

Hey all! Here is the first version of the full ATP chapter. I redid a few things, specifically in terms of timing and the scene where Harry is meeting with the rest of the world guard. A few more details in terms of force strength elsewhere.

Beyond that, the rest of the chapter is not quite the chapter I had first envisioned it to be. I decided that trying to split it up into the different theatres of combat really didn't make sense. Instead, I will leave the American portion to only a few mentions here and there, as, like in the portion I already posted here, the X-men and Captain America will be involved there. I feel that showing the start of that battle isn't as necessary, given the strength of the defenders.

Instead, I mentioned a few changes in the planning session, and then the first sign Glaive sees that the humans are striking back, and then went into greater detail in the other two, far bloodier, battles going on: the one in France and the one in Russia. The Chinese theatre will be left for the next chapter, since that will segue directly into Thanos stepping forth.

Really, I had a lot of trouble cutting this whole arc down into different chapters considering how many events are occurring consecutively. Regardless, I am looking forward to switching to shorter, less intensive projects for the rest of the month.

Chapter 53: Invasion: First Strikes

While Harry had been attempting to question Loki before deciding to release his wife's soul to do what she would to him, the invasion of the Earth proceeded quickly. The number of dimensional doorways was not ideal in terms of pushing through the majority of the Chitauri forces all at once. Still, the Chitauri were old hands at this, and the Black Order members were extremely adaptable.

Indeed, for the six teleportation areas, there were seven members of the Black Order. All but Black Dwarf who was more enforcer than general, was given a command within minutes, while Black Dwarf remained embedded in the Skrull Fleet to ensure Len'Dok did his part.

Thanos himself would wait until the second wave of the Chitauri. This was not because he did not want to be involved. Nor was it a sign of the Mad Titan's ego. Rather it was a strategic move decided on instantly as the six gates opened around the monstrous, gas-giant-sized artificial planet that was the Chitauri's homeworld. "I will remain here, where I can most easily move to counter the one called Potter... or to assault the Phoenix Force's Avatar," Thanos explained to his generals, a small smile appearing on his purple face for a moment as he envisioned the death of both the one who had hurt him so severely and the servant of that which was the opposite of his Lady.

Behind Thanos, a viewing port the size of a sports stadium showed the Chitauri mobilization splitting up already, the race's own officers more than up to the task of taking command of this movement. "Remember, the Phoenix Force is mine. I must be the one to kill it, to kill the being imbued with the opposite Force of My Lady Death."

As one, Gamora, Nebula and the rest of the Black Order had knelt then, and Thanos had raised his hand, the gesture half-benediction, half gesture of dismissal. "GO! Cleanse this world in my name and the glory of Death!!"

This was why the telepath Ebony had come through the main teleportation window. He was one of the best generals among the Black Order, but unlike the others, his powers and abilities leaned to the defensive just as much as offensive actions.

Now as Ebony and Wrecking Crew watched, the gash in the sky leading into the zone between dimensions expanded slowly, and out came several hundred large metallic... creatures. Very obviously an amalgamation of flesh and metal, it was hard to tell where one began and the other ended. They looked like a kind of piscine for the most part, although many seemed more eel-like, having far longer bodies than their fellows, their joints covered by iron plates that shifted and moved like scales on a fish. Regardless of size, they had six cannons embedded in their sides almost like the broadsides of a ship.

"...What are we looking at here?" Bulldozer asked, frowning in puzzlement. While huge, those things looked more like, well aerial tanks than jetfighters.

His concerns on that score were answered seconds later as hundreds of hoverboard-like objects flew out and around the larger creatures, with a group of three aliens on each. Two manned guns of some kind each of them set to the side of a central raised area on pintle mounts, while the third flew the device. And around each flyer up there flickered an energy field of some kind.

Which probably means it will take a lot of firepower to knock down, which in turn is pretty good considering I don't think they have the range of missiles or rockets, Bulldozer thought to himself, *Bulldozer thought to himself, scratching his chin thoughtfully. And while they seemed more mobile than jetfighters, if they don't have the range...* He had been a marine at one point and understood warfare and modern weaponry far more than the others who didn't care about weapons and vehicles unless they were somehow dangerous to them.

"You see, the Army of the Displaced, the Chitauri. The army of my Lord Thanos. A whole race, who reached the extremely logical position that he is a god centuries ago, and worship him as he deserves to be, the final arbiter of life and death," Ebony answered. "You see our armored fist. Tremble, and be very grateful that you have chosen the right side."

All three Wrecking Crew members nodded, watching as from behind the first echelon came what looked like pyramids, almost, until they turned slightly, showing that they were not one pyramid, but two pyramids stuck to the sides of a floating sphere. As it floated through the portal, the sphere emitted some kind of diffuse yellow energy beam down into the ground. It didn't seem to do anything, and all three of Wrecking Crew thought perhaps it was some kind of scanner.

Moments later, the strange thing touched down, and thousands of mechanical arms protruded from the sides of the pyramid, reaching down. Soon the sides of the triangle opened, and out came several conveyor belts which dug down into the ground. Metallic saws of significant size, and hundreds of other tools began to appear, stabbing devices into the ground, or moving into position all around the initial landing area, setting up what looked like some kind of construction zone.

Meanwhile other skimmers were touching down, hundreds of them, carrying large, truck-sized balls of metal, on top of which eight twin-barreled guns could be seen, sticking out of the balls back in a row. The skimmers touched down, and the creatures started to move, coming out of their ball-shape, revealing snouts and large mandibles at the front, looking for all the world like cyborg stink beetle perhaps. They instantly dug into the ground all around the main portal, seeming to not care whether

they dug through dirt or stone. Soon only the guns themselves could be seen, twisting this way and that as they stared up into the sky.

“Anti-air guns. Out here, with the mountains to move through, air’s the only area you’re possibly vulnerable,” Bulldozer opined, his military training letting him analyze what was happening.

With a snort, Ebony gestured the Wrecking Crew to step onto a series of skimmers that had just touched down in front of the trio. Each of them came complete with a driver, but with space at the back for one of Wrecking Crew at the back instead of the traditional two gunners. “You and I will serve as an outer guard for now along with the first wave from this portal. Soon still more portals will be created nearby, expanding this landing zone outward by order of magnitude as soon as they are set up. When that occurs, still more of the Chitauri will come through, and we will begin offensive operations from this point.”

Wrecker nodded, smiling faintly to himself. Seeing all this and knowing it was just the beginning, Wrecker felt like they were going to be on the winning side of this. After the past few weeks and Piledriver’s death, that was a good feeling. *And that’s without meeting this Thanos guy. Who knows how powerful he is if he was able to force this guy, others like this asshole, and Loki into submission?*

“So you’re just using **this** portal as your invasion point?” Thunderball demanded somewhat confused and very angry. “What was all the effort of setting up other portals then?!”

“Oh no,” Ebony laughed condescendingly, a supercilious sneer appearing on his face for a moment. “We are using those as well.” His laugh was perhaps the least humorous sound that any of Wrecking Crew had ever heard.

But all of them knew by this point that the die was truly cast. The new overlords of the world would take over, and the three of them would live like kings. Or they wouldn’t, and the Wrecking Crew would be remembered as quislings, traitors to their entire race, rather than a single nation. It was literally all of nothing for the three of them, and they knew it.

OOOOOOO

True to Ebony’s words, the other portals that Wrecking Crew had set up were being used as well, lightning strikes launched through each almost simultaneously. Commanded by Thanos’ Black Order, each group was slightly different, although that hardly mattered to the civilians of the cities in which Wrecking Crew had set those portals up.

And although the placement of the other five portal beacons was somewhat random, that didn’t mean they were without any merit. The one in Paris for example let the Chitauri target not only a huge civilian population in the millions, but also the capital of France.

In charge of this invasion route, Nebula was ambivalent to this at first. As she came out of the portal, she shrieked at the top of her metallic lungs, “KILL them all, slay the humans for Lord Thanos!”

All around her, Rippers, the massive flying beast-like cyborgs appeared first, dove down into the city. Screams rose in a cacophony, drowning out the normal background noise of the city as they crashed into buildings, smashing them down slaying hundreds of civilians in the first few seconds. Then they began to

fire, plasma bolts from their attached guns and larger beams coming from the Rippers. Fire spread, civilians were gunned down, cars exploded, carnage raged. And Nebula smiled, finding it good.

Yet even as the first group through the portal began the culling, Nebula knew that she had a large task before her, and she snarled as information started to flash across her eyes, pulled from the local communications structure. She, all of them knew the price of failure most keenly. *I will not fail, not here, not again!*

With the information thus far gleaned,, Nebula knew she was in a city called Paris, which was in the country of France.

The knowledge the invaders had gathered on the humans through captured radio signals and chasing down old light was quite a lot. They knew this species was divided into different nations, which would each individually fight off the invasion if given the opportunity. It was best to quell that kind of thing quickly if possible, and this nation had one of the larger, most professional armies on the planet. This portal had put her within France, which was one of the better militaries from her own analysis.

Although, strangely, the humans themselves didn't think so. There was a strange dysfunction there Nebula didn't quite understand, but she didn't need to in order to achieve her objectives. Even better, this put her close to the island nation called Great Britain, which they had discovered was one of the first allies of the most dangerous of the humans, Harry Potter, and his faction of superpowered individuals.

Nebula hastily sent a signal back into the portal, demanding further troops and the Super-Skrull. This particular Skrull had mastered their shape shifting power to such a degree he could take on the aspect of four super-powers, which would make him extremely useful here. Meanwhile, she dove down to join the slaughter, shooting down any of the humans she saw, of which she was quite spoiled for choice. *I must show my father that I am eager for this work, I must!!*

Landing on the ground, she swung her power staff around, bolts of plasma flashing out even as she physically smashed several humans around her with the ends of her staff. So powerful was the strike that the humans she struck, a middle-aged man, a young woman, and a child, just came apart, sending blood and viscera everywhere. Another young man astonishingly charged forward and tried to grapple with her but died to a single punch.

Three others followed his example, shouting in the local language. Two grabbed up pieces of debris to use as weapons, as a third hurled a brick at Nebula. Another, one of the local military forces perhaps, fired at her with a small handgun.

Nebula, caught the brick with ease in one hand, crushing it, laughing in glee as the bullets bounced off her, killing two people trying to run away. She then launched herself forward, slaying both of the pair closing with her before firing at the other two, killing them with precise shots from her power staff. "Fools! No matter how many of you attack me, it will not matter. The cleansing is here!"

Within a minute, the brave among the immediate crowd of Parisians were slain, along with dozens of others. She stalked through the streets, slaying any she saw while around her the Chitauri did the same. Above, more and more of the Chitauri came through spreading out quickly.

Download complete. Military analysis commencing... complete. Data will now be displayed. Grimacing at the sudden interruption from the computer part of her brain, Nebula turned away from her fun, taking to the air once more. She glanced down at the now burning city, staring at one of the Rippers as it smashed into and through some strange arch like object in the center of a transportation hub. All around it hundreds of the military within the city had gathered and had been slaughtered. *I commend their speedy response, but not their common sense.*

Shaking that thought off, Nebula turned her mind to the data her hacking gear had automatically pulled from the local communication net.

The Skrull super soldier appeared then, and Nebula moved over to his skimmer, which could move faster in a straight line than the Skrull, whose name she had not bothered to learn, could move on his own. Connecting to its onboard computer, she downloaded the information her own computer had discerned. "You take a force to this base, then move towards the ocean. This next base is naval in structure, destroy the ships there."

The man slammed his fist into his chest in salute, and raced off, followed by more than a hundred skimmers. With him gone, Nebula turned over control of the forces within the city to one of the Chitauri officers, ordering him to continue the slaughter. "Slay them all, slay them all and protect the portal. Send the skimmers out to attack any response force sent, use the Rippers to destroy the city and the portal. I will engage the nearest military base myself, but others will undoubtedly respond soon."

The Chitauri bowed obsequiously, and Nebula gathered her own strike force of several hundred skimmers, racing away from the city.

But as she raced away from Paris, Nebula spotted something in the distance. And as her enhanced eyes saw a glint of metal just over the horizon, rockets flashed towards her and the skimmers around her. "Evade!"

Missiles flashed towards them and four skimmers exploded, their shields unable to take two missiles. Nebula barely dodged one that went over her head, while the second exploded against her skimmer's shields, which collapsed in a flare of actinic energy. "Evade, evade, spread out and close, use your Over Drive!"

The missiles of the jetfighters gave them a very nasty edge in range, but at Nebula's command, the Skimmer's Over Drive activated, they shot forward, instantly hitting Mach 3. The French jets were stunned, with one of them crashing into the ground below, having been sent out of control by a Skimmer's close pass. Others reacted faster, evading the charge, but Nebula and the Chitauri fired on them with their energy based weaponry. And in close, the French Mirage 2000s had no shielding like the invaders did.

As the last jet fighter rocketed away from them on an angle, Nebula scowled, calling her troops back to her and radioing back to the Super Skrull. "Triple the size of the cutting out forces and add a Ripper to each. The blasted humans are reacting far too damn fast, and while their weapons are primitive, they can still pack a punch. I will continue on. I feel an urge to make these fools pay for the temerity of daring to think they have a chance against us!"

OOOOOO

In the Russian closed city of Severomorsk, the attack was led by Proxima Midnight. She was a blue-skinned alien who wore an extremely skintight clothing over an equally extremely svelte body. Her clothing was mostly black with a white chest area and gold highlights. Proxima also wore a helmet, with something that looks like horns or perhaps strange plumage, curving upwards from her head.

But perhaps Proxima's most striking feature was her glowing white eyes. They looked somewhat like Storm's when she used her powers. But unlike Storm, whose eyes were always warm even when she was using her powers in battle, Proxima's eyes were simply blank white. There was no window to the soul here. There was instead... nothing. Not Nebula's psychopathic joy in destruction, nor Thanos' elation in death, nor even simple delight in her own power. If these eyes truly showed the soul of the being behind them Proxima Midnight's soul came from the Abyss itself.

After all, Hell was fire and brimstone, filled with the souls of evil people who enjoyed what they did. But what was perhaps worse than someone who enjoyed causing pain and death was someone who felt absolutely nothing about doing the same thing.

Proxima had not been involved in the war against the Brood, as she, along with Corvus Glaive, were amongst the most intelligent members of the Black Order, as well as the most dangerous physically. One or the other was often left in charge of various other matters, as Thanos could trust them to quote all of his tics, and intelligent and ruthless matter without direction.

Whereas the Nebula actually became distracted by the death and destruction she brought to Paris, Proxima was more controlling, something that began with the mix of troops she brought in. Only four large Rippers came in, which Proxima sent not into the city, but out to destroy the shipyards and the remnants of the Northern fleet, such as it was. They would then return to the city and aid the follow-on waves. Since this city was, according to the local data and the severe nature of the fighting below, the center of this country's local military command, it made sense to Proxima that the locals would be desperate to regain control of it. This would let the Chitauri take the defensive for a time, so long as the locals could not push them back too quickly.

To that end, Proxima instead brought in thousands upon thousands of skimmers of all sorts, including the Chitauri version of large hover-trucks, and anti-air units. The hover-trucks were far slower than their smaller brethren, but they could carry quite a lot of material. As infantry squads stepped off onto the streets of Severomorsk some of them began to corral the locals or shoot anyone who tried to fight back, others began to emplace anti-air guns. Those civilians who didn't fight back would make for hostages to keep the humans from using weapons of mass destruction, or even fight back at all within the city. Later waves would focus further on anti-air units.

All of this Proxima had already set up with the Chitauri officers, and thus could leave them to handle. For there was one way she and Nebula were alike: they both liked to get their hands dirty. Now even as a third wave of strange flying creatures appeared through the dimensional rift, Proxima led out nearly half of her available force of skimmers in a single assault force. They would destroy the nearest military bases, while the infantry on hand would enter the underground cave system, the existence of which Lord Thanos and the others only knew very little about. It was only so much information about that kind of thing from chasing down old light after all.

The fighting down there would no doubt be particularly violent, but neither Proxima nor the Chitauri cared. This was a holy quest to the Chitauri, a religious act devoted to Lord Thanos, and thus no price was too high to pay. *I will build a mountain of human skulls for my lord Thanos. And while my troops do it en-masse, I will contribute the old-fashioned way, one slaughtered weakling at a time,* Proxima thought coldly as she led her forces forward.

OOOOOOO

However, while Russia had been badly battered by the Eurasian war, that did not mean that they were entirely without their protectors. And as Proxima led her forces out from the protected city, those defenders were also rallying quickly. While they hadn't been able to put as many of their forces on guard as France or America had, what Russia did have was an already existing hidden industrial base in the tunnels, and two preexisting powered armor programs: the Crimson Dynamo, the Titanium Man suits.

Neither were as easy to make as the ODM suits, as powerful as the Iron Man suit, nor could they be as uniquely suited for the wearer as the suits that Carol and Wyatt used. Yet the Russians could still make them, even if doing so went against agreements made with other powers after the Eurasian War. The fact that several suits of each had still been built would be no surprise to anyone. After all, since when had Russia ever kept any agreement they weren't forced to at gun point?

So it was that two Titanium Men and four Crimson Dynamos flew through the air toward the attackers. As they did, they were getting radar readings of the aliens pushing out from the city until they reached some kind of point where a radar began to turn to hash. "I'm not getting any more radar, are any of you?" The leader, callsign Rasputin, stated.

"Negative," came the response from the others, and he cursed. "Is it something portable, or something to do with this strange teleportation portal. Spread out, and head upwards to the sky."

"Should we write for normal reinforcements?" Asked one of the Titanium Men. "If we are being ordered to reclaim a city we need more boots on the ground. We can't be in more than one place at once."

"Reports from the Northern Joint Strategic Command stated that enemy troops had been seen leaving the city via their own flight units, some kind of odd hover-type device. Those troops are our primary target right now. When we destroy them, we can spearhead a force to retake the city," Rasputin reminded everyone.

The airwaves fell silent for a moment then one of the other Crimson Dynamo's, callsign, New-boy (he wanted to be called Lenin, but had to be vetoed most harshly by his more senior fellows, and was lucky not to be called Chernozopi or FNG) "Do you think it is the Potter? Has he finally begun the conquest of the world as we have feared?"

"Nyet, and you need to stop listening to that magazine tripe you like to read. Besides, why would the Potter need military force to take over the world? His politics and economic might are doing that job for his new Empire all too well," The second Titanium Man, Wall, growled out.

"Then it is aliens," sent another member of their six man team, callsign Sonja, for she was the only woman in the Armored Arms Corps. "Another group of aliens have decided Mother Russia makes for good target."

“We will know when we—” Rasputin began, only to be interrupted.

“Contact! Contact, numerous small craft in the distance, eight o’clock.”

All six of the line powered armor troopers turned their heads in that direction, staring towards the contact the last member of the Dynamos, callsign Spinner.

Flying out from Severomorsk were things that were clearly aliens on strange floating disks. They had two gunners on the back, with a pilot at the front, and were moving quite fast, perhaps just above Mach one, despite not looking at all aerodynamic or even having any defense against the wind pressure.

“Crimson Dynamos, I want us to get some altitude. Titanium Men, get their attention. Drag them further down to the ground. Fall back slowly if possible to allied forces.” There weren’t many of those, but some tank and infantry divisions were out there, and all of them had anti-air capability. Rebuilding their anti-air units had been a priority for Russia after the Eurasian War.

With that, the six man team broke apart along its natural divisions. The Titanium Men dove down, flying closer to the ground and pushing their speed forward while the Crimson Dynamo’s flew straight upward gaining as much altitude as they could. Power suit or plain, height was life in a dogfight.

Moments later, the Titanium Men engaged. First, pulling from over their shoulders large Rotary cannons that looked as if they were made of some anti-air gun from the soviet era. The routes they fired were large, not very quick, but had extremely good range.

As they came forward they started to fire, downing two while causing energy shields to flare up around several of the other alien devices. The only exception was a woman, who dived through the fire, as if she barely felt it, speeding along towards them so quickly that they had trouble adjusting their aim.

“Keep firing, I’ll take her on,” Wall growled, dumping his gun and using his suit’s inbuilt energy guns, blasting out at the woman.

But once more the alien woman ignored his fire, and a moment later, her spear crashed into his hastily raised arm. The blow hurled Wall downward into the ground, where he rolled, bursting back up towards the alien bitch with his thrusters firing at full power, snarling as he fired again, while also releasing constrictive force rings to try and incapacitate the woman.

Snarling the woman grabbed up a thin ovoid object from her waist which enlarged into a spear. The spear’s edge had barely formed before it cut through the constrictive ring and then she was whirling under Wall’s punch, and he barely blocked a blow that would have taken him in the chest.

As his partner continued to fire at the flying aliens above the alien woman, Wall once more found himself hurled off his feet, his arm dented badly, his real arm throbbing in pain despite the armor and inner padding. Then his eyes widened and he shouted, “Bunker, watch out!”

Wall’s warning came too late. The end of the woman’s spear glowed, and a blast of blue-green energy flashed out, cutting one of his legs off from just above his thigh as if a laser had hit a chunk of butter. The other Titanium Man’s armor had been absolutely no defense against the superheated energy beam of the enemy, something that appalled Wall almost as much as watching his friend be wounded like that.

“ARGGHHHhhh!!!” Bunker screamed, falling out of the sky to crash to the ground, the pain of his wound having knocked him unconscious for a few seconds, only to wake up and find he was in no better position upon crashing to the earth.

At that point, the Crimson Dynamos finally arrived from above. Diving down into the aliens, they scattered the group, knocking more than half out of the sky.

“Attack that pizda (Cunt) from long-range, she has superstrength and durability!” Wall bellowed. “Bunker is down!”

Seeing this, Rasputin ordered his fellows to fire their smoke rockets as dashed forward and downward, grabbing their injured fellow. “How durable is she?”

“She barely noticed any of my weapons,” Wall growled. “And her hits dented my fucking arm!”

Cursing at that, Rasputin watched beams of energy blast out from the woman. She was seemingly firing blindly but still nearly clipped Sonja and New Boy. “Damn it! Retreat. We will need to work with...”

That was as far as he got before the woman appeared in front of him, having crossed the distance between where she had been and Rasputin within an instant. His armor proved no defense as her spear stabbed straight through his chest. “GUUUGGQ!!”

Desperately, Rasputin reached forward, but the woman was already pulling her spear back, and the shaft of the spear was too long for him to reach her. He fell out of the sky, watching as his life’s blood dripped out of the gaping hole in his chest as the woman turned on his fellows. “R, Run...” he rasped. “Run...”

They didn’t.

Moments later, Proxima Midnight pulled her spear from the head of the man whose leg she had bisected near the start of the battle, her lips twitching in some amusement. “All armor, no substance these fools. Onward! We have billions of more dead to see to for Lord Thanos!”

OOOOOO

A third assault was led by Supergiant, another one of Thanos’ Black Order, who strangely was also a blue-skinned alien woman, much like Nebula or Proxima, although her features were slightly more robotic-looking than even her associate Nebula. Like Proxima, she too had not been a part of the military side of the campaign against the Brood but had been very busy behind the scenes as her powers of cani-telepathy served best in that realm.

A human might well have thought of Nebula as a comrade in arms, or an acquaintance. Such terms had no place among the Black Guard beyond the relationship between Proxima and Corvus. All of them competed against one another in hopes of proving themselves more to Lord Thanos.

Yet the first few minutes of her campaign against China would definitely not have pleased Thanos if he had been watching her particular portal. Not that it was entirely her fault. Because instead of opening over the city of Hangzhou, the portal open over the nearest army base, belonging to the 28th Attack Division.

And although they had responded to any information about the possible alien invasion passed on to them from the Avalon Empire with derision, China had not stood down its military forces from the recent conflict with the Wrecking Crew. This meant constant drills, and lots of trigger-happy anti-air units moving around their military bases.

“FIRREEE!!!” came the shout from many officers and noncoms, and Type-63 anti-aircraft guns opened up into the air the instant the portal began to open there. These ugly, blocky self-propelled guns fired flak into the air from two guns, which around four companies of quick reaction forces and units currently on various exercises did barely a few seconds after the dimensional doorway opened. The Type-63s were soon joined by the base’s own immobile anti-aircraft guns. These were a very eclectic group, some just simple flak cannons, others nearly modern guns, but thanks to the state of paranoia in China, they were soon all filling the air with lead.

In contrast to these older guns were a series of weapons designed by the Chinese Prime Minister himself. For anti-air work the Mandarin had developed two different systems and evenly distributed them in groups of four squads each to various important military bases across China. Since this army base served as a backup to the nearby naval base at Ningbo and protected the city of Hangzhou itself, this was one such.

One system was based on missile technology. The Dragon’s Fangs were small, truck-portable missile launchers with twenty missile tubes. One out of every six missiles would lock onto the actual target, while the others would either follow into that target homing in on the first’s signal or explode at precisely the same distance spread out in a line. The gunner made the decision of which was necessary.

Here, the local officers lost some control, as the individual gunners hastily made those decisions for themselves. This meant that there were several skimmers that were struck by several missiles smashed out of the sky almost at once, while other missiles exploded in midair, doing little damage but scattering the incoming Chitauri skimmers who led the attack.

The second system developed by the man who had once been called the Mandarin was called a Sparkling Spear design. Say what you would about his past, and few Chinese would willingly say anything at all about the man, but he did have a flare for nomenclature. The Sparkling Spear was essentially a lightning gun that fired a net of highly charged particles into the air. More anti-rocket defense than offensive weapon, the range of this system was quite a bit higher than anticipated, and now it came into play, hitting and weakening the shields of the Chitauri skimmers.

On her own skimmer, Supergiant wasn’t among the first groups through the portal. Instead she was leading from the back as she felt that was the correct position. Nonetheless, Supergiant could see the carnage in the air in front of her through the dimensional portal and snarled out orders. “Let me through! Give me cover as I enter, they cannot be allowed to bring up more guns!”

On the other side of the portal, alarms were going out from this base to the rest of China, and jets were slowly getting airborne. But enough of the Skimmers were getting through the ready defense anti-air units to hit the jets as they tried to take off. And neither the jets nor the attack helicopters or even the tanks and anti-air guns had shields like the attackers did. Humans began to die, their fire slowly being suppressed, while elsewhere in China jetfighters and ballistic missiles were fired.

One such missile arrived just as Supergiant was able to get through the portal. Luckily for the Chitauri, it simply kept on going through the void between dimensions, easily dodged by the forces arrayed around the portal. The jets though instantly began to have an impact, and one of the few Rippers that Supergiant had deigned to add to her force died within seconds of their arrival. The Ripper had wiped out several of the anti-air units though, and slagged numerous buildings across the base.

Worse for the defenders though was Supergiant being there. On her lone skimmer, she dove down, getting below the Chinese defensive envelope. There, she raised her hands, and with a growl, thrust out her hands, sending forth her telepathic powers.

Normally, Supergiant preferred to use her personal version of telepathy as it was meant to be used, only on one mind at a time, as this was what her power was originally, parasitic telepathy. With it, Supergiant could find the most intelligent or driven minds among those of her enemies and literally eat them, absorbing everything within the person's memories, leaving their mind a husk which she could then control.

But Lord Thanos was not only a master of engineering but biotics and genetics. He had perfected her power to the point that Supergiant could use regular telepathy as well, if in a far more blunt manner than a true telepath. This she did now, reaching out to the minds of the humans with a simple command of ***"STOP FIGHTING!"***

Her telepathic powers blasted out from her, creating a bubble more than twenty miles across, catching even a few of the jetfighters. The fighting instantly stopped on both sides as more Chitauri came through above them, although seeing no violence, they refrained from attacking the Chinese, as that would have broken Supergiant's telepathic control.

With the battle thus paused, Supergiant sent out another command. It was a simple one, but it still overrode the free will of the Chinese soldiers she had caught. *"Attack any human you see beyond those of your own units! Do not attack the aliens among you!"*

Yet even as this occurred, jetfighters from farther away fired their missiles from outside Supergiant's range. One such pilot was a man named Wen Shiang, and he had just seen his wing mate halt his fire. One moment they had been exchanging radio calls, and the other pilot had just shouted "SPLASH!" before falling silent, and was even now turning around, making to come back towards him. "Cobra 5, what is your status?"

There was no response and Wen hastily pulled up, flying above his comrade as he came back towards him. Anticipating that his friend had seen something coming up behind them Wen turned his head over his shoulder but saw nothing. Instead Cobra 5 shot past the pair of Cobra 7 and 8, and then...

Wen stared in horror as Cobra 5's missiles locked on and flashed out from under his wings towards Cobra 9 and 10. Both of them hadn't even evaded all that far, and 9 exploded, while 5 moved to follow 10, coming up behind him.

Before Wen could comprehend what was going on, Cobra 1,2,3 and even 4 all turned back on the rest of the ready squadron of the 71st Air Defense Brigade. For a moment, all Wen could do was dodge, ducking down towards the ground, going nap-of the earth for a time before pulling the stick of his J-10A upward, zooming up through the combat as his friends turned on one another before hastily twisting down and

back towards the ground trying desperately to throw off anyone trying to lock onto him. *What, what happe... it must be some kind of mental domination. I must call it in, the Party must be warned!*

Before Wen could do so however, fire from the enemies he was actually here to fight caught him. Having left the rest of the human-on-human fight behind, his plane was easy pickings for the Chitauri skimmers who had flown out under the rest of the battle.

While this little drama was playing out in the air to one side of the previous battle, Supergiant stumbled, grabbing at the controls of her skimmer and cursing herself for not having a driver as she desperately tried to concentrate through a now blinding headache. *Curse it, am I so weak? Even with Lord Thanos changing me so I can be a true telepath rather than a mere telepavore, I still cannot sustain long term use of my power... not without a source of food...*

Scowling, Supergiant moved into the base, searching for the local commander through half-closed eyes, a team of skimmers moving above her. Moments later they spotted a high ranking officer rushing out of a bunker in the base along with several others. He was even now turning around, ordering his troops to be ready to move in order to assault the nearby city, as her telepathic orders demanded, and whereas normally he would have remained there to command the base, Supergiant's mental orders did not allow for that.

Seeing this, Supergiant waited, trying to ignore the pain watching as missiles continued to streak in towards her troops, shot out of the sky either by their own defenses, or the humans', turned on their own hardware now.

Once the officer's orders were being carried out, Supergiant gestured, ordering the Chitauri above her. "Kill his guards."

The Chitauri above her fired down into the humans, who had not previously seen them as threats thanks to her mental orders. Now the soldiers around the general all fell, causing him to scream out in fear, rushing to the nearest shelter. But he was too slow.

Supergiant reached him quickly, grabbing at his head from behind. Desperately he wrenched away, one hand going down to his pistol. Yet Supergiant's grip on his head was impossible to break, and she smiled thinly, smacking the pistol out of his hand, pulling him into the air to look into his suddenly horrified, shocked eyes. "Don't worry, the pain will be over soon," she crooned, opening her mouth.

From Supergiant's mouth a black mist flowed out, enveloping his head even as he started to scream. The black mist entered the man's eyes, ears, mouth and nose, and Supergiant shuddered in delight, feeling the flow of the man's mind into her via the mist, the visible representation of her telepavore powers. A low hum of delight left her as the migraine she had been dealing with left her.

Moments later she released the man's body to slump to the ground. While his body still stood there, the man who had commanded this base was no more. Supergiant had eaten his mind, subsuming all the memories within. Now she could look into those memories almost as if they were her own, like a series of books she could pull off the shelf and read at any time. She had it all, command codes, callsign cycles, everything.

"Ahh... Now to cause some chaos..." Supergiant enthused, before communicating with the local Chitauri officers. A series of orders flashed out, and the invaders instantly obeyed. The other two rippers that

Supergiant had brought with her through the dimensional doorway landed in the base. Both of them would remain there, providing defensive fire, for the portal, while the Skimmers would spread out, hugging the ground now in order to get enemy radar.

This meant they would very obviously be seen much more easily by civilians, but here in China, it would take time for civilians, even hundreds of thousands of people to get their warnings out to the government. *Especially if I muddy the waters further.* "You," She growled out, gesturing to the empty husk. "Get up."

Without a mind of its own, those orders acted almost like a web inside a cave, connecting all of the walls representing the body's functions together. But really the cave was still there, still empty, and the web was extremely fragile, brittle. It would eventually collapse, leaving nothing behind. But for now, Supergiant could give this thing that was once human a series of orders.

With Supergiant's orders driving him, the former human reentered his command building, finding it empty. Supergiant's previous orders were absolute, and soldiers who would normally stay behind to take care of the base or communications needs of the troops were also leaving the base, eager to attack their own kind elsewhere. Regardless, after a few minutes, the general in charge of the base was dialing up a connection, getting in contact with the nearby naval base.

Meanwhile, Supergiant herself traveled there as fast as possible, also hugging the ground as best she could a guard of five other skimmers around her. Her destination was the Ningbo Naval Base. Two were felled by enemy fire coming from detached units of the army out on maneuvers but Supergiant ignored this and moved on swiftly.

Upon arriving at the base in Ningbo, Supergiant left her command outside. From there, she continued on, using her suit's cloaking technology to pass straight the guards there into the base despite how on edge they were, rumors having spread about what was going on elsewhere. Once within, Supergiant headed to the central command building, eager to dine on her second human victim.

Like with any military, there were some things that local commanders did not know or could not command. But after eating his brain, Supergiant knew her first victim was more senior than the officer commanding this base or the naval units that used it as their operational headquarters. She also knew, however, that some orders would need to come from higher up in the command chain. That was unless she could turn several officers here in the naval base to her designs.

Thanks to the cloaking technology built into her suit by Lord Thanos, Supergiant was able to pass entirely through the base, entering the command center. Here, dozens of people were moving around, trying to get to grips with what was going on further inland, while the main officer was shouting into the LAN-line phone in his hand.

Supergiant's powers allowed her to translate what she was hearing, and she actually let out a hastily covered giggle at how angry the local officer sounded. "I do not fucking care if you keep parroting the call signs back to me. Dammit, I am asking why, did the chairman... You, your base was under attack, and I recognize that you are the man on the ground, but without the Chairman's orders, this and all the reports about these aliens sound like a giant prank. I am not so low down the party as you, damn it, why are you just repeating your orders, it's almost... almost like..."

Feeling this was her cue, Supergiant stepped further into the room, locking it behind her for a second. The sound of the lock had several of the communication specialists turning toward her, but Supergiant held up a hand, a telepathic command flowing out from her to envelop the room. "Silence and cease all movement!"

The main officer had also turned seeing his people doing so, and looked at Supergiant as her cloaking tech faded, his mouth agape. "Ah, that makes this easier."

With that, Supergiant opened her own mouth, breathing out. For the second time that day, her original power reached enveloping the man's head, seeping his orifices easily. And once more, Supergiant shuddered in place for a few seconds, delighting in the treat. Unlike Supergiant's first victim, this man actually had something of a brain, although quite constrained by a severe, almost fanatical devotion to the rules of the Communist Party, and his inner turmoil based on the fact he could not rise higher without playing the patronage game.

Yet Supergiant could not linger over her meal as much as she liked. Instead she finished quickly, and then with a smile went from one of the officers in the room to another. Like so many flies trapped in a spider's threads, none could move, cry out or fight back as she went around the room, eating their minds. Not thirty minutes later, her series of flesh puppets had called in the captains of various ships in port and over the radio, with specific call signs to back their words.

The play Supergiant's flesh puppets performed was both easy and entirely made out of wool cloth. To these men and those who heard the orders being passed on, the Taiwanese had apparently released some kind of virus into China that made those exposed to it hallucinate and eventually go mad. That the entirety of the upper echelons of the party had been caught by one such attack, and that others had spread throughout the country.

This was precisely the kind of doomsday scenario that the Chinese Communist Party fed its folk. Especially once Taiwan had reached out to the magician Harry Potter and he had practically guaranteed the wayward county's independence. That actually helped the officers thus contacted believe Supergiant's tale.

Soon, the Chinese navy would start to attack Taiwan and with several minutes' worth of effort, her flesh puppets here were programmed to a degree that would allow them to act like themselves for a time. It would fade quickly, especially once battle was joined and there was a very clear limit to how many different scenarios Supergiant could program into them.

Yet that was all right. By the time their lack of true life was discovered, the first shots would be fired. And as someone who had started wars and conflicts on hundreds of different planets, primitive and sophisticated alike, Supergiant knew that once the first shots were fired, both sides would have every reason to continue.

With the Chitauri spreading out in small bands to target various infrastructure points throughout the country, Supergiant and her remaining guards moved on. There was one other kind of base that she was going to visit in order to cause still further disorder among the humans. *I will show Lord Thanos, I will show my fellow Black Order. It is not about raw violence, vitriol, or brute power like Black Hole uses, nor cold cruelty like Midnight or Glaive. All you need is deviousness, and access to the right toolset.*

OOOOOO

The most randomly chosen city among those the Wrecking Crew and Loki left beacons was perhaps Debrecen, Hungary. Not exactly a military power, the normal Hungarian citizen had next to no knowledge of the alien threat in general, let alone what the hell the giant black thing that had just appeared in the sky was.

This attack was led by Gamora and like Nebula and Proxima Midnight, she led from the front. Skimmers were the first units through, spreading out quickly, with orders not to engage, but radio back whatever they saw as they spread out quickly over the city and beyond while Gamora remained near the portal.

The lack of defenses around the city was astonishing to Gamora, who could only shake her head, shocked at what she was seeing. *A whole city like this, with no material defenses? But these humans are supposed to be warlike? Is this just local stupidity, or were the reports we looked at wrong?* Gamora was leaning heavily towards the latter, but it didn't really matter.

Gamora wasn't nearly as bloodthirsty as her sister or the other Black Order commanders. She had no wish to mindlessly slaughter, to build pyramids of skulls for her father. Rather, she would conquer. In that, Gamora was very much a pragmatist. She believed that Lord Thanos, her father, would be happy enough with the death of the Phoenix Avatar, Harry Potter and enough of the humans to add to his glory in the eyes of his mistress, Death itself.

If such a creature even exists, and it isn't just his nihilism at play, Gamora thought, not for the first time. And like all such thoughts, it was quickly buried very deeply indeed.

Regardless, many of the humans might well remain, to be added to Thanos into growing collection of empires that he had begun to gather. She hoped that Lord Thanos was pragmatic enough to not simply slaughter all. *I could be wrong, but I hope I'm not. I have no desire to add still more blood to the gallons I have already spilled,* Gamora thought, shaking her head slightly, while in the background, large scale hovercraft the likes of which Proxima was using in Russia appeared. These were carrying not more troops, but massive communication devices, high tech megaphones really.

As shrieks and shouts of shock abounded throughout the city below, these units moved out, spreading into a formation to cover the entire city. Once they were done, Gamora began to speak into the microphone, her voice carried throughout the city. "Do not resist. Resistance will be met with deadly force. Remain in your homes. The invaders will not enter your home unless fired upon. I repeat, remain calm and not resist. If you are caught outside, keep your hands visible and place them on your head and continue about your business. Once inside a building, you will remain there until the provisional government has been set up to replace any rebellious elements within your own which will reveal themselves."

Of course, Gamora wasn't so naïve as to assume this would work entirely. No matter how hard she tried, this was still going to be coming down to these humans, and some would undoubtedly resist. Their militaries would certainly do so, their governmental bodies, less so. Most of the time those with power would be too terrified of losing that power to fight for it, amusingly. But this way at least Gamora would not need to kill anyone. *My hands might not be clean, but they will not be as black with dried blood as the others.*

More troops came through behind Gamora as she made her speech spreading out over the city and away, dealing with a few instances of resistance from the locals. Between her brief speeches, Gamora listened intently, and she could tell it had only been a few projectile type shots fired, which was probably examples of the local entire constabulary. That was more than enough. Meanwhile more loaders came through, although this time they carried further Chitauri and anti-air guns.

They would pass over the city to defensible terrain in various places and build up fortresses there, hard points that could defend against land and air units. Once the city was surrounded, its citizen pacified and the portal thus protected, Gamora would push forward as fast as possible. *Mobility and retaining the high ground is key. Destroy any military forces that march on us, but otherwise simply retain command of the air and spread out. That is enough.*

OOOOOO

One beacon whose location Loki had chosen deliberately was the beacon set into the city of Washington, DC. As the nation which could project force beyond its borders the most easily of all the nations on Earth, Loki had decided America needed special care, and targeting its capital was an obvious choice.

Such was their research into the humans that Thanos and his commanders could tell from that first glimpse of the opening that this was indeed Washington. And since they had no idea where the Avalon Empire's capital was – they had looked for it extremely closely, but Potter's magic kept any who did not come through the runic doors from even knowing about Camelot at all, let alone attack it – Black Glaive, chief of the Black Order came through with the first troops.

He was easily Thanos's best tactician among the Black Order and was assigned to be the largest assault force outside the main force led by Ebony.

As he appeared, Black Glaive could already see why. In the distance, jet fighters were already moving to intercept. And below, several hundred troopers were racing around, bringing anti-air guns online from around the capital.

With a gesture, Glaive sent a group of Rippers out towards the incoming aerial units. As they went, anti-air guns lining their sides and backs opened up in a display of all plasma power.

Meanwhile, Chitauri troopers dropped from their skimmers all across the city. Rippers too lowered themselves into the city's laying waste with their main cannons to a few buildings, but more concentrating their guns below into the streets, slaying thousands.

Yet even that, and now the battle going on in the distance with the first jets to react, were a side show. This was the head of the American government, and the more carnage they could create here, the better. That was why Corvus himself lead the assault into the so-called White House. *By the time I am done with it, it will be called the Crimson house*, he thought to himself, knowing the joke really wasn't all that funny, but rather very prophetic.

With the Chitauri troops breaking off and engaging the local defenders, Glaive charged forward.

Human soldiers wearing strange uniforms of black pants and black jackets with white shirts underneath attempted to stop Glaive but Glaive knocked them aside as if they were bowling pins. Their bullets

bounced off Corvus Glaive's skin and the rags he wore as a uniform with no effect, even when two of them brought out larger rifle like weapons, rather than the paltry handguns previously in use.

He stormed through the White House's front door, carrying within the body of one of the soldiers in his way speared onto his scythe, before hurling it to one side smashing it into two soldiers having hurled so hard that the collision broke their legs. Twisting in the other direction, Corvus lashed out with a wave of energy bisecting four troops there who had been racing towards him.

Marching forward, Glaive smashed down doors as he came to them, lashing out within and then slaughtering those within guard or civilian. Above, a Ripper positioned its directly over the White House, while another one moved into what was called Congressional Hall, as troopers descended, rushing into the buildings there.

Corvus's orders were very, very clear. Anyone within those buildings would be slain, the barest frothing wave of the sacrifice he would create for Lord Thanos.

Glancing out the window, brief second, Glaive took a moment to stare across the lawn to the area around the White House, nodding some approval. Local resistance had arrived to fight his troops and were now trying to force their way into the cordon the Chitauri had thrown up around the governmental buildings. It was a viable tactic, but they lacked the weaponry needed to fight his people on an even footing.

Glaive's musings were interrupted by a spattering of bullet fire hitting his back, and Corvus turned, flipping his staff around sending out further energy bolts to one side as he marched down the court door, leaving three more dead. Eight dead guards later, Corvus was in front of the so-called Oval Office. Knocking down the door, Glaive discovered that was a bit of a misnomer as the office was not oval, but more importantly there was no one within. "Blast, so much for this being quick."

As he turned back, his communication device went off. "Lord Glaive, we have assaulted the so-called Senate and Congress buildings. In total, we have killed at least eight hundred people between the two buildings so far, with more to come. Several are in hiding, and others have fortified in small groups, but we will slay them quickly. I do not have enough data to tell you if we should have found them there. But there are some signs that some have escaped. There seems to be a secret tunnel underneath the building. I have sent troopers down already."

There was a momentary pause from the other voice before he went on. "We are taking losses. Their projectile devices are not without merit if they hit in unarmored places. Their rockets are also proving dangerous once our shields are down. Two Rippers have been destroyed already. We are encountering heavy aerial resistance."

"Bring in a further fifty Rippers, then signal the anti-air units to start coming through. Continue the cleansing," Glaive ordered, dispassionate as always. His people would prove themselves worthy to Lord Thanos once more. What mattered a few dozen, a few hundred, a few hundred thousand, when compared to that. "We will cleanse the earth! Release divisions five through twelve to continue the slaughter throughout the city. Have you hacked into the local data-net as yet?"

Instantly, a line of text and a map appeared in the iris of one eye, even as he came under fire as still more of the strangely garbed soldiers defended this place.

Three of them went down in quick succession, although their current fire was extremely precise, an oddity in this place. *These special service people evidently come in various levels of training.*

The next instance, however, Glaive rounded the next corner and bolts of plasma came towards him, yellow and brighter than the energy weapons of his people. The blow struck him in the thigh with enough impetus to knock him sideways into the far wall. Five more defenders appeared behind, and Glaive hissed as he was caught in a crossfire. Plasma rained down from both side, burning through his clothing in various places, and actually causing a slight bit of injury. They weren't quite hot enough to burn through his skin, but they certainly were going to leave Glaive with a few burns.

"You useless gnats!" With a roar of anger, Corvus turned, and charged towards the five who had appeared from seemingly nowhere behind him. Once within reach, his scythe lashed out, slicing one man in half as he kicked out another one, crushing his chest. A third fell to a kick to his leg, which almost tore his leg off, so powerful was the strike. The other end of his scythe came up, in a crushing blow that burst the fourth man's head like a ripe watermelon.

Throughout this, the troops who had previously been in front of him kept firing, ignoring their allies well-being. One of the wounded men went down with a plasma bolt through the chest, and yet the continued shots to his back caused Glaive some actual pain now.

The last man standing hastily pulled out a dagger, thrusting it forward. Glaive caught it on his forearm contemptuously, only to stare in surprise as the blade cut into his skin. Corvus noted that he would need to examine that sword later, as his hand, now bleeding slightly smacked that man aside, his scythe coming up and cutting. The last man fell, and he turned, sending out a blast of energy that seared the last two standing guards into so much char.

Kneeling down, Glaive reached for the dagger that had hurt his arm although his clothing was already mending itself, melding over the injury. Feeling the lightness of it, despite the fact that it looked almost like kit should be a short sword he scowled in irritation. Wherever this had come from it had hurt him, and the implications of finding such a weapon here, even only one was something he needed to pass on.

Reaching to his belt, he switched com channels for a moment, connecting to the rest of the Black Order elsewhere. "Black Order, the humans have developed a metal that was able to penetrate my skin. They seem to only use it in tiny quantities, perhaps given to their best warriors? But even so, that is a worrisome sign."

With that, Glaive cut off the communication, amused as he had heard his wife about to go on a tirade. Proxima would no doubt be annoyed that someone else other than herself had hurt him.

Strapping the dagger to his side, Glaive stood and connected with the information his command had gleaned from the local data network, searching for the relevant information, and swiftly barked out commands, sending others segments of his troops toward different areas. The so-called Pentagon would fall swiftly along with the accompanying military base and any others within the first twenty miles. However going over the information gleaned, he ordered one massive assault launched at a specific naval base, the one called Hampton Roads. There were rumors on the human internet of strange experiments going on there, and Glaive wanted no complications he didn't have to deal with.

Hearing reports of their losses in the air and how many squadrons of local air superiority fighters were already in play, Corvus also ordered a doubling of the amount of anti-aircraft guns being drawn through the portal from the original he had anticipated needing. America was a real superpower that could project that power over long distances, which meant **airpower**. Worse in a way was that the assault on the nearby naval base had been wiped out. Whatever ships there would be able to put to sea before the next wave caught them. Still, Corvus knew that any local fleet would pale in comparison to the numbers his people could field.

With his task force sufficiently organized, Glaive continued on his way, assured by another quick question that nothing had left the White House since their arrival. However, his search was in vain. No one seemed to be around, beyond the security guards he'd already dealt with some of whom had been knocked out rather than slain.

Scowling in annoyance, Glaive wound his way from there back towards the entranceway. Finding two unconscious guards he grabbed them one after another, dragging it together to lie against the wall of the White House shoulder to shoulder.

Once the two were in position, he slapped them each once across the face. Lightly, so as to not kill them too soon.

This woke them up and after staring at Corvus' glorious visage, they both tried to reach for their sidearms. Snorting in disdain, Corvus put his scythe against their throats, the blade more than long enough to touch both necks at once. "You will answer my questions, or you will die. Do not posture, I have seen such before and it ceased to be amusing several hundred years ago."

Neither man answered, simply clamping up and Glaive had to smile slightly. Whatever else these humans were and there was a lot of negative things he could say about them, they did not lack courage. Still he had questions.

Still smiling, Glaive reached down and without any effort, he tore off one of their legs, tossing it aside like it was a chicken leg.

"ARGGHHH!!!" The man screamed, grabbing at his leg right above where his leg had been torn away.

Snorting, Glaive brought his scythe down, pressing it against the wound, searing the wound shut.

"GRAAAHHHHAGHH!!!" The man's screaming increased dramatically during this procedure, and he fell unconscious swiftly.

This left Corvus looking over to the other man, whose other leg he had held in place while he used his scythe with his other hand. "That one got off easily. You will not, should you not answer my questions. First I will remove your arms and legs. Then I will remove that which makes you a man, always being careful the pain itself does not kill you. Then I will start to flay your skin, from that point outward across your body. Eventually you will talk. What condition you are in is the true question."

The man still glared at him, but there was now more than a bit of fear in that gaze. Glaive smiled when he saw it and made good his boast.

It was only when the first man was down to one working limb that the man finally broke. "Wait, wait, waag, wait! I, I'll talk!"

“Good. Where is your leader, you call him president,” Corvus snarled. Although amusing this had taken overlong. Every combat instinct he had was telling him that the human’s real defenders, Potter and his folk, would be on the move soon.

“I, I don’t know where, he’s been going around frantically in Air Force One, ever since....” At that, astonishing Glaive, the man clamped up. But that was enough.

Moments later Corvus was walking away from the now quite dead pair, moving over to a fountain set in the backyard of the White House. He plunged his hands inside, washing them clean of blood, smiling very slightly at the sight of the red staining the formerly pristine water. Once more, clean, he turned his attention to the overall battle, watching as above him several dozen shadows moved over the city, larger even than the Rippers, and far, far wider, looking almost like manta rays to the watching humans. As they arrived, they started to fire, long greenish beams of energy hitting something far off in the distance.

Seeing that, Corvus’s smile widened, and he stalked forward. Despite not having caught the president he knew that the locals had been ready for them. That meant he too would have to prepare a warm reception for their true enemies, Potter and his followers, when they arrived.

OOOOOO

Moments before the portal in the mountains of Afghanistan opened, Nick Fury was leaning back in his chair in his office in Washington, DC, ignoring the man on the other side of his desk for a moment as he looked up at the ceiling, seemingly in contemplation. But really it was more in idle musing than anything else. After all, the guy was repeating himself again for the third time running.

It had taken a while, but Nick simply knew where too many of the skeletons were buried for him to be completely pushed out to pasture despite how badly SHIELD had failed. Eventually, the powers that be, which in this case meant the American president and his chamber, had decided that he could still be useful in terms of homeland security. As such, they actually created new office for him. The investigative agency oversight committee. He had roped many of his former agents and friends into working with them. Although few of his spying type field agents had done the same.

Some days Nick was a little angry at that. The fact that Natasha and several others had switched their allegiance to Harry Potter and the Custodes, and then the Earth Defense Force and Avalon Empire, somewhat annoyed him. He had after all been the one to think up the idea of a worldwide defense initiative first and had seen it to their training or at least polishing their training in Natasha’s case. But most of the time he understood that Harry had simply become the source of the kind of stability Nick had been pushing for a long time, and was happy that at least in some fashion, the people from SHIELD were still doing good in the world.

Now, if only I could hand off this particular job to someone else and see if I could convince Potter to recruit me in some fashion. I know he’s got Sir Dennis, and that man, for all that he was railroaded by internal politics in the British intelligence community, is a consummate spymaster. Still, there is being a consummate professional, and then there is being the best in the game, and I was one of the best in the game for a long time. Despite how SHIELD fell, that is still true. And the fact that working with him means I wouldn’t have to deal with these idiots is a major bonus.

Shaking his head, neck once more turned his attention to the head of the CIA, finally deciding the man had talked to his ear off enough for one day. "I understand your concerns about the budget, I also understand that the president's decision to cut down on several operations overseas including in the Middle East bothers you tremendously. I also don't care. The president was very clear about this. The CIA's reach and mandate was to be cut down, and all of you were to be on your best behavior internationally. This Operations... Peach and Green Dagger, no! Absolutely not. I'm not going reverse my decision on that one, and neither will I stand for you trying to keep on pushing forward. I know where the money is going George, and I am not going to let it continue. Try to go around me, and I will bury you."

George Oppenheim, current director for the CIA, glared back at Nick, snarling out, "Dammit, you and I know Potter is too soft! He's done nothing about the terrorists in the Middle East unless they impinge on mutant rights, he's done nothing to topple the tyrannical regimes in Iraq nor the Mullahs in Iran, and both of them are still powder kegs waiting to explode. That doesn't even count the various issues in China."

His tone turned more wheedling. "Come on, Nick. The Mandarin's hold on to power in China isn't as concrete as he might want the world to think, far too many party members know he is a former criminal, that kind of thing is too disingenuous even for them. We can--"

"Add more fuel to an already burning building. One that more resembles something from a cartoon, you know the ones that are always ready to explode at a moment's notice, than anything in real life. I'll admit that China is a problem, and Potter hasn't done anyone any favors in his moves in Asia, which, given Sir Dennis is working for him I still find surprising."

Nick held up a hand as the man across from him tried to interrupt. "But if anything can get back to us, it will ream us in the ass so hard we'll be looking around for the god damn elephant that did it! And don't give me that old saw about how you've taken every precaution. I know how little that actually matters sometimes! There's always some loose end, something that can be traced back. I've been in your shoes for more years than you've been working at the CIA, trust me. I know what I'm talking about. I'm not a bleeding heart, I'm not saying this plan didn't sound good when you thought it up," he added somewhat more commiserating. "But now is most decidedly not the time for that kind of thing."

George grumbled a bit, but this was why Nick had been chosen for the disposition. He really had been practically everywhere and done every job within the intelligence society, offense, defense, bureaucratic even. At one dark point, he'd worked in records for goodness sake. He understood why a plan like Operation Peach had been thought up, and if he said it wasn't the proper time to even start putting it in motion, then George just have to grin and bear it.

He didn't like it, but he also knew that if he tried to go around Nick's back like he would do with the Senate Oversight Committee, or even the president if they asked about something like this, Nick would know. The head of the FBI had found that out the hard way, and the NSA was but a pale shadow of what it had once been. The only reason George still had his job was because he knew how to play ball and knew not to underestimate the man behind this desk. "Fine, I'll redirect the money to operation Redbeard."

Nick frowned for a moment, thinking, then nodded slowly. "Send me the dossiers on the field agents involved, there was one of them whose proclivity for violence rang a few negative bells my mind. But other than that I..."

At that point, there was a booming noise from outside, followed by screams, more booming noises, sounds of men and women out on these streets running, and behind it all, the distinctive "fzzGRK!" Of energy weapons of some kind.

"What the hell?" Turning rapidly he moved to his window, staring out through the bulletproof glass out onto the streets, where dozens of people were staring up in the sky, pointing while others were shrieking and running for cover already. The other noises were lighter, the source not visible from where he was

But Nick had been in enough firefights within cities to be able to figure out that the sound was coming from Capitol Hill. Just as a giant freaking metal clad fish of some kind dove down into the streets, its sides blasting out with numerous gun emplacements.

Nick, and George who had joined him at the window, both now hurled themselves away from it, not trusting the bulletproof glass to stand up against energy weapons. This proved to be very much the case, and Nick rolled away still further as the window shattered behind them, the impact of the energy bolts bursting through, sending molten glass everywhere. George gasped as his back, arm and leg were hit by small droplets of molten glass, but rolled away, grimacing in pain. But his clothing had blocked the bits just enough so he could still move under his own power.

Both men wordlessly raced out of the room, with Nick only pausing by the doorway to grab at a lever there. The two of them passed his secretary, who was staring wide-eyed out her own window, even as her desk shifted. A series of small lockers appeared there, and the secretary twitched, seeing that and Nick, before hastily opening the locker. Pulling out several rifles she tossed one to each man, taking one herself. "What's going on and what's the plan, Sir?"

"Agent Leo," George murmured, fighting back the urge to nudge Nick in the side at the cute-as-a-button but thoroughly professional young woman's actions. "You poached her from Travis over at the FBI, right?"

"Among a few others. There are secretaries after all, and there are secretaries." Nick snorted, then gestured the girl to follow him. "Let's get down into the basement, the secret tunnel there will take us to the FBI building, and then from there, we can push into Capitol Hill. George, do you think you can make it to the nearby police precinct?"

George nodded, staring down at his side where he could see a few of the burn marks caused by the molten glass, already feeling the pain from them and others on his back. "I probably won't be of much use with my arm and leg as they are, but I can hobble along."

They were interrupted, the noises outside growing monstrously. Numerous blaster-like noises joining the tumult of people screaming, running, cars honking, and the crashing of buildings being smashed to pieces out on the streets. "Mind you, I'm not certain I'll be able to get there in all that tumult..." George mumbled, staring out the window as numerous smaller flying devices of some kind flew down through the streets, carrying three of what were undoubtedly aliens on them as they moved.

“Fuck! It’s not just a mission to cut off the federal government’s head, it’s an invasion!” Nick stared out the window, then shook his head, moving after his secretary towards the door, and the hallway beyond. “Change of plans then. We’ll all head to the police precinct with you George, and then I’ll double back to Capitol Hill. We need to get some kind of motherfucking organization going, an evacuation and defense both.”

The other two both nodded, and they raced on not realizing the true depth of the conflict that had suddenly exploded into their midst.

OOOOOOO

As the militaries of the world began to mobilize, the Skrull fleet popped into existence in the outer edge of the system. Some of the information they had about the defenses of this solar system showed the impact of some kind of gravity weapon that seemed able to pull ships out of hyperspace diverting their route towards the prepared fortress planet of Mars. Since one of the most foolish things a commander could do was to fight on the battlefield of his enemy’s choosing, Len’Dok had decided to jump in well out of the inner system and moved in via their realspace drive.

That this allowed his own sensors to reach out ahead of him and start to create a real picture of the system of their own was also part of his thinking. Old light was, after all, not as accurate as you might think.

At first, Thanos had argued with the Len’Dok or rather demanded an explanation as to why his first steps into the solar system would be so cautious. But the Len’Dok had convinced him that being cautious was better overall, regardless of numbers.

“Shock and awe can come in two different forms, My Lord. It can come in the form of precise, swift and ruthless action, the application of force into areas where the enemy is vulnerable and did not even recognize it. That is the way your Chitauri allies can fight this war. Then there is the other way. Slow, methodical, the unstoppable approach of an overwhelming force, grinding away the will to resist until the enemy breaks. That is what my fleet will provide. And if we can break the morale of the humans, or even the majority of their fighting force, you will have a much easier time dealing with their superpowered elements.”

Thanos had acquiesced to that, although warned that in the future, he might not be so kind to a dissenting voice. “The humans will probably surprise you with their tenacity. And if the Phoenix Avatar or Potter ignores the threat of the Chitauri, your fleet will burn like the feathers of an avian in a bonfire. Still, it is your command. Do what you will.”

Alas, Thanos had not taken into account Len’Dok’s opinion on what kind of fleet they needed to create for this operation. Thus, the fleet was a little too top-heavy for his tastes in such an engagement. It was the kind of fleet he would take against an equivalent opponent, like the Kree. An enemy Len’Dok knew how to fight, knew what to expect. The humans, for all the information they had gleaned on them, there were still a LOT of questions. Thus he would have preferred more ships rather than heavier units.

His fleet’s composition would work better in terms of shock and awe than his own preference, admittedly, but it wasn’t quite as flexible. Nor, admittedly, did the various different aspects of the fleet work together in a manner that was fit to be called such. Len’Dok had been utterly appalled by the

number of flag officers Thanos had seen fit to cull, seemingly uncaring that it destroyed the fleet's efficiency.

Two hundred and thirty-one Equalizers, the super-dreadnought class of the Skrull Fleet. These were not Doom Bringers or Worlds Breakers, the Skrull didn't go into having specialized designs like that. Instead, the Equalizers were able to do both tasks almost as well as their Kree counterparts.

Or at least it was supposed to work out like that. It didn't quite, but the Skrull made up for that by having better shielding overall than their enemies, and somewhat better onboard repair resources. Alas, in modern space warfare that didn't really matter much under a normal commander, but the best officers could rotate their ships out of a battle, and the Skrull damage control teams would make it so that those ships could return to the same battlefield in a useable condition.

Three hundred seventy-seven battleships. Normally, those units would be split off to attack from different angles, to peel off enemy defenders to deal with them, and thus weaken the enemy for the main attack. But here, with the gravity trap Lord Thanos' information had told Len'Dok that was on the fourth planet out from the sun, that wasn't advisable.

Nonetheless, these ships were the second largest ships in the fleet. They bristled with the same kind of energy weapons as the larger ships, as much like their traditional enemies, the Skrull had moved away from missile-based weaponry.

Seven hundred and fifty-one cruisers. Unlike their opponents or the Shi'ar who somewhat specialized in the midrange class of combatants and relied on their far better specialized units, the Skrull barely used cruisers at all save for commerce protection and raiding. They were good for flanking enemy battlelines, destroying strategic targets when their defenders had been pulled away, but could not take much of a pounding in comparison to their larger brethren.

Nine hundred and seven destroyers. Normally, these ships would be sent forward of the main fleet to engage any soft targets available, investigate anything or anywhere their sensors could not discern enough information for the commanding officer, or to attack already weakened targets, prior to the main engagements. Here, despite their hyper-expensive dual hyperdrive engines, that ability was useless. They were, however, extremely well-armed, having a few weapons but larger type, mobile, and durable for their size.

For now, the Fleet Overlord kept them close, but he envisioned being able to send them forward to deal with any orbital defenses over the planet that the humans had possibly cobbled together, while he used the rest of the fleet as a massive hammer, destroying whatever space-based mobile units the humans had captured from the Kree. Maybe even deal with any space-based for space going superpowered elements that dares to faces fleet.

We know there are things in orbit over the planet, but we don't know their capability. We know how many ships the Humans have somehow brought back to fighting trim, but not much about their armaments. We know they have a lot of strange shuttle-sized ships, but not what they are for. I refuse to believe that the humans use all of those shuttles as part of their, admittedly growing, material infrastructure.

That was the problem facing him really. Their information they had on the humans was mostly based on two sources: radio waves captured from the work around 'Fortress Mars' and Earth, and captured old light recorded by Lord Thanos' spy ships well out of the system. Both had issues, and the humans didn't seem to send important military information via radio waves anymore. Not the Avalon Empire and not between the two planets, anyway.

Worse was how patchy the information was. Lord Thanos had only had a few ships that could go into the long dark between systems and find the old light to give them any idea of what they were facing. So while Len'Dok knew they had beaten a Kree fleet by pulling them into range of Fortress Mars and knew that the humans had beaten off a flotilla of Badoon, they had no idea how that second battle had occurred while they had near play-by-play recordings of the battles against the Kree.

And as they began to pass through the spherical Nalve Sphere (Oort Cloud) to where it shifted into the Nolj Circle (Hills cloud), Len'Dok's concerns grew.

"What do you mean you don't know where their fleet is? Either they are out on maneuvers and we should be picking them up on our sensors, or they are near Fortress Mars, and we should be able to at least tell us they are there. Are you telling me they are on the other side of the star from us?"

They could be on maneuver on the other side of the star, but that would be rather... suspicious timing. The Fleet Overlord though, gazing at his sensor specialist as his thoughts whirled. Could the humans have known we were coming? And what are they using as scanners or communication devices over inter-planetary range? Too many blasted questions. I know lord Thanos and his ilk are powerful, but it is our people who will die in our thousands if this goes poorly.

His flag bridge's senior sensor analyst shrugged his shoulders, knowing that the Fleet Overlord wasn't the type to shoot the messenger. So long as the messenger was competent at least, and the man would not be on his flagstaff if there were any questions on that score.

"There are no starship-sized energy readings within our sensor range, sir, and as you know while we wouldn't get much detail, we can see into the inner planetary zone. We have several dozen space stations identified around the gas giants, a few of what we assume are satellites in various places both there and scattered over other inner system worlds, particularly, the primary target. Small scale we have fourteen different energy signals moving around. None are large enough to be more than those oversized shuttles we were informed about."

The officer waited as two technicians began to fill in more information on the various energy readings. Some were instantly designated HE3 refineries, others defensive installations. The information on Fortress Mars grew as well, although at this range not anywhere near as detailed, but the energy readings there were impressive to say the least, and the overall gravity of the solar system had changed significantly, signaling what was going on there. The same went for the large human shuttles.

As for the primary target, from this position, they had begun to get a reading on the local energy infrastructure, but nothing specific from the third planet. Or where their sensors said the planet was, anyway. Some of the information gleaned from past battles which had occurred in this system seemed to indicate that the Badoon had been either woefully inaccurate with their fire or had been tricked to attack an empty segment of space with their long range bombardment weapons. The same went for the Kree fleet whose battle in this system they had been able to watch from beginning to end before that

fleet had been destroyed in orbit over fortress Mars. The fleet had launched planetary bombardment missiles towards the third planet, only for most to miss before they corrected.

When the staff officer saw that they had reached the point where they would need to get closer – as in past the seventh planet at least - to get any information, he continued. “I can send out more probes, but it will take time, as we can already tell that Fortress Mars gravity trap is activated. They’d be pulled out of hyperspace just as easily as we would have been.”

“Could they be hiding within one of the Jovians?” Using gas giants to hide from invaders is a time honored tactic because it works,” Len’Dok asked.

“Perhaps the innermost gas giant, but not the outer. And if they do, sir, we have enough ships to interdict the planet and still continue with our primary objectives.”

Len’Dok grunted at that but said nothing to it. “Order the fleet forward. I want the destroyers split into four, two to the side, and then one behind us, merged into the cruiser divisions. The other will be below us. From our information, the humans are new to space warfare, and most such always prefer to attack from below in fleet engagements if they can. The rest of the fleet will form Formation Puncture. I want you, Tactical to keep an eye on our inter-ship communications network. Our firing arcs and interlocked defensive network needs to be perfect.”

At his order his officers leaped to obey. Moments later, the fleet moved forward, the heavier ships form into what looked like the head of a x-shaped screwdriver. Broken into divisions, the Equalizer divisions were surrounded by their smaller brethren. Each ship was within the defensive firing envelop of at least its division mates and two other divisions. Around the main portion of the fleet, the destroyers provided almost wall-like formations to either side and below, while the cruisers and last group of destroyers provided the shaft of the ‘screwdriver’.

The mystery of where the human fleet fell to the wayside however as alarms began to blare a second later as another sensor specialist shouted out, “We have incoming! I’m reading a growing number of small icons coming towards us both from our right and left flanks. Numbers aren’t solid, they are too interspersed, They look like the oversized shuttles from our war book.”

“Hmm... disposable scout ships maybe? Or something similar anyway?” the senior sensor specialist mused. “If they could maybe send targeting data back... but there are no ships in sight. Do the humans have some kind of interplanetary weapons system?”

“Unknown,” Len’Dok grunted. “But you’re thinking too small. If those are probes, they don’t need to be limited to simply sending back information, but blocking our own sensors, and maybe communications signals too.”

“Their power readings are quite large for something so small,” sirs,” the specialist who had been watching the scanners said. “But their straight ahead speed isn’t so good. Maneuverability might make even the Shi’ar ships looks slow, but anything else I can’t sell yet. But...”

“But?” Len’Dok growled. “But is not a term I like to hear at any time soldier, let alone when going into battle.”

“Sorry sir. I... I’m not reading anyplace that could have been a base or launch platform for them.”

At the grunt from his senior officer, the sensor analyst quickly took over the main hologram, showing the area where the signals began to appear. Between one moment and the next, the red rash of icons appeared, so suddenly it was beyond startling. Not at all like they had just shut down cloaking devices of some kind, rather, this almost looked as if they had burst out of nowhere.

“Do the humans have a cloaking system as good as our own?” the senior specialist murmured.

“I doubt it, sir. From this many angles, it should have been almost impossible for anything to hide from us. They appeared barely outside of the destroyers weapons range.

“Look at how they are moving,” the tactical specialist murmured. “They almost look like they are moving under power and individual control rather than control. But why send their people to their deaths on what is obviously some kind of suicide mission. They have to be weapons of some kind.”

“Perhaps. Regardless, bring the fleet to battle stations,” The Fleet Overlord ordered, unwilling to assume that anything his enemies did was not purposeful in some manner.

Yet even he was astonished when they creatures entered range of his weapon systems and began to evade fire coming. They really were manned devices of some kind, kamikaze craft? He murmured.

“They could be some kind of suicide craft, but our information on the humans seems to indicate that such an act would be anathema to them,” the intelligence officer argued.

“We will know what they are shortly. Watch, and be prepared to give me your opinions after the battle,” Len’Dok ordered, cutting through the argument before it could begin.

“The numbers of the enemy have increased... possibly some kind of highly advanced decoy?” Skrull ships used similar devices, and even as the man manning the sensors position said this, similar decoys began to appear, ghost like around each ship. And a moment later, the destroyers on the flanks started to fire.

OOOOOO

Commander Jack Marshall, callsign Reaper Man, clenched his control stick with both hands so hard his knuckles turned white as he dodged incoming fire, while behind him, his fellow Ravens tried to keep formation. Well, calling it formation was something of a misnomer. They weren’t flying in such an organized manner, rather keeping close enough so that each squadron’s tac net could remain in constant contact.

Around him, his crew went about their business quickly. “Activating decoys! Decoys released. They are online, slaving to our systems.”

“Gravity cannon and particle beam are both online, we are good to go,” his fellow veteran, Oscar Harper, announced from the weapon’s officers position.

“Random walk, you useless shower!” Jack announced into the pickup, putting action to word as he bounced his plane in various ways to throw off the enemy’s targeting systems. “Hesitation gets you killed!”

Thankfully, the training they’d done up to this point seemed to be enough, and all the Ravens were dodging wildly as they zoomed in toward the first segment of the enemy fleet, something he was very grateful for. Few of his troops were actually combat veterans, and while this wasn’t exactly a dogfight

like they showed from World War II, the firepower coming towards him was far greater than in any battle the old-timers had ever faced.

Luckily for them, this enemy, like the Badoon, didn't believe in homing type weapons, simply because of the amount of defensive fire that their ships could put out. In tests against the captured Kree vessels, however, the Raven's had shown that their weapon's range could keep them out of the most dangerous defensive zone. Yes, the closer you got to the ship, the deadlier the fire was, but there was what the Raven pilots and crews called the sweet spot, an area where most of the main batteries on capital ships wouldn't be able to target you, and where you were still just barely out of the range of their secondary systems. *On most of the vessels anyway. The larger ships still will be able to range on us with their secondaries,* Jack thought grimly.

Closing to that zone cost at least twenty of his attack force, the one attacking the enemy fleet from their right flank, along with a vast majority of their decoys. His ECM officer's words of, "activating decoys, decoys online," became a mantra, one where the numbers slid by Jack's consciousness, not sinking in.

But those decoys were life here, and Jack feared that once they all started to run out of decoys, there Ravens would be torn apart. *We are eggs armed with nukes, but... we're about to show these fuckers the nuke side of the equation. "Activate ECM!"*

At his orders, across the battlefield the Ravens all activated their ECM packages. These were designed to disrupt the computer network linking one enemy ship to another. And within seconds, this had an impact. The fire from the smaller ships shielding this flank of the enemy formation instantly began to flounder, and the efficacy of the decoys grew immeasurably.

"Fucking about time!" His Electronics man grunted. "We're down to six of our ten decoy duos, boss." Each decoy pod the Ravens launched carried two decoys within it."

"Noted. Tell me when we are down to our last two duos," Jack ordered, grimacing. *Maybe we should have waited until the enemy fleet was right on top of one of the rings?*

The teleportation rings themselves couldn't be seen, and maybe already being within their firing range would have given them more of a chance to get all the way into the enemy's formation all their own? *Or is the necessity of firing off our decoys on this side of the portals too important to our survival?"* While the ECM suite could be used during the portal jump, the connection to the decoy duos was lost during the jump, and it was awfully hard to regain it afterward.

As he watched, another hundred decoys disappeared, coupled with seven actual Ravens spread across the combat group. *God, we are taking so many casualties already.* Jack took a moment to pray that the magical teleportation arrays on their suits worked as they normally did, or else there would be a lot of empty bunks back in the Nests later on.

Then they were close enough to the enemy fleet to start their own harvest. "Blue squadron, fire on my signal!"

Gravity beams struck out, crushing to the shielding of the enemy ship. After only three strikes from various Raven's the target's shields gave way. With practiced ease, Jack's weapons officer switched to their secondary weapon, the particle beams. The paired twin beams of silver light struck. The beams

tore down the bindings of solid matter struck on the atomic level, turning the enemy ship's own armor against it, tearing the ship into pieces with atomic fire.

"Hell yeah, take that you assholes!" Oscar shouted. "Get some!"

"Secondary target coming up," Jack warned, and his friend quieted down quickly. The next ship was another destroyer, one who was trying to roll away from the Ravens, taking their fire on different sides of their shields.

It didn't save it. Another Raven, this time from Jack's own squadron died, but the destroyer exploded, and then they were on to the next ship, which had been so close the cloud of debris from the second ship was actually able to shield them for a second, allowing them to reposition all of their decoys before hitting the next ship.

When that ship fell, Jack and the rest of the wing on this side of the battle were past the destroyers, diving down into the fire of the larger vessels. "Get those decoys out, keep the ECM up!" Jack ground out, appalled as he saw whole waves of decoys and ten more Ravens wink out of existence.

Still more died, but then the Ravens were within the enemy formation. The shields on these ships took far longer to knock down, several passes for the battleships, and more for the larger Doom Bringer-sized ships. And in so doing, still more of the ravens went down, although the ECM jammers worked against the attackers too. Twice Jack saw the invaders shoot one another, so badly was their interlinked network compromised. And from the other side of the enemy fleet came the other wing of this assault.

When the idea of a two-pronged assault was explained to him, Jack, like many others, argued that it was too complicated. Many of the older historically inclined pilots had shouted about Leyte Gulf and other disasters. But here, it seemed to have worked so far. The attacks from both sides seemed to be pulling the enemy ships in either direction, as if they were uncertain where to fire. The ravens were still taking losses, but nowhere near what they should have without that tactic, the decoys and the ECM jammers.

"Boss, we're down to our last four decoys!"

At that, Jack nodded, and shouted, "Bug out, bug out!"

With that order, the ragged remnants of his squadron joined others, pushing on through the battlespace. They had no need to turn around or decelerate and flee back along the route they had followed. This would have been deadly, as even Ravens couldn't bleed off their inertia well enough to do that on a dime, and the decoys which had spelled life up to this point were nearly depleted across the entire force. Worse, with their losses so far, the ECM jammers were having a harder time disrupting the enemy's network. Defensive fire had risen steadily as the fight went on, and now for every five decoys destroyed, a real Raven went with them.

Instead, Jack and his squadron moved through the enemy formation and out the other side, which had been smashed into equal disarray by the other wing. This saved them from a certain amount of fire from the ships of the line, but the destroyers had time to reform, and had been bolstered by cruiser-class vessels and more of their brethren from the back of the enemy formation.

The fire was withering from the moment they left the main enemy formation behind them and it was here Jack and his crew's collective luck ran out. The pilot had barely a second to register his ECM

officer's shout of, "The last decoy just went--!" When the enemy's next shots crashed into them, and his senses exploded, a feeling of intense, debilitating disorientation going through them.

When the world made sense once more, Jack Marshall and his people found themselves laid out in the receiving area of their Nest in orbit over the fake earth.

Groaning, Jack pushed himself to his feet, his stomachs growling, a feeling of weakness and exhaustion going through him as if he hadn't had any food or drinks for weeks. Knowing this feeling from training, Jack knew that if he looked at himself in the mirror, his face would reflect that feeling. Any excess fat he might have had was just burned off in an instant to pay for the emergency runic array.

But Jack was still alive. Hastily, he grabbed at some of the protein drinks and energy bars that were scattered around the room in small mounds. Around Jack, his squad mates all did the same, all of them began to scarfing the food down hurriedly.

Fifteen minutes later Jack had enough energy to think of moving, and made his slow, shambling way over to the nearby doorway, avoiding the medical officers already seeing to the wounded. He needed to get a tally of how many people they'd lost, and how much damage they had done, although despite that, Jack knew the campaign for him was over. There was no way his body would be able to fuel another emergency teleportation.

OOOOOOO

"Well?" Len'Dok growled out, while around them, the flag bridge was a scene of frenetic activity as the officers tried to reorganize the fleet. "What, by the genitalia of your matriarchs, did the humans hit us with?"

"Sir!" the tactical officer quivered. "The, the strange shuttles we had seen in our espionage package were very obviously not shuttles. I could almost call them gunboats, perhaps, although small ones. They were highly maneuverable, but also kept a significant stock of scanner decoys. Their ECM suite is also incredible, but while we can filter out the decoys now that we've seen them, the ECM suite will continue to impact our defensive network. We'll need to concentrate on shooting them down the instant they start interpolating with us. I would recommend pulling the destroyers into the center of the formation, use them to counter this."

"We, we detected two different types of energy beams, sir. One was a kind of gravity-based energy destabilizer. That is about all I can say about it," the sensor specialist took up the analysis. "The gun seems to have a wide beam visible in the natural light, mid-range, matching our secondary systems on the Equalizers. Speed is somewhat slower, but still hard to dodge. The second weapon system, of which each raven seems to have two, is an entirely different kind of energy sort. Even shorter ranged... maybe, that is unknown. What it would do against shielding is also unknown as it was used only against targets once their shields were down. And after that, they kill. No armor we have stopped those beams. The thickness of the armor didn't matter at all. Once our shields fell, every ship struck was either badly damaged or destroyed in a matter of seconds."

"And how many ships did we lose?" Len'Dok ground out, turning his glare onto one of this other officers.

That worthy was the Damage Control and SAR (Search and Rescue) coordinator for the fleet, and of all the officers he looked the most shocked. "Sir, only four of the Equalizers attacked were able to survive

being struck by those cursed silver beams, and even they are dead in the water. It's almost like someone set of nuclear devices inside the hulls. Multiple nukes." He shivered. "One battleship survived somehow, but we've had to evacuate the remaining crews from all five ships. Beyond that..."

"It was very much an if this, then that, type of battle sir. Once our shields went down, only those five ships survived," another tactical officers said, shivering a bit. The flagship Silence had lost some of its shielding, but thanks to the efforts of the crew on the bridge had not been struck by the silver beams in turn. "We lost twenty Equalizers outright, seventy-two battleships, three hundred destroyers, near to a full third of our complement. The cruisers lost one hundred and eighty-four."

"But we destroyed nearly nine-tenths of the attackers," the first tactical officer declared. "If these were the human's main defense, then they have shot their bolt."

"That kind of supposition is what kills fleets, Jro'toc!" Len'Dok roared, leaping to his feet. For a moment it looked like he would add a blow to the head to the curse he addressed the man with, a curse that, if translated to English, would read as someone who is so moronic he would eat his own clutch's eggs, a grave insult to Skrull who, in their normal bodies, were egg laying. But he gathered his self-control and simply continued to upbraid the man, his tone withering. "Assumptions let them strike us like that, and I will never allow them to do so again!"

Suitably chastened his officers all bowed his head, and he went on more coldly, looking over at the sensor specialists. "Tell me you have something report?"

The Skrull had very obviously sent out destroyers to try and run down the last of the attackers. This had worked in the main, but from the shaking of the sensor teams heads, it evidently had not worked as well as he had hoped. "We, we don't know where the attack craft went, sir. It, it's like they disappeared. And there is no chance they could have activated any kind of cloaking system with our ships so close. I, I am at a loss, Sir."

"They seemed to congregate around one point, as if they were, well, the shuttles we thought they were entering a space-station's hanger bay in groups of ten. But then... nothing," the other analyst added.

Growling in fury, Len'Dok strode over to the tactical plot, watching the rest of the system for a moment, almost ignoring the efforts of his fleet to reform. In total that assault hadn't done enough damage to cause him to rethink his plans, but if they could attack again... "Leave sensor probes behind where those ships disappeared. Then I want the destroyers broken up and spread out around the rest of the fleet in division sized packets, with the cruisers to back them up. They are to push out to the edge of our secondary sensors."

Those were the scanners the Skrull ships used to actually fight, rather than survey the system. Doing this would remove the destroyers from any chance of being aided by the guns of their larger brethren, but Len'Dok was willing to sacrifice those ships for the majority. That was, after all, what they were for.

"The remaining cruisers will form a globe around the battleships and Equalizers which will assume Formation Zed." Formation Zed was much like the previous formation except it had no depth to it. The ships within basically assumed the shape of a solid X shape, three ships thick in most places bar the center of the X, with no tail to the formation.

For a moment the tactical officers frowned, but then understood. With the larger ships just as susceptible to the strange silver beams as their smaller brethren, they had to be defended from any kind of contact with it. *And let us hope that the repaired Kree ships they have don't have the capital grade equivalent of that hell weapon.* "The fleet will advance thus. And I want every eye on our scanners as we do. We cannot afford to be caught in a battle against the human's super-powered troops and the Skrull fleet if they have more of those attack craft."

OOOOOO

Due to extensive use of the time dilation chambers and the sheer amount of Doom-designed repair droids the Avalon Empire had built up, the Empire had indeed built up a surplus of Ravens. They had to shift a lot of their priorities around, and even that would have been impossible without Harry's newest trading partners, the so-called Inhumans. Thus, they had around three-thousand ravens, eight hundred of which, the ready CAP (Combat Air Patrol) had been practically wiped out.

Yet the human cost was far lower than that, something that brought wry, wary grins to Whitaker's face as he reported, "We only lost around forty-two crewmen. Forty-two scattered across eight hundred Ravens. The emergency teleports functions still works even in a battle like this. We've got a lot more injured, but even there, we're doing far better than I anticipated in such a strike. The survivability of our ships also played a major factor."

"However, I doubt we can assume our next strikes will be as effective. Assuming your opponents are stupid is a great way to get dead." Whitaker then highlighted the new enemy formation on the main strategic hologram in front of them, watching as they cut a course to intercept the fake earth. "We... can be a little sneaky here. The teleportation rings are invisible to them, and so we can maybe jump their main fleet, but to do that we'll need to wait until they reach the mid-system range. But I think leaving them to their own devices that long is not the best idea. Powers?"

"I'm reluctant to take my fleet in against them alone sirs. I might be willing to try, if we can somehow convince them to hyper after us," Admiral Powers replied. He was the fleet admiral currently operating as the field officer, while Whitaker had switched over to overall commander. Murphy was in charge of Fortress Mars and its defenses."

"We can maybe shut down the hyperspace trap, make them think we can only hold it in readiness for a short amount of time before we run out of energy," Murphy mused.

"Again, I don't know if they would be willing to do that. Best to split up our Ravens then. Load up half of them, get the crews back into fighting shape, and prepare them to strike just in case when the fleet goes in. That won't happen though until we get some Custodes type help up here," Whitaker decided.

"The Human Torch is already here on Fortress Mars, along with Polaris, and the others should be on their way soon," Murphy soothed. "Powers, prepare your fleet to jump in once the rest of our supers arrive. We'll let you do that and get fully engaged with their destroyer screens before my people shut down the hyperspace trap and you retreat. That retreat will be up to you."

OOOOOO

While Pinoptes' warning had grabbed the attention of those gathered around Loki's cell, it did not hold it for long, because of the act they had just had Dani perform: mixing her blood, which carried the soul of Sigyn, with that of her estranged and mentally altered husband.

For a brief second as Pinoptes' spoke, Dani stared around at the nearby speakers, her eyes wide as she stared, but then she felt a vast... pulling sensation, perhaps. Pulling, tugging, shoving, regardless of the term used, and none of those was quite accurate, some kind of pressure was building up inside of her. A power, or perhaps a weight, thrust itself out from within Dani's blood, crossing that very vague connection between her life's blood and the internal dimension where Sigyn's soul resided. Or was made of Sigyn's soul. This was magic on a level Dani had never even heard described in much detail, let alone understood. Regardless of the exact nature of what was going on she gasped, nearly slumping to her knees, only held upright by Fenrir's bulk pressing into her from the side.

This sound drew everyone's eyes to her, and Harry tore the door to the jail open, moving to her other side as Skadi and Hela crowded in, the younger goddess actually worming around Harry to wrap a supportive arm around her lover's waist. "Dani, what is going on, is the Trickster's blood somehow attacking you or...?"

"GUHhh..." Dani slurred, her eyes rolling back into her sockets as the strange sensation continued.

Harry stared between her and Loki, who looked equally poleaxed, if not more so. The God of Mischief was swaying on his feet, his legs very obviously slowly turning to Jell-O as his mind was pulled elsewhere. Harry cast a spell to hold him in place, fearing what would happen if he fell and broke the connection between them. "I think it's happening. Sigyn's soul is pushing itself into Loki's blood... or body. Soul magic at this level is..."

Hela stared as well, using her equivalent of mage-sight for a moment before looking away, cancelling the spell, blinking her eyes rapidly behind her mask. "GAH! That, that is the soul of a goddess!? It reminds me very strongly of the child's souls within Eylandǫv barnœska, but many times larger, more varied and experienced, with none of their innocence but all of their goodness."

"And in terms of what it looked like?" Skadi questioned dryly, watching Hela raise hand to rub at her eyes.

"It was like someone had taken the sun and shone all of its power through a prism. Blinding does not do it justice," Hela drawled.

Despite Hela's warnings Harry tried the same thing, ordering Skadi to keep the pair's hands connected as he did so. He held out for a bare second longer than Hela before looking away. "Wow. Yes, okay, keep them connected, whatever is going on is still building, and it's taking a toll on both of them. But I think it should be over soon."

Five minutes later, a blazing bright rainbow of colors burst out of the immaterial into the material. All those present, four-legged and two legged alike gasped, looking away with howls of pain bar the two participants, neither of whom were seeing anything at that point. Yet at the same time a feeling of love, of motherly delight washed over them, causing them to smile.

As they looked away, the center for the blazing light shifted and then disappeared into Loki's body, slowly receding within. For a moment as the light vanished the pressure the magic users had felt still

rested between them. Then with a snap, it disappeared, and Loki slumped in Harry's spell, his mind most decidedly elsewhere. Dani followed a second later, and Skadi and Fenrir gently guided her away.

"Well... that was something," Hela murmured, causing Harry to look at her deadpan.

Then Jean's voice arrived in their heads, her telepathic voice a furious snarl in her head. **"HELLO!?! World Invasion going on here, you two! Get your sexy asses moving!"**

Shaking his head at this call back to the hear and now, Harry raced away, with Hela and Garm at his heels, flushing faintly for a second at Jean's flirtatious term. Moments later however, as they fully remembered what had been going on, her expression hardened to Harry's own as they burst through the runic doorways to Camelot, with Harry already shouting aloud, "Get me a sitrep, Pinoptes, Dennis!"

By the time Whitaker, Powers and Murphy were preparing a second assault on the slowly moving Skrull fleet, Harry and Hela were once more in the loop. Gathering his various officers took some time, but eventually all the X-men, Custodes, and their allies were gathered in Camelot, ready to respond to this worldwide threat.

Meanwhile, Dennis and Pinoptes had gathered information on what was going on, and contacted local commanders in various places, not only within the Empire, but in their allied countries. This included a few that they weren't formally allied with but had good relations with, or a mutual defense treaty, such as with Taiwan, just to make certain they were all on the same page going forward.

"First things worst," Dennis began, standing at the front of the packed hall. "There is no easy way to say this. Somehow, somehow, the alien invaders have convinced the Chinese military to go crazy."

At his words the globe, hovering in the air to one side of him zoomed in on China. Once it had, Pinoptes began updating it with real-time information. The crowd watched as Chinese military units began to move very which way, including, and more worryingly, naval units were on the move too, attacking their neighbors.

"Air Force and naval units are on the move attacking all of their neighbors bar North Korea. Thankfully, North Korea doesn't seem to have been infested with the same madness, and they are hunkering down, shouting out about how it is some kind of direct threat to them, but doing nothing," Dennis reported. "That's all that we can ask for right now, and the local American forces were already responding as well when Pinoptes and I began to put together this report."

"And the Mandarin is still saying that this is an internal matter and they'll handle it?" Harry growled snarling at his past self for trying to work with that man.

"Yes he is, but he is also calling the naval forces that bombarded Taiwan and fired missiles at Japan and the American Pacific Fleet units operating in those waters 'rogue elements that no longer are associated with the Party'. In CCP terms, that means the defenders and Americans can deal with them as they wish without repercussions. Why he did so we don't know, although I will say that our sensors haven't detected any communication between the fleet and China proper. There will no doubt be issues later, but right now, again, that might be the best we can get since the Americans have already started firing back." Dennis answered, shaking his head.

Sage took up the tale then, gesturing at the world map hovering in the center of the hallway, which again changed, zooming in still further. “Meanwhile in China, we have Chinese units fighting one another, Chinese units fighting the invaders, and Chinese units sitting on their hands. Mandarin has taken command of one of the local military bases himself and seems to be directing some kind of response against invaders from there.”

Dennis took up the tale there, being both an ex-military man and knowledgeable of the Chinese nomenclature, understanding what they were being told better than Sage despite her vastly better computer and analytical terms. “From what we can discern he’s doing a good job, but he’s also moving around the place. He seems to think, and I agree, that the aliens somehow headhunted officers around the first portal they opened. From this they gained access to various codes and phrases to give out orders and used that to cause this chaos we’re seeing.”

“Mandarin’s even ordered all of the nuclear silos to be shut down. Only an in-person command from him will be allowed to reopen them. According to open radio signals we’ve intercepted, any officer who suggests otherwise is to be shot. I don’t know how effective that will be though,” Mystique interjected. A consummate spy, Dennis had used her to look through the captured radio signals from China. “This is the kind of operation I could have done if I had my own powers **and** that of a telepath. That’s a deadly combination.”

“But that is but one ton of the multiple tons of mountain scree currently falling on us. What about the rest of the globe?” Hela demanded.

“The biggest attack so far, or at least the one that has the most units already in our world, is the one in Washington. They are spreading out quickly, but they are also coming under heavy attacks from Air Force and local military units. Still, they’ve struck back just as hard. Nearly every base within a hundred miles is either no longer responding or is under heavy pressure” Sir Dennis said, looking over to Enterprise. “Indeed they actually pushed out a massive force toward Hampton Roads. But there they were stonewalled, badly.”

That worthy stood up, smiling slightly. “My little side project, the Black Dragon project was completed a month ago. Her AI has not as yet been brought online, but I have no doubt that it is now, and the various anti-air defenses we sold to the U.S. Navy no doubt came as a supreme surprise.”

“Our rockets and missiles give us more range than their weapons, but even the small skimmers seem to have shielding. It takes two missiles to knock them out of the sky. We’ve only downed eighteen of the larger fish-like creatures so far but several hundred of the smaller skimmers,” Steve reported. “And they are still bringing in more and more troops. Thousands of skimmers, infantry and these strange manta ray things. The president is safe under Mount Cheyenne the NORAD headquarters. Local military commanders are handling this about as well as can be expected. We’ve war-gamed things like this before when someone attacks Washington in force. It, after all, has happened in the past,” he finished drolly, looking at his very British girlfriend and his nominally British friend, Harry who actually snorted despite the serious mood.

Sage however burst that brief moment of levity with all the subtlety of an orbital bombardment. “The Pentagon the Senate and Congress were not so lucky. The pentagon’s a bloodbath. They fought hard but went down within minutes. The Admiral at Whichever congressman and senator was on Capitol Hill at

the time, they're gone now. That includes the Vice president, the Speaker of the House and President pro tempore of the Senate. The Secretary of State is missing. The president is the only one who wasn't there. The enemy tried to decapitate our government, and only failed because of the warnings the Custodes have been giving everyone."

"The same occurred in Paris, although the French were not as willing to thank us as the Americans are for those warnings. They are now screaming for help to reclaim Paris. The city is entirely under the command of the aliens by this point," Ororo murmured, shaking her head slightly. She had been handling that line of communication. "The aliens began destroying the city almost immediately, and any fight went out of the Parisians."

Harry nodded, staring at the images on the map for a moment, highlighting them one after another as Steve cut in again, saying that Nick Fury was on the ground in Washington, leading a group of police, special forces, CIA, and other operatives to try and cause as much damage to the invaders as they could within Washington. At this point, that wasn't much beyond ambushing any of them they could do without air cover, though. Air superiority over the city definitely was in the hands of the aliens.

But considering that the Chitauri aliens didn't seem to be after anything other than killing people as many people as they could find, any little bit helped. Harry shuddered to think of the number of dead already, and a feeling of deep guilt washed through him.

"All right. We need to split up our forces, unfortunately. I wish we could concentrate on each place in detail, but if we do that, we're going to lose thousands more civilians in every other theater. We've already lost too many," Harry said aloud, shaking his head sadly, knowing exactly how many civilians were dying even now. "We should have anticipated this kind of shotgun approach to invasion the moment we were told about the Chitauri."

"And what could we have accomplished then, my Seidr Man?" Hela interjected firmly, poking Harry in the shoulder. "We had no way of accurately tracking Loki, no way of knowing where he had been unless we arrived on his heels hard enough to discover his magical residue. Until they activated them, the beacons were also unplotable. Nor did we have any idea the Chitauri would be so wildly violent in their approach, deliberately targeting civilian targets. So I will hear no self-recrimination on your part."

Harry smiled at her wanly, taking her hand and squeezing it briefly, trying not to look over at Emma who he could tell was also glaring his way, before turning back to the matter at hand. "Jean, we can't afford to send in too large a force into China without being invited, the last thing we need is to add still more fuel to that powder keg. Do you think you can head in and deal with them? On your own I mean?"

Of all of his people, only Jean had both the telepathic ability to fight something that apparently could take people over, and the raw telekinetic power to work on a countrywide scale. Indeed, before the China issue was fully explained, Harry had been tempted to send her after the fleet attacking so many of China's neighbors. Released of restrictions like taking prisoners or nearby civilians, Jean could slaughter that whole fleet in short order.

So could Harry, obviously, but he was going to be busy elsewhere. *The Chitauri obviously aren't our only enemy here, and if the shouts of their leaders Pinoptes told me about while we waited for everyone to arrive are any indication, well, it seems like it's time to bite the bullet and fight Titan with Titan.*

"If Emma and Charles are willing to back me up if I need it, yes," Jean answered firmly. This kind of mission was why she had rushed to get back into shape after giving birth to the twins, this was why she was part of the World Guard in the first place, and Jean ignored the small twinge of fear for her two little ones. They were hidden away in Camelot, up in the headmaster's tower in fact. Here they were under so many magical defenses it would take an orbital bombardment fit to crack the planet and then some to get through, and no one would be able to find Camelot or them.

Harry gazed into Jean's face for a few seconds, then slowly nodded. Worry was clear in his emerald eyes, but he couldn't address it now. He had orders to give. Looking around, he breathed in once, then nodded, making certain to meet every individual's eyes as he continued, his words firm. *This is another time where I need to make a decision as a hero rather than a king.*

"That's China, then. As for the rest of the world... I am somewhat reminded of a quote from Sun Tzu. 'He who defends everything defends nothing'. But... there are civilians dying all over the place, and as much as it would make good military sense to concentrate our forces and overwhelm each in detail, our allies and their people would pay for it in blood. Blood of their soldiers, blood of their innocent. I cannot allow that."

He waited, but even Hela and Emma understood that this was both the right thing to do and made good long term strategic sense. After all, if they didn't start pushing back against all of the Chitauri beach heads, then they would keep pushing out, and thus make it hard to stop them in the long run. It would put their people in a lot of danger, but that was a price they would have to pay.

"Hear hear," Dani said from the doors into the main hall.

The others all turned to her in shock, and Skadi leaped to her feet, shocked. "Danielle! But..."

"I'm fine. The uh, the transfer I suppose was a bit... yeah," Dani shook her head, not wanting to think about the sensations, the weirdness that had involved, or the 'thank you' that had gone bustling around her mind like a runaway bouncy ball in a small, enclosed space, instead concentrating on the here and now, hugging her girlfriend before looking over at Harry. "Ghigau reporting to duty, my Jarl."

"I see you've studied the book of too gung-ho as well," Harry snorted, but nodded. "Good. Skadi, I will be writing up a formal request for aid for Odin. No doubt he'll want it in writing. Emma, you'll transfer to Babylon and coordinate the Asgardian's response as they come in."

Skadi and Emma both nodded and Harry turned to the others while Dani and Skadi cuddled a bit at the back of the room. How the embarrassed but happy look on Skadi's face transformed her normally fierce face was somewhat cute, Harry reflected before turning to more important matters.

"Scott I'm sending you and all the X-men into Washington. Steve go with them. You're in overall command of that battle. We'll send in one of the battalions of ODMs as well. Beyond that, I will leave that battle entirely up to you and the locals." Harry smiled a little wintry smile. "Just don't let me hear about tanks entering urban environments without accompanying infantry please, or anything equally stupid? That would hurt my heart."

Steve snorted, but Sage interjected, saying that Tony Stark would also help. "He and the president are already talking about getting his house arrest officially lifted, rather than unofficially going around it through use of his runic doorway that you gave him, boss."

Harry nodded, then turned to Colossus. "Severomorsk is yours. You'll lead the majority of the world guard bar Ororo, Cannonball, Danielle and Amara. Another battalion of ODMs will go in with you, commanded by Sean McIntyre or Jeff Blaze. The two of them are our most senior ODM field officers, and I imagine that Sam will want to be in with Steve in America?"

But the Falcon shook his head, gesturing to the map. "Russia. They'll need my help more than Washington will in America with how far they've already spread. Whoever is in charge there is pushing it hard. The attack on France isn't nearly as well organized or as large. Who all were you thinking of sending to Paris?"

"Thunderbird, Cortez, Mystique, Thing, Thundra. Along with another company of orbital Drop Marines to drop directly into the city of lights."

"We might need to light a fire under the British Admiralty too. The Home Fleet isn't moving despite skimmers already moving out over the English Channel," Dennis added.

Sage shook her head. "King Duncan's already on that actually. We will need to watch the French front closely though. It's... well, wildly all over the place in comparison to the others. It's almost as if whoever was in charge has just stopped controlling his troops."

The Fantastic four, looked at one another, then nodded, indicating without words that they understood why Harry was willing to break the team up further like that. While Reed was a decent fighter, he wasn't really a soldier, so killing the enemy might not come easily to him on this kind of battlefield. The same could not be said about Thundra and Ben. And while Sue had somewhat recovered from her pregnancy, that was a far cry to being combat ready.

"I'm good with that. Heck, maybe when all this is over, I can take Thundra to Paris and have a bit of a date there. It is supposed to be super romantic, right?" Thing questioned, causing his girlfriend to roll her eyes.

"Hopefully it will again after the distractions been repaired. They haven't knocked over the Eiffel Tower, but they have destroyed the Arc de Triumph," Dennis answered, shaking his head sadly at what he saw as something near to sacrilege.

With a growl, Harry brought everyone back on target on the here and now, pointing over to Dark Star, Nikolai's sister Laynia, who had agreed to help once more in this war. "I want you to help up in space alongside the Human Torch and Polaris. Steven, Clea, you help them too. Jean will join you there if you need further help once she's dealt with whatever force the invaders have who can control other people's minds. Don't overstay your welcome in China, Jean."

He then smiled slightly. "Although, if you do discover that the Chitauri or Black Order telepath's are attempting to take over any of the nuclear silos, feel free to... neutralize the threat in any way you wish."

Jean smirked at that, nodding her head.

"Ororo, Hela, Danielle, you, Fenrir and Garm will have to hold the main enemy force in Afghanistan," Harry went on, looking at his mocha-skinned lover, the two hounds. "But first..."

Ororo interrupted him, smiling faintly as she stood up. "I will head to the US first, then France, Hungary if need be, and Russia. My Gaia-style teleportation spells will be invaluable for removing civilians from the combat zone."

"Thank you love," Harry responded, watching as she left the room. Turning back to the others, he thought for a moment, thinking about the various forces. He would probably have preferred to send Fenrir or Garm in with Jean but knew that they couldn't really be of any use anywhere with a civilian population. Both monstrous wolves exuded an aura of fear to those who did not know them, and with everything so chaotic in China already, there was one thing that didn't really need. *It's quite ironic, given that Garm actually plays well with others, and Fenris is surprisingly gentle if you don't get him angry. And they can go wild in the mountains of Afghanistan as much as they like.*

Catching his eye Hela smiled grimly, rubbing at Garm's eye ridges. "We will do aught we can, my love. But if the mad Titan does appear, even ones so doughty as we may become overmatched."

"You're just supposed to hold them until help arrives. Either me, Ororo, Jean, or one of the other Asgardians like Thor," Harry reminded her fiercely. "If Thanos himself shows up before we do, retreat as best you can."

Skadi had already been sent through the Rainbow Bridge to Asgard to request her people's aid. This kind of assault was precisely the type that the alliance between Lord Odin and Harry had been created to meet.

"Wait, if you're sending all of them into the main invasion point and note I'm not arguing with that, and the rest of us to Paris, Russia and Washington, doesn't that mean there's no one left to the city in the Balkans?" Scott asked in confusion.

Ororo Harry and Jean exchanged glances, looking over to Reed who winced, knowing what they were about to say. "Doctor Doom has created mutual defense treaties with many of his neighbors, including Hungary. He's already on the move, and bluntly ordered us to not stick our noses in."

"Ah. I almost feel sorry for them, I mean Doom's been acting all nice lately, stands to reason that he has a lot of nasty saved up..." Mumbled Ben Grimm, then shook his head. "Wait, no, no I don't feel sorry for them at all."

Harry snorted at that, and the meeting continued, getting down to nuts and bolts. And through it all, no one asked where Harry would be. Everyone knew that if Thanos was behind this, Harry would be finally taking the Titan plunge himself.

Scene break

As Dennis had reported, not everyone in the various militaries that had allied with the Avalon Empire (or Harry Potter, the difference was slight but there) was on board with actually working with him or had taken the warnings they had passed on seriously. Some of the French base commanders fell into this category, which was not good since one such was the base commander of Châteaudun Air Base, one of the many bases near Paris. He should have had his people ready to react at a moment's notice, but instead, General Huntziger II hadn't even bothered sharing the warnings passed on from on high to his officers. As far as they knew, whatever was going on with the Wrecking Crew and their ally had no connection to any larger issue.

Still, at least the commanders of the Air Force at Évreux-Fauville Air Base did not fall into that category. And while Châteaudun was under attack the squadrons of French jet fighters and helicopters from Évreux-Fauville Air Base had risen to defend their nation in record time, as had the jet fighters that Nebula had already tangled with. The Rippers and Skimmers around Paris were not going to be having an easy time of it, making Nebula's orders for the Skimmers to keep pressing out away from the city foolish in the extreme. Instead, the Super-Skrull had ordered them to destroy bridges and any military force they came upon in order to slow any land based military response.

Admiral Terrance Brighton, who had rotated into the command of the British Home Fleet, the largest British Fleet and certainly the largest single naval force in the European theatre was also an officer who looked down his nose at both foreigners in general and amateurs like Harry Potter. He had gone along with the idea of working together with Potter and other nations to this point but now, when orders came down that would force him to sortie in support of the French fleet to guard the French coastline, he misquoted the words of a rather ridiculously idiotic English World War I British officer.

"Bah, the French are not the sort of people I want to fight with, regardless of the circumstances, which all seems rather spurious to me anyway. This report about some terrorist attack in Paris is, no doubt, is simply hogwash. I have yet to see any actual news information coming out of the city. Regardless, I'm certain the French army and air force can at least defend their own borders," the man said in his ultra-educated British withdrawal, a sneer on his face.

"Sir, there are **no** signals coming out of Paris. Nothing on the internet, no phone calls, no nothing for the last fifteen minutes. While we don't have any reports per se, I think the lack of anything coming out of Paris and the fact that the French military have gone to red alert all across the board is enough to tell us something is going on," His aide shot back, voice stiff but respectful. Admiral Brighton had been the man's mentor for a long while, even if he had his head up his arse about working with any foreign powers.

"Which is precisely the kind of thing local terrorists could have done," Brighton waved off his aide's words, the importance of them obviously passing him by entirely. "No, I will not allow this issue to drive us to some kind of civil war in France. There is no doubt some kind of explanation for this. Besides which, the issue's in Paris, man! What in the world is the navy supposed to do beyond standing around with our thumbs up our arses?"

"But sir, we do have reports of alien sightings along the coast. Reports stretching from Caen to the port of Calais. From there it's only a short few minutes flight across to Dover," the very-much put-upon aide protested. "That makes it an issue of self-defense too."

"And where did these aliens come from? If aliens could invade the capital of France like this, why haven't they invaded London. Or the rest of the world? And where would they have come from? The Avalon Empire's been gobbling up large amounts of our industrial goods and recruited heavily among our naval personnel and general population for a reason. If they still can't bloody well give us some heads up before the aliens have boots on the ground then what is the bleeding point of Potter and his so-called empire?"

Brighton snorted, very much wanting to continue about how the Empire was a flash in the pan, and that Potter should have done the right thing and subsumed his holdings to that of the UK. He was someone

who truly believed that the British Empire would rise again, and secretly loathed Potter almost as much as he detested the surrender-monkeys and Bosch. Brighton had just been better at hiding his beliefs up to this point.

But he hadn't done so perfectly, and his current direct superior, the First Lord of the Admiralty, had realized something was going on when the various capital ships still in port had not set out within half an hour of the first reports coming in. As the general plan to defend the islands and their allies had called upon. A plan that Brighton had signed off on.

Thus before Brighton could wax lyrical about his pet peeves once more to a truly captive audience, someone else decided to make themselves known. The door to the rest of the Admiralty House opened and in walked the First Lord. He was a rail thin, elderly gentleman of Brighton's age who walked with a cane, his leg having taken some shrapnel when he was a Yeoman on a frigate during WW2.

He was talking over his shoulder to someone outside as he entered, not even looking at Brighton as he entered his office without even announcing himself. "So you see, Admiral Brighton has become something of an obstruction. But I wanted you to hear his words yourself."

Brighton scowled at his long-time rival among the Admiralty, and rose to his feet, about to launch an angry tirade at the man. But whatever words he would have said, died on his lips as King Duncan walked in behind the older man. "We made promises Chester, we told the French our Home Fleet would be able to support them with long range fire that our troops stood ready to be delivered wherever they were needed. Is that not the case?"

While his aide tried to act the part of an uncaring piece of furniture, Brighton paled watching Duncan stalk towards him. While he was new to his throne and he couldn't quite pull off a kingly glare, Duncan had been in the SAS for several years, and had the medals to show for it. His eyes were now locked onto Brighton as if the admiral was an enemy, and Duncan was deciding exactly which way to take him apart. "You were informed of Harry's warning, you were told to have Home Fleet ready in its entirety and start working to create plans based on a need to defend European countries. Did you, in fact, do write up such plans?"

"I, ye, yes my lord, but I..." Brighton stammered.

"Good. They will now doubt your system. And has the Home Fleet been made ready to act at least?"

"M, my Lord, the expense of that..."

Glaring at his normally bombastic opponent, Chester Blunderbuss spoke up, his voice a scalpel. "That would be a no, my Lord. We have two destroyer squadrons moving around in the Channel on maneuvers right now each of four destroyers and ten frigates. The rest of the Home Fleet however is still docked in Scapa Flow. And none of our heavier capital ships have been made ready to set to sea. They can be made ready quickly, but not instantly."

"So, the readiness report that reached me over the past week or so have been falsified." Gone was any veneer of civility in Duncan's tone. Instead his voice was almost venomous as his glare pinned Brighton in place. "That, Admiral, would be treason in a time of war."

"I wouldn't go that far my Lord," Chester cautioned, smiling inside as Brighton, his rival for political power within the Admiralty, lost his position most decidedly. Whatever anyone said, militaries did have a certain political structure within them. People had to be willing to grease palms scratch back, and generally get along to go along upon or whatever other euphemism anyone could use to really gain rank. The two of them had been dueling it out for leadership in the Admiralty for some time, but now Brighton would be gone, his Britain First policies completely demolished. "I would however say it is grounds for dismissal."

"True enough, I suppose now isn't the time to truly make an example of this kind of foolishness. The important thing is that I want our Home Fleet sitting within the Channel as close to the French coast as we can get them. I don't care how we do it, I want us to either start interdicting the lines of reinforcement, or barring that, drawing all their forces out to sea rather than letting them dig in further or spread deeper inland."

Duncan pointed a finger like it was a gun at Brighton, his lips twisting into a snarl. "I expect your resignation on my desk within the next half hour, and you and all of your personal belongings out of this office within two." As Brighton stared at the finger like it was a rattlesnake, Duncan addressed the other old man in the room. "Chester, you take command here. We've already got reports of small flying vehicles moving across the Channel, and I will be damned if you or those idiots over in the Air Force let us be attacked here and turn our back on our allies at the same time. For now, the Air Force will need to provide our offensive punch."

The first Sea Lord made a huffing noise under his breath. "Your Majesty, you know that their proposal was to keep at least two-thirds of the fighter squadrons rotating above for home defense, just in case we came under attack in a second--"

Duncan waved him to silence with an abrupt, almost violent gesture. "I told Harry Potter that the British military would be ready to both defend ourselves and support our allies in France. I told him we would be able to do so, come what may. If you and the Air Force make liars out of me I will have all of your jobs!"

The first sea lord grimaced, before nodding, gesturing the heretofore silent aide over to him as Duncan, his demand made, turned for the door. "We'll get it done, sire."

Scene break

Thankfully, not everyone in the British military had their heads up their rears. Commodore Nacey, destroyer division 2 Home Fleet stood to one side of the radar plot on his flagship, the Sheffield class *Coventry*, shaking his head. "They are how small?"

"Barely fifteen feet across, Sir. About a fourth the size of our jets. But they are moving fast. They are pushing out from the French shoreline quickly... estimate Mach two maybe? It's really hard to tell."

"Numbers? And is there any chance they are missiles or something similar?" the ship's captain, Ian Morgan, asked from the other side of the commodore.

"They're moving so fast and so wildly... and sir, there are more pushing out from the coast all the time... I, three hundred, maybe more within radar range? More outside of it..." In fact, to the Radar Specialist it

looked like a slowly rising rash of red icons was marching across the radar screen. “UM... way more outside of it.”

“And we can’t hail anyone anywhere in Le Havre?” the Commodore asked, looking over at the communications officer.

“No sir. The aliens seem to have some kind of scrambler device that travels with them. The more their flyers spread out, the more we can’t communicate with people around them. I can’t punch through it.”

“Radar’s going too!” the radar officer shouted, getting a slight glare from the captain for speaking out of turn, but the older man’s heart wasn’t in it.

“Call the division to battle stations. Prepare to repel an aerial assault,” the commodore ordered, and instantly, the captain had other things to worry about.

Across the destroyer, men went to battle stations and guns around the Coventry started to rotate in their mounts pointing to the sky.

Striding to the forwardmost windows of the bridge, Captain Morgan watched the horizon through his binoculars, waiting for the aliens to come into sight, thanking God that the aliens seemingly were just pushing out randomly in every direction from Paris rather than moving to Calais or Dunkirk and then coming across at the Straits of Dover. Instead, they had followed the Seine into the Paris Basin for some reason. That was bad for the various cities there, in particular Le Havre, but good for the rest of France and the UK.

If they had just concentrated on France, and then moved across from Dunkirk or Calais when their sphere of influence reached them, at their speed the destroyers would never have been able to do much to stop them from reaching the islands in numbers enough to swamp the defenders. *AA would have done what they could, but l...*

Morgan’s thoughts broke off as the radio operator cursed. “Sir, we are losing long range radar! The field is just, just hashing out.”

“Can our systems still lock onto individual targets?”

“Yes sir... I’d recommend firing now, sir, I can’t say how badly that jammer of theirs is going to mess with our systems the closer it gets.”

Nodding at the younger officer’s suggestion, Morgan ordered. “Lock and load people, I want us to go through at least half of our Sea Darts before they get close.”

The commodore agreed with that, sending out an order to the other three destroyers in the formation to use their missiles, the twin-firing Sea Dart missiles at the fore of the ship. “Fire until we can’t lock on anymore. Once we have each fired five times, I want the whole formation to come about. We’ll pull them further out to the Atlantic if we can. Keep the formation in AA mode.”

This meant to keep the ships in closer to one another than normal, so each ship could cover at least two of her fellows with their Oerlikon AA guns. This was not a normal formation for them, but the Commodore had been a captain during the Falklands War and knew that having multiple ships locked into the same anti-air umbrella was just as important in modern times as it was back in WW2. *Actually*

this might be more like the battles in the Pacific than anything else if those things have to keep closing with us to reach their engagement range.

The commodore's orders into the pickup was punctuated by the roar of missiles firing off forward towards the veritable horde of enemies coming towards them. He watched from the bridge's forward window as the missiles soared into the sky and almost out of sight before it hit something that the commodore couldn't see from his position.

"Hit! Splash one," the tactical officer shouted.

"Split the fire, let's see if we can knock those things down with single missiles," Morgan ordered, only to regret it moments later as the single Sea Darts couldn't take out their enemies. With a scowl he ordered the ship to go back to double tapping them, but by then, the enemy was in sight, and the radar was being badly hashed.

While the commodore bent to his work making certain all the ships in the formation stayed in their positions relative to the flagship despite no longer having radar, Morgan raised his binoculars to his eyes once more, staring in some consternation at the enemy.

The things looked nothing so much like small, strange plates, with a built-up area forward, possibly back as well, with an even more built up zone going down the middle. *It almost reminds me of a ready meal plate, or a children's plate.* At the front of the built up segment of the 'plate' was the pilot, while in both flat was a gunner standing behind a futuristic gun on a pintle mount.

And they were fast! By the time he lowered his binoculars they were already within range of the 4.5' Mark 8 naval gun. The destroyers main guns opened up, firing into the air. Aimed fire was almost useless at this point though, given how fast the skimmers could move. But the dispersal rounds, which filled the sky with a small ball bearings and flechettes, still took something of a toll, knocking a few of the skimmers out of the sky to crash with bone shattering force into the water below.

As they closed the defensive fire of the destroyers also began to come into play rather than just the offensive. Rotary cannons, the Oerlikons of the United Kingdom, whirred and began filling the air with bullets, smashing into shields, eventually downing them.

"Can we use the Sea Darts at all at this range?" he asked his tactical officer.

"Risky, sir. We can fire them sure, but this close, it's going to be next to blind firing," his weapons officer answered. "We might be able to program them to explode when they reach a certain height but again that would be a bit iffy."

Morgan grunted, then asked the sensor specialist, "Exactly how many contacts were there?"

"Um, before the radar went down entirely, around eight hundred sir... with more beyond," the younger officer answered weakly.

Wordlessly the tactical officer left the room, heading forward to meet with the seamen assigned to the missile launcher.

More of the strange alien skimmers went down, but then the first of them entered their own weapons range, a fact both Nacey and Morgan noted. It was evident the humans had the range advantage,

although the alien skimmers were so mobile it was insane. But the alien weapons were definitely energy based, something that caused both officers to grimace.

Greenish bolts of energy flashed out from their guns which seemed to operate on the same speed as a machine gun would, hammering into the leadership of the destroyer formation. There was no time to evade those bolts of energy. For all of their maneuverability, destroyers and their frigate companions couldn't move that fast laterally.

"All ships to take evasive action but keep in formation. Morgan, open up the speed, I want the whole command moving faster," Nacey ordered.

A man forward firing a machine gun up into the air screamed, riddled by energy bolts. One of the Oerlikons exploded on the prow, and another explosion in the back of the ship rocked the Justinian, nearly hurling people off their feet on the bridge. "Damage control get that fire under control!" The captain shouted.

"Turn us about, we need to open the range more. All ships to make best efforts to open range however they may while remaining in formation," the Commodore growled. More of the skimmers were falling now, the rate of fire if not the deadliness of the fire on the human's side.

But then the Hampshire, the Justinian's sister ship, lost forward momentum, listing to the side, it's bridge riddled by energy blasts. Like a group of vultures descending on a fresh kill, there skimmers broke off from attacking the other destroyers and frigates in the formation to finish off the Hampshire, silencing its guns one after another.

They lost more than a dozen of their own but soon, the ship was completely dead in the water. Worse was the fact they kept at it, simply shifting targets to the horror of every man who saw it. "Damn it, they're gunning down the crew trying to abandon ship!"

"All ships keep the fire going! If they are going to kill our men, make them pay for it!" Nacey ordered, his voice trenchant with fury and grief. "fire by eye, blast it!"

More skimmers went down and for a few moments, the Hampshire was the center of the battle. Then one of the skimmers flew down to just above water level, riddling the side of the ship with the two energy weapons. Despite being far thicker than the armor protecting the weapon systems on the deck, those bolts punched through the side of the ship along the waterline, letting in the water, and the ship quickly began to sink, joining its already butchered crew.

Grimacing, the Commodore ordered the rest of the formation away, still firing into the mass of skimmers above them as more began to peel off from the sinking vessel, trying to pull the destroyers away from this disaster.

They had taken their toll at range, but once the skimmers closed, this battle had turned against them. *It is like fighting wasps with shields! No matter how hard we smack them, we can only knock down a few at a time, and the others just swarm over us! I was wrong, this isn't like WW2 at all! Even when the IJN was at its strongest they couldn't throw in several thousand planes just to destroy one destroyer division!* Nacey had been counting and knew that the enemy had completely refilled their numbers several times over. There were more coming in even now.

Thankfully, help was on the way. Even before William began to browbeat his officers into doing what they should, several squadrons of F-4K Phantoms had been ordered into the air. Now, as the destroyers continued to try and pull away from their enemies, the first Phantoms flashed towards them at Mach speed, locking up on the enemy.

“Now, remember what our French counterparts found out the hard way. Two missiles per skimmer, and if we see any of the big uglies, we’ll have to nail them with at least five if it has its shields up. Do **not** try to dogfight with these things, ladies. Gain altitude, come down in strafing runs, but only when you can spot a target out of position for the others to help it. Now, weapons free, and lets send these arseholes to Neptune!”

As the calm, commanding voice of the senior-most squadron commander finished speaking, almost on his heels a far more boisterous shout from one of the younger pilots rocketed out of the formation, pushing his plane well beyond the cruising speed they’d been flying at. “Tally Ho chaps! I have a lock! Firing.”

If the man hadn’t fired as fast as he had, the commander might well have chewed his ass out so hard it became a legend. But since he had, the older commander would let his younger fellow get away with it. *Boisterous before the fight is better than grimness, I suppose.* From the incoming fighters several dozen missiles flashed out, heading out into the distance.

When they struck, they instantly began to turn the battle against the invaders. Seventeen of the attacking skimmers were knocked out instantly, while others flailed, smashed backwards by the hits on their shields even if those shields had allowed them to survive the strikes, unlike their fellows, who had already lost theirs. And they still had to deal with fire coming from the destroyers below.

The main 4.5 inchers in particular, firing at ridiculously point-blank range, for them, were deadly. While those shields could probably have withstood thousands of Oerlikon rounds a single shot from the main gun was enough to knock them out of the sky.

More missiles came streaking forward, knocking down still more skimmers, then the jet fighters where within visual range of the destroyers, with several of the destroyer men outside with machine guns whooping and hollering as they saw their compatriots arriving.

But so too were more skimmers, as a shouted report told the Commodore. “Sir! Captain Jeffries off the Speedy reports more skimmers incoming, along with something much larger!”

Nacey scowled, shaking his head as he looked at the damage reports for his surviving ships. One of the frigates, the *Daring*, had stopped signaling a moment before, and even now the remaining skimmers were descending on it to finish off the crew. But despite his rage at their losses, Nacey knew they couldn’t stay in contact like this, they had to break away.

Three of the jet fighters above them went down, coming too close to the skimmers, who filled the air around them with green energy bolts. The power of those bolts seared through fuselage wing or cockpit canopy equal ease, and all three pilots lost their lives, their planes exploding in midair.

“Commodore we are getting a hail. Commodore Blanche of the French First-rate frigate division five, on the *Sorbonne*.”

Commodore Nacey thought for a moment, and then recognized both the name and the name of the destroyer division as one that had been on patrol earlier that day near the entrance to the Channel. They only had four ships, rather than a full flotilla like he did, but those four were all destroyers. Reaching forward, he grabbed the transceiver, and spoke into it quickly, relaying all the information his people had garnered throughout this battle. As he did, a series of explosions began on the destroyer *Intrepid*, and it instantly began to lose speed.

Even as more fire from portside position came in over the horizon to hammer into the skimmers all around the destroyers, the Commodore knew that this battle is going against them. He opened his mouth to order the rest of the formation away, to abandon the *Intrepid*, when yet more help appeared.

Cannonball zoomed down out of the sky, crisscrossing through the battle sphere, smashing into and through shield and skimmers alike. When he was moving like this, Cannonball's mutant power was nigh on invulnerable, and that invulnerability allowed him to punch through the enemies shields like they weren't even there.

Reaching up to his helmet with one hand, Cannonball activated his radio. "This is Cannonball of the Custodes, I can help keep these things off you for a bit, but they've got some bigger bruisers coming out from the shoreline. Recommend ya'll keep your distance."

"Roger that, Custodes. Do you have any more information for us?"

"Ya'll fights out here done pulled 'em in like a dog does ticks," Cannonball replied instantly. Like the rest of the Custodes, Cannonball was connected to their own communications network. A network which was being fed information from Pinoptes and was more than capable of punching through the Chitauri jamming.

"The Chitauri, that's the name o' their species, have begun ta ignore targeting the civilian population centers and are concentrating on military bases now thanks to ya'll and the Frenchies inland. The Frenchies are not having a good time of it, but you and yours pulled almost all the skimmers and even most of those big bruisers away before they could start attacking French cities along the coast."

"Good. Good... at least our men haven't been dying for nothing," Nacey muttered.

"Don't never think that Commodore," Cannonball answered, trying hard to get his accent under control but failing as he continued to move through the battlefield, smashing into a Chitauri skimmer every few seconds as he zoomed through the battles zone like a runaway... well... Cannonball. "Your actions out here have saved hundreds, maybe thousands of lives."

Frankly, that was probably underselling it. The Chitauri might well have millions upon millions of troopers under arms, but beyond the necessary training to keep funneling forces through the various dimensional doorways, they lacked any real organization. They were scavengers, a swarm of locusts, whose entire philosophy was to kill as many of the enemy as possible. Any sites putting up an actual fight drew more of their troops down on them than was really necessary. The only exception to this were the cities over which the doorways loomed.

At that point, the French destroyers had also begun to fire from their main guns and the combination of the Custodes warrior and the new arrivals finally started to turn the tide. They skimmers which had

pressed forward out from the defensive envelope of the larger fish like creatures retreated back towards them now.

What the bigger guns on the rippers would do to a destroyer didn't bear thinking about, but they didn't need to. The destroyers still had missiles, and thanks to having retreated from the destroyers, whatever jamming equipment the enemy was using had begun to lose power. Rippers began to be struck by salvos of Sea Darts that served to batter down their shields and knock them out of the sky. Perhaps not enough to kill them, but certainly to knock them into the ocean.

And, despite the fact that they looked like fish, the rippers could not swim. Whatever electronics was on them also didn't fare very well in seawater.

More destroyer groups were coming towards them from the British islands, and within an hour, along with Cannonball they had been able to create a defensive bulwark, slowly spreading out in every direction. Several hours after the English Channel was secure up to and beyond the Straits of Dover, they were joined by the rest of the Home Fleet at last. With the guns of the bigger ships, including the flagship of Home Fleet, the *King Henry IV*, Britain's sole remaining battleship, the fleet began pushing in towards the French Coast.

Scene break

Within thirty minutes of the planning session breaking up, in carefully chosen secure zones on military bases within the United Kingdom, France, America, Canada, Germany, Sweden, Finland, and Norway, specially prepared caches weapons began to be opened. These were all magically sealed, but Harry had asked Kitty and Dr. Druid to see to the European caches. Wanda would see to the ones in America and Canada's own local goddess would see to their caches before joining the X-men as they attacked the Chitauri assaulting Washington, DC.

Of the other magic users, Clea and Strange had agreed to help against the Skrull fleet. Hela was leading the assault against the dimensional doorway in the mountains of Afghanistan. But Storm was easily the busiest of them all. The special area of effect teleportation magic Gaia had taught her allowed Ororo to remove thousands of civilians from the embattled cities, a process she had begun as soon as the sites of the various dimensional doorways had been discovered.

Many of the weapons in these caches had been taken from the marine lockers aboard the captured Kree vessels from the last time they'd attempted to assault Earth. Others, several thousands, had been made by Hephaestus 2 in an effort to build up a surplus of infantry style weapons during and after the Eurasian War. At that point, the belief was that infantry style weapons were not nearly as dangerous as powered armor technology, which, admittedly, several countries already had access to, or larger weapon systems. The magical locks also kept the weapons from being 'repurposed' (stolen) unless the locks were removed by magic. And while there were still a few other magic users around who hadn't allied with Harry, he had a monopoly on those magic users willing to work with nonmagical authorities.

Once the two magic users were done, military men from Fortress Mars came through. They took over, handing out guns to the locals, and then in many places, sending them through the runic portals to runic doorways closer to the action. Norwegian and Swedish forces were moved into Finland, and from there began to push across the borders, although only after the Russians had given them the go-ahead. Given the recent Eurasian war, there was still a lot of bad feeling across the various borders there. But with the

aliens pressing out hard from Severomorsk, and that making headlines and news across the country, the Russians could ill afford to let pride and arrogance make their decisions.

Similarly France couldn't turn down help from the United Kingdom or Germany, not that they were as prickly about it as the Russians. While French and United Kingdom naval forces battled the invaders to a vicious draw across the channel German jet fighters started to cross the border as well. They ran into the kind of cutting out expeditions that Nebula had been leading.

Here, the previous deaths of the first French fighter pilots who had run into the enemy skimmers served them in good stead: they closed into missile range, locked on targets, fired, and then kept their distance performing this move until they were out of missiles and then retreated back to base to rearm. Alas, they didn't think to use more than one missile each, so didn't knock out as many skimmers. And they were still losing planes from pilots who got a little too close to the enemy.

Meanwhile, Belgian and German motorized battalions moved into France, causing some momentary and very nasty flashbacks from older civilians or military men as they saw this. Most of these units were anti-air divisions, which would be worth their weight in gold in time. But there was a lot of distance between Paris and the border with Germany or even Belgium, and their vehicles were too big to get through the runic doorways. It would take time for them to get there.

By the time they did, hopefully the war would already be over. Or else there wouldn't be much of the city of lights left to save.

Elsewhere, infantry divisions of the French military were quickly being backed up by portal transferred units of the British army, bringing with them the more advanced weapons from the Avalon Empire. Other divisions, both infantry and tank-based, had already begun moving towards Paris from other military bases within the 1st Military Region. But there was no communications or coordination between them at all.

And they were also taking horrendous fire from the enemy skimmers. The sheer numbers the enemy had were proving a real detriment toward any force moving to stem the tide within the 1st Military Region. The other regions were also responding, but they were by definition further away.

Others, however, would find their own way into battle much more quickly.

"What do you mean magic carpets?" An SAS Major asked, staring down at the frizzy-headed youth in front of him. While her youthful looks reminded the older man of his own daughter, what she had just said threw him for a loop despite having been briefed on magic in general and Harry Potter in particular.

"I mean sir, that is how the Custodes sometimes travels around. Especially our retrieval teams, the groups that go into countries to rescue young mutants from abusive families or local citizens," Kitty answered, showing no concern on out the older man's gruff tones as she stared up at him, instead smiling whimsically. "The Orbital Drop Marines have their own way of getting into the fight, and the Custodes will be taking one magic carpet, that leaves us with a few here. Dr. Druid and I will be doing the driving."

Harry and his officers had decided to use the magic carpets here in Europe rather than in Russia or America for a few reasons. One, even magic carpets took time to get somewhere, and even if they flew them down from orbit to the nearest base that was still answering to local command, it would take a

long time for them to get to Severomorsk. And that city was already almost entirely under alien control, as well as defended now by an ever widening AA umbrella.

In America, the problem was entirely the opposite. There, the local militaries had done a much better job of holding off the enemy's attempts to push out from Washington. The Custodes had also assigned a large amount of their resources into the fight in Washington already, much like they had to the fight in Russia. The X-men had their own jet, and the Custodes would be using a dropship, basically the same thing they'd used during the Eurasian War, in Russia and France. This left the magic carpets to be used by their allies.

"Say I believe you. Magic carpets are supposedly really fragile, and I don't know about you miss, but I would see that large and flat thing flying through the air pretty easily."

"The fact no one has so far should tell you we've already thought of that," Kitty snickered, gesturing the man to follow her, who did so, nonplussed at her general blasé attitude towards him. As they walked, she explained that multiple different spells protecting the magic carpets, and even showed them to him, hopping onto the magic carpet and raising it into the air a second later.

After a moment meant staring up at the sky where the magic carpet was supposed to be hovering, the Major slowly nodded. "All right, you've convinced me, little miss. Let's get this show on the road. He who dares, wins."

Moments later, the first company of the SAS was in the air and heading south towards the channel and then on to Paris, skirting around the naval-aerial battle there and moving on.

Scene break

At pretty much the same time the SAS were leaving Britain, the Orbital Drop Marines and the Custodes arrived to join the battle for Paris.

Although admittedly calling it a battle was not really accurate by this point. Whatever defense the French police might have offered had been crushed by the Chitauri aerial superiority and by this point only the invaders were doing any firing. None of the responding French forces had been able to push into the city, let alone contest its airspace.

Rippers were still smashing down buildings, crashing into them bodily, their mouths gaping wide as they blasted out massive beams of greenish energy. From their sides smaller guns opened fire on anything moving down below, slaughtering any civilians who dared to show themselves. Skimmers hovered above, providing overwatch. Perhaps against missiles? Thunderbird, who had been watching all this as they closed, didn't know. Others dove down into the city like stooping vultures, firing at any civilians they saw just like the Rippers did with their secondary weapons.

And all the while, more skimmers and rippers came through the portal above. Even as the aliens became aware of the plummeting ODMs above them, more of the enemy were arriving: thousands of Skimmers and a dozen Rippers, only one of whom dove down to the city. The others moved off, hovering for a few moments before they were joined with still more, all of whom turned their attention to the plummeting fireballs above them.

Almost like a hive mind, the rippers and the skimmers turned their attention away from the burning, gutted city below, firing up at the ODMs. Fortunately, the small spherical shields the ODMs used as shields against the heat of reentry worked just as well against the energy-based weaponry of the Chitauri. Only six of the ODMs were mission killed to lucky strikes from the Ripper's main beams as they raised their heads to fire almost directly above their current positions in the air over Paris. Four of the six were teleported out by the medevac array, while the other literally lost their heads to the Ripper's main beams before the runes could activate.

And they should perhaps have been concentrating their fire against the one item falling towards them that was magically shielded against the heat of reentry. Because a second after they started firing at the newcomers, the slab of metal Thunderbird and his team were riding down smashed into the body of a Ripper. The monstrous amalgamation of metal and alien flesh screamed in agony as the slab of metal smashed into it, pulping its side and the guns there, smashing it down into the top of a mound of rubble beneath it as the Custodes leaped away.

Thunderbird bellowed orders as he fell, fighting back the urge to just screech out a Apache warcry. He had orders to give first. "You all know what to do! Mystique, get to the ground. The rest of us, let's make some noise, and be on the lookout for anyone among these Chitauri who seem to be giving out orders! Sean, the Oh Damns are yours."

With that, he raised his hatchet above his head as he closed with another Ripper. The weapon, a replacement for his original one which had been made by Asgardian smiths, slammed down, the raw cutting force splitting the creature's head in twain.

Quickly pulling out his magic broom, Thunderbird placed it between his legs and flew off towards another Ripper, hacking into its neck from below, then flying up higher. Behind him, the Thing roared "it's clobbering time!" and followed his example, targeting another Ripper. He landed on the creature's back, where he grabbed a fin with one hand, and began to rain down blows with his other. Unlike Thunderbird, the Thing had refused any weapon, preferring to use his fists, but he soon burst through the alien monster's armor and started to pulp the flesh beneath even as it bucked and heaved in an effort to throw him off.

For her part, Cortez didn't target the larger alien cyborg beasts. She landed on a nearby roof that had somehow escaped destruction, one of few in this area of the city, from where she began to lash out with her energy blasts. Each blast was hard enough to destroy a skimmer, although they seemed to barely bother a Ripper's shields, carrying out her decision to ignore them. "Thundra, you okay?"

Grumbling, Thundra, who had botched her landing to avoid a corpse of some policeman who had gotten onto the same roof, pushed herself to her feet, jumping up to join the other woman. They hadn't worked together before this in battle but had occasionally trained together in the Room of Requirement under Camelot. "Damn it, I need to get better at remembering my broom I think." With that, she whirled the chain portion of her weapon above her head, smashing it into a skimmer that come too close.

Meanwhile, Banshee was screeching his head off as he flew around and through enemy fire. A few times he couldn't dodge, but his suit had been fully replaced by a nonpowered version of the same type of armor Coyote and Uzume used, and could absorb a lot of punishment before it started to give way.

In contrast, both Ripper and Chitauri seemed susceptible to his sonic screams, the noise of them causing many of the aliens to grab at where their ears must be under their helmets. Many times this caused them to lose control of their skimmers and crash into one another or the cityscape below. Meanwhile, the rippers simply twitched in agony, looking almost like fish pulled onto dry land as they flopped about in midair, their weapons firing in every direction in unconscious reaction to the pain, causing still more chaos among the Chitauri forces.

Despite this, the force above the city closed from all sides against the intruders, almost like a gigantic fist trying to crush them. Rippers turned in their direction, skimmers began to fire, and the Super-Skrull blasted his way out from a wrecked building to glare up at what was going on, seemingly ignoring the distant Banshee's howl.

A soldier to his core, the Super-Skrull didn't bother with any kind of battle cry or announcing his presence until he crashed bodily into Cortez, hurling her off the building with a cry of pain. She pulled out her own magic broom, righting herself a few feet off the ground, where she began to fly along the ground and back up into the air, dodging wildly as skimmers closed in from all sides, forcing her to take shelter in a wrecked building, flying through the smashed window and into the interior.

There she landed, returning her broom to its expanded pouch as she hastily stepped over a corpse by the window. Turning, Cortez fired off an energy blast which caught the first of the Chitauri through the window in the chest, hurling him back outward. Several others burst through windows all around, and she was forced to duck away, rolling over another corpse with a grimace to avoid return fire. She fired back even as she retreated through the ruined interior of the building, completely pulled away from her teammates. "Damn it, this is Cortez, I'm pulling back and to the southwest according to my GPS. I'll link up with the ODMs as they land and rejoin you all later."

The other Custodes didn't reply but a terse acknowledgment from Thunderbird. The others were too busy.

Thundra roared as she brought across her weapon, crashing it into the Super-Skrull's shoulder and side, hurling him away. The next blow however was blocked, and fire flared from the Super-Skrull's arm into her face, Thundra's initial blow having only served to knock him off his feet, doing no actual damage.

But Thundra was almost as immune to heat as the Thing was, and although she stumbled back unable to see through the flame striking her head and upper body, it didn't actually hurt. Warrior instincts flaring, she ducked to one side as the Super-Skrull charged forward, his fist enlarging and coming towards her just like a blow from Reed would have.

Her return strike did nothing, simply deforming the man a little, as his rubbery body took the blow easily. One hand grabbed on to her own wrist, pulling her into a punch that rivaled some of the ones she had taken sparring with her lover.

At that point, both the Thing and Thunderbird arrived on the scene from both sides while above, the Orbital Drop Marines arrived. As they came, smoke flares fired from the Heavy Gunners, obscuring their positions slightly, while the Heavy Gunners opened up with rockets and decoys. The sudden shock of the assault on the heels of the Custodes' appearance meant that only two more Orbital Drop Marines were shot out of the sky, and only one of them was taken out permanently. An unlucky strike to his visor

burned into his face, searing through into his brain before his emergency array could teleport him back to orbit.

“You know what to do troops. First priority is to defend the civilians, second is to destroy these fuckers!” Sean McIntyre, previously of the US Marine barked out, as his jumpjets activated. Several small drones instantly began to pop out of the backpack-like segment of his armor, which had enlarged in this version of the ODM armor. These drones relayed their data into his helmet, giving Sean’s HUD a full three hundred and sixty degree view around him as he began to lay down fire on a series of Chitauri that had begun to crawl along the walls of a few ruined buildings nearby, firing into them and anything that moved.

Two of them turned quickly enough to take Sean under fire in turn, but he was already gone, using his jump jets to fly sideways and into the ruins of another building there, where he landed, and instantly turned, using the rubble of the building to hide himself for a second. “Command squad, sound off and regroup on my position.”

Even as twenty infantry style Chitauri began to concentrate on him, his command squad fired from nearby, regrouping quickly as they moved through buildings and across streets with speed. The Heavy Gunners also began to make their presence known. With two assigned to every four-man fire team, the Heavies were armed with mortars, gatling guns or rockets. As Sean watched, a mortar round caught a group of eight Chitauri in the open while four rockets fired up at a nearby Ripper caused it to explode under the last impact.

As Sean checked his HUD, he saw similar strikes go home in two more, killing both within seconds.

For several long minutes, the Oh Damns lived up to their name, striking, moving, killing. It would have almost seemed a cake walk at first, if not for the number of civilian bodies they were seeing nearly everywhere. It was very clear the Chitauri did not discern soldier from civilian. To these aliens, all humanity was simply a sacrifice their species wished to offer to Thanos.

Soon, however, the Chitauri began to get their act together. The skimmers pulled back into the sky, gaining distance, while the infantry used their own fast agility and speed to try to fight the Orbital Drop Marines.

But the Chitauri didn’t seem willing to enter buildings, whole or shattered as often as the ODM’s were, although they also didn’t care about civilian casualties. More than once, entering a building simply brought down the wrath of the Chitauri on the civilians huddling within, forcing the ODMs into sharp defensive actions.

Yet even on the defensive, the drones the Orbital Drop Marines had so recently added to their equipment soon proved a great equalizer. More than one Chitauri was slain when rocket-propelled bullets came from around corners to crash into their shields or their bodies, from seemingly nowhere, guided down on to them by the small drones that flitted around the rapidly expanding battlefield like hummingbirds on a high.

That didn’t mean that the Chitauri were pushovers. They most decidedly were not. The aliens seemed to understand just as well as the humans did the name of the game in an urban environment like this was cover, firing from different angles, and always bringing more firepower to the fight from as many angles

as you could. There, their numbers were a distinct vintage. More infantry were ferried through the dimensional doorway, dropped off to join the battle in the city. More Rippers arrived to replace their losses from earlier, and they started to spread out over the city, providing covering fire that the ODMs couldn't quite match. They still died to Heavy Gunner rocket fire, but the Rippers took a lot of killing.

This all began to take a toll on the Orbital Drop Marines despite their better armor. An energy strike hitting your elbow actuator would put it of action, a strike to your jetpacks would destroy them, and a hit to the faceplate would punch right through.

The Chitauri also proved to be far stronger than normal humans, even those augmented by normal ODM power armor. One trooper found this out to his cost in a somewhat dramatic fashion.

Trooper Laszlo, formerly of the Australian Marines, pulled back away from a window as return fire began to punish his former position. Falling back, he raced deeper into the partially wrecked building hoping up and over a hole in the floor and under a loose girder. "This is Laszlo, I'm pulling back. I'll meet you all down on the second floor."

Getting an acknowledgement from his sergeant, Laszlo sent out one drone ahead of him, leaving another behind to watch the window. Seeing none of the Chitauri (who the troopers called Chitters for now. A real nickname had yet to be voted on) coming after him, Laszlo moved out from the main room of the high-rise apartment he had been taking cover in. Moving through, he paused at the doorway leading out into the hall, opening the door slowly and letting his drone out, while outside the sounds of battle continued, a distant cacophony contrasting almost disturbingly against the seeming emptiness of the apartment complex.

With the drone watching one way and him watching the other, Laszlo moved out into the hallway, grateful that he wasn't running into any bodies in here yet. Seeing the stairs, he raced towards them, eager to meet up with the rest of his team who had also egressed downwards, intending to make their way across to another building, draw fire to them, and lead a group of Chitauri into the fire of their heavies, who were already in that building. *Now if we can get across without a Ripper spotting us that is a question.*

As Laszlo reached the stairs, the elevator door to one side opened, and he skidded to a halt, his gun rising in that direction.

Before he could target the door, the doors burst open, and a Chitauri trooper dove through, shoulder checking him into the ground. Instantly Laszlo dropped his gun and reached for an Asgardian dagger, pulling it out and stabbing it deep into the creature's chest.

Or at least, that was the plan. Instead, the creature grabbed his outstretched arm just before the blade tip would have hit his chest, twisting and turned to the side, holding the dagger-wielding hand against the ground. His other hand grabbed Laszlo around the neck and began to squeeze.

Instantly, emergency warnings appeared on Laszlo's Heads-Up Display as the creature's grip threatened to warp the metal there.

Laszlo try to kick out, only to find his legs were out of position, but when he tried to buck the monster the monster went over his head to crash spine first on to the floor. Laszlo then activated his jets,

bursting up off the ground and twirling in midair, bringing his leg around in a kick, his rifle having been knocked out of his hand by the initial charge.

His foot connected on the side of the alien's head, and the Chitauri was sent sideways into a wall. Yet even that didn't put it down, and in its hand it raised a backup pistol of some kind. Laszlo couldn't dodge it, and several shots impacted his chest armor, burning away segments.

A single shot rang out. The bolter round flashed between Laszlo's legs to impact the monster in the lower abdomen hurling it backwards with a cry of agony through its strange facemask.

Turning in that direction Laszlo found another trooper kneeling at the top of the stairs, nodding his head laconically to the previously embattled Laszlo. "Took a detour, did you?"

Little battles like that were occurring throughout the combat zone, and sometimes they didn't go the way the troopers. While their Asgardian-made weapons gave them an edge, the sheer strength of the aliens made them a threat to the regular troopers, although the Heavy Gunners were nearly immune to that threat. Worse, sometimes, they had to defend civilians, of which there were still thousands around, hunkered down, trying to hide, or trying to get into the subway system, which could double as a bunker. This was a losing proposition because the Rippers could be easily called upon to

Meanwhile, Thunderbird and the other superpowered individuals were pretty much stuck out in the open, taking fire from the Rippers and skimmers, but at the very least they were keeping the Super-Skrull from headhunting the Orbital Drop Marines.

But Cortez had not made it back to the team. Instead, the former mutant terrorist had been forced to retreat, her emergency medical array activating and pulling her back to Babylon in orbit. A stray Ripper had blasted caught her in the side and burned her whole arm and leg on that side before the emergency medical array had activated.

Thundra too was a little battered around the edges by this point. While she had about as much durability as Ben when it came to concussive force as her boyfriend, she lacked his ability to withstand intense heat, like the energy bolts that the invaders used in all of their weapons. Her armor however, a set of scale mail, had been given to her by Asgardians, and had so far passed the test of battle against these aliens.

The Thing grunted as his side took another hit by a fist that looked like it had come from Reed. He crashed into the wall opposite the building whose burning roof he'd just crashed through, then tumbled down a long slope of rubble to the ground. There, he growled, leaping upward, and grabbed the lower jaw of a passing Ripper fish that had just been about to fire at his past position. With a growl, he lifted his lower body and kicked out hard again with his feet, breaking the lower jaw and causing the cyborg monster to howl in agony, twisting around and onto its side in midair.

This still allowed him to kick off back into the fight where Thunderbird and Super-Skrull had been fighting alone for a moment. The Apache warrior now stumbled back, his face a mask of burns as the Skrull had launched a superhot bolt of fire at him, momentarily blinding him.

But before the Super-Skrull could finish his assault, the Thing crashed into his back, taking him to the ground. Knowing that trying to get the guy into a chokehold was completely useless given his stretching powers, the Thing simply settled on pummeling his head as hard as possible from different angles. He

and Reed had talked about it at one point, and he knew that the rubber durability of the Super-Skrull could be overcome if you could keep hammering his skull often enough in quick succession. The concussive shocks to his brain would eventually do damage despite its durability.

But thanks to his flexibility, the Super-Skrull was able to get a foot in between the two of them and kick the Thing off him.

The Super-Skrull nearly lost that leg when Thunderbird's hatchet came down. The strike still sliced a deep gash in his lower leg despite the Super-Skrull pulling his foot back. He rolled away then, dodging another blow from the hatchet, blocking it with his Thing-like arm, his face set into a strange mix of supercilious sneer. "You will never beat me primitive, I am the finest example of Skrull shape shifting skills in the universe, I have been trained by the finest warriors of—"

"shut up!" The Thing snarled, bringing around a piece of debris into the creature's side with enough force to force him to use his stretching powers. His body elongated immensely under the force of the impact, and the Thing charged forward's, grabbing him around the middle and hopping up off the wall down to the streets below. "You think you can just come here and walk all over us! You better think again!"

With a roar of fury, the Super-Skrull tossed Ben into a nearby wall, then raised his thing enhanced hand to grab at the dissenting hatchet from Thunderbird. The ground cracked then shattered, as did many of the walls around them for several dozen blocks in every direction the remaining windows exploded from sonic boom caused by the two opposing forces crashing into one another.

Super-Skrull was stronger than Thunderbird but he was in a disadvantageous position, only able to use one hand to block the incoming strike from Thunderbird's hatchet. A hatchet forged in Asgard. It couldn't quite break his stonelike armor, but it certainly stung like blazes.

And in blocking Thunderbird, he completely missed Thundra's strike. Her weapon wrapped around his neck from behind, tugging him away from Thunderbird. Then the Thing was on him too, pummeling his head again and again and again, while Super-Skrull pulled his head and neck out from under weapon, punching back, lashing out all around him with an enlarged fist at the end of a whip-like arm, smashing Thundra into the building nearby, knocking Thunderbird off his feet and skidding down the road to crash into a parked car.

For a moment, the Apache warrior blinked, shaking his head to clear it from the flashes, and felt his hand become wet.

Thunderbird looked down, and with horror, realized his hand had sunk into the chest of a corpse to one side as he tried to right himself. The corpse was that of a young boy, seemingly thrown loose from the crashed car, the back of his head stoved in, his neck hanging at an odd angle. The dead, staring expression on the young boy's face, he couldn't have been more than twelve, stared into Thunderbird's soul, and John Proudstar lost it.

Pulling back his other hand, Thunderbird hurled his hatchet down the street towards the Super-Skrull. Then as the alien batted that weapon aside, Thunderbird pulled a second hatchet from behind his belt, charging forward with the Apache warcry on his lips. "GRAAAAAAAA!!!"

The Super-Skrull barely had time to punch the Thing out of the way before the hatchet was coming down again. This time he couldn't interpose his shifted Thing-like arm between them, and the strike caught him in the chest, a shallow cut thanks to his last ditch attempt to dodge, but more than enough to cause the Super-Skrull to fall back in shock, blood oozing from the cut.

An equally deadly slice to the throat followed, and he barely got his neck out in time, stretching his head back and away from the strike. The next instant, the Super-Skrull sent his head forward in a massive headbutt, forcing Thunderbird to block it with the side of the hatchet. But to the Super-Skrull's dismay, the weapon didn't break, instead simply sending Thunderbird backward a few yards. The strike also caused the alien's head to ring, helped along by the numerous blows that he'd been taking to it from the Thing.

Reaching to the side, the Super Skrull grabbed up a car, and lifting it up smashed it sideways into Thunderbird as he closed, slamming the man into a building on the other side of the street. At the same time, a Ripper from on high fired, striking the same three story house that he had been knocked into. It collapsed onto Thunderbird who cried out in pain and rage as he found himself buried.

Before Thundra or the Thing could continue the fight, the Super-Skrull twisted his body around, using it almost like a spring and rocketing away out into the city, shaking his head. *These humans definitely play for keeps. But hopefully with their leader down, this battle will slowly turn against them. But we haven't even seen the Potter or the Phoenix Force that we have been ordered to look out for...*

Pushing himself out from the roof of the building he'd smashed into, the Thing had a moment to be thankful that at least the building he'd crashed into hadn't collapsed all around him like the house Thunderbird was currently buried under. "You all right under there kid?"

"Less of the kid, you living stone monument!" Thunderbird grumbled from where he was buried, coming back to himself from his moment of berserk fury. Thanks to his natural durability and his armor, John hadn't been all that badly hurt, although he had a cut to one cheek from some bit of shrapnel which had astonishingly been traveling fast enough to cut the skin. "Get me out of here!"

"Thundra, you get them out of there. If we don't keep that asshole in play, he's just going to go around wiping out our Oh Damns," the Thing ordered, causing his girlfriend to scowl but nod.

Although she had to dodge away as another Ripper moved into position directly above them for a moment while dozens of skimmers fired at both her and the Thing. "Dammit!"

Still more skimmers and a second Ripper appeared above them, firing down their green energy bolts. "I second that! Sorry Thunderbird, you're going to have to get yourself out there!"

With that, the Thing leaped upwards, a punch taking one of the Rippers in the underside of the stomach, sending it curled upwards and not under its own power either. He landed lightly on a still standing building to one side, leaping away even as it started to topple, grabbing on to the edge of a passing Skimmer, which began to roll in midair, thrown off entirely by his weight. A moment later, all three of its occupants were hurled clear, and he scrambled up the wing until he could grab at the center, where he was able to pull himself forward and grab the controls.

He zoomed through the group above where Thundra and Thunderbird work, looking more to disrupt them than anything else, as he took a moment to link up to the Oh Damns combat net. "Yo Sean, I don't

want to jog your elbow or anything, but how are things going on your end? And do any of your troops have eyes on that Super-Fucker?"

"We're holding our own. Our Heavy Gunners being able to move so quickly and fit into some of the buildings helps a lot against the Rippers. They are laying down a massive amount of fire. I'm losing troopers. Some of the civilians have been scared out of their hiding holes, and my troopers are trying our damndest to protect them. That makes us vulnerable in turn, though. We're down fifteen men already," Sean reported brusquely. "Nine mission killed, six dead."

The Thing nodded, thinking that maybe Potter had slightly underestimated things here. *The numbers the Chitauri have brought through these damn portals is insane.*

But then, a much needed voice came in over the same command line. "This is Storm. I have arrived at a nearby base. There is a large private airport nearby where we have set up an aid station. I will begin teleporting people out of the city now."

Thanks to spells she had access to as a student of Gaia, Storm was able to sense people living within a targeted area so long as that area was on Earth. She could also teleport people within zones of control. At first, she had only been able to teleport people within a single zone around herself, but she had learned to first extend that zone. Thanks to training with it and the monstrous power up she had gotten from Gaia blessing her union with Harry, her area of control had expanded from a few miles to a little under a hundred.

Storm had finished doing the same thing in Washington, although it had taken quite a lot out of her, and she had gone through several Pepper Up Potions. Nor was she so foolish as to believe that simply teleporting civilians away from the combat would be enough to make certain that they were all safe. But she could leave the rest in the hands of the local authorities.

"Roger that! Start from the southernmost segment of the city. My troops haven't spread out there yet so we'll try to keep to the north of the city for now and then move over into the empty zone once you're done. Hopefully the Chitters will follow us and ignore the remaining civilians. I will say I think a lot of civilians escaped down into the subway tunnels," Sean advised.

At that point, the Thing had to turn his attention away from the conversation for a few moments as several skimmers fired at him. His own skimmer was hit several times and began to lose altitude. This forced Ben to leap sideways, crashing into the side of a Ripper.

Having landed on a part of the cyborg creature that wasn't covered by armor, the Thing's fists plunged into it tearing away at its flesh as the Ripper floundered in midair, trying fruitlessly to keep itself in the air.

Meanwhile, Thunderbird found himself still underneath the rubble. He could move its arms thanks to how the rubble had fallen, but his legs were completely pinned, and he couldn't move enough to get the leverage needed to lift the rubble off himself. Growling in anger, he radioed Storm asking for her to teleport him out along with the civilians.

Moments later, the older Proudstar brother disappeared from underneath the rubble. He appeared in a field next to Storm, along with several thousand civilians, who found themselves elsewhere from where they had been hiding or taking cover from within the city near his former position. Nearby on the back

of the few military trucks military officers were shouting at the top of their lungs into megaphones to be heard, directing the civilians of Paris this way and that.

Parisians, however, did not do too well with being told what to do, and there was quite a bit of chaos all around them. Indeed, several hundred had begun to shout back, looking almost as if they were going to riot.

Seeing that, Thunderbird asked, "Are you going to be all right here?" as he wiped away the blood from where his cheek had been cut during the fight with the Super-Skrull.

"I will be perfectly fine. Get back into the fight Thunderbird," Storm ordered, not even looking up from where she was kneeling on the ground, her hands outstretched and pressed flat against the ground as magic flowed from her into the earth and then along to exact coordinates of Paris, where she started teleport away anyone who wasn't actively fighting in job lots several blocks across.

Thunderbird wasn't certain of that, knowing that massive teleportation's like this especially over such distances would take a lot of concentration. *And that this was the second battle zone that Storm's doing this to.* Still, he didn't argue, instead pulling out his magic broom and flying up into the sky, ignoring the shouts of consternation and shock from those who were in a fit state to notice such things from below.

He was almost out of sight when he noticed a group of Frenchmen trying to charge Storm's position, only to be blasted aside by something unseen. Seeing that Thunderbird had to smirk, realizing that Storm had seen the same problem brewing he had and set up a defensive spell around herself.

Regardless, Thunderbird sped away through the air back to the city, determined to get stuck in once more.

Scene break

While the others instantly started to draw the attention of the Super-Skrull and the invading Chitauri down on them, Mystique moved away quickly, heading down into the burning, ruined city, wincing a bit at the carnage all around her. She sniped one Chitauri off a wall that seemed to spot her before she ducked sideways into the burnt out husk of another building, hiding against the wall for a moment as she put away her broomstick, shaking her head with a wry, somewhat forced chuckle. "Magic, honestly will I ever get used to it..." Then her good humor faded, taking in the burnt out, half-buried corpses around her, hearing the fighting in the distance and the nearer creaks and groans of a building barely staying upright.

Slowly and carefully Mystique made her way to street level, preparing to follow the signal from the device Reed had created to try and find the Beacon the aliens had used to open their dimensional doorway, something he had been working on prior to the invasion actually beginning. It was felt that if they could find those beacons and shut them down, then the dimensional doorways they anchored would be forced closed. With no reinforcements, the Oh Damns the Custodes and the local militaries would be able to overwhelm the invaders.

As Mystique took on the form of one of the aliens the violence around and above her rose to a crescendo with the arrival of the Oh Damns, but Mystique could care less about that. Fighting the aliens head-to-head wasn't her mission.

That didn't mean however, that Mystique, one of the oldest living mutants and one of the most experienced hand-to-hand fighters in the world, couldn't throw down with the best of them, though. An alien that barged out of a room to one side and leveled a rifle at her found this out to its cost.

The sight of another Chitauri there where there shouldn't be one caused the alien front of her to hesitate. In that second, Mystique closed, grabbing the rifle with one hand, the other morphing into a claw and stabbing through its throat.

However, that alien wasn't alone. Several more aliens had been in the same room that one alien had been in previously. They now fired at her from the doorway, ignoring the body of their fellow trooper between them. She tossed it aside, changing her body into that of the Thing as she charged forward.

While she couldn't make her body quite as strong as the Thing or any other super-strong individual, She could make her body almost immune to damage by taking their form like this. Thus Mystique ignored the blaster bolts hitting her. A kick caught one of the aliens on the side of the knee, shattering it, while a forearm shot to the side of another alien's head set him stumbling. A knee to the head set the one with the shattered knee into a third.

With all three reeling, Mystique pulled out one of her plasma pistols, and fired into the aliens' heads, one shot each, whirling, snorting in derision, the voice sounding somewhat odd behind the near-skintight mask she had formed out of her body to look like the mask the Chitauri all wore. "Idiots. You never pile up like that in a doorway," she muttered to the dead, then moved on.

Until the floor caved in under her. The damage the building had taken had weakened it structurally, and now she was facing the consequences. The shape shifter found crashing onto the next floor down, groaning in pain as she was half buried under the rubble for a second. Two Chitauri there stared at her for a second before they began to fire at her. Somehow despite looking like one of them, the Chitauri seemed able to tell she wasn't one of them after only a brief examination.

This was something Mystique made a note of as she pushed through the pain, firing back with her pistol, and downing one of the Chitauri. With only one firing at her, Mystique decided to concentrate on pulling herself out of the rubble, not wanting to be pinned there if more of the aliens showed up.

It was well she had, because a grenade – one that reminded her very strongly of a similar weapon in a Star Wars movie - landed where she had been a moment ago. "Oh come on!" Mystique flung herself forward as it went off. Instead of being an explosive device though, the Chitauri grenade acted almost like a thermal weapon, creating an area of intense heat and blinding light for a second which melted everything around it like a tiny nova.

Rolling through the doorway into what looked like an office of some kind, Mystique panted for a moment, letting the wounds covering her body slowly start to heal, pulling her rifle out and lining up a shot into the doorway. As the Chitauri trooper appeared there she shot it through the foot, then through the side and head as it fell. But behind him there was noise showing that several more aliens had joined the two she had nearly fell onto a moment before.

Rolling away, Mystique settled into position, to one side of the door, wondering if she should try the little child routine. Whenever soldiers or police chased her into a building, she would assume a nonthreatening appearance for a few seconds just to throw them off in order to close with them. *Here*

though, I doubt it would work, she thought, her eyes straying to one side as she saw what must have been a young family, gunned down in the open door to a bathroom to one side.

“Right, the old-fashioned way it is!” Mystique growled, anger rising within her at the needless slaughter, firing back as the Chitauri closed in. Unfortunately for her, more appeared clinking to the outside of the building, firing through the already wrecked windows at her. The spy was caught in an enfilade, with no way out.

Stuck in place like this, the Chitauri might have eventually done enough damage to her body to overwhelm Mystique’s healing factor if not for the Oh Damns. Two of them pushed out of a nearly wrecked building nearby, firing at the Chitauri clinging to the outside of the building, dragging some of their attention that way. A moment later, a heavy trooper stuck his Gatling gun out from a window high above, firing down into the mass of Chitauri in the doorway. He had to retreat quickly as a Ripper from above smashed down into the building he was in and even as Mystique pulled herself out of the rubble, she heard, “Trooper Jeffries just ported out,” from the squads noncom over the shared coms net.

As the Chitauri on the wall outside the apartment building were now concentrating on the two troopers retreating quickly into the distant building, Mystique raced forward, leaving the battle behind. Once she had broken contact with any of the Chitauri, she snuck out into another building nearby, a deli whose storefront had been entirely destroyed, exploded inward by some tremendous shock or other, perhaps by the car which had been hurled down the street outside?

Regardless of what had caused the damage to the building, inside, Mystique found still more bodies. Several bakers and more than a few customers laid out around the place. Two seemed to have been killed by the glass window exploding, the pieces of glass having sliced into their eyes, throats and upper arms. The others had been gunned down by the Chitauri from outside.

Mystique gingerly moved through the dead bodies, grimacing to herself. *I thought I had left my last slaughterhouse like this behind in World War II, and now here I am again. I hope Paris can rebuild after this, Irene and I used to love coming to the city.*

Pushing thoughts of her late lover to one side, Mystique moved around the cash register and display case, grabbing at some of the bread on the far wall, munching on it quickly. She needed the energy reserves after having pushed her body so hard to repair the damage she had been taking.

Once she was certain she’d rebuilt as much of the reserves as she could with bread and salami, Mystique moved back out the window, staring hard at a few of the Chitauri bodies. The battle against the team of Oh Damns had moved away, leaving seven of the Chitauri dead scattered across the rubble strewn road outside along with the body of one of the giant fish things.

Examining them one after another, she slowly transformed her body to match a wounded Chitauri, one who had taken some damage to the side of its head and back, picking up one of their blasters at the same time. *They seem able to tell if I’m one of them. If that’s because of some kind of coms communication they share with all their cyborg-like parts, maybe if I’m wounded they won’t assume I can contact them or whatever.* It was a long shot, but Mystique hoped it would work, otherwise she would only be able to slip through the city in fits and starts, either killing any Chitauri who saw her or taking the form of a dead body to throw off any pursuit so often it would slow her infiltration to a crawl.

Soon, Mystique was done with her new disguise, which a moment later was put to the test as she pushed her way deeper into the city, following the signal on the scanner hidden on the interior of her wrist. Seeing them, she fired into an empty building, hoping that they would ignore her.

Thankfully, the wounds Mystique's form seemed to be suffering from appeared to be enough and she was ignored by the Chitauri who spotted her. They instead gunning down any surviving humans they could see, which they must have assumed she was doing, or fighting fiercely against the Oh Damns.

Good. now maybe I can make some progress to find this damned beacon thing. And then maybe afterward the Frenchies will pay for us all to have some time off down on the Riviera. That sounds like a nice reward for saving the world. With that somewhat jaundiced, self-centered thought, the shape changer moved through the ruined capital of France, ignoring the ever more violent battle around her as more and more Chitauri came through the portal above the city.

OOOOOOO

As he went, Thunderbird was notified of the arrival of the SAS, the first group having been dropped off and already at work defending the locals. They wouldn't last very long against the Chitauri, lacking the body armor of the ODM's nor did they have the same mobility, although they would be able to take cover more easily. Still, they would take some of the pressure, and pull the invaders in different directions within the city, something the Oh Damns had only been able to do slightly given the disparity in numbers.

Other military forces were also inbound from multiple directions around France, and more and more of their Air Force was also getting involved, although there, as with the first responders from Châteaudun Air Base, their losses were ruinous.

Still, hopefully all of that meant that the tide was starting to turn in this particular battlefield. *I can only pray it is.*

That hope was magnified a second later as he saw the Super-Skrull battling it out with a pair of Heavy Troopers. They bounced every which way they could, raining down mortar rounds, Gatling bullets and rockets onto the alien, who batted them away or didn't even seem to notice them, blunt force impacts doing nothing to him unless they hit his head and came in fast enough to add up.

As he saw this, the memory of that little boy lying dead the street came to Thunderbird again, and he looked down at his still bloodied hand, gripping it tightly around the shaft of his hatchet.

Then he leaned forward and down, the position they had all been told would allow for the magic broom to fly faster. How that worked, he didn't know but it did and soon Thunderbird was a blur through the air. Not quite at Mach speed, but certainly fast.

As the Super-Skrull finally closed with one of the heavy troopers, punching his head clean off his shoulders with a single blow, he barely saw something flashing towards him from a different direction.

He turned and gaped as Thunderbird's hatchet drove itself deep into his chest. "ARRGHHH!!!" he cried out in pain, the cutting edge of that blade bypassing his stretching powers entirely, almost chopping deep enough to hit his heart.

He fell back, and Thunderbird whirled around him, striking at the back of his head. The Super-Skrull barely dodged, taking another cut to his shoulder, but hammered out a blow that broke Thunderbird's broom, sending him tumbling to the ground below. The Apache warrior landed in a bit of rubble, and roared as he leaped upwards, trying to grab onto the Super-Skrull's still flaming legs.

But it dodged only to eat a face full of mortar which now, actually really began to hurt, the blast spreading enough to affect the wounds Thunderbird had caused. "Curse you, you barely evolved apes! Your tenacity will avail you nothing! The Lord Thanos and the mighty Skrull and Chitauri alliance will slay you all!"

"Really? Because from where we're standing, our tenacity is kicking your ass!" One of the Heavy Gunners shouted, using his exterior speakers to taunt the alien prick.

Before the Super-Skrull could retort, a Ripper fell out of the sky nearby, and the Thing hurled himself through the air towards him. But the Thing that couldn't really fly, just fall with style, and so the Super-Skrull was able to dodge away from him, putting several blocks of the ruined city between him and his previous position.

As he did though, he spotted movement below, a group of humans rushing out from a collapsing building as another Ripper smashed into it, only to blink as they disappeared between one step and the next. It was as if all of them had somehow hidden themselves under a cloaking device or been teleported away somehow without using any technology to perform either act. "What, what was that?"

And then artillery began to home in onto the city from the distance. Many of those artillery shells were airburst shells, which went off over the city, smashing into the skimmers and the Rippers there, forcing their shields to activate and some to fail.

Other artillery shells flashed into the portal along with several ICBMs fired from the French fleet through the portal using data from the Orbital Drop Marines. While the Chitauri were still able to suppress the normal human level of communications and radar, the highly advanced system that Reed, Tony and Forge had devised for the Orbital Drop Marines connected to the equally advanced scanning equipment from the satellites in orbit. Thus they were able to punch straight through.

Firing ICBMs at their own capital city was not a decision the French High Command, what remained of it after the assault into Paris, had taken lightly. But it was one they had decided on once Storm had begun to teleport the surviving civilians out of the city. The enemy was simply bringing in too many troops. Every minute skimmers, infantry transports and Rippers flew out of the dimensional doorway to join the horde infesting the city, pressing outward.

While those reinforcements were mainly concentrating on military targets, the flow had to be stopped.

Alas, just shooting through the portal was one thing, hitting something on the other side was another. The ICBM in questions flashed through the portal, missing a Ripper crossing the other way by inches, only to disappear into the blackness beyond. Several more followed, only for the same thing to occur, and the battle, and the influx of reinforcements, continued unabated.

OOOOOOO

On the other side of the various dimensional portals Thanos waited, sitting in his hover throne looking from one portal to the other, watching for his target to appear. Thanos had prepared, had strengthened himself in various ways both physically and technologically to fight and defeat magic users like Potter or the raw strength of an Avatar of the Phoenix.

But it would not do to show his own gains against lesser opponents. Until his two targets appeared, the Skrull and the Chitauri would serve to soften up the humans.

Watching the various portals, Thanos was somewhat amused to note that the humans didn't seem to have realized the main portal was the most important one. There were only a few locals attacking the forwardmost scouts of the main force so far, pathetic bandits slain instantly when they appeared. Instead, the humans were busy scrambling whatever forces they could to defend the scattered cities in which the other portals had opened. *Well, bar that one territory, but it seems to have been completely thrown into disarray thanks to Supergiant. I really must convince her to change her name at some point. Supergiant just makes absolutely no sense. I realize she is quite tall for her people but...*

The mad Titan's idle musings cut off abruptly as artillery shells and a giant missile came through one of the portals. He quickly turned in that direction, waving his hand. On his wrist a small band of metal began to hum, and a gravitational field empowered from the engine of his throne lashed out under his direction, grabbing the missile and twisting it away from the gathered military forces of the Chitauri. It kept on going through the void until it was well out of sight, by which time Thanos turned his gaze away, staring into that one portal.

He watched as several more missiles appeared, only to use the same defensive measure against each in turn, shaking his head sadly as he did. "And so it seems that nebula once more proves her worthlessness in comparison to her sister. Frustrating."

Working on the controls of his throne for a few seconds, Thanos quickly programmed the throne room to emit the same gravitational sphere as his wrist device. Moments later, bubbles of energy appeared around each portal. These would redirect or halt any missiles coming through from earth to be disposed of quickly.

With that defense in place, Thanos turned his attention back to the portal where the missiles came from, wondering if he should step in. But even as he had acted against the miniscule threat, more of the Chitauri had moved through the portal. Now more joined them, pulling themselves out of the line for Supergiant's breach. This included several large troop transports, thousands more skimmers, and over a dozen Rippers and Dreadwings, the slow moving aerial denial systems following the others slowly.

Thanos couldn't quite tell from where he was sitting, but regardless, it was very obvious that whatever human forces were on the other side of that portal, they hadn't been able to bring enough firepower to bear on it to stop reinforcements from arriving. Seeing these preparations, Thanos leaned back in his throne, crossing his arms as he continued to wait patiently.

The show was, after all, quite amusing. *Fight, kill, die gloriously, take hundreds of Chitauri with you into the Wheel. All of it serves my aims to gain My Lady's favor. Potter and the Avatar's deaths will then serve as the main course, and I will at **last** have her affections!*

OOOOOO

While she was no goddess to need worship, or even seek such, the ENDLESS was well aware of her would-be paramour. At first, hundreds of years ago, Death had been... amused, perhaps, and intrigued by the idea of a living being, a sentient of immense power like a Titan no less, being romantically enamored of her. And perhaps Death might have, in some fashion shown enough understanding of Thanos's actions to serve as encouragement. But since then, that interest had begun to fade. Death was the **ENDLESS**, and for her there was nothing as important as her duty, her knowledge that eventually, all things ended but her and her opposite, her 'sister', the Phoenix Force, the power of rebirth and life.

Now, watching events on Earth with a portion of her attention, Death acknowledged her past mistakes with Thanos, while also recognizing that her remaining interest in Thanos had faded almost instantly upon meeting Harry Potter as he crossed from the Forbidden Zone into this dimension. A being infused equally with life and death energies, one who was not afraid of her, who was a defender of life and dealer of death in equal measure, had grabbed her attention instantly. Not to the point where Death would look upon him as Thanos did her, a possible paramour, but simply as an object of fascination.

A fascination that had been well rewarded since. Not just with his services to her, killing fools and even entities who had thought themselves removed from her touch. Removed from the Wheel, something that Death truly hated. But also in terms of saving one of her favored servants from eternal, if hidden, slavery to another set of masters. Hela's freedom pleased Death greatly.

Moreover, watching Harry, communing with him alongside her 'sister' had taught the Endless something about herself. In many ways, she was like a firefly, yearning for the light, yet knowing she could never touch it. *NEVER WILL I LIVE, NEVER WILL I KNOW THE PLEASURES OF LIFE, YET THEY FASCINATE ME EVEN SO, AS AT TIMES THE PHOENIX FORCE HAS BECOME ENAMORED OF DEATH AND VIOLENCE. HOWEVER, THERE IS ALWAYS **THE DUTY**. AND I WILL NEVER SHIRK IT. NOR WILL I EVER FIND DELIGHT IN THE PASSING OF SOULS FROM THE MATERIAL INTO MY HANDS. THANOS, FOR ALL HIS PROFESSED LOVE FOR ME, DOES NOT UNDERSTAND THAT WHILE I AM DEATH, THAT DOES NOT MEAN THAT KILLING IS THE WAY TO MY HEART. IF I EVEN HAVE ONE. THAT, AS THE HUMANS WOULD SAY, IS A POSER.*

Her glowing cold blue eyes flared a bit in amusement at that, and then she turned her attention from on Thanos alone to the overall feel of the material plane around Earth, feeling it beginning to clench almost, like a man tensing for a blow, or a muscle tensing prior to performing some great deed of strength. Regardless, Death knew what that meant.

Nor was she alone in that. In the heart of the Mkraan crystal, the Phoenix Force looked on as well, while closer to hand, Gaia smiled, feeling Harry's presence in the weave of the universe begin to change. "SO IT HAS BEGUN..."

OOOOOOO

For her part, Nebula wasn't even anywhere close to Paris at the moment that artillery began to fire on the portal. Instead, she had finished leveling Châteaudun Air Base, the base which had launched the fighters that had attacked her assault force previously. Now she had moved on to another one nearby, further southward. But even as she and the now diminished force of skimmers she had brought along arrived above the base, Super-Skrull got in touch with her, his voice blaring into her ear from one of the portions of her cyborg body that Thanos had taken from Nebula during one of her losses to Gamora in training.

“Nebula get back here as soon as you can! Humans are pushing forward on the portal in force, and I am fighting some of their superpowered soldiers. They have the range on our allies and are using it to a tremendous degree. I can’t fight them and guarantee the safety of the beacon from their regular units at the same time!”

Scowling, Nebula turned her route back towards the city, ordering her skimmers down to attack the base without her.

She didn’t see the tornado that reached out for all the skimmers from that base, or the shield of magic that covered it from one end to the other from their attack. Nebula was already well away by the time the last of the skimmers crashed into the ground, porn asunder by the ravening wins that Storm conjured. “That portal must remain open! Get the infantry to form a series of defensive rings on the ground. I will arrive soon, and we can start moving it around randomly. That portal must hold, damn it, I will not face Father’s fury for another loss, not again!”

OOOOOO

By the time the battle in France devolved into tumultuous battles out at sea, over the lands of France, and more importantly in the streets of Paris, Colossus and his team of Custodes were ready to go. But in Russia, they faced entirely different problems. The French theatre was now dominated by the two fronts, Paris and out to sea, with several smaller battles inland as the Chitauri reacted to continued aggression from the defenders almost piecemeal.

In contrast, the battles in Russia were, to this point were very different. They were located far away from the city above which the portal had opened. Proxima Midnight was not only a better general than Nebula, but she also wasn’t one to get so stuck on what she was doing that she neglected to think about what her enemies could do against her. To that end, the majority of the Chitauri units she organized to be sent through after the first wave were antiair guns.

These systems came in two different types. One was the one the Wrecking Crew had observed taking position around the main portal, the cyborg creatures that looked somewhat like dung beetles. Short range, they were incredibly fast, able to lock onto multiple targets with each of the six guns mounted on their back, digging into the ground to defend themselves from return fire. The other system was the series of floating batteries that had shown up over Washington after Glaive had finished cleansing the White House.

These floating manta ray like creatures had four energy guns, which had far longer range than the normal variety. The slowness of their movement was why neither Nebula nor Gamora had decided to use them. But Proxima and Corvus both used them. But while in Washington these defenses were stuck in place due to having to deal with the might of the American Air Force and the missile launchers of the local army units, here in Russia, that was not an issue. Russia had never had as strong an air force as America or France and hadn’t rebuilt it to its pre-Eurasian War point.

So the Manta-ray like flying batteries, called the Death Claws, were making their slow way away from the city to provide continual overwatch against enemy air units proceeded to make mincemeat of the first groups of Russian planes to run into them. The same occurred later when the first allied planes arrived as the Russians who had ordered that force into action had declined to mention how effective

antiair fire was to their allies. Squadrons from Finland, Sweden, and the US forces there – holdovers from after the Eurasian War that had not been pulled out - - suffered heavily.

On the ground however was a slightly different story. Thanks to the numerous tunnel systems throughout Russia that the previous aliens and their backers used, Russia had been able to rebuild the majority of its material losses. Its troops were nowhere close to as good as those they had lost in the Eurasian War, but they were just as fiercely patriotic. And the Russian units responsible for defending those tunnels had long thought of how to do so.

Thus, the maintenance tunnel had been left open just so the Russians could force the attackers to enter close combat with them. Because while Russia would probably never be a great producer of electronics, they produced two things at once. Raw goods like titanium, and men willing... perhaps with liberal use of liquid courage... to fight for Russia.

Sergeant Goromovo held up a hand, signaling his troops to slow down as they raced along the tunnel leading from the rest of the tunnel network to Severomorsk. Most of the underground factories were situated in the northeast, although several of the small parts factories were under Severomorsk. This tunnel was the maintenance tunnel for the main tunnel, the one that actually transported goods towards the rest of the network. That tunnel had been collapsed in a response to this invasion.

The tunnel was three-men wide and the Russians took advantage of this by creating special units called Tunnel Shields. Ahead of Goromovo two such men stood troopers with heavy titanium armor and enormous tower shields but none of the mechanical muscles needed to move like the Titanium Man. These men were trained to hold the line ahead of regular troopers, their titanium shields held up in front of them.

Around the two men, only one trooper remained on his feet, the others having fallen from the energy weapons that the aliens were using. And looking through the legs of that man, he could see that several other troopers lay dead along the tunnel. Their mangled bodies were interspersed with more than a dozen alien bodies. Seeing that, Goromovo snarled, shouting out, "For Mother Russia!" as he fired his grenade launcher up over the heads of the two Shield Guards.

The grenade went off as it landed in among several charging aliens. Their armor seemed to shrug off everything but the concussive blast as they kept on firing even as they were flung around the tunnel. But that fire was noticeably less effective for a few seconds and Goromovo and the other troopers with him moved up directly behind the Shield Guards, sticking their guns through prepared slits in the shields that the man was holding. They fired, downing two of the aliens, then pulling back quickly behind the shields as return fire lanced through the slits in the shield at them. Whatever else, it was very clear that these aliens were excellent marksmen even on the fly. Or perhaps they had some type of autotargeting feature? Regardless the rifle of one of his troopers exploded as it took an energy round from the enemy, and he dropped it, moving away from the others trying to find a gun that was still intact.

"Heavy machine gun coming up!" A shout came from behind, and with a grunt, the two Shield Guards began to lift their massive shield.

As they did, Goromovo and his troops pressed against the side of the tunnel, allowing the machine gunners to open fire with their heavy crew served weapon under the tower shields as the Shield Guards raised them to stomach height. Several of the enemy troopers were quickly cut down but enough of

them were able to press to the side of the tunnel in order to shoot back. Another one of Goromovo's men went down, screaming as a round hit his leg searing straight through.

Back and forth of the battle went, with nearly a hundred aliens dying for only a few troopers until the tower shields began to glow red from repeated hits. One of them shouted, "Retreat, the shields are being overloaded!"

Goromovo and his men, only two of whom remain on their feet, retreated back down the tunnel, passing through two other Shield Guards, who were hastily moving forward.

The two Shield Guards Goromovo had previously been working with waited until their shields were melting, and then with a bellowing roar charged forwards. Their charge was ponderous, since their armor lacked any powered muscles. But both had been chosen because they were very large powerfully built men, and when they grappled with the enemy, for once the enemy found that they couldn't just overpower a human in hand-to-hand combat. Worse, thanks to the narrowness of the tunnel and how many of the aliens had pressed forward, they could not dodge very well.

Punches pulped alien heads and feet crushed bones, the two troopers still holding the line while Goromovo and their replacements came back into the fight. Unmindful of their fellows, Goromovo and the rest resumed fire, and once more the aliens began to die in large amounts.

This continued until one alien climbed onto one of the Shield Guards, clinging to it with their legs. Then using its hands, the alien tore the Shield Guard's helmet off. Meanwhile the human crushed the alien in a bear hug. "RAGGHHH!! Feel the fury of Mother Russia!" But a second later, several blaster bolts hit the man's suddenly exposed face.

The other Shield Guard fared better for a moment as reinforcements had reached them. Aliens continued to die all around him, crammed into the small space of the tunnel so much those in the back could barely fire forward, while the humans did so freely until two other aliens followed their fellow's sacrifice. They were once more able to tear the man's helmet off of his head, a weakness in the design Goromovo noted for his After Action Report.

But when Shield Guard Timochenko fell, behind him were two more who stepped into their place, their shields slamming down, blocking the majority of the tunnel save for the small slits in the shields to allow their fellow troopers to fire through. And behind Goromovo and his men were several more, arriving slowly from elsewhere in the near-nationwide underground web of tunnels via tram or truck to the area on the Russian side of the main tunnel. From that point on, switching to the maintenance tunnel made for much harder going for the Shield Guards. And moving them up around the shooting troopers was tough at this point since more fire teams had also arrived.

Regardless, the aliens were not going to be getting anywhere in the tunnels anytime soon. Here in the tunnels, they had to fight face to face, where they had few if any real advantages over the humans. And indeed, the defenders had the advantage thanks to the Shield Guards.

But on the surface that situation was entirely reversed, and not only in the air.

OOOOOOO

With the destruction of the majority of its reconstituted Winter Guard, Proxima Midnight had continued on her way, closing with the nearest military base at Mach speed and beginning her assault even as its troops began to prepare to move to assist Severomorsk. While the base did have an AA brigade of ZSU-23-4 Shilkas, and their four autocannons took a toll on her skimmers, in return she and her forces laid down an equally withering fire, as Proxima herself destroyed anything that she came across, targeting those anti-air batteries, getting in close and just smashing them into pieces.

The Russian forces routed quickly there, and she had moved on, keeping a tight rein on her troops. Thanks to humans lacking the ability to interdict her communications like the Chitauri so effectively interdicted the humans, there were still a few bases that had yet to learn about the invasion, despite a runner having gotten away through the underground tunnels. Better yet for Proxima, the toll of the Eurasian War had yet to be made good in any real fashion. The tunnel guards might have been brought up to strength along with the Winter Guard, but the majority of the Russian military was still a shadow of what it once was.

Yet despite the massive success she'd had in the first two hours, Proxima's desire to lead the attack force personally had taken her away from the portal.

This and Pinoptes was able to follow her progress had allowed Colossus to come up with a somewhat similar plan to what Thunderbird was trying to do, with admittedly scant success so far, in Paris.

But instead of attacking the city, Colossus felt that they would be better served to strike the head off this particular snake. "The blue-skinned woman in France is barely in control of her troops, there the portal is a much more important target. And it must be said, Paris has a much larger population than Severomorsk, and Severomorsk is mainly a military city too. The casualties there will be much less. But this blue-skinned woman is dangerous, and she needs to be removed," Colossus had opined to his team when they looked at the information Pinoptes had gathered about what was going on in Russia.

The rest agreed with him. This meant Morph would go in alone after the beacon, while the rest of the Custodes assigned to this defensive theatre would look to eliminate the blue-skinned spear-wielder.

Once they were close enough to the land to make out actual terrain features and the heat of reentry had faded, Colossus nodded over to Morph. "You have your GPS?"

"Yep, yep, I have my GPS, I have this nifty little tracker that Mister Fantastic made for me. The egghead might be a little too quick to lecture on emission spectrums, energy analysis, and multi-radiation theory or whatever it was, but he does good work," Morph answered with a smile.

"True that." Colossus nodded, exchanging a grin and a hand-clasp with Morph as the others gave him slaps on the back and well-wishes. Morph had become a firm friend to everyone on the team thanks to his irrepressible good humor, and everyone trusted him to get the job done and hoped he would come back in one piece. "Good luck, Tovarish."

"Don't need luck, just a bit of skill and timing." Morph snickered, then hopped onto a magic broom, heading away from the rest of the team.

Once Morph was out of sight, Colossus and the rest of the team guided the dropship to the ground, and then used one of the magic carpets to fly into the air. With Pinoptes guiding them, the group flashed over the countryside with all the speed of a jet fighter, quickly coming to where the blue-skinned

woman and her forces had just finished demolishing another military base. A simple infantry base for trainees, it had fallen within minutes.

As they closed, the group could see smoke rising from the ruins, as well as a single large fire, perhaps from the base's gasoline storage tanks. Soon they were close enough to see the wreckage of numerous stationary anti-air weapons littered the ground. As they closed, bodies too could be seen scattered around the base where the infantry had tried to disperse, and Colossus was somewhat proud of the fact that here, at least, most of the dead had died with guns in their hand.

Still, there was no doubt the fight had been horrendously uneven. Machine guns against energy weapons carried by flying skimmers with shields? There was only one way that could've ended. Hundreds of bodies littered the ground as they descended, with some of them having been cut in half, by energy bolts, others simply riddled with holes, the energy bolts having burned through them entirely. And there was not a single Chitauri body among them. This had not been a fight but a massacre, regardless of the courage of the defenders, and Colossus felt his anger rising.

They flew on over the base in search of the commander of this assault. Unfortunately for Colossus and his team, their quarry had a surprise for them...

Proxima Midnight looked up from where she had just tossed the torn apart carcass of one of the last humans alive in this pathetic excuse for a base, her thin smile of a job well done turning downward as her highly advanced senses told her some strange energy was nearby. Proxima wondered what it was, glaring around her unable to pinpoint where the feeling was coming from until she looked into the sky and, for some reason, felt her eyes trying to obscure or ignore the area.

It is as if my mind is not letting me concentrate there for a moment. My eyes are skittering away from it like some of the pathetic humans I've slaughtered have when faced with their certain death. As if they did not know their pathetic existence could have no higher calling than dying in the name of Lord Thanos. But more importantly, the more I think about that area of the airspace, the more I don't want to. Bah, that must mean there is something there... something that is trying to push my mind away, a telepathic trick perhaps? Like the rest of the Black Order, Proxima had dealt with telepaths numerous times before this, and had seen many of their tricks. And if I am supposed to not notice that area of space, there must be something there.

Even as her eyes were once more forced away, Proxima raised her spear and fired an energy bolt in that direction. The energy blast punched through some kind of strange thin flying thing? She wasn't certain what it was, it looked almost like a carpet, but that could be right, carpets couldn't...

"Magic" Proxima hissed, concern going through her for a moment as she observed the five beings on the carpet. All of them wore different types of armor, it seemed, with two of them looking almost like metallic robots, and two others wearing power armor perhaps. "Is this going to be Potter then? Or one of the other magic users that Lord Thanos warned us about?"

Proxima was almost relieved to see the first-person off the strange object was one of the metal-clad warriors. *That is one I have seen in the images... his name is Colossus I think... regardless, he is no magic user.* Her concern seemingly unfounded, Proxima shouted, "Close and engage! The enemy is upon us once more!"

Many of the skimmers had set down as they breached the human's base, the Chitauri upon them leaving their transports behinds to hunt through the various buildings for their prey. Now those who had left them behind raced out, firing up at the humans while those remained above quickly redirected their fire from the few remaining defenders. The Rippers also turned in place, their maws gaping, greenish energy coalescing there as they powered up their main guns.

"Husk, Warpath, with me, we'll try to take out their leader. Coyote, Uzume, spread out and target the Flyers. Take out those big ones first," Colossus ordered.

Before Colossus finished speaking, Uzume was already firing at one of the four Rippers, having lined up on the monster as the magic carpet snuck them into the middle of the attack force, toggling the enlarging runic array at the edge of it with a finger. The gauss rifle shot that zipped out of the barrel grew to the size of a boulder instantly, and crashed into the Ripper's shields, piercing through and hammering into the animal, tearing away a large chunk from its side and sending it flailing to crash into the ground. One of the other Rippers fell to a similar shot from Coyote the former triathlete targeting the beast's head, he shot tearing it apart and the two of them used their inbuilt teleportation devices to pop away, landing nearby where they both moved into cover, firing at the skimmers in the air.

But one of the Rippers got a lucky shot in on Warpath, the blast catching him in the side. The large Apache cried out more in annoyance than pain as the impact flung him sideways through the air to crash down onto a wrecked anti-air gun well away from the others.

But Husk had followed Colossus off the holed magic carpet, leaping for the strange, blue-skinned woman, lashing out with a kick.

In response, the woman laughed, her energy staff coming up in a quick riposte that caught Husk's leg, smacking her away to crash nearby. "Oh come on!"

"Hah! You think to challenge me in hand to hand, worms!?" the alien woman shouted.

Colossus barreled into her, and after dodging a similar strike, lashed out with a quick punch which, to his surprise, the woman didn't bother dodging, taking it on her chin instead. "What the..."

"Hmmm... not bad." Proxima worked her jaw for a second, then ducked under another punch, before leaping around a kick, which Colossus turned into a spinning kick that nearly caught her. But she ducked under it and watched with surprise apparent in her face as he lifted his leg up into the air, performing a mule kick in midair. Not having properly set herself, Proxima found herself stumbling backward despite her last second block.

By that point Husk had regained her feet, and now charged forwards now, completely undamaged by the previous blow. When the woman twisted around and stabbed her spear at Husk's face, Husk reared her head back headbutting the spear at the last instant, which nearly caused it to break, sending it up above her head with a squeal of metal on metal as Husk grabbed the spear and hauled Proxima into a kick that broke the alien woman's grip on her weapon. "Take that you alien bitch! Teach you to throw this gal!"

A blow caught Husk in the chest, causing her to gasp, before the next blow struck her cheek, sending her stumbling but doing no real damage. *Damn this bitch is throwing me around with every blow despite my*

weight increasing so much in my metal form. Still, I'm damn glad I evolved it after the campaign in Asgard.

Paige Guthrie's power was a kind of metamorphosis power that allowed her to shed her skin and take on the form of various materials, such as wood, metal, or stone. She had evolved her metal form, her main combat form, slightly after events in Asgard by studying the metal that the Asgardians used in their weapons and armor. Where before she had looked almost like Colossus in terms of her silver coloration, now her silvery form had a distinct greenish tinge to it.

And already Husk knew that was going to save her here. This woman was powerful, on the scale of one of the upper tier Asgardians in terms of raw power for certain. But she wasn't able to tear through inches thick armor plate made to defend those selfsame Asgardians from equally strong foes.

Similarly, Colossus wore the Juggernaut armor on his chest, which protected him a second later from a back kick from the woman. The impetus of the blow still sent him stumbling, and the alien use the impact from the kick to push herself into the air lashing out with kick to Husk's head that sent her tumbling to the ground. "Gah, fuck!"

Before Husk could recover, the woman stomped on her head, nearly embedding Husk's head into the ground such was the force of the blow. *Fuck she is fast! And good too. This is not going to be easy!*

"You human fools might have some interesting armor, but you have nowhere near the experience of one such as me when it comes to war."

Uzume just could not let that slide, her Air Force infused ego acting up. From where she was teleporting around the battlefield Uzume twisted around, lining up a shot with her gauss rifle, which caught the woman in the back. Even the insanely fast high-impact bullet only flung the woman to her knees, but that was enough to work with the blonde woman's taunt. "We're fast learners, blue-bitch!"

Roaring in fury, Proxima Midnight pushed herself to her feet, grabbing Colossus's foot as it came towards her face, twisting and pulling the man down into an uppercut that sent him flying, before turning around and barely grabbing the blow meant for the back of her head from the other metal-clad woman. She grunted slightly as a fist smacked into her chest, but still grabbed that arm in turn, turned, and flipped the woman onto her back, whereupon once more, Proxima stomped on her head.

"Dammit, stop doing that!" Husk barked, grabbing at the foot with both hands.

This didn't help much, as the alien woman's foot continued to lift away, pulling Husk off the ground for a second and allowing her other foot to come sweeping in. The kick sent Husk sprawling away, breaking her grip on the woman's leg, but also forced the woman to twist a bit awkwardly.

At that point, Warpath finally arrived. He had sacrificed one of his hatchets, hurling it up into a passing Ripper's chest, only to see it halted by the Ripper's shields falling away without doing anything, which put him in quite the bad mood on top of having been smashed away so easily a moment ago. "RAAHH!!!" He roared, and body checked the woman away from Husk, grabbing her in a bear hug, then twisting around and smashing her into the ground with him on top of her.

Stunned somewhat by the sudden attack Proxima Midnight couldn't react quickly enough. But now she broke the grip while on the ground, reaching up and grabbing at the warrior's face, her fingers digging in for his eyes. "You are unworthy to touch me, worm!"

Hastily, Warpath reared back, away from her hands, but this allowed the alien woman to punch him in the chest twice so hard that it rattled his ribs, followed by another punch to the side of the jaw that sent him sprawling to one side of her. She rolled away in the other direction, standing up just in time to block a blow from Colossus. Grabbing his outstretched hand so fast it almost reminded Colossus of Shiang Chi, the alien woman hurled him into Warpath, snarling out, "no matter how many of you there are, it will not matter! I am Proxima Midnight, of the black order, and you will never overcome me!"

Nearby Coyote dodged incoming fire by the skin of her teeth, his teleporter needing time to recover energy, rolling out of the way of incoming energy fire from on high and from the ground. He fired back up at the skimmers as they tried to box him in. However, he missed an attack from behind, which hit his armor, melting away a portion of the powered armor.

At the same time, Uzume made a mistake. Her teleportation device didn't carry her far enough forward to land in the ruins of one of the base's buildings as she had wanted to. Instead, she landed in the open between two wrecked trucks, where the Ripper she had just hit with an enlarged gauss round was crashing. "OH SHI!!!"

The beast, a cyborg creation whose higher brain functions were almost entirely superseded by the near-suicidal instincts programmed into it by its masters, blasted one final energy bolt the size of a battleship's main cannon round straight at her. The attack smashed into Uzume melting her body armor in various places. The heat of this caused her to cry out in agony, but her armor saw her through, although not without cost. "My teleporter's shot!"

"Pull back," Colossus ordered, grunting as a blow from Proxima dented his shoulder badly. "You too, Coyote. Keep the bastards busy for us and keep your distance. This is not going to be a quick battle."

As Proxima bellowed in cold laughter at that even as she crashed into Warpath, gripping his arms and slowly pushing the Apache back, all the Custodes realized the truth of his words, and shared a single thought. *I hope that Morph is having an easier time of things than us!*

OOOOOO

Elsewhere, Morph cursed as he zoomed across the landscape, taking fire from the strange manta ray things above. It had taken him an hour to get here from where he had left the others, but his approach to Severomorsk had quickly run into a major problem. Not only had the Chitauri's flying units pushed several hundred miles away from the city, but the manta ray floating batteries saw him coming, despite how low to the ground he was flying. "So much for all that effort of dodging around large trees and shit!"

Green beams of energy flashed all around Morph, continuing on to burn into the ground below, igniting trees or simply turning them into ash with direct hits. The large flying beasts thankfully seemed unable to deal with his last-minute evasive actions, but Morph knew he had a long way to go. Worse, their continued attacks meant he wouldn't be able to get into the city without being noticed.

“Not unless I fake my own death anyway, and there isn’t enough terrain around here to hide my presence after that, freaking Russia and its wide open spaces,” Morph muttered to himself, his voice snatched away by the speed of his flight almost to the point he couldn’t hear his own voice. “I suppose I could shift my body into some kind of camouflage form, blend into the background like a chameleon but that never works very well. If those manta ray things were robots maybe, but...”

His voice cut off as Emma’s telepathic sending suddenly invaded Morph’s mind with no prior warning. *“Morph, prepare yourself to go to ground. I won’t be able to follow you all the way in, Jean seems to be closing in on the alien leader of the attack in China, and she might need backup. But Pinoptes and I have prepared a bit of a distraction for you.”*

At that moment, there were a series of sonic booms, and suddenly, the manta rays had a lot more to worry about than him. The distant Baltic Fleet had begun to fire long range missiles by the hundreds over Russian airspace towards the city. After the first attempt by the united air forces to push the aliens back, Pinoptes had linked into their radar systems and were now providing them real time data.

But there were so many manta rays in the air now that the missiles had no chance of getting through even the first defensive zone, let alone actually hitting any of them. But the cost of those missiles stopped the nearby manta rays from targeting Morph, and he dove down to the ground, entering a bit of forest there for a second.

“Er, How long can they keep this up, miss?” Morph asked mentally, always on his best behavior when one of the telepaths contacted him like this and hoping that Mrs. Frost-Potter was still connected to his mind and hopefully not delving too deeply into his thoughts. *Oh that would be so bad...fuck it’s like not thinking about pink elephants!*

“Don’t worry about your little perverted fantasies Morph, I of all people know men always harbor some perversions inside. As to your question, the fleet will keep firing missiles until they run out. I would however suggest getting a move on,” Emma ordered, her mental tone both deadpan and holding a bit of warning. *“Succeed and I won’t tell Harry about your little fantasy involving me, Carol and Mystique in a bathtub...”*

“YES Ma’am!” Morph squeaked, hastily racing forward on his broomstick, his body shifting into the light blue of the daytime sky around him as he went. For several moments he flashed over the ground at around a hundred feet off the ground, then banked away, zipping through another series of trees, looking down at his GPS as he burst back out into the open. In this manner he slowly crossed the distance towards Severomorsk, wishing all the while that they had been able to get deeper into the enemy’s defensive envelope. *I still have another thirty minutes or more before I get there!!*

Despite his best efforts, Morph was still well away from Severomorsk as the Baltic Fleet ran out of missiles. Once they did, his earlier concerns about the limits of his chameleon skill was proven accurate as the manta rays once more spotted him. Their fire resumed and forced Morph into evading again rather than racing forward. “Damn it, I was so close!!”

Grumbling, Morph forced himself to land, going to ground. Hiding among the snow near an empty road, Morph waited against the white backdrop, changing his body to match. There he waited until the manta rays stopped firing, the beams of energy hissing into the ground around him slowly dying off as they lost track of him. “Either that, or those things can’t target enemies on the ground.”

Slowly pushing himself out of the melting snow, Morph sighed, looking down at his GPS and realizing he had at least twenty more miles to go. "Fuck. Let's just hope they don't have foot patrols out. Or anything else, damn it. Well, there's nothing for it..." With that, Morph put his broom stick into his expanded pouch snickering as always as he saw the shaft disappear into the bottomless pouch, his voice turning falsetto for a moment before deepening further than his normal tone. "No, no that shouldn't fit at all... Don't worry darling it will fit, I'm sure of it."

Despite his brief moment of levity, Morph sighed once more when the broomstick had disappeared into the pouch. Then with a resigned look, he started to put one foot in front of the other, picking up speed as he jogged toward the distant city.

OOOOOOO

As other Custodes descended into war, Dani, the Valkyrie Brunhilde, Garm and Fenrir were also heading in. They wouldn't be attacking the center of the Chitauri force slowly spreading out from the only one of the portals that was well away from a population center, though. In the time it took Harry and his officers to gather, decide on a plan and organize their response, the Chitauri here had rolled out so many anti-air guns that doing so on their own would have been horrendously difficult. Pinoptes had also seen the seeming leader of this assault use telekinetic powers, and the foursome were very leery of going up against such since telekinetic users so often also had access to telepathy.

While Fenrir's mind was so animalistic and powerful a normal telepath would struggle to control him, Garm was somewhat less so. And Dani and Brunhilde had no such defense. And although Hela did have her magic to defend her from such, she knew that kind of defense was not the best against a telepath. Such would always have a bit of an edge against someone using mind magics, regardless of the type.

So they would instead hit and run, striking at the outer edge of the enemy's forwardmost defenses, keeping the true strength of the two wolves a secret for now until Storm joined them to help Hela offset the alien leader's powers. They were also to keep their eyes open, to see if there was a reason why this dimensional rift was so far away from the nearest city when all the others were directly above them. None were happy about this, but they well remembered Harry's warnings about how thinly they were spread right now.

And unlike the forces sent into the breach in Paris or Washington, there were no local forces strong enough to truly help here, not given how the nations in the Middle East viewed the Empire and one another. India was the closest allied nation, and there was no way they could send in troops, not even aerial units. Thus on their own, it was better to use mobility and hit and run tactics than get bogged down and find themselves facing overwhelming enemy numbers with none to support them.

As they flew into the mountains of Afghanistan, the fivesome were silent. Garm was silent, his eyes smoldering with battle lust as he rested beside his mistress, shrunken like Fenrir to the size of a wolfhound rather than his normal monstrous form. Hela rested on hand on his head, the other glowing with fell magics as she readied herself. Fenrir rested beside Dani similarly, his face set in an amused, eager expression, or the wolfish equivalent of it anyway.

Meanwhile, Brunhilde prayed to Odin and Freya for courage and foresight in the coming battle. Dani did much the same, in her own way. Her prayers to Skadi were extremely personal in nature, not even a whisper under her breath as she raised the dagger her lover had given her, kissing the handle before

raising it to her forehead, murmuring a prayer to Freya. "Let my courage not falter, let my strength not flag. Watch over me, oh Freya, and find my acts worthy of one who has stood under your gaze before."

At that point, Hela, directing the magic carpet ahead of them, shouted, "Ware, we come upon their outriders!"

Instantly, Dani jumped to her feet, dagger slipping into her pouch as she pulled out her sniper rifle. A moment later, an enlarged gauss round crashed into a skimmer, overloading its shield and pulping skimmer and its riders in one go. "Let's do this!"

Hela snorted, black lightning flaring out around her to crash into more skimmers as the magic carpet flew into the center of the rapidly expanding group of flyers. Brunhilde also engaged, shouting out, "Have at them sister! For Midgard and Asgard united!" as she let fly with enchanted arrows that struck with all the power of a punch from Balder.

Below them infantry units, including one of the Wrecking Crew were moving through the mountains, the aliens climbing up and down sheer cliff faces like spiders, while Bulldozer was far slower. Seeing that, Garm led the way off the magic carpet growing to half his normal size as he went, while Fenrir did the same. The twin howls of the wolves and their very presence cause the Chitauri around them to feel fear for the first time since they had begun to worship lord Thanos, and skimmer and infantry alike quailed. This did not help them, as they and Bulldozer, who had come forward to help the Chitauri build up a forward defensive position forward of the main dimensional doorway found themselves facing the guard of Hel and the beast of Ragnarök.

Despite not feeling the fear gripping the aliens, Bulldozer was almost as stuck as a cow in a slaughterhouse. His main offensive skill was to charge and build up speed. His strength alone wasn't much to someone like Garm or Fenrir. Worse, he couldn't even dodge stuck on a small mountain trail with rocks all around him or a very precipitous drop. "OH fuck me!"

"No. Eat you yes, mate, no," Fenrir taunted from where had landed on a ledge above him, before lunging forward. "I need more iron in my diet anyway!"

As Bulldozer's shouts rose to pained shrieks, for a few moments, the defenders had a major advantage in terms of local force strength. But as a smaller portal opened up two mountains over and more skimmers and Rippers raced out, Hela called a retreat, her tone brooking no argument. "I don't want to hear it brother, get up here now! We will not sacrifice ourselves fighting on this hill for no purpose. We are away for now. We will be back."

Snarling, Fenrir turned aside from his latest meal, leaping upward to be caught by Hela's spell and, as he shrank down, dragged back onto the carpet. Once he and Garm were aboard, they raced away, disappearing under magical spells once more, causing the skimmers chasing after them to flounder, slowly turning back.

And so they left, with Bulldozer having been mauled within a few moments of the battle. One of the traitors to Earth had already been dealt with, caught completely flatfooted and unable to really fight back.

Hela, who had witnessed that even as she turned a Ripper into so much floating charcoal, had laugh as they raced away. They would wait a few moments before turning and attacking another enemy formation. "Thus always to traitors, fools!"

OOOOOOO

As the Custodes finally joined the fight, Skadi was in Australia, waiting. She had arrived ten minutes before Thunderbird and the others arrived in Paris, and was still there, standing almost as still as stone in the center of the airfield in Australia that was still the designated egress point for the Rainbow Bridge. Around her, workers moved around the area, smashing down the few buildings on the old WW2 airbase that had been left standing previously, readying the area for the Arc Reactor whose construction Harry had agreed to fund and lease out to the Australian government in return for using the land.

There had been some talk about moving the Rainbow Bridge's connection point with Midgard to a better location. But Odin, for whatever reason, had vetoed that for now. He apparently did have a place up in Norway he wanted it to be and refused to move it until the Norwegian government had agreed to his terms.

Regardless, Skadi waited until Heimdall activated the Bridge from his end. Again, this was something the Asgardians had been very clear on. The Rainbow Bridge, and any further interaction between the two realms, would be controls by Lord Odin and his court. Even the Asgardians on earth, like Skadi who now lived here with Dani, could not simply travel through.

In front of the Huntress, the air rippled, curving around itself in a spiral pattern, almost like water around a vortex and then the walls of the vortex widened, solidified. The ground of the tunnel thus created between dimensions shifted from gray air and bands of nothingness into the multicolored bridge, and a voice boomed out, "Come through, Huntress."

Skadi instantly moved forward, racing like a deer along it to the end of the bridge where it stopped in front of Heimdall's post of Himinbjörg. The All-Seeing One nodded his head, his eyes fixed beyond her. "Best you hurry, Skadi. The aliens are moving quickly, and their forces outnumber that of all humanity many times over. All that is stopping them is there is a limit to how many troops can come through those dimensional doorways at a time and the fierceness of the Custodes."

Skadi nodded and raced on her way but had only gotten to the archway leading into Asgard when Heimdall spoke once more, calling over his shoulder to her. "The doorway in the mountains. The one well away from any city. That one is the key, remember that when you return."

With a faint frown and a hasty 'my thanks' Skadi resumed her trek, racing through the city.

Passing through the city was quick thankfully, as all but a few families of karls had left the city months back. Yet at the entrance to Valhalla, Skadi had to wait once more. This, though, was a pure powerplay, one that Lord Odin had set up several months back simply to further distance the Asgardians, and himself and his position, with that of humanity. Anyone coming through the portal would need to wait for a time before being seen by his court. *Hmph, the fact that Lord Odin still is playing this game when I am here as an envoy to formally request that our people come to the aid of the humans as per our treaty shows that he really isn't as All-seeing as he likes people to think sometimes. Then again, that aspect of my King is one of the least consistent, so perhaps I should not be surprised.*

By the watch on her wrist Dani bought her, it had passed forty minutes before one of Lord Odin's Alfar servants eventually allowed her entry, announcing her presence. "My Lords and Ladies, Skadi the Huntress, as envoy of the Avalon Empire and Midgard!"

Skadi marched forward, noticing absently that the hall was full. Mead and meat was plentiful, a mid-afternoon meal hosted by the king involving almost all of Asgard. *So, he knows what this might be about, and has already brought the war host together. He just wants to play to the audience. Ugh, politics and posturing!*

Skadi shifted her stance from haste to one of grim formality as she strode forward, locking eyes with Lord Odin. He looked back at her, his face, previously laughing and boisterous, shifting into an equally grim visage. Something in his one eye, a gleam there, told Skadi she was right, that he knew what this was about, but also enjoyed the panoply. *Old ass*, Skadi grumbled internally, furious at this delay.

In contrast to Odin, Freya didn't look calm at all. She was staring at Skadi almost like she were a bird of prey. Gone was any teasing amusement at Skadi's expense, hiding her joy at the love that had come upon the previously virgin goddess as Skadi had seen there the last time she had seen Freya. Instead Freya's eyes were narrow slits, her hands clenching on the arms of her throne like talons. It was very clear that her warrior goddess aspect was slowly coming to the fore overriding her goddess of love aspect for some reason.

Seeing that, Skadi's heart began to pound in her chest, knowing somehow that look meant Danielle had joined the battle somewhere back on Earth. The young Moonstar's faith and raw courage had called to Freya and Skadi from the start, and Skadi knew that the connection between Danielle and the Queen was a very real thing, although she also acknowledged it was not the same kind of connection as Skadi and Dani shared.

My sister in the hunt, my love, is in battle, and I have been kept waiting here! Blast politics and the pride of kings! Skadi snarled internally, keeping her inner feelings off her face with an effort of will that was almost foreign to her outside of battle and stalking the most dangerous of prey.

Luckily for Skadi's blood pressure, it appeared that several of the Asgardians gathered were well aware of something going on thanks to Freya's attitude, despite Odin's own acting. Balder was looking now between Skadi and her mother with wild surmise, Sif was already on her feet, and Dour Hogun was nodding his head, as if his dire predictions for the future were all about to come true. That was good, it helped calm Skadi down somewhat to realize that despite Odin's love of panoply, her people would be ready.

Odin slammed the bottom of Gungnir into the ground, sending a concussive wave of sound and noise throughout the hall, a boom fit to silence any war drum. This silenced every other noise in the hall all conversation, all music, all jokes as everyone there turned their attention to their king and the young Huntress stalking her way down the middle of the hall. The All-father then stood up from his throne and waved his hand in the air in front of him, shouting out, "Make way for the Huntress, for she seems to have been sent on a mission of import."

Wordlessly, the Huntress passed through the now watching crowd, ignoring the murmurs that resumed around her, not letting her gaze straight from Lord Odin or his wife. When Skadi reached the dais

leading up to the two thrones, she knelt on one knee, holding up a formal missive from Jarl Potter, which he had written out on magical parchment sending her here as he went to meet with his people.

“Your majesties, Earth stands invaded. The aliens, the Chitauri and another race called the Skrull, have come at them in force, led by the Mad Titan and others he has gathered to his nihilistic banner. They come to earth from multiple angles of attack. Earth could perhaps stand one avenue of invasion, could perhaps match the magic Titan with Harry Potter and his Custodes. But it cannot match the might of two whole races, not alone. As such, Jarl Potter calls upon us to aid him, to aid humanity in this time of trouble as per our treaties with him and his Empire.”

Odin took the missive, opening it up quickly and reading through it, then after a second of seeming thought, held it high above his head. “Earth calls for aid my warriors. They who came unlooked for to help us in our time of need, have themselves been beset. What say you, my warriors? Shall Asgard answer this call?”

The answer was a roar to shake the heavens as Thor, Sif, Balder, and every other Asgardian there raised their weapons as one. “AYYYYYEEEEEEEEEEEE!!!!!”

OOOOOOO

Harry stared at the three-dimensional magical array, then breathed in cracking his neck explosively before gently stepping forward into the central position across from the steel-gray gem. There he breathed in again, then cut his palms with a ritual athame. He let his blood drip down into the rubies that made up part of the array, then smeared still more blood into specific runes etched into the metal bars around him, reaching out to his magic at the same time.

Pulsing his magic out in a way he’d learned since coming to this world, formless, without any intent behind it, Harry felt the stirrings around him. Now mentally prepared, Harry began the verbal portion of the ritual, directing the magic around him further into the runes around him. The various bits of metal started to heat up, as did the rubies, as he murmured, “With the power of Phoenix, I declare challenges overcome, and fate my own. With this blood, I signify my death and rebirth. By heart, by soul and mind, I leave my humanity behind willingly.”

Harry repeated the cutting ritual several times, placing his blood at very distinct different points in the ritual array. By the time both palms were showing seven cuts, the energy of the array was crackling all around him. Magic, ritual magic, the runes given to him by Death and the Phoenix Force, all of them throbbed with his magical power, turning inward as he continued the ritual. “Let my bones become as stone, let my strength become as mountains. Let my magical might change the reality of my merely human self as I become more than I was, but the same, my mind my own, my emotions my own, but my soul and body empowered further! Let the shackle of humanity fall entire, as I rise to become a Titan!”

With that, Harry placed one hand on the gem, and the other on the runes given to him by Death and the Phoenix Force, his hand creating a circuit between them even as his magic continued to flow out into the array. And as he did, he could feel the magic within the gem being dragged out, his soul being dragged the other way by the god within. *Here... we go...* Harry thought, before the ritual room disappeared, and the pain began.

End Chapter

As mentioned in the forward, I didn't show any of the real battles around Washington in this chapter. Given the strength of the X-men (+ Steve, E, Iron Man) and the American response, I think I can cover that in half the chapter. Then the events in Europe, and finally the confrontation in the mountains of Afghanistan before Thanos comes out to play.