

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

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

Chapter 54: Invasion: A Tale of Four Portals

Not ten minutes after the meeting in Camelot, things elsewhere began to move. Thanks to simple closeness, Charles and Emma were the first to respond to the assault going on in Washington, doing so well before any of the Custodes were on the field.

Emma spent a few seconds kissing Jean thoroughly before sending her down from Babylon toward China. Then, as reports from the ODMs came in on their readiness from Mars and began to transfer through the runic portals to the staging area here in the space station, she consulted with Charles for a few moments.

Charles, in contrast, had decided to see if he could manipulate the minds of the invaders. But he instantly ran into problems with this idea. First, the various alien bio-constructs were too alien in how they thought, and too animalistic to be impacted by his powers. Worse, the Chitauri were also all partly cyborg, and part of their robotic parts protected their minds from exterior intrusion, much like the insanely tiny web of implants that had protected Loki's mind. Thus this proved to be a dead end.

To a certain extent, anyway. Charles was still able to take control of a few hundred scattered aliens and turn them on their fellows. But the Chitauri also proved very quick to notice the quislings among them and gun the telepathically controlled pawns down easily.

"But that is still a zero-sum game," Charles sent to Emma. He was in the X-mansion, from which the X-men, Captain America and the rest of Force Washington were even now starting to leave on the Blackbird. *"Still, there are other ways I can help. Nick Fury has recently lost the ability to communicate out of the city, and I can help steer him and his folk for now. Unfortunately, the sheer number of alien and human minds, the fear and terror from the civilians, will probably force me to remove my overwatch of the city soon. I am..."*

The mental voice of the older telepath faded as Emma waited patiently, whispering out instructions to Pinoptes and another order to Cesaro and the ODM commanders. With Cap and Cyclops both in Force Washington, she felt the better idea would be to have Sean and their other more experienced commanders be involved in the Paris front. There, however, the ODM were also running into problems.

“There is no way, Ma’am,” Cesaro, said, resplendent in his own ODM armor. He had been brought in to be a deck jockey, an organizer rather than a frontline fighter, but evidently the Italian officer had not gotten the memo as he now stood in front of Emma as if he was going in with the battalion assigned to the DC front. “There is no way we’d survive a drop through that anti-air defense.”

“Explain that to me, Julio,” Emma ordered, letting Charles concentrate on whatever he was doing. “I thought the whole point of the ODMs was that they had those shields to absorb incoming fire.”

“We do, ma’am, and a straight drop will work everywhere else, but not in DC or that city in Russia. The aerial superiority weapons they brought in, the manta creatures who act like floating gun barges? Their beams are too strong,” He explained.

“I have been giving the various officers and scientists information on the various Chitauri weapons systems since the campaign began,” Pinoptes interjected. “The manta ray’s beams are of a noticeably different variety than the small skimmers or larger, fishlike bio-constructs. They have a far longer range although their beam aperture is obviously far more narrow. The energy output is much higher. Consider it more a laser beam like in popular science fiction rather than a plasma based weapon. The shields of the ODM could survive it at range, but...”

“But while dropping straight onto them, that wouldn’t be a good idea,” Emma acknowledged. *Damn it, we still don’t have enough magic users around. Druid and Kitty are in the UK and then set to head toward the various European caches. Clea and Strange are already with the fleet heading out from Fortress Mars, trying to draw the Skrull fleet into its guns with the rest of our fleet. Harry’s...*

Emma’s mental thoughts skittered away from what she knew Harry would be doing. Even though she had been there beside his physical body when he had challenged Balthakk, the idea of Harry challenging another Elder God, even after everything else he’d done, somehow disturbed her immensely, reminding her too much of the Lovecraft books she’d read as a teen. *That leaves only Wanda, and she’s busy opening the American weapon’s cache.*

“Wait a minute,” she said aloud, before reaching out to the young gypsy. “Wanda, how goes it?”

“Slowly! We want to send the weapons forward, right, but the caches is in Fort Riley in Kansas. I’m hauling them to Andrews Naval Air Facility, but I can’t fly very fast with this junk behind me. At least I can fly low enough I don’t have to deal with American Air Control,” the Romanian girl grumbled. “Why?”

“Crap. I need you to drop that stuff off, and then get up into orbit. We need a magic user to help with a project. The ODMs have to have some kind of barge to launch their drops from in America before we move on,” Emma ordered.

“Roger that. I’ll want to go in with them... probably,” Wanda answered with a shrug. “No one here is in the loop for what’s going on at the front, I was only told what base to head to when I left Fort Riley. That’s about all anyone knows here. The Chitauri have created some kind of jamming signal that have cut off all communication. Turns out that not all military bases have hard line coms lines.”

“Right, I’ll get on organizing communications, blast it. We didn’t think the local communication net would be so badly hammered by alien ECM so quickly.” It was now Emma’s turn to grumble mentally and she shook her verbal head even as she cut the connection to Wanda and told Cesaro the plan. *For all our planning for emergencies we missed one vital thing: it’s always damn hard to plan for such without the damn emergencies.* “Get in touch with Forge or Murphy. Maybe we already have something that will work. But I want you all ready to go when we need you.”

At that point, Charles reconnected to Emma telepathically, causing her to growl a bit, thankful that Cesaro had marched out of the room, letting her alone with Pinoptes the only one to notice her fit of pique. *Could I have a few seconds to get a handle on things? Damn it, and this is just the American front too. Colossus and the rest haven’t even reached Finland yet.*

Charles seemed unaware of Emma’s growing frazzled air, or perhaps smart enough to not comment on it. *“I apologize. I have been in contact with Nick and several others in DC Few in... normal positions of command, but they are all trying to do what they can to survive. I will keep helping on that side of things and help coordinate Tony and E’s assault. The two of them have gone ahead to help. The enemy commander in DC is sending out large groups of skimmers in random directions, and dealing with them and trying to slow the growth of the defensive zone around the city is proving difficult for the Air Force and army units nearby. They need the help. But I can point you in the direction of the people you need to contact at least.”*

“Thank you Charles. We’ll need to work together to connect Nick and his new version of the... howling commandoes I think they were called in World War Two? We’ll need to get them in contact with the army command at some point. But let’s not muddy the waters right away. I’ll want to get the local response fully organized and pushing into the city first,” Emma decided.

Charles acknowledged her words, then shared with her the impressions of the various military officers whose minds he had briefly touched to discern who was leading the effort to push the Chitauri out of America’s capital city. Although given the sheer number of aliens coming through, Emma wondered if the term ‘retake’ would be closer to describing events on the ground.

Regardless, Emma took a few seconds to center herself, then smiled in welcome as Sage came through the door. Sage normally stayed in Magical Minds headquarters down in the UK, but the communications and computer gear were far better up here in Babylon’s command center, and at this point, all normal business was on hold.

Sage instantly began to speak quietly with Pinoptes, and soon, the screens all around Emma shifted. The information on them flowed, shifting as information from the various 'eyes' of Pinoptes, somewhat simplifying so that Emma could understand it.

She ignored the information about Fortress Mars and the Skrull fleet. With Clea, Strange, and the Human Torch involved, it was just a question of what would happen to the Fleet, not if they would become a factor for Earth. But even though Emma had seen much of this information during the command meeting down in Camelot, the screen showing the information from around Earth made for grim reading. *Yeah, we really will need to move the ODMs and Thunderbird and the rest in quick on Paris, blast it. I hope we do have something on the books already to hold the ODM battalion slated for the DC front, or else I'm going to be taking them along when we shift orbit, and Steve and the rest will be on their own.*

With Sage stepping in and helping Forge on that project, communicating with the various team leads, and going over the ODM's battle rattle with their various commanders, Emma could now concentrate on contacting the various military officers trying to get a handle on what was going on in Washington DC. From what she overheard, Sage had been in contact with the president and high command already, but thanks to the alien's ECM, only telepathic communication was possible at the front at this point. That anti-coms system was reaching several hundred miles out past the city's outskirts, well beyond the Chitauri defensive envelope.

Within a few seconds, Emma's telepathic powers found the minds she was interested in.

"General Carter, Brigadier General Raizo, General Lester, this is Diamond of the Custodes Mundi. We have a force incoming on Washington along with supplies, and your high command would like a situation report. I'm speaking to you to link you to our teams, and to get a feel for how any land-based response is being organized."

Diamond's voice burst into the minds of all of the officers surrounding the command room of Joint Force Andrews Naval Air Facility startling everyone there and causing more than a few to flinch or stumble from where they were running around trying to put together a plan. As one, every man there looked at one another, their eyes widening as several asked, "Am I the only one that just heard a strange woman's voice in my head!?" After the day they had, this just seemed one more bizarre thing to deal with.

General Carter, a florid-faced aging man was the one with the most seniority, and he glared around at the others barking out, "Attention you idiots! This is... this is just another enemy! As if we weren't having enough problems, now the Custodes Mundi are showing their true colors, using this alien invasion to take over! We are all compromised. I am going to turn over command to..."

"General Carter, I am not trying to suppress your mind or will. If I was, I would be diving far deeper into your brain than I currently am. I am skimming your thoughts in order to open up communications with you all, not to try to see if you have any big bad secrets. If I wanted to do

that, why would I start with you? The Custodes Mundi already know that the president is safe under Cheyenne Mountain, so why wouldn't we start there?" Emma's mental voice now sounded an odd mixture of amusement and dismissiveness. *"We have more important things to..."*

Carter stared up at the ceiling, growling out verbally as he interrupted. "That's precisely what a telepath would say when they were taking you over." *Fucking mutants, a man's thoughts aren't his own any longer!*

In the command room in Babylon, Emma Frost shook her head slowly from side to side, her hands twitching with an urge to throttle someone. Of all the issues they had to deal with during this invasion they had to run into a racist? "I just hope he's the only one in the local command structure. If not, this is going to be far more difficult than it has to be..." she murmured aloud.

"General Carter, the very fact that you all heard my voice rather than began to issue commands should tell you that I am not trying to take you over. Would you like me to get the president on the line? He is fully on board with us doing this. Given the nature of the jamming device the Chitauri have introduced, your forces will not be able to communicate with ours at all, save via telepathy until we get our own communicators down to you."

She had broadcast that line to everyone within the command bunker, and now Emma went on, as she felt some of those minds beginning to calm down. Carter wasn't one of them unfortunately, nor were several of the communications officers and two of the other senior officers. *Hopefully, my next words will help soothe them. "In fact, if you look at it the proper direction, then you might realize that this means that the Custodes Mundi will be working under your command."*

"If they were under my command I might have them all shot! Mutant freaks!" One of the other officers muttered.

We do not have time for this. Emma snarled mentally, looking over to Sage. "Sage, get the president on the line, please. The local commanders are being troublesome. Perhaps he has some codes he can give us to either open up their cast iron brains or let us remove them from command."

"I'll have Pinoptes contact him," Sage answered, looking over at the screens to see if either Captain America or Tony Stark were close enough to divert to Andrews. If they didn't get the locals onboard before Kitty or Ororo, who had just left from Babylon, the confusion and chaos would mount, and at a time where they needed the exact opposite response.

But she saw that Tony had just hit the outer edge of a flying column that was forging westward out of Washington. And like the jets sent to intercept it, he was now out of communication, although Sage felt Tony and JARVIS would figure out a means around that soon. *And part of the Blackbird's stealth technology is blocking all internal signals. I'm not going to have them break*

stealth until their in position. The only one other one who is in a position for me to connect them to this guy is Storm. “Doesn’t Storm have one of our normal communicators? We can use that to get these men in contact with the president.”

“Good thinking,” Emma approved.

Moments later, Storm, after dodging anti-air fire, landed at Andrews . The African woman was thankfully so well known that the normal troopers took her appearance as a good sign, and she was quickly hustled into the command bunker. The officers attempted to puff up like so many frogs in preparation to shout and threaten, but Storm, calmness and hidden fury incarnate, held up a communications device. “If you will not hear the voice of common sense, then you can hear your president’s.”

Thanks to Emma’s position of touching the minds of the individuals within the bunker, she had a front row seat to her sister-wife’s arrival and smiled thinly at the sudden confusion and panic in the minds of the military types as the president’s voice came through loud and clear.

"General Carter, this is the president. I know you and I have met several times at various functions over the years. You should recognize my voice. You should also know that as president I have a device on me that both monitors my brain waves and protects it from telepathy at all times. I am not compromised in any way shape or form. Do you accept this?"

"Er, y, yes sir! But sir, we are not free of outside influence here. I recommend..."

"I do not give a flying **fuck** for what you recommend!" The president interrupted harshly, his Midwest accent coming through far more clearly than normal. "In the time you have spent arguing with Diamond, an ally and accredited member of the Custodes Mundi, thousands of our civilians have been dying within DC. By this point you should have been organizing our men to work with the Empire. I know the Pentagon’s echelons have made plans for an eventuality like this, and you and many of the other base commanders across America have been read into it. Did you or did you not read Silent Night?"

Silent Night was the plan the Pentagon had come up with to describe an alien invasion that started by attacking the world’s communications network. Since that network depended on satellites and a few deeply buried LAN lines, aliens from space could, if they got through the Empire’s magical illusion, destroy the majority of the world’s communications by destroying the satellite network. This hadn’t happened, of course, but Silent Night should still have created a bedrock of a plan to work with the Empire and the Custodes. One that Carter had not followed.

"I... sir, that, that plan, yes, sir, I know it, but I objected to its strenuously then, as it predicated allowing telepaths that owe their allegiance to..." Carter began only to be interrupted once more.

“So you know it. Good. Now, if you do not get off your high horse within the next two seconds and start to work with Ms. Diamond and Ms. Storm, my next call will be to the office of the

military police. Who will then take you under custody on charges of treason. From that point, they will work down the ladder there on the sharp end, until they find someone willing to work with Custodes Mundi! Do I make myself clear?"

Carter gulped. The president didn't need to continue his threat. Treason in the face of the enemy was still punishable by the death penalty in most militaries, including the American military. But the fear that being contacted by Diamond telepathically had caused still rode his mind far too much. "Sir, I, she can reach into our minds and..."

That fear was imbued his voice, and the president answered in calmer, more sympathetic tone, yet one that was made of steel for all that. "I have been in the presence of Diamond and Phoenix several times. Not once have they reached into my mind or in any way influenced me or those around me. Their track record speaks for itself, Carter. If you cannot set that aside to work with them now, when America faces an invasion on our very soil, in our very capital, I will have no choice. Five hundred thousand plus lives "

By the latest census, Washington DC was home to a little over five-hundred and sixty thousand civilians. And the majority of the videos and panicked reports which had gotten out before the alien's blackout device – whatever it was – had risen over the city showed the aliens ruthlessly massacring the civilians.

Carter stammered a reply, still trying to fight back against this and through his fear. but the president had already, in point of fact, gotten the ball rolling on his removal. Storm had not waited, instead marching back out and moving to the nearby open zone of the base's runways, situated at the far right side of the base.

Soon, the Scarlet Witch arrived. Behind her, more than ten large cargo hauler-sized boxes hovered, falling to the ground with a clang. Wanda shook her head woozily, and found Storm pulling her into her side, helping Wanda stay upright as the younger woman slurred. "FUCK, but that was hard. My magic doesn't do well with calm little spells like hovering or shit, and I had to keep that going for more than a freaking hour!"

"I am glad you did, child. Those weapons will be necessary soon enough. Moreover, I was able to work with Pinoptes to draw up a plan to put into place to keep the wounded and civilians moving out from here during that time," Storm answered. "As soon as we have the military on our side, we will be able to move very quickly... I hope."

Wanda opened her mouth to reply, possibly a pithy comment about hope in one hand and fecal matter in the other. But she paused as she saw a MP marked jeep pulling up in front of the command bunker just at the edge of her vision. The two women watched as the four MPs in the jeep hopped out and entered the bunker. As they continued to watch, Carter, his second-in-command, several other officers and communications specialists were dragged out one after another.

Several protested, loudly, their voices reaching the two women, shouting, "Our minds are our own, fucking mutants, they're the real threat! Don't you see!?"

"What in the heck?" Wanda whispered. "What have I been missing?"

"Oh, don't worry dear, just some spring cleaning going on in the form of getting rid of dead wood," Storm answered with a faint smile, watching an army colonel trotting towards them. "I assume," she said more loudly as the man entered polite shouting range. They did need to move with dispatch, after all. "That you are now willing to work with us?"

The Army colonel nodded, saluting, while behind him, a marine-marked jeep bounced over the tarmac. "Ma'am, Miss, yes! Brigadier Nolen and I are the two, well most senior surviving commanders within forty miles of DC's outskirts that weren't just removed."

"I understand, and I wish this could have been done better," Storm answered, falling silent for a second as the marine officer tumbled out of his jeep.

He spent a few seconds shouting at his driver and three other marines with him, all of whom leaped out and ran towards the command bunker or back the way they had come before saluting Storm and the others. He was an older man, but looked to have been carved from granite, and his eyes were stern, but somewhat wary as he looked at Storm, gesturing at his head. "Miss Storm, we're late to the ball, but I have been in contact with Diamond, and we've gotten the ball rolling on everyone checking in. But I understand your powers will be the basis for our first round of assaults, and the evacuation?"

"You would be correct, Brigadier. It won't be pretty, and it won't be picky, but my powers will let me teleport people from within the city to hear. I cannot pick and choose them at this range, however, and we will need somewhere to evacuate to."

The Brigadier gulped a bit, then shook his head slowly, and Storm did not need the whisper of Emma's telepathic voice to know that he had an issue with the nature of those powers. "What is... that is what manner of evacuation..." He stumbled to a halt, unable to really articulate what he was thinking.

"The manner of their evacuation will be magical in nature," Storm answered gently, but very firmly. She was well aware time was lives right now. "They will appear here in large groups, pulled from a wide area around specific coordinates within the city."

The colonel cut in at that point, asking, "Will there be wounded...stupid question, the magic won't help or hurt them further, right?"

"That is up in the air. If they are buried under rubble, impaled, or with broken legs, the teleportation will probably hurt them badly," Storm admitted with a shake of her head. "But they would be hurt, regardless. Now, Pinoptes and I have created a plan to start moving the

wounded and nonwounded civilians from this base and others in a set rotation as myself and my lovely assistant move around. For we not only bring magic and plans, but gifts.

Wanda blushed rosily at being called beautiful by someone like Storm, even if in a backhanded manner, but stood a little straighter and gestured. A bit of magic and the magical restraints on the first cargo crate faded, letting another spell tear the side of the crate open. The weapons inside gleamed with fell intent as her pinkish magic faded away. Both officers looked at them, nodded, and the Brigadier stated crisply, "In that case, Plan Silent Night is in full affect. Whatever you need miss, we'll do."

The Air Force colonel turned, and after a few hurried minutes of shouting, the army colonel turned, shouting out orders for several of his officers. They, with Pinoptes helping Diamond with the plan the AI and Storm had thought up, began to organize a response to the displaced population. This would in no way be easy, but it had to be done. City fighting was among the worst environments at the best of times. When you were unprepared for it, and had to fight through your civilian population? There had never been anything similar in American history. Not even in World War 2.

Meanwhile, the brigadier was organizing the locals, Air Force men - to hand out the weapons in the first crate to his marines and the army infantry units as they arrived. This being an Air force base, they didn't have any real infantry units on hand. Not ones that the army or marines would want on the sharp end, calling them, in their words, "Chair Force-style mall cops." Instead, they would act to keep the civilians under control as they arrived.

Similarly, the nearby army mechanized division at Fort Detrick would head for the various highways leading into the city for now. Cities were no place for tanks, but if Iron Man or someone else could protect the tanks and artillery could make an impact on the battle within DC without actually entering the city. It would take them a while, since the civilian traffic outside the city and in between Fort Detrick would get in the way, but it might make a deference down the line.

This made the man turn back to Storm, who had begun her own preparations. "By the way, how many civilians are we talking about coming through at a time?"

"As many as are in a specific segment of the city. The teleportation aperture at the other end will be several miles wide. I will be teleporting anyone human as my spell recognizes them, out."

"Oh..." the brigadier mused, then shook his head trying to dispel the image of thousands of civilians just popping in from nowhere. "But can you reverse that? That is, if you teleport say 1000 or so civilians out, could you teleport some of our folk in?"

"The usage of my teleportation spell gives me a rough idea of the terrain from which I am transporting people. I can possibly do so," Storm admitted. "It will slow down the evacuation however."

"But it will be worth it on the other end, miss," the Brigadier answered firmly. He then turned to another set of communications officers and began to issue commands.

His Marines on the other hand, along with several army platoons who could get here in the next few minutes would turn over their transports to the Air Force so that they could start moving people off the base with the help of the locals.

Soon, several hundred Marines and Army infantrymen were dismounting from their trucks, exchanging the habitual jokes between the two services, using that as a means to combat the shock all of them were feeling at what was going on. Not only an alien invasion, but an alien invasion of America, and America's capital. They would be going into combat in Washington DC of all places!

As they did, an Air Force officer trotted over to Storm, saluting crisply. "Ma'am, I'm Captain Ackerman, momentarily in charge of this boondoggle. I'll be in charge of transporting civilians off base after the first in-coming group and once these boys have been transported into combat."

"Very good. We need to organize here, first. Medical equipment, personnel, someone with a megaphone to start calling the civilians down. As I will be concentrating on my magical spells, that individual **cannot** be me unless you further wish to interrupt the flow of civilians out of Washington and your own people into the city. Further, my spell will only be transporting humans and telling me about the geography of the area I am using it on. I will not be able to tell your people what kind of opposition they will face on the other end," Storm warned.

The man nodded grimly at that. "The Brigadier already warned us about that, sir. Anyway, we've..." He paused as several trucks marked with the Red Cross began to pull up nearby. "Begun to get on that. If there's one thing we can do in the army it's organize."

Tents were quickly erected, and several other Air Force personnel worked on putting up a small wire fence around the area, as a dozen military police took position around the area around Storm. Several of them looked at her somewhat askance, and once more Storm did not need Emma's mental warning to know more than a few of the individuals around her were quite biased towards mutants. But all of them seemed to be willing to put it to one side to deal with the greater threat of alien invasion.

That was enough for Storm and as the final preparations on the nearby field hospital finished, she exchanged nods with the officers nearby, anxiety of what was happening in the city having been churning within her with every moment that passed. Behind them, well away from the

tarmac, platoon-sized groups had been given the weapons from the cache by Wanda, who had just opened up the second cargo container.

With the preparations complete on the receiving side, Storm knelt down, touching the ground with her hands and began her enchantment. She felt it then, her goddess was watching, a spiritual hand on her shoulder giving both aid and support, and Storm smiled.

From Storm, a series of scrawling runes began to appear, spreading out rapidly, covering a good chunk of the runway for a moment. The military men all quickly retreated off of the rapidly expanding light show. Then to the watchers it seemed as if the nature of the light seemed to shift. It became almost as if the light from the runes was suddenly coming from farther away, yet also had not moved at all. It was a very weird visual effect, and more than one of the military men turned away, shaking their heads.

And in distant Washington DC, several dozen blocks of people looked down at their feet for a second as the ground underneath them began to glow in turn. Whether that ground was the floor of a room in a house, the concrete underneath a road, or within the subway system beneath the ground, it didn't matter to Storm's Gaia-taught spell. All that mattered was the coordinates, the fanlike shaped area that would be impacted by her enchantment.

Several dozen people who had been buried under rubble near the entrance to a subway station cried out in relief as they were pulled from where they had been and then out into the sunlight somewhere else. Dozens of families were similarly removed from where they had been cowering in their homes. Other people, who had been caught in their cars and had been basically bunkering down praying they wouldn't be noticed, were also transported away. Men and women, wounded in various ways, appeared, their cries of pain rising up, higher and louder than the shouts of their fellows. Several policemen who had been fighting, firing on Chitauri infantry ineffectually with their sidearms, determined to sell their lives dearly, found themselves elsewhere.

Luckily, they had the fire discipline to stop pulling the trigger instantly. For them and most of the other civilians, it didn't matter where they were. All of them simply knew they had been saved and fell to their knees in shocked delight as they stared around them, disoriented but happy.

Others did not and it had not only been the police who had been trying to fight the Chitauri. Say what you would about most criminals, they did not lack in basic arrogance, or at least they did not so long as they were surrounded by their fellows.

Several gang members who had been trying to fight the Chitauri off found themselves firing at nothing, causing screams and shouts from nearby of, "Drop the gun!" as the Air Force men and MPs responded quickly.

Luckily, the military men, regardless of branch, had good fire discipline. That, and the majority of the several thousand civilians were in the way of the platoons ready nearby.

Two of criminals obeyed quickly, and even went so far as to kneel down with their hands up, staring around wildly, their normal belligerence completely battered by the day's events. Others however, either drunk or high on drugs, refused, and began to brandish their weapons threateningly. "FUCK the man, you bastards, ya'll..."

Military police were not regular police. While they were trained to capture their targets, they were also much quicker to decide to put those targets down hard. Shots rang out, and the four belligerents who had been trying to make trouble fell, neck or head shots having ended their lives instantly.

Storm nodded slightly in the direction of the individuals who had just done that, then announced, "I have the return coordinates ready to go. But again, I will warn you I cannot be specific sending people from this far away. All I can tell you is that I can put you somewhere you will not be in danger of merging into the local geography. I can then, with more precise coordinates send in reinforcements. But at first you will be on your own."

Thinking quickly and trying hard not to think too hard about what that could mean, the brigade commander that was designated assault one nodded. "Only two platoons to start with then, marines. You Army boys will have to wait a bit."

"Yeah, yeah, go off and have some fun with your little toys. When it comes to the big fights, the army will lead the way," one of his fellows retorted, the good-natured banter doing a lot to keep spirits up, as nearby, the military police and the bases Air Force complement began to organize the civilians, somewhat astonished to find themselves already outnumbered. Storm had transported out 5000 people in one go. It wasn't a drop in the bucket in terms of the population of Washington DC, but it already matched or exceeded the number of military personnel on the base.

"If you are wounded, please raise her hands if you can, or get someone nearby to do it for you. Families, please stay together, and moved to the left. Individuals to the right."

As this organization was continuing, Storm nodded over to the first platoon commander, and he quickly stepped towards the still glowing portion of the array, that area directly around Storm which had heretofore been clear of the incoming civilians. Within moments, two platoons of Marines were gone, teleported into Washington DC.

Scene break

Contrary to Storm's fears, the marines didn't come under fire instantly, which the officer in charge was very, very thankful for. However, one man did land awkwardly at the bottom of the staircase leading up from the subway, and somehow twisted his ankle of all things. His friends

gave him grief for that even as they dragged him over to lay out behind a pillar in the perfect position to cover the bottom of the stairs.

“Oof, some bad luck there, huh? You get to Lay about here all da... hey, you didn’t do that on purpose did you Richy?”

“Hah, Richard’s not nearly bright enough to plan that out, man. Nah, he’s just that clumsy.”

“Still think it’s a smart move though, he can laze about here at the LZ while we...”

Their whispered jibes cut off as the platoon lieutenant growled at them, shaking his head from where he had been trying to raise the other platoon. “Fuck, we’re really cut off here. And...”

For a moment they all fell silent, hearing the distant noise of screaming. It wasn’t nearby, the marines could tell that much. Indeed, the noise wasn’t close enough to make out any single sound amongst the tumult. But the total was a near animalistic shriek of mixed fear, hatred and pain, causing many of the marines to shudder. “Fuck me, I ain’t ever heard sounds like that before...”

“It is quite bad, officer,” Diamond’s voice intoned first into the head of the platoon leader, then his marines. *“Unfortunately, even with Professor X and myself trying to organize the locals, there are only a few scattered places where they are making a fight of it. There are simply too many civilians, and far too many aliens. At an estimate, they have sixty thousand or more troops in the city, and that isn’t even counting their skimmers or their other flying units. And their minds are so... bizarre we’re having trouble keeping track of them.”*

“That’s nice and all Miss, but what about the other platoon?” the platoon commander asked.

“...caught in the open in a small children’s park. A group of skimmers moved to engage them almost as soon as they were spotted. They are gone, marine. I’m sorry,” Diamond answered sorrowfully. *“Storm did warn you she couldn’t be certain of what was on the other side. If not for the skimmers it would have been perfect but the aliens have complete control of the skies over the city.”*

Many of the marines cursed at that, with several looking shocked. They hadn’t ever been in real war before this, and taking casualties like that right off the bat, that was a severe wakeup call.

To try and keep their spirits up, or at least their anger, Diamond went on quickly. “At any rate, I will have to serve as your connection back to the rest of the military. I have informed them that you are down, and safe. Is your GPS working?”

This took a moment to discern, but it turned out that no, it wasn’t. But that didn’t mean the marines couldn’t figure out where they were. Quickly, two fire teams moved up the stairs,

dressed in urban camouflage and full battle rattle, their new toys at the ready on their shoulders as they moved towards the light of day outside.

The two teams advanced on either side of the subway staircase by fire and movement until they were poking their heads up out of the short tunnel. As they did, they saw several dozen Chitauri nearby, standing around a bunch of abandoned vehicles and the entrance to a few buildings down the street. All of them were seemingly looking around in confusion, gesturing and screeching to one another in some unknown language.

"Check fire!" The team leader in charge of the movement growled. He attempted to radio back down to his officer but unfortunately even from this close, his helmet's coms device had trouble punching through whatever interference the Chitauri were causing.

Eventually he got his words across, and two more fire teams came up out of the subway. "LT's pushed out forces along the subway in every direction, he figures we might be able to use this place as a base of operations once we can report where we are," the sergeant announced.

Just then, one of the Chitauri must have somehow spotted them for it shrieked and turned fully to face them, raising its odd, arm-hugging blaster. The others followed suit, and the marines, not ones to let this kind of invitation go, fired. "Pick your targets and put them down."

Above, several skimmers twisted in their direction, coming down to fire on the Marines, who fired back up at them. Here the concrete awning of the tunnel served them well, letting some of the marines return fire while the others quickly spread out from the subway entrance and into various doorways or behind overturned cars. The return fire was brutal though, and three marines went down. But several of the Chitauri skimmers had to pull back to let their shields regenerate, showing the efficacy of the Avalon Empire's plasma-based rifles. Then more Chitauri were arriving, and suddenly, this didn't seem to be as good an idea as it had been a moment before.

By that time, the platoon commander had joined his troops on the surface, and shook his head grimly, ordering them back into cover in the entrance to the subway. He lost another marine doing it, and the alien infantry quickly created a web of fire so intense his men were forced away from the entrance, but it kept his men alive for now. "Diamond, that is a no go on bringing in more troops. Repeat, no go. We'll try to exfil out via the subway," he reported grimly. "This position is a no go. Subways might work, but we'll need to be really careful moving to the surface..."

Scene break

Not really needing to coordinate very much with the locals, Tony Stark, or Iron Man at the moment, Scarlet Witch, E, and Archangel, the only real flyer among the X-men, had joined the battle around DC long before the rest of Force Washington arrived. Primarily, because the team had three extras who had joined up unlooked for, but who had needed time to arrive:

Avalanche, the former member of the Brotherhood, Hawkeye, and Black Widow. The only one that Scott and Steve had expected to come was Natasha, but she had reached out to Hawkeye, who in turn had pulled in Avalanche. The young mutant with the quake powers had been staying with Clint's family, going to college in order to join the CIA.

Of the flyers, the Scarlet Witch, now finished handing out weapons, obviously had her magic. Enterprise and Iron Man were literally walking armories. The repulsor blasts from Iron Man's hands gave the Iron Man a sufficient long-range punch while his armor was proof against anything but the big blasts from the fish-like flyers. The groups of skimmers trying to push out in columns from the cordon above DC learned this to their cost several times before anyone else arrived.

The same thing basically happened with Enterprise. E's use of nanotechnology once more allowed the android to create several different types of guns, experimenting on which worked best. And defensively, his nanites could easily break down the Chitauri. However, both of these flyers were also concentrating on something else as they fought the Chitauri skimmers.

"We need to figure out how they are hampering our allies coms," Tony said as he and E buzzed around and through a group of skimmers. He stopped in midair dodging the repeating green bolts of energy that a skimmer tried to hit him with, then dove down on another, blasting it out of the sky even as he continued the conversation. "I think it's some kind of energy emitter, something that shuts off EMR waves rather than hashes them. But the power ratio for such a device..."

"It can't be something as easy as background hash for certain." E landed on the back of a Skimmer whose shield he had previously knocked down. From his legs, tiny nanites flew out in a cloud, eating into the skimmer. At the sight, the three Chitauri shrieked in fear, something that hadn't happened before this, even from skimmer teams that were knocked out of the air.
Curious.

As was the sight of all three leaping off the skimmer to their deaths rather than letting E's nanite swarms reach them. *Some kind of cultural response to nanotechnology then?* Shrugging, E used his nanites to take over the skimmer, his arms changing into quad-barreled plasma guns as he fired all around him while continuing the conversation. "At any rate, it seems to spread along with the giant fish at first, but as more of them appeared it grew more on an exponential scale than an additive one. But perhaps we are missing something? Perhaps the flying fish were the original source of the jamming, and then something else took over?"

"Fuck if I know," Tony grumbled, smashing two more skimmers out of the air then using his thrusters to blast through the shield of another one. "

"Damn it you two, stop showing me up!" Archangel complained, flying past them, his guns blasting at another skimmer.

Of the three flyers assigned to this front – Scarlet Witch was attacking another column and doing quite well on her own, thank you - Archangel was the only one who really lacked a natural offensive punch. Cyclops and the X-men had solved this however by giving the man, who was ambidextrous, twin plasma pistols along with a belt full of various goodies on top of a suit lined with the yellow type of Orichalcum scales. That, coupled with a runic array to defend his wings, let him take a few shots, but nowhere near as many as the other two.

“Sorry Warren, or should I call you Archangel?” Tony taunted, snickering inside his helmet. “Really, kid, you and I used to run in the same social circles, and you didn’t think I’d recognize you? I still remember that time I had to swoop in and save that...”

“Oh please old man! I remember that party too, and while that girl might’ve gone for old guys, I still went home with two other girls. Twins, I might add!” Warren shot back, while also shooting at two skimmers who had tried to break off and head back towards the defensive cordon their fellow invaders had set up. “I was banging cheerleaders in my high school years. You had to wait until you were in your thirties to get as much game as me.”

“Excuse freaking you, kid!” Tony began, before E interrupted them.

The Android’s voice was dry as dust as he intoned calmly, “Gentlemen, if you could set aside your testosterone fueled taunting until such time as other people are around for you to both impress and annoy, I would appreciate it. Now, seeing as Avalon Empire Tech and your own suit’s technology can punch through the interference, I propose...”

That conversation and whatever might come of it aside, there was only so much good the four flyers could do given the sheer amount of anti-air fire that the cordon around DC was putting out. This cordon was created by hundreds of giant manta-like flying creatures, along with the more normal seeming giant flying fish creatures. While the giant flying fish seemed to rely mainly on their main gun at long range the flying manta creatures had multiple gun emplacements on them and flung up so much anti-air fire that none of the trio could close. Scarlet Witch could still do some damage at range to the flying units within that defensive net but their primary mission was to cut down on the number of scammers that were detached from the assault on DC to spread chaos elsewhere.

However, help was arriving now. And whatever technology the Chitauri might process, the various technological and magical means with which the Blackbird was hidden from sight seemed to foil them entirely. So while the ODMs had to wait just above the enemy’s firing arc, the Blackbird was now entering the city’s air space.

"Nightcrawler, come on. I know we’d like to keep the jet intact, but with this much air power around, it’s more a prayer than a goal at this point, there’s no need to set the autopilot to return home. We’ll be getting another ride back," Cyclops quipped, smacking his copilot on the shoulder lightly.

“Ja, I know. Still, it has served us well, mine Freund. And you cannot blame me for wanting to save the ride I learned how to pilot on not too long ago, can you?” With a wan smile, the blue skinned devil-like mutant smiled up at him, flipped a few more buttons, and then hopped to his feet following his commander or out of the cockpit. He had just set a timer that would set the Blackbird to moving forward again in five minutes, hopefully drawing enemy fire as Force Washington landed.

Within the main segment of the jet, they found the rest of Force Washington. This included Iceman, Polaris, Rogue, Polaris and Boom Boom. Captain America, Hawkeye, Avalanche and Black Widow rounded out the team, replacing the missing Warpath and Cannonball.

As he passed each of them, Cyclops exchanged nods or hand clasps with each, bar Avalanche. They just exchanged uneasy nods, not at home around one another despite how much time had passed since their days at Bayville on opposite sides of the track, so to speak. Cyclops quickly moved to the back of the jet, where the loading ramp was already opening. "You all know the drill, folks. Get down and fuck these assholes up. Iceman, Avalanche, be careful with your powers in the city unless Professor X or Diamond have told us the areas clear of civvies. Otherwise, go wild."

Both men nodded, looking a little conflicted at that. “On the one hand, hell yeah, using our powers to the max,” Avalanche said for them both. “On the other... it’s in DC, man! I reaaaally don’t want to destroy the Washington Monument or any of the museums or whatever.”

“Too right. But, well, Guardian’s got this nifty repair spell, so hopefully afterward we can put the city back together. It’s the people that are the priority now,” Cyclops answered, nodding in sympathy. He would have the same problem in a way, after all. Turning away he addressed the group at large. “Captain, when Polaris and I clear the way, you call the cadence.”

Steve nodded, while Polaris winked back at the older man. Steve gulped a bit, but didn't look away from her challenging look, and she smiled, understanding that was quite a bit of progress since she and Psylocke had begun to tag team the man.

For a moment, Cyclops wished his brother was there. Scott didn't think he was all that jealous about his brother having met their father, who was somehow still alive out there in Shi’ar space, and now spending time with him, and he knew full well why Alex hadn't wanted to return to earth even without that incentive. While Polaris had turned away from everything to do with their time with Sebastian Shaw's Hellions and his indoctrination of them, Alex was still enamored of the green haired young woman, and also resented the fact that there was no place for him in the leadership ladder of the Custodes Mundi like there was for Scott.

But at times like this, he truly did miss his brother. *I could just hear Alex shout out that battle cry of his right now, and I could seriously use a power up.*

Shaking that thought off, Cyclops stared around them at the hundreds of large flying fish and manta-ray creatures hovering over DC. Well, the manta-ray creatures were hovering. They were even doing so in a recognizable pattern, a defensive grid almost above the city defending it in depth from any air-based assault. The flying fish, which were, unlike the report he'd had prior to entering communications blackout, outnumbered by the manta-ray creatures, were moving around and down into the city. There they smashed into buildings or blasted at clumps of civilians as they tried to flee, a sight which made Cyclops very grateful they were too high up to make out details.

Grimacing, Cyclops turned his eyes away from the shattered city below and pulled his visor up off his eyes. Few realized this, but even at its most powerful most diffuse form, the visors that Cyclops wore took away a portion of his beam's powers. They also narrowed the focus significantly.

To the Chitauri on the skimmers flying above the city, it seemed as if the blood-red cone of kinetic energy blasted out from nowhere deep within their defensive envelope. Six of the large flying fish-eel things were caught in that beam, along with seven of the manta rays. The kinetic impact smashed them through the air shattering armor, bone and guns, as those skimmers that had been moving in and among them were simply smashed into pieces and carried along by the beam of power like so much flotsam in a stream as Cyclops opened a corridor down to the ground.

Behind him, Captain America shouted, "GO! Polaris, then Hawkeye. Rogue you're third, move, move, move!"

As he spoke, Polaris zoomed towards the nearest manta-ray, reaching out with her magnetic powers. Instantly she began to frown a bit. A lot of the cyborg-like additions to the massive flyers and to the Chitauri themselves she could sense on the small skimmers were of nonferrous material. This meant the green-haired woman couldn't grip them with her magnetic powers. But some of their weapons, and bits of their armor did call out to her, and with a cry, Polaris began to twist and pull those bits in every direction in a circle around her. "If I can't go big, I can go small and bloody!!"

Skimmer engines began to fail as portions of their systems were torn out from their casings. The manta ray aerial gun platforms began to lose the ability to fire their guns, while the flying fish let loose screams as portions of their still somewhat animal-like brains were pulled straight out of their skulls. Greenish, blackish blood fountained in various places as she began to zoom through the defenders, dodging energy fire coming her way but unable to dodge all of it. "FUCK, am I glad I opted for the runic suit that came with a shield!"

Polaris wasn't doing nearly as much damage as she had hoped, but she had certainly grabbed the attention of a large portion of the anti-air fire, although Captain America staring out past Hawkeye, who activated a short-range hover device on his back, shook his head. His teammate made his way down towards the ground, but Cap could see the aerial defenders reacting.

Already, several manta rays had turned their guns on the Blackbird's position, tracking after them as the Blackbird moved under its autopilot.

And Cyclops' attacks hadn't done enough damage to the aerial defensive envelope. "ODMs, abort, repeat abort. You'll need to wait a little longer to get it stuck in. Rogue, Black Widow, Iceman, go!"

For now Polaris's distraction and the blasts from Cyclops would get them down to the ground, that was enough. Hawkeye was already down, and now, Rogue led the way, shouting out, "Yeehaw!" As she did, while behind him, Iceman made several long flumes down toward the ground, and took none of them. Instead, he and Black Widow both used hover packs to descend quickly to the ground, with Captain America following them along with Avalanche.

Rogue ran right into one of the energy beams from one of the large flying fish creatures, but it didn't do anything to her beyond smash her off course. Once more, the strength and endurance and power she had drained from Jörmungandr was more than up to the task. She landed on the top of one of the manta ray like creatures, tearing into its back in its weapons with her clawed hands as her clawed feet scrambled for purchase.

Steve and the rest followed quickly on her heels as Cyclops blasted out again and again with full powered shots of his eye beams, riding the Blackbird forward even as its magical shields failed. The Blackbird was hit several dozen times in quick succession, and the magical defenses on it work swiftly overwhelmed. The engines exploded, the ship instantly going out of control, diving towards the cityscape below.

By that point, Boom Boom and the others had leaped out, leaving Nightcrawler to grab Cyclops, shouting out, "Time we left my friend!" As he did so.

Moments later, appearing in the cloud of sulfur the two of them found themselves on the rooftop of the building below where the black jet was now crashing to the ground nearby, smashing into a building. Both young men winced and hoped that was an empty building, a hope borne out a moment later by the professor's soothing voice in their head. Then Cyclops shook his head, as nearby explosions told him what direction boom boom had fallen in. His eyebeams, once more constrained by "Team, check in."

"Cyclops, this Cap. I'm with Boom Boom, we came down relatively near one another. We can see Psylocke in the distance and are moving to her position. Regroup on me, I'm in sight of what looks like a burnt out-building we can use as a recovery point," came the order, and Cyclops nodded grateful more than anything else that the communication devices they were using were proof against the alien jammers.

Given how many other things the two telepaths were doing, keeping Force Washington in communication with one another would have been a bit much. However, even as his eye blasts crashing out once more to catch one of the flying fish creatures in the side before it could turn

towards them, Cyclops made use of those various services. *“Professor, keep Ororo apprised of our position, we don’t want to be scooped up by her teleportation spell. Also make certain the ODMs stay put!”*

Nightcrawler teleported them away to another building, watching as the building they had been on simply exploded under the main guns of various flying fish-eel things. *“We couldn’t do any damage to the real aerial defenses over the city, only cut into the bottommost layer. If they jump now, they’ll be slaughtered.”*

“Understood Scott,” Charles reported. *“And do not despair, project Black Dragon is out at sea at present. I am in contact with its captain and he is moving into Chesapeake Bay.”*

Cyclops couldn’t take the time to reply as he raced after Nightcrawler into the building, all of the buildings around them coming under fire from Skimmers trying to pin them in place as the same flying fish things turned away from their previous target. Nightcrawler chopped into the service door leading deeper into the building and moments later they ran down the stairs.

The top of the building exploded behind them, sending both men sprawling even as Nightcrawler grabbed Cyclops and teleported them further down the stairwell. *“Gaaa…”* Cyclops grumbled, his helmet absorbing the impact of the stairs while Nightcrawler, the poltroon, landed on his feet.

“Sorry, Cyc, but I figured speed was better than landing safe, ja?” Nightcrawler chuckled, trying to sound as if he was having fun. But the sight through a nearby open doorway of several bodies in what must have been some kind of office killed any sense of comedy.

The whole building began to shudder around them, and Cyclops pushed himself to his feet, pointing towards a window they could see past the bodies. *“OUT!”*

Nodding Nightcrawler grabbed him again, and the two teleported away, out into the open air of the alleyway between this building and the next. There, Cyclops reached out, grabbing an emergency fire escape, while his other hand held onto Nightcrawler’s arm. He held on for a second as Nightcrawler got his bearings, and teleported them both down to the ground, rolling as they did to kill off their momentum.

As he came up, Cyclops’ beams blasted out this time at several Chitauri roaming the streets ahead of them. A single wide angle blast smashed them off of their feet and the alleyway entrance, and then Nightcrawler was on them, one sword stabbing down as a pistol appeared in his other hand, firing at a still distant target. But above were still more skimmers coming toward them, and dozens of infantry leaping, crawling along buildings or running towards them, firing as they came.

In this, Corvus Glaive's force allocation had come to the fore. Like Gamora, he had emphasized bringing in large amounts of infantry along with his anti-air platforms, unlike Nebula or Proxima. This would mean the fighting inside the city would be vicious.

"Charles, direct us towards where Cap and the others are," Cyclops ordered, even as he turned his beam on the wall of a building across the street.

Taking this as his cue, Nightcrawler teleported them forward, almost too quickly, as the beats of concrete were still falling into the open hole Cyclops had made. But this got them behind and out of the way of the invader's fire. Several Chitauri turned towards them, but by that point, the two were trying to push through and away.

"Head right and left when you push out from that building," Charles ordered. *"Iceman has met up with them and..."*

The professor's words stopped at that point, as he didn't need to elaborate. Ahead of them several buildings were coated by frost, and Polaris hovered above them, her powers tearing at any skimmer or eel-thing that came close. But the infantry were still swarming, towards them, some freezing, others being attacked by the rest of Force Washington.

In this manner, all of them had gotten down to the ground easily enough, but they had also attracted quite a lot of attention. Which was precisely what Cyclops and Steve wanted. *Maybe in concentrating on us, they'll stop killing the civilians.*

Cyclops nodded at Cap, who nodded back. For nearly thirty, perhaps as long as fifty minutes, the team fought their way through the city, but it quickly became clear that the Chitauri were not going to let up. Worse was the carnage they waded through with every block the team raced along or building they entered. Bodies, sometimes hundreds of them, were scattered everywhere. The team passed a park, where there had been literal windrows of dead. Numerous doorways were filled with still more dead, gunned down as the people within tried to escape, to run outside.

And after fifty minutes, it became clear to the whole team that, while the Chitauri were diverting large numbers of troops to them, they hadn't stopped their depredations throughout the city. It only took seeing a few Chitauri turn to them from having gunned down civilians or blasting into buildings to realize that.

reached out to Charles, thankful for his most recent experiences in using telepathic communications. *"Charles, there are far too damn many fucking Chitauri in the city. We're bringing them down on us, but you need to warn whoever is in command that they need to wait a bit."*

"They've already discovered that, Steve, Cyclops," Charles answered, broadcasting his words to the entire team, causing Boom Boom to miss her next shot with her powers. Psylocke however

covered for her, the older woman's rifle blasting the Chitauri in the face. *"But we can't wait. Bringing in any help as we get them out is better than none if we really want to stop them from killing civilians."*

By that point, Storm had used her teleportation powers four times more, teleporting out several hundred blocks worth of civilians from the city, each teleportation taking thirty to forty blocks of area. At the same time, more than two battalions worth of marines and army troops had been sent in. But of those units, which varied wildly in size and disposition, only about a company and a half was still in the city fighting. The others had been ambushed and wiped out, costing the Chitauri, for certain, but not doing anything to reclaim the city. Storm was doing a far better job of evacuating the civilians, thankfully.

There was some good news, though. *"One of the intact platoons is actually quite close to you, and you are entering a zone that Storm already cleared of civilians."*

Grinning evilly, Cyclops shouted, "Time to stop running for a bit folks. Avalanche, Polaris? We're clear of civvies. Go wild!"

"OOORAAH!" Avalanche shouted. From where he had been hiding nearby in the third story of a badly truncated office building – it had lost at least four floors to the Chitauri – he pointed his fists down at the ground, shouting, "Let's RUMBLE!"

"Ooh, my god that was lame, kid!" Hawk-eye muttered from near his protégé, taking a shot at one of the Chitauri firing at them.

But he couldn't argue with the results. The whole street leading up to the ice-strewn zone the team had forted up in shivered, shook and began to come apart, bits of rubble stabbing upward, while other buildings along the road shattered, collapsing and killing the aliens within. Meanwhile, Polaris tore the bits of metal out from many of the buildings around them, hurling them up into the air at the incoming skimmers, smashing dozens, before raining down smaller bits of metal onto the infantry below.

This and Cyclops smashing another eel-fish thing out of the air was able to gain them a small breather. Charles used this time to further explain where the nearby regular troops were in relation to their current position. Instantly, the group began to move in that direction, but soon were forced away. The Chitauri kept coming after them, the bodies piling up around them as Force Washington moved as a unit but were unable to break contact. They were forced to retreat away from the main thrust of the enemy, entering an area of the city that Storm hadn't cleared of civilians yet, much to everyone's chagrin. And with the team there, she couldn't do so now. Still, Charles was at least able to warn the locals help was coming.

"Note to self, decoys and smoke bombs," Cyclops grunted, as he ducked into one of the buildings nearby. The numerous Chitauri crawling along the opposite wall fired, trying to pin

him in place, while skimmers began to fly down, Polaris too busy dodging from from the distant manta-rays to stop them.

“Right! If we’re going to be fighting these kinds of numbers, we will need any advantage we can get,” Avalanche muttered from nearby. “And that the Chitauri don’t believe I using cover much.”

“Yeah, they keep on breaking cover to try and close with us, whoopie,” Iceman grunted, thankful for his ice transformation form as a bolt of green energy went through his arm. “FUCK, but there are so many of them!”

“I’d estimate at least eighty thousand, maybe four times that across the whole city. Not including the cyborg constructs,” Natasha announced grimly. “And more coming in all the damn time. They load up on their people carriers, put down at the center, and then move out from there.”

"Rogue, have you run into anything that has actually bothered you yet?" Steve asked, his tone almost flippant, even as he engaged several of the Chitauri in hand-to-hand. He had leaped down on them from his own hiding place a moment ago, and none of them had attempted to retreat enough to use their plasma-based weapons on him just yet.

This proved to be a mistake on their part. The first alien realized this when Cap's shield took him in the leg, deadening all feeling in the limb, and causing the alien to collapse onto its side. But Captain American already twisted around, using the impact of that blow to twirl into another strike to the side of the head of another alien, shattering its visor and eye within.

A kick took a third in the chest, hurling him back into a fourth which tried to raise its rifle after seeing his first two fellows fall. The plasma weapon fired wildly into the wall of the building next to them, and Stephen charged forward's, smashing his shield face first into that alien, crushing its nose, such as it was, and the visor it wore, hurling it backwards, before finishing off the already wounded alien at his feet.

Before Rogue could reply to Captain America's question, a shout from nearby drew their attention even as Cyclops and Psylocke began to fire up at several skimmers there were flowing down into the streets towards them from on high. "Holy shit! It's Captain America! I honestly didn't think the voice in our heads was telling the truth there!"

From the blasted remains of a two-story building to one side, which might once have been a home, several dozen men and women appeared, flowing out of two entrances, one entrance leading down to the basement, and the other leading into the first story of the building. Several others climbed out of windows from houses nearby which had been practically flattened. Some looked like an extended family, five men, three women, several kids. Others looked like single folk, all of whom had taken cover together, caught here when the Chitauri reached this segment of the city. All of them were civilians, dirty, their clothing tattered and burned in

places, but staring at Captain America and the costumed heroes with him as if they were the second coming of Christ.

Few of them were armed. A few had taken up energy weapons from the enemy. Others were armed with personal weapons the peacetime use of which none of the superheroes bothered to question.

After all, I wager there were a lot of looters for a few hours... then the reality of the alien invasion kicked in as they cut down store owner and rioter alike, Natasha mused grimly, before a chilling thought hit her. OH, fuck... of all the times to be led by a pair of boy scouts...

Cyclops and Steve exchanged glances, but there was really no question as to their priorities. They couldn't just leave these civilians, not unless they could get Storm to teleport them away. But with Team Washington so close, that was impossible.

And then Cyclops was back to firing up at the incoming Chitauri, shouting out orders to his team to spread out, while Captain America moved towards one of the men, who had come forward from his people, also shouting orders for the most of them to get back into cover. Taking cover behind a wrecked car where it had plowed into a tree after it's driver had been killed and the forwardmost segment of the car turned into Swiss Cheese, he asked. "What's your name?"

"Er, Martin, sir." The man answered, scratching at his bald head for a moment, the odd look on his face fading as the battle above them began to ratchet higher, and beams of plasma began to strike all around them. "God dammit! Get back undercover you idiots!" he roared to his folk.

Without looking Steve raised his's shield and blocked several bolts coming towards them, his vibranium shield absorbing the heat based attack easily. Then he whirled, hurling his shield up and into the bottom of a skimmer that had moved to hover just above them after dodging around a blast from Cyclops. The blow from the shield sent the skimmer careening into a building to one side, and when the Chitauri aboard tried to leaped clear, Psylocke and Natasha took them under rapid fire with her rifle. "Martin, how many people you have that could fight?"

"Er... Well before this, I would've said not many of us would be up for this kind of thing. But I don't suppose that matters does it?" The other man asked, his tone making it a rhetorical question.

"Not so much, no. Get everyone who hasn't already to grab up some weapons from the dead Chitauri. If you can they should give you enough punch to take on the Chitauri at least at the street level," Cap ordered blocking incoming fire with his shield again.

The next second, one of the large eel fish began to fire at them from just above the top of one of the nearby buildings. The beam crashed into the ground in front of Psylocke, hurling her through the air. The telepath who had been trained as a ninja by Mojo rolled as she landed,

grimacing, and the beam continued on its way, pushing towards where Steve was talking with the locals. "Watch out!"

But then, Rogue grabbed up a chunk of masonry and hurled it at the giant fish, smashing it out of the sky and into another building. The skyscraper started to collapse above it, burying it for a moment in a slide of loose rubble and knocking the beam off course.

Yet there were others already moving on in on their position, and hundreds of skimmers were pushing forward despite all Polaris, could do. There were just too many of them, and she couldn't concentrate on keeping them at bay and dodging the longer-ranged fire from the floating bulwarks.

It was time to add more avenues of attack into the equation, Cyclops decided. "Rogue, go wild, leave us here and move! Push straight as you can towards Capitol Hill. Team, protect the civilians until they're back undercover." Cyclops ordered, his eye blast crashing out again to smash into one of the incoming giant fish. "Hawkeye, Widow, tell me you two have some means of creating smoke or something!"

Then there were dozens of Chitauri charging towards them, racing along the sides of buildings or leaping up over the blasted shattered remnants of cars, using the smoke of them to close the distance firing as they came. The locals began to return fire even as they fell back into cover again, with Steve and the rest of the Custodes Mundi on hand doing their best to cover them as they did. Still, several of them died joining the dozens of corpses that were within sight on this one street alone.

But Rogue's move had the proper impact. The various large eel-fish things twisted around, following Rogue, the one who had been determined as the greatest threat. This left the aliens without enough firepower to dig the defenders out in this small segment of the city. As they fell back, Hawkeye and the others dueled with the Chitauri, using the cover far better than the aliens seemed intellectually able to.

Doing his part for this, Cyclops fired several blasts, covering the others before in turn ducking into the opening of the store, some kind of electronics store he thought, as the fire of several skimmers met where he had been standing previously.

Five of the Chitauri followed him into the building, but Nightcrawler popped into existence behind them, blaster and sword lashing out as Cyclops turned at bay. A second later all of them were down. But a family who had previously been hiding nearby in the apartment above the store screamed as several more Chitauri came in through the windows on the second floor.

"Schiess mich seitlich (fuck me sideways)!" Nightcrawler hissed in anger, and raced upstairs with Cyclops staying put, providing cover fire for the Black Widow and Iceman as they raced towards them. Iceman was looking tired, the continued large-scale use of his powers draining him. But he kept up with Hawkeye until

Hawkeye twisted around and dove into an open hatch leading down into some kind of basement. Iceman was able to get to the previously glass window of the electronics store Cyclops was taking cover in, and dove in, landing awkwardly. "Hey, Cyc, um, can we talk about my payment for this whole hero thing? I got to say, I think your recruitment speech was kind of underselling it."

"Take it up with His Imperial Majesty after this," Cyclops quipped, still firing.

At that point, Black Widow joined them. She hurling herself through the shattered window, rolling to a stop and twisting in place with all the elan of a trained ballerina, her rifle barking in her hand.

"There are too damn many Chitauri! I don't think they have any kind of squad or company type organization, but they are everywhere!" The former Russian spy growled. "They're coming up behind us again, and from the north too."

"It's the same problem everywhere. I just had hoped that we would be bringing the Chitauri down on us, stopping their depredations on the civilian population. But they're just absorbing everything we do," Cyclops answered worriedly. "Rogue, Avalanche, Iceman and Polaris are doing their best but..."

Cyclops broke off as he watched his girlfriend, almost out of sight down the street by this point, be smashed in the back by a bolt of plasma from one of the giant flying fish who had shifted around to target her. Rogue didn't even seem to feel it, simply charging forward into a clump of Chitauri that had foolishly dropped down from the sides of the building to try and fire at where Avalanche had taken cover.

"Right. It is their damned air superiority that is giving us problems. Whenever we're moving out in the open, they take us under for so much fire we need to fight our way free, while all the while bringing up more infantry." The former spy glanced to one side, shaking her head. "And while a part of me agrees with Captain America's priorities, the bigger part of me thinks it's really fucking **stupid** to try and stay here and protect a small group of civilians when we should be moving on!"

As they watched, one of the buildings where the group of civilians who had been fighting back were hiding in was peppered by a few skimmers. Several Chitauri leaped down from behind the building, charging forward into the rubble. Short screams announced they had found several targets, even as Steve and Psylocke tried their best to defend them.

All of the Skimmers and Chitauri who had been part of that bit of actions were suddenly screaming as bits of their cyborg additions were pulled out of them at different angles. From the rubble all around girders and jagged chunks of metal rose once more, smashing into skimmers and other giant flying fish above the area where the Custodes Mundi had tried to go to ground.

"This is Polaris, I'm coming in hot and need some cover!" came a shout over the team's coms.

Hawkeye fired up an arrow from his hiding place, the thing shrieking in the air like a lost soul. Instantly Polaris dove down and into the basement where he was, pulling the shutters of the door closed behind them with a flare of her polarity power.

In the ruins of what had been a storage basement, Hawkeye stared at Polaris, who shivered, shaking her head woozily as she reached into one of her pouches. "You okay, girl?"

"No. Flipping manta-things! Three of their beams caught me at once, tore through the magical shielding I had. Good news, my scale suit was able to stop them from cutting me in half. Bad news, getting hit hurts like a bitch! My body feels like it's one giant bruise," Polaris mumbled around an energy bar she'd just pulled out. "Damn but I hope these things boasting about instant energy is right."

Snorting, Hawkeye grabbed her arm, dragging her back and away from the hatch they'd entered the basement by. "Come on, let's get away from here for a bit."

Polaris grunted in agreement, and the two of them were up the stairs leading into a tiny kitchen by the time the Chitauri started to blast through the metal hatch.

The two of them made their way up to the other building and out the other side, finding that the roads on that side of the conflict were surprisingly empty of infantry. The skimmers but Cyclops gave them cover fire. Unfortunately, they saw Polaris and Hawkeye, and moved into the attack. Nightcrawler appeared on one of them a second later, his sword flashing down and into the engine of the thing, while Cyclops blasted four of them out of the sky with a single beam of power.

"Way to make a woman feel inadequate," Black Widow grumbled, shaking her head as she looked down at her plasma rifle. Her stingers, the weapons she had routinely used for years as a member of SHIELD, hadn't lasted more than thirty minutes. The rifle had come from a kit she had been given as a field agent by Sir Dennis, her nominal immediate superior normally.

"Eh, in this kind of fight even my power's not as good as some others. Without Avalanche we would have been overwhelmed long since by the enemy infantry or without Polaris the skimmers," Cyclops answered with a shrug, as he led the way out onto the, for the moment, empty streets of airborne enemies. *"Professor, tell Storm. We need more anti-air guns assigned to the forces being teleported in! We're trying our best, but we're not stopping the massacre, and it's the damn skimmers that are the hardest to deal with."*

Professor X was still monitoring the minds of all the Custodes Mundi in the battle in America's capital, and now acknowledged Cyclops' point. By this point he had nearly bitten through his lips as he felt the minds of people throughout the city, some of whom he had been in communication with, dying under the weight of the invasion. The psychic impact of it was

beyond anything he had felt, not having been so mentally involved with even the war in Genosha months back. There was a difference between putting up a wide shield on the Astral Realm to protect from attacks from that sphere, and being connected to a man telepathically as he died a violent, painful end.

"Storm's now bringing people out in even larger groups, she's moved on to her third base so far. The locals around both the first two have been inundated with the civilians. We've got eight companies of infantry, both marine and army within the city, and the army units even brought in some anti-air guns."

"Without the fire power and mobility of the orbital drop Marines, they can't handle the number of skimmers and those big suckers!" Steve protested. He had gotten the group of civilians they had met into the nearest subway entrance. For some reason it seemed the Chitauri were wary

But some new helps arrived from the Chesapeake. Look to the skies Cyclops."

Cyclops did so and saw six beams of ravaging energy flashed across the sky. They weren't aimed as far as he could tell at any one target, rather they were simply sizzling through the air, each about as wide as a man's outstretched arms. The color was a deep red tinted with purple, not a color that Scott had seen before.

But it was very obvious that blasts of energy had done a tremendous amount of damage. Even a near miss had sent several of the giant flying fish to crash into the ground, screams of pain from the creatures showing that whatever else they were, the giant flying fish were still in some manner alive. And that the beam was insanely hot.

But that was nothing in comparison to the Chitauri units caught in the direct beam. More than a dozen manta rays were sliced straight through, like slugs hit by a welding torch, some falling in pieces, others simply cored entirely from one end to the other. Twelve of the eel-fish-things were equally dealt with. Neither units shields seemed to even register to the strange attack.

As Cyclops and the others watched, the Chitauri aerial units scrambling around, a new female voice was heard over the Custodes Mundi's radio, sounding almost tinny, but buoyant and with a certain Bronx twang. "Have some dragon fire, you bastards! This is the Black Dragon, BB-62, New Jersey online!"

Scene break

An hour into the assault on Washington, significant aerial assets of the Chitauri had broken off under Corvus Glaive's command, heading towards the nearest Navy base at Hampton Roads. There, the experimental battleship New Jersey had been working through its latest patch of tests, despite it being nearly the break of dawn.

Yawning and sipping at his proper navy coffee, Captain Andre Maddox shook his head fondly as he looked around his bridge for a moment, taking in the hustle and bustle everywhere. To one side a trio of scientists poured over the latest data readings from the consoles that linked to the various generators which had been installed into the hull of the battleship New Jersey. To his other side, a communications officer was going through a series of tests on the internal communications lines to the various other departments of the ship. And near the back of the bridge, several junior officers were being worked through their paces on the tactical map by a young lieutenant.

Maddox knew that elsewhere on the ship people were starting to move, the early morning watch and the various engineer teams slowly starting their day. More than three hundred men, all of whom looked to Maddox for leadership, even though the ship was, up to this point, a harbor queen, and that wasn't even a fourth of its normal crew complement. Despite all the work being done to turn the mothballed ship back into a ship of war, and moreover, one able to survive in this new age, they had yet to truly take to the ocean once more.

And no, the trip down from where it was mothballed to here doesn't count, Maddox repeated to himself, snorting, his smirk hidden behind his coffee mug, sighing faintly as he moved to stare out one of the nearby viewports, seeing the lights around New Jersey lighting it up for now.

Not even a year ago, everyone in the Navy thought that the time battleships was over and carriers were the new queens of the ocean. And then we learn that aliens are out there, and that most missiles our fighters can carry are too small to do much damage to even their land-based mechanized units. That missiles can be shot out of the sky. And then that artificial intelligence Enterprise comes along with its strange offer to help us bring about the advent of the battleship once more.+

Andre wasn't certain how much of that was rumor, and how much was reality, how much E had to really jumpstart this program, and how much was typical American desire to have a very big stick all on their own. But whatever the truth was, Enterprise had spent almost as much time on this project as many of the engineers, more so than even Tony Stark, who had been brought in almost as soon as his house arrest had been ended.

The fruits of their labor was obvious from where he stood near the front of the bridge, able to look out and down to the main deck of the battleship below, lit up by the lights of the naval base all around them more than the dawn, which was still at least an hour away.

There, the traditional cannons of the battleship had been upgraded. While the turrets remained, and the new guns retained the three-barrel-per turret, those barrels were very different, as was the interior of the turret, upgraded to use a new kind of energy-based weapons system that utilized technology Maddox didn't really understand. At one point one of the scientists had explained it to him, but the explanation had gone over his head. Essentially, the weapons first solidified then superheated bits of seawater or something (that was the part

that went over Andre's head), to such a degree that they became the fifth element of matter, plasma, and then shot it out in a bolt of energy.

A blast of power was far, far hotter and far more dense than the beams of the various rifles that the Custodes Mundi or Avalon Empire used. And, obviously, larger by far. Weapons fit for a battleship. Weapons that matched New Jersey's old appellation of 'the Black Dragon'.

The antiair guns had also been completely overhauled, and the central-most turret, the one nearest the battle conn, had been replaced by a missile system. They didn't have many missiles for that system just yet, at least not offensive ones, only fourteen all-purpose missiles. But what they did have was hundreds of missiles designed by Tony Stark to release flak and drones. Drones that would pick off incoming fire, immolating themselves in sacrifice for their mothership, or create separate radar images, sensor clones to draw in enemy fire, much like the ones the Ravens used but on a larger scale.

And the guts of the ship had also been replaced or revamped. A lot had been left in place, and the armor remained, as did the engine. But connected to that engine was a new generator, one of two, which, like the various blisters on the outer armor, were entirely new. *Not one, but two arc reactors. It boggles the mind how much energy that implies. One for the shields, the engine and internal power runs. The other one entirely devoted to the guns.*

Shaking his head once more, Maddox turned away from the view, moving through the bridge, deciding he would walk the ship for a time, see if everything was working as it should be. *I want everything shipshape when it comes time for our trials in two months' time, and there is sooo much to do still!*

Then, alarms began to well throughout the base. Moments later, Andre hung up the phone on which he'd been talking with the base commandant. His face was pasty white almost as he turned to the nearest officers, formally announcing, "All ships to battle stations. All civilians to be put off the ship immediately unless they can help us get ready to fight and know the risks."

The klaxons still going on all around him, Maddox marched towards the man manning that position on the bridge. "Radar operator, tell me we are connected to the base's systems," Maddox growled, his tone implying that they had better be, or else Maddox was going to gut the man, metaphorically of course.

Normally, the ship would be relying on its own radar section. But this late at night, there would only be one man on duty of a ship in port normally on the bridge let alone down in the radar and sonar room. Considering that the New Jersey was also supposedly not ready for sea yet, it barely had any sensor operators, let alone its full radar section.

"Yes, sir. Our radar's coming online...or will as soon as I can get a few ratings to race down there and push some buttons," the man said with all of the courage of a young man put in an impossible position at the crack of dawn hyped up on lots of navy coffee. Maddox could relate

and approved. "We've got... Well, we've got a hundred plus jetfighter-sized bogies coming in from the south, surrounding what looked like... Sir, the radar readings on the larger bogies make them look like small eels or something, I've never seen the like."

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

Maddox turned to look at his executive officer, who looked as if he had tossed his uniform on in a hurry and missed several bits. Considering everything else going on, Maddox had to appreciate his priorities. "True. Get down to engineering XO, I already shouted down at them a little bit, but if the scientists try to give you lip, toss them over the side. I want every civilian aboard the ship either off or working nonstop to bring our guns and generators online. And those that stay should know that we will be doing what we can to fight this invasion, or whatever it is. They will be putting their lives on the line if they stay aboard."

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

"The only one I can call. A ship tied to port is not a ship at all but a target. I refuse to let New Jersey go the way of the Arizona. This ship will be moving in ten minutes by hell or high water," Maddox growled.

The XO nodded saluted, and rushed off, while one of the tactical officers looked up from where he had been looking over the radar analysts shoulders. "Those flying squiggly things don't look to be big enough to be battleships. Destroyers maybe, but not battleships. Still, they are moving fast sir. The Air Force is on its way in but..."

For a few moments, the tactical officer, Maddox, and the sensor specialist watched the radar as four squadrons of jet fighters, their positions marked by green dots on the screen, flew out from the naval base to engage the incoming alien units. Foolishly, two of the squadrons attempted to dive into the enemy formation to attack what they must have thought were bombers of some kind. The planes fell, all twenty-four of them wiped out for only four of the enemy jet fighters. The others fared a bit better, but still apparently got too close.

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

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

The young man wasn't his actual tactical officer, being only a first lieutenant, but he was the only one on the ship right now. Somehow, Maddox didn't think that they'd be getting many officers over from the base's bachelor quarters with all this going on. It was a fifteen minute

drive from those quarters to the ship, which was one reason why Maddox had bucked tradition and moved aboard the ship now rather than when it was ready for its shakedown cruise.

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

One of the bridge crew said "Sir, were already getting fluctuations in the energy systems... it's exceedingly difficult to regulate the energy output. I recommend we bring the AI online... the decoy launcher is powering up now too."

Maddox grumbled a bit at that. but nodded understanding the necessity especially now.

This was part of what E and Tony had been up to from the start. The fact was to watch the two arc reactors, control the energy requirements for the Hellebores, the shields and the rest, was so high that you either needed several hundred experienced scientists and engineers to manage everything – with accompanying sectors of control and consoles – or an AI. Admittedly, the military liked the idea of the redundancy this implied, but they just didn't have the people who could handle this. Not without gutting their nuclear submarine fleet anyway, the engineers of whom were the closest they had to experts on similar systems.

Moreover, the ship didn't have enough of its crew present to really fight the ship on its own. If the AI could take over firing some of the guns and managing the energy output of the generators, that would free up a lot of engineers for other tasks. "Do it. And make damn certain that all of our mooring cables are cut! Get us moving as soon as possible, helm!"

"Sir, the enemy has hit the outer edge of the base's anti-air envelope! And they're not stopping," the sensor specialist shouted. "Repeat, they are not stopping... sir, those smaller flyers are making a mockery of our anti-air. I don't think the bases is knocking down more than one per gun before they are taken out. Estimate... four minutes before they push over the docks area."

Grunting at that, Maddox moved over to the southernmost porthole, staring out. The base was so large that Maddox couldn't hear things, but thankfully the bridge was so high up in the conning tower of the battleship he could see directly out over the horizon. With darkness still trying to fight the dawn light, he could make out a dozen sources of blinding green light, the green bolts stabbing downward. Here and there a flicker of blue energy appeared, perhaps the sight of a shield? *On something that small!? FUCK.*

"Coms, get the XO on the line, we need our engines up and going now!" Maddox nearly snarled. He knew he should be trying to project an air of calm, but right now, he just couldn't. No ship captain worth his salt wanted to be caught in this kind of physician, and his earlier words to his

XO came back to him again, the fear of any American skipper rearing up once more. *I refuse to have this ship go down like the Arizona!*

Two tension filled minutes passed but William's initial quick reaction to the blaring of the sirens had worked in the ships favor.

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

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

"Sir, the enemy is coming within range of the main rocket launcher. Permission to..." the tactical officer trailed off under his captain's stare and nodded. "Firing as soon we lock on target."

The rockets had the range for an incredibly short amount of time. The enemy fighters were incredibly quick, closing the range swiftly even as they dodged around the outgoing rockets. Soon, the anti-air guns on the ship and around the docks began to fire at the distant targets as equally distant sounds of energy weapons discharging and a strange high humming noise began to penetrate to the bridge.

But finally, the ship was moving. Maddox could feel it underneath him as New Jersey began to power out and away from the docks. Its screws churned the water at a slow pace for now as the helmsman turned the ship out towards open water, but slowly, too slowly.

There was a loud "FSSXCRK!" sound, audible even over everything else, and a naval rating at the back of the ship manning one of the anti-air guns hollered into his intercom, his voice tinny over the system into the bridge. "Jesus, those things are fast! Anti-air rockets aren't doing much! We need to hit one of the fuckers with four missiles each time to knock down the shields! And our guns are doing even worse, we can't keep them locked in! But at least our guns make them break off their own damn firing runs. I repeat, the small things, they look like... well midair jet skis almost, have shields! And the big things have range! Eel looking fuckers are hovering well above the rest, they've got anti-missile guns on their sides, one main gun in their mouths."

Making a mental note to look up that seaman's name and praise him for his good reporting under a stressful situation, Maddox stared out into the slowly receding darkness of the base around them. Now that the battle was all around them, he could more easily see the strikes of the skimmers and the larger creatures, tearing into buildings throughout the base.

Nearby, a frigate, a Coast Guard patrol craft that had come in for repairs to its engine, was simply annihilated by a blast from one of the eel things, and the destroyer Templeton took two strikes. It began to sink where it had been docked as what crew it had aboard abandoned ship.

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

Better than that small bit of vengeance, the New Jersey was finally pushing out away from the docks. They still hadn't gotten fully away, but the aliens didn't seem to be able to differentiate it from any of the other targets within the naval base. As he watched a few more skimmers went down from antiair fire, and the shields around one of the larger creatures flickered into existence, showing it far more prominently than any of the others. None of the guns from below stopped it as it came to hover over the ground, it's multiple secondary guns blasting out and down into the base.

At the same time, it targeted the New Jersey with its main gun. Maddox saw it and grabbed at his chair. "Brace for impact!"

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

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

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

"AI, my name is Maddox, captain of the ship New Jersey. You are the AI for the United States of America's battleship New Jersey. You will defend the United States against alien enemies, starting right damn now! You are part of her crew, and you will be treated as a sentient being the moment you take a name for yourself. Now help us get the shields up before we join our little cousins in death this morning!" Maddox barked.

Those orders were enough to get the AI thinking, and it was connected to the Internet just as Enterprise had been. For a moment, just like Enterprise, the artificial intelligence was overwhelmed by the odd mass of data that could be found there. But, the AI quickly became

used to it, discovering humanity in all its bizarre glory, as well as the limited news about the current invasion. Humanity had enemies and had built the AI to help. This gave the AI purpose and direction, the most important things for a newborn AI. It also found out that ships were routinely, in fact almost always historically, given female pronouns. This gave the AI even more in the way of a shape, so to speak, to fit itself into.

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

A moment later, the one manned gun turned and the one unmanned gun turret both turned. The manned one fired to the port at one of the larger groups of skimmers, and for the first time, the Hellebore cannons that Enterprise had helped design fired in anger. Bolts of insane hot plasma zoomed across at practically knife range, going through their targets and out the other side and then high, high into the atmosphere before slowly dissipating. The three beams of energy left next to nothing behind, even near misses having been enough to flash fry the small skimmers.

The other turret, the one that was following the AI's command for now, fired directly aft at one of the larger enemy aerial units. And although it was far larger, that creature fared no better than a smaller guided brethren. Its shields barely winked into existence before being overwhelmed and it disappeared, torn asunder by a single volley of the battleship's three barrels.

More of the aliens began to converge on the ship. But now it was moving forward at half speed out towards the bay's entrance, guided by the helmsman out of the docking position. As he worked, that same dulcet tones began to speak into his receiver, warning him of debris from one of the mauled destroyers, and that a tugboat had erroneously come forward to try and help them.

"AI? I'm presuming you're online, but I would like a verbal confirmation," Maddox said, slowly coming down from his manic energy of the past forty minutes. The shields were up and they were holding, and by the gleeful look on the computer technicians' faces, there didn't seem to be anything else going wrong at present. But that did leave one a large issue at hand: whether or not the AI was entirely friendly.

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

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

Tony would not be disappointed. An image appeared there of a young woman, eighteen to twenty-two if Maddox was any judge. Short cropped brown hair was held underneath a Navy officers cap, matching the Navy officers jacket she wore, along with a dress skirt. But somehow, making it look almost like a Halloween costume given the body underneath. For that body, was in his opinion, the very definition of thicc. Wide hips, thick powerful looking thighs, large chest, almost equally large biceps, muscles bulging under tanned skin. All of it was there, along with a face both dangerous-looking, and welcoming at the same time. At her side, she held two large handguns, looking almost like something out of the Wild West, big and dangerous. "Sir, just call me Jersey. And I am online, ready to fuck these aliens up!"

Maddox began to smile at that, his smile only widening when some of the gunners began to report hearing the music of AC/DC coming over the intercoms. *Oh yes, I can work with this...*

Hours later, the Black Dragon was out at sea, it's guns firing into the air over Washington DC.

Scene Break

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

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

"ON THE BOUNCE, OH DAMNS!!" he shrieked, both fearful and elated at what would undoubtedly be his last chance in the saddle, so to speak.

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

the black dragon's fire had created. More than a dozen still died in the first few seconds. Indeed, more than eighty in fact were blown out of the sky almost immediately.

But thanks to continued fire from the distant New Jersey the majority of the full overstrength battalion landed, and instantly began to take cover or fire back. The heavy gunners laid down withering cover fire in particular. Many of them had been outfitted with anti-air weapons themselves, and soon ten of the large mantis-like anti-air guns, which did not have guns on their undercarriages, were falling towards the ground, riddled from fire from below. Two giant fish joined them swiftly, as well as dozens of skimmers, then more and more as the heavy gunners came online and began to disappear into the city, firing up at the anti-air defense, doing what they could to help tear it into pieces.

Within twenty minutes, even though the fighting forces of the humans were still vastly outnumbered, the boot was on the other foot. The ODMs were even more mobile than the Chitauri, and most of them were more heavily armed, with drones and advanced weapons that were simply better than the direct fire energy weapons of the common Chitauri. The alien weapons could still hurt them of course, but being able to shoot around corners, dodge and jump into the sky as easily as the Chitauri could evened up the playing field tremendously. And even better, several units of the ODMs came down near where the beacon had been moved to just outside Capitol Hill.

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

At the same time, the aerial units of the Chitauri also responded. Many of the giant fish, which had been busily destroying buildings or massacring civilians, twisted around, now moving purposefully out towards where the fire from the New Jersey and its accompanying destroyers had come from. The manta ray monsters floated higher up into the air, hoping to get away from the fire from the heavy gunners, losing several more of their number as they did.

And forces of Chitauri skimmers and infantry that had been pushing out into the suburbs of Washington DC now began to pull back inward. Acting like a giant fist trying to clench on to the sudden influx of enemies within the city proper, they came in from everywhere, as did the Chitauri infantry units.

This had an immediate impact. First, Storm's attempts to bring in more troops on the heels of every hundred block units she evacuated of people now began to bear real fruit. Within thirty minutes, full companies were being teleported into the city and were able to start moving about without being instantly jumped on. This tripled the number of infantry within the city. At the same time, Iron Man and the other flyers started to push in at the southernmost flank of the defensive line.

All the while, the distant New Jersey was making its presence known. The ship's original guns could fire at targets almost thirty-seven miles away. The hellebore cannons could fire at nearly three times that. This put them well beyond the sensor range of the alien cyborg creatures. And unlike the missiles of the American F-18s, the hellebore rounds sneered at any shielding the Chitauri aerial units had access to.

Force Washington was informed of all this by Charles, who had taken over all communications between the American units and the Avalon Empire units. Even now the Chitauri were still blocking most normal communications, making integrating the two allies forces into one difficult. But Charles could see through the eyes of the Five Star general who had arrived on scene, and the officers at the front made certain to inform their superiors, through Charles, where they were. So the Professor in his distant mansion had the best idea of what was going on across DC and shared it out with everyone equally.

Ducking into an alleyway, Cap found a doorway open ahead of him, where he took cover, using his shield to block incoming fire from two Chitauri. Using the team's coms, he directed Hawkeye to take the Chitauri from behind. Hawkeye and Psylocke did so, quickly joining him, and they were then joined by the rest of the team bar Rogue. She had taken Cyclops' earlier orders to heart and was now several blocks away still drawing down fire on herself, laughing as she walked through the enemy fire without much effort.

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

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

Hawkeye hummed in approval, while Avalanche shook his head, starting a back and forth between the group, all of whom were thankful to have a few minutes to rest. It had been at least two hours since they entered the city, and all of it had been in conflict.

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

Others were too far in the outskirts and would need to make their way deeper into the city via the subway systems to be any help where they were most needed. Thankfully, beyond surface

strikes shaking the underground, the Chitauri hadn't made any effort to stop the trains from moving, although there would no doubt be problems regardless.

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

Steve knew better than to give Tony outright orders. The man would ignore them just to be difficult.

Done with this latest round of orders, Steve asked, "Scarlet Witch, how are you doing on your end?" over the coms.

Scarlet Witch had broken off from the other flyers. Able to handle herself, she had moved to defend the westward area of blockade, working closely with several Air Force officers from bases in Virginia and West Virginia. They'd taken losses but working with her had kept them from losing too many planes.

"We're doing alright on this end. But if you think we're going to be able to break in anytime soon, I'd think again," Scarlet Witch answered, her voice somewhat pained. While she had become an experienced fighter by this point, the Scarlet Witch had never fought so many enemies in the air, and her legs had taken a hit from a skimmer that had ducked down when she had thought it was going to go up just as she had decided to dodge instead of renewing her magical shield in favor of attacking another skimmer. "I seriously need to get better at dual casting or switching from one cast to another," she grumbled, before coming back on task. "The Air Force is doing their best, but it takes two missiles to down a skimmer, and the big manta-things blast down too many for us to saturate their defenses."

"Damn it," Steve murmured. "At least the evacuation has picked up speed."

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

For a moment Steve and the rest of Force Washington looked at one another in silence. Iceman and Boom Boom were both looking green, while Cyclops' jaw, visible under his mask, was clenched in rage. Black Widow was looking a little sick, and Avalanche was repeatedly punching a nearby wall. All of them knew that regardless of their efforts, the death toll among the

civilians would make any event any of them had been involved in prior to this seem tame in comparison.

When Pinoptes spoke up once more, Steve feared that the AI would tell them precisely how many had died so far. But he should have known better. Instead, what Pinoptes words were far more welcome. "Moreover, Professor Richards and I have discerned where the jamming equipment is coming from, as well as where the Beacon, the device that allowed the Chitauri to open their dimensional portal, is located."

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

"I'm at the Holocaust Museum. Just got blasted through a building nearby, and let me tell you, the damage is around here and the bodies are..." Rogue's tone was extremely grim, killing Cyclops' exceedingly brief moment of humor.

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

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

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

Rogue answered in the affirmative and then signed off, and Cyclops hoped that she would be able to get to it quickly.

A blast of energy caused everyone to look out the window and up into the sky as three more streaks of hellebore fire flashed out from New Jersey wherever it was. "What are they firing at?"

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

"Right. Make sure there captain is reaching out to the Army and Air Force, hopefully the Air Force has some more planes to send out there. Or if the captain thinks he can handle it, we can

maybe create a Big Wing situation, bring all our jets in on one attack," Steve ordered, then went back to the map. Several things had changed in the last few seconds, and he took a few minutes to issue orders, getting in contact with the arriving infantry forces via Charles. I have to remember to push for more high-tech coms. Using the telepaths for this isn't the best use of their abilities.

Steve also took a brief second to wonder what voices in their heads would be doing to people's paranoia in the future, and their morale now, but hoped that Charles would sit on any instincts she had to control of the individuals she was so connecting to. Then he moved on, giving out orders to Cyclops and the others around them. "Cyclops, you will take Nightcrawler, Black Widow and Hawkeye with you. Shut down the comms jammers, and if necessary, keep in contact with Rogue to reinforce her. Beyond that..."

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

Scene break

About twenty minutes before Force Washington was given a brief break, Nick Fury was shaking his head. "How many guns do we have?"

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

And people, she didn't add. The group had gathered people to them thanks to Professor X helping them and other groups of survivors. But just as often, the men and women they gathered fell in battle. The first group, fifteen policemen, had fallen trying to defend a street from Chitauri skimmers. None of them had obeyed Nick's furious orders to try and retreat, fighting to the last without doing anything. The skimmers had absorbed their fire and slaughtered every civilian on the street and then Nick's remaining people had been forced to fight their way through several buildings before they were able to break contact thanks again to Charles helping to direct them.

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

Why this was, he couldn't say, and Charles hadn't hinted at anything in their telepathic communications. Nick had what most would call a dullard's nose, and none of the hanging bits

of garlic or whatever bothered him all that much. *Hell, how are they smelling at all? The Chitauri don't even look to have noses really.*

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

Two policemen who they had picked up in the last few minutes, shook their heads dryly at that, one of them very clearly still dealing with shock at how the day had been going. That was easy enough to understand in Nick's opinion. The grins on some of the other locals, those worried him a bit. Judging from how they dressed and had been acting since they'd joined up with his little troupe, several of them were probably criminals of some sort. Luckily they were outnumbered by the more regular citizens, men and women who had grabbed up some kind of weapon and tried to fight back against the Chitauri when many had tried to run away, trampling their fellows in their fear of being gunned down by the Chitauri.

Nick had seen a lot of horrible things in his life. He had lived through the horrors of WW2, led his Howling Commandoes against Strucker, Zemo and the Red Skull, seen labs, demon lairs, and concentration camps, even the horrors of Japan-occupied China. But he knew the sight of a mother and son being trampled to death by a crowd of fleeing civilians, many of whom didn't even notice what they were doing as they tried to run away from the fire of the Chitauri, would be joining his nightmares. And it wasn't the only such sight he'd seen today.

"Where do we go from here?" Another local asked. He dressed like a lawyer, but one who took his health seriously at least, and had proven to be a great shot with a pistol that he had apparently taken from the body of someone earlier that day.

Nick frowned a bit, wondering that himself. *"Professor?"*

There was no reply, and Nick frowned, but knew that probably meant that either Charles had no idea what they should do, or his attention was elsewhere. For all his immense telepathic power, Professor X could only concentrate on so many things at once. *Good to know that even someone like him has limitations, I suppose,* Nick thought, somewhat leery of telepaths at the best of times. As someone who had two lifetimes worth of national secrets in his head, that was only natural, but he could not deny how much help the professor had been today, guiding them through the city away from larger concentrations of Chitauri and toward civilians willing to fight back.

At the moment they were near Capitol Hill because he had hoped to get close enough to see what was going on within the Capital complex, maybe even reach one of the weapons caches there that he had been forced to hand over to the secret service once SHIELD had been dissolved.

But the whole place was crawling with Chitauri. They been forced to turn back several times and had lost at least a dozen of their men in their latest attempt to break out between two buildings. *And the fact my makeshift militia has been going through their ammunition like water isn't helping matters.*

"We need to pull back and rearm. Anyone who knows where we can get our hands on some guns? I'm afraid the ones I know about aren't reachable from where we are at the moment," Nick admitted. The first cache he, Agent Leo (or Leona to her friends which did not include her boss) had reached had helped, but the ammunition hadn't lasted, and they hadn't had enough hands at the time to empty it at the time regardless.

Whatever response the group was going to make was silenced by the hiss from their lookout. "Large group of Chitauri moving down the road, skimmers and infantry both. one of them's... different."

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

Being led by two men with flashlights, the group quickly moved through the sewers, then up to the next manhole cover. Lifting those things from below was not easy, and more than one of the men grumbled to themselves about how movies had lied to them for years about that. But eventually it was moved, and one of the slimmer women quickly poked her upper body up, purloined alien gun raised and moving in every direction. She had been a waitress before today, but now moved like a trained veteran.

She signaled at all clear and the group were moving up and out of the sewers quickly. But as Nick left the sewers, a skimmer flew overhead, banked sharply, and came down on them. Four of his people went down, their chests and heads exploding under the fire, and one of the men fell back into the sewer, smashing the next person, another woman, off the ladder, causing a chain reaction.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Realizing that Derek must've been the name of the dead man who had been caught half out of the sewer, Nick nodded, shaking his head. *Fuck, I haven't bothered to learn any of their names. Why bother when they might be dead all too soon?* That might have sounded cynical, but then, against just one skimmer the group had just lost a little under half its fighting strength. And judging by the wide eyes and shaking hands of a few of the others, they weren't going to be good for much.

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

Nick obeyed, with the rest of his people following quickly hiding themselves in the building. The blasted shattered remnant of a building really, the upper three floors having been destroyed, and all the windows having been blown out by whatever had hit it. It was also very obvious that the Chitauri had been through the building before, as they passed several bodies of office workers and others. One of the locals muttered that this was a recording studio at one point along with a local radio show. "Guess it's going to be off the air permanently now."

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

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

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

And on it was an alien. But this was not one of the normal facing up to this point. No, this guy was very obviously special. He was taller. He had an actual mouth rather than mask coverings, his features appearing almost lizard-like, with yellow eyes, a strange, ragged looking suit, and a large scythe in one hand.

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

The man, who had apparently beaten an alien to death with a metal bat - Nick wasn't certain he believed that but didn't care one way or the other - nodded firmly. "Time to put my attempt to enter the big leagues to work, I guess." He murmured, and began to crawl towards Nick, being very careful to stay as low to the floor as possible. All of them had learned by this point that being spotted meant death.

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

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

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

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

These humans have some decently armed jetfighters, and I have to keep them at arm's length. To say nothing of that seafaring battleship. Such a quaint concept, but one that obviously can be effective with enough technology and on the defense. I cannot allow it to just sit out there firing into the portal, blast it. That will take most of my Ripper units out of play. I also need a shield generator to be brought in quickly to defend the beacon just in case. That blasted green-scaled

female is tearing across the city directly towards it. I refuse to let such a, a simple danger defeat this beachhead!

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

Scene break

After listening to what Nick had passed on, Steve spent a few minutes before asking questions about where Nick had been, then Charles pitched in, announcing, *"I was about to warn Nick about Storm's teleportation. I think that I can lock onto this commander's mind, it is far more intelligent and... self-aware than the regular Chitauri. The regular Chitauri are almost like a hive mind in nature, perhaps because of the heavy cyborg surgeries they have gone through?"*

The older man's telepathic voice trailed off as he seemed to lose himself in thought for a second, before everyone seemed to feel Emma nudge him telepathically. "Er, regardless, I will be able to guide you straight to him."

"Can you reach out to Rogue as well? I think this calls for a change of plans," Captain America said, smirking a little bit.

Scene break

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But like his battle with the shadows, Harry dug deep, reflecting, *From my childhood to the battle with the basilisk, the numerous times I've been put under the Cruciatus and beyond. I have been practically trained to push through pain! Unfortunately, it looks as if this creature either doesn't feel pain or is instinctively dealing with it in a way that his two fellows couldn't. Should I be grateful that he isn't also noticing the stream of his magical energy I'm draining?*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Quickly, Krakkan capitalized like an animal seeing a weakness, pressing Harry so hard on the spiritual realm he could barely think for a time, but eventually Harry grew used to even that pain. Yet still Krakkan fought him hard. The creature didn't seem to have the magical knowledge necessary to match Harry spell for spell, but his instinctual command of the pocket dimension they were within, his bestial combat style, was throwing Harry off badly.

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

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

Scene break

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

All around Mystique, the battle of Paris ebbed and flowed, as more aliens arrived. But more ODMs originally assigned to the Russian theater also arrived, along with groups of British troops being ferried across via Kitty and her magic carpet, and French troops similarly from nearby, teleported into the city by Storm as she teleported civilians out just as she had done previously in Washington DC. By this point, Storm had cleared a large portion of the city, and a full division's worth of infantry troops had been teleported in, along with antiair brigades. The enemy in Paris hadn't brought in enough infantry to fight effectively within the buildings, and this was costing them in terms of how quickly they could shut down the human reinforcements.

Of course, outside the city, the skimmers were still performing cutting out expeditions. Dogfights and the battle in the English Channel were truly becoming nasty. The skimmer's shields and speed meant they were death on marines or armored units moving in the open... or through easily smashed buildings such as that which were found in the suburbs of the city of lights.

But in the central city, the French and British troops had taken the pressure off the ODMs, although judging from what Mystique was hearing from Diamond, the troopers were definitely not having it all their own way. Casualties were beginning to mount, as few of the weapons they had could damage the 'Rippers', and with them as near inviolate air support, the French couldn't use any large-scale units within the city. Worse, the Rippers were simply smashing

buildings down even more than they were firing at the humans, and a destroyed urban environment was deadly to even the best trained and armored troops.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Deal with me is it?” Mystique growled, also charging forward, her rifle still firing. The two of them exchanged green energy bolts as they closed charging towards one another down the corridor, then at the last minute, Mystique leaped upwards, aiming to jump over the woman. But the other blue-skinned woman leaped upwards as well, smashing Mystique up into the ceiling. Pinning her there for a moment, she wrapped her one hand around the shapeshifter’s throat, the other grabbing her belt. With that, she hurled her back down the way Mystique had come.

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

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

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

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

Mystique waited until the woman close to finish her off, her legs lashing out and catching the woman in the diaphragm, with enough force to drive the wind out of her. A double-handed blow to the side of the head as she leaned forward from the kick sent Gamora sprawling to one side, and Mystique tried to roll on top of her, bringing her claws back into play. But the woman caught her clawed hands by the wrists and turned them both onto their sides, slamming Mystique into the ground and then releasing her rolling away to put some distance between them as several Chitauri appeared in the doorway.

“Kill her!” Gamora ordered, pointing back to Mystique only to stare in confusion.

Damn, but this never gets old! Mystique had seen the Chitauri first when they had been rolling around, and had been transforming her body as they did, finishing the transformation just as

the alien girl threw her off. Now the Chitauri stared at the two copies of Nebula in confusion, their guns flicking from one to the other.

Her eyes wide with rage Nebula roared and charged towards Mystique. But then the front of the dance club exploded in words, and the Hulk roared out, "hulk smash! I do believe I'm getting the hang of this." As he used a portion of a Ripper he had torn off the creature to, yes, smash the Chitauri so hard one of them came apart. The other two were flung through the air. Two others had already been buried by the rubble of the Hulk's arrival.

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

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

Looking up from where he had just smashed an alien into a meaty kind of paste on the floor, the Hulk shook his head while above him, Ripper fire began to fall like hail. "That was quite nasty."

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

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

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

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

But Mystique was fast on the heels of the group transporting the beacon away. Forty minutes later, as the group of them tried to zigzag away to throw her off their scent, Mystique cut across their route. Getting ahead of them, she positioned herself in a building directly above them. When the clump of aliens carting the strange bit of technology around came within

sight, She opened fire. One alien fell quickly, while the others dropped the device and ducked into cover, their automatic instincts failing them.

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

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

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

Scene break

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

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

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

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

Instantly the battle changed.

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

Several dozen Doom Bots flew through the air towards it, ignoring the enemy fire to slam gauntleted hands against the outer shell of the energy shield the invading aliens used. Energy weapons specifically designed to breach shielding, a miniaturized and highly refined version of the gravity beams that the Avalon Empire's Ravens used against enemy ships, blasted into the shielding. The small shield, barely large enough to cover a city block, shattered easily. Two more Doom Bots flashed down past original three, and were in among the Chitauri quickly, wiping them out with precise strikes of fist or energy weapon.

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

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

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

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

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

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

he was still a tyrant. But he was accepted in a way that he had not been before, and that amused him.

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

Indeed, the future looked bright for both Doom and his people above and beyond this newest alien invasion. Latveria was quickly becoming one of the most well industrialized, technologically advanced nations in the world, and had grown in leaps and bounds thanks to the Eurasian War and Doom's taking advantage of it. They even had a presence in space, which no other nation could say bar Potter's Avalon Empire.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Within seconds, the first shield flickered out.

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

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

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

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

to that of a diamond or other type of gem than metal, and it's edge is amazingly thin. Fascinating.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

With that done, Doom slew the final alien around them, felling it with a bolt of power from his eye beams, leaving the green-skinned woman alone. This did nothing to halt her attack if anything she became even more frantic. Doom blocked her blows with his hands and forearms, allowing his system to make more readings on her weapons, while taking in her somewhat exotic alien beauty. Unbidden, his earlier thoughts on his wife, Lourdes and the Enchantress

came to mind as he took in her perfect, athletic form. *And if Doom is to expand his Empire into the stars as Potter has, perhaps...*

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

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

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

The woman's eyes rolled up in the back of her head and she fell senseless, only to be caught by Doom tossed over one of his shoulders. "I wonder what manner of prize you will turn out to be, alien woman? We shall see when my wife and I question you. Perhaps a source of information about the various empires out there that is not completely connected to Potter and his enterprises? That could be useful in the future, even after this invasion."

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

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

A moment later, his various satellites in orbit reported the closing of the portal in Paris had occurred not a few moments before the one he had closed here, and Doom chortled, shaking his head as he repeated some of his earlier thoughts aloud. "Which I doubt admittedly. After

all, Potter is an ally of Doom, and if he could not see off this kind of assault, would not be worthy of that appellation. I think, Mad Titan or not, these aliens will find that out to their cost.”

Scene break

Nor were Gamora and Nebula the only two members of the Black Order to face sudden reversals, although in Proxima’s case, her shifting fortune occurred well away from where she was currently fighting the Custodes Mundi team under Colossus.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Oh well, I’ve always been told I had a hard head.” He smashed his head against the wall beside him, creating a hole there which he quickly backed into. Within a second he had burst out of the wall underneath one of the Chitauri, reaching up and grabbing it by its feet, hurling it across the street at one of the two who had been about to move around the corner toward Morph’s previous position. The alien missile worked, and Morph quickly pulled out a rifle, a plasma rifle that Harry, Dani and the others had forced Morph to train with. He couldn’t really use projectile weapons despite his abilities, not unless he wanted to get rid of mass like someone was just expelling their own bones as projectile weapons.

He was able to gun down one of the Chitauri, before several of their bolts hit him, causing him to gasp, twitching backwards into cover wincing at the pain of his injuries to his side and lower thigh. Then he was rolling away from the doorway, morphing his body into the Thing’s for a

moment. The two Chitauri remaining charged through, but Morph was able to take them both from the side, crashing into and pummeling them into paste.

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

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

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

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

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

Scene break

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

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

Those manta ray things were really making a difference on this front, as well as defending the main portal, and the portal in China and Washington. Only Nebula and Gamora had decided not to make use of them. Gamora preferred to fort up and use infantry while Nebula was too

proud, too certain in their technological and numerical superiority to care what defenses the locals would have.

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

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

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

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

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

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

But Proxima simply snarled, wrenched her arms sideways and broke his grip, flipping away. Warpath's hatchet nearly took her in the side of her chest, but she used his own hatchet to batter it aside, even as a sudden scream came in over the radio into her head. The sound was not one made by a throat, rather it was the sound of a radio signal suddenly cut off.

"CrRKBZZZZZ!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Scene break

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Now, as the humans tried to push forward to reclaim their capital, the humans were paying an exorbitant price for their a few successes. Even now, an armored column that had been trying to move in from the north unsupported by their flyers had been ambushed by his skimmers, which had slaughtered the entirety of that column to a man, retreating before they could be bounced in turn by jetfighters.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He moved away quickly, jumping from one rooftop to another. An arrow was shot his way as he did so, followed by a bullet from nearby. But these were immediately responded to by his guards, the infantry closing in quickly on each point. And neither bothered Corvus, bouncing off

his armor or even his own scaled skull. A second later, Corvus had left the area he had been ambushed in behind, disappearing under an invisibility cloak he had been given by Lord Thanos for a moment. It would need to be recharged quickly, but it would let him break contact.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Corvus stared up at the sky in horror as the portal disappeared. "No, no, my lord, I have... I have **failed!!** You, you **monkeys** have made me fail! For that you will die!" He howled in fury and turned, striking Rogue across the face with the edge of his scythe, drawing a small bead of blood from her cheek as his scythe tried to cut through her scales only to barely leave what amounted to a kind of cut that a man would get while shaving.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Pushing himself to his feet, he grabbed his weapon, then charged forward, not at the green scaled woman, but at one of the other attackers, who had just come around the downed building. This one, a redheaded female apparently, gasped, ducking back, but wasn't able to fully evade his strike. It took her across the shoulders and down to the side, opening up her uniform in a welter of blood and guts. A second later however, even as she fell to the road, she disappeared with a pop of displaced air.

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

He then rolled forward to dodge a blow from Rogue. Rogue followed up, and Corvus was forced to retreat again, dodging back through an alleyway, calling down fire from above. The only

surviving Ripper from his reinforcements a moment ago turned in their direction, firing down at Rogue, halting her progress.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Grimacing, Cyclops looked around, making certain the enemy had been dealt with, and hoping that Black Widow and Boom Boom would be alright. They had both been teleported away by

their emergency medical arrays, but he wouldn't know until Una or Amelia contacted him if that meant they had lived.

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

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

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

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

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

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

End Chapter