the poor grunt with rich profanity.

The dwarf moaned again, hugging his knees and pressing against the sealed crate.

Wherever they're from, they aren't used to water. And these so-called dwarfs don't like submarines.

Chris wasn't exactly partial to this one, either. But nowhere else in the world was much safer. In late 1962, very little time remained for the Alliance Against Nazism. If anything could be done this autumn, to stave off the inevitable, it was worth the gamble.

Even Loki -- bearlike, nearly invulnerable, and always booming forth laughter that sent

chills down human spines -- had betrayed nerves earlier, as the Razorfin dropped from the belly of a screaming bomber, sending their stomachs whirling as the arrow-sub plummeted like a great stone into Neptune's icy embrace. The fall seemed endless. The crash and shriek of tortured metal, when they hit the sea, was even worse.

And yet, almost anything seemed an improvement over the long, screeching trip over the Pole, skirting Nazi missiles, skimming mountains and gray waters in lurching zigs and zags, helplessly listening, strapped into place, as the airmen swooped their flying coffins hither and yon... praying the enemy's Aesir masters weren't patrolling that section of the north tonight...

Of twenty sub carriers sent out together from Baffin Island, only six made it all the way to the waters between Sweden and Finland. And both Cetus and Tigerfish broke up on impact, tearing like ripped sardine cans, spilling their hapless crews into freezing death.

Just four subs left, Chris thought. Still, our chances may be slim, but those poor pilots are the real heroes.

He doubted any of the crews would make it across dark, deadly Europe to Tehran and safety.

"Captain Turing!"

Chris looked up as the Skipper called his name. Commander Lewis had lowered the periscope and moved over to the chart table, making a beckoning motion. Chris unstrapped and jumped into the brine.

"Tell the swabbies we're savin our hooch for ourselves," O'Leary advised him, sotto voce. "Good pot's too rare to share."

"Shut up, fool." Marlowe growled. Chris ignored them both as he sloshed forward. The Skipper awaited him, standing beside their "advisor," the alien creature calling himself Loki.

I've known Loki for years, Chris thought. I've fought alongside him against his Aesir brothers... and still he scares the living hell out of me each time I look at him.

Towering over everyone, Loki regarded Chris with fierce, enigmatic eyes. The "god of tricks" looked much like a man, albeit an unnaturally large and powerful one. But those black eyes belied every impression of humanity. Chris had spent enough time with Loki, since the renegade Aesir defected to the Allied side, to know he should avoid looking into them whenever possible.

"Sir," he said, nodding to Commander Lewis and the bearded Aesir. "I take it we're approaching point Y?"

"Correct. We'll be there in ten minutes, barring anything unforeseen."

Lewis seemed to have aged over the last twenty hours. The young sub commander knew his squadron wasn't the only thing considered expendable in this operation. Several thousand miles to the west, the better part of what remained of the United States Surface Navy was engaged hopelessly for one reason only. To distract the Kriegsmarine -- and especially a certain "god of the sea" -- away from the Baltic and Operation Ragnarok. Loki's cousin Tyr wasn't very potent against submarines, but unless his attention was drawn elsewhere, he could make life unbearable when their tiny force tried to land.

So tonight, instead, he would be far away making hell for American and Canadian and Mexican sailors.

Chris shied away from thinking about it. Too many boys were going to their deaths off Labrador, just to keep one alien creature occupied while four subs tried to sneak in through the back door.

"Thank you. I'd better tell Major Marlowe and my demolition team."

He turned to go, but was stopped by an outsize hand on his shoulder, holding him gently but with steely adamancy.

"Thou must know something more," the being called Loki said in a low, resonant voice. Impossibly white teeth shone in his gleaming smile.

"Thou wilt have a passenger in going ashore."

Chris blinked. The plan had been for only his team and their commando escort... Then he saw the pallor of dread on Commander Lewis' face deeper than any mere fear of death.

Chris turned back to stare at the fur-clad giant. "You..." he exhaled.

Loki nodded. "A small change in plans. I will not accompany the undersea vessels, as they attempt to break out through the Skagerrak. I will go ashore with thee, instead, to Gotland."

Chris kept his face blank. In all honesty, there was no way this side of Heaven that he or Lewis could stop this creature from doing whatever it wanted. One way or the other, the

Allies were about to lose their only Aesir friend in the long war against the Nazi plague.

If the word "friend" ever really described Loki, who had appeared one day on the tarmac of a Scottish airfield during the final evacuation of Britain, accompanied by eight small, bearded beings carrying boxes. He had led them up to the nearest amazed officer and imperiously commandeered the prime minister's personal plane to take him the rest of the way to America.

Perhaps an armored battalion might have stopped him. Combat reports proved that Aesir could be killed, if you were very lucky, pounding one hard and fast enough. But when the local commander realized what was happening, he decided to take a chance.

Loki had proven his worth many times, since that day ten years ago.

Till now, that is.

"If you insist." He told the Aes.

"I do. It is my will."

"Then I'll go explain it to Marlowe. Excuse me, please."

He backed away a few meters first, then turned to go.

As he sloshed away, that glittering stare seemed to follow him, past the moaning dwarf, past O'Leary's ever-sardonic smile, down the narrow, dank passageway lined with strapped-in marines, all the way to the sabot launching tubes.

Voices were hushed. All the young men spoke English, but only half were North Americans. Their shoulder patches -- Free French, Free Russian, Free Irish, German Christian -- were muted in the dim light, but the mixed accents were unmistakable, as well as the way they stroked their weapons and the gleam Chris caught sight of in several pairs of eyes.

These were the sort that volunteered for suicide missions, the type common in the world after thirteen years of horrible war -- that had little or nothing left to lose.

Major Marlowe had come back to supervise the loading of the landing boats. He did not take Chris's news well.

"Loki wants to come along? To *Gotland*?" He spat. "The bastard's a spy. I knew it all the time!"

Chris shook his head. "He's helped us a hundred ways, John. Why, just by accompanying Ike to Tokyo, and convincing the Japanese --"

"Big deal! We'd already beaten the Japs!" The big marine clenched his fist, hard. "Like we'd have crushed Hitler, if these monsters hadn't arrived, like Satan's curse, out of nowhere.

"And now he's lived among us for ten years, observing our methods, our tactics and technology, the only real advantage we had left!"

Chris grimaced. How could he explain it to Marlowe? The marine officer had never visited Tehran, as Chris did last year. Marlowe had never seen the capital city of Israel-Iran, America's greatest and most stalwart ally, bulwark of the East.

There, in dozens of armed settlements along the east bank of the Euphrates, Chris had met fierce men and women who bore on their arms tattooed numbers from Treblinka, Dachau, Auschwitz. He heard their story of how, one hopeless night under barbed wire and the stench of chimneys, the starving, doomed masses looked up to see a strange vapor fall from the sky. Unbelieving, death-starkened eyes had stared in wonderment as the mist gathered, coalescing into something almost solid.

Out of that eerie fog, a *bridge* of many colors formed... a rainbow arch climbing, apparently without end, out of those places of horror into a moonless night. And from the heights, each doomed man and woman saw a dark-eyed figure on a flying horse. They felt him whisper inside their minds.

Come, children, while your tormenters blink and stammer in my web of the mind. Come, all, over my bridge to safety. Before my cousins describe my treason.

When they sank to their knees, or rocked in thankful prayer, the figure only snorted derisively. His voice hissed within their heads.

Do not mistake me for your God, who left you here to die! I cannot explain that One's absence to you, or His plan in all this. The All-Father is a mystery even to Great Odin!

Know only that I will take you to safety now, such as there may be in this world. But only hurry! Be grateful later, if you must, but come!

Down to the camps, to bleak ghettos, to a city under siege, bridges formed in a single night, and vanished with dawn like vapor or a dream. Two million people, the old, the lame, women, children, the slaves of Hitler's war factories, climbed those paths -- for there was no other choice -- and found themselves transported to a desert land, by the banks of an

ancient river, arriving just in time to take up hasty arms and save a British Army fleeing the wreckage of Egypt and Palestine. They fused with the astonished Persians, and refugees from crippled Russia, to build a new nation out of chaos.

After that night of miracles, Loki could not return to Europe. For the fury of his Aesir kin would be savage. Returning to Gotland, he was in as much peril as the commandos.

"No, Marlowe, you're wrong. I haven't any idea what on God's green Earth he is. But I'd bet my life Loki's not a spy."

2.

The sabots gurgled and rocked, shooting free of the submarine and then bobbing to the surface of a frigid sea. Outer shells broke away and sailors dipped their oars. Men gratefully took their first breath of clean air in more than a day.

The dwarf seemed little relieved. Staring across dark waters to the west, where a reddish line of sunset outlined a great Baltic island, the creature muttered in a guttural language like nothing Earthly.

Which seemed natural. Like most Americans, Chris was convinced that these beings were as much the ancient Norse gods -- recalled into the modern world -- as *he* was Sandy Koufax, or that the Dodgers didn't play in Brooklyn.

Aliens -- that was the official line. The story broadcast by Allied Radio all through the Americas and Japan and what remained of Free Asia. Creatures from the stars had arrived, like in those stories by Chester Nimitz, the famous science fiction author.

It wasn't hard to imagine why they might want to be seen as gods. And it explained why they chose to side with the Nazis. The ruse wouldn't have worked in the West. No matter how great their guests' powers, Euro-American scientists would have probed and queried. People would have asked questions.

But in the Teutonic madness of Nazism, the "Aesir" found fertile ground.

Chris had read captured German SS documents. Even back in the thirties and early forties, before the arrival of the Aesir, they were filled with mumbo jumbo and mysticism -- stuff about ice moons falling from the sky and the romantic spirit of the Aryan super race. In a Nazi-conquered world the Aesir would be gods indeed. Like the logic of a rat or a hyena, Chris could see the aliens' reasons for choosing that side, God damn them.

Silhouettes of pines outlined hilltops, serrating the western sky. Two lead boats were crammed with marines, assigned to take the beach and move inland. Meanwhile, navy teams would prepare the boats for a getaway... as if anyone thought that would really happen.

The last two craft held Chris's demolition team.

Loki knelt on one knee at the prow of Chris's boat, staring ahead with glittering eyes. Dark as he was, he looked like something straight out of a Viking saga.

Good verisimilitude, Chris thought. Or maybe creatures actually believed they were who they said were. All Chris knew for certain was that they had to be defeated, or for humanity there would be nothing but darkness, from now on.

He checked his watch and looked up at the sky, scanning for starry openings in the clouds.

Yes, there it was. *The satellite*. Riding Newton's wings more than two hundred miles up, circling the globe every ninety minutes.

When it first appeared, the Nazis had gone into paroxysms, proclaiming it an astrological portent. For some unknown bureaucratic reason, officials in the Pentagon sat on the secret until half the world believed Goebbels propaganda. Then, at last, Washington revealed the truth. That American space-argonauts were circling the Earth. For two months the world had seemed turned around. This new technological wonder would be more important than the atom bomb, many thought.

Then the invasion of Canada began.

Chris turned his mind away from what was happening now, out in the Atlantic. He wished he had one of those new *laser* communicators, so he could tell the men up in the Satellite how things were progressing down here. But the light amplification devices were so secret, the Chiefs of Staff had refused to allow any to be taken into the enemy's heartland.

Surely the Nazis were working on a way to shoot down the Satellite. No one knew why, with aliens to help them, the enemy let their early lead in rocketry slip so badly.

Perhaps they can't operate in space anymore... like they haven't been able to crush our

submarine forces.

But does that make sense? How could aliens lose the ability to destroy such a crude spacecraft?

Chris shook his head.

Not that it matters much. Tonight the Atlantic fleet is dying. This winter, we'll be forced to use our biggest bombs to hold the line in Canada... wrecking the continent even if we slow them down.

He looked at the figure in the boat's prow.

How can cleverness or industry or courage prevail against such power?

Those fur-covered shoulders were passive now. Loki had admitted to being one of the weakest of these "gods." But Chris had seen him tear down buildings with his bare hands.

"Loki," he said quietly.

As often as not, the Aesir would ignore any human who spoke to him without leave. But this time the dark-haired figure turned and regarded Chris. Loki's expression was not warm, but he did smile.

"Thou art troubled, youngling. I spy it in thy heart."

He seemed to peer into Chris.

"It is not fear, I am glad to see, but only a great perplexity."

Fitting their assumed roles as the fabled lords of Valhalla, courage was the one human attribute most honored by the Aesir. Even by the god of trickery and treachery.

"Thank you, Loki." Chris nodded respectfully. *You could've fooled me. I thought I was scared spitless!*

Loki's eyes were pools glittering with starlight.

"On this fateful eve, it is meet to grant a brave worm a boon. Therefore I will favor thee, mortal. Ask three questions. These will Loki answer truthfully, by his very life."

Chris blinked, for the moment stricken speechless. He was unprepared for anything like this! Everyone from President Marshall and Admiral Heinlein on down to the lowliest Brazilian draftee had hungered for answers. Imperious and aloof, their one Aesir ally had doled out hints and clues, had helped to foil Nazi schemes and slow the implacable enemy advance, but he never made a promise like this.

Chris felt O'Leary tense behind him, trying to seem invisible in order to be allowed to stay and listen. For once the beatnik's mouth stayed firmly shut.

Pine forests loomed above them as the boat entered shallows out of the evening wind. He could smell the dark forest. There was so little time! Chris groped for a question.

"I... Who are you, and where did you come from?"

Loki closed his eyes. When he opened them, the black orbs were filled with dark sadness.

"Out of the body of Ymir, slain by Odin, poured the Sea.

"Gripping the body of Ymir, Yggdrasil, the great tree.

"Sprung from salt and frost, the Aesir, tremble Earth!

"Born of Giant and man, Loki, bringer of mirth."

The creature stared at Chris.

"This has always been my home, he said. And Chris knew that he meant the Earth. "I remember ages and everything spoken of in Eddas -- from the chaining of Fenris to the lies of Skrymnir. And yet ..."

Loki's voice was faintly puzzled, even hushed.

"And yet there is something about those memories... something laid over, as lichen lies upon the frost."

He shook himself. "In truth, I cannot say for certain that I am older than thee, child-man."

Loki's massive shoulders shrugged.

"But make haste with your next question. We are approaching the Gathering Place. *They* will be here and we must stop them from their scheming, if it is not already too late."

Reminded suddenly of the present, Chris looked up at the wilderness looming all around them on the shadowed hillsides.

"Are you sure about this plan -- taking on so many of the Aesir in one place?"

Loki smiled. And Chris realized at once why. Like some idiot out of a fairy tale, he had squandered a question in a silly quest for comfort! But reassurance was not one of Loki's strong suits.

"No, I am not sure, impertinent mortal!"

Loki laughed and the rowing sailors briefly lost their stride as they looked up at the ironic, savage sound. "Think thou that only men may win honor by daring all against death? Here does Loki show his courage, to face Odin's spear and Thor's hammer if he must, tonight!" He turned and shook a ham-size fist toward the west. The dwarf whimpered and crouched beside his master.

Chris saw that the marines had already landed. Major Marlowe made quick hand gestures, sending the first skirmishers fanning out into the forest. The second row of boats shipped oars and were carried by momentum toward the gravelly shore.

He hurried to take advantage of the remaining time.

"Loki. What is happening in Africa?"

Since '49 the Dark Continent had been dark indeed. From Tunis to the Cape of Good Hope, fires burned, and rumors of horror flowed.

Loki whispered softly.

*"Surtur must needs have a home, before the time of raging.
"There, in torment, men cry out, screaming for an ending."*

The giant shook his great head. "In Africa and on the great plains of Russia, terrible magics are being made, and terrible woe."

Back in Israel-Iran Chris had seen some of the refugees -- Blacks and high-cheeked Slavs -- lucky escapees who had fled the fires in time. Even they had not been able to tell what was happening in the interior. Only people who had seen the earlier horrors -- whose arms bore stenciled numbers from the first wave of chimney camps would imagine what was happening in the silent continents. And those fierce men and women kept their silence.

It struck Chris that Loki did not seem to speak out of pity, but matter-of-factly, as if he thought a mistake were being made, but not any particular evil.

"Terrible magics..." Chris repeated. And suddenly he had a thought. "You mean the purpose isn't *only* to slaughter people? That something else is going on, as well? Is it related to the reason why you saved those people from the first camps? Was something being done to them?"

Chris had a sense that there was something important here. Something ultimately crucial. But Loki smiled, holding up three fingers.

"No more questions. It is time."

They scraped bottom. Sailors leapt out into the icy water to drag the boat up to the rocky shore. Shortly, Chris was busy supervising the unloading of their supplies, but his mind was a turmoil.

Loki was hiding something, laughing at him for having come so close and yet missing the target. There was more to this venture, tonight, than an attempt to kill a few alien gods.

High in the dark forest canopy, a crow cawed scratchily. The dwarf, laden under enough boxes to crush a man, rolled its eyes and moaned softly, but Loki seemed not to notice.

"Reet freaking hideaway, daddyo," O'Leary muttered as he helped Chris shoulder the bomb's fuse mechanism. "A heavy-duty scene. "

"Right," Chris answered, feeling sure he understood the beatnik this time. "A heavy-duty scene."

They set out, following the faint blazings laid by their marine scouts.

As they climbed a narrow trail from the beach, Chris felt a growing sense of anticipation... a feeling of being, right then, at the navel of the world. For well or ill, this place was where the fate of the world hung. He could think of no better end than to sear this island clean of all life. If that meant standing beside the bomb and triggering it himself, well, few men ever had a chance to trade their lives so well.

They were deep under the forest canopy now. Chris caught sight of flickering movements under the trees, marine flankers guarding them and their precious cargo. According to prewar maps, they had only to top one rise, then another. From that prominence, any place to plant the bomb would do quite nicely. Valhalla would evaporate in flame.

Chris started to turn, to look back at Loki... but at that moment the night erupted with light. Flares popped and fitted and floated slowly through the branches on tiny parachutes. Men dove for cover as tracer bullets sent their shadows fleeing. There was a sudden gunfire up ahead, and loud concussions. Men screamed.

Chris sought cover behind a towering fire as mortars began pounding the forest around

him. From high up the hillside -- even over the explosions -- they heard booming laughter.

Clutching the roots of a tree, Chris looked back. A dozen yards away, the dwarf lay flat on his back, a smoking ruin where a mortar round must have landed squarely.

But then he felt a hand on his shoulder. O'Leary pointed up the hill and whispered, goggle-eyed.

"Dig it, man."

Chris turned and stared upslope at a huge, manlike being striding down the hillside, followed by dark-cloaked, heavily armed men. The giant figure carried an enormous bludgeon which screamed whenever he threw it, crushing trees and marines without prejudice, exploding massive conifers into kindling and men into jam. Then, as if by a will of its own, the weapon swept back into the red-bearded Aesir's hand.

Not mortars, Chris realized. Thor's hammer.

Of Loki, there was no sign at all.

3.

"There, there, Hugin. Fear not the dark Americans. They shall not hurt thee."

The one-eyed being called Odin sat upon a throne of ebony, bearing on his upraised hand a raven the same color as night. A jewel set in the giant's eyepatch glittered like an orb more far-seeing than the one he had lost. Across his lap lay a shining spear.

On both sides stood fur-clad beings just as imposing, one blond, with a great axe laid arrogantly over his shoulder. The other, red-bearded, leaned lazily on a hammer the size of a normal man.

Guards in black leather, twin lightning strokes on their collars, stood at attention around the immense hall of hewn timber columns. Even their rifles were polished black. The only spot of color on each SS uniform was a red swastika armband.

Odin gazed down at the prisoners, chained in a heap on the floor of the great hall.

"Alas. Poor Hugin has not forgiven you Americans. His brother, Munin, was lost when Berlin boiled under your Hellfire bombs."

The Aesir chief's remaining eye gleamed ferally. "And who can blame my poor watch-bird, or fail to understand a father's grief, when that same flame deluge consumed my bright boy, my far-seeing Heimdallr."

Survivors of the ill-fated raiding party lay exhausted on the cold stone floor. Unconscious and dying, Major Marlowe was in no condition to answer, but one of the Free British volunteers stood, rattling his chains, and spat in front of the massive throne.

"Pearson!" O'Leary tried to pull on the man's arm, but was shrugged off as the Briton shook his fist.

"Yeah, they got your precious boy in Berlin. Like you killed everyone in London an' Paris! I say the Yanks were too soft, stopping there. They shoulda gone ahead an' fried every last Aryan bitch an' cub..."

His defiance was cut off as an SS officer knocked him down. Troopers brought their rifle butts down, again and again. Finally, Odin waved them back.

"Take the body to the center of the Great Circle, to be given full rites."

The officer looked up sharply, but Odin rumbled in a tone that assumed obedience. "We value courage, even in our foes. I want that brave man with me, when Fimbul-Winter blows."

Black-uniformed guards cut the limp form free as the chief Aesir chucked his raven under the beak, offering a morsel of meat. He spoke to the huge redhead standing beside him.

"Thor, my son. These other creatures are thine. Poor prizes, I admit, but they did show some prowess in following the Liar this far. What will thou do with them?"

The giant stroked his hammer with gauntlets the size of small dogs. He made even Loki seem small. Stepping forward to scan the prisoners, Thor seemed to be searching for something. When his gaze lighted on Chris, it seemed to shimmer. Thor's voice was as deep as the growling of earthquakes.

"I will deign to speak with one or two, Father."

Odin nodded.

"Have them cast in a pit somewhere," he told an SS general nearby, who clicked heels and bowed low. "Await my son's pleasure."

The Nazis hauled Chris and the other survivors away, but not before Chris overheard the elder Aesir tell his offspring, "Find out what you can about that wolf-spawn, Loki. Then give

them over for ritual sacrifice."

4.

Poor Major Marlowe had been right about one thing. The Nazis would never have won without the Aesir, or something like them. Hitler and his gang must have believed from the start that they could somehow call forth the ancient "gods," or they would surely never have dared wage such a war, one certain to bring in America.

Indeed, by early 1944 it had seemed all but over. There was hell yet to pay, of course, but nobody back home feared defeat anymore. The Russians were pushing in from the east. Rome was almost taken, and the Mediterranean was an Allied lake. The Japanese were crumbling -- pushed back or bottled up in island after island. Meanwhile the greatest armada in history gathered in England, preparing to cross the Channel and lance the Nazi boil for good and all.

In factories and shipyards across America, the Arsenal of Democracy poured forth more war materiel in a month than the Third Reich produced in its best year. Ships rolled off the ways at intervals of hours. Planes every few minutes.

Most important of all, in Italy, Africa and the Pacific, a rabble of farmers and city boys had been tempered, becoming warriors in a great army. Man to man, they were a match for their experienced foe, and outnumbered them as well.

Already there was talk of the postwar recovery, of plans to help in the rebuilding, and a "United Nations" to keep the peace forever.

In '44 Chris had been just a child in knee pants, devouring Chet Nimitz novels and praying with all his might that there would be something half as glorious to do in his adulthood as what his uncles were achieving overseas right then. Maybe there would be adventures in space, he hoped. For after this, the horror of war would surely never be allowed again.

Then came the rumors... tales of setbacks on the Eastern front... of reeling Soviet armies sent into sudden, unexpected retreat. The reasons were unclear... mostly, what came back were superstitious rumblings that no modern person credited.

Voices on a street corner:

Damn Russkies... I knew all along they didn' have no stayin' power... Alla time yammerin 'bout a "second front"... Well, we'll give 'em a secondfront. Save their hash. Don't fret, Ivan. Uncle Sam's coming...

Then it was June, and the Norman sky was filled with planes. Ships covered the Channel, as far as any eye could see. The greatest armada of free men ever assembled...

Sitting against a cold stone wall in an underground cell, Chris pinched his eyes shut and tried to crush away the memory of grainy black and white films he had been shown. Photographs never seen by the public.

D-Day...

D for disaster.

Cyclones, hundreds of them, spinning like horrible tops, rising out of the dawn mists. They grew and climbed till dark funnels seemed to stretch beyond the sky. Approaching the ships, one could make out terrible figures riding those whirling winds, driving the storms faster and faster with beating wings...

"Marlowe's come up aces and eights, man." O'Leary sighed heavily as he sagged down next to Chris. "You're the big cheese now, dad."

Chris closed his eyes. *All men die*, he thought, reminding himself that he hadn't really liked the dour marine all that much, anyway.

He mourned nonetheless, if for no other reason than that Marlowe had been his insulation, protecting him from that bitch called command.

"So what gives now, chief?"

Chris looked at O'Leary. The man was really too old to be playing kids' games. There were lines at the edges of those doelike eyes, and baby fat was turning into a double chin. The Army recognized genius, and put up with a lot from its civilian experts. But Chris wondered -- not for the first time -- how this escapee from Greenwich Village ever came to a position of responsibility.

Loki chose him. That was the real answer. *Like he chose me.*
So much for the god of cleverness.

"What *gives* is that you damp down the beat-rap, O'Leary. Making only every third sentence incomprehensible should be enough to provide your emotional crutch."

The beatnik technician winced, and Chris at once regretted the outburst.

"Oh, never mind." He changed the subject. "How are the rest of the men doing?"

"Copacetic, I guess... I mean, they're okay, for guys slated for ritual shortening in a few hours. They all knew this was a suicide mission. Just wanted to take a few of the bastards with them, is all."

Chris nodded. *If we had another year or two...*

By then the missile scientists would have had rockets accurate enough to go for a surgical strike, making this attempt to sneak in bombs under the enemy's noses unnecessary. The Satellite was just the beginning, if they had time.

"Pearson was right, man," O'Leary muttered as he collapsed against the wall next to Chris. "We shoulda pasted them with everything we had. Melted Europe to slag, if that's what it took."

"By the time we had enough bombs, they had atomic weapons, too," Chris pointed out.

"So? After we fried Peenemunde, their delivery systems stagnated. And they haven't got a clue how to go thermonuclear! Why, even if they did manage to disassemble our bomb..."

"God forbid!" Chris blinked. His heart raced, even considering the possibility. If the Nazis managed to make the leap from A-bomb to fusion weapons...

The tech shook his head vigorously. "I scoped -- I mean I checked out the destruct triggers myself, Chris. Anyone pokes around to try to see how a U.S. of A. type H-bomb works will be in for a nasty surprise."

That had, of course, been a minimum requirement before being allowed to attempt this mission. Had they been able to assemble the weapon near the "Great Circle" of Aesgard, the course of war might have changed. Now, all they could hope was that the separate components would melt to slag as they were supposed to when their timers expired.

O'Leary persisted. "I still think we should have launched everything we had back in '52."

Chris knew how the man felt. Most Americans believed the exchange would be worth it. A full-scale strike at Hitler's homeland would have seared the heart out of it. The monster's retaliation, with cruder rockets and fission bombs, might have been a price worth paying.

When he had learned the real reason, at first Chris refused to believe it. He had assumed that Loki was lying... that it was an Aesir trick. But since then he had seen the truth. America's arsenal was a two-edged sword. Unless used carefully it would cut both ways.

There was a rattling of keys. Three SS guards stepped in, looking down their noses at the dejected Allied raiders.

"Great Thor would speak vit' your leader," the officer said in thickly accented English. When no one moved, his gaze fell on Chris. "This one. Our lord wants him especially."

Guards seized Chris by the arms, lifting him bodily.

"Cool as glass, dad," O'Leary said. "Drive em crazy, baby."

Chris glanced back from the door. "You too, O'Leary."

The dungeon gate slammed shut behind him.

"You are a Dane, are you not?"

Chris stood tied to a pillar in front of a crackling fireplace. The Gestapo official peered at Chris from several angles before asking his question.

"Danish by ancestry. What of it?" Chris shrugged under his bonds.

The Nazi clucked. "Oh, nothing in particular. It is just that I never cease to be amazed when I find specimens of clearly superior stock fighting against their own divine heritage."

Chris lifted an eyebrow. "Do you interrogate a lot of prisoners?"

"Oh, yes, very many."

"Well, then you must be amazed all the time."

The Gestapo man blinked, then smiled sourly. He stepped back to light a cigarette, and Chris noticed that his hands were trembling.

"But doesn't your very blood cry out when you find yourself working with, going into battle alongside, racial scum, mongrels... ?"

Chris laughed. He turned his head and regarded the Nazi icily.

"Why are you here?"

The fellow blinked again. "See here. I am in charge of intelligence and party doctrinal -- "

"You're a jailor. The priests of the Aesir run everything now. The mystics in the SS control

the Reich. Hitler's a tottering old syphylitic they won't let out of Berchtesgaden. And you old-fashioned Nazis are barely tolerated anymore."

The officer sucked at his cigarette. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that all that racial claptrap was just window dressing. An excuse to set up the death camps. But the SS would've been just as happy to use Aryans in them, if that was the only way to..."

"Yes?" The Gestapo man stepped forward. "To do what? If the purpose of the camps was not the elimination of impure races, then what, smart man? What?"

There was a brittle, high-pitched edge to the man's laughter. "You do not know, do you? Even Loki did not tell you!"

Chris could have sworn that there was disappointment in the officer's eyes... as if he had hoped to learn something from Chris, and felt let down to find out his prisoner was just as much in the dark.

No, I wasted a question. Loki didn't tell me about the reason for the camps.

Chris glanced at the other man's trembling hands, that had doubtless wreaked more hell on broken bodies than bore contemplating. All in a cause that was no longer even relevant to the winning side.

"Poor obsolete National Socialist," Chris said. "Your dreams, mad as they were, were human ones. How does it feel to have it all taken over by aliens? To watch it change beyond recognition?"

The Gestapo man reddened. Fumbling, he plucked a truncheon from the wall and smacked it in his gloved left hand.

"I will change something *else* beyond recognition," he growled. "And if I'm obsolete, at least I am still allowed the pleasure of my craft."

He approached, smiling, a thin film on his lips. Chris braced himself as the arm swung back. But then the leather curtains parted. A large shadow fell across the rug. The officer paled and snapped to attention.

Red-bearded Thor nodded briefly, shrugging out of his fur cloak.

"You may go," he rumbled.

Chris did not even look at the Nazi as the interrogator tried to meet his eye for the last time. Chris watched coals in the fireplace until the curtains swished again and he was alone with the alien.

Thor sat cross-legged, joining Chris in contemplating the flames. When he used his hammer to prod the logs, heat brought out fine, glowing designs in the massive iron head.

"Fro sends word from Vineland... from the sea thou callest Labrador. There has been a slaughter of many brave men. Those cowards tools -- 'submarines' -- did frightful harm to our fleet. But in the end, Fro's tempests were masterful. The landing is secured.

Chris controlled a sinking feeling in his stomach. This was expected. Worse would come this winter.

Thor shook his head. "This is a bad war. Where is the honor, when thousands die unable even to show valor?"

Chris had more experience than most Americans in holding conversation with gods. Still, he took a chance by speaking without permission.

"I agree, Great One. But you can't blame us for that."

Thor's eyes glittered as he inspected Chris.

"No, brave worm. I do not blame you. That you have used your flame weapons as little as you have speaks well for the pride of thy leaders. Or perhaps they know what our wrath would be, if they were spent wantonly."

I never should have been allowed on this mission. I know too much, Chris realized. Loki had been the one to overrule High Command and insist that Chris come along. But that made him the only one here who knew the real reason the H-bombs had been kept leashed.

Dust from atom blasts, and soot from burning cities -- those were what Allied High Command feared, more than radiation or Nazi retaliation. Already, from limited use of nuclear weapons so far, the weather had chilled measurably.

And Aesir were much stronger in winter! Scientists verified Loki's story, that careless use of the Allied nuclear advantage would lead to catastrophe, no matter how badly they seared the other side.

"We too prefer a more personal approach," Chris said, hoping to keep the Aes believing his own explanation. "No man wants to be killed by powers beyond his understanding, impossible

to resist or fight back against."

Thor's rumble, this time, was low laughter.

"Well said, worm. Thou dost chastize as Freyr does, with words that reap, even as they sow."

The Aesir leaned forward a little. "You would earn merit, small one, if you told me how to find the Brother of Lies."

Those gray eyes were like cold clouds, and Chris felt his sense of reality waver as he looked into them. It took an effort of will to tear his gaze away, replying with a dry mouth.

"I... don't know what you're talking about."

The rumbling changed tone, deepening. Chris felt a rough touch as Thor brushed his cheek with the leather-bound haft of his great war hammer.

"Loki, youngling. Tell me where the Trickster may be found, and you may yet escape your doom, you may even find a place by my side. In the world to come, there will be no greater place for a man."

This time Chris steeled himself to meet the hypnotic pools. Thor's eyes seemed to reach hungrily for his soul, as a magnet might call to native iron. Chris fought back with a savage heat of hatred.

"Not... for all the Valkyries in your pathetic alien pantheon," he whispered, half breathless. "I'd rather run with wolves."

The smile vanished. Thor blinked, and for a moment Chris thought he saw the Aesir's image waver just a little, as if... as if Chris were looking through a man-shaped *fold* in space.

"Courage will not save thee from the wages of disrespect, worm," the shape warned, and solidified again into a fur-clad giant.

All at once, Chris was glad to have known O'Leary.

"Don't you dig it yet, daddyo? I don't fucking believe in you! Wherever you're from, baby, they probably kicked you out!"

"You Aesir may be mean enough to wreck our world, but everything about you screams that you're the dregs, man. Leaky squares. Probably burned out papa's stolen saucer just gettin' here!"

He shook his head. "I just refuse to believe in you, man."

The icy gray eyes blinked once. Then Thor's surprised expression faded into a deathly cool smile.

"I did not ken your other insults. But for calling me a *man*, you shall die as you seem to wish, before the morning sun."

He stood and placed a hand on Chris's shoulder, as if imparting a friendly benediction, but even that casual touch felt viselike.

"I only add this, small one. We Aesir have come *invited*, and we arrived not in ships -- even ships between the stars -- but instead upon the wings of Death itself. This much, this boon of knowledge I grant thee, in honor of your defiance."

Then, in a swirl of furs and displaced air, the creature was gone, leaving Chris alone again to watch coals flicker slowly and turn into ashes.

6.

The Teutonic priests were resplendent in red and black, their robes traced in gold and silver. Platinum eagles' wings rose from top-heavy helmets as they marched around a great circle of standing stones, chanting in a tongue that sounded vaguely Germanic, but which Chris knew was much, much older.

An altar, carved with gaping dragons' mouths, stood beside a raging bonfire. Smoke rose in a turbulent funnel, carrying bright sparks up toward a full moon. Heat blazed at the ring of prisoners, each chained to his own obelisk of rough-hewn rock.

They faced southward, looking from a Gotland prominence across the Baltic toward a shore that had once been Poland, and for a little while after that had been the "Thousand-Year Reich."

The waters were unnaturally calm, almost glassy, reflecting a nearly perfect image of the bonfire alongside the Moon's rippling twin.

"Fro must be back from Labrador," O'Leary commented loudly enough for Chris to hear him over the chanting and the pounding drums. "That'd explain the clear night. He's the god of tempests."

Chris glanced at the man sourly, and O'Leary grinned back apologetically. "Sorry, man. I mean he's th' little green alien who's in charge of weather control. Make you feel any better?"

I had that coming, Chris thought. He smiled dryly and shrugged. "I don't suppose it matters much now."

O'Leary watched the Aryan Brothers march by again, carrying a giant swastika alongside a great dragonlike totem. The technician started to say something, but then he blinked and seemed to mumble to himself, as if trying to catch a drifting thought. When the procession had passed, he turned to Chris, a mystified expression on his face. "I just remembered something."

Chris sighed. "What is it now, O'Leary?"

The beatnik frowned in puzzlement. "I can't figure why it slipped my mind until now. But back when we were on the beach, unloading the bomb parts, Old Loki pulled me aside. It was all so hectic, but I could swear I saw him palm th' H-bomb trigger mechanism, Chris. That means..."

Chris nodded.

"That means he knew we were going to be captured. I already figured that out, O'Leary. At least the Nazis won't get the trigger."

"Yeah. But that's not all I just remembered, Chris. Loki told me to tell you something for him. He said you'd asked him a question, and he told me to relay an answer he said you might understand."

O'Leary shook his head.

"Can't figure why I forgot to tell you till now."

Chris laughed. Of course the renegade Aes had put the man under a post-hypnotic command to recall the message later... perhaps only in a situation like this one.

"What is it, O'Leary? What did he say to tell me?"

"It was just one word, Chris. He said to tell you -- *necromancy*. Then he clammed up. It wasn't much later that the SS jumped us.

"What'a he mean by that, Captain? What was your question, anyway? What does the answer mean?"

Chris stared at the funnel of sparks climbing toward the Moon, and pondered. With his last question he had asked Loki about the camps -- about the awesome, horrible, concentrated effort of death that had been perpetrated, first in Europe and then in Russia and Africa. What were they *for*? There had to be more to it than a plan to eliminate some bothersome minorities.

Moreover, why had Loki, who normally seemed so oblivious to human life, acted to rescue so many from the death factories, at so great a risk to himself?

Necromancy. That was Loki's delayed reply to his final question -- told in such a way that Chris might never be able to tell anyone who mattered.

Necromancy...

The word stood for the performance of magic. A special, terrible kind. In legend, a necromancer was an evil wizard who used the concentrated field created by the death agony of human beings to drive his spells.

But that was just superstitious nonsense!

Light-headed, Chris looked out across the sand at the hulking Aesir seated on their gilded thrones, heard the chanting of the priests, and wished he could dismiss the idea as easily as he once would have.

Was that the reason the Nazis had dared to wage a war they otherwise could never win? Because they believed they could create such concentrated, distilled horror that ancient spells would actually work?

It explained much. Other nations had gone insane. Other movements had been evil. But none perpetrated crimes with such dedication and efficiency. The horror must have been directed not so much at death itself, but at some hideous goal *beyond* death!

"They... *made*... the Aesir. That's what Loki meant by thinking that, maybe, his own memories were false. When he suspected he was actually no older than..."

"What was that, Cap'n?" O'Leary leaned as far as his chains would allow. "I couldn't follow..."

The procession stopped. The High Priest, carrying a golden sword, held it before Odin's throne. The father of the "gods" touched it and the Aesir's rumbling chant could be heard, lower than human singing, a hungry sound like a growl that trembled within the Earth.

One of the chained Allies -- a Free Briton -- was dragged, numbed with dread, from his obelisk toward the fire and the dragon altar.

Chris shut his eyes, as if to hold out the screams.

"Jesus!" O'Leary hissed.

Yes, Chris thought. *Invoke Jesus. Or Allah, or God of Abraham. Wake up, Brahma! For your dream has turned into a nightmare.*

He understood now why Loki had not told him his answer while there was even a chance he might make it home alive.

Thank you, Loki.

Better America and the Last Alliance should go down honorably than be tempted by this knowledge... by this horrible way out. For if the Allies ever adopted the enemy's methods, there would be nothing left in the soul of humanity to fight for.

Who would we conjure? Chris wondered. If we ever used those spells? Superman? Captain Marvel? Oh, they'd be more than a match for the Aesir! Our myths were boundless.

He laughed, and the sound turned into a sob as another scream of agony pierced the night.

Thank you, Loki, for sparing us that test of our souls.

He had no idea where the renegade "trickster god" had gone, or whether this debacle was only a cloak for some deeper, more secret mission.

Could that be? Chris wondered. Soldiers seldom saw the big picture, and President Marshall didn't have to tell his OSS captains everything. This mission could have been a feint, a minor ploy in a greater scheme.

Lasers and satellites... they may be just part of it. They might have a silver bullet... a sprig of mistletoe, still.

Chains rattled to his right. He heard a voice cursing in Portuguese and footsteps dragging the latest prisoner off.

Chris looked up at the sky, and a thought suddenly occurred to him, as if out of nowhere.

Legends begin in strange ways, he realized.

Someday -- even if there was no silver bullet -- the horror would have to ebb at last. Perhaps when humans grew scarce and the Aesir were less well fed on the death manna they supped on from charnel houses.

Then a time might come when human heroes would count for something again. In secret laboratories, or in exile on the Moon, or at the bottom of the sea, free men and women would toil to build armor, weapons, maybe the heroes themselves...

This time the scream was choked, as the Brazilian ranger tried to defy his enemies, only breaking to show his agony at the last.

Footsteps approached. To his amazement, Chris felt feather-light, as if gravity were barely enough to keep him on the ground.

"So long, O'Leary," he said distantly.

"Yeah, man. Stay cool."

Chris nodded. He offered the black-and-silver-clad SS his wrists as they unchained him, and spoke to them softly, in a friendly tone of voice.

"You know, those costumes make you look pretty silly for grown men."

They blinked at him in surprise. Chris smiled and stepped between them, leading the way toward the altar and the waiting Aesir.

Someday men will challenge these monsters, he thought, knowing that the numb, light-headed feeling meant he wouldn't scream... that nothing they could do would make him take more than casual notice.

Loki had made certain of this. It was why the Trickster had spent so much time with Chris, this last year. Why he insisted that Chris come along this time.

Our day will come. Revenge will drive our descendants. Science will armor them. But those heroes will need one more thing, he realized.

Heroes need inspiration. They need legends.

Approaching the humming Aesir, they passed before a row of human "dignitaries" from the Reich. A few of the aging Nazis wore faces glazed in excitement, but others sat numbly, as if lost. He felt he could almost read the despair in those darkened, mad eyes. They knew that something they had wrought had gone far out of their control.

Thor frowned as Chris flashed him a smile. "Hi. How'ya doin'?" he said to the Aesir, interrupting their rumbling music. Where curses and screams had only resonated with the

chant, good-natured sarcasm broke up the ritual in a mutter of surprise.

"Move, swine!"

An SS guard pushed Chris, or tried to, but stumbled instead on empty air where the American had been. Chris ducked underneath the jangling, cumbersome uniform, between the Nazi's legs, and swatted the fellow's behind with the flat of his hand, sending him sprawling.

The other guard reached for him, but crumpled openmouthed as Chris bent his fingers back and snapped them. The third guard he lifted by a belt buckle and tossed into the bonfire, to bellow in sudden horror and pain.

Hysterical strength, of course, Chris realized, knowing what Loki had done to him. In rapid succession, four onrushing underpriests went down with snapped necks or spines. Of course no human could do these things without being used up, Chris knew distantly. But what did it matter? This was more fun than he had expected to be having, at this moment.

A golden flash warned him. Chris whirled and ducked, siezing Odin's spear with a sudden snatch.

"Coward," he whispered at the hot-faced "father of the gods."

Flipping the heavy, gleaming weapon around, Chris held it in two hands before him.

God, help me...

With a cry he broke the legendary spear over his knee. Pieces fell to the sand.

Nobody moved. Even Thor's whirling hammer slowed and then dropped. In the sudden silence, Chris distantly realized his femur was shattered -- along with most of the bones in his hands -- leaving him perched precariously on one leg.

Yet his only regret was that he couldn't emulate an aged Jew he had heard of from one of the concentration camp survivors. Standing in front-of the grave he had been forced to dig for himself, the old man did not beg, or try to reason with the SS. Nor did he slump in despair. Instead, the prisoner had turned away from his murderers, dropped his pants, and said aloud in Yiddish as he bent over --

"Kish mir im toches..."

"Kiss my ass," Chris told Thor as more guards finally ran up and grabbed his arms. As they dragged him to the altar, he kept his gaze on the red-bearded "god."

The priests tied him down, but Chris met the Aesir's gray eyes.

"I don't believe in you," he said.

Thor blinked, and the giant suddenly turned away.

Chris laughed out loud then, knowing that nothing in the world would suppress this story. It would spread, at first in whispers, then rumors and tales. There would be no stopping it.

The death-manna from tonight's ceremony would not nourish monsters. It would be a poison. A medicine.

Loki, you bastard. You used me, and I suppose I should thank you.

But rest assured, Loki, someday we'll get you, too.

He laughed again as he watched the dismayed High priest fumble with the knife. A wide-eyed assistant jiggled and dropped his swastika banner. Chris roared.

Behind him, he heard O'Leary's high-pitched giggle. Then, another of the prisoners barked, and another. It was unstoppable.

Across the chilly Baltic, an uncertain wind began to rise. And overhead, a new star sailed swiftly where older ones merely drifted across the sky.

THE END

Care to see this epic tale continued? For many years people wrote in about "Thor Meets Captain America," which was a Hugo Award finalist and has been translated into many other languages. Finally, in 2003, DC Comics and Wildstorm commissioned me to write the script for a full saga based on this story, and hired the great artist Scott Hampton to hand-paint illustrations. The result was *The Life Eaters*, a lavish 144 page graphic novel. (In France, home of the "*bande dessinée*" tradition of graphic novels, a large format edition was a huge hit under the title "*D-Day, Le Jour du Desastre*.")

Afterword by David Brin

The parallel-world story is another mainstay of SF. It explores the old question: "What would have happened if...?"

If a fly buzzing above a bowl of soup had dipped too low, getting caught, disgusting a

Roman centurion, who took his wrath out on an underling, sending him out on an extra patrol, which detected Hannibal's army in the Alps early enough to catch it far from Rome... You see the point.

Sometimes we like to frighten ourselves. The most frequent "what if" seems to deal with alternate realities in which the Nazis won World War II. Something about that loathsome possibility just invites a horror story.

Trouble is, I never could believe it. Mind you, Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* is a classic, a great work. But its premise -- that an early assassination of Franklin Roosevelt would have led to an inevitable Axis victory -- is hard to swallow.

They were just such *schmucks!*

I mean, it's hard to think of any way a single altered event would have let the Nazis win their war. They would have needed an entire chain of flukes even to have a chance. In fact, it took quite a few lucky breaks for them to last as long as they did, and to have the time to commit such atrocities.

I said as much to Gregory Benford when he invited me to write a piece for his upcoming anthology of parallel world stories, *Hitler Victorious*. Greg's reply? A dare.

"I'll bet you could think of some premise that'd work, David.

How unlikely can it be?"

It can be preposterous, as long as it sings.

Greg was my collaborator on a far larger large novel. I trusted him. But once the story was started, it took off in directions I never expected. I don't know if the story "sings," but it does tie together several curious things about the Nazi cult.

Why were the Nazis so evil? Why did they do so many horrible, pointless things? What was behind their incredible streak of romantic mysticism?

Maybe the bastards really believed something like this was possible.