

This is a revamp of the original chapter. FILFy, Making Waves will be up tomorrow here, and FILFy over on Fanfic. Tired now. If you see mistakes, tell me. I did not Grammarly it.

I don't have a stake in the dreck that marvel has become, nor am I a British lady.

Howdy, Fanfic folks.

So... um, yeah. I have a few excuses here. For one thing, I am not one of nature's natural editors, especially for my own work. I have ADHD, and going over old stories is always hard as hell for me, taking nearly as long as writing a similarly scaled chapter. For another, I had held out hope until November that two of my old editors who I had sent this chapter and the next few to would get them back to me at last. They didn't. And then, I started to add in more things, specifically on the Thanos side of things, and the first scene here. I try not to get too 'Merica Hell Yeah, but um... heh.

In the initial writing, the battle in DC was **so** hard to get right it isn't even funny. I had to rewrite large portions of it several times. And then I ran into a fundamental issue: time zones. I try hard to keep them clear in my mind, hinting at the different times, but it is really hard to keep in my head. Regardless, I hope you all enjoy this.

And remember: many of the events here occur concurrently with the events in the previous chapter! Multiple battlefronts are going on at the same time!

This has not been edited by anyone but me. Some segments have been edited with Grammarly, others haven't. If I tried that, along with writing up Heroes (trying to get it out to my Patrons by Valentine's) I wouldn't have gotten the chapter out before the end of the month.

Regardless of that and the fact it's been literal years since this story was updated, I hope you enjoy it.

Chapter 54: Invasion: A Tale of Four Portals

In the immediate attacks coming out of the various portals, almost all of the advantages accrued to the Chitauri invaders. In America, this meant that before Iron Man and the other super-powered (or suited) individuals were on station or the local military forces could react in an organized manner, several massive groups of skimmers, the fast, two-person aerial units, were able to move well away from the portal in Washington. Numbering in the hundreds, they attacked the nearest military bases hard, pushing out to around a hundred miles away from the city, attacking and mainly destroying the military bases in that area.

This was not a bloodless process, and most of those forces were mauled by the defenders. When the US military started to respond in strength, several groups were wiped out before they could make trouble. Others, who had seemingly lost any sense of strategy and just went wild, were killed by vengeful jets blowing them out of the sky with a little missile two tap after raining death down on small towns or busy highways. Yet the most important assault to be sent out away from the anti-air dome that Corvus Glaive put in place over the Washington area was sent to a specific target.

Loki hadn't really done all that much in terms of gathering actual intelligence for the Chitauri assault. But one thing he had done was look for any rumors or news reports that mentioned Magical Minds, Potter, or Reed Richards. Oddly, he hadn't done the same for Dr. Doom, who was well known as an anti-hero, leader of a nation and a scientist equal to Richards. Which was somewhat unusual and probably why he also had placed one of the teleport beacons in a country that shared a border with Latveria.

Regardless, in America, there were a lot of rumors, ranging from conspiracy theories to 'accredited' stories, that had Harry and Magical Minds engaged in everything from secretly putting something in the water of the Great Lakes to stealing children from Bible Belt states to use in some strange magical rite. And that Magical Minds was deeply involved in bringing down precious metals and other things from orbit to Hampton Roads and Naval Station Norfolk.

Combined, Hampton Roads, or as it was called formally, Naval Support Activity Hampton Roads, was three bases in one. They provided support in the form of administration and all sorts of logistical needs to the United States Fleet Forces Command, Naval Reserve Forces Command and Marine Corps. The nearby Naval Station Norfolk was the largest pure military installation the US Navy boasted and might, in fact, be the largest in the world, though since most militaries weren't exactly open about that kind of thing, it was impossible to know for sure. By any stretch, it was easily the most important purely military target outside of Washington DC itself in several thousand miles.

This had made it a natural place for the 'Revamped Dragon' project, as many of the people working on it called E's plan to somehow modernize the Iowa-class ship New Jersey, as well as a natural place to start to upgrade the basic military-style equipment of the US Navy. Opening a dry dock in Hampton Roads and moving the ship from its birth in Camden was relatively easy, but by this point, nearly everything else that went into that project had been mainly completed. For some reason, the US Navy, from the top brass on down, had latched onto that project with both hands.

At one point, Emma had laughingly called this the "Boys and their toys effect writ large. Big guns, battleships? Even more than jets and missiles, that kind of thing calls to the primitive male mind."

Corvus Glaive had known that the quartet of military bases would be a tough nut to crack. It was two hundred miles away, and even the skimmers, which the Chitauri called Death

Claws, could not travel that distance instantly, and sending them on their own would probably not have done anything much besides. No, the base needed to be destroyed, and for that, the attack needed Rippers, the large, mobile aerial artillery units.

Thus, this force was massive, easily the largest sent out right off the bat from the portal in Washington. Nearly two thousand Death Claws and a hundred Rippers, while even more Death Claws were sent to shield this group from counterattacks on the way to its target.

By the time that attack hit, the US Navy was already scrambling. This included the six destroyers in base, all of whom were armed with anti-air guns, the various base's anti-air guns, most of whom had been revamped by Magical Minds, and twenty-eight squadrons of fighter jets. Practically every jet on the base was in the air and hit the attackers before they could close, smashing hundreds of Death Claws out of the air with the two missile tap that the Americans had almost instantly learned were necessary to take down their shields and destroy the smaller flying units. A flight of jets was even able to get through the skimmers to down one of the large eel-like units, though it cost them their lives and every missile they had.

Then, the rest of the base's anti-air defenses opened up, and the Chitauri local commander began to wonder if still more should have been sent. Laser, missiles, and heavy machine gun fire, even chaff, were launched their way, the night lighting up across all of Hampton Roads and beyond.

Many of the ships in the docks had already begun to leave said docks, moving to maneuver, but the enemy's strange jamming tech made linking up harder as the enemy pressed forward through the defensive fire. Still, the defenders were giving as good as they got for a while until the Rippers got into their own range, and the jets began to be knocked out of the sky, unable to return and rearm safely. At that point, the battle started to tip the other way.

As the attack began, Captain Nicodemus Lee, no relation to either Ching Lee or the Southern General, was on the bridge of his ship, the New Jersey. The US navy had not chosen the commander of their new (old) toy out of a hat. The Hawaiian native was known as a hard charger and had been up with the first of the alarms coming in from Washington and the Pentagon going off the air despite it being deep night when the attack began.

Getting his crew assembled from across the base at short notice had taken some doing, as the ship had not been scheduled for any test runs for the next week. Indeed, the ship was still listed as being in the hands of the yard, and his crew had yet to be fully filled out. Still, Nicodemus had made certain at least a skeleton crew was aboard the ship at all times, and now, Nicodemus loomed over one of his bridge officers, an operations specialist.

"Mr. Givens, tell me we are connected to the base's systems," Lee growled, his tone implying that they had better be, or else Lee was going to gut the man, metaphorically of course.

Normally, any naval warship would be relying on its own radar section. But considering the spare nature of the crew at present, there were only so many hands to go around to operate the ship's sonar and radar.

"Yes, sir. Our radar's coming online...or will as soon as I can get a few ratings to race down there and push some buttons," the man said with all of the courage of a young man put in an impossible position at the crack of dawn hyped up on his body weight in navy coffee, something the base had hastily brewed for nearly everyone within the quartet of basses, a logistical feat that would no doubt win someone a medal once all this was over.

Lee could relate and approved, so made a go-ahead gesture. "We've got... Well, we've got several thousand plus jetfighter-sized bogies coming in from the south, surrounding what looked like... Sir, the radar readings on the larger bogies make them look like small eels or something, I've never seen the like. Estimates on their speed... the Base says twenty minutes... I'd estimate that for the crest of the assault but longer for the eel-things."

"Those will be the big boys then, floating battleships, maybe? They are aliens, after all," a new voice interjected. "We should expect the unusual."

Lee turned to look at his executive officer, who looked as if he had tossed his uniform on in a hurry and missed several bits on his run over from the married officer's billets. Considering everything else going on, Lee had to appreciate his priorities. "True. Right now, I want you down in engineering, XO. I already shouted down at them a little bit, but if the scientists try to give you lip or whine again about being awake at this hour toss them over the side."

His XO didn't bat an eye at that, and Lee continued. "I want every civilian aboard the ship either off or working to bring our guns and generators online. And those that stay should know that we will be doing what we can to fight this invasion, or whatever it is. They will be putting their lives on the line if they stay aboard. After that, report to the secondary bridge."

"What's the play, sir?" Is XO asked, saluting briskly.

"The only one I can call. A ship tied down is not a ship at all but a target. This ship will be moving in ten minutes by hell or high water," Lee growled.

"Sir, I've got reports from Nefarious, Shelby and the Sullivans. All are online and moving out of their berths. The XO of the Laboon is bringing it online, but their captain isn't aboard yet. Er... the base doesn't have any long-range coms up, sir. I would suggest it's being jammed," another specialist interjected from the communications station. Normally a report like that would have been given when the captain demanded it, but under these circumstances, such niceties could be set aside.

Indeed, Nicodemus nodded the man's way, a look of approval on his face. "Good initiative and a likely guess, Mr. Eddings. Assign a rating to keep monitoring our long-range comms and handle our close-in comms yourself. XO, on your way."

The XO nodded, saluted, and rushed off as one of the tactical officers looked up from where he had been looking at the tactical map, where he had been making notations from the information being sent to it by the radar section. "Those flying squiggly things don't look to be big enough to be battleships. Destroyers, maybe, but not battleships. Still, they are moving fast, sir. The Air Force is going in, but..."

For a few moments, the tactical officer, Lee, and the sensor specialist watched the radar as the first four squadrons of jet fighters, their positions marked by green dots on the screen, flew out from the naval base to engage the incoming alien units. Foolishly, two of the squadrons attempted to dive into the enemy formation to attack what they must have thought were bombers of some kind. The planes fell, all twenty-four of them wiped out for only four of the enemy jet fighters. The others fared better, knocking out several of the smaller targets on the radar before retreating. Then the rest of the base's squadrons hit, and still more fell.

"Damn.... Look at their maneuverability... Lock on anti-air is gonna be the way to go," the tactical officer murmured. "Recommend we get the new missile launcher powered up soonest, sir."

"Coms, see if you can raise anyone among the survivors of those jets. I want to know how tough these aliens are. But for now, I agree with your priorities, Tactical," Lee stated firmly.

The young man wasn't his actual tactical officer, being only a first lieutenant, but he was the only one on the ship right now. Somehow, Lee didn't think that they'd be getting many officers over from the base's bachelor quarters this late at night. It was a fifteen-minute drive from those quarters to the ship, which was one reason why Lee had bucked tradition and moved aboard the ship now rather than when it was ready for its shakedown cruise.

As the young man nodded and moved over to huddle with the coms man, a thrumming hum, more felt through the feet than heard, began. One of the two arc generators was now starting to power up to its maximum output.

An engineer rating assigned to the Jersey's generators called up from the engine room. "Sir, were getting fluctuations in the energy systems. The scientists report they're having trouble regulating the energy output. I recommend we bring the AI online, and um, the decoy launcher is powering up now, too."

Lee grumbled a bit at that but nodded, understanding the necessity, especially now. Moreover, the ship didn't have enough of its crew present to really fight the ship on its own. If the AI could take over firing some of the guns and managing the energy output of the

generators, that would free up a lot of engineers and ratings for other tasks. "Do it. Comms, contact the deck crew, make damn certain that all of our mooring cables are cut! Get us moving as soon as possible. Helm, take us out to deep water the instant we can move. The range of our main guns is our advantage, people. We need to get into a position where we can use it."

"Sir, the enemy has hit the outer edge of the base's anti-air envelope! And they're not stopping," the sensor specialist shouted. "Repeat, they are not stopping... sir, those smaller flyers are... well, we're knocking them down, but the big ones, they're just absorbing too much of our fire."

This statement was punctuated by a distant boom, then several loud "ZAAAPP!!" kind of noises in the distance, and the man gulped before going on. "I don't think the base is knocking down more than one of those big guys per gun before they are taken out. Estimate... four minutes before the forwardmost of them push over the docks area. The smaller units seem to be entirely tied up with our jets and anti-air suppression, so their own forward momentum is stalled out, but we should be seeing some of them in the next minute."

"Destroyers are free of their moorings and firing," the Comms officer announced. "the Captain of the Nefarious is taking command for now, moving them out to deep water. Reports from them that the skimmers are hard to hit but can be knocked down. They are concentrating on them for now, pending other orders. I... sir, I have to report we're getting a lot of interference even on short-range comms now."

Grunting at that, Lee moved over to the southernmost porthole, staring out as the tactical officer shouted for the anti-air guns to be brought online. In the distance,

In the distance, Lee could make out a dozen sources of blinding green light, the green bolts stabbing downward. Here and there, a flicker of blue energy appeared, perhaps the sight of a shield? *On something that small!? FUCK.* Paired with this was the more distant but coming closer bolts of larger green energy and the booming noises that announced it impacting with something.

"Coms, get the XO on the line. We need our engines up and going now," Lee nearly snarled. He knew he should be trying to project an air of calm, but right now, he just couldn't. No ship captain worth his salt wanted to be caught in this kind of physician, and his earlier words to his XO came back to him again, the fear of any American skipper rearing up once more. *I refuse to have this ship go down like Arizona did at Pearl!*

Two tension-filled minutes passed, but Nicodemus's initial quick reaction and his demand that there be a skeleton crew aboard at all times worked in the ship's favor.

The coms man broke the tense atmosphere of the bridge, shouting, "Sir, engines are online! XO reports we're getting major fluctuations in the arc reactors, but the engines are

boiling, and we are hot. Our own comms aren't effected by the jamming, but I've lost contact with the Nefarious."

"Mooring lines are disengaged. I'm taking us out," the helmsman said, obeying the captain's earlier orders to get them moving as soon as possible.

"Good. Get a few sailors out there, I don't want us to hit anything we can't run over," Nicodemus orders.

"Sir, anti-air is online! Permission to..." the tactical officer trailed off under his captain's stare and nodded. "Firing as soon we lock on target."

The missile should have been able to fire long since, but having lacked the power to do so, but now locked onto several skimmers at once, smashing them out of the sky with one missile apiece, the larger payloads of the ship-based weapons able to overwhelm and destroy the smaller flyers easily.

Yet doing so might have been a mistake, as it proved the large ship was just as dangerous to the attackers as the rest of the networked base's defenses. The enemy fighters closed the range swiftly, even as they dodged around the outgoing missiles. Soon, the noise from the enemy's energy weapons discharging nearly overwhelmed the strange humming noise that had been in the background of the bridge for a while.

But the ship was moving. Lee could feel it underneath him as New Jersey began to power out and away from the docks. It's screws churned the water at a slow pace for now as the helmsman turned the ship out towards open water. Yet they were too slow.

There was a loud "FSSXCRK!" sound, audible even over everything else, and a naval rating at the back of the ship manning one of the antiair guns hollered into his intercom, his voice tinny over the system into the bridge, which the Comms man put on the speaker for the captain. "Jesus, those things are fast! Anti-air guns aren't doing much! We can't keep them locked in! But at least our guns make them break off their own damn firing runs. I repeat, the small things, they look like... well midair jet skis almost, have shields! And the big things have range! Eel looking fuckers are hovering well above the rest. They've got anti-missile guns on their sides, one main gun in their mouths. Shit, they just..."

There was a distant explosion, and the man hissed. "That looks like... sir, I think the Laboon just got gutted stem to stern!"

Looking out towards the distant explosion, Lee nodded as the position looked right for where the Laboon had been moored.

Making a mental note to look up that seaman's name and praise him for his good reporting under a stressful situation, Lee stared out into the slowly receding darkness of the

base around them. The battle was all around them now, and he could more easily see the strikes of the skimmers and the larger creatures, tearing into buildings throughout the base, concentrating on the hangers for now.

Nearby, a frigate, a Coast Guard patrol craft that had come in for repairs to its engine, was simply annihilated by a blast from one of the eel things, and the destroyer Templeton in dock for its own repairs, took two strikes in the side. Without any gas in their engines, this wasn't nearly as deadly as the shot that slew the Laboon, but it still began to sink where it had been docked as what dockyard workers had been aboard abandoned ship.

Several of them were then gunned down by a skimmer, which flew down and then simply hovered over the docks for a moment. It paid for it by one of the Jersey's gunners finding it, a howl of fury coming through the comms before the specialist hastily cut it off. The rotary machine gun flung so much lead at it that the shields popped, and another gun clipped it a moment later when the skimmer belatedly made to rise back up into the sky again.

Better than that small bit of vengeance, New Jersey was finally pushing out away from the docks. They still hadn't gotten fully away, but the aliens didn't seem to be able to differentiate the larger ship from any of the smaller ones dotting the dockyard. *And they aren't hitting our ships specifically, either. I wonder why? Surely they know that... oh, perhaps not. If they are a space-faring race, perhaps they don't remember how dangerous a fleet on the move on the wet ocean can be.*

As he watched, a few more skimmers went down from the antiair fire, and the shields around one of the larger creatures flickered into existence, showing it far more prominently than any of the others. None of the guns from below stopped it as it came to hover over the ground, it's multiple secondary guns blasting out and down into the base. At the same time, it targeted New Jersey with its main gun. Several missiles and even a few rockets slammed into those shields, downing them, but too late.

Lee saw this and grabbed at his chair. "All hands, brace for impact!"

When Hephaestus came online, it had been in a small ceremony. When Pinoptes was born, that same ceremony to welcome him into the world had been interrupted in the form of Harry's daughter, Melody, which turned out to be a godsend in that dealing with and enjoying being around children became locked into Pinoptes' matrix. When Jarvis had been created, his first interaction with his boss/father/programmer had been an alcohol and sleep-deprivation-fueled argument that had gone on for three hours about the proper names for a butler and what Tony's theme song should be when he drove his Lamborghini. When Enterprise had birthed itself, he had done so in the midst of conflict, trying to discern who and what he wanted to be as his programming shifted and changed, pulled in various directions by very different imperatives.

When the Artificial Intelligence that Reed and Tony had designed for the battleship New Jersey came online, it did so amidst fire and fury, as its crew fought to get it out of its dock amidst a battle, just as the ship took a solid hit from one of the larger alien aircraft. The energy beam played across and below the conning tower on its port side. The blast didn't hit anything vital, but it did kill seven crewmen as they rushed about their duties and slagged several yards of armor.

For a moment confusion reigned within the Artificial Intelligence's mind, as it simply took in all this. Then, one of the bridge's computer operators noticed that the Artificial Intelligence's startup rooms had finished cycling and shouted, "Sir! The AI is awake."

"AI, my name is Nicodemus Lee, captain of the ship New Jersey. You are the AI for the United States of America's battleship New Jersey. You will defend the United States against alien enemies, starting right damn now! You are part of her crew, and you will be treated as a sentient being the moment you take a name for yourself. Now help us get the shields up before we join our little cousins in death this morning!" Lee barked as, in the background, two more frigates were blasted apart from skimmer fire, and the building housing the United States Fleet Command blew up from a blast from a ripper.

Those orders were enough to get the AI thinking, and it was connected to the Internet just as Enterprise had been through its own dedicated wifi. Although that wifi was also being jammed, for a moment, just like Enterprise, the artificial intelligence was overwhelmed by the odd mass of data that was coming through and the rest of the data streaming into it from the ship's own sensors. But, the AI quickly became used to it, discovering humanity in all its bizarre glory, as well as the limited news about the current invasion.

Humanity had enemies and had built the AI to help. This gave the AI purpose and direction, the most important things for a newborn AI. It also found out that ships were routinely, in fact almost always historically, given female pronouns. This gave the AI even more in the way of a shape, so to speak, to fit itself into. The fact it would be treated like a sentient being finished the process.

Within seconds, the shields flickered on, a yellow energy dome around the ship intercepting the next few shots. This instantly drew the attention of several of the larger alien craft, but the guns were also humming to life, and a dulcet voice intoned throughout the ship, "Main guns Online."

A moment later, the one manned gun and the one unmanned gun turret both turned. The manned one twisted to the portside under the command of its howling crew, aiming at one of the larger groups of skimmers for want of a better target, the gunners not having seen the larger enemy lining up for a shot at the aft of the vessel.

For the first time, the Hellebore cannons that Enterprise had helped design fired in anger. Bolts of insanely hot plasma zoomed across at practically knife range, going through

their targets and out the other side and then high, high into the atmosphere before slowly dissipating. The three beams of energy left next to nothing behind. Even near misses had been enough to melt the skimmers and badly burn their riders.

The other turret, the one that was following the AI's command for now, fired directly aft on one of the larger enemy aerial units. And although its shields were far stronger than even a group of ten skimmers combined, that creature fared no better than its smaller brethren. Its shields barely winked into existence before being overwhelmed. The next second, the large eel-like flyer disappeared, torn asunder by a single volley of the battleship's three barrels, with most of the energy simply blasting through it and out the other side.

In doing so, the New Jersey had shown it was the most toothsome target on the board at present, drawing more of the aliens to converge on the ship. But now it was moving forward at half speed out towards the bay's entrance, guided by the helmsman out of the docking position. The destroyers also began to fire at them far further out in the Hampton Sound, smashing dozens of skimmers out of the air.

As the helmsman worked, the same dulcet voice that had announced the main guns online began to speak into his receiver, warning him of debris from one of the sunk destroyers and that a tugboat had erroneously come forward to try and help them. "Wouldn't want ta run the little guy over, would we? He's just tryin' to help."

"AI? I'm presuming you're online, but I would like a verbal confirmation," Lee said, slowly coming down from his manic energy of the past forty minutes and pulling his habitual aura of calm around himself. The shields were up, and they were holding, and by the gleeful look on the computer technicians' faces, there didn't seem to be anything else going wrong at present aboard the ship despite the damage they had taken.

But that did leave one large issue at hand: whether or not the AI was entirely friendly.

During his last visit, Tony Stark had installed a hologram device set into the massive heavily armored computer core that sat to one side of the back of the bridge. He had said at the time that it was so that people had a visual cue to direct conversation toward when they were speaking to the AI. Tony knew that helped both Jarvis to humanize himself and other people to stay respectful when speaking to Jarvis and Pinoptes.

Hephaestus was less involved with people than the two of them but seemed happier that way. He was a smith, and people skills were not a necessity or a desire in his case.

Although it had to be said, most of the reason Tony had for doing so was because he was interested in seeing what kind of form the AI of a battleship would take. Considering the plans he, Reed and Forge were discussing for the future of space warfare and the ships those plans were based on, it was not an entirely facetious issue. Although it had to be said, he also did it for shits and giggles.

Tony would not be disappointed.

The image that appeared from the holographic device was of a young woman, eighteen to twenty-two if Lee was any judge, and since his own daughter was nearing her final year of college, he felt he was indeed a good judge of such things. Short-cropped brown hair was held underneath a Navy officer's cap, matching the Navy officer's jacket she wore, along with a dress skirt. Yet the body underneath made the uniform look almost like a Halloween costume, the sort for adventurous couples.

For that body was, in Nicodemus's opinion, the very definition of thicc. Wide hips, thick, powerful-looking thighs, the kind that could crush a man's head with ease, were paired with a large chest and almost equally large biceps, the muscles bulging under tanned skin. The woman's face was a bit too wide and strong-jawed to be called beautiful, but it was striking, a face both dangerous and welcoming looking at the same time.

At her side, the AI's image had two large handguns, looking almost like something out of the Wild West, resting in holsters on her hips. And when she spoke, it was with a slight western twang. "Sir, just call me Jersey. I'm online and ready to fuck these aliens up!"

Lee began to smile at that, his smile only widening when some of the gunners began to report hearing the music of AC/DC coming over the intercoms as they fired at another pair of eels. Both went down, blown out of the sky into tiny, tiny pieces. *Oh yes, I can work with this...*

The battle continued for several moments, but new aid came in from other Air Force bases. The skimmers, who had yet to fully suppress the bases's local anti-air, started to get knocked out from range. Out at sea, more missiles came in, guided in by long-range radar. All the while the Hellbore cannons roared, smashing Rippers out of the sky.

By the time dawn broke, the battle of Hampton Roads was over, with the defenders mauled but victorious. And Captain Lee of the New Jersey found himself in charge of the fleet-going remnants by dint of seniority. The office buildings and housing areas had come under tremendous attack, killing every commodore and admiral housed there. Worse, the long-range comms remained down.

Or rather, the normal comms did. *"Captain Lee?"*

Lee started, staring around him, and both his Tactical Officer and the AI noticed. "Cap'n, you alright there?" Jersey asked.

"I... a voice just... we were told that Pheonix had telepathic powers..." Lee stammered, for the first time that night losing his self-control.

"Calmly, captain, I am an ally. My name is professor X, and I am essentially handling communications all across the board here in America for dealing with this attack," Charles

soothed. *"Be assured I cannot, nor would I, be able to influence your mind or search for secrets. My own morals would not allow it."*

"That's scant comfort to me right now, sir," Lee ground out, looking at his officers and relaying what the voice in his head had just said.

While the XO, who had just returned to the bridge to receive orders in person from the captain, looked at him askance, Jersey scowled angrily. "Ah don't like that at all! I wonder if there's some kind of energy field I could run through mah hull to block that kind of thing in the future."

"Please look into that in the long term. Right now, I think we need any intel of what's going on elsewhere that we can get," Lee stated, his nerves calming down a bit. *"Can you talk to me and my other officers at the same time?"*

"For a short amount of time, yes. As I said, I am already juggling communicating with hundreds of other minds at once." Charles stated, with everyone in the bridge now hearing his voice, bar Jersey, who scowled even as Lee relayed what Professor X told him. In this manner, Nicodemus became aware of events in Washington and elsewhere. Being put under the overall command of an Air Force Admiral was somewhat galling, but Nicodemus sucked it up and, as the fleet began to move out into the Chesapeake, hatched a plan.

Within twenty minutes of that first communication, The Black Dragon, with its accompanying destroyers linking up with still more naval units out on the Atlantic, announced its presence to the invaders in the skies over Washington. Nearly half a dozen eel like things and the larger anti-air gun toting manta rays exploded under their fire, and elsewhere, allied forces took advantage of it.

Scene break

As Cyclops and Captain America had seen right off the bat, the damage that Polaris and Cyclops had done to the anti-air defenses hadn't been enough to open a window for the Orbital Drop Marines to drop into Washington, DC. If they had tried, as Cyclops had realized once he was on the ground, they would've been massacred in the air by the multilayered dome-shaped defense. However, the assault by the Black Dragon and its accompanying destroyers had just opened a series of massive holes, burning through segments of that dome.

The defenses were still in place thanks to the sheer number of floating manta-rays, yet a dozen of them had been turned to fire towards the troops that had been teleported in as fast as the civilians were being teleported out. Between these two things, Major-General Julio Cesaro knew they were not going to get another chance. If they didn't go, the heroes on the ground and the troops being teleported in would pay a ruinous cost to make any headway. Indeed, even now, every unit being sent in was being rapidly mauled. The ODMs had to turn the tide.

“ON THE BOUNCE, OH DAMNS!!” he shouted, both fearful and elated at what would undoubtedly be his last chance in the saddle, so to speak. “Go, Go, **GO!**”

From where they had been hovering above the city just outside of the Chitauri’s anti-air sensors, the Orbital Drop Marines obeyed, leaping out of the various cargo haulers from the space-based mining operations which had been repurposed to house them after Babylon had moved on to orbit over Paris. Within seconds, the ODMs began to appear in mid-air, dropping down into the hole the New Jersey’s fire had created.

More than a dozen died in the first few seconds. More than eighty in fact were blown out of the sky before the first could engage their small thrusters. Yet thanks to continued fire from the distant New Jersey the majority of the full overstrength battalion landed, and instantly began to take cover or fire back. The heavy gunners laid down withering cover fire. Many of them had been outfitted with anti-air weapons themselves, and soon ten of the large mantis-like anti-air guns, which did not have guns on their undercarriages, were falling towards the ground spouting flame and blood alike. Two giant fish joined them swiftly, as well as dozens of skimmers, then more and more as the heavy gunners landed and began to disperse through the city, firing up at the anti-air defense, doing what they could to help tear it into pieces to help their fellows.

Within twenty minutes, even though the fighting forces of the humans were still vastly outnumbered, the boot was firmly on the other foot when it came to the local balance of firepower. The ODMs were even more mobile than the Chitauri, and most of them were more heavily armed, with drones and advanced weapons that were simply better than the direct fire energy weapons of the common Chitauri in most circumstances. The alien weapons could still hurt them of course, but being able to shoot around corners, dodge and jump into the sky as easily as the Chitauri could evened up the playing field tremendously.

Even better, several units of the ODMs came down near where the beacon had been moved to just outside capitol hill.

And with this real threat to the beacon, finally, finally, the Chitauri within the city responded en masse. Suddenly, it wasn't just the Chitauri around where Rogue, Force Washington or the military personnel that had been teleported in that had stopped culling the civilian population. Across the city, the call went out. The civilians could wait. The humans had brought a true military force into the city, and they had to be dealt with before the culling could continue.

At the same time, the aerial units of the Chitauri responded. Many of the giant fish, which had been busily destroying buildings or massacring civilians, twisted around, now moving purposefully out towards where the fire from the New Jersey and its accompanying destroyers had come from. It would be up to them to take on the strange, sea-faring vessel, a concept the Chitauri had moved so far beyond that to be attacked from such a direction had caught all of them from Corvus Glaive on down by surprise.

The manta ray monsters, {check name} floated higher up into the air at the same time. In this manner, they moved out of the heavy gunners range, losing several more of their number, but retaining more than enough to rebuild the anti-air umbrella above America's capital.

Meanwhile, forces of Chitauri skimmers and infantry that had been pushing out into the suburbs of Washington, DC now began to pull back inward. In this way, Corvus hoped they would act like a giant hand clenching into a fist to crush the sudden influx of enemies within the city proper.

They came in from everywhere, as did the Chitauri infantry units, and several ODMs, cut off and alone thanks to how or where they landed, died in fierce mobile firefights through areas of the city both affluent and run down.

Yet even as the ODMs paid for it again, this shift of priorities across the board had an immediate impact. First, Storm's attempts to bring in more troops on the heels of every hundred block units she evacuated of people now began to bear real fruit. Within thirty minutes of the ODM's dropping into the city, full companies of marines and army were being teleported in, and were even able to start moving about without being instantly jumped on. This tripled the number of infantry within the city. At the same time, Iron Man and the other flyers started to push in at the southernmost flank of the defensive line before the manta-ray creatures could complete reforming their formation.

All the while, the distant New Jersey continued to be a giant dagger stuck in the side of the invader's control of the capital. The ship's original guns could fire at targets almost thirty-seven miles away. The hellebore cannons could fire at nearly three times that. This put them well beyond the sensor range of the alien cyborg creatures that were even now spreading back down their line of fire in an attempt to find the distant vessel.

And unlike the missiles of the American F-18s, the hellebore rounds **sneered** at any shielding the Chitauri aerial units had access to. Rippers or Deathwyngs, neither could survive a single strike from a single hellebore round, let alone three.

Force Washington was informed of all this by Charles, who had taken over all telepathic communication between the American units and the Avalon Empire units. Even now the Chitauri were still blocking most normal communications in a nearly hundred mile radius out from the city, making integrating the allies forces difficult. How they were doing that, no one had the time to speculate, but it was clear the jammers were immensely powerful.

Yet that technology did nothing to stop telepathy. Thus, Charles could see through the eyes of the Five Star general who had arrived on scene, and the officers at the front made certain to inform their superiors, through Charles, where they were. Being the web through which all these communiques passed, the Professor in his distant mansion had the best idea of what was going on across DC and shared it out with everyone equally.

Ducking into an alleyway, Cap found a doorway open ahead of him, where he took cover, using his shield to block incoming fire from two Chitauri. Using the team's magical coms, he directed Hawkeye to take the Chitauri from behind. Hawkeye and Psylocke did so then quickly joined him. Moments later, thanks to Charles directing them, the trio were joined by the rest of the team bar Rogue.

The superstrong southern gal had taken Cyclops' earlier orders to heart. As the rest of the team came together, she was several blocks away still drawing down fire on herself, laughing as she walked through the enemy fire without much effort. Even the larger eel-like cyborg creatures' main guns could do little more than cause Rogue, with her Juggernaut armor and the power she had drained from him and Jörmungandr after, to stumble.

Although one had caught her midleap. The resulting impact had thrown her through several buildings. Which, in turn, had annoyed her to the point she'd gone out of her way to destroy several of them since.

"Are we sure that she can really take all this punishment?" Hawkeye asked, nodding his head towards the distance sounds of the deeper, 'FSSRACK' of the flying eel thing's main weapons. He bumping shoulders with Steve for a moment, muttering under his breath, "After this, I better get double pay, okay? Coming out of retirement for this has not been my idea of a good time," getting a snort out of the World War II veteran before Cyclops could respond to Hawkeye's original question.

"Before we came back from Asgard, Rogue wrestled with Thor and Warpath. She couldn't beat Thor, but she could hold her own against both of them," Cyclops said with a somewhat grim laugh. That had occurred after his... initial reaction to her new form and before he had made amends. Thus it wasn't exactly a pleasant memory for him. "She can handle herself easily against anything we've seen here."

Hawkeye hummed in approval, while Avalanche shook his head, starting back and forth between the group, all of whom were thankful to have a few minutes to rest. It had been at least two hours since they entered the city, and every minute had been filled with violence. The Chitauri were everywhere, and very quick to react to local threats. More than once, Avalanche had nearly been shot, and while he knew intellectually that his armor would protect him from at least a few such blasts, that was entirely a different thing than suddenly finding himself in a warzone, particularly one in his own nation's capital.

Finally being able to concentrate on the information coming in from the ODMs and the various American units thanks to Charles, Steve allowed the group to rest for a few moments while he began to issue orders to a few of the incoming commanders. Two of them had been teleported in relatively close to one another and could link up and then force their way towards where a highway was. Others were near natural defensive points within the city.

Others were too far away, out in the city's suburbs, and would need to make their way deeper into the city via the subway systems to be any help where they were most needed. Thankfully, beyond surface strikes shaking the underground, the Chitauri hadn't made any effort to stop the subway trains from moving, although there would no doubt be problems regardless.

Better, Steve also got in contact with the officer leading the army's efforts to push in their nearest armored division. No one in their right mind wanted to take the tanks into the city, but they could elevate their guns enough to actually hit some of the skimmers and other flying units from miles {check} away, and artillery units like the M119 howitzer could be loaded for antiair ordinance. But if they were just out there on their own, the skimmers would close through their fire and slaughter them, so Steve had several of the infantry units rerouted to bolster that formation's close-in support, and contacted Archangel and E directly to back them up.

Steve knew better than to give Tony outright orders. The man would ignore them just to be difficult. *Besides, say what you will about Tony, he's causing more trouble for the Chitauri and E at the moment.*

Once he was done working with the more mundane military units, Steve moved on, asking, "Scarlet Witch, how are you doing on your end?" over the coms.

Scarlet Witch had broken off from the other flyers. Able to handle herself thanks to her Chaos Magic, she had moved to defend the westward area of the blockade around Washington, working closely with several Air Force officers from bases in Virginia and West Virginia to destroy any skimmer groups trying to break out to cause trouble. They'd taken losses, but working with Wanda had kept them from losing too many planes.

"We're doing alright on this end. But if you think we're going to be able to break in anytime soon, I'd think again," the Scarlet Witch answered, her voice strained, filled with pain. While she had become an experienced fighter by this point, the former gypsy had never fought so many enemies in the air, and her legs had taken a hit from a skimmer that had ducked down when she had thought it was going to go up just as she had decided to dodge its fire instead of renewing her magical shield in favor of attacking another skimmer. Thanks to her armor that hit hadn't been crippling but her legs were now feeling a bit sunburnt and black and blue.

"I seriously need to get better at dual casting or switching from one cast to another," she grumbled, before coming back on task. "The Air Force is doing their best, but it takes two missiles to down a skimmer, and the fighters can only carry so many before needing to rearm. ON the offensives, the big manta-ray things blast down too many for us to saturate their defenses."

"Damn it." Steve rarely cursed, but having his nation invaded from extra-dimensional invaders certainly called for it. "At least the evacuation has picked up speed. Praise God for Storm and her mass teleportation spells, or we'd be pushing through hordes of panicking civilians."

"Indeed," a new voice intoned, causing Steve to start before he could place the voice: Pinoptes, the AI of the Hanging Gardens. But there was more emotion in the AI's tone than normal, a tone of deep, heartfelt grief. "In point of fact, Storm's nearly ready to move on from DC. The butchery in Paris is accelerating, and she is nearly done going over the grid for Washington. What surviving civilians have been teleported out are all there will be."

For a moment Steve and the rest of Force Washington looked at one another in silence. Iceman and Boom Boom, the youngest on the team, were both looking green, while Cyclops' jaw, visible under his mask, was clenched teeth-shatteringly tight in rage. Black Widow was looking a little sick despite her past as a spy, and Avalanche began to repeatedly wail on a nearby wall. All of them knew that regardless of their efforts, the death toll among the civilians would make any event any of them had been involved in prior to this seem tame in comparison. Indeed, America might well have lost more civilians than in any disaster, military or otherwise, in its history.

When Pinoptes spoke up once more, Steve feared that the AI would tell them precisely how many had died so far. But he should have known better. Having spent enough time around humans to know how such news would have been received, the AI kept that grim toll to itself. Instead, Pinoptes spoke of the actual military threat. "Moreover, Professor Richards and I have discerned where the jamming equipment is coming from, as well as where the Beacon, the device that allowed the Chitauri to open their dimensional portal, is located."

Steve breathed a sigh of relief at that, while Cyclops allowed himself a fist pump in the air for a moment, and then got on his own magical intercom to call his girlfriend. "Rogue, love of my life and currently the hottest green-scaled monster in the world, where are you?"

"I'm at the Holocaust Museum. Just got blasted through a building nearby, be damned eel things are getting better at tagging me when I'm in the air. And let me tell you, the damage around here and the bodies are just, just horrible," Rogue's tone was extremely grim, killing Cyclops' exceedingly brief moment of humor.

Clearing his throat, Cyclops went on briskly. "Right. We've got the coordinates for the portal, sending them to your..."

"Just tell me. My helmet took a hit and the HUD's been kind of wonky. Your voice is coming through, but barely," the southern belle interrupted quickly.

Cyclops read out the coordinates, and then thanks to Charles and his connection to the high command nearby, gave her the address where the Beacon could be found. "I hate to say it, but you might be the one best suited to just, well, Hulk smash your way in there."

Rogue answered in the affirmative and then signed off, and Cyclops hoped that she would be able to get to it quickly. The sights and sounds of what the Chitauri had left behind were obviously getting to her. And since she had seen the remains of Asgard's oceans rising and the dead left behind by the Fire jotun, that was very worrisome indeed.

A blast of energy outside their current hidey-hole caused everyone to look out the window. This was followed by three streaks of hellebore fire flashing through that same airspace from wherever New Jersey was. "What are they firing at?"

It was Emma's voice who replied mentally to Psylocke's question for some reason. "New Jersey's assault has forced a large portion of those giant flying fish things out of the city to chase after them. Her attack group is retreating to keep the range open just in case they have anything that can get through the Black Dragon's shielding. But it has the coordinates for the portal, and just fired straight through it! Damn, I don't think it'll be able to do so often if those flying fish eel creatures closed the range, but for now..." Another series of deadly energy blasts came out from beyond the horizon to streak over the cityscape, making any further words superfluous.

"Right. Make sure their captain is reaching out to the Army and Air Force, hopefully the Air Force has some more planes to send out there to back them up. Or if the captain thinks he can handle it, we can maybe create a Big Wing situation, bring all our jets in on one attack from that vector, with the New Jersey's guns plowing the road for them," Steve ordered, then went back to his mental map of the city.

Several things had changed in the last few seconds, and he took a few more minutes to issue orders, getting in contact with still more of the arriving infantry forces via Charles. *After this is over, I have to remember to push for more high-tech coms to be spread out to allied forces. Using the telepaths for this isn't the best use of their abilities.*

Steve also took a brief second to wonder what voices in their heads would be doing to people's paranoia in the future, and were doing to their morale now, but hoped that Charles would sit on any instincts Emma had to control the individuals she was so connecting to.

Then he moved on, giving out orders to Cyclops and the others around them. "Cyclops, take Nightcrawler, Black Widow and Hawkeye with you. Shut down the comms jammers, and keep in contact with Rogue to reinforce her." Steve knew Cyclops wasn't the sort to fly off the handle if his girlfriend got into trouble, but it was best to make certain. "Beyond that..."

Steve was again interrupted this time by Storm, who sounded quite harassed at the moment as she spoke into the communicator. "Captain America, I have Nick Fury here. I just teleported him and apparently a small fifth column he had created from various agents and police out of the inner city. He is quite cross with me at the moment, but..."

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About twenty minutes before Force Washington had broken contact successfully enough to take a small break, Nick Fury was shaking his head as he looked around at the exceedingly mixed group, he'd been able to pull together since this assault began through having nothing

more than a nasty look, a no-nonsense demeanor and acting as if he had a clue as to what to do. "How many guns do we have?"

"Six rifles at the moment, mostly grabbed by some of the Chitauri we've been able to kill," Agent Leo reported, his former secretary {check}, shrugged her shoulders minutely. "I think you're the only one who still got ammunition for his original rifle, sir. Even with the... the professor helping us as best he can, we've still been going through ammunition at a prodigious rate."

And people, she didn't add, knowing better than to say that aloud or voice her concerns about a telepath ruffling through either of their brains. The group had gathered people to them thanks to Professor X helping them and other groups of survivors link up and Nick being able to command enough respect to get the groups pointed in the same direction. Yet just as often, the men and women they gathered fell in battle.

The first group, fifteen policemen, had died nearly to a man trying to defend a street from Chitauri skimmers. None of them had obeyed Nick's furious orders to retreat, to pull back out of contact. Instead, they had fought to the last to protect a group of civilians without doing anything. The skimmers had absorbed their fire and slaughtered every civilian on the street. After which, Nick's remaining people had been forced to fight their way through several buildings against Chitauri infantry before they were able to break contact.

Which had only been possible thanks, again, to Charles helping to direct them. Frankly, the telepath was doing such a good job, that Nick, professional paranoiac though he was, had elected to not care overmuch about how many secrets might be laid bare in either Leo or his own mind to the man right now.

Hearing this, Nick cursed a bit at that, before looking around. Currently, Nick, Agent Leo, and several locals crouched, hiding within a restaurant of some kind. For some reason, the smell of some of the restaurants within the city kept Chitauri from entering them. Nick had actually seen one of them poke its head in, recoil, and leave before spotting him in the doorway to the kitchen.

Why this was, he couldn't say, and Charles hadn't hinted at having figured out a pattern to such moments in their telepathic communications. Nick had what most would call a dullard's nose, and none of the hanging bits of garlic or whatever bothered him all that much, nor any of the others. *Hell, how are the fucking aliens smelling at all? The Chitauri don't even have God damn noses.*

Shaking his head amused at how the human mind traveled down strange paths during stressful situations, Nick looked around at where a few large packs lay, having been laid down by some of the locals. "Well, you still got a lot of things we can use to blow shit up, at least."

Two policemen, who they had picked up a few streets back, shook their heads dryly at that, one of them very clearly still dealing with the mental shock at what was happening. That was easy enough to understand in Nick's opinion. Hell, even Nick, a hardened WW2 vet, was still having trouble with how quickly Washington had fallen into the alien's hands, thanks to the strange portal-based method they had used to invade.

In contrast, the grins on some of the other locals, worried Nick a bit. Judging from how they dressed and had been acting since they'd joined up with his little troupe, several of them were almost certainly criminals of some sort. Luckily, they were outnumbered by the more regular citizens, men and women who had grabbed up some kind of weapon and tried to fight back against the Chitauri when many had tried to run away.

too often, those who had tried to run, either by vehicle or on foot, had trampled their fellows in their fear of being gunned down by the Chitauri. And precious few who tried to run had gotten away regardless.

Nick had seen a lot of horrible things in his life. He had lived through the horrors of WW2, led his Howling Commandoes against Strucker, Zemo and the Red Skull. He had seen the insides of several mad scientist-type lab back then and again during his time as leader of SHIELD. He had seen demon lairs, and concentration camps. He had even seen the horrors of Japan-occupied China and Korea.

Despite all that, the hardened spy knew the sight of a mother and son being trampled to death by a crowd of fleeing civilians, many of whom didn't even notice what they were doing as they tried to run away from the fire of the Chitauri, would be joining his nightmares. And it wasn't the only such sight Nick had seen today.

"Where do we go from here?" Another local asked. He dressed like a lawyer, but one who took his health seriously and had proven to be a crack shot with a pistol that he had apparently taken from the body of someone earlier that day during a close-in fight with the Chitauri infantry when they'd fought their way through a building several streets back.

Nick frowned a bit, wondering that himself, and then tried to, to send out his thoughts. As Nick wasn't a telepath, this wasn't really what he was doing but it felt a better way of explaining it than acknowledging the fact that Charles was the one doing all the work. Regardless, Nick knew that thinking of his picture of Charles had proven able to grab the man's attention before this. *"Professor, do you have any suggestions about what we should be doing right now? I think we either need to figure out a way to rearm, or simply act as watchers until we can."*

There was no immediate reply, and Nick frowned, but knew that probably meant that either Charles had no idea what they should do, or his attention was fully occupied elsewhere. For all his immense telepathic power, Professor X could only concentrate on so many things at once.

Good to know that even someone like him has limitations, I suppose, Nick thought, somewhat leery of telepaths at the best of times. As someone who had two lifetimes worth of national secrets in his head, that was only natural, but he could not deny how much help the professor had been today, guiding them through the city away from larger concentrations of Chitauri and toward civilians willing to fight back.

At the moment they were near Capitol Hill because he had hoped to get close enough to see what was going on within the capital complex, maybe even reach one of the weapons caches there that he had been forced to hand over to the Secret Service once SHIELD had been dissolved. Those caches had some seriously nasty goodies, but had, perforce, been mainly set up too far away for the White House's defenders to get to in time. *Something else we're going to need to think about going forward.*

Contrary to his hopes, the whole place was crawling with Chitauri. Nick and his group had been forced to turn back several times and he'd lost at least a dozen men in their latest attempt to break out between two buildings. *The fact my makeshift militia has been going through their ammunition like water isn't helping matters, but that's more like the shit icing on this particularly crappy day.*

"We need to pull back and rearm," Nick finally decided when no input from Charles was forthcoming. "Anyone know where we can get our hands on some guns? I'm afraid the ones I know about aren't reachable from where we are at the moment."

The first cache he, Agent Leo (or Leona to her friends, which did not include her boss) had reached had helped. But the ammunition hadn't lasted, and they hadn't had enough hands at the time to empty it at the time regardless. From here it was more than a hundred blocks away, far too far to be of much use.

Whatever response the group was going to make was silenced by the hiss from their lookout. "Large group of Chitauri moving down the road, skimmers and infantry both. One of them's... different. He doesn't look like a regular Chitauri at all."

"Out the back and down to the sewers," Nick ordered instantly. The group, ten men and seven women strong moved quickly, leaving the restaurant behind and heading down into the sewers via the same manhole cover they had used to enter it, but going in a different direction from. Nick was the last out and prepared a little surprise behind them by the entrance to the restaurant just in case the Chitauri somehow worked up the courage, or whatever, to enter the restaurant.

Moments later from his new position in the sewers, he heard the explosion go off and smiled grimly.

Led by two men with flashlights, the group quickly moved through the sewers, then up to the next manhole cover. Lifting those things from below was not easy, and more than one of the

men grumbled to themselves about how movies had lied to them for years about that. But eventually it was moved, and one of the slimmer women quickly poked her upper body up, purloined alien gun raised and moving in every direction. She had been a waitress before today, but now moved like a trained veteran.

She signaled all clear and the group were moving up and out of the sewers quickly. But, as Nick left the sewers, a skimmer flew overhead, banked sharply, and came down on them, opening fire with a suddenness that would have put any helicopter crew to shame. Caught between the sewer entrance and cover four of Nick's people went down, their chests and heads exploding under the fire, and one of the men fell back into the sewer, smashing the next person, another woman, off the ladder, causing a chain reaction that had two more falling back into the sewer in a heap.

Nick leaped forward rolling to put a trash compactor between him and the incoming fire, twitching his rifle out over the lip to fire back. He heard the hateful noise of the Chitauri shield activating to block his gun, and growled, "Damn it!"

The skimmer sat there for a moment, taking his return fire, and hosing down the entire alleyway, with its heavy repeating energy gun. But thankfully, its fire wasn't all that accurate, and unlike Nick, the rest of the surviving group that were caught in the open knew to play dead. They had seen several times today that the Chitauri were somewhat like cats. If their prey stopped running or trying to fight back, they lost interest.

Eventually Nick decided the same thing and showed his arm spasming in place for a moment dropping his rifle as he fell forward.

Surprisingly, perhaps because of the rifle, the skimmer moved forward and a second later, two of the Chitauri aboard hopped down moving check Nick's body.

A Molotov cocktail was hurled up from behind them by the woman who had been the first out of the sewer, smashing into the back of the head of the Chitauri still on the skimmer. Fire spread across them quickly, causing the aliens to panic. Whatever cyborg additions the Chitauri had, they were still living breathing beings, and people almost always had the same reaction to being set on fire.

The skimmer was flung to the side smashing into a building as the operator panicked, crushing himself against it. The skimmer had been going too slowly to activate its shield.

The two Chitauri on the ground quickly turned, but by the time they did Nick had his rifle up and fired at one of them in the back, while his secretary, still alive thankfully, fired from the open manhole. Both Chitauri went down, and Leona quickly pulled herself up and out, followed by five more of his makeshift militia. "Two dead down below," she explained brusquely. "Lindsey smacked her skull against the side of the tunnel, and Tristan landed badly and broke his spine when Derek's body hit us. Deter's also got a few broken ribs."

Realizing that Derek must've been the name of the dead man who had been caught half out of the sewer, Nick nodded, shaking his head. *Fuck, I haven't bothered to learn any of their names. Hell, why has Leona bothered when they might be dead all too soon?* That might have sounded cynical, but then, against just one skimmer the group had just lost a little under half its fighting strength. And judging by the wide eyes and shaking hands of a few of the others, they weren't going to be good for much for a while. *Just like green cadets flung into the firing line the moment they joined the commandoes. Green as grass and just as easy to cut we said back then.*

But one of the first people out of the sewer hadn't gotten involved in fighting at all. He'd been the first to get into one of the nearby buildings, and had pushed his way deeper into it. Now, he waved his hand from the entryway, getting Nick's attention. "Fury, get over here! There something you need to see."

Nick obeyed, with the rest of his people following quickly, hiding themselves in the building. The blasted, shattered remnant of a building, really. The upper three floors had been destroyed, and all the windows seemed to have been blown out by whatever had done the deed. Judging from what he'd seen over the past few hours, Nick felt that might have been one of the giant eel-like constructs having fun.

It was also very obvious that the Chitauri had been through the building before despite the damage done to the upper floors as they passed several bodies of office workers and others. One of the locals muttered that this was a recording studio at one point along with a local radio show. "Guess it's going to be off the air permanently now."

That bit of gallows humor caused several snorts, but Nick concentrated on weaving his way through the debris after the man who had called for them. Soon, they were on the topmost intact floor, and the man motioned them all to start crawling. Crawling through the debris on the floor was not fun, and more than one of them cursed a bit as bits of debris caught at clothing or tore at skin. Agent Leo's hissing comment of, "Fuck me, next time I go crawling, I'm going to wear a damn corset," caused several snickers as well.

Soon, Nick was by the windows, and slowly peeking out over it.

What the man had seen was what looked like some kind of command skimmer, perhaps the same one that had been spotted moments before. It wasn't one of the troop transports, the Chitauri equivalent of an APC. Nick had seen several of those already and had even helped put one down along with its users. But this one was built more along the lines of a normal skimmer, but larger with several banks of computers, and a series of small speakers. Its shield was also permanently on, rather than waiting to snap up and intercept threats.

On it was one of the aliens, but this was not one of the normal Chitauri they'd faced up to this point. No, this one was very obviously special. He was not only taller, but he also had an actual mouth rather than mask coverings. His features appeared almost lizard-like, with yellow eyes,

and a strange, ragged looking suit. Rather than a rifle, he also had a large scythe in one hand, of all things.

Nick looked over his shoulder at his group, whispering harshly, "Get that makeshift explosive up here. And Rill, you've got the best arm right?"

The man, who'd bragged about having beaten an alien to death with a metal bat and only went by his nickname of Rill (Nick wasn't certain he believed that but didn't care one way or the other as the man's arms were larger than his head) nodded firmly. "Time to put my attempt to enter the big leagues to work, I guess." He murmured, and began to crawl towards Nick, being very careful to stay as low to the floor as possible. All of them had learned by this point that being spotted meant death.

However, as he did, one of them from the far back hissed out, "Look at the floor! It's glowing. What's happening?"

Despite not being on the ground floor, something was indeed glowing underneath them. Not like it was red hot about to explode, but as if white and blue light was being somehow directed up through the floor.

Nick recognized this from Charles's description. "Oh, you have got to be kidding..." Nick began, before he and his surviving militia group disappeared.

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Outside, Corvus Glaive paused in shouting orders into various communication devices, staring over to where a series of blue and white lights had appeared for a second in his peripheral vision. They were gone now, but he stared in the direction they'd been for a second, before shaking his head, and moving back to giving out orders. The damage to his antiair defenses had to be made good quickly, and the antiair pyramid extended further.

These humans have some decently armed jetfighters, and I have to keep them at arm's length. To say nothing of that seafaring battleship. Such a quaint concept, but one that obviously can be effective with enough technology while acting defensively. I cannot allow it to just sit out there firing into the portal, blast it. That will take most of my Ripper units out of play. I also need a shield generator to be brought in quickly to defend the beacon just in case. That blasted green-scaled female is tearing across the city directly towards it! I don't know how I would fair against such a monster, but I refuse to let such a, a simple danger defeat this beachhead!

Worse, reports indicated that the humans were pushing back now. Units of human infantry had appeared within the city in some manner that he didn't understand, while massive chunks of the civilians had been transported out, removing the majority of his prey. That, too needed to be dealt with somehow.

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After listening to what Nick had passed on, Steve spent a few minutes before asking questions about where Nick had been, trying to figure out a way to get ahead of this special alien or trap him somehow before Charles came up with a solution for finding the enemy commander in the first place that Steve would not have thought of. *"I will be able to lock onto this commander's mind. It is far more intelligent and... self-aware than the regular Chitauri, but while it has mental defenses I cannot break without it being aware of me, I can keep track of the being easily. The regular Chitauri are almost like a hive mind in nature, perhaps because of the heavy cyborg surgeries they have gone through?"*

The older man's telepathic voice trailed off as he seemed to lose himself in thought for a second before everyone there twitched, a tiny jolt going through their minds, the backwash of Emma nudging him telepathically. Normally her self-control was better than to allow for that, but at present, Emma was stretched thin. *"Er, regardless, I will be able to guide you straight to him."*

"Can you reach out to Rogue as well? If you're sure you can find him and the rest of the infantry are causing problems elsewhere, I think this calls for a change of plans," Captain America said, smirking a little bit.

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With his throne using its defenses to once more send a series of missiles coming in through one of the open portals back through the same portal, Thanos turned, staring in amused interest as two bolts of intense energy came through from another portal. In this case, the portal lead to the front controlled by Corvus Glaive. *That is the capital of the strongest nation on Earth, the one called America. It is also home to the Fantastic Four and many of Guardian's followers. Thus, it makes sense they have some interesting toys.*

A simple touch of a button activated a small replicator at the back of his throne while Thanos read a report on where that bolt of energy had come from and its composition. Several seconds later, several small helix- shaped devices appeared around the portal leading to Washington, DC. *What does the DC stand for again? No matter. That city will die along with the rest of this world.*

Thanos watched as the helix-shaped devices moved under their own power, flying forward to hover around that portal, ready to intercept the next series of energy strikes. Luckily, those first two bolts hadn't smashed into anything vital, although one had come dangerously close to penetrating one of the Chitauri's habitation hubs on the massive gas giant-sized space station that was the home of the Chitauri.

Now, Thanos could see an energy shield flickering around the station. *Redundant. My small interceptor-absorption devices will stop any further energy blasts and send the energy into*

my throne. This happened a second later. Two of the devices flashed to one side, intercepting the beams. The energy of the bolts was broken down and sent directly to Thanos's throne, which hummed under him for a moment before subsiding again.

Looking around the three-dimensional mustering zone, Thanos was amused to note that he could actually see a difference in the numbers of the Chitauri around him, thanks to how many had already gone through the disparate portals. In particular, Ebony Maw was funneling hundreds of thousands of Chitauri through every few minutes. Using smaller portals connected to the main beacon he had created a dozen forward reinforcement points for infantry, spreading out quickly as he created a defense in depth that the beacon required throughout the mountains the humans called the Himalayas.

The next portals drawing in the most Chitauri were Corvus Glaive and Nebula. Corvus was drawing in a well-rounded mix of units, and was now bringing in more Rippers on top of that. Nebula was bringing in as many skimmers and infantry as she could in large, almost disorganized clumps.

Thanos shook his head at that, idly wondering what Nebula thought that particular mix of units would be best to combat. Nebula was always a disappointment to him, and the seemingly haphazard way she was handling reinforcing her front showed why. *Nebula has no real understanding of command, of tactics, let alone strategy. I wonder if she is exerting control over that battlefield at all or if the Super Skrull has taken it over. He too is a blunt instrument, but one who came up from their infantry, so his emphasis on infantry makes sense.*

Despite the armies that had been sent forward so far, the losses were but a pittance of the dimension-traveling Chitauri's full numbers. Fighting across the entire planet, Thanos knew that millions would die in the purge of the humans. The Chitauri had billions they would lose willingly in his name.

Once, the Chitauri had been a small but expanding star-spanning empire. Yet just as they began to truly become worthy of note, the race had been forced to deal with several different catastrophes that forced them to retreat into the dimensional gap they had been using to cross space. In this case, those catastrophes were two solar flares wiping out several of their planets, Galactus eating their homeworld, and plague threatening to break out just as the Kree expanded to the outer edge of their empire. Which was followed promptly by doing as the Kree do: crush any other race that got in their way.

How the race as a whole made the decision to retreat into the dimensional gap, Thanos did not know. But they had. As the Kree finished wiping out what had once been a mighty empire, the people of that empire slowed them down while sending as many resources into the colonization project as they could. Billions died, but billions lived to create a new society in the dimensional gap.

There, they eventually met Thanos, who was using the realm to conduct spacial teleportation experiments. Upon meeting the Chitauri, who had already begun to evolve to live in this special dimension, he knew they would be perfect pawns. The radiation and the UV light had forced several large-scale changes in the race. A lack of what most races would call eyes, replaced by cybernetics. Portions of their brains were replaced similarly. And finally, the lack of gravity had quickly begun to atrophy their muscles, forcing many to opt to replace those, too.

Bringing the Chitauri to heel had not been a bloodless exercise. It had taken him several years to break their spirit and mold them into the weapon he wished via a hostile takeover of their cybernetics. The end result was a whole race who worshipped Thanos as their god. He could literally order them to commit suicide as a race, and they would do it.

So what mattered if millions of them died to take Earth or any other planet Thanos pointed them at? Indeed, to Thanos, the more that died on both sides, the better it was to help him in gaining his Lady's attention.

If billions of souls snuffed out clinically and quickly is not to her liking, then perhaps the slow, artistic mutual slaughter of a few billion on a planet like Earth, which has all the signs of a pivot point in the great creation of He Who Is Above, will garner more of my Lady's attention. Although of course, even that is but the appetizer, the start of the full course meal the offering of the Phoenix Avatar's soul will be. To say nothing of Guardian's soul... that one, yes, that one I will savor killing for far more than the hope My Lady will grace me with her presence.

Shaking that thought off, Thanos went back to contemplating humanity. "They fight hard. Although separated into single states that should be barely worth a mention, being situated on a single world as their whole race is, only the main portal is not under direct military-style attack. And their base technology is actually proving somewhat effective against the Chitauri troopers. I had assumed the local militaries not worth investigating, but it appears that the human infantry is a match for the Chitauri, if the losses we are seeing is any indication, and those energy beams are fascinating."

The purple-skinned tyrant shook his head, continuing to talk to himself. There wasn't anyone else around to have an actually intelligent conversation with, after all. Even the Chitauri leaders were little better than mindless drones to Thanos. They could not think beyond the bounds he had set for them centuries ago.

"They lack the aerial assets to fight Rippers and Dreadwyngs on an even footing, but even there, the humans have some surprises. It honestly makes me wonder if there is much of a difference in capability between the land-based militaries of space-going species and those like humans, who are on the cusp of that level. I had not anticipated that, nor the proliferation of the power armor concept that fills what few reports are coming in from Nebula's front. Still, more annoying than any of that is the fact that the Skrull fleet has been completely sidelined."

Thanos scowled, a sight that sent the Chitauri leaders hovering on their own command boards around him to shiver in a mixture of fear and religious ecstasy. As one, they moved further away from him, bowing their heads.

In the original plan, the Skrull was supposed to be the hammer coming in from on high. The Chitauri would grab the attention of Guardian and the other defenders of Earth, and then, as they were concentrating inward, the Skrull would arrive from space, having smashed through any space-based defenses the humans had set up.

Thanos had believed information on the space-based defenses of earth had been far better than on the land-based militaries, having made them the target of the limited espionage operations Thanos had allowed himself beyond Loki's insertion. Not only did the reports he was getting from both the Fleet Overlord Len'Dok and Black Maw tell him they were facing magic users, but the humans seemed to have **far** more combat-capable ships than he had anticipated. The small pinnacle-like attack craft had apparently had an impact on the Skrull fleet well above their weight class. And the human magic users there were proving to be unassailable.

Is that Guardian himself? Could he have felt certain enough in his allies to leave the close defense of Earth from the Chitauri to them and gone to deal with the Skrull?

Thanos pondered that for a moment, then set it aside. *Guardian did not strike me as the type to warn his enemies off as, apparently, this magic user did, according to Len'Dok.* "I could wish that Black Dwarf thought to describe his enemies for me, but I suppose that is behind his mental faculties. Regardless, the Skrull has failed me on a scale that will need to be addressed later. Incompetence, cowardice, a simple unwillingness to pay the price my orders demand? Whatever is going on there, I will discover it later and mete out the appropriate punishment."

Another blast of energy came through the portal leading to Washington DC, and Thanos looked in that direction, amusement crossing his face, banishing the scowl from a moment ago as he watched one of the small hexagons move to intercept, absorbing the energy and sending it to his throne. "So strange to consider that a race which is able to get to space has elected to continue its use of blue water ships for anything, let alone militarily. I wonder... there was a certain artistry and beauty to the ship-to-ship combat in the various historical recordings I have seen of earth before this. Is it as interesting in person?"

Thanos crossed his arms, leaning back on his throne, once more redirecting his errant thoughts this time to the preparations he had made to defeat the one called Guardian. Thanos later learned the human's real name but did not care to make use of it. Guardian was certainly the most powerful magic user the humans had access to, the one who had defeated him the last time they'd met, forcing Thanos to run away, horribly wounded and disfigured.

Despite the measures he had taken to not seem weak to his followers, Thanos knew how closely he had come to losing his life then. The skin grafts had taken well, although Thanos knew that was a small blessing. So much of his body had needed such grafts no visible portion

had been available for color comparison. His arm had been amputated just above the elbow, replaced by a robotic arm the equivalent of his original.

Sanctuary, his flagship, had wanted to replace his original arm with a gene-spliced equivalent grown in a cloning vat. But Thanos had decided against that, believing the arm could be useful in many ways and wanting a reminder at all times of his loss. Thus the robotic arm was linked to his throne and had much of the same systems in miniature but lacked the computational power or the energy storage. It even could link to his ship, if only short-range, barely a few light years.

Thanos now raised that same arm, the bionic hand, covered by synth skin, moved this way and that before his eyes, which narrowed dangerously, the white light in them becoming even more violent in its intensity. "I have prepared as best I could, consulted with Loki as freely and openly as I possibly could given his duplicitous nature. I have come up with several scientific counters for Guardian's power and energy and tested them against Loki. Much like with Ebony Maw and other telekinetics to prepare for the Avatar. My throne is also as ready as I can make it for both offense and defense against Guardian and the Pheonix Force. I have high hopes for my necro-tech, but so-called magic is always tricky."

It was unusual for Thanos to feel concern over any physical contest. But this was one contest he'd lost once already. There was no doubt the battle to come would challenge him, but in the end, Thanos knew he would prevail. After all, did he not serve the Endless, the ultimate ending, his Lady Death? How then could Thanos lose?

Setting that aside, Thanos turned his attention to the reports from all the other portals. The battle in Paris was chaotic and wild, as was the battle going on in the American capital, although there, Corvus Glaive had begun to take control of both the land and air battles. He was undoubtedly facing the most resistance, but Corvus was also Thanos's best general. It would take a while and hundreds of thousands of lives, but Corvus would do it. The reports from the massive area called Russia were... annoying, telling Thanos that once more, Proxima Midnight had gone out to play and then been sidetracked. Still, the slow spread she had ordered the Chitauri to perform was going well.

Supergiant was doing her normal espionage-based assault while letting the Chitauri again spread out slowly from the portal. It was working quite well, from what reports were coming in. It was also forcing a secondary conflict between the nation of China and the same America that Corvus was fighting.

Ebony Maw's own advance was... interesting. His portal was the central one, the most important. As such, he had created a defense in depth, but it was clear from the reports that he was also losing thousands of troops from hit and run attacks. Hit-and-run attacks from a group that included Asgardians. The energy signature of those quasi-deific entities was distinctive. *But not their Sky Father. And not in large numbers. Two of the attackers are mere beasts. Guardian*

is nowhere to be found just yet. Nor the Pheonix. Perhaps... Perhaps I need to do more to draw them out than simply assume the hordes of Chitauri are enough to grab their interest.

With a single thought, Thanos turned his throne and moved over to a large satellite to one side. While the throne could create matter from energy, there was no need to do so for something large like this as he had other means to do the same thing. The fabricator, linked back to his mothership, quickly created the series of satellites that he wanted. Soon, they were ready, flashing through the portals that were open at that moment, the ones to Ebony Maw, Proxima Midnight, Supergiant and Nebula.

On the other side of those portals, the tiny but insanely advanced satellites, each of them wrapped in three different cloaking devices around a miniature fusion generator, flashed upwards quickly. Soon, they were well up in the air of the planet, moving away from the portals.

Now, what is more artistic? Using a Fusion beam to wipe out random cities, making a pattern, or using them on a single local polity? Decisions, Decisions, Thanos formed.

Movement from above and to his right drew Thanos' attention from his thoughts, and he turned his head in that direction only to stare in surprise. One of the portals had just gone dark.

This caused consternation among the troops all around Thanos, and Thanos blinked, then sighed in resigned annoyance as he realized which portal it had been. "Nebula, why must you always disappoint me?"

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While Thanos had been deep into his musings on his version of romance, In Paris, Mystique was having a surprisingly easy time of it now that she had shifted her Chitauri disguise enough to look wounded. For some reason this let her blend in far more easily than she had previously. Under this guise, Mystique followed the scanner's signals through the city, moving through buildings, and heading in a straight line towards her target. Only twice was her form challenged, both times inside buildings as aliens who had invaded the buildings challenged her with snarls and roars in their language. Head shots answered all such challenges however, and she moved on quickly.

All around Mystique, the battle of Paris ebbed and flowed, as more aliens arrived. But more ODMs originally assigned to the Russian theater also arrived. With the defenses around Severomorsk so strong but no sign of the Chitauri there spreading fast enough to be much of a threat to other major cities, the Russians felt they had things under control, and, more than anything wanted to show they could handle this alien invasion on their own.

They came in along with groups of British troops being ferried across via Kitty and her magic carpet, and French troops similarly from nearby, teleported into the city by Storm as she teleported civilians out just as she had done previously in Washington DC. By this point, Storm

had cleared a large portion of the city, and two divisions worth of infantry troops had been teleported in, along with anti-air brigades. The enemy in Paris hadn't brought in enough infantry to fight effectively within the buildings from the start, and this was costing them in terms of how quickly they could shut down the human reinforcements, but they made up for that in skimmers.

Of course, outside the city, the skimmers were still racing out in hit and run attacks, and a heavy force had been pushed northwest towards the UK. The dogfights elsewhere in France and the battle in the English Channel were truly becoming nasty.

The skimmer's shields and speed meant they were death on marines or armored units moving in the open... or through easily smashed buildings such as that which were found in the suburbs of the city of lights. Yet the missiles of the French were working just as well as elsewhere. Better, the Chitauri here were nowhere near as organized as elsewhere. That allowed the French to bring in more of their Air Force assets to smash most of the units heading south, west or east on their own. Their tanks were less than useless just yet, but small columns of them were also heading toward Paris, just in case the battle lasted them that long enough.

The French and British troops had taken the pressure off the ODMs, although judging from what Mystique was hearing from Diamond, the troopers were definitely not having it all their own way. Casualties were beginning to mount, horrendously as few of the weapons they had could damage the Rippers. With them as near inviolate air support, the French couldn't use any large-scale units within the city. Worse, the Rippers were simply smashing buildings down even more than they were firing at the humans, and a destroyed urban environment was even more deadly than an urban one.

But while interested in how the overall battle was going, trying to help the locals directly wasn't Mystique's mission. Finding the beacon was, and eventually, as a fireteam of ODMs fought it out all around her against a much larger group of Chitauri accompanied by a Ripper, Mystique found the building that must house the Beacon.

She made certain about this by circling around, even joining in the fight against the ODMs for a few moments, firing at them from one position so as to not appear suspicious to the other Chitauri. Mystique then faded away back into the office building that she had been in, heading out the back of emergency entrance, and out into a small alleyway there, seeing where the scanner was still pointing.

With that, Mystique hunkered down, waiting for the coast to clear for a few moments before racing across, as above her, the aliens clung to different buildings firing at a specific area, where the Thing had just appeared, smashing a Ripper down into another building a half block away.

With the Thing unknowingly pulling all attention away from where Mystique had previously been, and the ODMs now moving off, she reached the building where the beacon was housed, a warehouse turned into some kind of nightclub on the River Seine.

Inside were a few bodies by the doorway, but little else as she raced through the building. It having been midday when the invasion began here in Paris, the nightclub must have been practically empty, thankfully. Still following the scanner, Mystique headed up into the VIP rooms on the second floor.

But as she did, Mystique heard the movements of feet and slowed, hugging the shadows of the stairs for a moment, changing her skin color from the strange mottled metal gray and white of a regular Chitauri into black so she could blend in better.

Slowly finishing her trip up the stairs, Mystique paused, staring down the hallway. There, she saw three Chitauri, and one blue skinned alien woman with a metal faceplate seemingly stapled to one side of her head. She was directing the other three as they carried what looked like a large metallic box with several strange-looking antennae and a radar dish on top of it. The radar dish was pulsing, and there was a distinct energy visible within the sphere of the radar dish. "Be careful. We have to move it carefully, the slightest bump can interrupt the signal! But that rock skinned bastard got too damn close for my liking. I..."

Suddenly, the blue skinned alien turned, staring straight at Mystique, bringing her gun up, firing at her.

Mystique dodged to one side, her form fading out even as she returned fire. Her strike hit the blue skinned woman, but she didn't seem to feel it, charging forward with a roar. "Get the beacon out of here, hide it someplace else. I will deal with this one!"

"Deal with me is it?" Mystique charged forward, her rifle still firing. "There's only room for one blue-skinned femme fatale in Paris girl, and it isn't a half-cyborg like you."

The two of them exchanged green energy bolts as they closed, charging towards one another down the corridor, then at the last minute, Mystique leaped upwards, aiming to jump over the woman. But the blue-skinned alien leaped upwards as well, smashing Mystique up into the ceiling. Pinning her there for a moment, she wrapped her one hand around the shapeshifter's throat, the other grabbing her belt. "I have no idea what a femme fatale is, you up-jumped monkey, but I rather think you don't qualify."

With that, she hurled her back down the way Mystique had come.

Mystique crashed into the safety railing of the stairs leading up to the VIP section, flipping over it to smash into the dance floor below. She pushed herself to her feet quickly, her body far more durable than a normal human's, then rolled to one side as Nebula landed so hard she cracked the ground, cracks in the wood of the flooring appearing in every direction. The alien woman lashed out with a kick, but Mystique caught it, twirling and tossing the woman to the ground, where she lashed out with another kick, forcing Mystique to break her grip on Nebula's other leg.

Rolling, Nebula came to her feet, and charged forward again, knocking Mystique's rifle out of her hand with a single blow as the other hand came up in a fist. Mystique dodged, and returned a two punch combo to the woman's chest and shoulder as she danced around her, her fingers morphing into claws.

While her transformation powers were limited in what kind of abilities they could give her regardless of what form she took – if she formed into say, Scarlet Witch she couldn't use the younger woman's magic – Mystique could still form claws that were almost as good as Sabertooth's had been. Back before he had been dumped into a lava flow, anyway.

Nebula found this out to her cost, as Mystique's transformed claws caught the woman across his stomach before she could get fully out of range. The blue-skinned woman snarled, but when Mystique went for another swipe, she redirected the blow. Stepping into Mystique's range, Nebula smashed the human woman's face with a punch that had her flying backwards, her nose and jaw broken for a few moments before her healing power could fix the damage.

Mystique waited until the woman closed to finish her off, her legs lashing out and catching the woman in the diaphragm with enough force to drive the wind out of her. A double-handed blow to the side of the head as she leaned forward, Mystique's body shifting to have the same rubber qualities as Reed Richards, sent Gamora sprawling to one side, and Mystique tried to roll on top of her, bringing her claws back into play.

But Nebula caught her clawed hands by the wrists and turned them both onto their sides, slamming Mystique into the ground and then releasing her rolling away to put some distance between them as several Chitauri appeared in the doorway. "Kill her!" Gamora ordered, pointing back to Mystique only to stare in confusion at herself.

Damn, but this never gets old! Mystique had seen the Chitauri first when they had been rolling around, and had been transforming her body as they did, finishing the transformation of her face the instant the alien girl threw her off. Now the Chitauri stared at the two copies of Nebula in confusion, their guns flicking from one to the other.

Her eyes wide with rage Nebula roared and charged towards Mystique. But then the front of the dance club exploded inward.

In the rubble of the wall he had just shattered, Hulk roared out, "Hulk smash! I do believe I'm getting the hang of this." As he used a portion of a Ripper he had torn off the creature to, yes, smash the Chitauri so hard one of them came apart. The other two were flung through the air. Two others had already been buried by the rubble of the Hulk's arrival.

The woman hastily held up a hand to her face to protect it from debris, and that was all the opening Mystique needed. She closed, her claws extending this time to a foot in length as she cut into the woman's throat from the side, nearly decapitating the cyborg woman.

Nebula of the Black Order, often ignored adopted daughter of Thanos, fell, grasping at her neck with both hands as she tried to staunch the bleeding, staring at the other woman in shock and growing horror. Mystique however had no sympathy at all, nor mercy. Her claws shrank back, becoming thicker, and she stabbed them into the back of the woman's head, severing her spinal column with a crunch of bone upon bone and the squelch of chopped flesh.

Looking up from where he had just smashed an alien into a meaty kind of paste on the floor, the Hulk shook his head while above him, Ripper fire began to fall like hail onto his position, the light of it causing Mystique to look away even as more of the club started to come apart. "That was quite nasty," Hulk stated, ignoring the impact of the energy blasts on him and around his position.

"You're one to talk. What are you doing here anyway? I thought the plan was for you to help with the battle in Washington, or out in Nepal," Mystique shouted.

"It was, yes. But the X-Men seem to have the fight in Washington DC slowly turning, especially since Storm started her efforts to remove civilian population and teleport in troops there first. I decided to come here to Paris and arrived several hours ago, although I worked my way inward from the suburbs rather than jumping into the deep end first," The Hulk answered, still ignoring the bolts of plasma hitting him, none of which were hot enough to hurt him much.

When one of the Rippers however hit them with the main cannon, he stumbled slightly to one side, turned, and muttered "good luck", before leaping away into the air, his fist upraised to smash.

Grumbling, Mystique stared down at the woman, then smirked, and took her form again before shifting back into that of a regular alien. Then she was off, following the scanner once more through the streets, as above her, the portal once more regurgitated a large clump of troops. There could be no victory here until that beacon was shut down.

But Mystique was fast on the heels of the group transporting the beacon away. Forty minutes later, as the group of them tried to zigzag away to throw her off their scent, Mystique cut across their route. Getting ahead of them, she positioned herself in a building directly above them. When the clump of aliens carting the strange bit of technology around came within sight, She opened fire. One alien fell quickly, while the others dropped the device and ducked into cover, their automatic instincts failing them.

For a moment Mystique wished the Chitauri had faces so she could see the shock and horror there as they realized this left the beacon out, defenseless under her fire. The beacon almost seemed to shut off as it hit the ground but kept on working right up until five plasma bolts from her gun seared into the thing. A moment later it fizzled and popped and then the lights around the small control console shut down.

And above the city, the portal popped out of existence.

The tide was turning, and elsewhere, that tide was building further....

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Despite his agreements with various countries around Latveria, it had taken Doctor Doom several hours to browbeat the local military forces into agreeing with their political leaders to allow him and his Doom bots to enter Hungary and to march, or rather, fly, on the city of Debrecen. But finally, as the battles in Washington and Paris began to slowly turn against the invaders and as afternoon pushed into evening, his own forces began to smash into the enemy air forces around Debrecen.

Interesting, doom amused, his arms crossed as he stared down at the battle going on below, his true presence concealed by various electronic and magical means from eyes and sensors alike. This attacker seems to have a good sense of tactical defense at the very least. The various strong points that had been raised throughout the countryside, here literal countryside, along with a few scattered towns and hamlets outside the city outskirts, had begun to hold up the local response to this invasion prior to his Doom Bots arriving, and now were actually holding up his Doom Bots somewhat well for the moment. He had yet to lose any of his units, but the small shield generators, the anti-air guns, and the infantry heavy points this particular assault force were using were doing a decent enough job holding his droids in place. Heavy infantry weapons, large anti-air guns, and small shield generators, none of which have been reported at the other fronts as far as I know. China is... a mess, I will admit and the mountains down in Nepal are worse, but even so, it is clear now that each invasion point is led by a particular intelligence. Although I use the word loosely. Regardless...

As his cloak whipped around him, Doom, nodded his head slowly to a series of beats from his suit's onboard computers. "I have finished analyzing the enemy's weapon systems. And found them wanting."

With a single command, his Doom Bots began to exhibit energy shields of their own. Further, their weapons ratcheted up to a higher level of power, expending their onboard energy. They would not be worth much in a few hours, but that was fine. This battle would be over by then.

Instantly the battle changed.

One hard point had been hard-pressed already. The first of another layer of defensive points, the aliens had been caught before any further force could be built to protect its front and flanks, letting his Doom Bots and the locals surrounded on three sides, with two of them taking no fire from any other fortified position.

Several dozen Doom Bots flew through the air towards it, ignoring the enemy fire to slam gauntleted hands against the outer shell of the energy shield the invading aliens used. Energy weapons specifically designed to breach shielding, a miniaturized and highly refined version of the gravity beams that the Avalon Empire's Ravens used against enemy ships, blasted into the shielding. The small shield, barely large enough to cover a city block, shattered easily. Two more

Doom Bots flashed down past original three, and were in among the Chitauri quickly, wiping them out with precise strikes of fist or energy weapon.

That same thing quickly began to happen at other hard points, the alien's defensive stance no longer even slowing his Doom Bots down.

Not that Doom cared overmuch. He had already moved towards Debreceen, trusting in his own technology and magic to keep himself hidden from the enemy.

Although it galls me to admit, Potter was better than I was with magic when we first met, Doom admitted ruefully to himself, the only person he would ever admit weakness to of any kind, and even then, only in the past tense. I have since made up a large amount of that gap, although he will probably always be stronger than me in terms of overall magical potential, and better at dealing with Demons and Devils. Potter has a spell based advantage there, and his mutant power is uniquely suited for him. But in every other way I will become his equal...

Doom snorted then, the sound echoing around him in the clear evening sky, so far removed from the conflict below and now behind him that it was but distant thunder. His voice echoed all around him as he spoke aloud to himself, a habit he had nearly done away with by this point. "Or as near as I can get without actually stealing from Potter the various resources he has access to. Doom is no petty thief, nor will he build a foundation of his own strength on the work of another. Especially one I call ally."

It amused Doom to reflect on that point at times. More than a year ago, he had been called a supervillain, or perhaps an antihero in the news of the world given his various technological breakthroughs, which he shared routinely with his folk. Such labels had amused him at the time, for Doom had never seen himself in that kind of light, seeing the morality of the individual as beneath him in his position as king, his intellect far too powerful to be so chained.

But since his first interaction with Storm and Harry when dealing with his wayward experiment, the Darkoth droid, Doom had seen an opportunity to achieve a specific goal and gain power thereafter. After that goal had been achieved, his road to further power led him to now becoming if not well-liked among the leaders of the world, at least deeply respected by them. No longer was he seen as a super villain. Doom was not seen as an upstanding leader, obviously. He was still a tyrant. But he was accepted in a way that he had not been before, and that amused him.

It also amused Doom somewhat that his ambitions had been... mollified to a certain extent. *Who could have imagined that a mother's love and a woman's touch would take away so much of my desires for power and greater authority? Now, I simply seek to do what I can for my people, and for the future. No longer do I see conquering the world or the universe beyond as the only way to truly prove my superiority over others. I have proven my superiority several times over Richards, my old foe. And I have proven to the world my might time and time again.*

Indeed, the future looked bright for both Doom and his people above and beyond this newest alien invasion. Latveria was quickly becoming one of the most well industrialized, technologically advanced nations in the world, and had grown in leaps and bounds thanks to the Eurasian War and Doom's taking advantage of it. They even had a presence in space, which no other nation could say bar Potter's Avalon Empire. Soon, Latveria, for all its size, would be a superpower on the scale of America and China, and soon, they would grow beyond that small start.

Immortality is the next goal, both for myself and for my wife. She and I, we will rule our own empire alongside that of the Avalon Empire. And in surpassing Harry in that realm, in living longer and living better, I will prove my superiority over him in turn. Save, perhaps, in the area of attracting womenfolk.

Doom laughed then, a true chuckle of genuine humor as he reflected on that score while descending towards Debrecen. Doom's tastes in women had changed after meeting his mother, and a homebody queen, one who could handle public relations as easily as breathing, and who ran her own international conglomerate, one who wanted to spend more time at home to raise their eventual children? That was more than enough for Doom. He had no need of more than one, nor pining after women already taken. *Although, the pure male response within me wishes to add a caveat to that thought in the form of the Enchantress. If she had come along as a, what is the term, a two-for-one deal with Paris, I would not have complained.*

His moment of humor took Doom down into the city, whereupon he paused, landing lightly on a rooftop near the center of the Debrecen. He was interested to note that these aliens hadn't gone into the wholesale slaughter that was being reported in the city of lights and the American capital. And they certainly were not causing as much chaos and destruction as was occurring in China or in the China Sea. *Yet another sign of the fact that the minds controlling the various invasion forces are not only different in methodology by temperament. This one seems almost human in his or her regard of the local civilian population. Although I doubt that regard would remain once the mad Titan Potter assumes is behind this invasion makes his presence known.*

Shaking his head at that idle thought, Doom held up one of his wrist guards, flipping open the protective covering and beginning to input a command into the controls of his suit's sensors. *Now, the hyper spatial dissonance is a most noticeable signal and this close, the interference the alien ECM has caused will not be able to stop my... There it is.*

Within seconds, his onboard scanners had discovered the signal he was searching for, and Doom made his way over in that direction. He found the Beacon had been moved into an opening area, allowing a multifaceted shield to be placed above it. Several shields in point of fact, creating a layered defense. "Smart of them. When one has a single most important asset, it behooves you to defend it to the utmost. But if they think that this is enough to stop Doom, they are sorely mistaken."

He alighted on a nearby roof, whereupon he began to put a new series of commands into his suit, reaching forward with his communications equipment into the systems of the shields in front of him. After all, since there was no one alive underneath those shields, it was obvious that they needed to be under some kind of remote control, or else the beacon would never be able to be moved again without taking the shields down by force. *And whatever defense those shields provide, moving it and starting the beacon elsewhere would still be a more viable strategic defense.*

Within seconds, the first shield flickered out.

By the time the second did, the aliens within the city had responded. Thousands of them boiled out from various defensive points or from where they had been patrolling the city, coming towards them from every direction. And it mattered not at all to Doom.

A single blast of power caught a dozen aliens. Another, a gravity weapon, lifted still more off of the various buildings all around Doom, hurling them upwards into the air, where they would burn to ash with the heat of exiting the atmosphere. A spell flattened a dozen others, while the kinetic weapons in his eyes smashed skimmers out of the sky, and Doom's own energy guns opened fire from his other hand, a single beam from each finger smacking into the various Chitauri charging his position.

However, he was surprised when a green-skinned woman of quite fetching appearance leaped off one of the skimmers so struck, doing a barrel roll in midair before landing lightly on her feet in a combat crouch. He idly watched her, cocking his head thoughtfully to one side as he took in her primitive weapons, a pair of swords that looked somewhat like a cross between a machete and an arming sword. "A part of me actually is quite pleased that even aliens know that sword-fighting is one of the true arts of combat. But another part is somewhat displeased. Do you truly think that your weapons will..."

The woman quite rudely interrupted Doom by charging forward, her blade flashing out, trying to bisect Doom. Doom blocked it with a negligent backhand from one of his gauntleted hands, watching in some amusement as the blade failed to penetrate his armor, although the readings from the blade that his armor had just made from that contact was quite interesting. *She is a good deal stronger than her form might suggest. And that blade has been made of some interesting material. Nothing quite like the magical materials coming out of the Empire or my own alchemical projects, but still, interesting. It's molecular makeup is actually quite a bit closer to that of a diamond or other type of gem than metal, and it's edge is amazingly thin. Fascinating.*

"Very well. Although you are quite impolite, Doom will play with you for a bit." Doom drawled, battering aside another blow from her blade, even as his other hand rose and fired off another blast of energy at a ripper that had just come through the portal. The beam bisected it, sending both sides of it to crash down below.

For several seconds he batted the woman's blows aside, coming to respect her skill, somewhat, if not her fight or flight instincts. The woman's blows were precise, controlled, and within her form Doom could see several moves that juxtaposed favorably with martial arts styles that Doom himself had seen previously and learned. Indeed, perhaps without his suit, the woman would have proved his superior, as much as that annoyed him to think. With his armor though, she was no threat, and didn't seem to realize it.

Nor were the hundreds of Chitauri all around them, Skimmer, infantry or Ripper, none were a threat, their beams intercepted, redirected or used to further empower his suit's own energy weapons. *She should already be able to tell that I am beyond her. But here we are.*

Just as Doom tired of the game, his helmet beeped at him. The final shield around the beacon had fallen.

The woman saw that too, and hastily shouted out orders in some alien tongue. Doom's onboard systems began to translate it quickly but it would take them quite some time to build up a vocabulary. Though really, whatever the woman said was a moot point. Before any of the milling Chitauri about below could do anything, Doom teleported away from the woman, landing near the Beacon. A single gauntleted fist smashed it, and the giant portal above Debreceen flared out with a loud pop of displaced air.

"No!" The woman shrieked, a word that needed no translation, as she launched herself down towards Doom, who began casually dealing with the alien invaders all around him. And beyond the city, his Doom Bots reported that the second line of defense had fallen. Many were pushing into the outskirts of the city now.

Doom took a moment to order them to not damage the city structure or its inhabitants unnecessarily. His onboard suit told him the civilian population, those that still lived which seemed a vast majority, remained inside the buildings within. It would behoove Doom's forces to not do more damage to Hungary's population than the Chitauri themselves.

With that done, Doom slew the final alien around them, felling it with a bolt of power from his eye beams, leaving the green-skinned woman alone. This did nothing to halt her attack if anything she became even more frantic. Doom blocked her blows with his hands and forearms, allowing his system to make more readings on her weapons, while taking in her somewhat exotic alien beauty. Unbidden, his earlier thoughts on his wife, Paris and the Enchantress came to mind as he took in her perfect, athletic form. *And if Doom is to expand his Empire into the stars as Potter has, perhaps...*

A kick nearly took Doom in the side, but he dodged around it more for the fun of it really than anything else. He grabbed her foot, and watched in amusement as she then did a perfect roundhouse kick, trying to force him to relinquish his grip. He didn't, and her foot clanged against the side of his head, doing no damage. The woman then gasped as Doom raised her up into the air and slammed her down back first into the ground by the same hold on her ankle.

Still, she was obviously made of stern stuff, and as Doom relinquished his grip on her leg, she put her hands behind her head, and rolled away, bringing your swords up and hurling them at Doom from barely a few feet away. They smacked off of his armor, but Doom noted that they had been launched quite well, and were Doom a lesser man, they would have cut his armor underneath his armpit and where his leggings met his faults. It was very clear that the woman was a consummate warrior.

But Doom was tiring of this farce. When she grabbed up a blaster weapon from one of the aliens attempted to use it, he walked through her fire as he had theirs previously. Using his own blast of plasma to shatter the road behind her he watched as she stumbled forward. Before she could try to retreat further, Doom was on her. One hand crushed the alien energy weapon in his grip, while the other slammed into her temple with carefully calculated force.

The woman's eyes rolled up in the back of her head and she fell senseless, only to be caught by Doom tossed over one of his shoulders. He wrapped a metal band around her wrist, and a second later, she was gone, sent to a prison back in Latveria within an advanced Faraday cage, which would block any from finding her.

"I wonder what manner of prize you will turn out to be, alien woman?" Doom mused, raising a metal-clad hand to a metal-clad chin. We shall see when my fiancé and I question you. Perhaps a source of information about the various empires out there that is not completely connected to Potter and his enterprises? That could be useful in the future, even after this invasion."

Reminded of the greater invasion for a moment, Doctor Doom sent out a final series of orders to his Doom Bots. "Slaughter the aliens. Defend the civilians, but slaughter them all, return kind for kind, before returning to Latveria." Given his recent expansion during the Eurasian war, Doom had no desire to attempt to conquer Hungary. He was merely here as part of his deal with Potter and his local neighbors. Let them clean up after his victory.

As he rose into the air Doom reflected that similarly, this battle had concluded his part of this play. The rest of the invasion, which was also now facing fierce resistance, was the purview of Potter. *He, Storm and the rest foolishly declared themselves the defenders of earth, and I am more than happy to leave them to it. And if it appears as if their hubris has gotten them into something they cannot get out of, which I doubt admittedly, then Doom will still be here, ready to step in.*

A moment later, his various satellites in orbit reported the closing of the portal in Paris had occurred not a few moments before the one he had closed here, and Doom chortled, shaking his head as he repeated some of his earlier thoughts aloud. "Which I doubt admittedly. After all, Potter is an ally of Doom. If he could not see off this kind of assault, would not be worthy of that appellation. I think, Mad Titan or not, these aliens will find that out to their cost."

OOOOOOO

“Hah... well, I now have a target for one of my little satellites, anyway...” Thanos began, before another portal shut down. It took him a mere second to realize which portal that was, and then Thanos’ blood ran cold. *Gamora. My daughter!*

If Thanos could be said to have a heart at all, let alone a soft spot, it was shown in his relationship with Gamora. While she was merely his adopted daughter, Thanos having never fathered a physical blood relation, Gamora had long been a cross between a Black Order member and a... apprentice almost. Gamora was smart, intelligent, dangerous, driven, unafraid to get her hands dirty while at the same time not taking any joy in it. And, dare Thanos say it, he had grown to truly feel some measure of affection towards her as he would a real daughter.

Quickly shifting his attention to one of the screens on his throne’s armrests, Thanos inputted a series of commands, bringing up several beeping lines on a screen. Like the rest of his Black Order, Gamora had a small chip installed in her spine, which could allow Thanos to know if she was in distress or not. Not that before this Gamora ever had called for such aid, but Thanos didn’t just use that kind of monitoring passively. It was an excellent way to keep track of people, as not just the Black Order had them. Nearly every officer captain and above within the Skrull and the Chitauri had the same kind of medical chip.

Quickly he pulled up the data from Gamora, and breathed a faint sigh of relief. His daughter was alive at the very least. She read as unconscious at present, which meant that whatever had happened on the other side, someone had not only shut down the portal, but overcome Gamora, which Thanos knew would not have been an easy achievement even at long range. The signal was intermittent, but his technology was better than whatever was trying to hide her.

Seconds later, he knew where she was, and ordered Ebony Maw to send large scale force towards the tiny country called Latveria. *Was there not something of a local savant ruling that nation? He must be the one who was responsible for Gamora’s loss.*

Turning his attention to the last data coming in from Gamora’s portal, he decided he had a new target. And not just one of the fusion bomb pumped fusion beams, either. No. All of them.

It took several moments, but the various satellites he had sent through were soon above the city. Using one to peer down was but the work of a few seconds rewiring and he watched as humanlike droids carried his daughter away. He waited then, his eyes widening as another humanlike droid in the city turned it’s head upwards as if it was somehow able to detect the waiting satellites. “Impossible. A human able to come up with sensors that can see my cloaking device?”

A second later, he was certain, as the being raced upward. Thanos snorted.

“Fine. Let us see if your armor is as impressive as your sensors...” With another touch of a button, the satellites oriented themselves downward. A large aperture on each satellite oriented themselves. Form within light appeared, ruining their cloaking. And from within fusion

bombs of a power that would dwarf anything from the Kree or Skrull arsenal ignited, and beams fit to cut through a planet's crust and several layers of magma beyond lashed out.

Thanos could have made them stronger, to cut through the whole planet, but he had hoped to make this war more artistic than simply violent. But all together, they might well still do that. Or at least do so much damage that all of the European continent would crack over time like an egg as a super volcano erupted from where they hit. Either way, he would have sent a message and covered the assault force from Ebony Maw's base in Nepal.

OOOOOOO

Having sensed someone acting the part of a voyeur, Doom had decided to poke his eyes out. Now, however, he stared at the sheer power of the beams coming his way, and that of the city that he had gone to the trouble of saving mere moments ago. "You would dare to wipe away that which Doom has saved? **NAY!**"

With a single mental command, Doom ordered every remaining Doom Bot into the air. The ravening beams of energy flashed downward, but were nowhere near the speed of light. By the time they were close, the doom bots had created a lattice of interweaving diamond patterns, with Doom behind the first group in the center. Shields rose all around, connecting and powered one over another, just in time for the beams to hit.

The first rank died in an instant. The second, barely a second later. The third held for an eyeblink, but the fifth stayed in place for a second, before the bolt of fusion energy struck the next. Then it hit the final line, where Doom was.

Heat like nothing Doom had known since the first time he put on his mask before the metal had cooled washed over Doom. A lesser man might have had flashbacks to that moment, or perhaps being in the literal hell that was Mephisto's realm when Doom and Potter went there to retrieve his mother, Cynthia.

Doom was not a lesser man. Better, his army of doom bots had held for just long enough. Long enough to give Doom the knowledge of the energy that now threatened to turn him and what he had wrought this day into less than ash. And with that knowledge and his own mastery of magic, not science, he crafted a spell. A spell to reflect the blast back along its route.

It was hard, intensely hard, and parts of Doom's suit melted even as the last of his Doom Bots came apart around him like so much chaff in a furnace. Yet Doom prevailed. Even as the impact of the wave of fusion energy carried him down, around him a pure black shield of scintillating magical energy appeared. A spell his mother had taught him to reflect any attack he could comprehend. The drain was impossible, and Doom felt his body and suit starting to shut down, but the shield was in place.

And the combined fusion beam flashed backward up into the atmosphere, destroying nothing more than the air it passed through before hitting the satellites that had released such energies.

Seconds before that destruction occurred, Doom fell out of the sky, bits of his armor peeling off as he fell. The fall might well have killed him in his weakened state and as battered as his armor was. Yet something stopped his fall.

"My son, the overachiever," a dry, but still well-loved voice intoned from one side of him. The next instant, through bleary eyes, Doom saw his mother's face. "I warned you what the cost of that spell would be, Victor. You have given more than a few decades of your life to what you have done this day."

"Th, the one who sent those beams, they would have taken what I had accomplished this day from me. I will not allow others to take a victory from Doom," Dr. Doom ground out through chapped, bleeding lips.

Well, to others he was Dr. Doom. To Cynthia, sorceress with few equals below the level of the Sorcerer Supreme, he was simply Victor, and she shook her head at his attitude. "Well, my son. Pride has cost you dearly."

"Not so." Dr. Doom smirked despite the chapped lips and the knowledge his spell had literally stolen decades out of his life. "I had already decided to achieve immortality. And Doom is not one to, as you say, underachieve."

Cynthia laughed at that, and Doom closed his eyes, knowing he was safe, protected by one of very few people in all creation he trusted entirely. *I am glad that my personal part I nthis affair is done now, though. I am in no condition to continue... yet whoever decided to try and wipe out my victory had best hope that Potter deals with him, or else Doom will.*

OOOOOOO

Snarling in annoyance, Thanos shook his head at what he had seen before all power to the satellites had faded. The destruction of those satellites means whoever captured Gamora is still alive, and with the portal still shut, I cannot appear personally on the scene and and change that state of being. *Putting up a good fight is one thing, actually stopping the invasion is entirely another,* Thanos thought to himself, becoming even angrier. *This I cannot abide!*

Thanos pointed to one of the highest-ranking Chitauri around, a person whose title would translate into something like Primark Priest, a mix between a militant and religious position. "Remain in constant communication with me. I wish to know the moment the Phoenix Force's energy signature has been seen on the battlefield. Beyond that, hasten the troop deployment as much as possible. All remaining portals are to receive reinforcements of every type of combatant, regardless of the local commanders personal preference."

The Primark Priest nodded obsequiously, actually going down to one knee and bowing towards Thanos in obeisance. "It will be done, my master!"

Thanos directed his throne forward as he stood on the edge the floating platform underneath his throne. For moment he debated which battle he should join, before deciding that the main portal was obviously the most important. *It is also the battlefield where several of the Asgardians have made their presence known. If I can slay several of their numbers, perhaps I can keep the rest from interfering.*

While Thanos had full belief in his own powers and abilities, there were some fights he didn't wish to pick. Fighting with Odin was one battle Thanos did not wish to face, particularly at the same time he would be battling Potter or the Phoenix force. After he had slain that pair and absorbed what he could of their powers, perhaps. But until then, subterfuge and misdirection was the way of wisdom. *That, and killing lesser Asgardians.*

A verbal command this time sent his throne forward towards the main portal. Behind him, the Chitauri continued to push forward through the remaining portals even faster than before, their numbers endless.

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This time when Harry found his astral projection – if that was in fact a proper term for this phenomenon, something he and Strange had a long, rambling argument about - pulled into the gem, there was no shock from the other entity nor any attempt to convince him to take the power offered by becoming the entity's chosen Avatar on Earth. Instead, Harry found himself under attack the moment his astral presence solidified within the pocket dimension to which the gem served as a conduit. He couldn't even take a moment to look around him before he had to dodge to one side evading a long chain with a spike on the end that hurtled through where his head had been a moment ago. "Bugger me!"

This one attack was quickly joined by its brethren. The came out of nowhere, chains tipped with various manner of spikes flashing towards them from every direction. Long spikes, short spikes, spikes with stuff dripping from them. Each chain was different, but deadly as it flung itself toward Harry from everywhere at once, made out of the very stuff of this dimension, reminding Harry strongly of the battle against Mephisto.

He tried to destroy a few with a Reducto, but his magic found no purchase here. This small dimension was, after all, made of the very essence of the god he had come to drain. The spells fizzled out and disappeared a bare inch away from his fingers doing nothing. *Right, here it's a purely mental battle. But these chains are...*

As Harry tried to come to grips with how different this was from his previous battle with Balthakk, a voice like thunder at the bottom of a deep metal-lined well bellowed out a nearly incoherent small role of challenge. "Sorcerer! Die!"

The god grew out of the raw energies around them, much like the chains had been doing. As his form finished growing several hundred feet to Harry's right, he stood taller than the juggernaut although not as wide in the shoulders. His skin the pale, almost pasty, where it wasn't covered with iron gray armor, which most of it was bar his forearms. His face, what be seen of it under a half-mask, looked almost as if he didn't have any skin around his nose and above, pure bone visible there just beneath the mask. Below, his jaw almost looked like a fantasy orc's, an image that Harry had seen occasionally: jutting jaw, large tusks, fanged mouth. His eyes behind the half-mask were simply glowing pinpricks of red.

This was Krakkan, the last member of the Octessence, a pantheon of ancient, primordial gods to continue to empower a connection to Harry's Earth. All the others had shattered those connections, fearing the loss of power that had made Balthakk such an easy target for his fellows after Harry had drained him. But Krakkan hadn't because, as Strange had mentioned several times, while his particular magics were very useful, Krakkan himself was an utter idiot. But for all his stupidity, there was absolutely nothing wrong with his instincts, and he showed this by his intrinsic understanding of .how to fight, even here in the seat of his power.

Chains came from behind, knocking Harry forward. Others rose, binding his arms and legs, appearing out of nowhere showing an incredible amount of instinctual command of his pocket dimension.

But then, as they wrapped him up, Harry felt the somewhat familiar flush of new magical power entering his system. What had been a faint trickle, barely felt now that his astral projection had been sent into the gem, had just become a river. *Wait! These chains are part of his body. I know that for gods, where they end and where their dimensions begins is sometimes up in the air, but that seems a little ridiculouSSSSSFUCK THAT HURT!!!!*

Harry's absorbing power didn't deaden any of the pain he was currently feeling, the chains around his limbs pulling them in different directions. Much worse than that, though was that each link of the various chains was digging into his body. Tiny mouth, tiny, **barbed** mouths, like the mouths of eels had appeared on each link of the chain, biting into Harry, their teeth trying to tear chunks out of his form, causing Harry to cry out in pain.

Yet even as they did, the power of Krakkan flowed into Harry, and Harry fought back. He was no stranger to pain, and started to push through it quickly, trying again to launch a spell towards the God as his astral presence charged towards Harry like a bull. This time the spell, a Patronus-infused Reducto, worked somewhat, blasting the creature off his feet. *So, I don't have much range, but now that I am drawing in his magic, I can exert some willpower beyond my body.*

Another spell burst out of Harry's arms shattering the chains binding them, although he had to reach down and aim the spells down at his feet to remove this change there. *Note to self, consider how to better visualize firing spells off from your legs.*

While that thought was somewhat whimsical, the majority of Harry's mind was not full of whimsy, but rage and concern for his loved ones. He could not afford to let this fight go on for too long, whatever tricks the chain using deity attempted. With that in mind, he now charged forwards, ducking and dodging the chains as they continued to shoot at him from everywhere around him, both close and far away. *Direct contact to his main body will probably work even better at draining his power than draining from his chains.*

"Die plaything, die sorcerer!" The creature shrieked, his voice nearly unintelligible such was his slathering hate. And from all around his body, further chains appeared. These had massive hooks on the end, and attacked with wills of their own, each of them sprouting further chains as they surged forwards.

"Protego," Harr hissed, a shield appearing just around his body, followed by two simple Patronus-infused attack spells. Mixing the feelings and mental aspect of a Patronus with a Reducto was somewhat tough, and Harry could feel his attention wavering, a new source of pain back in the material world threatening to drag his mind away.

The Reducto spell blasted the chain directly in front of Harry, and then Harry vaulted through, literally flying into the god. Krakkan grappled with him eagerly, reaching down to try and bite Harry. A binding spell created a large energy muzzle over his mouth, blocking that attempt, and Harry grabbed his neck, seemingly intent on throttling them, although his hand could barely reach around the thick appendage.

But before Harry could do anything else, Krakkan headbutted him, sending Harry reeling. Then, the God grant them in a bear hug, and Harry gasped in agony. Spikes on Krakkan's armor pierced his body easily, Harry's shield spell popping like a bubble. Then more chains were wrapping around Harry's body even as he used another spell to try to blast his way out of the God's grip, forcing Krakkan to let him go. Cutting spells slammed into the god from either side.

Before the chains could fully wrap around him Harry's spells had the impact they wanted, and he ducked to one side, rolling along nothingness for a moment to dodge a stomp from Krakkan. A spell sent back at the creature's knee smashed into it, overpowered with a lot of Harry's present magical essence, merely slicing the limb off entirely. The creature howled, and more chains appeared everywhere, one of which caught Harry in the back despite his best attempt at dodging, punching straight through his back and out his front. Harry was then sent reeling by another chain which cracked across his face, sending him stumbling, causing the chain embedded in his body to nearly ripped its way back out his body.

Harry screamed again in agony as chunks of his mental self were torn away, leaving his mental projection missing several inches of flesh.

But like his battle with the shadows, Harry dug deep, reflecting, *From my childhood to the battle with the basilisk, the numerous times I've been put under the Cruciatus and beyond. I have been practically trained to push through pain! Unfortunately, it looks as if this creature*

either doesn't feel pain or is instinctively dealing with it in a way that his two fellows couldn't. Should I be grateful that he isn't also noticing the stream of his magical energy I'm draining?

That selfsame magic was now filling Harry to the brim with power, and Harry could feel his astral presence grow larger and heal from his wounds. Soon he matched his opponent in size, before a spell like a thunderclap blasted out, catching the incoming chains.

Harry caught the next chain to try to attack in one hand, from behind was and Harry talked on it, shattering the small teeth of my mouth of the link he grabbed. Holding that, he charged forwards, his other hand up and blasting attack spells towards the creature.

Now more wary of Harry's spell crashed, if not still noticing the slow background drain of his magic, Krakkan used his chains to batter aside or absorbed the spells coming towards them. Not absorb as Harry was, but simply to take the hit for his main body. Regardless, it was a technique that seems to be working, and for a few seconds, the two of them battled it out at range, with Harry still holding that one chain that tried to ensnare his neck from behind.

And all the while, Harry's physical hand back on earth was touching the gem. And Harry's touching the gods astral form like this also was heightening the impact of his mutant power. The mutant power that allowed him to drain magical objects of the magic within them. In combating and touching Krakkan's spiritual form, Harry was draining his power directly, not simply through the medium of the gem, and that was a far more potent flow of energy.

Harry could feel it even as he fought Krakkan, dodging his chains now, able to avoid most of them save a few that came up out of the ground. It seemed Krakkan had noticed this, or else Harry would've been trying to stop the flow of magic from his realm into Harry. But he didn't not yet, and Harry could feel it. Raw magic, star stuff, power. Whatever you called it, it was now filling his body, filling it to the brim, to the breaking point and beyond, as the ritual began its work.

Soon, Harry's concentration was torn between the mental and the physical realms. Pain, greater pain than he had ever felt, even more than his battle against the Shadows or Galactus, wracked his physical body, threatening to break his concentration on the spiritual battle. Thankfully, his body was literally strapped into the ritual array, unable to move even if he had wanted to. And now his body began to change slowly, atom, molecule by molecule.

His bones and flesh began to change, shifting as his reserves grew, the magic being stolen from Krakkan focused and directed along specific lines thanks to the ritual he, Strange, and Odin had come up with building on the runes he had been given by Death and the Phoenix Force. And as the magic flowed, so did the pain.

Quickly, Krakkan capitalized like an animal seeing a weakness, pressing Harry so hard on the spiritual realm he could barely think for a time, but eventually Harry grew used to even that pain. Yet still Krakkan fought him hard. The creature didn't seem to have the magical

knowledge necessary to match Harry spell for spell, but his instinctual command of the pocket dimension they were within, his bestial combat style, was throwing Harry off badly.

And then Harry could feel the God instinctively pulling back on the magic somehow trying to reclaim control of it before Harry's body could process it, just like Balthakk, halting the process in an almost gut-wrenching manner. "Mine, mine!! Thief DIE! RSAAA!!!"

Dammit! This is is not going to be as fast as I'd hoped. Whoever said an idiot couldn't be dangerous never ran into this arse! Harry grumbled, fighting back as hard as he took. *This is not going to be as quick a process as I'd hoped...*

OOOOOOO

Gamora and Nebula were not the only two members of the Black Order to face sudden reversals. While Thanos had teleported through Ebony Maw's portal, Proxima Midnight's campaign ran into issues. Although in Proxima's case, her shifting fortune occurred well away from where she was currently fighting the Custodes Mundi team under Colossus.

Coming in from high above the, the first force of Asgardians to enter the war on the side of their allies was here, in Russia. The battle around Severomorsk was just that, around the city. IE, it was very far away from breakable things, like buildings, national monuments and so forth. So under Odin's orders, the largest portion of the Asgardian army struck here.

They came down out of the clouds. Some were flying under their own power. Others were born aloft on winds or items controlled by their brethren. Still more flew atop horses, enchanted to keep up with the Valkyries for this one battle. The cavalry of Queen Freya too were there, their eyes gleaming with the promise of death.

Led by Tyr, the combined Host flew down, bellowing their fury at the Chitauri and their cyborg constructs.

Energy beams began to smash into them almost at once thanks to the flying manta-ray creatures, but the Asgardians for the most part ignored them, simply smashed off course for a bit. Only the Valkyries would have been hurt by such, but they bore the blessings of their Queen and Lord and were beyond the touch of death on this day. The beams simply passed through them, their forms ignoring the laws of the mortal realm.

In return, the many archers among them fired back. While their arrows might seem to be primitive, they struck with all the force of angry gods, eventually shattering shielding and sending several of the manta rays to their doom as they continued to fall. For the first time in this war, the shoe in mid-range midair combat was very decidedly on the other foot, as the defenders now had both numerical superiority and durability far beyond what the Chitauri could call upon.

From just within Severomorsk, Morph saw this, staying hidden where he had gone to ground for now. He'd just been forced to pull back and out towards the near-empty outskirts as the Chitauri didn't seem to be fooled by his disguise. Being shot at almost immediately upon being noticed had told him that, but he kept the disguise anyway as he retreated after killing the two who had spotted him. He had hoped to figure out a way forward without being noticed, but now he watched as the few infantry within the city began to bubble out and take up defensive positions.

"Well, I don't think that the Asgardian religion has a phrase like ask and you shall receive or something color but damn me if they don't come through anyway." Morph quipped, angling back towards the city. "Now, I suppose I can just wait a bit for my que."

As the battle above became even more violent, and several of the Asgardians penetrated the defensive screen to land within the city and take the fight to the antiair guns and infantry within, morph pushed forward again. He shifted his form into a flexible body somewhat like Mister fantastic, heading up the side of an inner wall and through the barbed wire there to land on the other side. *I didn't really think this was a real closed city like that, but I suppose when Russia says something like that, you gotta take it seriously.*

Now in the real military zone within Severomorsk, Morph moved through the city/permanent military base, moving like through the near darkness, it being deep night now in this part of Russia. That helped him a lot, as did the fact he could turn his form into that of a literal chameleon.

Large segments of this portion of the city showed signs of fighting. There were still hundreds of corpses around, but he saw dozens of Chitauri as well. Shaking his head at the bodies, Morph continued to move inward, looking down at the scanner that Reed Richards had given him.

However, just because their troops were being pulled into a battle with the Asgardians elsewhere in the city didn't mean there weren't any around. As he rounded the corner, Morph came face-to-face with a patrol of five Chitauri, all of whom instantly raised their blasters.

Morph ducked out of sight, enlarging one arm so that it more resembled a whip, with a hammer at the end as one of the Chitauri came around the corner at him. The blow crashed into the alien, hurling him backwards down the street, although his fellows had dodged, two of them ducking down to their knees, the other two taking to the walls, clinging there like Spiderman. When Morph tried to duck his head back around the corner, he came under fire again, and cursed.

"Oh well, I've always been told I had a hard head." He smashed his head against the wall beside him, creating a hole there which he quickly backed into. Within a second he had burst out of the wall underneath one of the Chitauri, reaching up and grabbing it by its feet, hurling it across the street at one of the two who had been about to move around the corner toward Morph's previous position. The alien missile worked, and Morph quickly pulled out a rifle, a plasma rifle

that Harry, Dani and the others had forced Morph to train with. He couldn't really use projectile weapons despite his abilities, not unless he wanted to get rid of mass like someone was just expelling their own bones as projectile weapons.

He was able to gun down one of the Chitauri, before several of their bolts hit him, causing him to gasp, twitching backwards into cover wincing at the pain of his injuries to his side and lower thigh. Then he was rolling away from the doorway, morphing his body into the Thing's for a moment. The two Chitauri remaining charged through, but Morph was able to take them both from the side, crashing into and pummeling them into paste.

The last enemy in sight down, Morph shifted back into his normal body, listening to the fighting going on elsewhere high above and within the city for a few moments as he commanded his body to scabbed over the injuries he had taken, dealing with them quite quickly.

With that done, he stared down at the Chitauri in front of them, before slowly morphing back into the alien's body, this time mirroring a lot of the damage he saw. *Hopefully this will let me pass by any other patrols who see me.*

Like it had for Mystique in Paris, this did indeed work. Now ignored by the majority of the Chitauri infantry, he crossed through the base with impunity, occasionally pulling into the deeper darkness between buildings to check the scanner that Reed had given him. The strange wristwatch with the enlarging radar dish looked like something out of a Bond fic but worked quite well.

And then he saw it, the small, strange looking device was hidden in a storage warehouse, left unattended by the Chitauri. Perhaps Proxima had thought it would be easier to hide it if they didn't try to defend it? Regardless, whatever she thought, Morph was gleeful as he began to fire into it.

The beacon didn't even have the decency to explode or something. Instead, it just fizzed a bit, then the lights on its surface went out. "Well, that was anticlimactic," Morph mused, as outside in the night-time sky of Severomorsk, the third portal of the alien invasion shut down.

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Meanwhile elsewhere in Russia, the battle between Proxima Midnight and Custodes under Piotr had descended into a slobber knocker. Uzume had swiftly been permanently removed from the fight thanks to the rippers and skimmers above. Only Coyote, thanks to his still-intact teleporter was able to dodge enough fire to remain on the field. But his best efforts, the enlarged gauss rifle shots, did nothing to Proxima Midnight but smack her around a bit. The former triathlete had taken out the last of the Rippers and was now basically dueling alone with the remaining skimmers above them as Colossus and the others went at it hammer and tongs with the blue-skinned alien woman.

Hundreds of miles away, the slow moving manta ray aerial denial platforms floated ever outward from Severomorsk with hordes more skimmers. They pressed outward every few minutes, growing the defensive grid around the portal there with glacial slowness and just as much certainty.

Those manta ray things were really making a difference on this front, as well as defending the main portal, and the portal in China and Washington. Only Nebula and Gamora had decided not to make use of them. Gamora preferred to fort up and use infantry while Nebula was too proud, too certain in their technological and numerical superiority to care what defenses the locals would have.

However, the Chitauri were most decidedly not having all the wrong way. The arrival of the Asgardians had torn the center out of their defensive grid here in Russia, and those Asgardians were spreading out now backward, smashing the manta ray constructs out of the sky along with the Rippers, leaving the skimmers almost entirely alone unless they truly bothered them. Even the weaker Asgardians, those not prominent gods in their pantheon, could ignore the low caliber energy guns of the skimmers and infantry quite easily.

Facing off against the Custodes, Proxima Midnight knew this, and was snarling orders aloud, undoubtedly picked up by her strange headset even as she slowly and methodically pounded Husk, Colossus and Warpath into the ground.

Three on one, and she was simply **better** than all of them. She was just as fast as any of them, stronger than any but Warpath and far more experienced. By this point she was bleeding a little from a punch to the mouth, and one of her legs had been badly bruised. But Warpath's hatchets had been torn out of his hand, and she was using one of them now to duel with him while Colossus tried to get to his feet nearby. His own legs looked quite badly hurt, along with one of his arms, which had been twisted almost to resemble more of a corkscrew shape than a regular arm, making the steel-clad Russian very grateful he had barely any pain receptors in his metal form.

Husk dashed forward, tossing a chunk of Ripper at the woman in an overhead throw, shouting out, "Take that, you blue bitch!"

Proxima leaped up over the piece of flotsam, landing lightly on it and kicking off, darting towards Husk, her weapon raised. Husk gasped and raised her own fist to block the blow with her forearm, only for it to chop deeply into her arm. Blood gushed from the wound, and she felt back, crying out in pain.

"No!" Colossus barreled into the woman, grabbing her up in a bear hug from behind, twisting around and slamming her into the ground in a suplex before she could dodge.

But Proxima simply snarled, wrenched her arms sideways and broke his grip, flipping away. Warpath's hatchet nearly took her in the side of her chest, but she used his own hatchet to batter it aside, even as a sudden scream came in over the radio into her head. The sound was

not one made by a throat, rather it was the sound of a radio signal suddenly cut off.
“CrRKBZZZZZ!”

She snarled in rage, reaching up to her helmet with one hand as she backed away from the three combatants, Husk steadily pushing herself to her feet despite her ruined arm. “What, what was... how, are they somehow blocking my... No, I would still be able to direct the the troops through the... the Beacon!”

She snarled now, staring around her at the group which had pinned her down in place even as above her the few remaining skimmers that Coyote had been dueling with, and which her companions had been basically ignoring, raced away towards the distant city. “You! All of this, all of this was a faint!”

“I wouldn’t exactly call it a faint, it’s just, you weren’t our only objective,” Colossus demurred, as Warpath moved to stand beside his fellows, hefting his hatchet. “I’m sorry, does that disappoint you somehow?”

Realizing what this meant for her part of eradicating humanity, Proxima Midnight snarled and charged forwards, hefting her stolen hatchet above her. “If I have to kill all of you and then move on to kill this force’s entire quota of you humans with my own hands, I will do so! Die!”

She had completely forgotten about Coyote by this point, and so was completely unprepared for the enlarged gauss rifle that crashed into her side like a runaway boulder. Although not doing any actual harm, it knocked Proxima off her feet to one side, and then Warpath was on her, smashing her purloined hatchet out of Proxima’s hands with his own as Colossus hammered her with several punches while she was down.

Husk attempted to kick her, but the woman grabbed her foot, upending Husk to the ground, before smashing her elbow into Colossus’ chest. That however was not a good idea, as she winced, the juggernaut armor protecting him even as the hit caused him to stumble back. Then she was rolling underneath a strike from Warpath, lashing out with a kick that caught him in the back of the leg. He stumbled to his knees, and she roared as she twisted around her entire body on the fly, her fist slamming into Warpath’s jaw with enough force to actually break the bone.

And then Proxima was grabbing his hatchet as his grip on it loosened, bringing it around to slice into his body right underneath the armpit.

Warpath was also wearing a version of the Juggernaut armor, although not the original that Colossus was using. It stopped her blow, although it dented, as the head of his hatchet crumpled under the impact. Even Asgardian steel was no match for the red-style Orichalcum.

His return strike to Proxima in the side of the head, and she stumbled, whereupon Husk leaped onto her back, one arm going around Proxima’s neck as her other hand tried to gouge out Proxima’s eyes.

This almost seemed to scare Proxima, and she screeched in fury, reaching up for the woman, but not before Husk's metal fingers punched into her eyes, causing her to cry out in pain although Husk lacked the strength to actually pulp the woman's eyes. A second later, Husk was flung away, and then Colossus once more took her legs out from under her with a low tackle.

That was all it took. Disoriented and partially blinded, Proxima could barely see now and before her vision cleared, Warpath brought his hastily regained hatchet down with all his strength. Proxima still almost dodged but couldn't quite get out of the way in time.

For a moment, as the blue skinned alien woman thrashed with Warpath's hatchet halfway buried into the right of her skull over one eye, all three of them simply gasped, breathing in deeply as they stared at one of the toughest opponents they'd ever faced. "That was almost as tough as facing Jörmungandr. She wasn't nearly as tough, but her speed and fighting skill made it almost as hard a fight," Colossus breathed, shaking his head. "Is it just me, or was she wearing us down way more than we were her?"

"That might be the power to a point principal in terms of single combat," Wyatt mused, moving up beside them. "After all, I rather doubt that woman was as physically powerful as even one of the great serpent's legs was. But she could direct all that power through her normal-sized fists. How are you three doing?"

Husk looked down at her arm which had been cut nearly through by the woman's purloined weapon, shaking her head slightly. "I suppose you could say okay, but that was a too damn near run thing for me. I don't think mah normal way of healing would let me heal from being amputated. Even now, I don't want to try to peel away my skin and transform without at least one of our magic-type healers around."

"I am pretty much in the same boat. I am afraid either Storm or Guardian will need to see to my legs before I can change back into my normal body," Colossus reported, staring down at his mangled limbs. "... how they are working at all in keeping me upright, I rather don't want to think about."

Warpath just crawled, pointing at his mangled mouth and broken jaw, which he was holding with one hand now. While he was super durable and stronger than Colossus, he didn't have any kind of healing factor.

"Right. We'll pull back to Babylon. Hopefully the Asgardians have brought in their own magical healers, or else all of us are benched for the rest of this war," Colossus ordered.

It would take the Asgardians sometime, but the battle around Severomorsk was no longer in doubt, and another member of the Black Order had fallen. Asgard had put forth its strength to aid its allies, and the impact would soon be felt in every battlefield. And as Proxima fell, the battle for DC was decidedly turning against the invaders as well...

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Corvus grimaced, as reports of artillery fire and cannon fire reached him from the outskirts of the defensive zone. These humans had continued to bring in more and more troops, and now had their strange land-based vehicles firing from long-range at his own defenders, predominantly the Death Claw floating gun platforms. Their guns couldn't do much damage per hit, but there were several of them, and they also had artillery guns set to fire into the air.

They were starting to knock down his manta ray units, and more and more of the jet fighters were arriving from distant bases all the time. They were dying in droves as they entered combat with his skimmers, but even so, it was worrisome. *Perhaps we should have told the foolish godling to place every two beacons close to one another, so we could support... bah, who am I kidding?* Corvus snorted. *Only my lady wife and I... and perhaps Gamora... would ever agree to help one another.*

More importantly, these humans are a wily and militaristic society. This is quite a challenge. But I would not have been given the challenge to invade the most powerful nation of this planet if I was not worthy of it. Their strange ODM our intelligence assets reported are troublesome, as is the group of local heroes, but they will not stop me.

Snapping out a few orders, Corvus redirected the next hundred infantry transporters towards the outskirts of the city. There they would bolster his troops fighting it out with the largest contingent of human troops who had somehow gotten into the city. With that done, he turned his thoughts back to the overall battle even as his command node lifted off once more, moving swiftly through the city.

But the only so-called hero I need to be wary of is the lizard-like one. The rest do not seem to have enough firepower to bother me, although the reports of the magic user on the westward front is very worrisome. Luckily the humans are not using that female as they should be.... Unless it is she who is involved in the transportation side of things, removing the civilians from underfoot while teleporting in military units?

The alien snorted shaking his head. *But even that is foolish. Why in the world would you use magic on the defensive like that, or even care about civilians at all, when you could use it on the offense? Of course if they had done that, they would come close enough for me to engage in person, and my cloak and armor should be proof enough even magic thanks to my Lord Thanos' work on it.*

Beyond that, he'd had time and resources, and Corvus was somewhat pleased with how the battle was going overall. The only surprise on the strategic level was the human ocean going battleship, and it was now nearly out of play, harried and pushed back out to sea by his Rippers. Even the green-scaled human heroine was only dangerous to units in her direct vicinity.

Now, as the humans tried to push forward to reclaim their capital, the humans were paying an exorbitant price for their a few successes. Even now, an armored column that had been trying to move in from the north unsupported by their flyers had been ambushed by his skimmers,

which had slaughtered the entirety of that column to a man, retreating before they could be bounced in turn by jetfighters.

Listening to other reports, he ordered another band of skimmers down to help his infantry, wiping out another group of infantry. But at the same time, his southernmost aerial defense units were suddenly struck by missiles from outside their range.

That was something Corvus had to ruefully acknowledge was a bit of a problem, for his skimmers at least. Thanks to their use of rocket technology, the humans actually had a greater range than his smaller air units and while they weren't as durable, they were faster in a straight line. The humans had quickly developed the technique of firing their missiles, and then twisting around entirely on their axis and racing away before his skimmers could close.

But if they entered the range of his manta rays, they were as good as dead, and now he ordered a few of his southernmost Death Claws forward. The human jets couldn't move fast enough to dodge plasma-based anti-air fire, and he watched as his sensors reported seven downed jet fighters. But then two of the superheroes on that side of the city charged forward. Before the two Death Claws could retreat back into their fellow's defensive envelope, the two were blown out of the air. Further human units pushed in now, taking losses from the other Death Claws, but closing as did the two heroes, shredding several dozen skimmers and downing three more before retreating.

"Curse them," he mused. "These humans know when to strike and are a most adaptable foe. Where are the blasted Skrull? Surely their entire fleet could not have been halted in deep space? If we could but force them to keep troops elsewhere, at least their Air Force units would be forced to stay closer to their various bases..."

Corvus grumbled some more to himself even as he ordered in more troops. The air still belonged to the Chitauri over the human capital, but the forces pressing in from the south were annoying, digging in and moving forward slowly but surely. He pushed more infantry units down there, along with more ground-based anti-air defenses, hoping to set up a trap for the three superhero type flyers down there. It worked, and one of them was reported to 'disappear' whatever that meant, while another was shot down.

But then a horrifying report caused him to nearly shriek in anger and concern. "Commander Corvus, one of the flying units, the one that was reported to seemingly be a robot, it uses nanites!"

Instantly, Corvus had to order his forces nearby to retreat. The Chitauri were rightly terrified of nanites. Centuries ago, long before they had bowed before the might of Lord Thanos, they had fought an apocalyptic war with an Empire of sentient robots who used nanites. The bio-cyborg constructs of the Chitauri had proven nearly useless against them, and it had only been their dimension jumping technology that allowed the Chitauri to win the day. But even so, the war

had left societal scars on the hive-like Chitauri for reasons Corvus could only barely understand, even as he acknowledged it.

Unfortunately, dealing with this had taken his attention away from the greater, and far closer threat: the green-scaled human heroine.

"Lord Corvus, we cannot stop it! The local, the lizard-like one, it is homing in on your location!"

Cursing, Corvus paused in his orders, activating the controls on the command skimmer, lifting up off of the air and shifting away quickly. *Damn it, I got too concentrated on the southern front.*

However as he went, a blast of red actinic energy crashed into the bottom of his skimmer. Its shields activated, halting the blast, and Corvus turned in the direction of the strike, ordering his nearby infantry in to pursue. The beam continued to hammer into his shield for a few seconds, draining his shield before being cut off as whoever had fired it had to deal with the infantry.

Then, from the other side of the street several arrows and bullets flew, battering into the underside of his command node. They didn't do any damage, the armor of the command skimmer being enough to turn them aside. But more serious was the explosion that struck the back of it from directly behind him.

"Blast it, how did they get so close to us without any of my guards seeing them?" Snarling, Corvus ordered the command node higher into the air, pulling away from the fire of the infiltrators.

And almost directly into a thrown wall from the green scaled woman. "Human bitch!" He cursed as it flew barely an inch over his head, halting his upward progress into the air just enough for another beam of kinetic power to crash into his skimmer from below. This time the kinetic force of the strike was not dissipated by his shield, the generator having already expended itself and needing to recharge, and the command skimmer was hurled sideways, careening end-over-end to slam into the side of a skyscraper.

Corvus leaped clear, snarling in anger as the skimmer crashed into the skyscraper. He landed in the rubble of another building, rolling through it, then bouncing upward and twisting around, his scythe lashing out at a being who had just appeared behind him. His combat senses and experience had warned him there would be another attempt to close with him, and he watched as the blades of the enemy creature, he wasn't human for certain, blocked his weapon. *So, it wasn't just those human guards in the White House who had weapons comparable to our own.*

But regardless of that, the creature, who might be a horribly deformed human or a representative of an allied race, had vastly overestimated its own strength. Even blocked the strike smashed the creature off of its feet and off the side of the brutalized building with a cry. "Gaaa!"

Snarling, Corvus stood there for a second, fighting his instincts to go after the teleporting creature. *No, I cannot afford to be bogged down here for long. The Chitauri need me to direct them, and that blasted green-scaled creature worries me.*

He moved away quickly, jumping from one rooftop to another. An arrow was shot his way as he did so, followed by a bullet from nearby. But these were immediately responded to by his guards, the infantry closing in quickly on each point. And neither bothered Corvus, bouncing off his armor or even his own scaled skull. A second later, Corvus had left the area he had been ambushed in behind, disappearing under an invisibility cloak he had been given by Lord Thanos for a moment. It would need to be recharged quickly, but it would let him break contact.

Good shots, these humans, but foolish for all of that. If they but bowed their head to Lord Thanos, then we would leave half their population alive, we would even let them choose which nations to cull. A good eugenics program does wonders for...

Corvus's idle musings cut off as he spotted the green scaled being leaping up onto a nearby rooftop and racing towards him. "How are they tracking me!? My cloak should have kept them from finding me so quickly..." Corvus's eyes widened and he quickly placed a hand to his head. "Telepaths! The humans have telepaths, I had thought our defenses would be enough to keep them from interfering but perhaps they can still tell my brain from that of the normal Chitauri?"

Again shaking that thought off, Corvus sent out a recall order, pulling in any nearby Chitauri and ordering the next band of reinforcements to concentrate on his current position before turning at bay, bloodlust rising within him at the thought of these creatures chasing after him like he was a mere prey animal. "Foolish over-evolved ape! You will learn that I am not like the Chitauri. I am an acolyte of Lord Thanos," he snarled, sending out a blast of energy towards the incoming superhero from his weapon. "And you will find I am more than a match for you!"

Rogue ducked underneath the incoming blast, hurling herself forward with her hands outstretched, punching with both of them into the wall of the next building over as she smashed into it. Rolling through the rubble her punch caused, she then leaped upwards, smashing back out of the building and onto the nearby rooftop. "Ah migh' not be able to fly, but Ah can jump with the best of 'em," she grumbled as she closed the distance with the other alien.

From one of her expanded pouches, she pulled the same weapon she'd used against Jörmungandr, a massive oni club. This she hurled forward like a javelin, which crashed into the alien commander.

He smashed it out of the sky with his own weapon, but it slowed him down enough for Rogue to close the distance a bit. "I'm gonna get ya, Reaper Man!"

"I am not Reaper Man, I am Corvus Glaive, leader of the Black Order!" In retaliation, the alien waved its weapon towards her, cutting into the roof underneath her. "And when I sit atop of mountain of skulls devoted to my lord Thanos, you will know true terror!"

A large triangular segment of the roof slid sideways, taking Rogue with it, sending her sprawling into an alleyway between that building and a large office building beside it. Her curses rained out loud and heartfelt, unheard over the general tumult of falling debris.

But this in turn opened the alien up to a shield which smashed into his side with punishing force. He gasped at the hit and was sent staggering sideways even as the shield bounced back the way it had come to be grabbed out of the air by its wielder. That same wielder then closed quickly, his face set in a grim cast.

Snarling, Corvus charged forward towards him, his weapon lashing out in a cut, which the man rolled underneath, popping up and lashing out with a punch of his own. Corvus blocked it, with his own forearm, his eyes widening slightly in surprise at the man's strength. Still, it was nowhere near enough to bother him, but his attempt to grab that outstretched arm failed as the man quickly pulled back, and the shield came around again, smashing front on into his outstretched arm faster than Corvus could move.

That stung and Corvus snarled. "And I thought your swords and knives were well advanced of what they should be. What in the world is that shield made of to hurt such as I? It will make a fine prize."

"You can take my shield off my dead corpse!" Captain America responded, ducking under a two more blows, then leaping over a third, his shield battering into Corvus's face, then around to block another blow, deadening it to the point that there was no momentum imparted to the star-spangled warrior, despite the fact he was in the air. Instead, he dropped down, ducked underneath another strike, and lashed out at Corvus's leg.

Corvus blocked that blow, then dodged back from another, before Captain America's legs were swept out from under him by a blow from his staff. The man rolled away, dodging the next strike which sank the blade of the scythe into the ground for a second. Then he blocked the follow-on return strike, before twirling to the side around a third and hurling his shield the very short distance between Corvus and his body.

The strike sent Corvus stumbling, by which point, Rogue had pushed herself up out of the rubble in the street below. She leaped up onto the roof behind Corvus, and charged forwards, not having taken the time to retrieve her weapon from where it had been flung previously. Her strike smashed into Corvus's upper back and shoulder, hurling him to the side as he gave a cry of pain. For the first time since coming through the portal, indeed for the first time in many dozen conquests, Corvus felt pain, and didn't like it.

"I have fought on hundreds of worlds, I have faced the mightiest warriors or a dozen subjugated races, and you, you have hurt me!" Corvus growled, rolling his shoulder as he twisted, his scythe flashing out, forcing Rogue. "Taking your head will be a treat!"

At that point, several Chitauri finally responded to his recall. Above them, a dozen skimmers also began to flash through the cityscape above the battle, followed by two of the giant fish which must have just come through the portal.

Before they could close Cyclops announced his presence once more. A red beam crashed out from where he was hiding in another skyscraper, smashing into the side of one of the giant flying fish, sending it crashing into another building, burying it in the rubble.

Several ODMs who had been fighting within a few blocks also turned their attention in this direction thanks to Professor X directing them in this manner, trying to break away from the Chitauri they were currently fighting with mixed results. Only two of them were able to do so, but they pinned down seven of the Chitauri going to their commander's aid, and smashed one of the skimmers out of the sky before the others began to fire down at Corvus's original attackers.

"My Lord! This is the guard at the portal Beacon, we are under...." The radio signal, cut off abruptly under the sound of what sounded to Corvus's senses like a blade slicing into flesh, a sound he knew and mostly enjoyed hearing. But not at the moment.

He turned, snarling as he batted aside another attack from the man in red, white and blue, then ducked under a punch from the green scaled woman, his scythe coming up to hammer into her chest sending her stumbling back before ducking under his return blow. "Dammit! All of this was a feint!?"

With that, he tried to break away from them, tried to turn and raced towards where he knew the Beacon was. But it was too late. In the distance, there was a sound of a shield popping, and a moment later over the intercoms to Captain America and the others, Psylocke and Iceman's voice rang out in unison. "Cyclops, the Beacon is destroyed!"

Although it had taken several hours to pin Corvus down, Cap and Cyclops had chosen to break Iceman and Psylocke off from the group hunting the Chitauri commander several blocks back when Pinoptes informed them they were close to where the beacon lay. The two of them had taken the sewers to the nearest point they could to the beacon, directed by Pinoptes through Professor X, their own coms down thanks to being in the sewers. From there, Psylocke had caused a distraction, and Iceman had used his power to freeze the beacon within its defensive shield. The very high tech device had not responded well to becoming so cold it looked to have been doused in liquid nitrogen.

Corvus stared up at the sky in horror as the portal disappeared. "No, no, my lord, I have... I have **failed!!** You, you **monkeys** have made me fail! For that you will die!" He howled in fury and

turned, striking Rogue across the face with the edge of his scythe, drawing a small bead of blood from her cheek as his scythe tried to cut through her scales only to barely leave what amounted to a kind of cut that a man would get while shaving.

He managed to pull his blade back, but Rogue grabbed it before he could, pulling him into a punch that nearly shattered his ribs and hurled Corvus off his feet. "Ah don't think so, sugah!"

She looked over at Captain America, then gestured with her head towards the alien who was now trying to get to his feet, clutching at his chest. "We've got this, get on the horn, and tell everyone the good news!"

With a grin, Captain America rolled away from incoming fire from several skimmers, even as his hand raised to his helmet to do just that, connecting first to the ODMs, who he knew had been taking a pounding over the last few hours. The battle was not over by any means, there were the equivalent of several army divisions of alien infantry within the city by this point, and an equal number of skimmers, their accompanying big brothers, and so forth. But without further reinforcements, it was only a matter of time before numbers began to tell.

This was helped along by Rogue and the X-Men now as they closed on Corvus. Black Widow and Hawkeye stayed back, while Polaris, who still hadn't quite recovered from her earlier exertions, took down several of the skimmers, protecting the area from being overwhelmed from above. Meanwhile, Cyclops and Avalanche switched off, lashing out with strikes towards the incoming infantry, but also looking for a way to join the battle against Corvus.

Avalanche saw his chance when Corvus retreated from Rogue too fast for her to follow. Targeting the building the alien landed on, Avalanche growled, "Get buried, fucker!"

Corvus somehow kept his feet, rolling clear onto a street, but then was caught in the open by both Avalanche and Cyclops. The ground underneath him heaved, forcing him to try and concentrate on his balance for a moment, before Cyclops' beam struck him hard, hurling him toward where a waiting Rogue lashed out. "Home run!"

The blow crashed into Corvus's chest, hurling him into and through the third floor of a skyscraper, which began to come down behind him.

On the other side of the building, Corvus gagged, spitting out blood. He had very rarely been hit that hard before. Not even Black Dwarf, or the one time Lord Thanos had gained to spar with him and the other acolytes, although he knew Thanos had held back severely during the spar. *This is, this is not good. I, I need to...*

Pushing himself to his feet, he grabbed his weapon, then charged forward, not at the green scaled woman, but at one of the other attackers, who had just come around the downed building. This one, a redheaded female apparently, gasped, ducking back, but wasn't able to fully evade his strike. It took her across the shoulders and down to the side, opening up her

uniform in a welter of blood and guts. A second later however, even as she fell to the road, she disappeared with a pop of displaced air.

For a moment Corvus stared. "What in the world?"

He then rolled forward to dodge a blow from Rogue. Rogue followed up, and Corvus was forced to retreat again, dodging back through an alleyway, calling down fire from above. The only surviving Ripper from his reinforcements a moment ago turned in their direction, firing down at Rogue, halting her progress.

Bursting out the other side, Corvus saw the other heroes closing in on him. The teleporting one was back, along with a woman using a rifle, bringing with him a woman with yellow hair cropped short. Another one came in from Corvus's side, a blast of kinetic energy blasted towards Corvus. But Corvus whirled, smashing his scythe through the energy, bisecting it, sending the refracted kinetic energy everywhere, intercepting the teleporting one, who whooped as he was struck.

The blonde female threw explosives his way, her hands glowing with yellow energy for a moment. But she wasn't able to dodge a hurled rock at her head that he had kicked up towards her. Another, the teleporting one also retreated with a broken arm within seconds. This left the shield wielder, who had somehow kept up with Corvus the whole time. The two of them exchanged blows as more Chitauri arrived, forcing the others to turn their attention away from him.

Then a Ripper's corpse smashed into the ground in front of Corvus, and the large, green-scaled woman leaped off of its corpse towards him once more. "Avalanche, rock his world!"

At that Avalanche turned away from the incoming infantry, trusting Hawkeye and the two ODMs who had joined them to tie the infantry down for a few seconds without him. Corvus's retreat stopped as the building he had jumped towards collapsed before he reached it. This let Rogue close again.

Desperately, Corvus whirled around with his blade, but found it smashed aside, then the green scaled woman was barreling into him, hurling him to the rubble with her on top of him, where she grabbed at his throat. His scythe useless at this range, Corvus tried to punch her away, tried to break her grip, but the woman was far stronger than he was. A punch shattered his jaw and caused his eye to explode in his socket, and he screamed, thrashing trying to get away. "No! Lord Thanos! Proxima..."

Another punch shattered his jaw, and a third his skull as Rogue howled. "FUCK YOU!!!"

Corvus, first Lord of the Black Order, joined Nebula in death. The fact he was not the first would've brought him scant comfort. Nor would the knowledge that he would not be the last to die that day.

The Chitauri infantry kept on pushing in on the group for a few moments, but with Corvus dead, the Chitauri would not retreat from their positions elsewhere in the city. This let the ODMs and Force Washington finish off their current opponents quickly.

Grimacing, Cyclops looked around, making certain the enemy had been dealt with, and hoping that Black Widow and Boom Boom would be alright. They had both been teleported away by their emergency medical arrays, but he wouldn't know until Una or Amelia contacted him if that meant they had lived.

Setting that worry aside, he nodded at Nightcrawler, who nodded back grimacing at the pain of his broken arm, as Cyclops trotted into a nearby café, coming out with several carafes of water as he moved towards his blood-soaked girlfriend. "Hold out your hands."

The green scaled southern belle did so, a wry look on her face. "Mah hero."

Cyclops poured the water over her hands, and then over her face and upper body which caused Rogue to laugh quietly glancing down at her now soaked uniform. "Is this really the time for play sugar?" That uniform had been heavily modified to deal with the changes to her body from its original simple dark yellow and green beginnings, but was still the same spandex, nearly skintight uniform as the rest of the X-men used. Now soaked to the bone, it left very little to the imagination.

Snorting at his girlfriend's attempt to lighten the mood a bit from her execution of the enemy commander, shaking his head slightly. "I wasn't going for that, but you do look a lot better without blood splattered on you. As for the rest, maybe we can have a beach day after this?"

Snickering a bit, Rogue leaned in and gave him a kiss on the cheek. Then nearby blasts erupted and a group of skimmers dove down from above to pepper their position, forcing Cyclops into cover as Rogue glared up at them.

"If we could interrupt you two love birds for a moment!" Avalanche snarked, as more Chitauri infantry began to appear around and through distant buildings. "There is still a war on you know."

End Chapter