It took Wakanda six months to complete its obligations under the treaty. As part of the peace treaty and prisoner exchange they signed, Wakanda delivered the last of two million two hundred and fifty thousand tons of vibranium. That was enough vibranium ore to build at least twenty dauntless class ships made of pure vibranium.

Of course, Cerion was not an idiot to build ships based on a singular metal across its profile. There were a lot of other technical aspects to consider. But the Wakandans were content to let their vessels come out in full vibranium. It was one of the reasons why they couldn’t build shield emitters on their ships despite their technological advancements.

Cerion had the opportunity and time to study the salvaged Wakandan ships in detail in the last six months. The inherent property of vibranium to absorb and evenly distribute energy made it impractical to use energy shields on their ships. The intrinsic property of vibranium tended to deplete their shields, which he found after some extensive testing with the intact ships he captured. His plan of retrofitting the vibranium ships with the available weapons and tech in hand was left in the lurch upon the problems encountered with the shielding technology.

He was sure there was some method to control the properties of vibranium. However, it needed more experimentation.

For now, using a vibranium alloy was the only way to circumvent the challenges faced in using an energy shield on spacecraft.

As the six months drew to a close, Cerion made sure to tie up his affairs on Earth. He knew his absence would be felt, but he had prepared for it. He assigned an excellent management team to take care of the companies he started, ensuring their continued success. YouStream was already under different management, and they were doing fantastic work in expanding the cyber presence of their platform. With Vex smartphones, desktops, and laptops gaining more popularity, the SolPrime OS allowed for the accelerated growth and reach of YouStream. Similarly, he pulled back his direct management of Vex Corp and put some people in between to manage the company's affairs while he went for his ‘vacation’.

He still hadn’t developed a functioning humanoid bot that could realistically pass off as his body double. His work on that was progressing, but not to the level he was comfortable with.

Still, he couldn’t be tied down to Earth with certain plans in motion. So, he left his major assets in good hands while also keeping close communication while he prepared to journey into the stars. So, in October of 2005, he was ready to leave Earth and take upon the Kree mining planet designated C24. By that time, his recruiting pool of ex-military and intelligence agencies from around the world had expanded, giving him a total strength of 624 personnel spread across three ships. His old Kryptonian scout ship, Serenity, housed only 30 people as it was the smallest of the crewed spaceship capable of exospace travel. The Dauntless hosted 124 people, most of whom were from former Marine Corps.

His newest ship, the Star Killer, hosted 340 soldiers, including some of the officer corps of his budding fleet. It was the first ship he built using Vibranium alloy. The Star Killer was only slightly larger than the Dauntless, as it also acted as a cargo ship. Right now, he was on the bridge of Star Killer, watching the last of their precious cargo moved on board by the Kryptonian bots and the new Sentinel corps he had painstakingly built up. Ony Star Killer and the Dauntless hosted the fighter class crafts, which he developed in a minimal capacity. He called them Phoenix fighters.

Trained naval officers commandeered all three ships. Most of their training was done on simulations in Koron and a bit of real-world experience in the last six months of several small-scale missions.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| SHIP | LENGTH (meters) | WIDTH (meters) |
| Phoenix (Fighter class) | 20 | 38 |
| Serenity (Scouter class) | 700 | 480 |
| The Dauntless (Destroyer class) | 2600 | 600 |
| The Star Killer (Super Destroyer class) | 3500 | 1000 |

Cerion had been training them by hunting down some of the secret HYDRA bases in the world, capturing their resources and turning their operatives into his own budding army. Of course, he also took care not to include those captured agents in his new operatives. They were still held in Koron and were undergoing some reconditioning before they were allowed to join the space naval corps. The study of Eternals and the complexities involved in their psyche scheme, along with his research into human biology, had allowed him to use memory wipes and extractions. He was weaponising that technology against the captured HYDRA agents to wipe them clean and give them a clean slate.

“Sir, the cargo bay reports the payload is aboard. We are a go.”

“Good.” Cerion nodded. “Optima, initiate take-off sequence.”

“Yes, sir.” Optima replied.

The screen before him switched to the video feed of the cargo bay, where the doors started to slide in and seal themselves shut. The screen slaps started to show structural integrity, radiation levels, engine energy outputs, energy consumption from different blocks, cooling systems and the status of other assorted systems.

“Engaging anti-grav thrusters.” Optima said.

The screen before him flickered to show all Serenity, Dauntless and Star Killer activate their thrusters simultaneously.

“Koron, disengage the magnetic clamps.” Cerion ordered into the mic.

The officers operating the command centre from Koron removed the clamps holding the ships in place, allowing the three ships to float on the thrusters' power.

“Engage stealth mode and take us out of Earth’s gravity.”

Cerion lounged back in his seat and kept a close eye on the screens as the three ships simultaneously engaged their boosters to generate enough thrust to climb out of the Earth’s atmosphere.

“Engaging sat-com blinders.” Officer Andrew said from Cerion’s right side.

The Earth’s satellites that were keeping their eyes on the Pacific went blind, allowing their ships to move out of the magical ward and keeping the island out of sight.

“T minus 80 seconds for sat-com blinders to shut down.”

“Engage shields.” Cerion ordered once he saw the air friction pass the threshold.

The energy shields snapped into place, taking away any direct friction burning up their ship's surface and the shallow turbulence they felt. He watched the status of the energy shields of all three ships as they quickly breached the Earth’s atmosphere within the designated time.

“Sat-com blinders are down in ten seconds.” Officer Andrew spoke up.

“Engage the exospace drive.” Cerion said.

“Aye, sir.”

The space around Star Killer warped as the ship jumped into FTL mode. For a brief moment, they lost sight of their sister ships as space folded on itself.

Star Killer’s sensors picked up two other energy signatures following their exospace lane.

“Sir, comms are restored. The Dauntless and Serenity reports stable FTL jump.” Officer Andrew reported.

“Good.” Cerion relaxed in his seat, “Put the fighters on standby. We commence the attack in thirty minutes.”

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Cerion stood from his seat as Star Killer exited exospace, followed by Dauntless and Serenity. The projected screens before he switched showed C24, the mining planet of the Kree Empire. It was a planet on the furthest border of Kree space, and that was why he chose to strike at this planet.

“Open a channel to Serenity.” Cerion ordered.

“The channel is open, sir.”

“Captain Vincent. Take out the satellite defence systems.” Cerion ordered.

“We hear you, Star Killer. Serenity moving in to intercept.”

The plasma ray guns on Serenity came alive and began raining down bolts of energy upon a chain of satellites surrounding the planet.

“Sir, we’re getting scanned from the planet's surface.” One of the officers reported.

“Track the signal and bombard the enemy position.” Cerion ordered.

The long-range plasma cannons on Star Killer energised before they started firing into the planet's surface.

As Star Killer pummeled the position on the planet that scanned, he opened a channel to the Dauntless.

“Captain Michelle. Take out their communication installations on the other side. You have operational command over the Dauntless and Serenity.”

“Yes, sir.”

Cerion watched the two ships move to the dark side of the planet, which was submerged in the night. While their earlier recon missions had given them an overall plot of the Kree military installations on the planet, targeting those installations at night would be slightly challenging. It’d be a job for the fighter squadrons to sweep any such surviving installations with precision strikes.

For now, they had no choice but to lead with orbital bombardment instead of precision bombing techniques. After all, they needed to land their ships and use the landing troops to take control of the planet.

For half an hour, they maintained orbital bombardment, but Cerion didn't use any incendiary or radioactive missiles. His ship hosted some of them after recovering such missiles from HYDRA hideouts, but he kept them back and used plasma weapons. But his ground forces would be equipped with such weapons as he hadn’t had the time to develop weapons for his ground forces. They’d have to make do with French and American-made weaponry.

“Sir, our surface scanners are picking up activity in the northeast sector 8.” Officer Smith said, frowning at the screen in his workspace.

“Bring up the telemetry on the screen.” Cerion ordered.

When the imagery came on the common screen, it showed one of the islands farther away from the largest continent of C24. They hadn’t seen anything substantial in those islands in their recon missions. But still, they had bunched them into one of the sectors in the northeastern seaboard of the continent.

“Sir, the spotters detected an energy spike in the accelerometer from sector 8. It’s from the island.” Officer Andrew said quickly.

“It’s a plasma build-up. A cannon! Target the island and take that cannon out.” Cerion ordered.

While the officers on the bridge worked to reposition Star Killer’s main cannon on the island, he used his enhanced vision to watch the island. There, he could see a cannon nuzzled in between two large hills covered by a forest. But it fired its first shot before Star Killer could destroy the cannon.

Cerion immediately returned to his seat and abruptly moved Star Killer to one side. Still, the bolt of plasma struck the shield protecting the ship, but it was a glancing shot.

“Shields at 97%.” Officer Andrew reported.

“Do you have the target?” Cerion asked.

“We’ve got him, sir. Firing the cannon.” Officer Andrew said.

Cerion watched as a giant explosion consumed the forest area of the island, and the cannon was blown up.

“Release the fighter squadrons. Have them sweep the continent for any orbital defence systems. Send recon drones as well.” Cerion ordered.

“Aye, sir.”

Cerion watched from the bridge of Star Killer as twenty of his Phoenix fighters flew out of the bay and entered into C24’s atmosphere. Accompanying them were the recon drones he made to penetrate the planet’s surface deeply with better scanning tech that could get detailed imagery of the terrain. It’d also help them in jamming all outgoing signals as well as studying the positions of the ground forces arrayed against them.

“Sir, the fighter squadrons are facing minor resistance from ground forces.” Officer Smith reported.

“Anything concerning?” Cerion asked.

“Their weapons are not strong enough to breach the shields of Phoneix fighters, sir. Average shield depletion is 1% from enemy fire.”

“Tell them not to engage the ground forces. Their mission is strictly recon, and they are only allowed to engage orbital defence systems and airborne enemy assets.”

“Yes, sir.”

As Officer Smith conveyed the orders to the squadron sweeping the continent, Cerion focused on the task at hand. It’d have been practical for the squadron to engage the ground forces and eliminate them, but the chances of the Kree fleet coming to the rescue of C24 couldn’t be ruled out. That was why he was holding back Star Killer from landing on the planet and unloading their ground forces. Facing armed and well-supplied Kree ships while unloading cargo on the planet would be the height of tactical error. They had to secure space around the planet from any exospace entry before they could land troops on the ground, as they couldn’t confirm that all communications from C24 would be jammed since commencing hostilities.

“Sentinel crew. Start deploying gravity wells.” Cerion ordered.

The Sentinel bots started flying out of the open bay of Star Killer with the gravity well module and started placing them around the planet in certain orbits.

“Send word to Serenity and the Dauntless. Let them know we’ve started mining the cislunar space of C24 with gravity wells.” Cerion said.

“Yes, sir.”

The gravity wells were a defensive mechanism used by Krypton to control all exospace jumps into and out of cislunar space around Krypton. The technology employed artificial gravity to bend the fabric of space between a planet and its moon, employing the dark matter between the planet and its moon. With the gravity wells coming online, the Kree ships would have to jump out of the FTL and travel outside the cislunar space of C24. The fact that C24 had two moons worked to Cerion’s advantage. This meant that the gravity wells could cover more area outside the cislunar space.

So, in case the Kree fleet arrived in force, they’d be forced to travel inside the cislunar space from outside and only after they destroyed the gravity wells. That’d give his people enough time to mount a proper defence and send the ships against the Kree.

“Sir, the fighter squadron reports the Kree forces are attacking the civilian population.” Officer Smith said.

There was a sudden silence on the bridge as everyone stopped what they were doing and placed their focus on Cerion.

“They are attacking the Krylorian slaves?” Cerion asked with a frown, as that action didn’t make much sense.

“Why are they attacking their slave population instead of us? Shouldn’t the Kree be using their slaves against us as fodder?” Officer Andrew wondered.

“They’re using scorched earth policy.” Captain Michelle spoke up as her image flickered into the screen.

“Captain Michelle.” Cerion stared at the woman curiously.

“The Kree ground forces are doing the same in our continent. They have realised they can’t win, so they’re destroying the civilian population to deny us any resources.” Captain Michelle explained.

“This changes things, Cerion. We must intervene before they wipe out the Krylorians. They’ve already suffered enough for centuries. We can’t stand by and watch as they get wiped out.” Captain Vincent of Serenity also pitched in.

“Captain Michelle. You have the operational command in your sector. Do what you think best.” Cerion eventually said.

As the comms cut off, Cerion could feel the weight of stares on him from the men on Star Killer’s bridge. Cerion warred within his mind to decide with the least risk for his fledgling fleet. He couldn't allow the civilian slave population of C24 to be exterminated, but at the same time, he couldn’t risk the ship. After thinking for a while, he came to a decision.

“Star Killer will maintain its position and the complete mining of the cislunar space with gravity wells as we planned beforehand.” Cerion said.

“But sir…”

He didn’t allow the men to protest and continued on.

“We cannot compromise the mining mission. It’ll compromise the safety of this ship and our crew.” Cerion said, standing from his seat.

He could see the crew on the bridge were unhappy with his decision. But he was not about to condemn the Krylorians living in the ghettos to be slaughtered. After all, he didn’t need a ship to fight the Kree forces on the ground.

“Officer Andrew, you’ll take over as Captain of the ship. I’m going into C24. You focus on the mining and follow our plan. Leave the ground forces to me.”

Cerion immediately made his way to the ship’s bay, where the Sentinel bots were diligently carrying out their mission. He flew straight out of the ship into the vacuum of space while the Vibranium armour covered his body. As each speck of the metal covered his body while floating in space, he took in the bright white light of the sun of C24 and cast his senses down to the planet's surface.

He blasted straight towards the continent at top speed, locking on to one of its largest ghettoes.

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Mirlan ran for his life with his wife Naera and daughter Bilinska. He was terrified but so was every Krylorian in their slum. When he rose early in the morning, he was supposed to work in the mines to extract precious metals from the Kree. His wife and daughter were supposed to work in the fields. But Mirlan and his family woke up to see a massive orbital bombardment of their planet.

Initially, he feared the bombardment would level the slum and destroy his family and his people. But nothing of that sort happened. The bombardment was focused on the Kree military installations, which were far away from their slums.

This had brought hope to Mirlan, who had heard from his forefathers about the mighty Nova Empire and its capital, Xandar. He had heard stories that his people were defended by the Xandarians and one day, they’d liberate the enslaved Krylorians. The people in the slums had gathered together and hoped for the best: that their cruel overlords would meet their end.

Then, the bombardment stopped and for whatever reason, the Kree warriors turned their weapons on his people.

“They’ll kill us all, Mirlan.” Naera sobbed as they ran, “Our daughter…”

Mirlan looked at his wife warningly while keeping a tight hold on his daughter, who was slung on his shoulder as they ran away.

“Will the blue demons kill us, papa?” Bilinska asked, training her innocent but fearful eyes on him.

The screaming from his people reached a new high, and Mirlan could feel the ground underneath his feet tremble as the Kree rained down bombs on his people.

“They won’t Bili. Xandar will save us.” Mirlan gasped, running with everything he had towards the treeline, desperately hoping for an escape. “Xandar will save us all.”

Suddenly, a scream came from his front as the treeline began to fall away as if they were cut down, and then people started falling one by one.

Marlan caught his wife by her elbow and dived with his daughter to the ground in front of him, erupting in a violent explosion. He heard his daughter scream in fright as he dived to the ground, but he shielded her with his body. He could see his people explode into a shower of blood, bones and pieces of flesh under the barrage of plasma fire. He shielded his daughter’s eyes and huddled with his wife as he stared in horror at the melted red skin of one of his neighbours in front of him, staring into the sky in horror. He could see one lone eye hanging out of the socket while the other side of the face was melted away.

Piles of corpses littered the ground before him, and he could feel more were being made into corpses. The dead started to fall into the top of his family.

Marlan covered his daughter’s mouth with his hand to keep her quiet. But he saw the Kree soldiers come towards them in numbers with their plasma guns and armoured ground troops. He desperately hoped the Kree wouldn’t notice them, but he saw some of them turn their weapons on the downed people. Marlan closed his eyes as he heard the weapons discharge and waited for the inevitable.

But nothing ever happened to his befuddlement. When Marlan opened his eyes, he found a wall of energy before him, shielding his family and people from the onslaught of Kree weapons.

“You know… I thought the Kree could be taken prisoners and reasoned with.”

A firm voice broke through the eerily quiet battlefield, making Marlan land other survivors to look up. He saw a being in shiny silver armour floating down gently from the sky.

‘Is that an Asgardian?’ Marlan wondered, having heard stories about the gods of Asgard since his childhood.

“But you’ve shown there is only one way to end this war. If it’s death you want, I’ll give you death.”

The floating man said before twin beams of bright blue energy blasted out of his eyes and cut through the assembled Kree warriors in an instant.