

I'm not Disney (PRAISE THE LORD, I have a good imagination) nor am I JKR.

This has not been Grammarlied. Well not all of it, anyway. Getting GDWHOM finished took too long. Another lesson of forcing the muse, LOL. On the other hand, I figure I should give you all a week or so to spot small mistakes and let me make the chapter better. Have fun!

Chapter 56: A Titan's Death

If there was one thing that infuriated Thor more than being defeated in a flyting, a test of wit and insults, it was being overlooked. It was being ignored. And as the dais carrying his opponent disappeared over the horizon towards the Chitauri portal Thor could barely see from here, Thor howled in fury, the sound as loud as any that Fenris could have made. "G, get back here you, you do not turn your, no, R, RAAGGGGGGGGG!!!"

From nearby, the wolfish son of Loki looked on as Thor howled and smashed the ground like a berserker, each blow delivered with enough force to make the remnants of the mountain underneath them shudder. The man's screaming was so loud it hurt Fenrir's ears, and his lips pulled back in a snarl of his own. "Cease your whining, cousin! Else you will find yourself on my menu!"

Even in the midst of this war and despite his accumulated, and quite serious, wounds, Fenrir would cheerfully admit to a desire to see how he could stack up against the god who had killed his hated brother, Jörmungandr. There were family bragging rights involved.

Thor's howling ceased, and he glared over at Fenrir for a moment, before he shook his head and turned away. "Bah, you are in no fit state to be a challenge even at the feast table, cousin. Keep thy fangs hidden behind thy lips."

That caused Fenrir to let loose his own snarl, but Thor ignored him now, hopping into his chariot and, with a flick of the reins, his chariot was on the move, flying high up into the air. As it went, Thor began to twirl Mjölnir above his head, reaching out to the weather around them for the first time.

It could've been honor which had held his hand in terms of using the local weather against Thanos before this, a desire to make their contest a physical battle alone, or simply a desire to get it stuck in. Thor was the warrior of the common man, not of kings, after all, and a good set to was always fun.

However, the reason behind this choice was actually something even simpler than that. Thor just hadn't thought of it. Despite his enjoyment of a good flyting, Thor rarely won them even if he thought he had, because, to put it simply, Thor really wasn't the sharpest tool in the shed.

But now, in a fit of pique and a desire to punish Thanos's troops in his absence, Thor called on those powers. As he rose into the sky in his chariot, he whirled Mjölnir above his head, calling upon the storm as he made his way forward around a slowly crumbling mountain peak. Its sides had been literally carved into by the previous combat, leaving behind a almost fantastical shape that was only now yielding to reality in the form of gravity.

This allowed Fenrir to watch Thor for some time as his hurricane from Hel built up around and above him before smashing downwards into the defenders. Glowing bubbles of energy appeared, but several fell quickly, while others held only for a few moments while in the air, Fenrir could see Rippers being tossed around or torn to pieces by the hurricane force winds.

"My word, and I thought I was supposed to be the one with a temper," Fenris murmured, shaking his head before sniffing the wind. *Hmm... how to get there...* Unlike Thor, Fenrir couldn't fly, but here, at least, his massive size would be a help. He bounded over the mountains, leaping from one crag to another and then up sheer rock faces before closing with the ongoing battle between the Asgardian host and the dug in Chitauri.

While Thor had joined the fight against Thanos, most of the Einherjar and Asgardians like Tyr and Hogun had, once Thanos was fully engaged with dealing with Thor, bypassed that portion of the battlefield that had once been a mountain range. The lack of flyers had allowed them to close and deal with a significant portion of the Chitauri's outermost defenses, but they had since begun to hit the truly organized portion of those defenses. By this point, those defenses were quite formidable, and even though the Asgardians were still making good headway, smashing this or that bunker, clearing out this or that trench, the going was **far** harder for the Einherjar.

To an outside observer, this conflict might've seemed almost like a mix of Middle Ages mountain warfare, perhaps like something during the Muslim conquest of the Iberian Peninsula, mixed with the Italian front in World War I. The defending Chitauri opened up with their guns at range, and before he had moved forward to deal with Hela's team, Ebony Maw had brought in several ground-based units that, despite being direct fire systems, filled the same niche for the Chitauri as short-ranged artillery would for a human army.

In contrast, the Einherjar were wielding swords, spears, axes and armor. All of them were ancient warriors who had, through bravery in battle in their original lives, won a place at Odin's table before being allowed to start a new life in Valhalla. While most of them were superlative warriors, against dug in defenders with energy weapons they fared poorly, even if their armor gave them far more durability than any similar weight in Earth-made armor would have.

Worryingly to most of the Einherjar, dying to enemy fire without even being able to come close to the enemy was not a way for such warriors to die. It was too common too bland to earn them

a return to Valhalla. Simply dying in battle was not enough for that, especially those who were on their second, or, in many cases, third lives. All of them knew that Odin and Freya would not be willing to simply accept them back. Odin had warned them all of such before sending them across the Rainbow Bridge. If they died in such a inglorious manner, they would die permanently, never to see the fields of Outer Asgard again.

The Valkyrie, too, were somewhat limited in how they could impact the battlefield. Their aim was superlative, and their range insane. Better, they and their horses were not, technically part of this dimension of existence, the magic of their station meaning that as long as they were on horseback, they could not be struck by purely physical assault. But the Valkyries' arrows, as enchanted as they were, were not enough to make a real difference, coupled by the fact there were only a handful fighting in this conflict. Most of them had been assigned to follow the Bright One in battle in Russia.

Ebony Maw had retreated straight back to the main portal when his Master had ordered him to. From there, he had been giving out orders, attempting to create a even better defense in depth than he had before by the use of bringing in further shield generators. He had hoped that his Lord Thanos would finish off the Asgardians that he was personally fighting, but since most of that horde had already bypassed Lord Thanos, he knew that the defenses of the main beacon would still come under heavy assault.

An assault that Ebony Maw knew would be the ultimate battle of this whole campaign. Unlike Thanos, he had checked in with the Chitauri, and knew that beside the portal that Supergiant had been in charge of, all of the other portals around the world had already been closed. While a part of Ebony Maw rejoiced in the demise of his competitors for their Master's favor, in particular Corvus Glaive and Gamora, that had not made for pleasant listening.

Now, as lightning and hurricane force winds tore out of the sky down towards his defenses, shredding skimmers and rippers alike before crashing into the shields, Ebony Maw congratulated himself on his forward planning. The scattered shields held in places defending the dug in ground forces, although once more, Ebony Maw was forced to watch as the majority of his air units, which he had barely begun to build up again, get wiped out within seconds. So devastating was the weather-based assault that he barked orders to keep rippers on the other side of the portal for a time.

While the area around the actual main portal was protected by several connected shield generators, the area within that shield wasn't exactly infinite, and Rippers were large units. "Damn it," Ebony Maw muttered. "And with so many losses in my CAP, I have no idea what is going on away from the battlefield. Who knows what the humans are doing, thus protected by their allies."

He might have continued down that vein if not for the battle around the beacon changing once more.

Thor was able to keep control of the storm well enough to keep the main strength of it away from his own host, while blinding and tearing away at the defenses. As the Thunderer continued to release his fury, bellowing a war cry as he sent lightning down against their foes, the Einherjar and his fellow Asgardians the attacking host cheered and the Einherjar charged up the various slopes or climbed up the various walls of stone to close with their foes.

And with them came Fenrir, howling and barreling into the first of the hardened defensive points. A shield that had held against all that Thor could throw at it shattered as the massive wolf crashed into it. His numerous wounds were still bothering him, but Fenrir was the Wolf Who Eats The Sun, and he would not simply retreat or let others do his fighting for him.

Even as he reached down to rend a large, snail-like gun station into pieces, finding the meat much more to his liking than the Chitauri themselves, Fenrir's eyes widened. A chunk of the ruined meat fell away from his slack jaws as he stared, ignoring the Chitauri infantry's attempts to injure him with their puny weapons. Instead, all his attention was on the sight of his friend Dani, hacking her way through a trench. "I thought she had been magicked away!"

Thanks to the vagaries of the battle against the Mad Titan, Danielle had actually survived the clash between him and Thor through the simple expedient of being too far away from ground zero to be killed by the reverberations or aftershocks of their clash. Fenrir and the others had at least done a great job of pushing Thanos around in the air, even if they hadn't really done the purple-skinned prune any real harm.

That didn't mean she had gotten out of that or the preceding battles with Thanos unscathed, though. One of her boots wasn't functioning right, forcing her to basically use the other one as if it was a pogo stick at times when she needed to jump, while also skimming along on one foot like a ballerina, which had taken a great deal of getting used to, especially in this kind of environment with so many vertical surfaces. Her helmet had also been almost shattered, and she had discarded it somewhere.

But she still had Sigyn's gift in one hand, and now Fenris watched, his eyes wide, she leaped out of the first short trench she had been fighting in, charging towards another trench that the Chitauri had dug out of the solid stone of the mountain as a shield covering it and several more went down. In her other hand, her gauss rifle boomed, clearing several of the Chitauri ahead of her before she skidded into the trench. Sigyn's Gift shifted from short sword to spear and she stabbed it forward before she whirled, changing it into a broadsword for a second to cut another Chitauri's head off. This opened her up to being shot in the side by one of the defenders

but luckily, her armor still held even as she hissed in pain, and twisted around, lashing out with a whip that cracked into the man's face.

"More courage than sense that girl," Fenrir mused before shaking his head. In the next second he charged to join her, a wide grin on his wolfish face before he howled, bounding from one mountaintop to another then down onto the same large, flat escarpment Dani had reached. *Perhaps that is why I like her so much!*

As the Einherjar reached and began to breach the defensive line of the Chitauri, Thor was forced to rein back his storm. The rain and wind remained heavy enough to bother the Chitauri's ability to target anyone more than a few yards away from them, while he began to aim his lightning at specific targets down below. However, in the air, the Chitauri began to bring in more aerial forces, pushing out from the shielded area around the main portal as quickly as they could. This process was fought by both Thor and the Valkyries who closed, swords flashing and attacking with impunity. There were a few magic-users among the other Asgardians, but in comparison to Thor's lightning, their attacks wouldn't have been able to do much against the sheer numbers of Chitauri coming through the portal.

At the same time that this allowed more air based Chitauri units to come through the main portal, Ebony Maw used them to shield his own flight up into the air. Soon, he was above where the main aerial battle was, and slowly drifted down, coming in behind Thor's chariot. The oddity of that creation struck Ebony Maw for a moment, but then, he was within range to use his voice.

He started small, soothing, his voice that of a friend almost, a non-threat, causing Thor's almost instant turn to swat him away to stop in place. "My, you are powerful aren't you! So strong, so fierce..."

Ebony Maw continued in this vein for a few moments as Thor resumed attacking the Chitauri, the voice doing its work on his mind swiftly. After Those who Watch Above in Shadow had been dealt with, Odin had begun to develop circlets that could protect the mind from telepathic assault, yet even they had yet to be finished, as he had not wanted to ask for help from the mortals on the project, a bit of hubris from the god of kings. Even if they had, though, against something that came through Thor's ears like this they would have been no help.

Thor had almost no defense whatsoever against such an attack, not the ear-covering coms, not even the feral nature which had allowed Fenris to try and keep a similar attack at bay for long minutes during Ebony Maw's clash with Hela and the rest. Within a few seconds, Ebony Maw had moved on from making himself seem like a friend to directly controlling Thor, whose eyes seemed to dull to the hue of glass rather than sparkling with life. Mjölnir fell to his side, almost

out of his grip entirely, while his goats reared and stomped, trying to turn around enough to see what was going on with their master.

“You should prove it. You should prove how strong you are. Prove it by wiping out your fellow Asgardians!” Ebony Maw hissed, a small triumphant smile on his alien features, ignoring the snorting and glaring coming from the two strange creatures that pulled his chariot as he settled into place behind him. *If I can turn him against his fellows, possibly alongside that giant animal, then I can win this battle! By the time the Custodes or other world powers turned their attention our way, we would spread out throughout this entire mountain range, and will be insanely costly to dig us out, especially once Lord Thanos returns from dealing with the Phoenix Force Avatar.*

For just a moment, Thor’s **very nature** rebelled. Thor was the defender of the common man, the chief guardian of Asgard. It was he who had for ages stood between them and the jotun, between man and the fell beasts beyond the fires of their settlements. Never had a moment, come when he would turn his hammer against the Asatru, the believers, or his fellows. Never. Not even when he was his drunkest or when his blood was hottest would Thor ever be unable to tell friend from foe.

Thor stood there, his face a rictus of indecision, his eyes glazed, his grip around Mjölfnir’s gripping it so hard the wood began to creak, his other hand cracking the metal frame of his chariot’s rim, while below, no one was in a position to see what was happening, his own storm debilitating to all but his fellow Asgardians. And not one of them had seen Ebony Maw take to the air. Now, even as Tyr and Hogun, Thor’s closest friends in the host, wondered why his lightning had slackened, they still couldn’t see Ebony Maw, hidden by the walls and bottom of the chariot from their view.

Eventually, Thor’s mind could not sustain the contest, unable to push out Ebony Maw’s influence. His eyes still those of a corpse, Thor began to move once more. Mjölfnir rose in the air as he flicked the reins of his chariot, commanding his goats to towards the ground. A second later, lightning arced away from him, aiming not this time at the Chitauri, but at the nearest of the Asgardians.

Njor screamed as a bolt of lightning slammed into him from on high, sending him sideways and burning his shoulder and neck badly despite his Asgardian durability. The father of Freya wasn’t as physically durable of their race, but he still withstood the strike better than most, the wounds healing over quickly as his skin shifted into water before reforming. Around him, several of the aliens spasmed from being so close to the lightning blast that had hit the god of the sea. This attack was followed by still more raging down on the Asgardian host, hitting more than a few Asgardians and the Valkyries.

Even now, somehow Thor's basic deific nature wouldn't allow him to strike at the Einherjar, the common men among the host. However, given that Thor was both a fellow Asgardian and his lightning was partially magical, the Valkyries started to take losses as they had earlier when Thanos had struck the host.

Snarling, Tyr raced up into the air to engage Thor, shouting, "What worm has invaded your brain, Thunderer? You're hitting your own!"

Tyr was mighty warrior, a strong swordsman, and one of the most physically powerful of the gods, a god of justice, bloodshed and order. Yet Thor was stronger physically than even Odin with his girdle of strength and Mjölnir in his grip, although nowhere near as experienced, skilled in war or learned in magic. Whereas Gungnir would have easily repelled a strike from Mjölnir thanks to the magic in the spear and it's wielder, Tyr's sword shattered even as it deflected a blow from the mighty hammer.

A second later, Thor was staggered by a shoulder charge to the point where he nearly fell off the back of his chariot, knocking Ebony Maw off in turn. This did not break the gray-skinned alien's mind control, however. Instead Thor wrapped his mighty arm around the other man's neck, twisted, and tossed him aside down towards the ground below. Before he landed, several lightning blasts slammed into Tyr, causing him to cry out in pain, although nowhere near as much as Njord, the Aesir having more durability than the Vanir. Better, this was a just war, a war against a friend who had been mind-controlled. The justice inherent in his cause powered Tyr still further.

He hit the ground and rolled down it into a ravine, cursing volubly, before stopping his dissent and beginning to climb back up towards the battlefield above, barely worse for wear. "Curse it, Thor, I knew someday your bullheaded nature would bite us all on our fundament. And you owe me a sword, you strawberry-bearded ass!"

Normally any attempt to call his hair or beard strawberry would have resulted in a wrestling match. Thor knew his hair was the color of sunset, thank you, and anything else was vile calumny. However, now Thor simply turned his attention elsewhere, saying nothing as he launched another lightning bolt downward.

His target at the moment was Hogun, the dour mace wielder. He now held a shield above his head, grimacing as the metal of the shield began to melt and the wood began to smoke despite the many enchantments on it, as he shouted at his friend, trying to get through to him. "Friend Thor, this is not you! You are our war leader, our mighty hammer. Whatever has happened, do not forget who you are!"

This did nothing. Thor's mind was wholly locked under Ebony Maw's control. He simply kept up the strike, burning Hogun's magically enhanced shield into slag on his arm.

Snarling, Fenrir tried to leap up to engage Thor, but before she could reach him, the giant wolf found himself suddenly simply stopping in the air. Telekinetic energy wound around him in the form of several bands, and then he was slammed back down into the ground, causing his wounds to ignite in renewed agony even as Ebony Maw's hated voice hissed out, "I think not beast!"

Holding Fenrir pinned with his telekinetic powers, Ebony Maw began to hiss into his ear, a smile of triumph on his face as he went to work on creating a second thrall. "So sore, so wounded, so ill-used. Why should a mighty beast like you fight for these Asgardians, they are not your pack, not your family. Why should you fight for the humans? They are so weak, so fleeting. Why..."

Throughout this turn in the tide, Ebony Maw had not reckoned for Danielle, nor had Thor, concentrating as he was on his fellow Asgardians. Even as Ebony Maw began to work his fell will on her friend, Dani had been crossing through the battlefield, not an easy proposition, until she was hidden among a group of dad Chitauri close enough to Thor she could maybe, just maybe, use her powers on him. *Oh, I so hope he's within my range! There's no way I can get up to from here, not with my one hover boot barely working at this point,* Danielle thought, as she reached towards Thor with her empathic-based powers.

Like before with Thanos, she found that her strange mental assault could easily find a target, and instantly, whatever Thor was seeing under Ebony Maw's control changed. Where before he had seen himself standing against his fellow friends in the firm belief that they had betrayed him, not the other way around, now Thor saw his former family. The family he'd had before Those Who Watch Above in Shadow had felt they were surplus to the great play the Shadows wanted to put on. He saw his sons, his wife Sif. And then he saw himself, attacking them, his eyes blank, visible shadows wreathing his limbs, his face.

It was a mix of Thor's most horrifying memory, as he had remembered his sons, how they had died in battle against the Jotun, and his deepest horror: the idea that he could be controlled, compelled to turn on those he loved. As he had now thanks to Ebony Maw.

"AAAAHGGG!!!!" Thor screamed, trying to banish the image, his Ebony Maw-controlled mind, trying to fight through them, trying to dispel the images.

This allowed Tyr to pull himself out of the crevice he found himself in, and then leap up towards his friend, Hogun doing much the same. They grabbed at the bottom of the chariot, then hauled themselves upwards, only to find Thor fighting off phantasms, shouting curses and screams at the Shadows. "Damn you all, you will never control me again!"

"Nay, my friend never will they nor that short, gray-skinned alien," Tyr growled.

He grabbed his friend's arm, holding it still with all his might, while Hogan crashed his mace down onto Thor's wrist. The Thunderer's hand released, dropping Mjölnir where it rattled on the bottom of his chariot and then out the back, falling towards the ground below. It hit with all the power of a comet, tossing Chitauri in all directions.

Without the hammer in his hand, Hogun and Tyr began to grapple seriously with Thor, restraining him as Tyr began to prepare a spell to rid Thor of the mental malady controlling his actions.

Elsewhere on the battlefield, the Asgardian host, with several of their strongest sidelined and the weather clearing up, began to be pushed back and away by the defenders. With more of them coming through the infantry sized portals, and now with air units coming in, once more the differences in their weapons and tactics began to tell. The badly battered Dani, and a few Asgardians scattered around the area held, but the Einherjar were forced to duck into cover or retreat back down the exceedingly nasty slope that they had already felt their way up.

For his part, Ebony Maw's attempts to take over Fenris as he had already Thor was running into the rage just underneath the surface of Fenrir's mind at the moment, bolstered further by the sheer pain that Fenris was still feeling from the various wounds he had taken in his battle with Thanos. Ebony Maw's powers simply couldn't block out enough of that pain in order to take over the feral mind of the wolf as he had Thor. At least not quickly. Still, as Fenris howled and raged in midair in front of him, Ebony Maw Maw knew was only a matter of time.

However, while concentrating on the tactical battle, Ebony Maw had forgotten the strategic picture.

High above what had previously been a significant chunk of the Himalayan mountain range, Storm flew at the head of a mixed force of bombers and fighters. The fighters were a very mixed bag indeed, coming from numerous different nations around the embattled area, with the majority being American built. The bombers were entirely American, the B-52 Stratofortress, nicknamed, Storm had learned, by the men who crewed them as the BUFF. What that meant, she had no idea, but she was glad they were there. They had been sent out from a US Base in the Middle East, and had been in flight within a bear hour of the invasion starting, sent this way because the local commander had decided that India and its neighbors would need the help against the invaders setting up shop in the Himalayas.

For her part, Ororo had finished evacuating Paris as she had previously Washington soon after the portal there had been closed. And then, after downing perhaps twice as much Pepper-up Potion as was good for her, Ororo had first healed those she could in the infirmary on Fortress Mars and then directed her energies down to this portal. It was only one of two remaining, and the sensor readings that Pinoptes had been feeding her and the rest of the world guard since

this invasion began had told Storm that this portal had been created by the main beacon. Destroy it, and the one portal remaining in China wouldn't be able to piggyback off its signal into the dimensional gap where the Chitauri invasion force resided.

In so doing, Ororo had joined up with an operation already going on. India and several other nearby countries had been basically fighting Chitauri skimmers in the air since shortly after the main portal had opened, aided by a US carrier group in the Indian Ocean. Now, these forces had been further reinforced by fighter jets from further away, and the bombers.

Now, as Storm flew down, lashing out with lightning strikes and spells alike towards Ebony Maw, disrupting his attempts to suborn Fenris, the B-52s flew on towards the main portal. The hundreds of skimmers and dozens of rippers moved up to engage Storm and the fighters, not seeming to realize at first the Bombers were the main threat. This changed the moment bombs began to drop, but those bombs continued to hammer down, causing further destruction on the ground and tearing huge swaths into the defense in depth that Ebony Maw had tried to create from the first. This destruction continued on, a straight line racing towards the portal and the beacon buried under the Chitauri equivalent of concrete and granite.

Gasping in pain from a near miss from a spell that looked like a striking snake only with multiple heads which had just missed his side, Ebony Maw twisted around, darting towards the distant portal as still more bombs began to fall. He tried to reach out, tried to grab at those bombs, to toss them back up towards their motherships, but in concentrating on that, he opened himself up to a blast from Storm. The baleful blast of fire crashed into his back, shattering his telekinetic shield and hurling him down towards the ground.

Ebony Maw was able to halt himself well above the ground, but the normally calm cynical alien stared around, desperate now. The rippers were getting a good showing of themselves, and more than a dozen of the human bombers had been smashed out of the air, but they in turn were being attacked by Fenris and arm as she twisted away from Ebony Maw. Too much was going on, and he had not brought forth enough Dreadwyngs to stop the humans in the air. He knew that his powers would not be able to turn the tide any longer as still more jet fighters join the battle and rolled again across the battlefield and then lightning once more began to crash across the battlefield from a second source.

Whether it was the smack to the side of the head from Hogun's mace, or the spell crafted by Tyr to force Thor to see the truth would never truly be known. But Thor was back in control of himself, and more furious than he had been even when Thanos had simply ignored him to go after the Avatar. Now he was everywhere, lashing out with lightning and hammer alike, riding rippers down in his chariot, hurling dozens of skimmers around with every blow and even the passage of his chariot.

Seeing this, Ebony Maw knew that the battle was lost. Looking around, Ebony Maw cursed his luck. There wasn't a single infantry-sized portal around him, although he could see at least three of them had been in this position, but they had been smashed. The nearest portal seemed to be at least two hundred meters away, over broken cracked terrain and up a sheer cliff face, set into another trench overlooking the area where Ebony Maw had found himself landing.

Lifting up into the air, and using his telekinetic powers in defense only, Ebony Maw charged towards that portal, determined to get away.

An arrow of all things flashed down from another position nearby. By this point, Dani knew what to look for in terms of what created the infantry-sized portals. Her arrow, shot from Sigyn's Gift, struck like a tank shell, shattering the device buried at the back of the infantry trench, the portal cutting out with the suddenness that cut a Chitauri in half as he came through the portal.

Ebony Maw skidded to a stop in midair, desperately looking around for another portal, only to scream as a blast of wind crashed into him so strong that it overrode his ability to fly. It slammed him back into the stone wall of the mountainside beside him.

And then there was lightning. Ebony Maw tried to raise a telekinetic shield, tried to protect himself, but the lightning crashed into him and he screamed as his shield failed. It protected him enough to survive the strike, but he was burned badly, and the next moment, there was a hammer slamming into his head with sufficient force to pulp skull and brain alike.

Thor growled as he pulled Mjölnir out of the hole in the stone he had made after splattering the vile creatures head all over the mountainside. "You puny, cowardly thing, you tried to control me, **me!**" Horror at the memory of their time under the shadows and fury at the attempt warred within him even now that he had avenged himself, and Thor spent several moments hammering Ebony Maw's body until not more than blood and viscera remained.

Only as Mjölnir's stone head slammed into the stone of the mountain without even a hint of flesh within, did Thor come back to himself. As he did, he turned his eyes towards the large glowing portal in the distance as above him, while above, the last of the B-52s dropped their payloads. Already most of them had emptied their entire ordinance, and had turned for home, but there were still a few up there dropping bombs while Storm took the battle of the enemy in the air and the Asgardian host began to once more press in hard.

The battle still took quite a while. The Chitauri didn't seem to know when they were beaten, and more reinforcements were coming through every portal that Ebony Maw had set up. But with Storm there and the Asgardian host pushing back in, along with the holes torn out of their defenses thanks to the bombers, the battle was no longer in doubt. And around the same time that Thanos began to truly batter Pheonix into ruin, the main beacon was destroyed, and the portal in China popped out of existence, as did the main one. The invasion of Earth was over,

with the Chitauri trapped in the space between dimensions, unable to aid their lord or his goals any longer.

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It took Jean Grey a little over two hours to cross from where the Mandarin's bunker was and where the portal lay. In that time, Thanos had seemingly done nothing, content to simply sit there, directing the forces as they came through the portal, ignoring the drones, although Jean doubted he was unaware of them. What he was doing she didn't know, but it had to deal with his throne, and with a bracer he wore on one wrist. According to the Chinese analysts who were relaying this to Jean from the Mandarin's bunker, it looked to have been battered and warped, but he had replaced it with a second bracer that looked, to the drones, like it a datapad embedded in it, as Thanos immediately began to fiddle with it.

"His face, it is one of total concentration and, and more, Lady Pheonix," the analyst reported. "I, I do not know how to describe his face."

"Thanos is planning something, Jean," Pinoptes warned. He had previously wound his way throughout the unofficial command networks that were trying to restore order throughout China, offering what help he could, and since Phoenix's shouting match with the Mandarin, had seen no reason to not expand that network further. "I am looking at the real time data from these drones, which are actually quite sophisticated. He looks completely absorbed in what he is doing, but is... if he was human, I would say he was one preparing for a religious experience, almost? It is hard even for me to describe.

Grimacing, Jean acknowledged, flying into the attack. In the preceding hours, several hundred eel-like flying fortresses, an equal amount of the weird manta ray anti-air air units and whole divisions of skimmers had come through with even more infantry. They had joined up with what forces had already been around the portal, and now several dozen miles in every direction were totally in Chitauri control, while wings of skimmers and the ee-like things spread further away.

To any regular enemy, that would have seemed a formidable army, and the Chinese, fractured and still trying to regain control of some of tis scattered forces, would have been hard pressed to dislodge them, especially with more reinforcements coming through from the portal. Yet all of that, it was but a sideshow to the real threat. The threat of Thanos, and Jean knew it.

The redhead was barely within sight of the alien's outer defensive envelope when Pinoptes shouted a warning. "Pheonix, he's aware of you. Be careful."

The drones that the Mandarin had designed were good at what they did, that is recording events they observed in real time, sending that information back to their controllers. However, they lacked the ability to read the sudden energy spike in Thanos's throne, or the link that had

been established between his throne, and through a bit of quantum engineering, to his distant flagship.

Once more, as had been the case many times during his clash with Hela's team and then Thor, a shield of power enveloped Titan and throne alike. It rippled, a series of energy waves, two solid barriers almost like glass, while between them, a dark bluish energy buzzed. "Come, Avatar," Thanos whispered behind these shields. "Come. I am ready for you, ready for the Everfire."

Despite Pinoptes warning, Jean made no move to retreat. Instead she screamed out her warcry, a harsh raptor's screech as her fiery aura flared, going from just covering her body to spreading out to cover miles in several directions. It then raced out directly towards the Chitauri. Heat and telekinetic force crashed over the Chitauri in a seemingly unstoppable wave that consumed much of the forces around the portal. It even flared into the portal, acting almost like a solar flare, the heat and energy released reaching the mustering zone and hundreds of thousands of Chitauri packed as they were to try and come through the portal as quickly as possible.

The sound of the impact between the shield around Thanos and his throne and the Phoenix's power also blasted outward, covering an even wider area. For hundreds of miles around the area where Jean's aura could be seen people fell to their knees, clapping hands to their ears at the strange noise, a mix of a loud mechanical screech, the *Fwoosh* of an out of control fire, and the sound of glass skittering on glass.

"Energy absorption shield, Life Energy variant holding. Degradation at .5% every second, increasing with every ten seconds passage at a variant of the Estos Five principle," Thanos's throne reported, mentioning a mathematical principle of material degradation Thanos had developed on a planet he had subsequently annihilated. "Transferral process to inbuilt reserves at 32%. Transferral process to main unit, designation Sanctuary, active and fully online, process is draining a further 50% of the energy in the Avatar's attack. Transfer process is degrading at .00387% every two seconds. Degradation increasing."

"Ahhh," Thanos let out a sigh of pure joy, a scientist whose work had been proven accurate. Accurately discovering a way to drain away the Phoenix Force was even harder than trying to create shields that could block Guardian and other fighters' reality altering powers. It was also a system that was internally energy intense. "It is always nice when theory becomes substantiated fact. There is still room for improvement, obviously, but, it works. Report to Sanctuary, have the main computer work on refining that shield design. Warn me once the shield is within ten seconds of failure, and prepare for my signal to release it back into the human female. Let us see if that tactic works here as it did against the weaker Asgardians."

With his orders given, Thanos began to laugh even as all around him for several miles Chitauri died, some of them lasting just long enough to spasm or release loud electronic squeals, the

equivalent of their lobotomized race's version of screams of agony in the telekinetic fires of the Phoenix Force. Thanos did not see them, nor would he have cared. Like everyone bar Gamora, Thanos had no interest or care for any of the Chitauri. Certainly not now, when much of the planning, pain and research he had done since coming to this piddling world the first time was bearing fruit for the second time. "Yes! Empower me further, Avatar. I will enjoy breaking you and sacrificing you to Lady Death!!"

Jean strove against the shield for several minutes. However, Jean wasn't only a telekinetic. Within moments, Jean realized that she could sense Thanos's mind still there at the very heart of her long-range attack. While she couldn't get into that mind, Thanos had some of the hardest, most powerful mental defenses, natural or technological, that she had ever felt. Yet she could still tell his mind was there in the first place.

Right, well, I didn't think this would be that simple. If Thanos could be overcome by sheer brute force, he wouldn't be the danger he is. Cancelling her technique, Jean pushed herself forward, lashing out instead with small bolts of TK energy.

Yet the moment that her large scale attack ended, Thanos took her under fire too. Energies flashed through the space she previously occupied, as Thanos in turn had trouble tracking her, the Phoenix's form around her shifting and moving, hiding her exact presence within it. Soon, they were within a hundred yards of one another, with neither having landed a real blow.

Thanos's triple barrier fell from around his throne at his command and he began to lash out towards the Avatar, a grin on his face Power Cosmic coalescing around his hands as he batted aside her attacks with his gauntlets while Jean raged at him. "Yes, yes! Fight, strive, it will make offering up your soul to Lady Death all the sweeter!"

"Y'know, most women prefer flowers and chocolate, not mounds of skulls or souls," Jean shot back as she dodged. Thanos could not fly per-se. His boots allowed him to hover, but his throne was his main mode of transportation. Thanos's reaction time was so fast it might have seemed he could teleport to normal people, but as a telepath, Jean's mind worked even faster than that, and her body, lined with her TK powers, followed.

Even as more Chitauri began to come through the portal, the pair danced around one another, all of them which could firing at the Avatar, one of the primary focuses of this campaign that was hardwired into their heads. Growling, Jean concentrated, her aura flickering down as it became even more concentrated, then as she ducked under a blast from a Ripper, she let loose two beams of furious energy almost the size of her own body, not just towards Thanos, but towards the portal.

Knowing this blast was too powerful for his bracers, Thanos was forced to dodge under the attack coming his way, unable to do anything about the blast of energy that lashed towards the portal. A second later, the attack on Thanos petered out, and his eyes widened a bit. "Clever."

Jean hadn't empowered those attacks equally. Rather, the attack towards Thanos was hollow. The outer edges of the attack was all of it, whereas the other was full blast of energy, which slammed into and through the portal, a ravening beam of Pheonix Force amplified Telekinetic force and fire.

On the other side of that portal, thousands of infantry and skimmers, hundreds of rippers and other biotechnological creations burned, slowing the reinforcements forward. However, this opened up the Avatar for an attack from Thanos, who took his shot quickly. "But foolish!"

"GUH!" Jean grunted as she was smashed out of the sky, but her telekinetic aura and the armor she wore as part of her combat suit held even as the kinetic energy flung her down into the ground. She skidded through it for several hundred yards, creating a gouge in both dirt and concrete alike, then was back up in the air, blasting away as Thanos did the same, and the fight was on.

OOOOOOO

Harry Potter came back into his physical body once more, his face slowly shifting from the snarl of rage it had held as he fought Krakkan. The foolish ancient deity had finally realized he wasn't winning the battle and severed his connection to the gem, although not before Harry had supped deeply of his power.

As Harry became aware of the physical world around him, the crystal under his hand began to turn to dust in his hand. As it did, Harry grabbed at the the edge of the pillar which had held it. For just a moment, Harry clung there, shivering and shaking as the magic taken from the ancient primordial god and repurposed according to the ritual's design finished... changing him.

The first change was the easiest to figure out, although the second was almost as easy. His exhaustion disappeared, his mind and body, within seconds, going from exhausted to the point of collapse to brimming with energy. And looking down at his hands, Harry felt they were a bit bigger than they had been. When he stood up, too, the pillar wasn't where it had been, at chest height, rather it only came up to his navel.

Blinking, Harry stared at it, then looked down at his body. *Huh, it looks like I'm at least, I want to say, a foot taller or so?* Harry's body was also wider in the shoulders, and across the body. He was still trim and fit, but now it looked like he had gone from being a mix of sprinter and soldier to soldier and body builder. *Heh, I wonder what the girls will think about that.*

Shaking that thought off, Harry pushed his way out of the array, stumbling for a few moments, his sense of balance thrown off by the physical changes Krakkan's power had sparked within him as he became the equivalent of a Titan. *And the physical changes are going to be the smallest, most obvious of those changes. I'll need to be careful about any mental ones I run into, and make certain that Ororo and the others tell me if they see any changes in how I act.*

By the time he reached the door into the portion of the configured Room of Requirement that he had used to create the mix of enchantment and ritual site, Harry was back to normal. Ten paces later, his voice boomed out for the first time since he came back to himself, and Harry idly noted that it sounded deeper, stronger, and also as if he really needed some water. "Dennis, I need a sitrep. How are we doing?" he growled out, assuming that the intercoms placed throughout the castle would pick his voice up.

"Overall, I think we are doing well, although the Oh Damns have been hemorrhaging men, and our allies have lost far more. Storm nearly exhausted herself into a coma from teleporting the civilians out of Washington and then Paris even with chugging Pepper Up potions like they were water. But despite that, she is still in the fight even now. Fighting is still going on in both of those cities and in the Himalayas, where Ororo is heading right now. I've done some legwork there, and the US has done more. The fighting there's about to get a major upgrade," Dennis reported.

By the time he finished, Harry was walking into the main hall where Dennis had set himself up where he could use the hard light system to keep track of things, his voice coming from two directions at once for a second before he noticed Harry was there and flicked a finger, cutting off the intercom. The mild-mannered, middle-aged man looked drained dry, and it was clear he was close to exhaustion.

A clock hovering nearby as just one of many hard light screens told Harry that he'd been fighting the stupidly stubborn Krakkan for at least twenty hours, maybe more. *Damn, I can't remember when I started the ritual. But twenty hours sounds right.* "That's good to hear. How are we doing on closing the various portals?"

"I..." Dennis blinked, taking in Harry for a moment. Harry had already noticed his physical changes, but looking at him, Dennis was struck by the feeling Harry was giving off. If he had to put it into words it was amicable otherness, of being something relatable yet more than human. It was a bizarre difference, and it took Dennis a moment to get over his surprise.

It isn't like being in Skadi, Freya, or Heimdall's presence, that sense of undeniable alien power, but it is very strange, the spymaster thought, before shaking his head and telling Harry about how the war on Earth and in space was going in more detail. "With Storm on hand and the US's reinforcements arriving – and I really think the US Air Force is going to need to do something very nice for General Kellerman for seeing that his bombers would to best in an entirely

different theatre – I think we can conclude that the main portal's going to be dealt with soon, regardless of whatever tricks the local alien general has up his sleeve. Thor and his forces are still there too, so..." he shrugged.

"Agreed, we can leave that front in their hands. Unless Thanos is there?"

"No. He's in China currently. Pinoptes thinks, and I agree, that he's there to fight Jean particularly. He'd basically crushed Hela's team. All of them were pulled out via emergency array. He was holding back the Asgardians, even Thor, before suddenly leaving the battlefield and then shifting to China. There was no other reason for that. If he'd stayed, he might well have been able to beat them or even kill Thor and the host with him."

Dennis's lips twitched. "Pinoptes has a local drone nearby, and is remarkably good at lip reading. Thanos is obsessed with taking 'the Avatar' and sacrificing her soul to 'Lady Death'." While he was generally agnostic, Dennis was still a little ambivalent about the whole anthropomorphic personifications of forces like death and life, although he had more problems accepting the idea of someone being obsessed with the personification of Death than anything else, really.

His humor fled him as Pinoptes gave him an update on the battle between Jean and Thanos. "I...I suggest you move fast, sir," A second later, one of the screens nearby began to show the same feed the Chinese drone controller was seeing. "Jean's fighting Thanos right now, and it isn't going well."

Before he had even finished, Harry was off, flying so fast a sonic boom blasted back into the main hall so powerful it shook the castle and tossed Dennis out of his chair.

OOOOOOO

Jean wielded the Phoenix Force, the primordial force of life and rebirth in the galaxy. Conceptually, that was a level of power that put her on the same plane as Galactus, Greater Deities like the Octessence and even the Externals. Thus, Jean Grey should have been more than a match for Thanos. However, there were a few problems. One, despite her unique connection with the Phoenix Force, Jean Grey herself was still only human. There was a limit to how much of that power she could use at any one time without burning away her physical body, let alone her mind and soul.

For another, unlike with Galactus, who Jean had fought alongside Harry, Ororo and the rest of their team in an ambush, here she was alone. Worse still, the boot was on the other foot in terms of preparation.

Thanos had known he would face an Avatar of what his people had once called the Everfire. Indeed, she was one of the main reasons why he had come to Earth in the first place, and returned this time. He'd had centuries to think up ways to deal with a avatar of the Everfire,

hoping to run into one in order to slay them for his lady, and had sufficient technology and scientific knowledge to do something about it. Something he had shown from the first with his anti-avatar triple layered shield. Just as his throne's shields could absorb or redirect various types of energy, magical kinetic and so forth in the battle in the Himalayas, so too could this energy shield absorb the telekinetic force that Jean exerted.

Although it was a near-run thing despite his preparations. Only his throne's quantum connection to Sanctuary, his massive flagship allowed his shield to deal with the power of the Pheonix Force by shunting it to the larger vessel to let it convert to usable form. Yet in return, Thanos could concentrate entirely on offensive action.

Jean began to feel this a few moments into the fight after her first trick. That same trick proved handy several times, but It wasn't easy, and more often than not the diverted energy needed to bolster her telekinetic aura rather than an attack. Jean's mobility was also causing Thanos issues.

Or so she thought. In reality, Thanos was simply keeping Jean back as he prepared to unleash another trick. "Status?"

"Units are ready."

"Deploy."

From the back of his throne several drones rose from vent-like structures built into the dais underneath. They sped up into the air, and before Jean could do anything, beams of energy lanced out and down at her, burning out the onboard batteries of the drones. Her own energy attacks converted into Power Cosmic crashed down from everywhere, hammering into and around Jean, hemming her in.

Jean grunted as the blasts caught her from above and at an angle, smashing her out of the sky again. But even that Jean was able to deal with, she groaned and grunted, but her telekinetic barriers held.

Or they did, until Thanos struck once more. This time, the Power Cosmic radiating around his forearms was joined by a new kind of energy pouring out of his new bracer. The energy blast that came from the new bracer lanced out toward Jean in a condensed, arrow-like form was a dark, almost sickly looking green. In fact, to Jean it looked disturbingly familiar, and her eyes widened. *Fuck me, that looks like the Arvada Kedavra spell I've seen in some of Harry's memories!*

At one point in their courtship after they got together, Harry had allowed Jean to view some of his memories. A time or two since, when talking about how to combat other magic users he had used a pensieve to let Jean and the others plan out defenses against spells similar to the ones

used in his old world. Hela also used a few spells of a similar variety, a school of magic based on necrotic energy.

Desperately Jean dodged, jumping up and bobbing to one side in midair. The greenish beam flashed under and to one side of her thigh, only to be joined by several more.

And as one came close, disrupting Jean's own desperate counter-attack, she watched as the greenish beam cut through her aura like a hot knife through butter. "What the..." *FUCK!!! Necrotic energies are anathema to the Pheonix Force, I should have realized, but I've never been hit by the real thing before.*

Thanos sent out another purple beam of power from his other hand, hitting Jean's weakened shield with pinpoint accuracy, causing her to crash down into the ground for the fifth time in the fight. Lashing out with another wide area attack, Jean covered her movements for a moment as she flew upward higher into the air than before, trying to use the sun to blind her opponent for a second sending out another series of attacks down at Thanos and his throne, the two having separated earlier in the battle.

That shield can't last forever, you ass, and thenNNN---! Jean's thoughts broke up as she was forced to dodge again. The sun did not blind Thanos at all. He had stared unblinking into supernovas. This was nothing in comparison.

Her aura flickering around her as if it felt the pain of the necromantic darts blasting into and through it, but luckily Jean herself avoided direct contact. Normally Jean would be in the center or the head in that form, but she had instead shifted the aura around so she was in one of it's wings. Yet Thanos was still able to target her.

While Thanos' regular purple and white rays of Power Cosmic were blocked or redirected, the green bolts ate straight through her aura again and again. Jean yelped and was forced to dodge, but one nicked her arm even so, having passed entirely through her Phoenix Form. And the response was immediate. Even as her armor took much of the energy, some seeped through, and Jean screamed.

Jean was the Avatar of the Phoenix Force, the power of life and renewal. What Thanos had created was an attack based entirely on entropy, the power of negative matter and energy that was almost precisely like that used by the source of his obsession. To say the two forces were entirely opposite was an understatement.

"Ok, that is not fun," Jean growled, feeling as if something had reached in and pulled something out of her just then. *Fucking hell, it's like all the power of the Pheonix Force in that portion of my body was just negated somehow. I can feel the Pheonix Force trying to flow back in, but it's like the energy's moving in molasses.*

Thanos smirked as he watched the telekinetic form surrounding the human female start to waver, firing as he did from both hands. "Throne, the Entropy Weapons system seems to work. Prepare secondary and tertiary weapons systems."

"Preparing. Warning: there is a 90% chance that overuse of Nectoric Energy by the living will be hazardous to even the health of the owner. Further, analysis by the main unit, designation Sanctuary, states it will act on this unit like antimatter connecting to matter on a tactile degradation of .026 mili-quadrants per second."

"That is within my own calculations." The throne was rocked by another blast from the side, as Jean recovered and went on the attack, and Thanos grimaced slightly at how quickly the female had recuperated as another blast washed over him, grimacing only slightly at the pain of it. *And she is now keeping her distance even more. If I cannot close, even with my throne to aid me, I may lose this battle once my shields have collapsed. The Power Cosmic that is my normal attack does not do enough to the Avatar, and my Entropy-based attacks will not last long.*

Thanos, as a living being, couldn't naturally use necrotic energy. While as a titan, he was nearly immune to it himself, that didn't mean he could use it to empower his attacks. And the Power Cosmic had proven insufficient to truly overpower the Avatar and her mix of telekinetic powers and Pheonix Force. *The woman must have been a superlatively powered telepath before becoming an Avatar, and now that power is mixed at the most basic level with the Pheonix Force. That is... far beyond anything I have ever learned or discovered about what past Avatars were like. Odd.*

"Warning! Shield overload is imminent. Energy wave absorption matrix is failing. 58% impairment... 69% impairment..."

"Teleport, **now**!" Thanos ordered, and his AI, reading his mind to a certain degree via a chip Thanos had installed in his brain, did so to the coordinates Thanos wanted it to. It teleported only a short way, straight up in this instance, but that was enough to give Thanos the advantage again as he found Jean once more.

Jean had barely a second to react before the throne appeared to one side of her. This time Thanos' green energy beams struck out first, sizzling through Jean's defenses. She tried to fight back, but another near miss tore at her mental control, and for a second she floundered, into which the throne struck. From the front of the throne's platform two large webs of green energy flew out towards Jean.

Realizing that defense was off the table against that strange energy, Jean desperately dodged downward, returning fire as best she could, concentrating her attack to appear midair behind the throne, coming in from above. She also concentrated on thinner beams in one area and a wider somewhat enveloping assault from the other angle,

“Warning, absorption system impaired. 77% of the Avatars attacks are now going through. Further, signal to the main unit, designation *Sanctuary*, is degrading even faster. Only 10% of the attack’s energy is being transferred. This units online energy system is compromised. Repairing. Estimate to full repairs: ten minutes, twenty seconds,” The AI droned.

The web-like form of greenish energy seemingly did not travel as fast as the arrow-like bolts did, and Jean was able to dodge them relatively easily at range. But her defenses were only slowly reforming, from the barest touch of it, and Jean could sense some kind of disconnect between her powers and herself growing. Something seemed to be disrupting her ability to use her powers. *Time to get a little desperate.* For just a moment, Jean’s mental avatar zoomed out past her mental defenses into the greater mental plane, surging forward towards Thanos’ presence there.

On this realm, most people’s minds were unformed blobs, more resembling gas or something similar. Wizards like Steven were shown by a pair of floating eyes, which became aware of those around them, but were slow to respond to assaults on this plane simply because they had to use spells to do so. Another telepath like Charles or Emma would have their own constructed forms, like Emma’s Diamond avatar, or the godlike image that Charles somehow evoked.

Thanos was built somewhat on the lines of the last one. Here in the Astral Realm he was even larger, even more imposing looking, a giant statue made out of purple, dark green and white energy. While its eyes were open and staring, the statue was immobile, meaning he could not reach out and interact with the Astral Plane under his own power.

But in turn, Jean’s own attacks on this realm didn’t do anything. Jean was one of the most powerful telepaths in known space, both on Earth and elsewhere. Yet when her avatar crashed into the statue that was Thanos’s mind, there was nothing. No shiver, no quake, no sign of anything that she could feel give. Her powers rolled over Thanos’s mind, trying to find a crack, some weakness. But there was none. Even a full-bore attack, concentrated at one point like she had begun to do to her TK power, did nothing, breaking upon Thanos’s stone-hard mind like a water hose on a concrete wall.

Then Jean’s attention was back in her physical body as she dodged and ducked aside, putting all her effort in controlling her body, pushing ti to move so fast that even someone like Captain America wouldn’t have been able to keep up. Even so, she was below Thanos’s hovering throne which was not a pleasant place to be. And every time she tried to remain directly underneath, it would shift, letting Thanos take her under fire.

The attacks from Thanos crashed into the ground far below, causing further damage to the area around the still open portal.

Taking a second to glance in that direction, Jean saw that troops were still coming through. At this point they were mainly skimmers and the eel-like things, but that was still enough to annoy. The large biomechanical creatures launched attacks at Jean, which now, in her somewhat weakened state, she had to dodge rather than simply take on her telekinetic aura shield. A series of blasts wiped out the Rippers, and to Thanos' annoyance, shown by a loud grunt of irritation, did not distract Jean's attention from him as she kept on dodging his attacks.

But he was still able to keep her from regaining any of her previous altitude. *I will take what wins I can, this woman is too adaptable and quick, blast it! And I can feel my bracer already eroding away from the weapon system within. I need my nanites to repair it, which will take time.* Shouting out orders in Chitauri, Thanos allowed his throne to do the attacking for a moment, switching entirely back to the Power Cosmic.

Given Jean's weakened state, that wasn't altogether bad, as she grunted and winced more than once. Her aura wasn't strong enough now to keep his attacks from hammering her, and her armor too began to give. Worse, Thanos's orders sent his Throne to attack her directly again and again. The thing, which, despite its shape, could move like a Chitauri skimmer, battered Jean from on high, as if it was a helicopter which had the high ground, forcing the Avatar to play a deadly game of cat and mouse to avoid any further hits from the greenish energy.

Another green energy weapon, this time something like a shotgun fired down from the sides of the throne's platform, through the weapon instantly collapsed into itself as if the weapon had been hit by powerful acid. "Warning! Units usage of Entropy Weaponry is being severely curtailed. Unit only has one more entropic weapon. Switching to other means of offensive action."

This was followed by still more types of attacks raining down on Jean. The lack of Entropic energy meant no one attack mattered, but she couldn't respond in kind. Rather, Jean was forced to dodge rather than attack, allowing further skimmers and rippers out of the portal. But Jean no longer could afford to care, instead concentrating on hammering Thanos and his throne. *Can't let him keep the momentum, I need to push him, force his weapons to wreck themselves.* With that, she began to launch attacks from elsewhere, hammering the throne and titan alike, as they began to try and bracket her in with the help of the Chitauri forces.

The next time Jean launched a massive attack at the throne, the attack blew backwards away from the shield, enveloping the entire area once more, wiping out the Chitauri units that had been attacking her, turning even the eel-like things into large piles of molten metal and seared flesh.

Worse for Thanos, that proved to be too much. While he'd had the basic principle correct, the design of his Anti-Avatar shield wasn't perfect, and had been slowly degrading. Now the shield

around his throne popped like a balloon, and Thanos grimaced as the same energy flashed over his own position. Both were made of stern stuff however, as had been proven earlier against the Asgardians. They both endured and fired back.

Purple-white bolts of energy from Thanos' original hand were intercepted by Jean's defenses. But again the greenish bolts from the bracer on his synth-flesh covered forearm flashed through her defenses, and this time, her ability to dodge wasn't up to the task and a bolt took Jean directly in the stomach.

"AYEEEEEEEE!!!!" Jean screamed, losing all control of her powers for a moment as she felt pain unlike anything she had ever felt before. Not only her connection to her powers but her body and vitality and had taken a major hit.

She fell through the air, with Thanos and his throne both blasting her now with his original purple rays of energy. But just before she would have hit the cracked ground below them, Jean recovered. A shield of telekinetic energy appeared all around her, and this time, it was a simple sphere, with none of the reddish energy from her connection to the Phoenix Force. Still it held, as did a minor telekinetic illusion she used for a brief second, ducking to one side and flying toward Thanos' right flank in an effort to turn him, she fired a blast of telekinetic energy up at not him, but the throne, and then Thanos, with a Phoenix Force assisted blast as her connection to that power began to come back.

This time, that blow got through, and Thanos grimaced as he was blasted off his feet, hurled further away from his throne, which in turn let Jean turn her attention to his thrown. Dodging more Necrotic energy attacks coming towards her, Jean lashed out, slamming blow after blow into the throne's shielding, a different one this time, that popped up to protect it.

"Al, raise the shields!"

"Warning: Estimated time to repair Anti-Avatar shielding, 2 minutes, 10 seconds. Repair time further degraded by the use of the Entropy Weapons. Taking evasive action," the throne droned even as it suited action to words. The shields around it had held despite not being programmed to directly counter the Avatar, yet it was clearly a near run thing. "Primary normal energy shields at 60%."

Growling, Thanos got to his feet, still somewhat pleased by how this had gone. *A few more strikes from the necrotic energy bolts and the Avatar should be cut off entirely from the source of her power no matter how hard it tries to come back. With that done, I finish her easily. Mere telekinetic power is nothing to the Power Cosmic.* "Continue taking evasive action for now. Look to get closer if possible." *At range, she still has an advantage.*

The battle spiraled out from where it had begun, raining death and destruction in every direction over dozens of miles as both sides now were doing more dodging than anything else, each side trying to get in one good strike at the other rather than trying to wear one another away. The landscape paid for this, but so too did Thanos' throne. Durable though the normal shields were, they started to fade quickly. Worse, the experimental Entropy Weapons were all gone, and had a nasty effect to the throne's frame. As Jean's assaults continued it began to flail at it and Thanos, it was the throne which was getting the worst of it by far, something it told its master in a near endless stream of minor reports.

This got to the point where, After getting his breath knocked out and Jean dodging a return strike, Thanos lost his temper. "Blast you to the ether, cease all damage reports, they are distracting me!" He roared lashing out with Power Cosmic from both his original hand and his synth-skin covered metal hand. He could tell his bracer, with its Entropic Energy weapon, was going to degrade soon. *I might have spent far more time on it than on my throne's but it isn't a finished product, and this woman's ability to evade and shift her position within her aura is bothersome.*

"Complying."

It might have been Jean's imagination, but for some reason, the throne's heretofore entirely bland AI sounded almost caustic, or annoyed. The kind of annoyed of someone waiting to say 'I told you so' to someone else. Regardless, Jean couldn't dwell on it now.

As the throne fell silent at last, Thanos began to press Jean harder, forcing her to fight almost entirely defensively, just waiting to unleash his entropic weapon again. They began to fly over an area still inhabited by living humans. Many were fleeing the destruction had wrought elsewhere, but the original inhabitants were still around. A significant number of Chinese army troopers had retreated into this city, and had begun to fight back, working with the local police even as the civilians ran or hid, having no access to weapons to fight back on their own.

Seeing this, Thanos had a rather amusing idea and issued a new order. "To my throne and the Chitauri still following us. Fire weapons down into the ground with as wide an area as possible. Kill the humans."

"Acknowledged," was the response of his throne, while the Chitauri skimmers and the few Rippers in the air obeyed instantly, flying down to join their fellows in attacking the city.

As Jean was forced to defend a few buildings from attacks from the biomechanical monsters, several panels along the bottom of the throne opened. More than a few of them were fused shut, or their contents had been destroyed in the battle so far and not been repaired yet, the throne having run out of nanites or resources to create more since its energy-to-matter

conversion system had been destroyed back in the Himalayas. But there were still a few mini missile launchers and two remaining energy weapons that began to fire.

“Oh fucking hell!” Caught out of position to target the attacking thrown thanks to needing to keep her attacks on the eel-like things away from the locals, Jean snarled as she spread out her telekinetic energy once more, defending more of the city from their strikes. “FUCK!” *God damn it, of course this asshole would go for the civilians! And I know I just got fucking played. This is going to hurt.*

“You humans, so predictable.” Thanos snored, feeling something approaching good humor for a second as he renewed his attacks on Jean. The pulses of Entropy energy crashed into the Avatar, and a moment later, the human female’s aura winked out under the effect of his necromantic assault even as his bracer started to come apart as if the highly advanced polymer had become naught but wet tissue paper.

As the female crumpled out of the ground, losing even her original powers for a second, Thanos ordered the throne to ascend into the air, the better to spread the destruction, knowing it would keep the human off balance. “It is almost as if you have no idea of the term sacrifice,” he mused as he followed her, the screaming and burning around them as his throne and the Chitauri attacked the city providing a rather apropos backdrop, in his opinion.

“Funny how it’s always the people who don’t lose anything that talk about other people not knowing about sacrifice!” Jean snarled Thanos’ words carrying to her through the carnage as she felt her connection to the Phoenix Force slowly renew itself once more.

But she kept from using it just yet. *Better to keep from doing so until I can really hurt him, stick to my own telekinetic power as best I can.* Not showing any of the typical fiery edge that her Phoenix powers gave her was hard, but Jean did it as she lashed out toward Thanos. *And that damned throne still’s up there!*

The power of that strike lifted Thanos off his feet, hurling him back through a public toilet set in the center of the park. It didn’t hurt though, simply knocked him off his feet as he hadn’t set himself properly. “Foolish female, of course I know sacrifice. I sacrificed my entire race, my own family to the glory of my Mistress. I have wandered the galaxy for thousands of years, far longer than you humans have even existed, the only one of my kind. You think I know nothing of sacrifice? That is bad comedy.”

Dodging several blasts of Power Cosmic, Jean was then forced to leap up into the air only to have to twirl and duck under still more blasts as Thanos closed, almost on her before she could pull down a building on them both. It was currently empty of living minds, and large enough to shadow the park with room to spare, but she had no doubt it’s weight would be nothing to

Thanos. Yet Thanos, midair, had not been ready for it, and Jean was. She zipped up through a window on the side of the building coming down and out another up top.

Unfortunately, Thanos simply blasted out a portion of the building with his power, flying straight up before coming down towards Jean. She still lashed with telekinetic blasts, but Thanos weathered them until one sliced his face open from ear to mouth, causing him to snarl in pain and begin to dodge again as a thin trickle of blood began to drip from the shallow cut. "Clever, hiding one type of attack inside another. Yet immaterial."

"Fuck you, you genocidal psycho!" Jean knew that wasn't exactly original or anything, but she felt it could be allowed at present.

"Really, simple insults?" Growling, Thanos used his Power Cosmic to create another shield to cover his arm, battering aside Jean's attacks as she retreated, keeping the range open. He could track the woman's attacks but couldn't tell which bolts of telekinetic energy were sharp and which weren't. A few cut into his lower legs despite his shield, yet none were deep enough to matter. The female alone did not have enough power, unlike before with the Phoenix Force. Even the hurled car that came next shattered on his outstretched arm with a squeal of tortured metal as parts continued on past him and the rest didn't.

"Okay, you want a better insult, how about this one. You're mental state is highly psychotic due to falling in love with the personification of Entropy, who, by her very nature," Jean paused as she hurled another car, this time backing it up with dozens of TK bolts and a grip towards Thanos's thigh, while keeping some of her attention on his floating death dais and the screaming civilians trailing behind her and into hiding. "Is unable to return that love. You either are completely broken in that you don't understand that, or are soOOOGHHH!"

Jean grimaced as Thanos smashed the second car aside and hurled a Power Cosmic blast her way too fast to dodge. It crashed into her, blasting through her telekinetic defense, striking her body with enough force to crack the scale mail-like armor built into her suit. Yet Jean grinned as she finished what she had been saying. "Or you secretly enjoy what you do, large and small, and just use that love as an excuse. Because that's all it is, an excuse."

Now it was Thanos's turn to hurl something her way, a truck that had previously been behind him becoming an overly large bowling ball as he slung it towards Jean overhand. A telekinetic grab held it in place, but Thanos lunged under it, and a Power Cosmic blast, followed rapidly by a punch caught Jean, hurling her backward.

She slammed into and through several buildings, but each of the dozens of impacts barely mattered to the pain of those two strikes to her chest and stomach respectfully. Jean was barely conscious as she rolled to a stop somewhere else within the city. She couldn't see much

through her barely open eyes and the agony of something, or maybe multiple something inside her breaking, but it looked like it was dominated by shops and restaurants.

She barely looked up, but when she did, Jean saw the throne hovering above her, firing down into the city still since Thanos hadn't ordered it to stop. Then sound returned to her, the screaming and howling of wounded and scared people, the crunch of two heavy boots on the debris her flight had caused. *D, damn it, I, I can't...*

"Warning, this unit has detected unknown energies building up within Target, Phoenix Avatar. Energy signature matches that termed 'magic'." The throne's AI intoned in its normal blank voice. "Conjecture: the energy signature might be a match for one found in the archives of the main unit, designation Sanctuary. Specifically, a energy wave that was observed prior to the Master's sudden removal from the surface of the third planet of this system to the fourth."

W, well, at least I know it can't detect the Pheonix Force coming back to me, Jean thought, wondering if her emergency medical portkey would teleport her away before anything else happened. *N, not that I'm in any shape to argue.*

Alas for Jean, that wasn't going to happen. "Isolate that energy wave and create a counterwave targeted on the human female," Thanos ordered, even as he reached down toward her.

Jean didn't have a magical bone in her body, but she could still see the sickly yellow ray of power coming down from the throne to encompass the pair. *We, well there goes that idea... better make this count then, and hope that my portkey works...*

As Thanos peered down at her, raising Jean to head height, he saw something inside her suit, which had been glowing a light blue, disappear. "Excellent. That worked. And now, Avatar...."

Jean's eyes **glowed** with fiery red and orange light for a moment and she thrust out, blasting Thanos away from her. Her connection to the Pheonix Force wasn't back to normal, it was in fact flickering on and off like a phone call threatening to drop every millisecond. But Jean had a plan. Not to kill Thanos, no, that seemed impossible given how he'd been tanking her blows, both cutting and blunt force power. No, Jean knew she had to get away, and right now, Thanos wasn't the thing keeping her here, and he also wasn't the one still targeting the city around them.

A concussive blast with all of Jean's current power behind it flashed up from her form, fiery and concentrated into a narrow bolt. Not towards Thanos, but his throne. Before Thanos could shout a warning, the blast of fiery telekinetic energy blasted upward catching Thanos's throne platform near the center of the dais's square, searing straight through right through it and destroying most of the throne itself.

Staring upwards from where he had been thrust away, Thanos snarled angrily as his dais fell, nearly breaking in two as it fell. He then looked over at Jean, his eyes flat and dangerous. "Well, that was both smart of you, Avatar, and very, very stupid."

With that, he charged forwards, blasting ahead of him with both hands as Power Cosmic crashed into Jean's aura. Unfortunately for Jean, her portkey was not working. The anti-wavelength thing the shield had done had killed it. The runes burning themselves out in the backlash.

Jean cried out in pain, but the Pheonix Force within her was also slowly starting to heal her injuries, a part of her mind directing her power within to knit herself together. At the same time, she was able to hit back, blasting Thanos back into a building behind her.

Thanos recovered quickly, and another purple-white blast of energy struck Jean as she tried to take to the air sending Jean tumbling back to earth. She struck with such force the small bridge, barely worth the name really, she hit nearly exploded as she hit it, then Jean was falling down into the stream below, sending up a mass of water and steam as she struck.

Spluttering, Jean pushed herself out of the water, blood dripping from a cut on her forehead and from her lips as her internal injuries had been aggravated again. With the water no longer diluting it, the blood quickly blinded Jean in one eye, and she didn't even see Thanos coming until a massive hand grabbing at the back of her neck, lifting her up. A squeeze caused her to groan in pain as her bones ground against one another, and a powerful blow, fit to hurt even someone like the Thing or Thor, crashed into her stomach.

The pain of that on top of her already existing wounds nearly caused her to blackout, and her aura flickered out, dying instantly. "You gave me quite a lot of trouble, Avatar. But now, at least I have one of my prizes," Thanos murmured, his own face showing several shallow cuts from the fight, but nothing serious.

Jean tried to turn her head but couldn't and felt his hand tightening around her neck despite the armor of her suit still being in one piece. Despite feeling about as powerless as a kitten being held by a giant, Jean allowed a blood speckled smile to cross her face, staring straight ahead of her with her one good eye. "At least I fucking destroyed your throne, you bastard..."

"True. That **is** a setback just as annoying as the loss of so many of my Black Guard." For just a moment something more than dry arrogance was audible in his voice, some hidden pain. Then it was gone and the Power Cosmic seeped out of his other gauntlet as he raised it to the back of her neck. "You will be the first to pay for that effrontery, and your demise will garner my Lady's interest in my doings here, on this world. She will look upon me and smile once more!"

"You, you really are we, well, named. Mad Titan..." Jean grunted through tightly clenched teeth. And as she did, a voice resounded in her mind, one she hadn't heard since this invasion began. That voice came down the permanent pathway she had created, not the power of the man on the other end of that link, yet she had maintained it even now, as she had for months on end.

"Jean, hang on, I'm coming!"

It was the most beautiful sound she'd ever heard, and Jean's grin widened even as the Power Cosmic started to grind its way through her armor.

"As you and many others have said before. I will say the same to you as I do them. Love is called the original form of madness by many races for a very good reason," Thanos answered almost philosophically, only to grunt as a telekinetic whip cracked into his false hand, the hand's wrist nearly cracking under the blow.

This forced him to release Jean but fell a few feet before a blow hammered into her side. So strong was Thanos that the thin, already shattered Orichalcum armor that was part of Jean's suit was no help, the impact alone conveying force enough to shatter bones as she cried out and was flung away to imbed into a nearby building.

Thanos flew over to stand above her, watching as Jean coughed up blood trying to push to her feet. "I would prefer to take my time for this, but you are not my only target today."

Jean smirked though, as she looked up at him, her hair lank and matted to her face with blood, her uncovered eye glaring angrily at him. "Heh, the thing about real life targets? They rarely move the way you think. And they can hit back..."

A instant later, there was a booming noise as a blow blasted Thanos off his feet and away from her, and the owner of the voice Jean had heard a few moments ago in her mind arrived in physical form, the owner of the voice moving off with the Mad Titan. "Round two, you prune-skinned cock!"

Behind them, Jean lay there recovering her breath, then she sighed, and pushed herself to her feet, feeling the presence of the Phoenix Force rebuilding her reserves, letting Jean start to repair the damage her body had taken. A few minutes passed, Then Jean, slowly rose into the air. She wasn't one hundred percent, but she was close, and there was still work to do and she reached out telepathically for Emma and Charles, grimacing as the use of her powers caused her brain no small amount of pain. *Damn, those blows to the head messed me up almost as bad as the body blows.*

Shaking that observation away, Jean spoke to her fellow telepaths even as she began to lash out at the Chitauri attacking the city, her fiery aura slowly but surely rebuilding around her. *"Emma, Charles, my coms gear was wrecked. I'm... not up to any large-scale battle right now, but I am*

still ticking. Just don't expect miracles. Unfortunately, I think that China's gonna need some. Spread the word, we're going to need as much humanitarian aid as we can get, and please tell me the portal's have been taken care of!?"

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Thanos recovered from being blind-sided quickly, a blow crashing out into his assailant hard enough to separate them, sending the man flying to the side for a moment. Finding his back slamming into and through something, Thanos rolled, grabbing onto the asphalt beneath him, slowing his passage after a few seconds, leaving a series of yards long gouges in the material.

Pushing himself to his feet, Thanos found himself standing in the middle of a road somewhere. Around him a few dozen cars lay where they had been abandoned as he and the avatar had moved over the area, while ahead of him a large bus sat, abandoned. There were few bodies around the place, oddly, but that was the last observation he could make before a blast of supercharged magical lightning crashed into his chest.

The blast staggered Thanos only slightly, on par with or perhaps exceeding most of the blunt style kinetic impacts that the Avatar had used in their battle, and he smiled widely, recognizing the type of attack for what it was, even though the attacker was nowhere to be seen right now. "Finally, Guardian. I have long prepared for this day."

Thanos brought his fake hand up, pulling back the synth-skin there as his body glowed for a moment with the Power Cosmic. Soon, parts of his armor began to emit a counter-energy wave. Not quite a shield, this energy signature, like the one used previously to keep the Avatar from escaping, was specially calibrated to create an anti-energy field to stop any changes created through use of 'magic' from impacting him. Without his throne's power generator it would not last for very long, but it could be used in spurts. *And while the computer in my hand is not up to my normal standards, it can run that system for me.*

A serious magical attack flew towards him from different angles, looking like an advanced form of the same 'Drill of Light' attack Guardian had used on him in their first clash, but Thanos roared, launching his own blasts in return all around him, small, low powered ones intending to force his opponent into view more than anything else. One struck true, and Guardian appeared, his invisibility spell unable to withstand direct contact with the Power Cosmic, even if the strike itself barely staggered him.

With a target he could see, Thanos released a more powerful blast of energy towards Harry only to frown as the human merely batted it aside, despite being caught on the backfoot. The human did stumble back into the side of a nearby car, which skidded sideways into another one before stopping. Both cars crumpled under the impact, but the human pushed himself out of the side of the car he had struck with ease, looking as if he hadn't even noticed the impact.

For a moment both combatants paused, taking in one another.

Breathing in deeply for the first time in what seemed like forever since Dennis had told him how badly it was going for Jean, Harry was intensely grateful for the added speed and durability his Titan Transformation had given him. He had teleported up to High Note and then flown down from orbit, but even so, if he had been limited to his prior speed, Harry would have been too late to save Jean, a fact that even now was uppermost in his mind.

*I knew that there was a limit to how fast I could move without adding wind resistance or general durability enchantments to something, but I never realized how **much** faster I could go when you removed those considerations from things. It took barely a minute to travel from High Note to Jean's position, and that was with using magic to cancel out the shockwave I created as I flew! And I still barely got here in time.*

Harry wasn't complaining on that score, rather, he was very, very aware of how lucky he, and all of earth, had gotten in the fact Harry arrived in time to save his lady-love and the fact that Thanos had seemingly been too arrogant to really lead this invasion as he should have. *Or perhaps disinterested would be the better word? The rest of this whole fucking war was just a sideshow to Thanos. It's me and Jean that he was here for. Me for revenge, her to sacrifice her to Lady Death.*

If Thanos had led the various assaults, Harry and the Custodes would be mourning a lot more dead of their own and undoubtedly a **much** higher death toll among the rest of their forces, to say nothing of humanity as a whole. *That one fucking strike he sent at Doom, if he'd just spread those kinds of assaults out, Earth would well have lost this war, even if we could have called Strange back or Reed could have found a way to block a attack like Doom did.* Meanwhile, in person, only Rogue, Strange and maybe Fenrir and Thor could have held Thanos off as Jean had. *Which isn't even considering his damn throne, something Jean thankfully took out of the equation.*

As it was, that death toll was going to give people WW2 flashbacks for certain thanks to what happened here in China and the atomics the locals had turned back into their face, along with everything else, but it could have gone far, far worse. *And if half of what Jean and Storm reported, if I let Thanos go, he will undoubtedly make it worse very quickly. I can't let him withdraw to somehow bring the Chitauri in through real space somehow, or worse, bring in that 'Sanctuary' that Jean reported his throne was in communication with.*

Setting that aside, Harry observed his opponent for a moment. He had seen a flickering aura, sickly yellow to his eyes for a moment, and had heard from a almost-frantic Pinoptes about the various energy attacks and shields Thanos had used during the battle with Jean. Now Thanos stood, a few cuts to his lower legs that had sliced through his greaves, a shallow cut on his

cheek, and missing a vambrace. The scars from their previous battle was still visible, and Harry knew at least that one of Thanos's hands wasn't real, but he otherwise looked none the worse for wear.

He's learned, he's prepared for this fight, probably to the point of obsession. This isn't going to be easy, especially when I need to be aware of my environment. I can't go breaking the earth in my attempts to save it. Thanos isn't going to be under any similar limitation. Worse, he probably knows it, going by the trick he pulled on Jean.

Across from him, Thanos also took a moment to observe his opponent, and had to stop his eyes from widening as he became aware of the changes that Guardian had gone through. The human was at least a foot taller than he had been during their previous battle, which Thanos knew was not normal for his race at Guardian's apparent age. His shoulders were wider. Indeed Thanos felt the human was more powerfully built in every direction. The human's eyes were also deeper, a shade of deep forest green now rather than emerald. Those eyes seemed to glow with a dim, yet intense light.

Those were minor changes, merely physical. His forehead scar, which Thanos had seen after tearing his helmet off in their previous battle, had changed, with something seemingly having added to it. On one side of the lightning bolt there was a symbol, a symbol that screamed to Thanos of something dangerous, of something he had seen before, but could not recall, the greenish energy of it reminding him almost of his Entropic energy weapons. The other symbol though was easily recognizable as a feather of a bird, but it gleamed with energy similar to but yet different from the Avatar that Thanos had been fighting moments ago.

Above and beyond those symbols though was the presence of the human. *Or should that be former human?* Thanos was entirely aware of the effect his presence had on lesser beings, how far above the common being of this galaxy he stood. It had been literal millennia since he had met a creature whose presence was near his own that was not, in some way, bound to the deific system that the galaxy enforced. The feel of such beings, such as the Asgardians he had faced around the main portal, was different enough to be remarked upon.

As Thanos stared at Harry, he realized that Guardian had not ascended, nor was he human. Looking at Guardian, Thanos felt he was standing in the presence of a fellow titan for the first time since he had killed the last of his race in honor of his goddess. "You... Guardian, what have you done..." he growled, fury rising through him.

"What I had to in order to defeat you," Harry answered grimly, then suddenly the magic around his hand disappeared and he charged forward.

Although not caught off guard by this ruse, Thanos' eyes widened at his speed even as another burst of Power Cosmic flashed out from his body, covering the territory around him, letting him

spot the real Guardian as he had leaped into the air. His real blow crashed into a spell from Guardian as Thanos roared. "You dare to ape my form!? To somehow evolve yourself into a Titan? That affront will earn you a thousand deaths!"

Blast after blast of magic and Power Cosmic flashed between them, the aftershocks and backslash shredding the world around them. Cars, asphalt, the trees and anything within a hundred yards simply disappeared as a crater began to develop, spreading quickly. Added to this raw destruction were random magical effects as Power Cosmic disrupted specific spells, sending the magic of them every which way, This created fires, bolts of lightning out of nowhere, and random conjured bits of madness, green splashes, purple air, and transfigured bits of debris, including a pair of strange, horned rabbits, the chaotic energies inherent in all magic released.

Darting forward, Harry engaged, Thanos in close combat, hoping to use physical attacks to hide his real attack. The two began to exchange punches at a rate that none of the Custodes could have kept up with, not even Hela or Steve, their most skilled hand-to-hand combatants. And despite the speed of those blows, they struck with such strength that they created shockwaves which shattered trees, broke the asphalt and blew out windows for miles around, the crater from a moment ago growing with each and every strike.

Grimacing, Harry knew that they were probably now killing people just by the backlash of those hits, but couldn't afford to hold back, knowing that his opponent wouldn't. *I need to keep it close, hit his armor with a Portus spell and get it to stick!* That was Harry's overriding priority right now: getting Thanos off the earth so he could really let loose without adding further to the death toll of this blasted war.

With each touch Harry tried to get a spell to stick to Thanos, but the Mad Titan's anti-magic field was stopping his magic from taking hold. Although it wasn't as powerful or had as many functions as his throne, Thanos's replaced hand could run that shield easily.

A moment later, Harry's Latinium Malleus_fired point blank dissipated, letting Thanos strike Harry with blow that rang his bell despite his Titan transformation. A charm intended to make Thanos weightless simply fizzled out, as did the Portus spell. A Reducto worked when Harry aimed it at the Titan's feet, but didn't do any harm to Thanos, not even rocking the larger being. A lightning spell, in the shape of sword crashed down, but Thanos dodged, lashing out with a blast of Power Cosmic that caused Harry to stagger.

At that point, Thanos pushed forward, battering Harry's hands to either side, landing several strong blows, further battering Harry but not injuring him overmuch. A kick caused him to stumble when it caught Thanos in the leg, followed by the sword of Gryffindor appearing in Harry's hands and flashing up to stab at Thanos's face. Thanos grabbed it before it struck, and a

release of the Power Cosmic slagged the weapon in an instant despite it's heavy enchantments. However, this opened up Thanos to a conjured wave of gas, a spell that Harry had come up with when creating one of his Bloody Insane spells.

That gas instantly reacted with the air around them exploding violently with enough force to scorch Thanos's face a bit, and, better, blinded Thanos for just a brief second, which Harry took advantage quickly. Ducking under a wild, unaimed punch from his opponent, Harry created a wave of power and force behind his elbow as he went for a punch, marveling internally at how much easier it was to manipulate raw magic in this form for a second right before the strike hit. The blow caught Thanos on the chin, and there was a monstrous 'BOOOM' like a bomb going off, the already massive crater widening still further as Thanos was smashed off his feet into the air.

Grimacing, Thanos shook his head. *That blow was nearly as strong as a blow from Thor's hammer.* Worse, though was that when he activated them, only one of his boot repulsors activated. *Damn it, I didn't realize that the Avatar's attacks on my lower legs had caused that much damage!*

Looking down he saw Guardian coming up after him. Even with only one foot allowing him to move the air was enough to let Thanos to twist downward into a lunge, zooming down in turn, a blast of energy coming from his synth-skin covered hand. At the same time a bolt of necrotic energy flashed out from his other. It was at least worth a try.

Harry's eyes widened at the sight of that bolt, but he quickly got over his shock at seeing Thanos create something that looked so much like the Arvada Kedavra spell, dodging to the side. This allowed Thanos' other blast to catch him, hurling him through the air but otherwise not doing much damage. Thanos followed up, coming in close and throwing out both energy blasts and punches.

For miles around them people stared up at the strange blasts of energy. Shock gave way to awe, then fear as the blasts continued to grow, to expand in every direction. Even the weather began to change as the Power Cosmic and magic warred in the sky over China.

Both combatants were now using shields at various intervals, blocking or redirecting one another's attacks. Back and forth they went, with Harry using his greater facility with flight to dance around Thanos, trying to get a spell through his shields, but finding that Thanos's hand-computer thing was too quick to trick.

In return, Harry, unused to his new body's dimensions, was making mistakes that Thanos capitalized on. Several times, Harry thought he dodged or lifted himself over an attack only to get hit by it. He was quickly beginning to take a pounding that only his new Titan body allowed him to continue to take.

Even his Crisis suit wasn't able to defend him from the Power Cosmic. The scale armor woven into it had already begun to fail much like Jean's had, the armor based off Balthaar's armor just not strong enough to withstand the strikes. Unlike Harry's Titan form, something he realized, and had to grin at when a blow got through that blew apart a portion of his Crisis suit, scale mail and all, only to leave Harry undamaged.

Thanos could tell none of his strikes were doing much to Guardian. He kept on pumping more and more energy into each strike, uncaring of how his missed attacks were destroying miles upon miles of Earth around them, while Harry, as Thanos knew he would, was forced to hold back for fear of the same.

Not that my perseverance there is doing much, Harry thought bitterly even as another spell chain dissipated on Thanos's shield one spell after another while a dodged blast of Power Cosmic disappeared over the horizon to one side of him. *But that shield has to have a limit, and when it falls...*

A second later, Harry was pummeled again, the blow so strong it blasted him backward, creating a large enough shockwave that the air seemed to shiver for a moment, the sonic boom of that blow blasting outward. Falling through the air, Harry grimaced as he realized the battle had begun to shift, and worse, towards a city. *FUCK. I, I need to change the parameters here.*

From behind him, a spell began to form, the magic within Harry acting almost like a third arm, so easy it was to manipulate now. And as he sent several raw magical attacks up at Thanos, the spell created an area of effect teleportation spell, almost like he had created an enchantment to duplicate the spells on the runic doorways. He didn't have time to empower the spell very much, though, as a moment later, the Mad Titan broke through his offensive spellfire, tanking several strikes rather than dodging in order to close faster.

Harry's spells cut off, and the two exchanged still more punches before Harry grabbed at Thanos' arms twisting them around and then pushing hard. For a moment Thanos didn't notice what Harry had done, not having seen the glowing runes behind Harry thanks to the energy released between Harry's spells and the Power Cosmic. Then there was a sudden flash as they crossed the threshold of the teleportation doorway, and then there was darkness as they came out the other side.

Huh, Harry thought for just a second, a flare of self-deprecating humor flashing through his mind. *My stomach didn't try to rebel there. That's a positive to this whole Titan transformation I didn't expect.* That humor didn't last however, he had a monster to kill. A second later, as Thanos attempted to get his bearings, cursing all the while as his stomach had seemingly not defended him so well, Harry struck out once more.

The two of them were now in deep space, an area near one of the hydrogen scoops over , a place Harry had taken Jean on a date a few weeks back. The area had come to Harry's mind as he had been out there again for a brief safety inspection near the end of the hunt for Loki, and thus he had two memories to draw on while hastily creating a teleportation spell that he had never used before or even imagined was possible. *My magic is so much easier to use in its raw form now!*

Even as he was blasted away by a spell that tried to cling to him like glue only to fail as his shield activated again, Thanos recovered. The white lights of his eyes gleaming in the dark of space, equal to Harry's own green eyes, he lashed out with several blasts of Power Cosmic even as he activated the chip in his head, reaching out directly to Sanctuary.

For a few seconds as he closed again, the two of them once more began to fight like two brawlers, with Harry's offensive magics dissipating on Thanos' shield. Thanos once more proved the better, more experienced hand to hand fighter, while at the same time, Harry escalated his spellwork once more. After Harry took a blow to the side of his head that sent him blasting away, Harry was able to create one of his Bloody Insane spells, the same one that Harry had used to help end his battle with Galactus.

Antimatter appeared in front of Thanos, right outside his anti-magic shield. And for the first time in their battle, Thanos's mouth opened in a wordless scream of pain as his shield finally failed and he was sent tumbling through space down into Saturn's atmosphere. The antimatter explosion seared away significant chunks of his skin and armor, but didn't do more damage, such was Thanos's titan endurance.

The next second, as Harry charged forward, trying to attack Thanos from behind, a blast of his own caught Harry in the chest, searing Harry's side, hotter and nastier than before as Thanos, began to access the power stored within Sanctuary throughout his fight with Phoenix. That power would swiftly burn through his cybernetic hand, although nowhere near as quickly as it would if he was using an Entropic weapon, but it was worth it.

"GAAHHH!!" Harry howled, his voice torn away from him by the winds of Saturn as he found himself hammered into the planet's upper atmosphere. His durability held, but that blow, a mix of Power Cosmic and pure Pheonix Force energy, tore through his suit's armor despite the orichalcum scales that were a part of it.

Thanos eagerly took the initiative, and a punch sent Harry crashing deeper into the atmosphere of the planet heading downward. But while Harry was hurt, he, like Thanos before him a moment ago, wasn't blinded by the pain. As another blast washed over his form, igniting some of the gases around them, Harry returned fire. A searing beam of power, a mix of antimatter

energy barely contained within a tube of magic, slammed into Thanos' leg causing him to gasp in agony.

While the Mad Titan had more natural durability towards spellwork than Galactus had, Harry's transformation had given him far more raw power than he had during their previous meeting,. And while Thanos had upgraded his own resistance with his shield, now that Harry no longer needed to hold back, his raw power was able to overcome it.

The strike nearly burned all the way through his shield and the armor covering Thanos's knee. Although it didn't the sheer impact shattered the bone, hurting Thanos severely for the first time in the fight, pulling another howl of pain from Thanos in turn. "GRAAaaa!"

Pushing through the pain, Thanos reversed course, pulling several small spheres from his belt and tossing them in front of himself. They went off, a mix of insanely high powered flashbangs and gases that Thanos had created to use on Earth. The gases created a chain reaction around them with the oxygen and hydrogen, much like the Bloody Insane spell Harry had used in their first battle on Mars, which Thanos had used as a template.

For just a moment, a storm of lightning, fire, wind and metal rain the size of Earth flared around them, with Harry at its center as Thanos retreated. Unable to retreat in turn fast enough, Harry howled in pain as more of his armor began to fail despite his last moment effort to empower it further with his magic.

By the time Harry got through the torrential horror, Thanos had reached space once more, pushing past what a human would have called the Cassini Division into the A Ring around Saturn. He was now sending beams of ravening purple-white energy down towards Harry, creating new gaps in the rings, so powerful were those beams, destroying all they touched down to the liquid hydrogen level, causing further chain reactions that racked the gas giant and Harry even as he tried to escape.

Meanwhile, out in deep space beyond the solar system, Sanctuary went from a mode that was barely a step above standby to fully powered. It's massively powerful AI began to go to work, calculating a hyperspace jump with the issues of Fortress Mars and all the other gravitic bodies.

Even as Sanctuary jumped, Harry was forced to retreat further into Saturn's atmosphere, speeding up even as the atmosphere around him went from gas to liquid to helium rain and the heat began to be noticeable, Harry finally left the blast wave behind. Now free of the pain and and constant battering, Harry teleported up to the same point the two of them had arrived at just outside Saturn's atmosphere next to the hydrogen scoop.

Thanos had drifted near it during his artillery-like barrage of Harry's previous position, and now before he could realize Harry had teleported out of his impromptu trap, an overpowered punch

caught Thanos in the side of his jaw powered by Harry's magic and the speed with which he closed. The blow was so strong that Thanos lost a tooth as he launched him further away from Saturn, while the three spells, two overpowered Shatter Shakers and a Sectumsempra blasted into Thanos's face, causing him to howl in agony even as he was flung away from the planet with so much force it reached an appreciable percentage of light speed.

Harry followed up, zooming after him as fast as his magic could take him, not even noticing Sanctuary appearing in real space behind him for a moment.

The same could not be said for others however. Nor were the other forces in play elsewhere in the star system unaware of Harry and Thanos's clashes beforehand.

OOOOOOO

The eyes of the EDF and Skrull Fleet alike found themselves trained on events occurring within and above the outer atmosphere of one of Sol System's large gas giants. Up to this point, the Skrull Fleet had been somewhat sidelined. The defenders of the system had introduced an entirely new, shuttle-sized combat unit, which hit the Skrull Fleet soon after they began to move in-system, moving in real space so they could avoid being dragged into conflict with the fortress planet the humans had set up. That first strike had been devastating but the next two had been almost as bad, coming in at disparate angles.

Desperation and rage had created innovation, and the Skrull had come up with anti-starfighter doctrine, a name that one of Len'dok's age had thought up, quite quickly. It was based off overlapping firing lanes, swift repositioning and defense in depth to protect their largest ships in a way that was almost quixotic given the size of the enemy vessels they were being protected from. The human starfighters had a horrific two-punch combo of energy beams, one to knock down shields, the other to turn the very matter of the Skrull ships strike into miniature nuclear explosions, almost like antimatter given beam form. That meant that the armor of their targets did not matter at all. Equalizers, the super-dreadnaught class of the Skrull, were suddenly just as vulnerable as their destroyers.

This came in handy when the stinging starfighters attacked again, this time accompanied by the human's capital ships coming in to attempt to attack the fleet from deeper into the gravity well. That short clash had resulted in two of the purloined Kree ships of various sizes being destroyed and the rest forced to retreat, yet that fleet was almost beside the point. Because at the same time they attacked, a starfighter force had come in with them from one direction, while another had come up behind the fleet. And both forces numbered in the thousands. Len'dok had needed to carefully maneuver his fleet in order to not take crippling losses. However, this time, after the starfighters had begun to retreat, he had sent out forces of his battleships in order to blindly bombard the area where the surviving starfighters.

This resulted in a cloud of debris from whatever it was that was allowing the starfighters to cloak themselves or retreat deeper in-system. Even now Len'dok's sensor specialists couldn't tell which, and nothing they did could determine what had been there originally. Sanctuary, Thanos's massive flagship, might have had better luck, but it was not in communications with the Skrull Fleet, having stayed behind where they had first jumped in out in deep space.

Up to this point, Len'dok had lost thirty-five Equalizers, his change in tactics meaning the starfighters couldn't target them as easily. In comparison, he had lost nearly half of his battleships, the starfighters deciding to go for them when they could not get to the superdreadnoughts, killing one hundred and ninety of them. Another hundred cruisers had died to the one hundred and eighty four they'd lost in the initial clash. Their destroyers had been paired down to barely seven hundred from their previously over nine-hundred complement.

The spells hiding the Runic Doorways through which the Ravens deployed were capable of defeating the Skrull sensors entirely. On the other hand, the Runic Doorways did not have much in the way of defense against such overwhelming firepower, which had allowed the Skrull battleships to destroy three of the time-intensive Warp Gates.

Similarly, the emergency portkeys woven into every Raven crewmember's suits routinely pulled three out of every four of them away to be assigned to a new Raven and rejoin the battle. They still took losses, of course, but Admiral Powers and Whitaker were both extremely pleased by how the Ravens had done. Not so much the main fleet. The loss of two destroyers and the damage done to three cruisers had been a harsh lesson, and one the humans could ill afford given the size disparity between them and the attacking Skrull fleet.

Thankfully, there was one area where the humans had an advantage even larger than the Skrull's in terms of capital ships: the superpowered side of things. This quickly became apparent moments after Powers had been forced to retreat from his first probing assault, and even that was simply a mistake in timing. At that point, Steven Strange had created a massive shield behind which the human fleet could sit, inviolate even as they in turn fired back.

It was only the size of the Skrull invasion fleet that allowed them to absorb the losses they had since then, and Fleet Overlord Len'dok knew it. The moment that shield had flared into place, he had tried to keep his distance, pulling back out system.

Black Dwarf might well have objected to that. Indeed, the Black Guard member left to watch the Skrull for Lord Thanos would probably have crushed Len'dok's head like a grape at the show of 'cowardice. But he had previously left the flagship, then rapidly thereafter this plane of existence, and Len'dok could barely keep himself from saying good riddance when it happened.

The massive, powerfully built superpowered alien had charged out to do battle with the human's special forces in the form of a young woman (Skrull and human women both looked

very alike) with startlingly green hair. But if he had thought that the humans would allow him to challenge just one of them at a time, the moron had been sorely mistaken. He had been quickly slain by the one their intel had labeled, of all things, the Human Torch, and others. Indeed, the fiery-looking human, the one who looked like a star made into a bipedal form, was still causing trouble when the first sign of Lord Thanos battling some other superpowered individuals around one of the gas giants had reached the Skrull's sensors. Only the largest ships in Len'dok's fleet had sufficient shielding to ward him off, and he was continuously making attack runs through the fleet, evading all defensive fire to hit one or two ships at a time even as they retreated, still taking fire from the humans behind their inviolate magical shield.

He was the only one doing so, thankfully. The young woman who seemed to use what his analysts called other dimensional energy and the other young woman with magnetic powers seemed content to act defensively as did the two actual magic users, something Len'dok and every other Skrull in the fleet was thankful for.

Regardless of their willingness to remain on the defensive, however, fear, confusion and simply not having any weapon that could get through the enemy's magic would have normally forced the Skrull fleet to fully withdraw into hyperspace in a planned retreat, if not a disorganized rout. The shield especially, something that had simply appeared out of nothing at a few gestures from one of the human's super-powered individuals, would have caused panic in any less well-trained fleet.

Magic was not a term that most Skrull were mentally prepared to accept. It had been literally millennia since any of their race had been able to use magic, the result of a very nasty civil war well before the Skrull had reached the stars that the Skrull of the modern era barely knew anything about. If not for Thanos warning the Skrull what they might face, even Len'dok would have been unable to keep a lid on the panic and fear that the magic shield and other surprises had caused.

But Len'dok had pulled his fleets back together and then kept it together as they retreated. He felt, and had explained to his officers, that as long as they remained a fleet in being, they represented at least a shadow of threat that was in turn pinning down at least one powerful magic user, and several other super-powered types.

In all honesty, Len'dok knew that was probably not nearly enough to save him from Thanos's displeasure. Yet he could at least hope the mad Titan wouldn't devastate his race further. Under such a master, that was the best he could truly hope for, and had felt so since he had stood in front of Thanos in person for the first time.

Now however, as their scanners continued to tell them more about the colossal exchange of energies occurring in orbit over one of the gas giants, followed by Sanctuary jumping in-system

from where it had been hidden in the deep dark, the Fleet Overlord made a decision. From this far out their scanners hadn't been able to tell much about what was happening on Earth (who named their planet dirt, anyway?) especially with the magical defenses fooling long range scanners. Yet they didn't need to tell him much in order to paint a grim picture. It had been more than twenty four hours since his fleet had first arrived in this system, and there had been no sign of the Chitauri's invasion winning the day on the ground. And now without Sanctuary behind him and no sign of 'Lord' Thanos's forces having one on any other front, Len'dok's priorities changed.

"Send a request for ceasefire to the humans. We are but a sideshow here, and I will not let any more Skrull die for nothing," Len'dok ordered. *This is no longer about surviving our overlord, it is about this fleet in particular surviving.*

"B, but sir," one of his officers hissed as the others all turned to stare at him. Everyone was showing visible signs of the strain of the ongoing battle, and not one of them had not needed to step out and change their shirts or grab a stim at some point. "We, we have our orders. Lord Thanos--"

"I rather think that our lack of progress here is not the only thing that has gone wrong with this invasion, officer. Indeed, I cannot help but believe that even if the Mad Titan wins against whoever he is fighting out there, we will still have lost this campaign." Fleet Overlord Len'dok shook his head with a sneer, finally allowing himself to show his true feelings towards the mad creature who had conquered his race and yet had seemingly failed to plan a single campaign with enough cutouts and backup plans to take a single, prepared planet.

"Thanos believed in his own power, his own intelligence and the importance of his personal goals with all the faith of a fanatic. Yet he did not keep as good an eye on his subordinates or the reality of the war as a whole as he should have, it seems. The battle on Earth is lost, and with that, the Chitauri are almost certainly entirely sidelined."

That could have changed if he had used Sanctuary appropriately, but I was never asked my opinion on that or indeed the overall plan. I would like to call Thanos arrogant, but it's been a little over a year, I think, since he first was here? And the humans have come up with not only enough ground forces to retake the Chitauri beachheads but dozens of super-powered individuals, and those dratted starfighters? There is something truly frightening about how fast the humans seem to grow.

Shaking that thought off, Len'dok covered that moment with a gesture to the tactical screen. "That leaves our fleet as the only appreciable force Thanos can still command. For now, we are best served by looking out for ourselves."

“Sir, Lord Thanos will not take kindly to any kind of ceasefire,” the same officer said, not, Len’dok could see, because of any real loyalty to the purple-skinned monster. No, worry and concern shown in the younger Skrull’s face as he put his concerns into words. “You, you won’t survive his, his displeasure.”

“Perhaps not. But if the Mad Titan lives, then I will take my lumps, and he can try to salvage the rest of this campaign. If he is able to overcome his current opponent, and has access to that ship of his, he might be able to,” Len’dok admitted. “But if not?” He smiled very slightly. “We might just lose one tyrant titan and gain a... titanically capable ally...”

The groans his officers all released at that pun despite their self-control made the Fleet Overlord smile, although not as much as the sight of the enemy fire slackening off and then stopping entirely as the humans agreed to the ceasefire. SAR teams launched from his fleet as the Ravens, those maddeningly capable ships disappeared again, and Len’Dok and his officers turned their attention back to the battle going on deeper into the system.

OOOOOOO

Sanctuary took barely a millisecond to realize that its master’s battle had left the range of its weapons before going after them in real-space. Pushing through the artificial gravity well from the fourth planet had caused its engines to nearly explode, and they were in no shape to allow for a micro-jump, even if Sanctuary had allowed for the possibility in its jump calculations and had actually come out where it wanted to. The part of its subroutines that Sanctuary devoted to that task said the repair bots would take at least two hours to repair the damage, and until then, Sanctuary could not jump to hyperspace.

That did not matter, much, however. Even in real space, Sanctuary was incredibly fast, using a advanced real-space engine that made even the Shi’ar’s version seem slow. Even more importantly, Sanctuary was also extremely well armed, as it showed a moment later. Blasts of energy that only vaguely resembled the weapons used by the Skrull and other, lesser, species fired, filling the area around the target with a halo of fire with enough power to flay a planet, either cutting it apart or removing bits of its surface from existence.. Most of these were thin, cutting beams intended to slice enemy ships into pieces. Others were brute force kinetic beams that resembled Cyclops’ eye beams, but far more powerful.

Like most space-going races, Sanctuary had no rocket or missile type weapons. Lock on speed and computer reaction time meant such systems were less than useless. Those it did have were bombs meant to be used against planets. Yet it did have a few, more esoteric weapons systems which it now used against the target: designated Guardian. Two gravitic trap weapons, much like the one the humans had created, reached out from the central section of Sanctuary. A Phase Shift weapon built along its spine also blasted out. Normally when such a weapon struck

a target the effect was devastating. Few things and even fewer people could survive being struck by a weapon intended to teleport a portion away into another dimension.

But to the surprise of the AI built into Sanctuary, neither weapon worked. A wave of Guardian's hand seemingly created an anti-gravitic field to cancel out the first weapon. The second seemingly just couldn't grasp anything within Guardian, the beam splashing off him without doing anything, much to the electronic consternation of Sanctuary. Such should have been impossible against a purely mortal, three-dimensional being. It seemed as if Guardian was no longer simply a physical existence. Like Deities that Sanctuary and its Master had dealt with before and the Master himself. With that in mind, Sanctuary cut power to that system, and began to funnel more power to its other onboard weapons. Brute force would need to suffice.

Grunting under the impacts, Harry barely had time to turn and look behind him before Thanos blasted him again, causing still more of his Crysis suit to explode off him. Even as he tumbled through space in a new direction thanks to that blast, Harry looked up and over his shoulder, blinking in surprise.

The thing behind him was huge. Even though it was well out of range of most of his own spells, it was so big that it looked like a small planetoid, although not in shape. The ship had wings to either side coming out top and bottom flaring out and up or down to merge together in a way that reminded Harry of the aft end of a sci-fi ship that Jean had once shown him, although this one wasn't in green like those stealth combatants were supposed to be. At the front of the main body of the ship was a strange grill-like area that Harry put down to whatever weapons systems were placed there. Above that, there looked like there were two narrow eyes, giving the face of the vessel an almost alive look.

Weapons nacelles lining the wings of the vessel blasted out, followed by more from the grill-like area, which merged into an even more powerful beam, and Harry found himself hissing in pain as they struck. The laser-like energy beams coming from the secondary systems couldn't cut or slice into him even though his armor was more rags than helpful at this point thanks to his Titan body. But that central beam had enough impact to its attack that he found himself blasted away much like he had done to Thanos earlier, covering even more area than Thanos had before Harry was able to shift enough to get out of the beam's way.

Thanos was not idle during this. He quickly communicated with Sanctuary, and moments later, the same yellowish shield that had worked so well to protect Thanos from spellfire up to this point flickered around Sanctuary, creating a sphere in which no spell would work. The energy to do so caused Sanctuary to cut power to its secondary and tertiary weapons systems, while the main blast, a spinal mounted kinetic dispersal beam flared out again, hammering into Harry for less than a second before cutting out before Harry could get away then resuming. It impacted

Harry almost like an Orion Drive would, multiple nukes going off one after another, providing a odd form of propulsion.

The repeated strikes allowed Thanos to call upon a medical bot from his ship, which helped repair his ravaged face and then replaced his boot thruster. Harry's spell had ruined one of his eyes to the point he would need to build a replacement, as he had for the hand he'd lost in his first fight with Guardian, but that and a scar that the medical bot sewed shut were the only long term wounds from that strike.

Meanwhile, Harry found himself battered across the lightyears for a bit before he was able to dodge fast enough to not be hit by a follow-on pulse. The next pulse that attempted to hit him instead hit a Sciath na BhFéadfadh that Harry flung up between them. Then Harry was zooming back into the attack, lashing out with long range spell chain towards Sanctuary and Thanos alike. He didn't try to split them up, figuring that would just make it more difficult to deal with them both. At the same time, help arrived for Harry.

From the nearest Warp Gate, the Human Torch, Polaris and Dark Star arrived, followed by Clea. Dr Strange had stayed with the defense fleet facing off with the Skrull Fleet. As the most experienced, Johnny called the shots, blasting out a beam of fire so hot it more resembled a solar flare than anything else. "Polaris, if you can't grab onto anything on that big bastard, wait at range for now, Dark Star with me. We need to make it split its fire."

Sanctuary was already doing so even as the trio came within their own range, however, not even turning to address them, keeping it's spinal mounted weapons pointed at Harry. Clea's shields saved them from that return fire a time or two as the massive ship seemed to have no trouble firing on enemies that were merely human-sized. Still, it had diverted much of its fire away from Harry, and that in turn allowed him to strike back, both against Sanctuary and Thanos.

Thanos dodged through the multiple spells that came his way, frowning in anger. The Power Cosmic did not have infinite range, and here in space, even Thanos's eyes weren't good enough to see all that far away. Guardian didn't seem to have the same limitations, and while unformed magical blasts dissipated even more rapidly than the Power Cosmic, his formed spells did not. That gave him much the same range as Sanctuary and more than Thanos himself. *Very well, I will need to close, I already have proof enough that I can overwhelm him in close combat. The newcomers will be annoying but worthless in the main and—*

The titan's thoughts cut off as a huge spell blasted out from Harry, crashing into the shield of Sanctuary, followed by a spell that Harry had used previously on Thanos. But instead of a small cube of antimatter. Several yards of the substance appeared, held at first within a modified Bubblehead Charm, but when that Bubblehead Charm failed, it instantly went critical, exploding

with enough power to rock the massive vessel despite its myriad shields, the explosion large enough to be caught by sensors across the star system.

Roaring, Thanos charged forward, entering his own range and blasting Harry with several bolts of Power Cosmic, barking out a command verbally to Sanctuary, so furious was he. The ship didn't need verbal commands, after all, given the subcutaneous communications device embedded in Thanos's brain to send his mental commands to the ship. "Sanctuary, concentrate on defense. Keep all shields up, diverting energy from weapons systems as needed. Guardian's energy conversion magic is too deadly for anything of mere physical material to withstand it."

"Complying. Warning: Normal anti-material and anti-energy shielding down to 85% from that strike. This unit cannot stop Guardian from using further spells that are targeted not at this unit, but at the surrounding area," Sanctuary warned.

"Acknowledged," Thanos answered, this time mentally as he dodged around several more spells from Guardian. Each of those, he realized with a slight bit of worry, were much larger than the equivalent spells he'd used when they'd been fighting on Earth. *He no longer needs to hold back,* Thanos thought, his lips curling into a fierce grin. *Good.*

While Harry was more mobile, he wasn't any faster in a straight line, and Thanos was able to close.

Harry's eyes, which were still hidden behind the goggles of his Crysis suit, widened, and he ducked under a blow from Thanos, his own hand flashing up with a Bombarda with enough power to shatter a city contained within. It cracked into Thanos's chest and did nothing more than cause the larger Titan to grin as he blasted Harry with a face full of Power Cosmic. Harry reeled, then even as his goggles cracked despite the enchantments on them, returned fire. Spell chains flickered out point blank, but the yellowish energy shield was back, blocking his best attempts.

At the same time, Harry realized that his air bubble had been gone for a while. *Huh, so much for the need to breath. That's interesting, even though I knew Thanos didn't need to breath before this. Pity, spells to attack his lungs could've been something to try when we were in an atmosphere. Right now though it doesn't matter. Lightning, fire, ice, water, raw force, Thanos' shield seems to block all of it, and I can tell whatever battery he was using to power that shield was replaced when he got his ugly mug repaired.*

Harry knew he had the advantage at range, with his magic easily overcoming Thanos's in terms of range and type of use. Further, Harry was quickly realizing he was just as, if not more durable than Thanos when it came to taking Thanos's energy blasts in comparison to Thanos taking magical strikes in turn. *My suit's kind of wrecked by this point, but the Titan Transformation is*

more than making up for it, Harry thought with a wild grin even as his head rocked back from a blow that cost him a tooth.

Sanctuary took that moment, however, to remind Harry of its presence. A blast of energy took Harry in the side, causing him to grimace in pain and opening himself to Thanos.

Thanos grabbed his arm with one hand, bringing his other hand around to break Guardian's arm, a wild grin on his face.

But before he could, Harry lashed out with a spell he aimed with his eyes. This was something he had trouble with before but the Piercing Fang spell, the penetrating type spell he had come up with on the fly when fighting Galactus that acted like a drill or Rifela-like spell on steroids, blasted into Thanos's chest. His shield held, deadening the spell, but the raw impact of the spell still halted him, and the next moment, a Lumos Proxima followed.

The light, as bright as a star going nova, blinding not only Thanos but everyone in the vicinity as Harry accidentally overpowered the spell. This included Sanctuary, who lost a appreciable percentage of his auspex equipment based on sight, and and Harry himself. Both titans reeled back, with Thanos releasing Harry. Harry recovered first, and two more spell chains flashed out, hammering into Thanos and the more distant Sanctuary.

As his ship rocked once more from not one but multiple near-contact antimatter explosions and the other three humans took advantage of this quickly, Thanos found himself grimacing even as his anti-magic shield protected him from the worst of Harry's assault on himself.

The Mad Titan was feeling it more than a bit. His fight with Thor had wounded him somewhat and while he'd come through his fight with the Avatar relatively unscathed, she had still cost him energy. His Power Cosmic abilities could mitigate Guardian's unformed magical skills, and his formed magic could be handled by his shield, but that shield was again slowly losing power, just as Sanctuary was. Even with his ship there to back him up, Thanos was slowly being pummeled, and he knew it. *Potter's Titan transformation... and how he achieved that I have no idea... seems to have given him just as much durability as I possess.*

Thanos had entirely lost the initiative at this point, and even as he rallied, Dark Star shouted something into the intercoms, which Harry somehow picked up, the back of his helmet the only part of his Crisis Suit that still looked like it was in one piece. "Guardian, I can sense some kind of sub-dimensional connection between the ship and it's owner! The ship's got to be powering that yellow energy field, he can't create it himself."

With that, Harry turned a significant portion of his attention towards dealing with the ship. Even as Thanos closed, Harry remained entirely defensive, creating small balls of Bubblehead-enclosed antimatter to keep Thanos at bay. He paid for it with more than a few bruises and a lot

more strikes coming in than Harry was able to block, including one that rocked his head and nearly blinded him in one eye, with Sanctuary also joining in despite everything that the other three could do.

Thanos had no idea what Harry was doing. He thought that perhaps the fool had latched onto his antimatter creation spell for some reason given how well it had worked before, and pressed his advantage without further worry. He should have.

Suddenly, Harry shifted tactics. Between one raw magical attack and dodging a blow from Thanos, Harry hit his shield with the Shield Breaker Spell. Not just once, but ten times in a spell chain, overpowering each iteration so much it could have shattered a shield fit to protect a planet the size of Mars. Thanos's anti-magic shield held, but the raw power of that spell blasted him away much like the pulse-type attack Sanctuary had used on Guardian earlier. Between one second and the next, Thanos found himself going from within hand-to-hand range to nearly forty miles away, well outside his range of sight if not the Power Cosmic.

Before Thanos could recover and close the distance again, Harry twisted around, launching a spell not directly at Sanctuary, but the space nearby. **"Expecto Praetorian MAXIMA!"** Harry shouted, his words making no noise in space, but helping him to concentrate through it.

In the previously empty space around the diving quartet trying their best to engage Sanctuary, a white light blazed and a magical construct appeared. It almost gleamed like an Expecto Patronus, but Harry was somewhat surprised to see more fiery red and orange colors mixed in with the sharp white light. Moreover, the Expecto construct did not take the shape of the massive knights that Harry had used to clear out Hogwarts all those months ago.

Rather, a giant version of Hedwig appeared, easily larger than even Sanctuary, reaching down to grasp the ship in claws of raw light and, Harry realized with a start, life-based magic. *The transformation to a Titan seems to have given my magic some extra oomph. A gift from the Pheonix Force, perhaps?* It didn't change Harry's orders though, which flowed along the spell even as the Praetorian Maxima appeared. "Destroy that ship!"

The claws of the magical construct grabbed onto the shields of Sanctuary, and to the surprise of the vessel, it did not instantly dissipate on contact with the anti-magic shield. Instead, its attack continued, the construct renewing itself as it's claws closed on the yellow shield. Technology-based energy met magic in a continuous conflict, and instantly, Sanctuary blared a warning down the nigh-telepathic link to it's master. "Warning! This unit is sustaining considerable strain. All offensive actions halted. Kinetic and Anti-magic shielding failing at a rate of 2.75% per second."

Even as Thanos closed with Harry, forcing him to defend himself less Thanos just pummel him under, Clea, who had been holding back, zipped down. She began to use attack spells all around

the ship. Along with Dark Star and the Human Torch's assault, this forced Sanctuary to keep its shields up all over the vessel.

And into this, Polaris soared. Previously, the anti-material and energy shield Sanctuary had kept up had been enough to defeat her ability to find any ferrous material within it, disrupting her ability to feel such. Now, though, the shields began to flicker, and Polaris struck. Even as Harry found his jaw broken by a blow from Thanos and his chest blasted by a strike of Power Cosmic energy, Polaris's magnetism found several panels within the ship. A wrench, and those panels were torn open. Small-scale things, but they began to escalate.

Thanos turned to stare towards his ship for a second in shock as Sanctuary blared out another warning. His attempts to force Harry to pull his power back from the construct he had created having thus far failed, but the bad news was about to get worse. "Alert, Alarm! This unit's internal structure is under attack! Analysis suggests magnetic assault of some fashion!"

As Thanos watched one of Sanctuary's shield nacelles exploded as bits of it tore out from the rest. Most of the ship wasn't ferrous, but enough was and most of that was in some way important. And worse, without that shield nacelle, a quadrant of the large ship was left without its anti-material and anti-energy shield.

Dark Star and the Human Torch both pounced. Flame and other-dimensional energy struck tearing further into the ship as more of its systems began to fail.

That was all Thanos could see before a spell chain slammed into him. Or rather, into his fake hand. A series of overpowered Shield Breaker crashed into the anti-magic shield, followed by a cutting spell that Harry had learned from Hela. It was part deific spell, part death magic, and as the yellowish anti-magic shield failed, the cutting spell launched into Thanos's his sliced his mechanical hand in two.

With a whine that went unheard in the depths of space, Thanos's anti-magic shield failed, leaving him with only his Titan durability and quasi-fourth dimensional existence to protect himself. No transfiguration spell could work on him, but this definitely opened up Thanos for a world of hurt, something that he learned in the next second as the Piercing Fang spell slammed into him with no protection available to take up any of the impact.

The mix of Light, raw, and piercing magic, the mix of which had become something of a specialty of Harry's, still couldn't penetrate Thanos' skin but the spell caught him in the side, shattering ribs and hurling Thanos down through space as the titan soundlessly groaned in pain.

With a start, Harry realized the battle had taken them across the solar system so far they'd left Saturn well beyond and had entered Neptune's orbit. The blue ball of gas, methane and what-have-you hovered in the distance, creating a backdrop to the fight along with the far closer

moon that Thanos was rapidly approaching. *It's large, and looks mostly stone-like from here, so... Oberon, I think?*

Shaking his head, Harry followed, flashing forward so fast that even Clea couldn't follow him, hitting Thanos several times more and taking a few blows in turn before the two Titans crashed into the moon. They struck with all the power of several nukes going off, creating a massive plume of dust, ice and rock, a crater appearing under them the size of Asia.

Groaning, Thanos tried to give as good as he was getting, but without his antimagic shield, there was no way he was turning the tide without Sanctuary. And reaching out to the ship, his eyes widened. *"Sanctuary!"* He sent, via a mental link to his ship, the same ship that had saved him the last time he clashed with Potterm the same he'd used throughout the fight in space to give his ship its orders. *"Sanctuary, come to me!"*

He blocked the next few strikes retreating as he did, his immense jaw locked in a rictus of pain as he called on all his Power Cosmic reserves to redirect Harry's spells with extreme difficulty, each exchange weakening him further. But there was no response. No response until he turned his eyes upwards, and saw Sanctuary itself. The ship was racing towards him, but it's engines were being destroyed as it came, a significant portion of one wing was already gone, and none of it's weapons were firing.

"Thi, this, unit is failing. Hyperdrive engines repaired from earlier jump, but compromised by new damage. Losing power. This unit is..." The AI's voice cut off as a large chunk of it's 'face' was suddenly transfigured into glass, before shattering leaving the ship listing as most of the power flowing through it disappeared, leaving only a few scattered shield nacelles and the central power generator, the glow of which was beginning to grow dramatically as Thanos stared. The next instant, the ship exploded, shredding itself in its explosion, hurtling the Human Torch, Polaris and Dark star away before Clea could shield them, destroying the magical construct that had plagued the vessel up to this point.

The Human Torch rode the explosion, but Dark Star and Polaris both were teleported out by their emergency medical portkeys. Even Johnny needed a second to shake his head, before he and Clea raced to Oberon to help Harry.

Seeing this, the final destruction of his seat of power, Thanos howled in fury, rage and hatred rising, his home for literally longer than humanity disappearing into so much scattered bits was gone now and he could feel nothing but hate for the being who had destroyed it. That was almost worse than knowing he could not retreat, but for a moment his anger overrode that thought.

Thanos's attacks pushed Harry back, but he was still able to concentrate on a second spell. A hammer of roiling magic appeared above them, growing until it went from horizon to horizon

around Oberon, then shrinking, condensing until it looked almost solid with raw magical potential. It crashed down, and Thanos found himself smashed into the surface of Oberon with such power that he began to be sent deeper into it's outer crust, to the point where the whole moon trembled. He fought back, tried to use the Power Cosmic to defend himself, but he couldn't until the spell cut off.

Harry rained down further, smaller spells, cutting spells now, on Thanos. These were a mix of his own, and those he had learned from Hela, and some he created now, and when the Mad Titan finally forced his way back up onto the surface of the planet, he was a wreck. Like Harry, all of his armor was nearly gone, leaving him in rags that barely covered his legs, let alone anything above the waist. Whereas Harry was covered in a mass of bruises and bleeding from a single cut to his side and was missing several teeth, Thanos had more flayed skin than whole, more bruises than burns and far more of both than uninjured surface.

Yet still, he glared across at Harry.

Scowling, Harry gestured, and a bubblehead Charm the size of a city block appeared, covering both of them, letting them speak. *Even someone like Thanos deserves to have his last words heard.* "You brought war and death to my world, Thanos. Not once, but twice. You launched your followers like a pack of mad dogs at the head of an army of hyenas. But there is another saying among us humans. Pride comes before the fall, and it is time for you to fall."

With that, he gestured to one side, and a spear of fire, Pheonix Force-tinged magic mixed with light and raw magic appeared, causing Harry to once more almost shake his head in shock at how easily his magic came to him in this manner.

Across from him, Thanos glared back, teeth bared, and he slowly raised his arms, in a defensive stance. Whatever else, Thanos would not die without still trying to do his best to bring Guardian with him.

It was now, as Thanos realized that he had lost all chance of escape, of all chance of living through the next few minutes, when he accepted his fate, that he saw his Lady. For the first time in several years, Death herself appeared to one side of the titans.

She appeared so abruptly it was like the whole universe had simply blinked, and she was there, a moment stretched into infinity, everything around them, the dust, ice Clea and Johnny frozen in place, not keeping up with this one extended moment. Reality bent around Lady Death, the ultimate end of all things so **real** that everything else became false in her presence.

This was not the first time Harry had dealt with Lady Death, and he simply bowed his head respectfully as she looked at the two of them from the side. "Lady Death."

For his part, Thanos breathed in, his face shifting to one of abject adoration, of religious fervor? Harry couldn't tell which. Regardless, it was highly disturbing to see such an expression sent Lady Death's way. Not that Harry didn't recognize that she could be... attractive... if you were into bones and skulls, but by the very nature of the woman in question she could not love, and Harry had never gotten the impression that she was unhappy with that state of affairs.

Obviously the Mad Titan did not see it that way however. "Lady, at last! At last I see you in person, for the, the first time in ages you have responded to my overtures. You, you are even more beautiful than I dreamed... your eyes, the, they draw me in. I..." he coughed up blood, before reaching his one remaining hand out to Lady Death as if to offer her something, or to request something in return. Again, Harry wasn't certain. "All this, all I have ever done, for you..."

Death did not respond, instead staring right at Harry, not even looking in Thanos' direction. Instead, Harry felt her gaze locked on his forehead, specifically the two runes that had replaced his lightning bolt scar there. Sensing that something was being demanded of him, Harry bowed his head deeper this time than before. "As you can see, I took what knowledge you and your sister gave me and ran with it. I cannot believe this was outside your calculations but I do suppose I need to say it. I will not abuse any of my new powers... including the possible immortality that comes with it. I will always be grateful for the aid given and will respect the balance of nature. If you wish me to swear an Oath to you on that score, I will do so."

Although much of that last had been pulled out of the ether (or his arse, Harry wasn't certain which) it seemed to satisfy Death. Her expression could not change, indeed it had never done so in all their interactions, yet her body language seemed to ease a bit and she slowly nodded.

This did not sit well with Thanos, who cried out, his hand slumping back to his side, anger giving him some strength but blood loss and pain almost enough to force the man to his knees. "Wh, why do you speak to him!? Why do you not even, even look at me. Please!" Thanos nearly screamed, his voice both passionate and desperate, and not just desperate because he knew he was at the ends of his rope. No, this was the desperation of someone who was looking at the love of his life, who he had done impossible, awe-inspiring things for, still not giving him the time of day.

"I, I know I failed to give you the ultimate prize, this one's soul and that of the Phoenix Force's avatar," Thanos babbled. "But surely, surely there must be a reason you have appeared before me despite my shortcomings! Please, tell me what I must do to gain your favor, to have you look at me as I do you! Even were I to die myself for us to be together, I would gladly accept that price!"

Only now did Death turn her attention to her would-be suitor. That was a strange thing, one she didn't understand, even now several millennia after she first became aware of Thanos. It was then when he had slain his race, starting with his family, and had done so in some kind of misplaced belief that she would look favorably on him for it. An idea he had carried forward, as if he believed she cared about the trillions of beings he had killed in the centuries since, how they died. For all the death he caused, Thanos did so because he had somehow convinced himself that Death would love him back, if only he could gain her attention.

Such was far from the truth but given what he had done supposedly in her name, Death had deemed that she should appear in person now, as she so rarely could. But Harry having a rune tied to her realm on his forehead allowed for this. And, although it annoyed her, she also needed to speak.

"PLEASE!" Thanos looked almost close to a full mental breakdown now, staring back. "I, I have slain worlds, star spanning empires, all for you, all for the glory of Death!"

Death flicked a single finger at her side, the motion enough to fill both men with dread. Then she spoke.

To Harry Death's voice sounded as it always had when she pulled his spirit to her realm: like the slamming of a tomb's doors, or of two gravestones banging together. By the expression that crossed Thanos' face, he did not share Harry's opinion, although he also didn't seem to like what Death was saying. **"When have I ever asked for such?"**

Death waited a brief second, showing some knowledge of conversational mores, surprising Harry somewhat. But then she went on. **"I AM DEATH. THE ENDLESS. THE CONCLUSION OF ALL THINGS. SUCH IS MY BEING, SUCH HAVE I BEEN SINCE THE START OF TIME. WHY WOULD I COME TO LOVE ANYONE? I CANNOT."**

She shook her head, once with all the finality of scythe going through wheat. **"FURTHER, WHY WOULD I COME TO LOVE ANYONE WHO WISHES TO SIMPLY BRING MORE DEATH? IT WOULD BE LIKE THE COLOR BLACK FALLING IN LOVE WITH A PAINTER WHO USES THAT COLOR more than any other. Foolish. I HAVE NEVER WANTED MORE THAN MY DUE. NEVER FELT LOVE, NOR WANTED TO. EVERYTHING YOU HAVE DONE TO GARNER MY ATTENTION HAS MERELY BEEN A REFLECTION OF YOUR OWN SOUL."**

Harry watched grimly as Thanos stared, before slowly shaking his head, unable to believe what he was hearing, but also unable to disprove The Endless's words. And as that final revelation hit him, Thanos, for perhaps the first time since he had slain his parents in cold blood, looked at his actions without the lens of his obsession with Lady Dath. And in so doing, he knew they, like the trillions of deaths he had caused since, had no purpose. Knew he was just as much a

madman as a common serial killer. There had never been a real justification for what he did. All of it had been in his own head.

When that hit him, Thanos's mind broke, and he fell to his knees, screaming.

"AAHHHhhhhhhhaaaaaaaa!!!!!"

Shaking his head, Harry lashed out with the spear-like spell he had prepared. It was time to finish this, at last.

Even with all the power he had put into the spell, Thanos' natural resistance to magic was far higher than Galactus' ever had been, and it took a while for the attack to finish its work. Minutes of Thanos' screaming, before the magic finally finished eating into his face, searing skin, bone, teeth away followed rapidly by his skull and brain. Moments later, Thanos' body fell the stony ground of the planet below, his entire head seared away by Harry's magic.

For a moment, Harry waited for something to happen, some final last gasp trap, or for the universe to acknowledge the Mad Titan's passing in some fashion as Harry gasped, nearly slumping to his own knees in exhaustion. As he gasped in air, waiting, for a second, there was nothing.

Then from Thanos' corpse an image rose, an image made in black, red and dark purple, with ice blue eyes. It was an extremely detailed, well-formed soul, showing how powerful Thanos had been in life. Thanos's soul seemed to still be screaming, but thankfully Harry could no longer hear him.

Death could, but she ignored it, waving her hand. The soul continued to cry out soundlessly as it shifted, compressing, becoming a small white and black-colored ball of gaseous energies. When the process concluded, the ball floated into Death's outstretched hand. She stared down at it for a few seconds, then clenched her hand. The ball burst, and for just a second, Harry imagined he could hear a last, despairing wail on an unseen wind.

For some reason, perhaps the connection forged between him and Dath's realm in his Titan Transformation, Harry knew that meant that Thanos' soul was simply... gone now. There would be no return to the wheel for it. The soul would not be made to forget its past self and be reborn. Death had judged him, and, perhaps because of everything he had done to gain her favor, felt it within her right to judge Thanos' soul permanently rather than give it a chance at eventual redemption.

At that, Harry had to suppress a shudder, a small, tiny part of him wondering if even Thanos deserved that. Yet he said nothing, simply bowing from the waist this time towards Death, who, to his surprise had not yet disappeared. "With your leave, Lady. Cleaning up after this war will not be an easy chore, and the faster we start, the faster we finish."

Death nodded her head imperceptibly, not looking up from where the energies contained in Thanos' soul were still slowly dissipating. By the time they were gone, so too was Harry. Death stood there still though, turning her gaze towards the distant Earth. No physical eyes could ever see so far, but Death could. After all, was she not already there? Was she not already everywhere?

Beside her, a flame appeared for a moment, a flash of crystal visible behind it as the Phoenix Force appeared in this realm of reality for a second. Soon the living embodiment of life stood beside her opposite in companionable silence, both of them staring towards Earth, and the still young human male who had become so much more, and who now wore the marks of both on his brow.

For Death, the silence was enough, lacking the spark of imagination to mark the moment with words. But she still nodded in agreement when Phoenix Force murmured, "We will continue to watch your career with great interest, Harry Potter," before both of them disappeared back to their respective realms.

The Titan War was over.

Epilogue: An Ending and a Beginning

"So we're agreed that technology and, in particular, medical supplies will be the core of our demands? You'll note I'm not bringing up the breakdown of who can get how much again," Harry drawled, looking around the table at the other delegates, his eyes both sharp and annoyed.

All of the delegates around the table, bar Dr. Doom, looked tired, although Harry found, not for the first time since his Titan Transformation, he still had energy to spare despite how frustrating this conference had been. The symposium on what to demand from the Skrull Fleet and their Empire up to this point had been quarrelsome, to say the least. Several of the nations that had wanted to be part of this discussion sought compensation straight from Harry and the empire. Others wanted specifics, while the American president wanted the Skrull fleet's smaller units to be turned over to Earth entirely so that the UN could start building its own space navy.

But finally, with a few concessions on his part, a few side deals between the others, and a **lot** of discussion, the peace treaty that the humans would agree to with the Skrull was written. This process had taken two weeks in Harry's time dilation chamber, and yet, all of the locals hadn't suffered more than a minor headache thanks to some changes made to the time dilation array. It was now much more power-intensive, on a scale of fifty to one, but that was fine by Harry.

“I am not looking forward to telling my people that we have made this agreement with the Skrull. The public will want a scapegoat, and I don’t doubt we all saw the hundreds of demonstrations worldwide demanding blood before we came up here. But I do agree that this distribution of resources is one that we can all live with,” Chancellor Wen Lo Di of China said, running one hand down his face and then up into his hair. He looked nervous at being the first to speak but also grateful that the others allowed him to do so as he stood up.

Contrary to the prediction he had rather casually thrown off to Jean in her Phoenix persona, the Mandarin had discovered that truth had its own sharp tip. The nuclear assault on the gateway, recorded by his own drones and then snatched out of the communications network by Pinoptes only to return after hostilities had ended, had proven too much. The fact that those missiles, which he had ordered launched against a target inside China’s own borders only to explode in Chinese cities when Thanos had redirected them so easily, had been simply too much. The mob had come for the Mandarin.

Sadly for the Mandarin, the military apparatus that should have helped the leader of the People’s Party stay in power had been **gutted** by the invasion. Whole bases had been wiped out by surprise Skimmer assaults, the air force had been shredded, and the navy, such as it was, had been mauled when they followed orders from on high to assault Taiwan and run into the US 7th fleet’s buzzsaw.

Harry had added still more impetus to the mob’s hatred of their former leader, although only partly because he knew it would, in fact, hurt the Mandarin’s position further. No, that had merely been a side benefit of, as Melody still put it, being a hero. In this case, that meant opening up hoarded amounts of Magical Minds potions and medical supplies and then offering his own and Ororo’s magic-based healing to the, well, the entire world, frankly. Harry had started in China, while Ororo had started in America, and they’d worked their way towards one another via Europe.

They hadn’t been able to save everyone, of course. There had been far too many wounded, both civilian and combatants, for that, even with Harry being able to heal busloads of people at a time thanks to his Titan Transformation’s powerup and the added skill being connected to the Phoenix Force had given his healing ability. Harry had even retreated into a time-dilation chamber to meet with Strange and the other magicals to figure out spells that could heal radiation damage.

Between them, Harry, Odin and Freya, who had joined the conversation surprisingly, and Steven had figured out a spell that could reverse the cellular degeneration caused by radiation. A spell that, once more, most would have had trouble powering without asking for aid from the Elder Gods of magic as Strange did. Harry didn’t need it, and coupled with another spell to fight

the background radiation, Harry had saved hundreds of thousands of lives outside of the original nukes' blast zones that had been the centers of Wuxi and Wuzhou.

In so doing, the magicals had rather accidentally opened up an entirely new study for Reed Richards and the bio-scientists of Magical Minds, but that didn't really matter much to Harry. What did matter was that the Mandarin's power had not survived a week after Thanos's death. China was still very leery of foreign influence, but Harry had not only extended medical aid but also aid in many other areas, and had offered a seat at this table to the Chancellor who came into power after the Mandarin was ousted.

Ousted, he thought now, watching Wen Lo Di address the room. Such a small, banal word. The man was literally torn limb from limb despite his 'magic' rings. If I hadn't been busy healing the radiated civilians around Wuxi... well, I suppose that even as a Titan, one thing hasn't changed. I can't be in two places at once.

Wen Lo Di was a middle-aged Chinese man who had served with distinction in the Eurasian War against Russia before being wounded and medically discharged. At that point, Wen entered the CCP. He had been a city mayor when the Chitauri invasion struck and had taken control of the local military base, maintaining order in his area and setting up defenses that downed hundreds of skimmers and even a few Rippers. After the war ended, he was one of the very few CCP officials who had gained notoriety during the invasion that could also be accepted by the remnants of the Chinese military apparatus. That made him one of five who stood for a general election among their fellows in the National People's Congress.

Two weeks since the start of this conference, and Wen had yet to get used to the fact that this entire meeting was occurring in space aboard a space station (complete with a garden, a restaurant run by house elves whose cooking could match any five-star chef's) and magic in general. Let alone Harry himself. But he tried and, far better, he had not allowed himself to be browbeaten by the older, more politically experienced members who made up the conference. He belabored the point that China needed **far** more in the way of reparations, either from the rest of the world or from the Skrull, without losing an ounce of pride in his nation and continually pointed out they still had one of the world's largest populations and industrial sectors.

After Wen finished speaking, President Jacque D'Merceau of France pontificated for a few moments before Duncan stood up, frowning a little as he brought up a holographic representation of the document they were in the process of finalizing. "I'm afraid that my points are not nearly as heartfelt as Wen or Jacque's. My nation didn't come under direct assault, after all. There are, however, a few issues with the wording of this, and in particular this segment,

where we warn against further reprisals against Earth and what we will do if such are attempted.”

Duncan manipulated the console in front of him, and the portions he was speaking of enlarged, copying itself and hovering in front of each of the delegates. All of them had gotten used to the controls of the conference room by this point. “Specifically, we mentioned that any hint of infiltration will be answered by force. I don’t think that is a tone we should take for two reasons. One, we’re still not in a position to wage war against an opponent the size of the Skrull Empire. We can bring more power to a point, for certain, thanks to the Custodes Mundi, yourself, Dr. Droom, and so forth. But how often can we do so before our spear tip starts to break?”

“I see you are practicing your eloquence on us. Very well, consider us if not impressed, then at least amused, Duncan,” Doom announced, causing Harry to snort and then nod as Doom went on. “Yet you bring up a good point.”

“But they **need** to understand that they cannot get out of not paying their reparations to us! Given our meetings with Len’dok and the conciliatory note he has thus far taken, we have kept our demands deliberately light so far. China understands what it means to be under the roots of a conqueror and how little choice you have in certain matters under those circumstances. But still, they must pay,” Wen argued, not understanding the point Duncan was making.

“I still think we’re being extremely lenient there,” the Russian representative grunted, wiping his glasses on a small silk handkerchief. Andre Ilovoko had been the man Harry had thought of as the ‘thoughtful Russian’ in the discussions after the Eurasian War and had been elected to take part in this debate. “Industrial and medical technology is well and good, but we need more ways to get out of our gravity well in an economical manner.”

“We’ve already been over this,” Samuel Northton, the American president, said, shaking his head and somewhat glaring at Harry. “And if anyone at this table should be rightfully annoyed at the fact that our space defense relies entirely on a secondary party, it should be me. So unless all of your nations are hiding some kind of plan to create a similar ability as magic can?”

“The only talk of that nature I know of comes from a joint European Union space station program, and it has barely gotten off the ground for lack of funding. And admittedly, trust in Harry Potter and the Avalon Empire,” The Frenchman muttered, shaking his head in turn. “That has become quite powerful, and it has to be said, in my nation, at least, there is more trust in them than our own government.”

Like the Chinese presence, the French presence at this table might well have surprised many people despite the recent battle for Paris. Those people would've been idiots, hung up on the French surrender during World War II. Armchair historians who didn't realize that it had been the French who had mostly held the line in World War I and who had a proud martial tradition going back far longer. Now, though, Harry doubted that anyone would ever doubt French élan again.

Once it became clear that the aliens were no longer in any position to send cutting-out expeditions away from Paris, the French had ordered the ODMs and the rest of the foreign aid out of the city. *Not that there were that many of my men left by then.* The final reclaiming of Paris had been done by the French alone. It was a matter of pride, and one that Harry had felt was rather self-destructive, but he hadn't argued at the time, as he needed more hands on deck in China. The French had paid in blood for their pride, as the Chitauri had not given up or tried to surrender after the portals had closed. No, they had fought to the end, no quarter given.

"Turning the discussion back to reparations for a moment," Dr. Doom said, looking over at Harry. "When will you and your lady begin to work on rebuilding the various cities destroyed during the war, and in what order? You hinted at doing so, but you didn't give us a set time frame."

"While we've been stuck in here, Storm should already have begun the task. I believe it was her plan to start in Paris and work her way outwards. Storm doesn't plan to completely repair each city before moving on, but rather to concentrate on the most historically and socially important areas first," Harry explained. He sighed then. "Realize, however, that when you're talking about laser weapons and plasma-based weapons. Magically assisted reconstruction will not be a cure-all. There will still be a lot of hard work ahead for every nation hit by the invasion."

The American president barked a laugh, and Dr. Doom snorted inside his mask. "I believe that no one at this table could raise their hands and say that their country is afraid of hard work."

Doom's gaze flicked over to the Frenchman, who bristled a bit at that shot. It was a well-known fact that French work hours were considered something of a joke in much of the world.

"Getting back on the point I tried to raise, please, gentlemen," Duncan said, rapping the table with two fingers gently. "The other reason why I think we should change the wording on this area of the document is because it, in fact, tells the Skrull that we can discover such infiltration."

The others all blinked, and Duncan read that segment of the document aloud before asking, “Do we want the Skrull to know we have magical means of outing their shapeshifters? How would we explain that away, and would that very explanation cause further issues?”

That was a good question, and Dr. Doom leaned back in his chair, tapping his fingers together thoughtfully, creating a metallic tink-tink sound that echoed around the room while Harry touched the marks on his forehead in thought as well. “You do bring up an interesting dilemma. Is it better to play our cards close and hide such abilities so they are ready to use when they attempt to attack us again? Or is it better to try and stave off that almost inevitable assault by hinting at such abilities? Yes, that is quite the conundrum. My vote would be to keep it close or make the wording deliberately vague rather than an outright statement we can discover their infiltrators.”

“How certain are we that we **will** be able to detect them? I know you’re anti-infiltration arrays were supposed to work against those dire wraiths that tried to take over Russia, but how accurate do you think they will be when it comes to the Skrull, Harry?” Samuel asked.

Harry scowled a bit, leaning back in his chair as he looked over at the Russian. He hadn’t shared this information yet, but he knew trying to hide it would probably not be well received, so... “We went over the wreckage of the space battles, and we were able to collect a lot of DNA samples from the bodies of dead Skrull. Dr. Pym tested them, and it turns out that the Dire Wraiths seem to be a genetic offshoot of the Skrull race. We don’t know enough about the Skrull to know why that happened, but the Skrull powers are based on changes on the genetic level that act much the same as the Dire Wraiths’. So, the same array can find both of them. We’re not 100% certain, but we’re close, and Reed and Dr. Doom both have developed scientific means.”

“Which Latveria will cheerfully sell to any nation that is able to meet my price,” Doom stated firmly, showing no sign, amusingly enough, of the mention of Reed Richards and how he had also achieved this difficult scientific feat. Then he seemed to look only his eyes could see underneath his mask. “And I note here that you took prisoners in that battle. Several thousand, in point of fact.”

“Repatriating them could be a feather in our caps,” the American president mused, looking narrowly at Dr. Doom. “And why did you bring it up now?”

“Will your runic arrays work on Skrull when they are not shifted into other forms?” Doom questioned instead of answering the other man.

Harry shook his head, and Dr. Doom nodded. “In that case, we would have to... coerce them into acting as we wish. And we surely do not need to send them all back. There are numerous experiments we could run to discern ways to actually halt their transformation skill

rather than simply reveal it. I will admit that my own ability in that is somewhat limited in how it can be emplaced, so other means of discovering such infiltrators can only be a good thing.”

That was a cold, somewhat scary thought, which fit Dr. Doom, obviously. And much against his will, Harry found himself nodding a little. It made sense from a leader’s perspective. Yet Harry wasn’t just a leader. He was a hero. And there were just some things he could not condone. *Not and show myself to Melody or any of the youngsters who look up to me again.* “Those prisoners are mine, Dr., and I am afraid I cannot accept experimenting on them in such a manner. If they agree, that is one thing, but no medical experiments whatsoever.”

While Doom scoffed, the others all nodded. The changes to the document were quickly made. A few other minor word changes, mostly proposed by Duncan and Dr. Doom, were finalized, and the document was completed. With that done, Harry shut down the time dilation array and then initiated a communications call to the Skrull flagship.

At the same time, he reached out to Emma. *“Emma, would you mind listening in to this talk for me? I’d love a second opinion on Len’Dok’s state of mind and his general trustworthiness. I know from our previous interactions that he is a patriot and a professional, but how that will impact how he takes our demands, I don’t know.”*

Emma answered him instantly, agreeing, and moments later, Fleet Overlord Len’Dok appeared, looking somewhat haggard and tired. “I realize you humans do not run on the same clock as my fleet, but surely you could’ve figured out that this is the middle of the night over here.”

“Since when do prisoners dictate such terms to prison guards?” Doom asked caustically. “You’re in no position whatsoever to make such comments. Let alone demands.”

“Dr. Doom is quite correct. We wouldn’t even need our conventional forces to deal with you, remember that,” Harry warned before mellowing his tone. “However, we are not calling you to remind you of the balance of power here. We are calling you to tell you we have finalized the peace document between the Skrull and humanity,”

“**You** have!?” The Fleet Overlord barred his teeth in annoyance. “Surely you mean you have completed the document you wish us to go over and edit to our mutual satisfaction, correct?”

“Such a thing would only happen between equals. We are not,” the French president leaned forward. “This is called shotgun diplomacy by our American friends. I have a shotgun; therefore, you will be diplomatic.”

Harry cocked his head. That was not what that phrase meant, in point of fact. But he was willing to go with it for now and did not speak up as Wen continued from where Jacque had left

off. "We are dictating these terms; it will be up to you and your other leaders as you have stated you have no wish to push to take over as sole leader of your people, who will make the final decision. In that case, I hope they are simple enough for this old sailor to understand and not nearly as horrible as they might be."

Len'Dok snarled and made to speak, but Harry held up a hand, counting off points on his fingers. That this allowed him to give the Skrull his finger was merely incidental, even if it did earn him a few carefully disguised snorts from the Russian and American presidents. "You lack magic. You lack sufficient superpowered individuals to fight us on an equal footing, while we have enough to launch attacks and defend Earth simultaneously. Your basic scientific level might be more advanced than ours, but that gap is closing rapidly due to the presence of our resident geniuses. You have the numbers and industry but also have prior commitments both within your empire and in the form of sharing a border with a par enemy in the form of the Kree, which means there is a severe limit to how much force you can pull away to bring to bare on us."

Len'Dok flinched at that, but Harry went on inexorably. He held the alien man's gaze, allowing his eyes to glow with power just a bit, causing the man to flinch a bit. "We are well out from your empire, and if it came to a conflict, would have power to a point. And we humans are extremely aggressive when our homes are invaded."

"Could you find a way to destroy Earth? Possibly, I'm not an idiot to speak in absolutes and say we could create a perfect defense," Doom spoke up, his tone deep and ominous as he piled on. Just because they weren't going to slaughter the Skrull fleet out of hand did not mean that any man at that table wished to be too soft on them. "The question is, could you do it before we launch attacks on your home worlds? How many worlds would we destroy in retaliation? War between us would be pyrrhic at best and serves no purpose but weakening us both."

Again, the man was made to speak, and this time, no one stopped him. "That may be, but you're still a single system polity. No matter your achievements in stopping this invasion by the Mad Titan, there will be members of my government who look down on you for that. And there will be many who resent strong-arm politics."

"Resent or envy the fact that we are in a position to do so?" Doom asked, his tone making the question almost into a statement.

"My helmeted colleague is correct. It seems as if what we call human nature is far more normal throughout the galaxy than anyone would otherwise have thought. But they can resent us all they want, so long as they do not make war upon us," the American president said firmly.

“And that you pay the reparations demanded as part of this peace agreement,” the French president added, with the Russian and Chinese representatives both grunting in firm agreement. “You were in the wrong, and you must be made to pay. And I would think our letting you and the rest of your fleet live when we could have wiped you all out easily would be enough largess.”

Harry hid a frown at that, as it would not have been the French or United Nations who did that wiping, but his men, Harry himself, and Strange. *That would have been a grim business. I wouldn't do it if they weren't a threat, and with Strange beside me, they wouldn't be. Still, I can't argue with threats like this.*

“Resentment can fade. A leader needs to be able to see reality. And at the moment, this is your moment to do so,” Wen said.

The Fleet Admiral argued back for a few moments, refusing to be cowed. But every time he glanced at Harry or Doom's way, he seemed to lose the momentum of whatever he was saying. This hindered his attempts to assert himself to the others, and eventually, he was forced to acquiesce, as everyone at the table knew he had to.

Including the Fleet Overlord himself. As Emma had warned Harry from the start, a lot of this was no doubt going to be re-broadcasted into his fleet for local consumption. And in that light, the Fleet Admiral could not come off as weak.

“*What do you think of his acting then?*” Harry asked mentally, contacting her once more, just as he had when he ended the time dilation effect in the conference room.

Emma had been joined by Jean, and for a brief second, Harry could see them, Emma allowing him to see through her eyes for a second as the blonde very deliberately nuzzled into the redhead's currently naked breasts, taking delight in one of her semi-downtime moments. Such had been very few and far between since the invasion for everyone at the command level of Avalon Empire and more so for the Custodes teams.

Yet despite having her head nestled into her lover's chest and thinking extremely carnal thoughts currently, Emma responded quite promptly, showing the multitasking ability that had been ingrained in her from a very young age. *“Judging from what I've caught as I skimmed over their minds, I believe that the majority of his fleet's personnel understand their current position. But I don't know if the Fleet Admiral understands the extent of resentment within that fleet towards not only us but also the government of his people for how quickly they capitulated to the Mad Titan. I think his acting will play decently well, but all of his officers and sailors know that they were badly overmatched and have to accede to our demands.”*

*"Emma's right, but there is also a great deal of fear throughout his fleet," Jean added, her greater ability to feel out emotions making her more certain than her lover. "I've sent my telepathic powers out towards the fleet subtly several times since the invasion ended, and that is the main impression I've gotten most of the time. We **terrify** the Skrull. A lot of them are just going to be very, very grateful that we're letting them go at all and will be very vocal against any move against us in the future."*

Jean hesitated for a second, then continued. "A lot of that fear is centered on you, Harry. I know you don't like to hear it, but your battle with the Mad Titan across the star system definitely garnered a lot of onlookers. The fact that you killed the being that almost single-handedly conquered their government..."

"Hey now, you softened him up for me, love," Harry interjected quickly. "I would've had a much harder time of it if Thanos still had access to his throne when we fought, especially while we were still on Earth. Don't sell your part in that short, Jean."

Jane could feel Harry meant it, of course, and was also more than a bit sad at the fact that he was so feared, even by an alien society. Yet Jean could also feel Harry's reluctant understanding that it actually served their purposes quite well to be so. So she allowed Harry's interruption to go unremarked, simply sending back an affirmative feeling of thanks and the final thought, *"And I'm also getting the impression, Harry, that Len'Dok is really telling the truth about wanting to hand over power back into the hands of the civilian government of his people. Mind you, I don't think that what the Skrull think of as a civilian matches what we think of when we use the term, considering how many members of that government are also serving officers, but..."*

"But it is still a good sign for his overall trustworthiness and maybe a sign that the Skrull Empire can really retain its power even after having been conquered by Thanos," Harry mused. "Good point. And good for us too, if we can eventually create a few trade agreements down the line as the others are already talking about now."

The only one at the table who wasn't talking about that kind of thing while Harry was having his mental conversation was Doctor Doom, who had leaned back in his chair and was watching the American, Chinese, British, French and Russian members all talking about normalizing relations between themselves and the Skrull Empire. But the Skrull Empire would not deal with individual polities on a single planet, something Len'Dok was very adamant about. They would deal with humanity as a whole or not at all.

Deciding that hearing Len'Dok's voice rising for the second time in a row on that point was as good a moment as any to resume taking part in the conversation, Harry sent a burst of love and affection down his telepathic link to Jean and Emma, and then leaned forward, saying

aloud, "In that case, the Earth Defense Force and the Avalon Empire would be more than willing to serve as a go-between. You just stated that it's the ability to get into space and colonize that routinely makes one power or another more acceptable to the Skrull Empire as a trade partner, correct? Would you be willing to see us as the space-going arm of an umbrella human government, the United Nations?"

The conversation continued for a few more moments on that score, then returned to the peace treaty, with the Admiral agreeing in principle with most of their points quickly before starting to argue about specific items in the reparations segment. Again, Emma proved helpful here, peering into the man's mind and seeing that he was hoping to not only not need to pay too much from his own fleet's stores but also to seem as if he had brokered as hard and as firmly as he could with the government at home, whatever type of government that might be once his people learned their conqueror was dead.

Although, in many ways, to Len'Dok, the form of government, who led it, or how it came about was immaterial. Len'Dok knew that his people liked scapegoats and was determined that he would not be one of them for the Skrull's part in this debacle. *"Which, to them, is more about the massive loss of face being defeated like this will entail,"* Emma finished.

Harry could well understand the need to place blame on this kind of utter FUBAR, although he felt that there was already someone perfectly well-placed to take the blame for this entire incident. Thanos himself. Whatever reports he had about Earth, the Mad Titan had vastly underestimated humanity's willingness to fight back and had run the invasion so poorly it put many a person in mind of Hitler at his worst.

How much of that had been arrogance, and how much was simply misunderstanding human nature or lacking information on how many super-powered heroes the Custodes could all on, Harry didn't know. But he felt Len'Dok could at least take some solace in the fact that his portion of the invasion had been merely sidelined instead of wiped out to the last sentient.

Because that was what happened on every front on Earth. The Chitauri did not believe in surrendering and refused to be taken prisoner. Several times, Jean or one of the others had attempted to take a prisoner, but they always committed suicide somehow. Some hidden circuitries within their cyborg systems flash-fried their brains or hearts when they were knocked unconscious, or their weapons were taken away for more than a few minutes.

That, and the fact that not a single individual among them had even tried to surrender was disturbing in the extreme, not just to Harry but to everyone involved. It had already begun to create rumors among the media that the Chitauri had been some kind of hive mind, mere drones sent into battle by a higher caste or something like that.

Eventually, the discussion wound down, and the specifics of the wording of the document from the Skrull perspective began. That took another few hours, to the point that most of the leaders in the room began to be a little antsy, and Jean and Emma parted ways back in Camelot. After an intense make-out session, anyway. Enough to put a spring in Emma's steps as she went back to work, and Jean went to spend time with her babies.

Regardless, the politicians and Len'Dok finally finished the document. The signing would be official and public, taking place at Fortress Mars the next morning. This would be recorded live and broadcast around the world. Mary Jane and Dr. Doom's fiancé had warned that a lot of the countries who had been attacked, particularly from the force under Ebony Maw's control, would probably still not be happy with the Skrull, but most of their anger was apparently centered on the Chitauri. The news that the Mad Titan had conquered the Skrull Empire and forced them to join the invasion had garnered some sympathy from the various news agencies. Sympathy that Mary Jane had a whole cavalcade of online operators working to keep growing, and which would be reinforced by signing an official peace treaty.

Len'Dok cut the communication at that point, and the various leaders finished their glasses of wine, stood up, shook hands, and made for the teleportation doorways. A few of them asked to stop in at the Gardens to look around first, which Harry was fine with. They were met at the door into the conference room by Steve and Piotr, who were serving as guides today. Piotr took the Russian and Chinese representatives to view the gardens while the French, British, and American representatives conversed quietly among themselves as Steve led them to the teleportation array.

Dr. Doom remained in his seat, still sipping at his wine, and Harry, after handing off the other guests to his two aides for the day, moved back to the table, sitting across from him and picking up his own wine glass. The two of them sat in silence for a few moments, and then Doom spoke. "It is always interesting to see how people act when given or having taken great power. You were powerful before, and yet now, you are far more than you once were. You're a Titan, just as much as Thanos was. You could have browbeaten nearly everyone here into giving you whatever you wanted. You could have used your Titan Aura to overawe not only the other leaders but the Fleet Overlord, too. You did not. I could feel you reining it in from the moment we met."

This was a statement, an observation, not a question. Doom had been around Harry long enough to understand that was not his way of doing things. Yet Harry still answered. "I think one of the greatest lessons of power that everyone should learn is when not to use it."

Doom snorted at that, then murmured, "Is that why you also haven't made an attempt to take over the world? Given how popular you and the Custodes are, you could do so, and

many a country would applaud you for it. Their people would loudly acclaim you as their new sovereign.”

“You would not. We would come into direct conflict on that, I’m certain. And while I don’t want that kind of direct conflict, I also believe that competition breeds excellence.”

“In that at least we are agreed,” Doom snorted again, gesturing out to the bulkhead with his wineglass.

Harry paused, staring at the man. “So, does that mean that you will start to build your empire in space then?”

“Perhaps. My country is doing quite well at the moment, but if I am to build an empire out there, then I would need both men and material to create it and advisors to leave in positions of power behind me. That last could be created certainly, but for all the fact that my country has greatly expanded thanks to the Eurasian War, we are still a small population, and with wildly differing educational levels from urban to suburban environments.”

Doom smiled thinly under his mask. “We will eventually grow, and we will eventually take to the stars on our own merits. Unlike the French, British and Chinese, who are more than willing to let the EDF do the heavy lifting there or beg for access, I am practically American in my desire to build my own military presence in space. Would you object?” he asked, almost challenging Harry.

That was a challenge Harry did not take up, simply chuckling in response. “See my previous answer, Doom. Furthermore, I believe I can trust you not to make the mistakes of many sci-fi books and allow piracy or similar issues to arise if you do create your own spaceships, so I have no objections. So long as we keep our Nonaggression treaties, of course.”

“That has served both of us quite well, and I see no reason to discard it currently.” Doom let that caveat sit there between them, knowing his own nature might eventually bring him into direct conflict with Harry, yet finding himself not looking forward to it. The challenge, certainly, but the actual battle, no. Harry had been a good ally, even a good... friend, a word that Doom was not used to using since they had rescued Doom’s mother from eternal damnation. And it was not as if Doom did not already have other challenges worthy of his intelligence and drive.

He was unwilling to admit that, however, and quickly changed the subject, asking, “And speaking of nonaggression treaties, I could not help but notice that the Inhumans did not take part in repulsing this invasion.”

“True, but we didn’t really need their help in space, although we could have used some more help on the ground to keep the casualties down. They will face sanctions in terms of trade and getting access to the new colony... although I’m not certain that is the right term,

considering it's going to be their new homeland from now on. Regardless, they will not be taking possession of it for quite a bit now."

Doom nodded in approval at that. "If they cannot be bothered to fight for this star system, why should you hand over any segment of it to them?"

Harry refilled Doom's glass from the fire whiskey, noting absently that it had become quite a favorite of the man. "Moving on to other topics, I received the invitation to your wedding today. I understand it will be the event of the season?"

"So Paris tells me. I was more concerned with the historical scope of it. This will be the biggest social event in central Europe in decades," Doom said without a hint of modesty.

"... And I also have been told that you invited Susan but none of the rest of the Fantastic Four," Harry said, trying hard not to keep a grin from his face.

Doom laughed quietly at that. "While I might have foregone direct confrontations with Reed Richards, that does not mean that I enjoy being around the man. Whereas Susan is quite delightful and, strangely enough, has somehow become a friend to Paris without either of them bringing it to my attention. I merely took advantage of that situation."

Harry laughed at that, reflecting internally that he was also very grateful that Doom hadn't asked him to be his best man. That would have been interesting but also awkward in many ways, showing a closeness between them that, despite their respectful treatment of one another and several moments like this one, did not truly exist. Instead, Harry knew that Doom's best man was a Latverian, an elderly gentleman who had become the mayor of Latveria's capital and had something of a history with Doctor Doom.

Set for timesharing the whiskey, speaking quietly about the invasion and the social upheavals it had caused. Doom was particularly interested in how it would affect religion going forward. Organized religion had taken several blows recently, which many in power in certain religions had not taken well to. Harry was more interested in how it had affected America and France. There was a lot more respect for veterans in both places that Harry was happy to see, and an overall shift in how the common civilian in both nations viewed their military.

Eventually, however, Ororo and Jean arrived, the two women entering carrying Jean's children. The twins instantly began to reach toward Harry, with Harry feeling a tug on him as if they were trying to pull him out of his chair with magic. "Sorry to interrupt, but the babies wanted their Daddy, and unfortunately, Harry, you're coming up on your next meeting. So best to get in a bit of toddler time now."

Harry stood up obligingly and moved towards the women, making faces at the kids, who began to giggle in the way of babies.

Seeing this, Doom stood, bowing grandly toward Ororo, who was taking a break from the reconstruction projects, and the redheaded woman, saying, "I do believe that is my signal to leave. Do be dressed appropriately when you come to my wedding, Potter. I know I need not worry about the ladies. I do not want anything to go wrong with it. It would set a bad precedent for the marriage to come."

"Or you could stay around? You might need the practice eventually," Harry tossed back, taking Sirius in his arms and sitting Rachel on his shoulder, where the baby promptly reached up and grabbed at his hair, cooing in delight.

"That is what Doom Bots are for... Or can be repurposed for anyway," Doom said, exiting the room. Harry at least did him the courtesy of waiting until he was well out of earshot before starting to laugh, shaking his head ruefully.

Scene break

At the same time that the meeting in Babylon was winding down, most of the Custodes had been given time off. With access to a worldwide system of near-instant transportation, it was no wonder that many of the Custodes, X-Men, FF, and their other allies had spread out in wildly disparate areas. Scott and Rogue had gone to Australia for the surfing. Piotr and Amara had gone to Vietnam for a several-day trip. They had bought motorcycles to get around and stopped to sleep in a magically enlarged tent wherever they wished to paint the scenes they came upon. Others had spread across America and Europe in ones and twos.

Steve and his two girlfriends, a thought that still disturbed him on many levels, had decided to go into DC to take in the sights as the reconstruction project continued. Now they were walking down one of the main streets arm in arm, a fact that caused the normally redoubtable Captain America to flush as he wondered what they looked like to anyone watching.

*If my mother could see me now, she would tan my hide for being a two-timer. But... well, I do like them both, and they seem to have buried the hatchet somehow. I wish I knew precisely how that happened, but I have no clue. A few months ago, they were circling around me like tomcats clawing at one another each time one tried to flirt with me. Then, a month ago, that disappeared, and they started working together. Against **me**, most of the time. Ugh. Women. I have to wonder how Harry handles four women at once, and I swear you need to be a telepath to understand them at all!*

Betsy squeezed the arm she was holding onto, getting Steve's attention. "Look, we're coming up on Capital Hill."

"I know. However, with so few of the office buildings having been repaired yet, it still looks like a battlefield. I'm just grateful that we're moving people in slowly. It would have been a disaster trying to return the civvies to the city before we had housing for them. To say nothing of cleaning up the bodies," Steve lamented, shaking his head. "I've fought in cities dozens of times in my life, and regardless of the weapons used, it's always a bloody affair. I can't argue with the idea of prioritizing places with historical importance, but I wish we could be doing more."

"We've done enough," Carol shook her head wryly. "Lots of resources, hundreds of construction droids... You've seen the protests on them, right? How they're taking jobs away from real people?"

As Steve snorted at that, Betsy continued her crisp British accent a stark contrast to Carol's mellow Midwest one. "To say nothing of Potter and the rest of the magicals. However, that's also caused problems. I didn't think there were that many Catholics in France, and the growing protests in America about how the federal government has 'Fallen to worshipping the magic of the Devil' have been hilarious. Funny how none of those protests actually come close to Washington or Paris."

"Can you blame them?" Steve snorted as they came around a pile of rubble and saw the Washington Monument ahead of them. Unlike a significant portion of the city they had been traveling through, the Washington Monument had been magically repaired. It and the Lincoln Memorial were both back to normal, pristine, almost after Ororo had repaired it. There were even a few dozen food carts around. Where they came from Steve didn't know, but they were doing a brisk business from the hundreds of workers working with the construction droids.

There were dozens of other such areas, most of which were located around the city's historic sites. With those sites taken care of, housing had priority, so the majority of the human effort was focused on that area. But men and women were also still clearing out and identifying bodies throughout the city even now, days after the last Chitauri had been hunted down.

The three of them were traveling incognito at the moment, something that Carol ruefully pointed out was "Just a little too easy to pull off. Honestly, Steve, your face should be bringing us a lot of attention if Betsy's isn't. I'm not complaining, but do so few people notice the face rather than the outfit?"

"Such is the way of things," Betsy said philosophically. "I personally am not going to quibble."

"And I would say both of you are getting enough attention from my fellow man, regardless," Steve stated, twitching his head towards a crew of construction workers. All of them were staring at Betsy and Carol, their eyes locked on their rears.

“Eh, well, they’re just looking. No harm in that.” Carol shrugged.

“Right, and it’s honestly the same sort of thing Carol mentioned a moment ago. I doubt those men would remember what I looked like beyond maybe the purple hair and my cracking rear.”

Steve smiled, pulling out the arm that Betsy was holding to reach up and play with her purple locks for a moment. “It is quite memorable. The purple hair, I mean, not your rear. Although that is nice, too.”

Betsy flushed, reflecting internally that while Steve would never be entirely at ease with flirting in public, he did have a way with words. “Have there been any more problems with the locals?” She asked in a way to change the subject before Steve became embarrassed again.

The two Americans sighed, with Carol scowling slightly. There had been a lot of issues with the displaced civilians, with gang members and other criminals trying to take advantage of the situation in various ways. It had fallen on the military and the tattered remnants of the police force to try to keep order. There’d also been a great deal of vandalism, groups of civilians trying to make their own way back into the city, stealing from houses, leaving graffiti in places and so forth. “Of course. That kind of thing will continue for a while, I’m certain. But the military and civilian police have done a pretty good job of shutting actual violence down.”

“And the fact that the president has declared that this is still a state of emergency until repairs to Washington have been completed and people are being allowed to move back in,” Carol reminded the others. “Until that happens, any civilians making trouble answer to military justice. Without that, it would be illegal for the military police to help the regular police keep order.”

Steve nodded reluctantly at that. He wasn’t exactly a fan of that, but he understood the necessity. The city was now on the mend, and maybe, just maybe, with the criminal element having caused so much trouble during this upheaval and so many of them... paying for it, perhaps a lot of the city’s problems he’d seen in the news would be gone as well. *A man can dream, can’t he?*

Carol saw something red in the sky and turned, watching as the Scarlet Witch flew through a series of burnt-out buildings. As she went, a cheer rose from many of the construction workers, and the young woman paused to wave back, looking extremely sheepish to Steve’s eyes. She then dumped her present burden, several hundred tons worth of construction material, in neat little piles before rocketing back up into the sky and away.

“Well, we can safely say that the city is on the mend, but it won’t be finished anytime soon.”

“Any progress is good progress. Paris is worse in a way because there, the military didn’t try to stop people from going home, and now they’re dealing with a lot of people who are homeless who refuse to leave until their homes are repaired and are demanding food and water. Those riots are a lot more violent too, although there isn’t nearly as much gun violence as with the civilians from Washington.”

Steve grunted at that and then asked politely if the two girls wanted anything to eat. They did, and the three of them moved over to one of the nearby food carts, then circled the area, drawing some looks but mostly being left alone by the off-duty workers.

Rebuilding and healing were still ongoing, but eventually, the physical wounds would be healed, at least. The mental ones, those Steve wasn’t so certain about.

Scene break

Repair and humanitarian efforts took nearly a month to complete in Paris, Washington, and Russia. China would still take many months to repair what could be repaired, which did not include the center of the cities hit by the Mandarin’s ill-fated nuclear option. However, China had agreed to hold a celebration to repel the invasion, despite that. This included the Avalon Empire.

Thus, nearly a month after the invasion ended, Harry and Jean watched the Orbital Drop Marines perform a parade in Fortress Mars’s atrium. The two of them stood alongside thousands of others pulled from the savage land and Fortress Mars itself as below them on the floor of the atrium, the Orbital Drop Marines conducted a parade.

The Avalon Empire had yet to create a national anthem, and a series of selected songs played as the review continued, starting with a new song from America called ‘Hey Brother’. This should’ve made the parade seem a little strange, but the feelings of this and other songs chosen came across quite well. Jean was not the only person crying in the audience.

There was something very special about this parade, as well as all the others that were going around the world. No effort had been made to fill in the gaps in the units making up those marches.

Here, a squad marched with holes in their parade formation. Here, an entire unit was gone, leaving a gaping hole in the larger formation as their comrades marched on. This was especially true for this particular parade.

The Orbital Drop Marines had been the tip of the spear of the human reaction to the invasion, and that spear tip had been badly blunted. In Washington, two out of every five Oh Damns who took part in the battle had died, and their command structure, in particular, had taken a pounding. In Paris, the casualties had been even worse. Three out of every five Orbital

Drop Marines involved in that battle had died, with the other two being wounded in some fashion. By the time the order to pull out and let the French take over entirely, the surviving Oh Damns had been down to less than a platoon from the starting size of three companies.

This performance hadn't been Harry's idea. He had thought the pain of the losses was still too raw to allow something like this. But Sam, Steve, and many of the commanders the world over had liked the idea when Sean had thought it up. The numbers were just that: dry and anecdotal. Stories and tales were closer, but there was almost something visceral in seeing a parade like this with missing men and women. It made the losses far more real.

The response that Harry was getting from Mary Jane and others who were watching the impact this was having on the local civilian populations was mixed but generally extremely positive. Most particularly in America, where the parade had occurred the day before. Time zones were a thing, after all.

The normal American's view of the military had shifted quite drastically since the days of Steve Rogers and World War II. The Korean War had started it, a war that America could not say it had really won but had merely tied. Then came the Cold War, the peace movement and Vietnam, the Cuban missile crisis and so forth, eroding the feelings of patriotism equaling support of the troops in America.

This was no longer the case, at least for the vast majority of Americans. America had been invaded on their own soil, in their own capital, for the first time since the era of sail ended. And although they needed help, the American military had not been found wanting. Now, they saw the cost that their soldiers had paid, and it was leaving an impression. There was a great deal of pride but also a grim determination to never let something like this happen again and to support their troops to prevent it.

China had needed to rebuild not only its cities and infrastructure but also its pride in itself, which had taken a distinct pounding both in the manner of its invasion and how its leader had reacted to it. As a result, their parades not only featured military personnel but also included emergency responders, doctors, nurses, and other medical personnel. It made for a much stranger and longer series of parades, but Dennis was extremely upbeat about what it said about China's overall thoughts on the war. He gleefully pointed to the strange lack of CCP colors throughout the parade and what that could mean for the future, as well as how much the Chinese had taken to thanking the Avalon Empire and the Asgardians for their help. Indeed, several Asgardians had been personally invited to view the parade in Beijing. The social upheaval would continue, but perhaps in a more positive direction.

Russia once more was different. Being invaded and throwing those invaders out was something central to how Russians saw themselves —an 'us against them' and 'we cannot lose'

type of outlook. This had been proven once again. They had been invaded and turned the invaders aside. The Russians were not so pleased about needing to admit they'd needed help, but neither could they argue that they had gotten some that was even more important than America's help in WW2 with the lend-lease agreement. More importantly, they had also regained their pride in themselves as a nation, not just on the military side of things, but as a people, something that had been severely trampled upon during the Eurasian War and how they had been dupes of the Dire Wraiths.

While French thoughts on the military hadn't changed significantly, the perception of France as a global military power had changed drastically. Thanks to how they had been forced to surrender to the Nazis so quickly, a lot of the public around the world thought of the French as weak, as people who would rather surrender than fight. Any true historian knew that was so much hogwash, but that had been the impression.

No longer.

Paris had been reclaimed almost entirely by French hands, and they had even demanded that the last of the Orbital Drop Marines retreat (those who hadn't been medically evacuated) and that Ben Grimm and the rest of the Custodes on hand leave the city. Ben and the others argue, but with the portals all closed, they had agreed that house to house clearing could be left to the French. And they had paid for it, but the French had been the ones to liberate Paris yet again... if with help once more.

And that was only the major parades, the ones happening in the cities that had been the center of the invasion and which had suffered so tremendously. Harry wasn't really certain if Debreceen should be among that number, considering that Doctor Doom's prisoner, Gamora, who he had talked to several times at this point and who would be remaining the Doctor's guest for quite some time to come, had treated the city and its civilians with such kid gloves.

Regardless, there was a parade there, too, along with one in India, Burma, Bangladesh, Germany, and many other countries. Every nation that had sent men off to war was holding a parade today or the local equivalent. Time zones were a thing, after all.

Harry had sent representatives to each and every parade going on. Hela went to China along with Danielle and Skadi. Colossus, Amara, and Thunderbird went to Russia, while Ben Grimm and the Fantastic Four went to Paris and so forth. Even Wendy, the leader of the snatchers, had gone. Kitty Pryde and her parents had joined Ororo in India. Harry and Jean would join them presently, and he was already looking forward to Jean, Emma, and himself joining them in India and exploring the subcontinent for a few days with the Prydes, whose family atmosphere Harry always enjoyed just as much as being around Melody and the kids.

Hela may or may not join them, as she was going to spend time with her family. A family whose patriarch and matriarch Harry had met in the physical world with their own minds this time, for the first time barely three days ago when Loki had woken up.

Flashback:

Harry stood outside the same cage that Loki had been occupying ever since Danielle had delivered his wife's soul into his body, wondering idly how this was going to go. "I know you're awake, Loki. We have numerous sensors which are telling us that you are so please don't insult our intelligence by trying to play dead or something."

It was not Loki's voice that answered first. Instead, it was a female voice coming from his mouth, a strong alto. "You'll have to forgive my husband," that voice said, adding a possessive tone to that word that Harry had to smile at even as he wondered if this was some kind of trick. "Trickery and deceit come easily to him, especially when he is in a cage, cornered as he is now. And more especially when he must admit his faults to others. That oddly is something he has in common with all too many people, man and woman alike, regardless of race."

"Some of that sounded good, but who exactly am I speaking to right now?"

"That Sigyn's voice, precisely the same tone heard in my mind when I commune with her," Dani said.

She, Fenrir and Hela were also there, although the rest of the high command were still busy elsewhere on other projects. Steve, for example, was meeting with the Winter Soldier and speaking to Charles about how to help Bucky Barnes through the indoctrination he had undergone. Ororo was meeting with various teachers in the Savage Lands to talk about yet another request to enlarge the school structure there. Work continued on, even with family drama like this in the making.

"That is well and good, but do we know if this is really Sigyn? Has she taken over Loki's body then?" Fenrir growled.

"We're actually cohabitating in the strangest use of the term that has probably ever been," Loki said, his own voice now rather than that of his wife. "It is actually quite crowded in here and not at all pleasant. I feel somewhat bloated. A feeling that I have not felt since I lost a wager and had to turn into a female horse for, shall we say..."

"Ah yes, Father, thank you, I believe we are all familiar with that particular tale. Although many of us still wonder why Sleipnir was not resurrected and used in the Shadow's games like so many of us," Hela said sadly. "Thanks to the Shadows messing with my mind even more thoroughly than most of our people, I have very few memories of him I can trust, but those few I do have are pleasant, and I would have liked to get to know Sleipnir more."

“... Yes, well, while I had put plans in motion to save my wife, there was a limit to how many such plans I could make. Especially in your case, as you were still holed up in Niflheim and did not participate in the final battle. Indeed, to the best of my knowledge, you should not have been a part of the agreement at all. Your service to Death should have kept the Shadows from affecting you, but I suppose that the Shadow Scum were able to do so because Niflheim is such an intrinsic part of the Yggdrasil system,” Loki answered with a shake of her head.

“So it is not just the fact that you have your wife’s soul within your body, but we are expected to believe that your memories have returned entirely to you? This seems too good to be true,” Hela scowled, although internally, she was doing flips. Dani had mentioned her thoughts on the items in Sigyn’s loghouse being symbols of Loki’s memories, but until now, Hela hadn’t held out hope those memories would also return when Sigyn’s soul came into contact with Loki’s.

At that, Loki finally stood up from where he had been slumping in his bed. Moving towards the bars, he gripped them with both hands, staring through them at Harry, then around at Fenrir, Hela and Danielle. His lips quirked as if he was fighting the urge to make a snarky comment.

He didn’t and instead shook his head. “Given how much power I can sense coming off of you, Harry Potter, I would be a fool to try and tangle with you physically. I made a deal with one Titan, and I reckon my survival of that is a very good thing, which can mostly be laid at your feet. Of course, we don’t get news in here, so I cannot be entirely certain, but...”

Loki’s voice suddenly shifted, as did his entire stance, becoming almost feminine despite the fact he was a man and still wearing the clothing he had been caught in. “Enough, husband. You have more important things to do than to let you try and convince everyone that you are far smarter and wiser than you truly are. Save such things for later. I wish to return to my body first. Harry Potter Danielle once carried a weapon made by my hand in my realm within her body, and I like to think I gave her good advice. And now I am going to give you some. A single body cannot hold two souls, no matter how malleable those souls may be for very long. Especially souls of such power as my husband and I. Take us to my body so that the stasis upon it can be removed, and I can be back home within or else I am rather afraid magical mishaps will occur.”

Harry frowned a bit, looking over at Hela. “Do we trust him?”

“Trust but verify. I believe that is my mother speaking just now, and I believe that was my erstwhile father a moment ago. I would prefer something else from both of them to know that he is truly his own man again before we release him from this cage and some means of magically making certain that he cannot somehow escape,” Hela answered, with Fenrir growling in agreement.

Loki looked at her, and his body tone changed again, becoming masculine once more. Loki then took several steps back away from the cage doors and bowed his head towards her, even sweeping his hand along the floor in a courtly manner. "My dear daughter, I am sorry for how I treated you. I am sorry for failing you and your brothers, and I am sorry that I insulted you as I did while under the influence of the last vestiges of the Shadows. My wife has told me as much as she could about the war in Asgard against their influence, and I wish that I had been there to take part in some measure. I was not, and although I can blame that on the Shadows influencing my personality, I think even that would ring hollow. Please accept my forgiveness, and know that even if you do not ever acknowledge me as your father in the future, I am proud of the woman you have become."

For a moment, no one spoke, simply looking at Hela, and then she finally nodded. "Some kind of anti-magic inhibitor on him, Harry, I still would not like him to try and run off. But I do not believe he will any longer. It seems as if my mother is a very good influence on him."

"I try to be, but inside his body like this, my abilities to do so are quite more limited than I would like," Sigyn stated as Loki's body language once more shifted.

Harry let Loki out of the cage and then led him to where they had moved the coffin-encased body of his wife. Harry was in no way willing to take Loki into Camelot for this, after all.

When it came down to it, it was almost anti-climactic from Harry's perspective how easily Loki removed the crystal containing his wife. He simply leaned down, pressing his forehead into it, and breathing out slowly. His breath became almost blue-white for a moment, engulfing the crystal. And then the crystal shattered, leaving Sigyn's body lying there immaculate.

Almost instantly, however, Sigyn's body began to collapse, but Loki was already in motion. He leaned down, kissing the comatose form of his wife.

Once more, there was a tremendous thrum in the air, a feeling of weight as Loki's body lit up. Then, an image of Sigyn's form overlapped his, before being drawn into her body. It was not a fast process, and the magic continued to ebb and flow as the image slowly shifted from Loki's body to her physical one.

But eventually, several hours after they had started, Sigyn's eyes opened. Her hand rose up, clasping the back of Loki's head as all Loki's energy seemed to leave him. She caught him, slowly rolling and setting him down to the side on the table her crystal coffin had been sitting on. "That..." she rasped, her voice hoarse with disuse, "That was not an experience I would ever willingly go through again."

“M, mother?” Hela asked tremulously, almost sounding like a little girl. “Is that really you?”

Beside her, Fenrir also looked on in shock and no small amount of longing. Like Hela, his memories had been twisted, erased and changed by Those Who Watch Above in Shadow. But he still had some few memories of this woman, her scent in particular one that, even through the Shadows’ deprivations, he associated with safety and warmth.

“It is indeed, and with a physical body once more. Ugh, I feel weak as a week-old kitten, but it is indeed I.” Sigyn made to sit up, only to fall back, what strength she’d used to roll her husband to lay beside her leaving the woman. Hela quickly moved forward, helping her to stand up, as Harry followed, calling for some food.

Later, the two godlings ate voraciously as Hela and Fenrir sat nearby, plying them with questions. Both of them had their full memories from the time before the Shadows came. Hela ate it up, acting more like a young woman rather than the determined queen of Niflheim Harry had gotten to know. Not that he didn’t like this version, of course. Fenrir had also lost much of his wild edge, and his traitorous tail was wagging so wildly it was all Harry could do to not point it out and laugh at the change that had come over the young wolf.

All of this had settled Harry’s concerns about Loki trying to pull some trick. He wasn’t certain what to do with him at this point, but he was at least certain the Trickster God wasn’t going to be their enemy anytime soon.

“So, were you able to get your transformation powers back when you undid the crystal?” Harry asked during a lull in the conversation.

“Alas, Titan, no, I will not.” Loki had taken to addressing Harry like that for some reason. Harry was uncertain if it was a dig or a compliment and knew that very uncertainty was probably part of the reason why Loki was doing it. He seemed to delight in such speech, even when imparting tales from his family’s past. “Once used to power such an enchantment, a deific power is used up, never to return.” Loki smiled then, taking Sigyn’s hand in his own. “Yet I would do it all over again if I had to in order to save my wife.”

Sigyn smiled at that, doing so in such a way that Harry thought of her appellation ‘the Victorious Wife’ once more. Then Loki turned to him, and Harry felt a frisson of concern going down his spine despite his new Titan form. “And speaking of family. What are your intentions towards our daughter, Harry Potter?”

End flashback

The music in the background changed, bringing Harry back to the here and now. He shook his head, staring down at the marching ODMs, hearing the faint shouts and cheers, as

well as the subdued crying coming from too many wives and children whose fathers would never come home again. As he did, Harry fell to brooding about the nature of arrogance of both Thanos's and Harry's own. *If I had only figured out the Titan Ritual earlier, if only I had gone through it the moment Strange and I were finished going over it, then I could have...*

"Stop that," Jean practically hissed angrily into his ear, jerking Harry out of his thoughts once more. "Harry, don't beat yourself up on what ifs, and don't you dare denigrate the sacrifice of these men by thinking their sacrifice was meaningless! You made mistakes, yes, but putting your trust in the Custodes and the ODMs was not one of them. It was war, and in war, people die. If I'm not allowed to beat myself up about not stopping the Mandarin from launching those nukes, like you, Hela, Ororo and even Emma told me I couldn't this morning for the fortieth time at least, you can't beat yourself up about not being omnipotent, alright?"

"No... not alright," Harry said, shaking his head although he was smiling somewhat crookedly at his redheaded wife as he said it, so she didn't grab his danglies in a telekinetic death grip. "But I will try to remember that, my love."

With that, Harry put his arm around her, ruffling Rachel's hair as he did, taking Sirius in his hands. The boy, who had been looking restless, calmed down, grabbing at Harry's brightly colored handkerchief from the breast pocket in his suit, pulling it out and biting toothlessly onto it.

Harry chuckled at that, gently rocking the boy as he turned his attention back to his troops, thinking about the future.

Scene break

"Hmmm..." Harry murmured, leaning back in his office in the Magical Minds headquarters as he stared down at some of the paperwork in front of him. This was not actually paperwork for Magical Minds. For this paperwork, Harry was wearing his Imperial hat, as he liked to call it, acting as head of the Avalon Empire and the commander-in-chief of the Earth Defense Force. Because these papers were official requests from the United States for access to space. Not to enlarge their base on Fortress Mars, which they were already in the process of selling back to the EDF because they simply could not truly make use of it in a meaningful way outside of training their infantry in zero-g. Something that was of very limited utility. No, this form was a request to buy access time to his technology so the US could build their own space station.

And not just a space station, but a construction yard. The Americans want to build their own space fleet. But they want to do so by having me build it for them. A part of me admires their... what is that Jewish word that Ben used recently, chutzpah? Yes, that's it. And another

part of me admires the fact that they want to be in a position to defend themselves. But this is just not going to happen.

Eventually, Harry felt the Earth Defense Force would transform into a space-going arm of the United Nations, with himself remaining as commander but the rest of the world's governments funding it in different ways. To a large extent, the various smaller polities like the European Union and the SARU South American Resource Union were already doing so in an informal manner. With China signing on to the Asian one, the Asiatic Conglomerate would undoubtedly join them in doing so. However, allowing the various governments to have their own space-based militaries was simply not going to happen.

I respect the American military more than any of the others, even Britain's. They're truly the best in large-scale fleet maneuvers, keeping large fleets maintained, handling logistics, and providing training. But much like everyone else, the Americans have personal axes to grind with their fellow nations. And more importantly, the other nations would view that idea with varying levels of horror. China, France and Russia in particular, who just happen to slowly be building up how much aid they're giving the EDF.

They can send more men to join the Earth Defense Force and the ODMs. Both of them are in need of a lot more men. The OH Damns are still at barely company-level strength, and the next batch of recruits won't be ready for another three months. And with our plans for the first human-built starships moving forward, that's going to open up a lot of jobs and opportunities in the construction sector.

Briefly writing out a polite yet firm rejection letter to the request, Harry turned his mind back to those plans. The idea of creating a human fleet in space wasn't exactly a new one. Reed, Carol, and a large majority of her think tank had been busily working on designs for some time. However, with Forge taking charge and pushing forward on the engineering side of things, and the Long Voyager serving as an example of what was possible, those plans had been moving forward far more rapidly. Indeed, the construction yard to build the ships in question was almost complete, with construction over Fortress Mars nearing its end.

The idea was to pair the concept of the Ravens with a capital ship capable of defending itself. This, plus the examples of the Kree and Skrull superdreadnoughts, had pushed Forge and Reed to design an equivalent of a supercarrier-dreadnought hybrid. It would be built to launch fighters at extended ranges and also to fight at long range on its own while taking one hell of a pounding. The ship also had onboard repair capabilities.

Forge and Reed both understood that humanity would never be able to match the quantity of any enemy fleet they tangled with. Therefore, they had to **grossly** exceed the quality. Survivability was also a major priority. Thankfully, they had access to Harry's magic, or

rather Kitty's runic arrays, since Ororo's young apprentice had basically moved into Fortress Mars along with Polaris at this point. So, despite the numerous objectives the hybrid ships needed to meet, humanity could indeed make ships that were the equivalent of four or five of their enemies.

And once we have a fleet of our own here in Sol, we can release our existing stolen fleet for diplomatic and survey missions. I know Reed wants his own personal ship. I'm actually inclined to give it to him given some of the things I can understand about his experiments in light refraction, faster-than-light communication over galactic distances, and the impact on various chemical and metallurgical products when created in Zero G. He's not the only one though, and I know Carol said something about being embarrassed recently on a date with Steve when some scientist or other came up and literally begged on hands and knees for a chance to explore space beyond the solar system. That must've been quite a sight.

Looking at the 3D image of the supercarrier, Harry's fingers began to flash on a control panel, the image shifting under his command before noting some interesting features and some areas where he had questions, the fingers of his other hand typing away a message, showing a level of multitasking that he had not previously had before his Titan Form transformation.

The fact it was also four in the morning and he had left Jean, Ororo and Emma all comatose from a night of lovemaking was also a sign of the sheer vitality that being a Titan gave him. Harry had also discovered he was able to speedread far, far faster than even Hermione at her best had ever been able to. His typing speed also exceeded his computer's ability to keep up with it, and he'd been forced to have a specially reinforced one built.

For once, Harry was actually dealing with more of the paperwork and the organizational aspect than even Sage.

The mutant with the supercomputer for a brain had instantly noticed this. Sage then told Harry quite cheerfully that she was going on vacation. Told him, not informed her employer, and that in a tone that told Harry that trying to argue would've been a very bad idea.

But Harry wasn't going to do so in any event, even if he knew that he couldn't handle Sage's workload. Of everyone who worked behind the scenes, Sage and Sir Dennis were the two who were the most indispensable to the rise of the Avalon Empire. Frankly, if Sage had told him that she wanted a small minor moon for herself, complete with beaches, sun, and nude serving boys, Harry would have moved heaven and earth to get it for her.

Similarly, Dennis was going to be passing on his spymaster position to Mystique for now. He would remain as the Asian liaison, which had always been his particular bailiwick, and he would still be in charge of recruiting. But Mystique would be taking over running the overall

organization. An organization they still had no specific name for, something that Harry had left cheerfully blank for now.

For a moment, Harry stopped working, his hands once more becoming visible to the normal human eye as he paused typing and stared into space, thinking about how far they had come. Earth was now protected against further alien invasion, humanity was more united, and the mutant issue was no longer uppermost in everyone's minds. That, perhaps more even than defending Earth against several alien invasions, was something Harry was extremely proud of. Of course, there were bigots still on both sides, but after the invasion, after the Eurasian war, after the numerous times the Custodes Mundi helped defend the planet, the only real area where mutants were still seen as a major social issue was in the Middle East. That quagmire Harry knew would take decades, centuries, perhaps, to figure out, let alone to try and change. *But, perhaps in the near future, I'll have time to devote to it.*

Harry shook his head and looked back at his screen, noticing that the PC had caught up with his typing again. But before he could get back to work, Mary Jane poked her head in and then sighed, shook her head and pushed the door open. A moment later, the redhead strode inside with the confidence and poise that Harry knew Ororo, and Emma took great delight in seeing in the young redhead from New York. The fact that she was wearing an extremely formal dress, however, was what caused Harry to blink.

"I knew it! I knew you would forget the time once you got into work, boss. I don't care how much you can do or how fast, there will always be something more to grab your attention. But not today!" Mary Jane said, tapping her watch meaningfully. "You have someplace to be, remember? Heck, all of us have someplace to be."

Harry blinked again, then turned to look at the clock before rising and moving over the desk so fast that Mary Jane lost track of him for a second. He took her hand gently and gently tugged her towards the door. "You're right. We do need to get a move on. I'll take us right to the portal in Australia. Ororo and the others should be ready to head through to meet with Hela soon, so you can join them there. And don't worry," he said, his lips curving into a wry smile. "Despite the fact that this is going to be my fourth wedding, I know all too well how not to offend my wife-to-be."

Scene break

"And you still won't remove the mask?" Ororo asked, her tone teasing as she held Hela's hair up for Jean. "And if I did not know you were a goddess, sister, I would be most jealous of your hair as I know you do barely anything with it normally unless one of us is in the baths with you."

“Hah, that just shows that I am good at understanding how to take advantage of the kindness of others,” Hela answered, humming in delight at the dual feelings of Ororo’s fingers through her hair and MJ and Kitty giving her a last-minute manicure. “And no, I will not remove my mask until my Seidr Man and I officially go to bed together as man and wife.”

MJ and Kitty had declared her nails unworthy of the rest of Hela’s current outfit when they had joined the rest of the women in their current boudoir. Said boudoir was part of the halls of Hel, Hela’s home in Niflheim. The actual ceremony would be happening in Valhalla, but given how easy it was to transport from one dimension to another here in the boughs of Yggdrasil, there was no reason to stay in Asgard until right before the ceremony began.

A ceremony that Hela had hoped to see for months, a ceremony she yearned for after helping her sisters-in-love through their own: a wedding. A wedding, moreover, where Odin would be officiating, and her parents (her parents! A thought she still had trouble believing was real) would also be there. *By the Fates, I thought I would remain a spinster for decades more. If Thanos was still alive, I might be tempted to send him a thank you basket for sending Loki back to Earth. It would be loaded with a mixture of poison and enchantments designed to make his life both short and uncomfortable, but I might still be tempted to send it in the first place.*

Hela currently wore a traditional Norse wedding dress, red blouse and skirt paired with white sleeves. Her neckline and the sleeves were marked by immensely intricate stitching. Her mask was now white as well, contrasting only slightly to her skin. Hela wore only one piece of jewelry: a single necklace of silver and bronze.

Ororo was dressed similarly, except she was all in white, which offset her rich black skin to magnificent effect. Jean and Emma had opted to dress in more normal modern-day dresses. But as chief bridesmaid, Ororo had agreed to follow the overall wedding tradition and the deep crimson color of the dress stood out strongly on her skin. Thankfully, having women involved in the wedding had been somewhat easy to add in as having bridesmaids at all was the only aspect of modern-day weddings that Hela had kept while they were designing the ceremony.

“Nervous?” Jean asked, leaning down to give Hela a kiss on her collarbone, causing Hela to both smile and gently push the redhead away, for propriety’s sake, although the sentiment was very appreciated. “It was just the hormones for my pregnancy talking, but I sure as hell was nervous walking down that aisle. Nervous so much about Harry, or our relationship or anything like that. We’d been living in the same set of rooms for months by that point. But the whole ceremony, all those people looking at me...”

“For my part, I did not feel nervous about the ceremony. The whole idea of actually being married was... disturbing to me. For so long, I had been trained to think of the company first, the family’s money first, and then myself and my happiness. The very idea of actually being

able to marry someone who I generally liked was a strange one to me. I enjoyed it quite a lot when it came to it. But leading up to the wedding, that was a strange time for me,” Emma admitted.

The blonde woman was leaning against the door jamb, having arrived with several bottles of her family’s best wine and spirits and had been starkly trading barbs with Hela up to this point. But now Emma smiled faintly at Hela. “I don’t think you have that kind of baggage. And, although I will deny I ever said this to anyone bar Harry if any of you mention it in public, I think I am looking forward to calling you a sister-wife Hela.”

Hela smiled at that, nodding her head towards Emma. The two of them still had their little moments, but generally speaking, they’d grown to love and cherish one another, just as Hela had Ororo and Jean. Now Hela looked up at Ororo, one eyebrow rising under her mask as she asked the woman who was easily the central not woman in the relationship, “And you? Were you nervous? I must admit that I was somewhat nervous about my role in your wedding. I’d never officiated one before, after all.”

Ororo laughed quietly, shaking her head. “When I was young and on the Serengeti plains, I officiated several weddings and nearby tribes. It’s not my business on that score. I was... Ambivalent about making my wedding a political statement, although I was right on board for making it a social one if that makes any sense. Regardless, I believe that you will perform magnificently, my dear, just as you did on that day, so if you needed reassurance, there you are.”

Snorting at that, Hela leaned further back in her chair, letting Mary Jane and Cordelia do her nails. The moment was ruined, however, when Emma said, “Hah! Hela is not feeling nervous. She’s horny as hell! Can you imagine how any of us would’ve been if we’d been forced to flirt and just take things so slowly for months? Frankly, I’m surprised she’s not ruining that little dress of hers right now with...”

Thankfully, Ororo had finished holding up Hela’s hair by the sport, and a quick silencing spell halted Emma’s words in place. The laughter from all of the other women caused Hela to blush rosily behind her mask. Yet she did not gainsay Emma’s words.

About an hour later, the wedding bride’s party departed from Hel with Hela’s faithful wolf beside them. Garm walked us along beside her, his wounds during the battle with Santos having long since healed. Hela gently rested one hand on top of his head, and the two of them moved towards the door. There, Hela met with Fenrir, Loki and her mother. Occasionally, Hela still had trouble calling Loki ‘Father’ yet she was slowly getting used to the idea. She exchanged hand clasps with him and a brief but heartfelt hug with Sigyn, whose eyes gleamed with pride.

"I could wish we could've waited a bit longer for me to measure the true metal of your man," Loki grumbled, shaking his head as Hela and Sigyn exchanged hugs and cheek kisses. "This haste is unseemly."

"I have been waiting for this for months, and if you did not think that I would be taking advantage of your presence here as quickly as possible, you are a madman," Hela said, despite the fact that this gave Emma a perfect opportunity to say the dreaded words of 'I told you so!' Behind her.

Sigyn joined the laughter that occurred then, but Loki did not, sadly shaking his head and looking at his daughter. "You're certain this is what you want? I realize that I am not in a position to tell you what to do, but I just wish to be certain that you are certain in your own mind. You have never struck me as the type to share, and now you are entering into a..."

'Relationship with not one man, but one man and three other women. We are not a traditional harem. We are a multi-relationship, Loki. Harry might be the center of it,' *along with Ororo*, Hela added mentally. "But we are all equals. Yes, I will have to share Harry's time and his affections. But I have had months to get used to that, as well as to fall in love with the other ladies." She turned and gave Emma Jean and Ororo such a look that had two of the three blushing, and Ororo simply chuckling quietly, looking back at her, a certain eagerness in her own eyes that said Hela's pulse to racing. Turning back, she gave Loki a faint smile. "I thank you for being concerned about my welfare, but I am a grown woman, and I know my mind. This is what I want."

Loki stared back at her, then shrugged and gestured with his head towards the door. If he was feeling any further regrets or perhaps anger at the fact that he would have so little time to get to know her before she turned from his daughter into someone else's wife, he did not mention it. "In that case, Garm, Fenrir, if you would do the honors?"

Of the two siblings, Fenrir still had the most issues with their father, although he followed Sigyn around like a lost puppy quite often. But this was one order that Fenrir had no trouble obeying. He and Garm moved towards the doors leading into Valhalla and muscled them open with their heads and shoulders.

As they did, the cacophonous noise of men and women chattering to one another faded, and the drumbeat began. Those who had been standing around the area quickly moved, forming two square blocks. No one sat. Instead, they stood, peering over one another's heads toward the incoming family of Loki and Sigyn as they moved forward. The hall had been cleaned from top to bottom, and now, as the ceremony began, the normal torches changed color. Instead of the normal flame, they became almost white, like tiny stars lit the hallway from one end to another, giving everything an ethereal cast.

Lining the way were the rest of the Asgardians, along with many of the chosen Asatru. All were dressed in their finest clothing, with Freya, in particular, looking exceedingly happy and dressed to kill as she stood to one side of Danielle, with Skadi on the young woman's other side. Whatever they'd been talking about had once more put a blush on the younger twosome's faces and a smug smile on Freya's. Baldur stood across from his mother with his brother Thor, both of whom looked warily on Loki. Thor was looking at Loki that way because he thought Loki was a danger to himself... or any of the others, rather. Since Loki had been allowed to interact with the Asgardians once more, Loki had taken to pranking Thor and Odin both as often as he could get away with it.

"One of my chief duties as the trickster God is to poke fun and deflate egos, and what better target for such things is there than the Thunderer and Lord Odin, God of Kings?" He would often say. The fact that this was his way of bonding with the rest of his estranged family was somewhat lost on Thor when he was dealing with his clothing being turned into a dress and his beard, which had finally begun to grow in once more, trying to crawl up his face and blind him.

Baldur, on the other hand, had simply not quite yet reconciled the reality of Loki's position within the royal family of Asgard and the one that the Shadows had embedded into all of their minds. There was still a large part of his mind that saw his estranged half-brother rather than his estranged uncle. Even if Baldur did enjoy Loki's sense of humor.

Among the Asgardians were much of the rest of the Custodes, but they were not alone. Piotr sat behind Melody and several of the kids, those whom Hela was particularly close with. Father Garnoff sat with Rahne, the wolf girl having a complicated expression on her face, while the Russian Orthodox priest simply took everything in, neither judging nor doing anything. There were even a few house elves sitting around the kids, and although a few of them were exchanging glares with several of the Alfar who served Odin, two of them were holding the babies, who were also surprisingly taking it all in. Or it would have been surprising, as most babies would not react well to the tumble and the strange atmosphere, but these two had small, minor silencing spells on them.

With that in place, Sirius and Rachel seemed to be doing quite well from Sigyn's perspective, and she took a special moment to wave at her pseudo-grandchildren, getting a wave from little Rachel in turn. Next to her, Loki made a point of maintaining eye contact with both of his nephews and then winking at them.

Hela had no eyes whatsoever for the rest of the crowd. No, her eyes were locked in an emerald gaze, and her heart was once again attempting to do a hundred-meter dash.

Harry stood decked out in his own traditional wedding outfit, and it truly showed what a change during his Titan Transformation, his height and his breadth of shoulder. Yet that was only part of it. No, it was the love, the welcome and the raw desire that Hela saw in those eyes that took her breath away. *Oh yes, Mama, my Seidr Man, mine, **mine!** I want this one.*

For his part, Harry was utterly stunned. While it Hela's outfit was nowhere near as sensual as some of the dresses she had worn on their dates previously, the severity of it merely highlighted her uniqueness in a way that those dresses had not. The warmth in her tiny smile, the way her eyes caught his behind her mask, her hair, her face, the way she strode, commanding, no, demanding attention like a queen of all she surveyed, all of it caused Harry's mouth to go dry, and his heart to decide that today was a day to imitate a Formula 500 car. *I would think something like God is blessed, but that would be far too on point at the moment,* a small part of his mind thought. The rest of his mind was lost in the moment and what it entailed for the future.

Almost robotically, Harry held out her hand to Hela, finally able to throw off the spell that her arrival had put on him as she touched his hand with her own. They linked fingers before they turned to look at Odin, who, as he had said he would, presided over the wedding.

For an endless moment, the two of them stared into one another's eyes, lost in their mutual emotions. Then, as one, they turned to Lord Odin, and the ceremony began, binding the last of Harry's wives to him in holy matrimony.

There were other challenges to come. Other enemies to fight. But from now until the end of days, Harry would not face them alone. He would always have his wives by his side, come what may, the foundation of what they had all built together. And for now, that was enough.

FIN

There you have it, folks. The end of the third path to the future. If I'm not mistaken, this is one of the longest stories on this site, and it is certainly by far the longest of my stories up to this point. I... Am of two minds about it. I think that, in many ways, it reveals some of the mistakes I made early on in my writing, and in particular, it highlights the folly of attempting to world-build to such a degree in such a chaotic setting. I truly, truly should have done a much better job of narrowing the focus and timing each arc out. But we live and learn, and right now, this is the best place to stop this story.