

(Every character depicted in the story below is a consenting legal adult over the age of 18)

A/N: Fighting Apocalypse.

-x-X-x-

Given the events of the last few days and all their preparations, Thaddeus has never felt more powerful. Which is why it's a little worrying when Apocalypse catches his first punch in a single palm, barely being pushed back a step by the force behind the blow. While Thaddeus does take some solace in the way the ancient mutant's lips pull back and his teeth grip in effort, it's still telling that their first exchange clearly marks them as closer to equal than not.

He immediately follows up his first strike with another all the same of course, whipping his other arm around... literally. Turning it to liquid diamond, he tries to spear right through Apocalypse's head... but the other mutant shifts out of the way, his own form equally liquid as he dodges Thaddeus' attempt at a lethal attack.

“You are five thousand years too early to threaten me, whelp.”

Thaddeus doesn't dignify that with a response, focusing on the fight at hand. At the same time, he's not unaware of the battles taking place all around him. However, he can't really spare even a single ounce of attention for everyone else's fights. Not when Apocalypse demands every last bit of it just to keep up.

They go through a few more exchanges, nothing much changing, before Apocalypse speaks again.

“Why are you even here? What has brought you to my doorstep?”

The inquisitive, almost bored tone, when he's giving his all to this fight, has Thaddeus bristling somewhat. Still, he can't help but bite out a response.

“You know why. You attacked my allies. More than that... you’re clearly one of the Externals. You know what Selene is up to.”

And then, because he might as well try...

“Surrender and release the people you’ve taken from your control. Help me stop her.”

Obviously, Thaddeus knows Apocalypse isn’t going to go for it. He’s not surprised when the ancient mutant lets out a bark of laughter in response.

“You are a confident one, whelp. Why would I disband my horsemen when I need every last drop of power against that witch? Her intentions have become clear with the exposure of her machinations towards you.”

Thaddeus frowns, dodging an attempt to grapple him and whipping out another liquid diamond arm to try to cut Apocalypse off at the knees. The hulking mutant simply leaps up into the air though, dodging that blow too.

“What does that even mean?”

Apocalypse adopts a knowing smirk.

“Your ignorance is to be expected. She’s cut you off from us. Hence why I did not feel your approach... and I suspect, why you have been blindly groping around in the dark searching for answers, rather than making your way towards any of us directly.”

Selene had... cut him off? From the other Externals? How and when? What did that even mean?

“She knew you to be one of us before you had even experienced your first death. She plotted against us for quite some time. Now she hunts us down, forced to skulk in the shadows out of fear of you... and your paramour.”

Apocalypse's eyes flick over to Emma and though Thaddeus doesn't fall for the obvious bait, he does see a hint of respect in the ancient mutant's eyes seemingly directed at the blonde. Her power is certainly nothing to scoff at, even for someone like Apocalypse.

Thaddeus, meanwhile, processes the other mutant's words as their fight continues, his brow furrowing in consternation. He'd figured Selene did something to all of the Externals to hide herself and them from his gaze. But if Apocalypse had felt Saul's death, then that thinking had been wrong. Instead, she'd done something to Thaddeus himself.

That felt like it should have been impossible. After all, why run from him in the first place if she had some magic spell capable of directly effecting him in such a way? And yet... he doesn't get the impression that Apocalypse is lying. That said...

"You fear her enough to do all of this. And she fears us enough to run and hide. And yet... you don't fear me enough to stand down and work with us to defeat her."

For the first time, Apocalypse pauses. Only a fraction of a second, not nearly long enough for Thaddeus to capitalize on it... but still, he pauses.

"... Fear, whelp? Fear has nothing to do with it. In the end, this is about survival, just as it has always been. The strong survive."

The strong survive. A survival of the fittest mentality... Storm had mentioned that was how Apocalypse thought, how he'd been thinking for the last five thousand years, supposedly. But if the strong survived... wasn't Thaddeus stronger than Apocalypse? Weren't Thaddeus and Emma together stronger than everyone?

Gritting his teeth, Thaddeus puts the metaphorical pedal to the metal. He puts on the gas, drawing upon more power, more energy, until its filling him to bursting. All the strength he's gained combined with all of the power he can call upon, augmented even further by his immense psychic potential.

He shines brightly for a second, making Apocalypse take a wary step back before setting his stance into a defensive one. Hands curling into fists, knowing his eyes are leaking nothing but golden light, Thaddeus tilts his head to the side. His voice changes, reverberating somewhat like Apocalypse's now as he grunts.

“Personally... I'd rather thrive.”

He launches himself forward again and this time his fist meets Apocalypse's face, the speed too much for the ancient mutant to keep up with. He lands the hit with a satisfying crunch, not quite breaking the older man's jaw but certainly giving him quite the bruise. Of course, even if he had broken his jaw, Apocalypse has a healing factor... an intense healing factor.

That's why Thaddeus doesn't stop at just one punch. He continues his barrage without stopping, continuing his onslaught while he has Apocalypse unbalanced. Blow after blow lands now, all of it powered by what feels like the power of a sun. Apocalypse is taken to the floor of his dais, grunting as he's pounded into the sandstone beneath him.

After a certain point though... it becomes obvious that the mutant isn't really fighting back anymore. Thaddeus can pulverize him into paste, but it's honestly difficult to want to do that to an unmoving, docile target. So... he stops. He pulls back, and he stares as Apocalypse looks up at him.

“Why do you stop? Where is your conviction?”

Thaddeus narrows his eyes.

“I have plenty of conviction, thank you very much. But I already told you... I'm not here to kill you. I'm here to recruit you. Help me defeat Selene.”

There's a pause... followed by a quirk of Apocalypse's lips.

“You are too late. You did not feel her drain Garbha-Hsien. Just as you did not feel her drain and kill the others. It is just us now, the last three Externals alive. She approaches ascendance.”

What? He must be lying. That couldn't be... only, it did make a disturbing amount of sense. They'd been running around like chickens with their heads cut off ever since Selene vanished. Every clue about immortal or old mutants had eventually turned up nothing, the numerous leads that SHIELD and similar organizations could turn up winding up too old to follow up on by the time they got there.

It was as though every External candidate they found turned out to be just a particularly old individual... or had vanished in the wind. Apocalypse was the first External besides Saul that Thaddeus had managed to actually lay eyes on, infuriatingly enough.

“Our only hope of fighting her... is to join together. If we become one, our power combined might be enough.”

Thaddeus stares at Apocalypse as he makes his proposal. Was this what the ancient mutant had been working towards? Was this his plan all along? Obviously if he'd won, Thaddeus wouldn't be learning any of this... but he hadn't won. In fact, he was very much losing.

Without taking his eyes off of Apocalypse, Thaddeus confirms that by reaching out to Emma. Apocalypse's Four Horsemen have all been defeated at this point and there have only been minor injuries on their side. The battle is all but won at this point.

“You must consume me. You must take my power for yourself.”

Thaddeus' eyes narrow, searching for the trap. As he does so, he dials it back a bit, his voice returning to normal.

“... What happened to this being about survival? The strong survive, no?”

Apocalypse's lips twitch in amusement.

“... Consider a rock battered by the ocean for a million years. It is worn down... but whole. The rock is strong. The rock is there. Just as I was there. But... in the end, it is not enough only to be there. It is not always enough to merely be strong.”

Suddenly, he's up out of the crater that Thaddeus punched him into, his arms reaching out as he lunges forward. Thaddeus moves without thinking, whipping forward a liquid diamond arm into Apocalypse's center mass to force him away.

But the ancient mutant does not dodge. And with a wet shunk, Thaddeus' arm goes right through Apocalypse's chest, even as the blue-skinned man's hands land upon Thaddeus' broad shoulders and he bares his teeth in a rictus of a grin.

“Do it! Or I will consume you and face the witch myself!”

He feels something between them then as Apocalypse begins to make good on that threat. He feels a tug as the other mutant tries to drag at his power, taking it for himself. Obviously, Thaddeus isn't about to let that happen. He bats away Apocalypse's metaphorical grasping hands and then reverses it, returning the favor a thousandfold.

He solidifies his grip on Apocalypse's insides and grabs the hulking mutant by his shoulder in turn... and he begins to *pull*. He drains away Apocalypse's power, recognizing that it may in fact be the only way. Not just to stop Selene... but to stop Apocalypse himself. The bastard always comes back for more, that's what Storm had said. For five thousand years, he's been making trouble.

A hero might hold themselves back. A hero might not kill a seemingly suicidal opponent. But Thaddeus was no hero. And if Apocalypse was just going to come back to be a problem down the line, if he was just going to be another enemy potentially holding a grudge against Thaddeus and his loved ones... then Thaddeus would deal with the ancient mutant here and now.

Over the next few minutes, Apocalypse's broad blue form... shrivels. It takes every last second of that time period, to be fair. The power that he holds within

him is immense, leaving Thaddeus feeling like he's about to burst with it. He's not, he can handle it... but it's certainly a near thing.

Apocalypse shrinks down, his physical body becoming that of an ancient man. His muscles vanish and he becomes skin and bones within his armor, until eventually he drops off of Thaddeus' arm and onto the ground, reduced to nothing but a lifeless husk.

Thaddeus stares down at what he has wrought with a frown. The whole fight from start to finish had felt... unsatisfying. Something was off about this situation. Why would Apocalypse set all of this up just to die like this? Was it all just to draw Thaddeus in quickly while Selene was still busy with the others? Was it-

Good... good.

Thaddeus twitches and stares down at the shriveled husk nonplused. He was now hearing Apocalypse's voice... in his head.

I did say, didn't I? This was our only chance. To become one. Now... submit.

A sudden, crushing weight descends upon his mind and Thaddeus cries out, driven down to a knee as Apocalypse's true plans become clear. The ancient mutant had 'jumped ship' so to speak... and was now trying to commandeer an entirely new vessel in Thaddeus.

Five thousand years of memory and history slam into barely two decades of lived experiences. Joined together as they are now, with Apocalypse taking up residence in Thaddeus' mind, it becomes a battle of wills, a contest between not just psychic power, but sheer experience. And in that latter category, Apocalypse completely overwhelms Thaddeus.

SUBMIT!

That doesn't mean Thaddeus just gives up, however. He doesn't stop fighting, even as it feels like he's drowning in Apocalypse's memories. This irritates the ancient mutant to no end... and Thaddeus takes strength from that irritation, feeling Apocalypse's fury growing as they struggle with one another. Out there in the real world, Thaddeus had Apocalypse beat through sheer bullshit. But here in their now shared mind space, it was Apocalypse who had the advantage.

Or... it would have been.

THADDEUS!

Emma's voice cuts through the weight of Apocalypse's mind and lived experiences like a finely honed blade. Thaddeus lets out a mental gasp as he feels her and the Phoenix's power swoop in.

What? No! The defenses-!

It becomes obvious in a moment that Apocalypse had been... mistaken about a few things. Perhaps he'd tried to enter Thaddeus' mind himself during their fight only to find it completely impenetrable. And so he'd decided to attempt this method instead, tricking Thaddeus into welcoming him inside where the protections against psychic intrusions would no longer matter.

Once past Thaddeus' mental defenses, Apocalypse no doubt thought it would be enough to keep anyone, even a Phoenix-Empowered Emma, from interfering with his takeover of Thaddeus' mind. Alas... he had miscalculated. He had not understood the love that existed between Thaddeus and Emma Frost.

For someone like Apocalypse, allowing a permanent backdoor connection to exist between his mind and another's, one that he neither controlled nor even held the upper hand in... was anathema. But for Thaddeus, it had been his happy choice for quite a while now.

The Phoenix, bursting with love, proceeds to scour away Apocalypse's assault on Thaddeus. The ancient mutant screams in fury and agony within the depths

of Thaddeus' mind even as he's boxed up, shoved into the mental equivalent of a small cage, and locked away.

Not completely destroyed. Doing so without destroying the power Thaddeus had drained would be impossible. And for all that Apocalypse had been trying to trick and trap him... there was one thing Thaddeus was confident he'd been telling the truth about.

Selene... they were going to need every ounce of firepower they could get to deal with Selene once and for all.

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A/N: Remember to Vote, leave a Like, and let me know what you think!