

I am not Disney, Stan Lee, or a British lady.

It's here! It's finally here! ATP has, at last, won a poll, LOL. Nothing more to say there really, though I may be making a change in the future so it keeps getting updated more regularly. Despite the (ab)normal size of the chapters, going by the number of chapters left it is actually within a year of completion.

Summary of the last Chapter: After an extremely rocky start, the earthers and the Shi'ar High Command make plans. Everyone pretends to get along as everyone sharpens their knives in preparation for backstabbing one another the emperor not yet understanding that in any physical contest, his forces are vastly overmatched by magic, since magic to the Shi'ar is simply barbaric superstition based upon the mental instability known as 'imagination'. While the planning session starts to bear fruit thanks to the Shi'ar's information on their enemies and Reed's scientific genius, Jean follows up an odd observation and finds that Nightside of the Imperial Guard is primed to jump ship the moment she is able. A promise to help on this score is made.

Elsewhere, Nikolai and his team go into hiding, waiting to act when needed. A planet suitable for sacrifice is found, and Reed and Banshee started to work on the bait while Harry and the rest built the actual trap before Harry and his ladies found themselves in a strange meeting with the Phoenix Force and Death. This consultation changes their plans a tiny bit and makes them aware they cannot truly afford to kill Galactus, lest his death birth an even greater evil.

Regardless the battle commences, with Morg walking into the trap gleefully and calling his master before being attacked by the Imperial Guard on the planet. With Hela in the lead, the defenders held his attention while Galactus appears and is ambushed in turn by Harry, Steven, and Jean. In the ensuing battle more are injured or outright killed than not, but Morg is slain, and the Phoenix Blade is destroyed by a blade of it's opposite number. Galactus proves to be far tougher than they originally thought, but still susceptible to magic, and eventually, with everything on the line, Harry breaks out another Bloody Insane spell, using the power of antimatter to explode the star, producing a double-whammy that finally puts the World Eater down.

As Deathbird wonders what to do about these humans and D'ken's plans for them, Harry and the others lay down an ultimatum for Galactus, who, having been pushed closer to death than he has been in a very, very long time, agrees to their terms, and the two parties part ways, the humans wearily returning to their ship, and Galactus moving out into the depths of space.

This has been edited by [Old One](#) and [morde24](#), along with myself using Grammarly. I hope you all enjoy it.

Chapter 44: An Empire's Fall

Emma Frost, clad in her Diamond persona, leaned back, staring coolly across at the group of Russian representatives that she was meeting with, and trying hard not to scowl. Scowling or showing irritation got you nowhere with Russians, especially when they were being deliberately obtuse. Those across the table included a banker, General Barisov, Duma Representative Mikalikovo, who had led the Russian delegation at the peace talks, an industrial magnate who, as Emma Frost, Emma had previous dealings with, and another Duma delegate. Combined, these men represented the very top of the Russian government at the moment, given how the presidential and prime minister positions had been so badly eroded after the Eurasian War.

Before he had departed, Harry had left what amounted to a troika in charge of the various portions of his holdings in the solar system. Captain America handled the military side of things with the remaining Custodes Mundi answering to him and Piotr. Beyond always being on call in case of alien threat, they followed Steve's lead in most things. The EDF was running well by this point, so it didn't need any specific oversight, although Steve could intervene if Carol or someone else felt it was needed.

Meanwhile, Sage handled the majority of the business side. Again, this was almost to the point where her special talents were no longer needed to keep the industrial, and most importantly, the medical, side of things going, giving Sage time to devote to other pursuits like espionage.

Diplomacy and following up on new businesses and new business partners were left to Emma. With her connections in the Hellfire Club, Emma had made significant inroads on that front. More in the area of distribution and the creation of small-scale items than anything major really, but Fortress Mars and the various Ravens Nests being built in orbit were certainly becoming far more habitable thanks to her efforts, with several hydroponics gardens and several hundred miles of tunnels.

But on the diplomatic side of things, Emma had also been in continuing Harry's program to reach out to Russia. The tunnels – a word that truly did not do them justice - that the Russians and their allies had created before being tricked into launching the Eurasian War by the Dire Wraiths made them a massive resource. One Harry wanted to weld to himself by helping Russia become an industrial powerhouse to a far greater degree than ever before. However, as well as Emma and Harry got along with some of the Russian leadership, they were still getting pushback about a few of the specific demands to continue providing them with the technologies they requested from Magical Minds.

Not the medical technology, though. Harry had been very firm on that score, if somewhat limited in scope. Any soldier who had been injured in the line of duty got access to Magical Minds' medical equipment and potions, regardless of their nationality. With Ororo and Harry gone, they could not heal amputated limbs, but they'd made tremendous inroads in on

that score already before leaving. The resources they had left were slowly but surely dealing with the backlog of wounded and maimed.

It was also winning them a tremendous amount of goodwill across the entire globe despite some aspects of their social policies still being seen as controversial. After all, there were still anti-mutant groups and a few religious nuts who believed that the idea of aliens was some kind of American or British plot despite all evidence to the contrary. Fortunately they were few and far between in most of the world. The Middle East was... another matter.

This meeting was about one of the holdout points, or rather two of them. And while one was going about as well as she had hoped, the reaction to the other was honestly surprising her. It was unlike Mikalikovo in particular to simply be this obtuse and outright deny something and Emma was beginning to get annoyed.

Deciding to cut to the chase, Emma ignored the latest round of protestations and innocence to declare firmly, "Gentlemen. I can understand the desire to keep the full map of your tunnel system to yourself. I know how difficult it is to change a society's outlook on something like mutant rights, and you are doing a decent enough job there. Your concerns on that speeding up that task make sense and have been heard. But your unwillingness to admit you are still running a Super-soldier program is vexing. The so-called Winter Soldier Program has been on your books for more than a decade, and I fail to see how all of you can fail to recognize it."

She let the name hang in the air, but to her surprise, even with her telepathy active, she didn't detect any surprise or shock, only confusion from most of the men across from her. One was apprehensive, but that was all. *Perhaps they really do not know? I need to probe a bit more, heh, before I do more probing of the telepathic kind.*

"My companion, Sage, is more than willing to start digging into your systems further, but I thought as allies, we would give you the opportunity to come clean. What are you hiding, and why?" She leaned back, crossing her arms under her bust line, using the move to emphasize her chest in a way that caught the attention of one of the men across from her for a moment. The other men's eyes didn't even flicker toward her bust, and all of them still wore the glaring, defiant looks they'd had since Emma had called them out on their continued recruitment, perhaps illegally and unethically, of super-powered soldiers. "Not going to say anything? Sage, would you please enlighten these men?"

Tapping a few figures brought up a series of bank accounts and transfers, one superimposed to the other, then connected via a lone red line. "While the Winter Guard system has been shut down and its survivors all placed on a dual retainer from the Custodes and the Russian Government, there are still at least two money trails that are going into what I would term extra-special military endeavors." Sage began, the tint of the overhead lighting catching the red of her glasses almost ominously.

“One of them, I am actually pretty certain, is completely aboveboard at this point: the re-design and rebuilding of your mechanical armor suits.”

“Which we’re fine with up to a point,” Emma interjected, causing her listeners to blink in surprise, and indeed several of them thawed considerably. *Okay, I think we took an entirely wrong tack here to begin with. Time to soften my stance.*

“We simply don’t want mutants indoctrinated or people being experimented on, and we do not want your super-soldier programs to be turned against other nations any longer. Beyond that, we would like the Armor program out in the open, just like the American government’s attempts to recruit Stark to make suits for them is occurring in the open. We would also want you to sign onto a nonproliferation treaty later. We don’t want these suits to be active outside your borders. Certainly, no one would profit from such a design falling into the hand of extremist groups. But that is for the future.”

Mikalikovo nodded slowly, looking over at his fellows. “That... that we can agree to, certainly. We will have to speak to the full Duma on it, but yes. Yet as I said, none of us have ever heard of the Winter Soldier program.”

“Yet the evidence of its existence is irrefutable. I would be fully willing to let Sputnik check my work,” Sage practically chirped. Showing a flash of good humor like that coupled with the threat would get under the skin of many of the men across from her. Despite his incredible sense of loyalty to Russia, few of the Duma wanted to allow Sputnik access to their internal computer network.

“Indeed, I think if this evidence is accurate we might have to,” Mikalikovo murmured, to the shock of his fellows.

“While I am now willing to take your word that none of you knew of this program, someone in your security apparatus must know about it for this money trail to still be in use. We want this plan, whatever it is, shut down. We want every kind of super-soldier program that experiments or indoctrinates their victims, the kind which created Omega Red and those like him, shut down,” Emma growled.

“Like the kind that your Guardian annihilated nine months ago? That base near Lake Baikal in Siberia was the largest Winter Guard training site we had going,” one of the Russians Emma hadn’t named before riposted, scowling. “You may deny it publicly all you want but let us not mince words here.”

“I haven’t been mincing words, nor will I deny that action,” Emma said dryly, shrugging her shoulders. “Considering that Piotr, Nikolai, and his sister are under our protection and that Vanguard, in particular, is one of our noncommissioned officers in the Custodes Mundi, that would be remarkably stupid of us. We’ll never admit it publicly, of course, and I’ll have you know that any recording devices you had were shorted out when you entered this room.”

Emma smiled thinly. "To put it bluntly, you try to out that secret, and we will reply in the negative and then return fire in-kind."

There was some grumbling at that, but not a lot. Only two of the Russians were glaring at her now, while the others were thoughtful. One of them was General Barisov, one of the men who had been a part of the meeting on High Note. But Emma felt he was glaring at her for more form's sake than anything else, or perhaps patriotic annoyance? The other man was the nervous Duma rep.

Hmm... interesting. That man might not have recognized the name Winter Soldier, but he is hiding something. Is that enough to let me probe his mind further? Curse Harry and his ideas of morality, Emma grumbled mentally.

"You might have found this Winter Soldier program of ours, whatever it is, and I will say now that I don't know anything about it. But what I do know is what our own spies have reported. And that is that other nations have their own Super-soldier programs, not just the powered armor programs. What are you doing about them?" Barisov challenged.

Emma languidly waved a hand, counting off on her fingers. "First, your neighbors, China. Their Mutant Resource Exploitation Program, at least the Chinese never really tried to couch their wrongdoings in anything but reality, never recovered after the young mutant they labeled Chamber exploded like a nuclear bomb."

"We're still trying to figure out how he was in China at all, let alone how he had been captured and forced into that program, as he was originally a British citizen. We assume human trafficking," Sage interjected, and there was nothing teasing about her voice now. "Possibly connected to the now-defunct Brotherhood of Mutants. But we have yet to find the individuals who got him out of the United Kingdom."

"His eventual implosion not only killed an innocent young man, but also the entire faculty of the Chinese program, all of the scientists, and the majority of its officers. We're still not exactly happy with the fact that the Chinese are dragging their heels on the social side of things, but to put it bluntly, even with access to the Mandarin and his high level of technology, China doesn't offer anywhere near as much of a benefit to us becoming more closely connected with them as Russia does."

Emma paused, then held up her pinky with some amusement. "Australia is ostensibly running some kind of mandatory training program for mutants with dangerous powers. But that training is simply an extension of the Australian Marine Corps and is completely aboveboard if only about as humane as any marine training can be. Which I'm certain you know."

General Barisov scowled but waved that off. The one he was most interested in was America, of course, but since he had asked about every other super-soldier program, Barisov had to let Emma have her say no matter how annoying.

“Britain used to run a superpowered Espionage agency, but it was destroyed before the king contacted Harry for help. The only survivors are Psylocke and Captain Britain. Psylocke is a member of the Custodes, and Captain Britain is about as far removed as you could possibly get from the kind of unthinking uncaring super-soldier who would be sent off on assassination missions or any other kind of black ops.”

“If anything, he is rather bizarrely connected more to the idea of some kind of Arthurian legend of the night than anything else,” Sage snorted. “And the British government and our faction have been in bed with one another for a good long while. No attempt to create such a program has even gotten as far as the planning stage, and at this point it has been deemed unnecessary.”

“And America and Canada?” Barisov growled, unwilling to let Emma continue to prove how well connected they were throughout the world by naming the other attempts to create Super-teams being run by other European powers. It wasn’t as if most of them had made any headway, after all, nothing like what Russia had before the Eurasian War. “We have information that the Weapon X program of Canada was never shut down. Rather, it simply moved across into the United States. You cannot sit here and belabor us about our attempts at a black ops division of super-soldiers when that abomination is still ongoing!”

“I’d be very interested to see the information you were able to collect on the Weapon X program, as well as how you did so,” Emma answered, but she was still smiling thinly, the man’s words not surprising her as Emma gestured to her companion. “Gentlemen, we have access to Sage. We also have access to Pinoptes, one of several artificial Intelligences working for us.”

The men in front of her squirmed, and Emma couldn’t honestly blame them. Artificial Intelligences going amuck was a staple in science fiction for a reason, after all. Yet in the case of Pinoptes, working with Harry, Ororo, and, more importantly, Douglas and the children like Melody and Illyana had humanized him to a massive degree.

“And while Pinoptes is mostly dealing with defense measures and leading our education programs, any kind of computer is an open book to them. When we discovered the Winter Soldier Program, we started to look for others and found out about Weapon X and its mysterious Director. Even as we speak, that program is being shut down with extreme prejudice. And in a rather ironic fashion...”

OOOOOO

As the Russians all turned to the man in question with expression ranging from interested to instantly distrustful, Steve looked around at the Marines in the Douglas C-133 with him, all of them dressed in black camo and loaded for bear. Falcon, Steve’s friend Sam, was also there, along with two fireteams of his own Aerial Drop Commandos, as was Ghigau of the Custodes. Sam would be leading them to take out the Anti-Air defenses and the target's power grid. Captain America, Wolverine, and Ghigau would be going in with Marines.

Wolverine was still grumbling about that aspect, and though Steve couldn't blame the guy he wasn't willing to argue with him about it again. Logan thought he should be doing this on his own entirely, but that wasn't going to happen. Not after Emma and his meeting with the President the day before. President Northton wanted this handled instantly, but he also wanted it handled above board and by units of the American military, hence the Marines. Meanwhile, the president himself, with Paige, John, Scott, and Rogue in attendance under disguise, would face down the CIA director who had continued to fund the Weapon X program after it had been run out of Canada by Logan, Kitty, and Kurt after the idiots had tried to take control of Sabertooth and Wolverine again.

None of the other Custodes were going to be involved in either part of this operation. The President had requested this issue be seen to by Americans, even if their various loyalties didn't lie with their home nation. Steve thought it silly, but with the amount of regular firepower they were bringing to bear, he thought they could get away with being short-staffed on the super-powered side of things.

Steve had met the current President several times, and he trusted the man to get his part in the operation right. He also trusted the Marines, who had been handpicked for this operation: Sean McIntyre and his bloodthirsty band of ne'er do wells. Having fought on the Caucasus front, they had come through the Eurasian War relatively intact and with a reputation for being extremely competent and deadly. When he had been offered them, Steve been very happy for the chance to work with Sean and Marcus Greentree, his new First Sergeant, who had been transferred into his unit prior to the Eurasian War. Steve had remembered them from the series of meetings he had attended about the alien threat that Harry had clandestinely held before the EDF went public.

To one side of him, Ghigau sat, her full armor on, hiding her features but not her femininity. That was enough for many of the marines and a few of the commandos to give her some looks, but none of them had been so rude as to make comments, not with their officers sitting among them. She sat talking quietly to two of the marines who were Native Americans, chatting about their disparate backgrounds. But leaning towards her, Steve could tell that, like many of the marines, she was listening to heavy metal music to get herself psyched up.

Marines being Marines though, one of them just could not stop himself from trying to take those hills. "Hey Ghigau, I gotta ask, we're all wondering it, what's up with the bow? I mean, you don't even have arrows, and I mean, c'mon... a bow, in this day and age? You can borrow one of our guns for the op if you want something more powerful to play with. Trust me, a Marine's rifle never disappoints."

Ghigau turned and cocked her head to one side. Suddenly with a quickness that startled the Marines beside her, her bow was in her hand, shifting into a spear, then a sword, then a dagger, which she placed at her side. "I think if I was looking for more bang for my buck than a weapon like Sigyn's Gift, I would be out of luck. And as for your rifles' ability to satisfy, I could

hardly be asked to comment, although I've found most men who brag about that kind of thing are those who most often miss the mark..."

The rest of the Marines laughed at her comeback, and Ghigau turned back to her previous conversation as they started to rib their friend for his failed assault.

Chuckling, Steve stood up, winding his way through to where the Falcon and the troops with him were waiting. "You good to go?"

"Always," his friend said, reaching up to clasp hands with Steve. Despite coming from two very different generations, the two of them had become fast friends, and that friendship had become one of the pillars of Steve's life in this strange era. That didn't mean Steve wouldn't tease his friends a bit. "By the way, did you have a chance to go over that program that Diamond sent to us?"

In public, they still used callsigns for people like Diamond who had their own private lives away from the Custodes.

"Yeah, I looked at it. I thought it was interesting. Although the suits they're talking about giving the program aren't finished yet. Are you certain that you'll be able to talk Tony into working on that kind of thing? He was kind of against the idea of the military, or anyone, owning suits like his," Sam answered, frowning as the question took his mind off the upcoming fight. Which was partly why Steve had asked, Sam knew.

"As I understand it, the suits you'd be using won't be anywhere near as deadly as the Iron Man suit. Limited online computer systems, and you won't have arc reactors powering everything," Steve shook his head with a snort. "That would've been overkill."

"There's no such thing!" the nearest drop commandos and Marines caroled, with a few going on to state the full joke. "There's only dead and not dead enough."

Sean looked up from where he had been going over last-minute details of the operation with Marcus, the two men checking their memorization of the maps of the target Pinoptes had been able to give them. "What are you all talking about? Because if you are making suits that even remotely come close to, say, Coyote or Ghigau's? I would re-up for access to that kind of thing."

"Famous last words gropos," said one of the aerial commandos in reply, twitching his wings this way and that as he used the shortened colloquialism for ground-pounders that Air Force troops had used since there had been an Air Force at all.

"In that case, yeah, I think it's an excellent idea," the Falcon didn't bother replying to these interruptions, instead continuing to address Steve. "Precisely for missions like this, and even larger scale if we can build up."

Steve nodded at Sean, flashing Sam a thumb's up. "We're thinking of creating a new branch of the EDF for if aliens ever manage to land a force on Earth someplace that can't handle them. Like Africa away from Wakanda, India, or portions of Europe and the Peloponnesian. Or, well, Asia outside of Japan and China, though don't tell China that, heh."

"Are you even going to be able to get the ability to act in those countries without it being an act of war ourselves?" Marcus asked, joining the conversation.

"We might be able to via working through the various organizational units, like the South American Resource Union or the African Defense Organization. We're calling it the Orbital Drop Marine program, or ODM."

Every Marine in hearing rang looked at one another then began to laugh. "Oh, Damns! Hell yeah!"

"That is the name of a Marine outfit right there. Right there! From Devil Dogs to Oh Damns, that makes way too much sense!"

This was the response Steve wanted to happen when he brought up the subject. Steve wanted everyone to be not just focused but also upbeat before heading into battle. *And if I use this mission as an audition for the first group of ODMs, so be it.*

"All right, you apes," said the voice over the plane's intercom, "We're coming up on drop-off point Alpha. All of you are using the gifts that God gave you to go the rest of the way get off my plane!" At these words, the hatch at the back of the plane opened, letting in the wild wind from beyond.

Chuckling, Steve led the way, reaching up to pound one fist against the top of the hatchway leading off the C-133. "Let's go, troops. Time to bag us some mad scientists."

"OOorah!" the Marines shouted while Ghigau simply stood up, nodding at Steve, then was the first one out of the plane, despite not having any visible parachute. And as they exited one by one, they all performed the same ritual, slamming one fist up into the hatch above them before leaping out into the night beyond, their parachutes opening one after another to let them fall gently towards the designated landing zone several miles away from their target. Although he was also still muttering under his breath, Logan did the same. His mutters had changed topic, now being about how Canadian Marines were better than American rather than the marines being there at all.

Those would've been fighting words in any bar where marines could be found, but this wasn't a bar. This was a combat mission, and instead, all he got was grins from Sean and Marcus. Both of them knew at this point that this whole mission was what amounted to an audition for bigger and better things, and they, and indeed all their men, were hoping to make the most of it.

Down below, Ghigau activated her hover boots. When they did so, she hit the foliage below, bouncing through the trees to the ground below. There, Dani opened her helmet, sniffing the air of the forest, letting the breeze flow over her face as she raised Sigyn's Gift to her forehead, pressing the flat of the blade against her skin. "May Tyr guide us to a just victory this night, may Thor give my arm strength."

In the months since having first come into contact with Hela via the goddess reaching out for her sleeping mind, Dani had become a follower of the Asgardian faith. It was not so much that she believed the Asgardians were all-powerful deities, no. It was more that she saw them as powerful spirits, much like the animal spirits of her ancestors, who could be called upon and, if the caller was found worthy, aid Dani in her endeavors. Like a shield captain lending his strength to a soldier, or an experienced hunter guiding the eye of a young one. And she well understood that each of them had different realms of influence. *And if any of them would feel pain for those experimented on and twisted into beasts against their will, it is the god of the common warrior and the god of justice.*

With the small benediction done, Dani, not bothering to close her mask again, moved off, silent as a shadow in the night.

As the rest of the Marines disembarked, Steve waited by the hatchway. When the last Marine jumped, Steve reached over, clasping forearms with Falcon, who smirked at him. "Don't worry, we'll do our part. You just be ready to take advantage of it when the power goes out."

"We will be. But if Harry does start up the orbital drop Marine program, you do know you'll be in charge of it, right? And thus an officer?"

The look on Sam's face as Steve pulled away was everything he could have wished for, and he leaped out after the Marines.

Landing through the woods was an acquired skill, but one that Steve had long since perfected on the battlefields of Europe during World War 2. In fact, with no flak or strobing security lights to avoid, it was a cakewalk. In the woods, he met up with the Marines, blending into the night with his own version of the nighttime camouflage as they did the same. Pulling down his mask, he smiled as the night vision goggles built into it activated. Thinner and better than the norm, they adjusted automatically between several different types of vision, shifted his view into an almost-daylike landscape.

"Wolverine and Ghigau didn't bother waiting for us," Sean whispered, keeping his voice low despite the lack of anyone but his own men around them as he looked at a compass in his hand. "We have a direction, sir. We need to move."

"Right. You know your people best, choose your flankers. I'll be Tail-End Charlie. Let's go," Steve ordered. The Marines moved off, racing through the woods, not silently - they had too much gear to be entirely silent - but as quiet as they could be.

On the other hand, Ghigau and Logan moved through the woods as noiselessly as animals. Ghigau moved like a deer, light on her feet even with her suit powered off. The suit was made so well it was silent as she moved under her own power through the night. Wolverine blended in so well even Steve would have never been able to spot him without help.

The two squads of special forces operators didn't see either of them as they moved through the woods around the perimeter of their target.

About five minutes later and way higher in the air than they had been, Sam shook his head, still somewhat stunned at the idea of being in charge of anything so quickly. He had been working with the X-men to integrate several regular human troopers into their ranks, the men chosen by himself and Hawkeye from special operatives throughout America. He knew that at the command level they were slowly starting to be a bit strained with so many of the Custodes out of the system, but that was a long way from being in charge of organizing an entirely new combat arm.

Shaking that thought off, he turned to his fellow drop commandos. "All right, folks," he said, pulling down his own helmet and fixing his visors over his face. "Now that the baggage is gone, perhaps we can really get down to business."

The other commandos laughed, the rivalry between the various military branches always a source of strength and good humor. Soon the C-133 was flying high, so high that the various detection devices of their target wouldn't be able to spot them, and thanks to the anti-radar coding, nothing stronger would either.

Once more, the pilot's voice shouted out instructions. "Alright, my fine winged fowls, we're over the landing zone in three, two..."

Red lights blinked on throughout the interior of the plane once more, and Falcon moved over to the entranceway, cracking his neck this way and that, straightening his shoulders, making the wings on his back flare in preparation. Then he reached down to his waist, where he pulled out two pistols, the same kind he'd used during the Eurasian War. He'd added to his battle rattle since then with a few flash-bang grenades and an expanded pouch like the Custodes Mundi had, which Sam, like many of the Custodes, could not think of as anything but bags of holding. The bag contained quite a lot of goodies, but as his initial offensive punch, the plasma pistols were hard to beat. Both of them were plasma-based, able to lay down automatic fire and retain the penetrating power of a plasma rifle, although their energy requirements were much larger.

The other drop commandos with him had a more eclectic grouping of weapons. One of them had what amounted to a gatling gun with a much shorter barrel than normal strapped to his side, with a correspondingly heavy weight on his other side, the drums feeding into the gun along his back through a specialized holster. He wouldn't be able to stay in the air for very long,

but if they ran into real defenses below, his weapon might be necessary. *I could wish he'd changed to an energy-based weapon system, but I wasn't going to push Raul on that.*

"Let's get it done, son," Raul hollered as he leaped out, followed by the rest of Sam's team. As they fell, the Falcon's wings began to shimmer, the engine underneath his wings slowly flapping to life at his muscle's command. "Coms check."

The response came in quickly, and Sam smirked. "Pick your targets, and let's fly!" With that, the Falcon's wings flared out, slowing his descent. Moments later, as they moved directly over the target once more, what had been a simple drop became a power-dive, his weapons raised like talons underneath him as he closed at speeds more normally seen in rockets than falling men. And from his wings and the wings of his fellow's burst out a cloud of missiles, which followed them for a second before speeding ahead of them, exploding seven stories above the ground, flinging tiny aluminum plates all around them.

The target of this assault was a large mansion-like structure sitting on the outskirts of an upper-class strip of land near Lake Superior with several smaller buildings close to one another, situated like guest or servant's quarters might be, on a large-scale property. As far as the locals knew, the mansion was marked as private property rather than commercial. Although if you looked closer, it had more of the look of a laboratory than a mansion in certain aspects, despite its outer appearance.

As the commandos closed, several dozen square or rectangular portions of the lawn around the main building flipped up. From within, gun turrets deployed and instantly began to twist upwards, Anti-Air fire tracking up towards the descending attackers.

However, the cloud of chaff exploding around them fouled their targeting systems. Several of the guns started to just spin in place, unable to discover any target. Others began to fire randomly into the air, still dangerous but not nearly as dangerous as targeted fire.

The orbital commandos took those out first, destroying them with long-range rifle fire from several of the railgun armed rifles they had.

Falcon disdained those, moving straight down towards the roof of the main building. Several more defensive installations started to pop out from hidden bunkers, the crenulations coming apart to reveal heavy mortar barrels, rocket launchers, and several Gatling guns. These instantly began to track the closest enemy, the guns perhaps not automated like the others.

In reply, Falcon's pistols spoke, raining down fire onto them before the new guns could lock on him.

Several exploded, not even getting a shot off, but one of the surviving Gatling guns began to fire, spreading metal through the sky in a welter of tracer fire. Falcon jinked this way and that, flipping under and around the incoming fire while one of his fellows came in, raking

the rooftop with his own heavy weapon. Then the Falcon was moving off, dropping a grenade on what looked like a generator.

The other buildings had their own generators, that combined to create an energy grid for the property. Soon they were all bombed out, and the majority of the automated guns, and a laser defense grid around the property, went down.

Out in the woods, the guards on patrol instantly started to turn, racing back to the lab. But then Wolverine was on one of the squads coming out of the darkness like a wraith, his claws slashing. The other squad fell to Ghigau, who came out of the dark, Sigyn's Gift in hand, so quickly that they never got a shot off before one was dead. The others put up a fight, but with her armor on, none of them had anything that could actually hurt her.

By this point, guards were spilling out of every building on the property, firing up at the attackers. They weren't having much luck, but were taking up defensive positions, and the commandos were too busy dodging to fire back very well. All of the defenders had excellent gear, the same rifles that the Marines would normally be using, and the same night vision goggles, so the lack of lighting didn't bother them.

But the defenders had not split their attention as they should have, all of them firing up at the attacking commandos. This cost them as the Marines charged out of the forest, covering the open area that should have been a killing ground. Several of them dropped to one knee, firing downrange at the defenders to provide covering fire as they moved in from every direction at once in almost platoon-sized troops, each led by one of McIntyre's lieutenants, while the weapons platoon waited with Sean himself. Others took up position in the woods behind trees.

Several of the defenders fell as the Marines moved forward, their guns speaking in staccato rhythm. But the defenders, despite their momentary mistake, were extremely well-trained too. They instantly began to return fire, both sides now using short, controlled bursts or precise fire from a few sniper rifles. The defenders also used fire and maneuver to spread out from their barracks and the main building further to link up in a defensive cordon. Their fire control was so good, several of the marines fell, and the advance slowed as more marines went to ground as best they could. Worse, the buildings seemed to have a hidden level of battleship grade steel under the outer concrete, meaning the plasma bolts and gauss rifle rounds couldn't quite penetrate.

Seeing this, Sean ordered his weapons platoon in, and the mortar squads instantly began firing. Swiftly the mortars did their work, destroying the defender's defensive positions.

Under this covering fire, the machine gun squads moved forward towards the barracks, one of them getting into position to cover the door, making it death to come out into its fire, their own position covered by several other Marines who did a good job clearing the two windows that could train on them. The men in the windows were replaced by more enemy

riflemen, but they couldn't get a shot off. Meanwhile, the machine gun team's corporal waited for a chance to use the grenade launcher underslung on his rifle.

Steve barreled forward, his shield in front of him, as he crouched down low, putting as much of his body behind the shield as possible, charging forward into the clump of soldiers still coming out from the main building. For a second, the defender's fire falters, staring at the circular shield with its red, white and blue image coming out of the flickering darkness, but then every attacker who was able began to fire at Steve, only to find the shield ricocheting their bullets right back or to the side, with no damage to the shield visible.

Reaching the battlefield himself, Logan closed with the barracks from another angle entirely. Doing so, he avoided notice, closing while the defenders were too busy with the Marines. Reaching the building, Logan hurled himself through a first-story window into a defender firing from there, cutting him down quickly and rolling on the floor, coming up and charging into a clump of men who had been waiting for a chance to get out and into the fight, the other windows already in use by a few other defenders.

The men inside the barracks all turned, staring, as one of them dropped some kind of large-barreled gun that they were going to try to use to clear the machine gun team out of their position. Then Logan was on them, and the screams began. Several of the defenders went down to his claws, and then two rifle teams charged the door.

Meanwhile, elsewhere, another round of mortars had landed, decimating what was left of the defenders positions, while Steve had reached the main building. He crashed bodily into the defenders there, his shield taking one man in the face, then hacking to the side, shattering a shoulder as Steve's other hand punched out, downing a third man. "Go, go, go!" he shouted, "in, in, in!"

Above them, Falcon raked the defenders with fire, then ordered his own commandos down to the various roofs. From there, they provided cover fire, helping the Marines finish off the defenders remaining on the ground outside the building.

Two Marines were down, one fatally, the last just knocked unconscious by a bullet that caught his helmet at just the right angle to knock him senseless. The overwhelming firepower that the attackers had brought to bear, not to mention that these Marines had been fitted with enhanced Kevlar body armor, had seen them through. Four other Marines had been forced to retreat with various wounds but were moving under their own power with a corporal to lead them back to the evac point, as the last of the defenders retreated from Steve, leaving him in control of the entrance.

"Falcon, maintain overwatch. Marines, split and divide, clear the other buildings and maintain guard. Ghigau, you're on patrol out here, your power skates give you a speed advantage we might need if someone does a runner. Remember, we want at least some alive

for questioning, but it isn't a priority. Your lives are and making certain that this den of filth is dealt with. If they surrender we don't kill them, that's it."

"Damn it, and here I was all set to chew you out for sidelining me, and you had to have a logical argument," Ghigau scowled inside her helmet. But she couldn't deny Captain America had a point.

"Acknowledged," Sam answered, also grumbling a little. Still, he knew that his specialty was open-air environments, not close-quarters combat.

In contrast, Wolverine and Steve were probably the best in the world at just that kind of thing. Now finished in the barracks, a somewhat gore-covered Wolverine led the way in with Steve beside him. And instantly, the shield came in handy, bouncing back a grenade into a line of entrenched defenders at the far end of the entryway, the main door opening up into a hallway around ten yards long.

As the explosion went off in the defender's position, Logan charged forward, leaping up over the bulwark and hacking through the soldiers there. In turn, Steve bounded over the carnage, hurling his shield forward at a gun mount that had apparently been waiting for the soldiers to get out of the way before firing. The gun mount shattered, his shield crashing through it then careening up off the ceiling and then back to Steve, who rolled as he caught it on his arm, smashing it down into one soldier, almost using him as a mount to carry himself down to the ground.

There Steve rolled, thrusting the shield out sideways into another soldier, then reached up, grabbing the gun of another one who had thrust his gun down towards Steve, pushing it out of the way as it went off. Still retaining that grip, Steve twisted around and up into an uppercut that took the man in the chin, breaking his jaw and hurling him backward.

Steve then barely got his shield up in time to deflect a hail of bullets coming at him from another gun mount which had not waited for the soldiers around him to get out of the way. The few black-clad soldiers around the two attackers fell, then Wolverine was charging past him, taking the bullets himself but not stopping until he sliced the gun mount into pieces.

In the corridor beyond that gun mount, the hallway split. Steve assumed one direction would lead around the building's outer edge, looping back on itself, the other deeper in towards what looked like an elevator and a few doorways on either side. He looked at Logan, who shrugged his shoulders, pointing in one direction. "I like going right."

Steve shrugged and moved toward the elevator as two of the Marine platoons came in after them, having cleaned up the few survivors behind them, leaving the rest of their men to keep watch.

“I want a hardpoint here, Top,” Captain McClintock said, looking at his First Sergeant. “I want one squad here dug in hard, then get two of those commandos out there, bring them in for added firepower. The one with the gatling gun in particular.”

Logan snorted at this and raced off, and Sean rolled his eyes. “Top, take a squad and follow Cap. I will follow Wolverine with another squad. I want two more squads following both and spreading out as needed. Don’t shoot anyone who isn’t attacking, but no one gets out of here under their own power. Let’s clear this building, fuckers!”

‘Yes, sir,’ Marcus replied, shaking his head at the Captain, moving forward with the troops. Still, doing so was part of why Marcus respected Sean McClintock, despite the very different backgrounds the two men had.

By the time the Marines caught up with the two superpowered heroes, they had run into the first real hurdle. For Steve, this came in the form of two individuals who looked as if they had been genetically crossed with a gorilla and a cat, respectively. “Okay, this just got weird,” Steve muttered as he blocked the punch from the gorilla, which proceeded to pick him up and hurl him back down the hallway.

Rolling as he hit the ground, Steve slung his shield back down towards the gorilla man. The possible mutant tried to catch the shield but unless you were Steve Rogers, touching that shield was no longer a viable option. Thanks to Harry placing some runes on the interior of the shield, the shield had become enchanted. Anyone touching it that wasn’t Steve would be electrocuted, and if they tried to pick it up anyway like if they were immune to electricity or something, its weight would increase into the metric-ton weight range.

The gorilla stumbled backward, not hurt much by the electricity but still shocked. Meanwhile the cat man leaped forward, clawing and kicking at Steve, who blocked the blows with difficulty. The cat man was fast and powerful, and soon Steve’s arms and shoulders were showing tears, his helmet torn along one side. *Thank goodness my helmet’s been reinforced somewhat. With how dark it is in here, I’d be almost blind without it.* There were only a few emergency lights on at the moment around them, either due to the building no longer having any power or what power it did have being conserved for something else Steve didn’t know.

Then the cat man was forced to dodge around a well-aimed round of bullets, throwing him off balance. Steve took advantage instantly, grabbing his arm in a hold and pulling him further off balance before hammering in elbow the cat man’s face.

A high kick caught his chest in turn, and now Steve’s body was blocking his ally’s shots. But Steve took the kick without being knocked back, coming up and redirecting another kick. A second later, he landed a punch into the other man’s lower leg before extending his arm around that leg as he stepped forward and twisted, throwing the man back towards the gorilla man.

The gorilla man had backed away from the shield by this point, shaking out his hands from the shock he had taken. This allowed the cat man to land on top of it and be electrocuted in turn. "Gyaaaa, what the hellllll!" the cat man screamed, the first words either animal-like man had spoken.

Then Steve was on the cat man, bearing him to the ground. This forced him to remain in contact with the shield, which kept on electrocuting him, while the array doing so also started to drain him of his bio-energy. Even as the man thrashed and tried to get away, Steve got a chokehold on the possible mutant.

This made Steve turn his back on the gorilla man. It also got him out of the firing way line of the Marines behind him.

"Put that son of a bitch down!" Marcus growled.

The Marines were not as heavily armed as the Custodes Mundi would be. However, they did have a few rail guns and plasma rifles among their rifle platoons, one of which Marcus was using. The railgun round went straight through the man's shoulder, right where it met his chest, causing him to cry out in pain, but he retreated quickly around the corner, protecting his wounded arm but in one piece.

The cat man that Steve had been wrestling with soon fell unconscious thanks to the combination of chokehold, electricity, and having his bioenergy siphoned off him. Feeling that, Steve lifted the body off of his shield, asking one of the Marines to come over and put some of the extra sturdy handcuffs on the individual in question. "Look alive, folks, there's probably more where they came from."

There were indeed more, and Logan was dealing with two others. Moving along the hallway had brought him, and his following squads of Marines, into what looked like a long row of cubicles, each of them had their own computers, and for some reason, a Post-it note in one of them caught his eye as he passed by. 'Remember, it's not rocket science. It's harder.' Next to that was another note declaring that 'Scientists do it with imagination'.

Looking at that note, Logan had an urge to claw his eyes out for a second before shaking his head and moving on. Luckily there were no people around, and they passed through quickly.

However, the corridor started to break up. To one side, there was a stairwell, while the hallway itself once again split in two, one leading to what looked like a dead-end and another row of cubicles. The other continuing around the outer edge of the building, maybe. Although it did also seem to open up into what looked like a cafeteria.

"I don't get the layout of this place," Sean muttered, scowling irritably. "Nothing on the interior matches the exterior. Was that deliberate, made to make this place hard to invade?"

"Not invade. Confusing to leave if you don't know the way out," Logan answered grimly, popping his claws out of their sheaths, as he crouched down, sniffing the air. "I'm smelling

people downstairs, and a lot of blood that way, closer than the entrance. I'd guess that someone is trying to clean house."

Scowling, Sean organized his men, asking Logan to wait for the moment while he led a fireteam straight around the building's outer edge. Logan scoffed and went on his own way, slicing open the door to the staircase, finding it only led down instead of both ways as they had thought. Regardless, he moved down the stairs, leaving the marines behind.

Scowling, Sean radioed the squad they had left in place, ordering them to pass the duty on to one of the heavy weapons teams pulling them from the perimeter for a moment. Leaving one rifle team at the hardpoint inside the entrance, he ordered the remaining two fireteams forward. When they reached his current position, Sean ordered one fire team forward along the hallway back to their starting point. Despite Logan's assurances that there was no one left alive along the outer hallway, Sean was taking no chances.

Despite that, once the rest of the first floor was cleared, the Marines eventually followed Logan down the stairs, finding that he had been slowed in turn by several security doors and guns set into the stairwell, which he had destroyed. Several stories down, they somehow came out onto what looked like an observation area over some kind of testing ground.

And what waited for them as they cautiously moved out of the stairwell was several dozen mounted guns in the ceiling, all of which twitched their way. Logan had a second to note that they would all have been originally facing inwards into the testing zone before the guns opened up on them.

Logan twisted and leaped to one side, shouting out, "Cover!" Inside the stairwell, Sean ordered the same and his men ducked back into the stairwell as the guns started to chew into the wall, four of his Marines being cut in two by the guns before they could retreat, the gore flying everywhere.

They then switched targets to Logan as he advanced, crawling at first, then leaping up and racing forward, leaping down into the pit to get closer to the guns in question. This drew fire from the surviving Marines allowing them to roll out of cover and blast the Gatling guns to pieces. One after another, they shut down while Logan kept their attention on him.

However, from two offices on either side of the stairwell came two more mutants or possibly genetically altered soldiers. One was a frogman, the other a woman who looked almost like someone had crossed her with a lizard. The frogman had iron gauntlets on his hands and feet, which made them into lethal weapons, something he proved without a doubt by killing two Marines as he jumped out into their formation, getting so close they were now afraid to fire or fear of hitting one another.

The woman too tried to close with the Marines but had miss-timed her appearance, and Sean's shout of "Remember your quadrants!" had kept some of his Marines centered forward

and to the right towards where she appeared rather than all turning to deal with the frogman. One of them was a railgun user, and his reflexive fire took the woman high up in the chest, punching through and sending her hurtling backward, dead.

Meanwhile, Sean stepped into the boxer's reach, ducking underneath the blow, then flicking some kind of dust into the frog man's large bulbous eyes. One thing Sean had learned while wrestling with a Russian Spetnaz who had been trying to exfiltrate back to his lines was that everyone in the world needed to see. And even the toughest SOB wasn't going to be seeing anything if you tossed fine ground pepper into their eyes. Or, in this case, high-grade Capsaicin.

It had saved his life then, and now the frogman squealed, both hands rising to work at his eyes. Before he could recover, Steve pulled out his pistol, placed it into the frog man's open mouth and pulled the trigger. And that pistol was a plasma pistol.

"Damn cap'n," one of his marines muttered, even as he moved to help his unconscious or badly wounded comrades.

Sean shrugged, holstered his pistol, and picked up a rifle, looking around and towards where the sound of combat was still going on. "See to your wounded sergeant, the rest of you with me. Second squad two after us minus one fireteam when they come down."

Even though the gatling guns had been silenced, that didn't mean the battle was over. From out from what looked like a cage set against the side of the testing area, an abomination had bounded, launching itself towards Wolverine the instant he could. The man across from him trying to tear Wolverine apart was only a little taller than Wolverine, but he was thin to the point of emaciation. Despite that, he had something of the same appearance as Sabertooth: the same blonde hair, long fangs, and claws on his hands.

But this creature wasn't just a knockoff of Sabertooth, or maybe his son, Logan didn't know. What he did know was that the man's claws were adamantium. He was also fighting back just as hard as Logan was. The two of them exchanged cuts and slashes, their regeneration mutations working to heal the damage the instant it was made. *Luckily his bones don't seem to have gotten the full treatment yet!*

Watching this, Sean shook his head. "Right, I'm not going to wait for this shit. We still have to clear the rest of this building, Wolverine!" When the man in question didn't answer other than shout and snarl, Sean shook his head. "Right, stun grenades, people! All of them, on three."

"Oh no, you don't, you asshole," Logan shouted, but too late. The Marines threw their stun grenades down into the pit, where massive blasts of sound and light burst out.

Both combatants shouted in pain and reeled away from one another, grabbing at their eyes, and Sean ordered his Marines to fire into the creature. The man stumbled back, but even with two fireteams of marines firing on him, the creature simply absorbed the damage.

Then Logan was up, and his claws cut and stabbed. The man, who even smelled somewhat like Sabertooth, was stabbed through the heart as Wolverine's other claws sliced his head off his shoulders. Whatever his regeneration ability, he wasn't going to come back from that.

"Sorry about that, Logan," Sean said in a tone of a man who didn't mean it. "But you two looked as if you could keep wailing on one another for days. And I don't know about you, but that is not my idea of a good time."

Logan snorted but exchanged a fist bump with the other man as his wounds from the fight healed. "Right, let's keep moving."

Against the far wall from where they had first entered, they found a doorway leading to what Logan thought of as the jackpot. Or at least one of two jackpots he had hoped to find here. They found the laboratories. The large-scale glass-like coffins, the banks of computers, the examination tables. It was all here, along with another dozen soldiers who had dug in among the lab devices and bodies of several scientists, who had apparently been shot by the soldiers.

Another firefight began, but with Logan charging forward and hacking at any of the defenders who couldn't get away, it was over quickly. Sean only lost one more Marine as Logan had again sucked in so much of the defender's attention that he and his Marines were able to get through the chokepoint in the door and spread out before the defenders could realize their mistake.

But looking around, Sean cursed. The damage had already been done. Most of the computers were destroyed, and a little over a dozen men in white outfits lay dead all around them. Moving around, Sean went from body to body, staring at the faces revealed, comparing them to information they had gotten via Pinoptes and Sage's invasion of the CIA's most protected, most secret computer networks. His curses became more vituperative, as he realized that nearly the entire scientific core of the Weapon X project were laid out around them.

Doctor Cornelius was by the largest computer console, connected to the central glass tube, in which another victim had been killed, some kind of green mix added to the water that had burned its skin away in large patches. Not a nice way to go. Dr.'s Duncan, Hines, Killebrew, and Thorton were all laid together, as if they had had been running for the door as one large group, only to be cut down. Zira, Rice and Alba, other doctors who apparently had been there for shorter amounts of time than the others, were spread throughout the room, dead to single shots in the back of the head, unlike the group who had run for the door.

"Crap. We're not going to get any answers here. I just hope Cap is doing better than we are on that score. The only one missing is Robert Windsor, and the director himself," Sean said, earning a grunt from Logan as he moved around the room, seemingly in a kind of daze.

Above them, Steve was not in fact having an easier time of it although at first, heading up to the second story of the laboratory, it almost looked like he might. The elevator was such an easy, obvious chokepoint that when he passed through it without tripping any traps or running into the gorilla man again, Steve was almost tempted to breathe a sigh of relief.

But he didn't. Instead, he kept situational awareness, moving forward slowly, shield held in front of his body, as his eyes scanned every which way before he came to the first doorway he could see. There he paused, waiting for the Marines to back him up. Behind him, Marcus and the Marines came up as well, slowly, with Marcus and two of the others going first and then staying by the elevator doorway as the others climbed up rappel lines.

No one had even attempted to turn on the elevator. Again, it was just far too easy to sabotage the darn thing. Indeed, having made the climb, Marcus noticed several traps both inside the elevator and along the sides of the elevator tube. But all of the traps seemed to have needed power to activate, which meant that they weren't an issue now. *This place really was more concerned with internal security than external. Oh, they had the guns and everything, but once we got into the building, we haven't seen much that would work better against an attacker than someone already on the inside.*

Once the squad of Marines with him were ready, Steve looked back at them, his eyes and ears straining for any other sign of movement. The second floor of the mansion-cum-laboratory continued the odd, almost confusing architecture they had been running into since entering. First, there was a long, central hallway set probably in the middle of the second story of the mansion, with six large offices marked there, and a seventh at the far end. Between each of the offices were smaller, shorter hallways that a man would have trouble squeezing through. At the end of these small hallways was an iron staircase. These led to small cramped, control positions for the guns that had popped up from the roof earlier to try and fire on Falcon.

Of course, that meant that those tiny hallways were also places where people could hide, hence why Steve had waited. *I don't think that gorilla man would be able to hide in there, but I'm not willing to take the chance.*

Soon enough, Marcus was ready to go. Like his boss, he left a fire team by the elevator, watching the backs of the others as they moved forward, assigning two of the seven men he had with him who were using gauss rifles to that position with the rest of their fire team.

As they moved forward, the intercom crackled, its voice almost tinny, perhaps caused by the overall lack of power. "I don't know how you all discovered us, but you should know that this is a government sanctioned facility. If you all retreat now you might be able to run before the CIA comes for you. I'm certain the EDF and the World Guard don't want another war on their hands."

"Director Malcolm Concorde of the Weapon X program, you are wanted for crimes against humanity. By order of the President of the United States you are to come quietly, or

lethal force is authorized." Steve answered, moving forward with the Marines behind him and kicking open the door to the first office.

At the same time, two Marines entered the small passageways along either side of the main corridor. At the end of them, they found the men who had operated those guns had died in the destruction of the guns above, holes created in the rooftop showing where plasma or Gatling gun fire had ripped into the rooftop dumping debris onto the men, and crushing their heads.

"I suppose I should've expected a self-serving, short sighted politician to not understand the greatness of our work. The need to have our own super soldiers, loyal to America, to American ideals, to the government rather than to one another and the whole of so-called mutant kind. I suppose you even believe that the aliens really are as big of a threat as Potter would have us all believe. The reality is..." Malcolm began again.

Unwilling to banter words with the man especially over an intercom, Steve cut him off continuing to the next office. "Considering you're Canadian by birth, your spouting about American ideals isn't really persuasive. And considering that I have battled those aliens, yes I believe they are that big of a threat. So big that we can't afford people like you running around trying to control their own private armies. Last chance Conrad. Come quietly or come in a body bag. I really don't care which."

The next office proved to be empty as well, but the passageways set along the walls of the hallway were not. On the floor of either passage, bodies were sprawled out on the ground. One of them looked to have been hit by a piece of falling debris in the back of the head. The cause of death of the other was not easily discernible, the man being face down, and sprawled out as much as possible in the small hallway, one hand under his body, the other splayed out.

Staring at the body, Marcus frowned thinking about why it looked so strange to him. *Almost like it was placed to block the passage...* "Back!" the First Sergeant shouted, grabbing one of his Marines and tossing him away from the entrance to the hallway before diving to the floor. The man's partner however didn't react in time, and had stepped forward, kneeling down and reaching towards the body.

The body came alive, suddenly twisting around, and on its chest was a pistol, held there by the hand that had been under the body a moment ago. At the same time, the man's movement seemed to have set off some kind of booby-trap in the walls to either side of the hall and in the two remaining offices along the sides of the hallway.

The Marine who had stepped towards the man playing possum flew backwards, four shots impacting his chest and face, while the fireteam who had entered the office nearby were caught in the explosion hurling one of them back out the doorway, his body broken, as he slumped against the far wall leaving a bloody trail. The other three barely had time to scream before they were all engulfed in the explosion itself. The rest of the Marines who had come

forward from the elevator had ducked or rolled to the floor and came out alright, although singed, and somewhat battered from flying shrapnel.

From the farthest doorway came the gorilla man from before. He was favoring the shoulder which had taken a railgun round before, but he was still strong, and regular bullets didn't matter to him. Which he proved by charging through a hail of them and reaching out to grab at Steve, who was still in the point position and closest, having crouched and used his shield to defend against the explosion.

Steve now used his shield to batter aside the man's blow, then punched out, his fist slamming into the gorilla man's injured shoulder, causing him to howl in pain. The gorilla man's return blow was again redirected, upwards this time, and Steve rolled over a kick, landing behind the man, and bringing up his shield to block the blow full on. The man winced at the reverberations, then Steve grabbed his outstretched arm, twisting and hurling the stronger gorilla man through into the last of the six offices set into the side of the hall. The gorilla man had barely a second to widen his eyes, before the tripwire connected to several claymores broke, and he and the office in question were engulfed in fire.

With the gorilla man dealt with for now, Steve turned and raced towards Marcus and other Marines. They had mostly recovered and were firing into the man who had been playing dead as he came out of the passageway where he had been lying, moving back and away in pairs from the man as they did.

The reason for this was that their fusillade was having no effect whatsoever. The bullets hit, and they did damage, but they were pushed out again, the man's body healing almost as soon as the wounds were made.

From his belt, Steve took a grenade, and he tossed it into the hallway where the man with the incredible healing powers now stood, firing back against the Marines. The man barely had a moment to widen his eyes, the grenade impacting the wall right beside his head and exploding.

As that explosion roiled through the passageway Steve ordered the other Marines to duck into the various doorways as he did the same. This freed the firing lines of the Marines who had been left back at the elevator, who had been watching all this unable to intercede save for a few single shots past their fellows.

The gorilla man came out of the fire looking very much worse the wear, but still in fighting shape, only to eat several railgun rounds to the face and upper chest, which went straight through him, killing the man instantly.

However, to Steve's astonishment, from out of the explosion in the small hallway to the side, the man who the Marines had been firing at with so little effect came out looking none the worse for wear, grabbing up a fallen rifle and firing it in full auto towards the Marines.

In the light of the fires now raging here and there in the blasted ruins of the second floor Steve could tell the regenerative monster was a tall man, built along the same thin, powerful lines as Steve, if a little thinner in the shoulders than Captain America. Still he was heavily muscled, wearing a dark black outfit marked with streaks of red at the elbows and hips that left his arms uncovered, although the outfit was now showing lots and lots of tears from the number of bullets that had hit the man.

His face was uncovered, and it was a mask of horror. Every segment of that face was covered in scars, so many scars that it almost looked as if the man didn't have a nose or even a mouth except for the fact that it was open and screaming. "AAAAAAAAAA!"

Two more Marines went down to his fire, even as more fire riddled his body, including several railgun rounds. One of them caught him on the elbow, shattering the bone and tearing the arm away, dropping the forearm to the ground. But as Steve watched, the wound healed itself within seconds, and the man charged forward, still shrieking.

"Meet Dead Man Wade," the intercom said, one of them somehow still in one piece. "In terms of giving someone a regeneration factor, he is our greatest triumph. Greater than Wolverine and Sabertooth combined. Yet the process did, admittedly, break much of his sanity. Still, scientific progress cannot be made without breaking a few eggs, and the control function is perhaps our crowning achievement thus far."

"Check fire," Steve ordered with a grimace, charging forward to keep Wade from the marines. In turn, Wade dropped his rifle and pulled out twin daggers from behind him and began to cut at Steve with both of them at once, forcing Steve back. The man was **fast!** And highly trained, the knives flicking this way and that, his legs coming up in a series of knee blows and kicks, all of it mixed into a fluid, wild style.

Steve couldn't find many openings, and when he did, his punches and kicks didn't do much, barely phasing the man. Steve was able to hold him in place though, then twisted them around at one point, allowing the Marines behind him to start to fire again before Wade used a handhold and twisted them back into their beginning position, placing Steve between the shooters and Wade once more.

For a moment, the battle fell into a stalemate. Steve wasn't willing to let Wade past him and was skilled enough to hold him in place. But his own blows weren't doing anything to Wade, and Wade was faster and more dangerous than nearly anyone Steve had faced recently. Steve knew that Wade could kill him with those daggers, and only had to be lucky once, while Steve had to keep on holding him back with everything he had. *Maybe I really should look into adding some kind of cutting edge to my shield? Something to think about if I survive this.*

"Aim for the head! Aim for the head dammit! If that thing can regrow its own brain, we're going to be in deep shit!" Marcus shouted to his Marines, who had been joined by still more of their fellows from below.

"Yeah no shit, a real living dead man, a freakin' real-life zombie," a nearby Marine muttered.

Marcus might have shouted at him for the bad timing of that joke, if not for the fact that the man put the next few shots right into Dead Man Wade's head, Steve having just ducked to the side. The man stumbled, but despite that, as they watched, his brain and head began to heal itself.

Yet that brief moment allowed Steve to roll backwards, getting out of the way of the rest of the Marines who began to fire again into the dead creature's body making certain to target the chest and head, this time with three plasma rifles having been added to the mix, Marcus having made the mistake of assigning the fireteams with those weapons to the first strong point instead of splitting them up.

Under this hail of fire, Dead Man Wade finally fell like a puppet with its strings cut.

"Don't!" Steve shouted, as some of the Marines made to move forward, Marcus echoing him an instant later.

Their concerns were proved right a second later, as Dead Man Wade rolled on the ground, grabbing at two grenades on one of the fallen Marine's belts. He threw them down, even as he once again was struck by several dozen bullets including more than a few railgun rounds, which tore giant chunks out of his head and shoulders.

Yet the man didn't even seem to feel it, let alone be slowed by it. The instant a wound was caused, his body was already healing the damage. Steve had never seen the like, not even from Wolverine. As Concorde had boasted, Dead Man Wade's regeneration ability put Wolverine's to shame.

That was the last second for observation Steve had before the two grenades went off, filling the hallway with smoke. The goggle armed Marines were able to see through it, but not too deeply. But Dead Man Wade didn't really need to see, instead, he simply started to fire blindly towards them through the smoke and fog, while he retreated back down the hallway.

That was suspicious to Steve, whose shield had blocked most of the bullets coming towards them. "Wait here," he ordered Marcus. "I'm going forward. If I don't spring anything, come after me, but hold the range open as much as possible."

Steve reached the point where Dead Man Wade had been hiding before. Now disdaining the idea of clearing out the various areas small hallways and offices slowly, he moved quickly, tossing grenades of his own down into the house small hallways and into the rooms as he went, only for a larger series of explosion to occur ahead of him. These sounded odd though, not like grenades or bombs, but like det charges set into the building. A series of low-scale 'wumps' instead of 'boom'.

Outside the building, Ghigau and Sam had been staring at the building, hearing the explosions within, wanting to know what was going on, but unwilling to just charge straight in. Now they watched as a portion of the second story's wall came down, the wall crumbling downward.

Following on the heels of the explosion, a man leaped out, landing and beginning to fire with twin machine guns in his hands towards the surrounding Marines. Five of them went down quickly, while the others ducked into cover, and began to return fire. But that return fire didn't do anything to the figure, who began to fire off smoke grenades in every direction, blinding the Marines and causing many of them to check fire for lack of a target.

At the same time, from out of the wreckage of the second story, a tiny plane suddenly pushed himself out from underneath the rubble.

"Go after it, Falcon!" Ghigau shouted up to Sam, as the dagger in her hand changed to a bow, and she shot an arrow towards the berserker so quickly that even a marine with a rifle would have had trouble getting a shot off as fast. "We've got this!"

The arrow penetrated, blowing off the man's arm and dropping one of the guns he had been holding, but Ghigau watched in shock as the arm reformed instantly.

The horribly scarred man, his features now clear as the smoke began to billow away and the fires of the second story lit them, turned in her direction. He shrieked in fury and hate, racing towards her as he pulled a dagger from along his back with his regenerated hand. But instead of being surprised or put off, Ghigau bared her teeth in challenge inside her helmet as she raced forward on her skates.

The man was fast though, and just before they would have clashed head on, ducked to one side, lashing out with the dagger.

It took Ghigau in the shoulder, bouncing off her armor and she returned her own strike, Sigyn's Gift shifting into a dagger once more, the two of them exchanging blows. But Dani couldn't keep up with Wade's speed, and a kick took her in the side, right where one armor joint met the other.

Ghigau gasped at the pain, but the kick didn't do as much damage as it would have if the man had been able to get his dagger into that point. She twisted, coming back in, the goddess' gift shifting into a spear as she thrust it forward, slamming into the man's chest and penetrating.

Yet Wade grabbed a spear with one hand and pulled, lashing out with the dagger in the other hand towards her eyes. Ghigau's visor cracked under the blow from the dagger's point, causing her to reel away, losing her grip on Sigyn's Gift. The spear in the man's chest instantly

reverted into the simple bow that it had been when Ghigau had first been given it by the goddess whose soul her body housed.

But the man's attack on Ghigau faltered as Steve leaped out from the fire and fury of the second floor, crashing his shield into the man's head with bone-shattering force. He stumbled, and Steve ducked under the return blow, grabbing up a dagger that had fallen from the man's exploded arm earlier, and cutting upwards, removing the hand holding Wade's remaining dagger.

Ghigau instantly took advantage, Sigyn's Gift flying to her hand in a dagger form. She then darted forward, and away, having cut cleanly through the man's arm, just as Steve had.

The damage of losing both hands oddly, caused the man to have a moment of clarity as he stared down at the stumps as his hands began to reform. "What is it with you people trying to disarm me?"

"We didn't disarm you," Ghigau said darting back in from the side. "We un-handed you."

For some reason, that caused Wade start laughing, the sound even more horrifying than the earlier screaming, even as he attacked Captain America once again. Then Ghigau was there again, and this time, Sigyn's gift was in a sword form cutting from the side at his neck.

The man never even saw it coming before the sword cut cleanly through his neck, slicing all the way through in one quick stroke of its magically imbued blade.

Steve had seen this man come back from having half of its head and brains splattered across the walls and didn't falter. Instead, he stabbed forward with his own dagger, piercing the man's heart.

Kicking Wade's head away from his body, Ghigau waited, watching breathlessly.

But apparently, that at last was enough to put down the Dead Man Wade. After a second, Steve released the hold of the dagger which he'd just thrust through the man's chest, stepping back and allowing the corpse to fall.

"I want three guards on this thing at all times," he said, getting an affirmative from Marcus as he and the other marines with them on the second floor slowly started to make their way down the still burning wreckage towards the ground.

Looking around at the bodies that Wade had piled up in the last few moments of the fight, Ghigau nodded. "Right. And the next time that a politician decides on something for political reasons that is going to impact a fight like this, I'm going to personally tell them to stuff it. And you too if you back them up Cap."

“Duly noted and agreed,” Steve acknowledged with a sigh of regret. Then he looked up towards the distant sound of yet another boom. “You think...”

“Already gone,” Ghigau answered, racing out on her repulsor skates towards the noise.

The noise had been caused by the Falcon, of course.

All of the Air commandos had taken to the air except their heavy weapons man and had surrounded the plane as it tried to get away by hugging the top of the forest, but their fire didn't seem to be doing anything. The plane had some kind of ceramic armor, which absorbed plasma and could deflect bullets, something Sam made a note of.

But the plane soon started to leave them behind, accelerating slowly but surely.

Time for drastic measures, Sam thought. Reaching into his pouch with one hand, he raced upward towards the ascending plane, redlining his small thrusters. His other hand stretched out, the gauntlet shifting into two long talons. Desperately Falcon grasped onto one of the plane's wings before it could really jumpstart its engines. As it started to race away from his fellows, Sam pulled out a massive bunker-buster sticky bomb, slamming it down into the side of the plane, where it stuck.

Reaching into his pouch once more and pulling out the detonator, nearly caused the Falcon to lose his hold. But his gauntlet's shift into talon mode allowed him enough grip to get it done. Plunging the detonator into the side of the bunker buster, Sam let himself fall off, moving away from the plane, his wings flashing open as he flicked the command for the charge.

Whatever armor the plane had, it wasn't up to stopping the bunker buster. The bomb went off, tearing the wing and the plane's rear-end apart, sending the rest of it tumbling. Sam cursed as he lost his night vision, shouting out, “keep an eye on the ground, I repeat, keep an eye on the ground. Marines, I need a team to follow the debris, confirm that thing had someone inside it, and they are dead or in custody. Commandoes, back into the air, spread out and make certain the perimeter isn't breached. There is no way we want any of these fuckers to get away!”

“Found him,” Ghigau reported a moment later. “He's er, very mangled, but judging from er, scars I can see on the half of his head that's still here I think this is the chief asshole, Director Concorde.”

The cleanup for the battle went on for some time and involved waving off the local police who had been called to the disturbance. When they were given the presidential orders and saw Captain America though, they went away willingly enough. The bodies of the Marines were seen to, loaded onto the transport after it returned, landing in the only possible space, in this case, a nearby road. Marcus went with them, along with half the remaining Marines, as

Carol, Wyatt and Piotr joined the team on the ground, just in case. Too little too late in Steve's mind, something he would have to live with going forward.

Sean and the remaining Marines went through the dead, while also burning the body of Dead Man Wade just in case. With its head set to one side, and its heart carved out and put in another fire. The Marines that Marcus had led on the second floor had seen Wade come back to life after killing their fellows several times and wanted to make certain he was dead. When the body was entirely burnt away, they would then scatter the ashes and bones into the nearby Lake Superior.

If Steve or the others thought this was overkill, they never said anything. The Marines had lost too many men in a battle they didn't need to for Steve to begrudge them anything.

Meanwhile the Custodes handled the scientific devices and any computers that were still intact enough to get anything from. Thankfully from the list that Pinoptes and Sage had discovered on the CIA mainframe the only one missing from their list of doctors was Robert Windsor.

Later, they discovered that even that man had been dealt with. Pinoptes linked an image of him to Mr. Sinister, and Mystique confirmed that Windsor was a name the man had used several times.

Only one of the computers in the basement was still intact enough to get anything from. The rest had been both cleared and destroyed. Ghigau took charge of it, handing it over to Douglas and the many eyes for analysis along with portions of the plane that Sam had downed.

All this Steve reported later that night to Emma while on the way back to Washington D.C.

"Don't beat yourself up over this Steve, it was the President's call, and it was his to make in the first place. And remember you'll be up on the stage with the President when he makes an announcement about your attack and about the new head of the CIA," Emma said into the air of High Note later that night.

"Yeah, well, I think if you want to root out immoral practices and unearth skeletons from your closet, Duggan's the man for the job, especially with Nick still under semi-house arrest. But what happened in Russa?" Steve asked.

"We were able to convince the Russians to concede on allowing the EDF to have a map of their tunnel systems, although not all of it. Still, that is fine. Things got strange when we started talking about the super-soldier issue. They thought we were lying about there being another super soldier program in Russia at first, but eventually the Russians okayed calling in Sputnik once I pointed out how nervous the Duma Representative Yigliovich was acting. It came out that he was majority shareholder of the bank where the government's money was being

sent. From there, the truth came out quickly, without me needing to use my telepathy at all. Turns out that even the highest levels of government didn't know about the Winter Soldier program, and for good reason."

"Good reason?" Steve parroted. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"From what Sputnik and Sage discovered today, the project was torn out of books when the communist government fell, but the pay log for the entire program was somehow kept in place, funneling money directly from the new Russian government into the KGB, just as a large number of KGB agents were turning into an organized criminal empire," Emma replied, shaking her head slightly, then waving off MJ as she held up her fingernails, all of them gleaming in different colors. Mary Jane and Sage were both up here with her, a bottle of wine nearby along with a bag of munchies. After the meeting in Russia, the three of them had retreated to High Note for some girl time.

It somewhat surprised Emma now, but with the absence of Ororo and Jean (and Hela, although even now, Emma wasn't willing to admit how much she liked the Asgardian), Mary Jane and Sage had become her friends. Mary Jane was a very down to earth, very with-it woman in a way that Emma enjoyed. Talking with Sage was often times trying and often times delightful, but always interesting, and the two of them had become friends over a shared delight in word games and chess.

"Well yes, they would say that what they? Corrupt politicians and bureaucrats will say anything to get out of taking responsibility or keeping their secrets from coming to light. Heck even with all the evidence laid out in front of him the former head of the CIA still attempted to get out of admitting he knew the program had performed live experiments on soldiers and mutants they had captured."

Steve actually snickered then, something unusual for Captain America. "Right before he attempted to use some kind of subliminal message thing to activate his bodyguards. Which in turn, lasted right up until Paige, John, and Scott interfered." The fight at that point had been almost painfully anticlimactic, although Steve would still have paid to see the man's face when he realized who most of the guards in the room really were. It was obvious that while the head of the CIA, whose name Steve hadn't bothered to learn, had cut the checks, he hadn't been the sharpest knife in the drawer. *More like a spoon really.*

"Yes, but in this case, they actually meant it. The Winter Soldier program was supposed to be shut down, like so much else when the fall of the USSR happened, and none had even heard the name. But instead of eventually amalgamating into the central government as the other super soldier programs had done, the winter soldier program disappeared, while, like I said, the money trail remained. Sputnik has now been authorized to follow that lead up, and they've already begun to act on that and Representative Yiglovich's information."

Smiling faintly Emma shook her head. “The upside of all this is, I signed off on building the necessary arc reactors in the tunnels. With that, Russia will be to the point where they can build up the industrial capacity we want soon.”

“I think that’s excellent Emma. You’ve followed up on Harry’s hopes, turning a past enemy into an ally. I think he and the others will be happy and proud of what you’ve been doing,” Steve answered, knowing that, for all her icy exterior, Emma was deathly worried about their friends.

Remembering her brief, and very odd, out of body experience, and coming from a telepath that said quite a bit, moment with Harry, Jean, Hela, and the personifications of Death and the Phoenix Force, Emma sighed. “I hope so. I really, really hope so. But against a foe like Galactus, I just don’t know if planning and magic will be enough.”

OOOOOO

While Emma was worrying about how the group who had left Sol was faring against Galactus, Harry and the others were recovering from the battle against the World Eater and his Herald. Ororo cuddled into Harry’s right side as Jean did the same on his other on a wide, soft leather sofa. Nearby, Hela was laid out in a chair, her legs up on a table, a look of utter exhaustion on all their faces, but none more so than Harry and Ororo. When the adrenaline had worn off, the effort of the battle and healing had hit them both hard.

Nearly every member of the Custodes team on the Long Voyager had sustained injuries of one sort or another but, they had been ridiculously lucky to get away with no one actually dying. Indeed, Ororo had dealt with the worst off during the battle. Thundra owed her ability to move to the Weather Goddess, whereas Havoc and Banshee had both lost limbs, which Ororo’s magic had been instrumental in regrowing. But the process had been slow and extremely exhausting for the weather goddess on top of how horribly the battle had drained her before that. The cold compress Harry had tied around her head and the tissue tinted with blood from her nose emphasized this on top of how boneless she lay there.

James had to be literally cut out of his borrowed juggernaut armor, which had been both slow and extremely painful for the Apache. But once that had been done, Harry had been able to use some Anti-burn cream to deal with most of his wounds. Amara, too, had been utterly exhausted to the point she nearly had a brain aneurism, but there was little that could be done for her other than rest.

Still, all of the wounded were now on the mend, and Harry smiled wanly as he nuzzled into Ororo’s shoulder, breathing in her scent and simply taking pleasure in the fact that all of his friends and loved ones were alive after what had been easily their hardest battle. *For all of our planning, preparation time, and the massive aid that using magic was against someone who had no knowledge of it, we barely pulled through.*

But they had. Morg was dead, and Galactus had promised to leave planets that had sentient life on them alone. *And the second we get back to Earth, I'm going to start researching the Titan change or whatever it is called*, Harry thought. And he wasn't thinking about the large and all-too fragile Imperial Guardsmen of the same codename. *With the runes the Phoenix and Death showed me, I have a strong starting point, I think.*

"How is Nightside doing?" He asked, looking away reluctantly from Ororo's neck for a moment, as he turned to look to his other side and the equally beautiful redhead laying there.

"Nightside is well enough and happy to be away from the Emperor. I'm watching to make certain that she doesn't get homesick or have any second thoughts, but I don't think she will." Jean replied. Then she looked at Harry quizzically. "What I want to know is, why is Hedwig so interested in her?"

"You'll have to ask my dear familiar that yourself. I'm uncertain on that matter as well."

"You know I'm awake and can hear you talking about me, right?" a tart female voice from another sofa nearby. A second later, Nightside shifted up so she wasn't laying down any longer, simply leaning against the side of the sofa.

Unlike many of the others who lay sprawled out likewise in the communal room around them, Nightside hadn't been all that badly injured, but she had taken a hard knock to one of her shoulders and another on her knee that she hadn't even noticed until the adrenaline wore off. When that had happened, her leg and back had basically seized up like someone clenching a fist. Despite that, Nightside had been almost guilty about receiving medical attention after the battle, given the wounds the others had sustained and had waved off any help beyond painkillers.

Now she looked at Harry, keeping her voice low to avoid bothering any of the others, many of whom were sleeping or just laid out, too tired to do anything but too keyed up to sleep. Or, in the case of Banshee and Alex, dealing with the sensation of phantom itches on their regrown limbs. "As to your animal companion's interest in me, I don't..."

Hedwig was suddenly there, popping into existence above them all, flying down to land on the back of the sofa between Harry and Ororo. The owl butted the back of their heads, nipping at their ears and hair in affectionate worry for a moment.

Harry stroked her plumage for a time as Ororo smiled at her. "Well, Hedwig? You haven't explained yet why you have been so interested in Nightside, and she doesn't seem to have a clue."

The snowy owl looked over at the girl, and Harry got the impression that she was indeed very interested in the young alien woman. When she turned back to lock eyes with him, Hedwig gave Harry the impression that it had something to do with how Hedwig could travel. Harry had

once called it Going Between, having gotten the name from a fantasy novel series Hermione had introduced him to. And it looked as if Hedwig thought that maybe the girl had access to the same kind of energy, the Dark Force, as Nightside had called it.

He relayed this to Nightside, and the woman looked shocked at the idea. "I've never heard of any of my people being able to teleport like that!"

Flying forward, Hedwig alighted onto Nightside's shoulder. And somehow, the alien woman knew what the snowy owl wanted. She closed her eyes for a brief second and concentrated, reaching for the Dark Force. Then, before she could do anything with that energy, Hedwig acted, and they were gone, teleporting to another room on the ship. Reed and Ben, the only humans not sprawled out in the main room, had barely a second to gape at bird and woman before they popped back, with Nightside bouncing as she hit the sofa. "I... okay... that was cool, I, I think I felt something there... it's possible she, er, Hedwig that is, is right..." Nightside stammered.

"Excellent. Do you think you could learn from one another then, Hedwig? Is that what you're after?" Harry asked, still speaking softly, although most of the other Custodes and their allies were now watching this with as much interest as they could do anything right now.

Hedwig bobbed her head up and down firmly, and Nightside smiled. "That is kind of awesome, frankly. And heck yes, I agree to that."

"I'm glad for both of you," Harry replied. Then he shifted gears, looking at Nightside almost commandingly for a moment. "However, since you are actually awake, I don't have to rely on Jean's empathy for my answers about you. Do you have any regrets about joining us?"

Nightside shook her head firmly. "No, I don't. Like I told Jean when she first approached me, even my own family wanted me to basically sell myself out to the Emperor. They thought it was a high honor. And I was never all that close with them anyway given how I started training for the Imperial Guard when I was ten." She then cocked her head to one side, gesturing to her face and the alien features there, her blue skin color, and the markings under her eyes. "My question is, will I be able to well fit in with you hu..."

She cut off as James, Alex, and many of the others laughed. "Nightside, even if you choose not to join the Custodes Mundi, you'll fit in quite well with the rest of our companions back on Earth, and even in public, you won't get that many looks. Most people would simply assume you are a mutant, and acceptance of mutants is on the rise at home thanks entirely to Harry," Jean answered.

Perhaps in another lifetime, Harry might have demurred or said that he had simply built on the starting point that Xavier had created. But Hela had long since drilled into him that false humility wasn't exactly attractive, and he didn't argue the point now.

Instead, he made a joke of it. "Yep, you might only be moving from working for one kind of military organization to another, but I will wager that I pay a lot better than the Imperial Guard, and I will not be rattling your doorknob at night. I already have three lovers, with another waiting in the wings because she believes that courtship should turn into some method of slow, debilitating torture via rising sexual and romantic tension. So I am not looking for another."

While Hela let out a weak but decidedly throaty chuckle at that, Nightside snorted. "Bah, paying me at all would make you better than the Emperor. We're given an unlimited amount of credit to use on our off-hours. If you're an Imperial Guard, everything is free. But you're certainly not given any actual money. And don't get me started on our retirement package."

"You have a retirement package?" Jean asked quizzically.

"No, we don't, hence why I said not to ask me about it," Nightside replied dryly.

Everyone there laughed at that, even the slowly rousing Ororo. But their laughter cut off when a call from the bridge came in at that point, Reed's voice calling out from a few of the nearby speakers. "Ahem, I've always wanted to say this. Captain to the bridge, captain to the bridge. We have an incoming communication from Deathbird."

About ten minutes later, Harry looked at Hela and Jean, then over at Reed as the request from Deathbird to join her on her ship echoed around the bridge. "So, what do we think?"

"Given how we know these Shi'ar act toward their 'lesser's' there is certainly more going on here than simply wanting to meet us in person," Hela replied tartly.

Thundra, who had also followed them to the bridge to join Ben, nodded firm agreement. "Agreed. Although, recall that this is Deathbird. She is... possibly ambitious for her own sake."

"If you're going to ask me to try to figure out Deathbird's intentions, don't. Remember, Deathbird also has some technological defense against telepathy," Jean reminded them.

Snapping his fingers, Harry turned to Reed. "You mentioned at one point that you want to see if you could build something that would cancel out that kind of thing. Did you have time to work on that project?"

"In my copious amounts of spare time, yes," Reed nodded and gestured with one long finger towards the back of the bridge. "Indeed, I even tested the device. Although I will warn you, it is very short-ranged, barely two yards."

'In that case, I think it's time to act a bit weaker than we are by just a bit,' Harry thought aloud. "While the Shi'ar have seen Ororo's ability to heal the wounded, they don't know how

strong it is or how powerful our telepath is," He said, winking at Jean. "So let's keep it that way. If she is planning a surprise, she will plan for what she can see, instead of the reality. Hela, you're with me, we'll go over just the two of us. Ben, tell Deathbird to expect us over there in an hour, and Reed, I'll need that device. Let's see what we can discover about Deathbird, and maybe the Emperor's intentions too now that Galactus is dealt with."

Harry would normally have brought both Jean and Ororo to a meeting like what he expected this one to become, but he wanted Jean, and her various abilities, to be hidden away for now. And Ororo was in no shape for it. *A Pepper-up Potion might get her well enough to come with us, but the backlash later would be even worse, and I refuse to do that to her without a much better reason.*

Leaving the bridge, Harry and Reed took a brief stopover at Reed's room, where Harry picked up the device Reed had made. It was in the form of a small bracelet that, according to Reed, emitted an electromagnetic field that would push down or permanently disable the Shi'ar's technological defense against telepathy.

"Very good, Reed," Harry murmured, looking over to the doorway where Hela and Ororo stood. "Thank you. With this, Jean should be able to figure out Deathbird's intentions and maybe anything else she and D'ken discussed after we left the palace. With that information we will at least be able to make an informed decision on what to do next."

Nodding, Reed bid him good luck and waited until Harry was almost out of the door before he said anything, his back to the younger man, stiff and somewhat uncomfortable. "Harry, realize whatever you do, I will back you. The Shi'ar... I cannot condone or understand what they have done to rise to prominence as they have. In my mind, they represent a clear danger to humanity, but what to do about it... I leave it up to you."

Understanding what Reed meant beyond his actual words, Harry nodded slightly, though Reed could not see it before replying verbally, thanking Reed for the support but understanding the underlying message. Whatever was going to happen when they returned to the Shi'ar capital, it would be Harry's choice. That was the burden of command.

Harry and Hela took the shuttle over to the Shi'ar ship. As they did, Jean, back on the bridge, pointed out something their scanners were telling them about the Shi'ar bombardment ship Deathbird flew her flag from. "She was part of the battle for certain. That ship is badly damaged."

Hela chuckled harshly. "I never said I doubted Deathbird's basic courage, firebird. I simply mentioned her ambition."

"Still, it is something to be aware of. Deathbird is the one that has the most knowledge of the military, and I'd wager that means she probably has partisans in it," Harry mused.

From where she was sitting next to Jean, Thundra added something herself now. "And the Imperial Guard. Remember, she is connected to the Borderers and the Subgaurdians."

"Then why wouldn't she have attempted a coup already? If she's as ambitious as we all assume and is eyeing up her brother's neck as you said she was?" Jean questioned.

"Gladiator," Hela answered simply. "Against him, I would wager that whatever numbers she could bring to bear would not be enough. Now here we are, Gladiator dead, Galactus defeated with a plan she might be able to sell as her own, and us, powerful foreigners who might be willing to act as mercenaries. It has happened before in human history has it not, the history of the Normans and the Vikings who birthed them, for example?"

This was all guesswork, Harry knew, but it was good guesswork, and stuff that they could definitely make certain was accurate once Jean was able to rummage around in Deathbird's head.

Exiting the shuttle onto the Shi'ar ship's hanger, Harry and Hela were greeted by Shi'ar naval personnel drawn up in two long lines. As the two earthers (as far as the Shi'ar knew anyway) stepped down from the ramp, the crewmen all smashed their clenched fists against their chests before saluting with their arms raised up at an angle above their heads. They wordlessly cheered the two earthers as they marched forward towards Deathbird, who stood at the far end of the two lines, her talon weapons noticeably absent.

"You did it. I'll admit, a part of me thought that you humans were blustering when you said you could fight Galactus on an even footing. But you did it. The Shi'ar Empire is thankful, and I am certain my brother, the Emperor, will have a feast prepared in your honor. We sent word of our victory already, and he has requested your presence there. But first, I wanted to ask if you had any wounded or damage to your ship that you required help with, and I wanted to have what we call Deg'razi, the honor drink. In the ancient past, when my people went out on hunts, the hunters would always come together to the pack hunter's home for a cup of the strongest drink they could find before heading home once more, a way to show appreciation for their courage."

Harry nodded, understanding that she was playing the crowd. "We thank you for this, and we graciously accept."

Nodding, Deathbird turned away, gesturing Hela and Harry to follow her. As they exited the hangar bay, she looked back at them. "I expected the red-haired one and the one with the fascinating dark skin to be with you, as well as the scientist Reed Richard. Where are they? A Deg'razi cup should rightfully be shared with all the leaders of this venture."

"Phoenix was injured in the destruction of the blade Morg had been further empowered by, and then again in the battle against Galactus," Harry answered, lying with an ease that would have appalled a far younger Harry. "She is not in critical condition but healing her has wiped out Storm for now. Neither are in any shape to be moving around. We have other

wounded as well, although thankfully not nearly as many as we might have. We only lost Banshee and Havok in the battle, although Reed too was lost after Morg fell. He was retreating with one of the wounded, only to be struck in the head by a stray bolt of cutting energy.”

Deathbird nodded, and Hela spoke up then before the woman could voice whatever empty platitude she was about to give voice to. *After all, my words might be a platitude, but they are anything but empty.* “Our condolences on your own losses. Your people fought with bravery and honor.”

The Shi’ar princess simply nodded as she led the way through the ship, asking specific questions about the battle and its aftermath. The news that Galactus was still alive was appalling, especially after Harry told Deathbird that they had dropped what amounted to several tons worth of antimatter and a supernova on him. The idea of anything surviving was terrifying to Deathbird.

On the other hand, Morg’s death and the destruction of his sword brought a smile to her face. “My brother might have issues with the destruction of what he thinks of as Imperial property, but I do not,” she confided, smirking slightly. “Indeed, I rather approve.”

Harry looked at her quizzically, and she shrugged, a motion that the Shi’ar, like nodding and so much else, had in common with humans and all other humanoid species. “If that thing could give such powers, why would I want it in the hands of anyone but myself? Yet the surviving Imperial Guard units who clashed with him in this battle noticed that the sword seemed to interfere with Morg’s faculties. Ergo I would be hesitant to wield it and thus would sooner not see it in anyone else’s hands.”

Harry nodded, impressed slightly at that. At least Deathbird had enough self-understanding to know her limitations.

Soon enough, they were all in her room, sitting across from one another at a small, extremely personable desk made of a natural dark cherry-black wood, which looked almost like bamboo. In contrast, the area around the desk did not show any sign of long-term habitation, Deathbird not having bothered with that. This ship, after all, wasn’t Deathbird’s personal flagship. Instead, it was simply one of the many bombardment ships which composed the fleet that had been put together for the battle against Galactus.

However, she had brought along several decanters of extremely good wine as well as the desk.

She politely asked her guests whether they had a preference for sweet or tart wines, then poured out a blue wine for Hela, while Harry took a wine that was a surprisingly orange color, almost neon oranges point of fact. He looked at it quizzically, sniffed at it, smiling in approval before asking, “What exactly is this?”

"We call it Varl wine. It is a delicacy among my people and one of the most expensive wines known in the galaxy. It is one of my personal favorites," Deathbird replied as she pulled out a small device of some kind. She then set it on the table between them, flicking a small switch on the side. A brief tone followed, and she smiled grimly.

Not acknowledging this oddity, Harry waved the glass under his nose again, sending a brief apology to Jean about breaking the promise he and Ororo had made to not drink until Jean's pregnancy was over. *"Only, I don't think I could get out of it this time, love."*

"No worries, Harry," Jean snorted. *"I agreed with you, and hey, at least technically I'm not pregnant right now, you know?"*

While Jean was looking forward to being reunited with her unborn children, feeling the warmth of their presence and growing souls within her, she was also very worried about the unpleasant repercussions the Phoenix Force had warned her would occur when the being returned her babies. Not because she would go back to being a blimp, no. Jean was very worried about the backlash that would occur when the Phoenix Force returned her children to her. The being had warned it would not be a pleasant experience, after all.

Ugh, best not to think about it. It's like knowing there's a train coming your way and knowing you can't avoid it, whatever you do. But no matter what happens, it will be wonderful to be with my babies again...

Not being party to Jean's rather muddled thoughts at the moment, Harry took a sip of of the wine, nodding in approval at the taste. It almost didn't taste like wine at all. Rather, it tasted almost like a margarita, with orange and lemon and perhaps a hint of cherry mixed in.

The blue wine likewise met with Hela's approval, and the three of them took some time to talk further about the battle. Hela gave a running commentary on the battle against Morg, while Harry told about how they had trapped Galactus. He saw no harm in giving away their secrets for now since all knowledge of the battle would be erased from Deathbird's mind after this, either now or sometime in the future when they erased all knowledge of Earth and humanity from the Shi'ar Empire.

Feeling that thought brought Jean back to the here and now. *"What do you want me to replace it with?"* she questioned.

"Just destruction of the star, I think," Harry mused as Hela carried the discussion with Deathbird. *"That, and we can use Gladiator and the Imperial Guard to deal with Morg, whose death somehow weakens Galactus. Along with, maybe, some kind of bomb to recreate Magma's powers?"* Despite not taking part in the battle face to face, Magma's ability to give Galactus indigestion was seriously important to the battle against him, weakening and throwing Galactus off-balance right from the start.

Back on the ship, Jean bit her lip thoughtfully, then slowly nodded. *“Okay, I think you can build on that... Deathbird wouldn’t have been on the planet after all, plus maybe giving credit to one of their scientists for Reed’s projects and that bomb would work?”*

“We’ll have to find a scientist to fit the part among their courtiers. But yes, that sounds workable,” Harry answered before turning his attention back to Deathbird as he sensed the discussion of the battle slowly petering out. Taking a second sip of his wine, Harry firmly set it aside, nodding to Hela.

In response, Hela changed the topic of conversation abruptly. “Perhaps now that we have taken bread and salt, we should get down to business.”

The bread and salt comment took Deathbird a moment to understand, but then she smiled grimly. “Ah, I see. A sign that you are an honored guest, perhaps?”

Hela nodded. “We accept that we are no longer in danger from you, but what is the real reason behind you wishing to talk to us in person? I do not believe that you are the type to simply want to socialize after a battle.”

“Especially not with that little device there. A scrambler of some kind, I presume?”

Deathbird took a moment to take a sip from her own glass of orange wine, glancing over at Harry. Hela and Harry had been very ‘honest’ about the damage that the Custodes took in the battle and even said that James was much worse off than he actually was. Now Harry wondered if perhaps they had oversold it, as he detected a faint flicker of unease.

But then Deathbird set her glass down, and Harry could see in her body language that she had come to a decision. “Indeed it is. You can never be too careful after all, which is part of why I wished to talk to you. Tell me, do you honestly think that my brother D’ken will let all of you go back to your homeworld in peace? After humiliating him as you did, after slaying Gladiator, the strongest of our Imperial Guard?”

“No,” Harry replied bluntly. “We’re prepared for that eventuality. And if you think that just because some of our members are wounded, we will be unable to stop D’ken from attacking us, you are grossly mistaken.”

“But why are you asking? Or rather warning us like this,” Hela said, leaning forward, her body language screaming co-conspirator for a moment. “It is almost enough to make me believe that you might have... ulterior motives, perhaps?”

“I do,” Deathbird announced, tossing the gauntlet down in no uncertain terms. “I, Cal’syee Neramani, of the Imperial family of the Shi’ar Empire, wish to come to an agreement with you to form a temporary alliance, the purpose of which is to oust my brother from the throne and place myself on top of it. I saw your strengths, the power you wield, you Potter, and you Hela, and Storm and Phoenix. I firmly believe that even if only you two are combat capable, the Imperial Guard does not have the ability to deal with you without the aid of Gladiator. I

believe that my brother's attempt to take advantage of the situation will fail miserably, and I believe that is one mistake too many for an empire to bear."

"That, and you want to be Empress," Hela said, certainty in her tone as she finished off her glass of wine, standing up to get the decanter. "Although I find it interesting that this is the first time we have heard your actual name."

"That, and I wish to be Empress," the woman acknowledged with an easy nod. "As for my name. I was born Cal'syee. I made myself into Deathbird, hence why I prefer it."

"So, we've determined that you have something to gain from this, but if we're still going to be walking into an ambush, and like you, we're pretty certain we could get out without your help, what's in it for us?" Harry asked as he fiddled with the bracelet he was wearing, turning on the device that Reed had constructed.

Deathbird nodded as if the question was completely understandable, and she and Hela began to haggle about what their aid was worth in terms of technological resources. So busy with Hela was she, that Deathbird didn't notice Harry twisting his wrist around to where a red glow slowly turned green. With that, he reached out to Jean. "*Her defenses should be down. Can you...*"

"*Already on it,*" Jean replied instantly, and midsentence, Deathbird paused as Jean's willpower slammed into her mind despite the distance between the two ships.

Deathbird's eyes widened for a brief second as she felt the intrusion. Deathbird, like her siblings, had some measure of mental discipline, but it wasn't enough on its own to stop a telepath of even Oracle's power, let alone Jean Grey. The redhead bore in, halting the woman's voice, shutting down her mind for a moment and freezing her body in place as she began to search around inside of the Shi'ar woman's mind.

"She was planning to betray us the moment her brother was dead. Deathbird even sent out a signal to a group of Outland guards before you boarded her ship. Two of the Imperial fleet's Admirals are also under her sway, although Deathbird only has about a third of the Home Fleet captains willing to follow her lead," Jean reported, now communicating with both Harry and Hela, while also speaking aloud to Reed, Ben and Thundra aboard the bridge. The others had opted to head to sleep, not having much to contribute at this point in the planning.

"She also knows about the Emperor's plans for us," Jean went on after a few seconds. "It looks like he was going to use narcotics and hallucinogens in various forms to weaken and break our minds. It... it looks like it's some kind of thing he uses on his harem women combined with things they put in prisoner's food to weaken them or break them before interrogation. If... I hate to say it, but one of the various pathogens might have worked if we were taken by surprise. The air-based one in particular."

“Hmm... yeah, that one might have caused issues,” Harry agreed, scowling and thankful they had been on the lookout for this kind of thing. “Blocking or negating poisons in food or drink is actually a simple enchantment to use if you think about it at all. Air-based... I don’t know of any spell that isn’t very visible that could deal with that kind of thing.

“So the question now becomes, what are we going to do?” Hela mused, her tone almost whimsical but her eyes very firm as she looked at her Seidr Man.

Seeing that look, Harry straightened his shoulders and looked back at Hela firmly, speaking not just to her but to Jean and Ororo. The others would learn of his decision when he returned to the ship.

“We’re going to use her,” he declared bluntly. “And when we get there, we are going to use the virus as well.”

He could feel Jean’s shock as she realized he wasn’t actually opening this up for debate. No, he was simply stating what they would do. It was harsh, but being a leader meant that Harry had to put what was good for his people ahead of his own sense of morality. Harry, the individual, was appalled at the idea of using a computer virus that would basically destroy any system it touched in due course, shutting down all intergalactic communication, destroying any ability to communicate, destroying their hyperdrives and indeed a large portion of their computer-based infrastructure. Worse yet, the virus was self-replicating. It would just keep on going, continuing to destroy any system it interacted with after its first initial activation.

Billions, trillions of people might die as the Empire came apart. But Earth would be saved. The Shi’ar Empire would cease to exist, let alone be a threat, for a very, very long time. And in the end, saving humanity from facing yet another extraterrestrial threat was worth it.

Hela smiled in approval, both of the action, and how Harry was going about it. *Such is the way of a Jarl, the final word must be his.*

On the bridge of the Long Voyager, Ororo simply nodded her head. She was more resigned to this act than approving, but she had studied the history of the Shi’ar with Reed and Harry. Ororo had come away with the knowledge that this race’s leaders could not be trusted to keep their word, could not be trusted to leave Earth alone now, and further, were purely evil in how they treated other races, just like the Kree.

Indeed, in a way, the Kree were the more understandable evil. They had never simply eaten another sentient race into practical extinction, after all. That made working non-space faring races to death over generations seem no less evil but certainly less horrifying.

Jean too very reluctantly agreed on this course of action, although unlike the others, she disapproved of the way Harry was handling making the call, taking this choice and its consequences all on his own shoulders. “I agree,” she said formally, adding her words to Harry’s as if she too had made the decision. *“The Shi’ar know too much about us, and they aren’t like*

the Kree, who we know have already cut their losses. D'ken or Deathbird or even Lilandra, the Shi'ar are too vindictive to be let alone on the hope that they won't come after Earth later."

Smiling tenderly at Jean's words and support for his decisions, Harry asked her softly to release her hold on Deathbird.

As far as Deathbird was concerned, the last ten minutes had not occurred, and she continued speaking as if that was the case, arguing a point about death rays and whether or not that piece of technology was on the table as part of the payment to the humans for helping her ambition. She didn't know that Jean had already implanted the mental suggestions and commands inside of her brain to come under Jean's command at the appropriate time. And because the electronic defense the Shi'ar used only detected changes to her overall brain pattern as they occurred, they could not detect embedded suggestions once they were in place.

Forcing out a laugh, Harry reached over and tapped Hela on the elbow, shaking his head. "We don't need that kind of technology, love. What we need is anonymity and being left alone to our own devices. Earth is far away from your Empire. With Galactus gone, we have nothing you want, no resources that you could not get easier elsewhere. Yes, we are individually powerful, but as a race, we wish to be left alone. We have no dreams of Empire, no thoughts beyond our own star system. Promise us that the Empire will leave us alone, and we will agree to help you against your brother."

"Is that all?" Deathbird snorted. "That seems too small a price to pay and is rather suspicious."

"Oh, we'll take the technologies that Hela was trying to finagle you out of," Harry answered cheerfully. "But remember, we're all under the assumption that D'ken is going to pull something anyway. If that's the case, then helping you permanently remove and replace them isn't all that big of a jump."

Deathbird forced out a laugh, nodding her head. "That is true. So, let's get down to the meat of the prey."

For the next twenty minutes, they discussed various portions of the plan, with Deathbird being open about the various resources she had slowly begun to put in place for her own power play and what she knew of the plans that the Emperor was making. Jean pointed out, though, that Deathbird didn't share all of those plans. *"She's not telling you about the gas that apparently is going to try to affect our libidos and intoxicate our minds. She's only telling us about the poisons and drugs in the food. Bitch."*

"I would wager Steven, Hela and myself can come up with some way to deal with all the various drugs they want to try to give us," Harry soothed. *"The only issue will be the air-based assault, and even there, we should be able to come up with something. Really, my concerns are the orbital defenses and the Shi'ar's Home Fleet."*

When he said that last aspect aloud, it was Deathbird who replied rather than Jean. "You are correct. The orbital defenses are a threat, but I have several agents in positions of power there. They will be ready to act when needed. They might be able to even keep the orbital stations from becoming directly involved. Beyond sending down the Imperial Guard units, they will undoubtedly be playing host to, at any rate. Just because my brother believes that the poisons in your meal will do the job doesn't mean that he is so foolish as to not stack the deck further. Indeed, he might well have pulled in more Imperial Guard units to fight you all then were fighting Galactus."

Harry waved that off. "Numbers really don't matter much to us. We can deal with them so long as myself or one of our other more powerful members isn't forced to do double duty, blocking the attacks from the orbital defenses at the same time we're fighting on the ground."

There was a flash of concern from Deathbird at that point that Jean helpfully relayed, commenting on the fact that she was just now almost having second thoughts about using them, but not really. A momentary misgiving was all. For Deathbird, the die had been cast.

Soon, the discussion faded, and the two earthers stood up to leave. Spending too much time together might seem suspicious to those members of the crew who could possibly be informants for the Emperor. Deathbird walked the duo back down to their shuttle and bid them farewell, smiling internally at how well the meeting had gone. *For the paltry sum of a promise of few bits and pieces of technology and the knowledge of D'ken's actions, I will gain the crown of the Empire! After that, we will have to see...*

Back aboard the ship, Harry called a meeting for everyone aboard. This took some time, as many had gone to sleep, and several were not happy about being roused, feeling they had earned the mother of all lie-ins for their day's work.

When they were all gathered, Harry began. "Well, ladies and gentlemen, it turns out that yes, Deathbird has her own plans, and she wants to use us for them. Considering that we know that the Emperor is planning to betray us anyway, we agreed to help. But more than that, I have made the decision of what to do going forward."

Harry looked around, locking eyes with each individual there in turn, as he continued. "We're going to use the virus. Instead of just removing D'ken from power, we're going to kill him, and then we are going to bring the Empire down around their ears while also setting a civil war into motion between his siblings."

Like his lovers had been, the men and women around him were surprised at the tone of voice Harry was using. He was not asking for their approval or even for their backing. He was simply stating what was going to happen. The decision had been made.

Everyone there simply nodded, with only Stephen and Reed looking a little worried, while Ben looked regretful but understanding. Reed, too, only looked worried about the feasibility of what they were planning, as he agreed with the necessity.

Steven, on the other hand, did not. But he also knew that it was Harry's call and wouldn't fight against it. He did, however, say, "I will have no part in actually downloading the virus into their internet or whatever it is called. Nor will I fight the Emperor personally, who is so outmatched that it is laughable against you and your team, Harry. I am not a king, nor am I a leader. My sense of honor is not like yours. Nor do I work for you yet," he finished, smiling wryly as he gestured around at the others.

"Will you help in creating the illusions and false memories we'll need to create afterward to erase our presence from their minds?" Hela asked, sounding somewhat contemptuous of Steven's position.

But Harry was much more positive as Steven nodded. He was simply happy to have whatever help the powerful mage was willing to give them, and he knew that Steven would be instrumental in creating the series of memories that they would have to implant into the mind of everyone in the entire system after the fact to cover up the human's involvement. Magic and Jean's telepathy would be the keys to that, just as much as erasing any physical evidence above and beyond the virus's propagation.

"In that case, you, Reed and Jean will get to work on that aspect the moment the battle commences. We'll need to alter the minds of literally everyone in the system who knows about 'those strange human creatures that the Emperor called in'."

"Luckily, the Emperor's ego is going to work for us there, according to Deathbird," Jean added, seeing some concern on the faces of the people around.

"D'ken did not desire knowledge of our involvement against Galactus to spread, since it could be seen as a sign of weakness even within the Empire. So D'ken actually shut down all normal travel between the home system and anywhere else for a time and has forbidden knowledge of you to spread with a blanket communications blackout on mentioning us. According to Deathbird, it has kept knowledge of our involvement to military forces that were involved in our battle against Galactus, all of whom will be coming with us to the home planet, and the rest of the home system."

"Wait, is that actually possible?" Alex scoffed, joined in this disbelief by many of the others. "There's no way that kind of thing would stick among humans, not for any length of time anyway. And you're telling me all his subjects in the home system agreed to not spread the news, not even the criminal element?"

"Remember that most civilian-style ships wouldn't have been able to see us anyway, and that any attempt to flee the system until the Emperor rescinded his order would most likely

be destroyed.” Ororo explained. “And do not equate the Shi’ar with humanity. Even at our worst humanity has never been as rigidly Imperial as the Shi’ar. Further, I would wager their laws are equally draconian. So while there is organized crime and corruption and so on, even the most greedy would not go against an Imperial command. I have no doubt such a system would still crack eventually, but nowhere as quickly as it would for humans.”

“So instead of having to worry about a whole lotta trillions, we just have to worry about billions. That’s a load off my mind,” Ben added dryly, rolling his head. “You and Stretcho both think big, don’t cha?”

He was correct, though. The capital system of the Shi’ar was easily the busiest star system that any of the humans could ever imagine. Beyond the planets themselves, one ecumenopolis and two mostly agrarian. There were hundreds of orbital stations, both defensive and mercantile in nature, around those planets and the two gas giants. The Home Fleet, which was by definition the largest fleet the Shi’ar had, and thousands of civilian and commercial vehicles moving about in space.

Worse, while Steven, Harry, Ororo, and Hela had all learned an area of effect type of Obliviate spell, there was a limit to how minds each casting spell could impact at once. Harry believed they could overpower the spell to a truly insane degree, well beyond what the creator of the spell had ever envisioned, but wasn’t certain how much so. Thus, while the virus did its work on the computer side of things, spreading throughout the Empire, the spellcasters would have to first experiment, then enchant the entire system in lumps.

It was not going to be fun, and none of the four spellcasters looked forward to it. But to keep the secret of humanity’s involvement with the Shi’ar and Earth’s location, they would do so. Luckily, Jean was pretty certain she could knock out several million people at once with her telepathic powers. After that, keeping them out while Harry and the magic users created their enchantment would be easy enough.

“So what is the plan, boss?” James asked, leaning his large frame back into an equally large chair.

“Jean and Reed will remain with the ship, along with Amara to start with. Steven, you’ll start work on the illusion and discretely influencing minds as soon as the battle begins, starting from the system’s outer edge and working your way in. Reed, you will start to invade the local communications systems, get a jump on deleting the information about Earth and us. The rest of us will deal with the Imperial Guard and D’ken personally, with Amara ready to shake things up right away.”

Amara smiled at that, nodding and not saying anything as Ororo spoke up. “Remember, they don’t know about the full breadth of my healing spells. We told Deathbird we were still dealing with injured, so perhaps we should leave Alex or Banshee on the ship. Whichever of you is the worst actor, perhaps,” she finished drolly.

"Well, seein' as this boyo's done undercover work for Interpol more than most, I'd say I'm the one to come to the dance," Banshee joked. "Let Alex stay with the ship."

Alex looked as if he was going to explode in rage at the very idea, but Jean spoke up before he could, squeezing Ororo's hand as she looked around at the others. "Ororo's right. We don't want to seem too strong. Or else D'ken might do something we aren't expecting."

"What, like agreeing to leave us alone?" Banshee asked somewhat hopefully. While he knew Alex had a personal bone to settle with the Emperor, The Irish mutant had seen enough fighting against Morg to last him for years and had no desire to fight the Imperial Guard again, especially in the numbers that would no doubt be brought against them this time.

"Doubtful," said every one of Harry's lovers and himself, followed a instant later by Nightside. After a round of laughter at that, Harry waved the others to silence, looking over at Nightside for her opinion.

Nodding Harry's way, Nightside began. "You all have only interacted with the Emperor for a few hours. I've spent several years in his presence, and he is not one to let any slight or moment of lese-majeste go unpunished. There is no chance of him letting you all go. He might let you go for now if the various drugs and everything else he's preparing doesn't work, but that just means he'll come after you later, and maybe against your home planet at the same time."

Harry had told everyone about what Jean and found in Deathbird's mind for the upcoming plan against them, and it had hardened everyone's views against the Emperor and the Empire itself.

"Exactly. Indeed, the more intelligent thing is to continue on as if we are still dealing with wounded."

"That's fine and all, but I am going to be part of this fight from the get-go! I have a familial score to settle with D'ken. He's mine! That fucker forced my mom to become a harem girl, then killed her when my dad tried to save her. He has to pay!" Alex growled, having gotten his temper under control but still wanting to be clear on this point.

Hela smiled in approval, understanding the calling of just vengeance as she did, as did Harry, although Ororo was a little worried about the idea of Alex's personal involvement in that aspect of the fight. But Harry caught her eyes and shook his head, indicating without words that he approved. He then turned back to Alex, his face stern. "That means you'll have to be visibly wounded. A lot of the Imperial Guard who survived the fight against Morg saw you get wounded, you and Banshee."

"Some kind of illusion then? Although I am uncertain how well something like that would stand up to the jostling and crowded conditions of a royal party," Steven suggested, shaking his head wryly.

That caused the Ororo to laugh quietly, shaking her head as she set aside her concerns for the young man's mental state for now. "We won't need any fancy illusion for that kind of thing. Everyone else looked at her quizzically, and Ororo smiled, her pale blue eyes flashing with humor. "You forget that before I found myself on the Serengeti Plains, I was a street urchin in Cairo. And while I was a thief, I still had to deal with thieves of other sorts. Including cripples who were anything but. I can show you a few tricks on how to hide the fact your foot works, so long as someone else can provide a crutch and a fake stump."

"And me, Miss?" Banshee volunteered himself, looking intrigued, his earlier concerns fading thanks to Nightside's earlier words. If this was going to happen anyway, he saw no need to argue further, and anything that kept Shi'ar away from Earth was a good thing in his mind. *I've got a daughter to see to after all.*

"Faking an arm is somewhat harder, especially the side of the amputation in question, but certainly doable. I will warn you it can be somewhat painful for someone who isn't flexible enough, however," Ororo warned. "You'll have to practice operating with only one arm over the next few days. Obeying instincts is the easiest way to give the game away."

Harry snorted at the scowls on both budding thespian's faces before he looked over at James Proudstar. "James, you can basically be put in a full-body cast. I've no doubt that the surviving Imperial Guard also saw you getting injured too. Ben?"

Ben shrugged his shoulders, tapping his rocky chest, creating a dull sound of rock clattering against rock. "Thanks to my rocky form, I'm able to keep on going even from pretty bad injuries. I don't think any of them realized that I was injured. So I don't think faking an injury in my case would work." Indeed, Ben had taken a pounding against Morg, but despite breaking a few bones, he hadn't slowed down at all.

The meeting continued, the group discussing various contingencies, what kind of enemies they might be facing, how many and so forth, including the rules of engagement for the two Imperial sisters and the bystanders. The bystanders would have to fend for themselves. As for the royal sisters, there Hela decided they wanted to be a bit tricky, adding even more chaos into the pot.

"If we are going to not only release the computer virus but also create a civil war, we need them both alive," Hela declared firmly. "Able to pull what resources they can to one side or another and then waste those resources fighting one another."

"There's no chance of them working together when the virus hits? I mean, they are sisters, after all," James questioned, not having been privy to the impressions Thundra and Hela had made or most of what Jean had found in Deathbird's mind. The others were also looking concerned.

“Deathbird holds Lilandra in contempt. She would rather die than work with Lilandra on anything but keeping D’ken’s paranoia and vices in check. Indeed, Deathbird has as many dreams about killing Lilandra as she does D’ken,” Jean supplied. “On the other side of the ledger, from what we saw of her, maybe Lilandra would think up the idea of working together, but if she ‘knows’ that Deathbird was the one who killed their brother, that will be a long time coming.”

Nodding, Harry clapped his hands, then waved them at everyone as if shooing them away. “Regardless, I think we’ve all planned as much as we can at this point. Get back to bed and keep on resting. You’re all on break until we arrive in the Shi’ar home system. I want everyone in top shape for this. I’ll see you all in the morning.”

He watched as everyone nodded, then turned, telling his lovers, “I’m going to take a shower and turn in myself. I haven’t been able to have one yet, and I am feeling bloody dirty right now and not in a good way.”

While Harry might well have wished to just sleep that night, Jean and Ororo had a different idea.

About two hours later, as Harry laid out in bed, the suite's bathroom door opened. Harry's eyes widened as most much of his blood began to flow south, his heart beating wildly in his chest as Jean and Ororo stood there, wearing perhaps the sexiest bits of lingerie that Harry had ever seen.

For Jean, this was sheer, crotchless black panties. This was paired with a fishnet half-body suit that covered her from her bellybutton upwards to her neck. It gave no support to her chest, but Jean’s breasts needed no such aid anyway. Instead, it seemed to highlight and add to the sight of her bare breasts and body underneath in a way that was startlingly arousing.

Ororo too had gone for fishnet, but in her case, the body suit was designed to look almost like a one-piece bathing suit, although Harry doubted it could be used as such, especially not paired with the stockings and garters she also wore. Both portions of Ororo’s outfit were white, contrasting intensely with her dark caramel-colored skin.

“W, what's the occasion, ladies,” he whispered throatily, his erection already making a tent in the bed covers, as they made their way over to the bed, their hips swaying hypnotically, the crotchless panties that Jean was wearing drawing his eyes, as the garter and stocking arrangement that Ororo was wearing did the same thing to her. *Who knew that fishnet could make such an impact!?*

“Well, you see, Harry, while I understand why you have to be the one to make the decision, that doesn't mean you need to take all the burden on yourself, whatever happens. Ororo and I wanted to show that we love you, and leave it at that,” Jean whispered, kissing Harry hard on the lips. When he lifted his hands to hug her, Jean moved away quickly, breaking

the kiss and moving down his body, pulling the covers of the bed off with her. "You just sit back and relax. This time, we're going to take care of you..."

In the next room, Hela smirked, shaking her head as she enjoyed a glass of wine and an extremely tawdry romance novel as the noises from next door washed over her, causing bits to tingle. *Though it pains me to think it, I think that Harry had a point when he made that joke about our courtship at my expense. It is past time for our courtship to come to a close. Although I am still determined to come to the marriage bed unsullied. Odin and Freya damn all pride.*

OOOOOOO

Several days had passed since her last meeting with the Russians, and Emma had been pleased by the results of that meeting. While she had gone into it assuming political chicanery was the cause of the information Sage had turned up, discovering it wasn't and ousting a long standing criminal organization had been just as good. Better, the Duma had moved rapidly, bringing in Sputnik and a few surviving Crimson Dynamo units to first find and then lead the physical assaults on various mafia holdouts. In return, work on the first of the Arc reactors to be placed inside the Russian tunnel systems to power their hidden infrastructure had begun.

News on the Weapon X front was also good. Several young mutants and soldiers who had been listed as MIA had been discovered in the raid, although few had lived to be rescued, Marcus's orders having been followed all-too eagerly by the soldiers in the building. But despite that, generally speaking the public was reacting with horror and disgust at the very idea of men and women being experimented on like that. The CIA director's removal had followed, as had placing Dum Dum Duggan in charge instead.

I am glade President decided on him for the position. He's a man of streetwise integrity, as it were, and has a bulldog's determination. Better, Duggan will be respected across the board and has some experience in trying to create a unit of power armor thanks to working with Tony Stark before this. I still think getting Tony Stark aboard is rather too much like setting a tub of ice cream in front of a child you've just put on a diet, but that is not my problem.

No, the best thing is that soon Russia will be turning out missiles and weapons parts for the EDF, and work on the last of the captured Kree ships, the renamed Warspite, will be finished in five days or so. Yes, Emma mused, it has been a good week.

She stood up from her desk in Frost Industries, having spent most of the day working on various dealing within her own holdings, smiling faintly as she stared out the window. *Not as good as it would be if Harry, Jean, and the others were back, or if I even knew how they were faring. But I can't do anything about that, blast it. Still, they should be back in another week, I can wait. I have to, after all.*

Shaking off those maudlin thoughts, Emma waited until her computer shut down, then began to get ready to leave for the day, smiling slightly as she stared out over what she could

see of New York City's skyline. *Hmm... should I head to Camelot after I get back home? The house elves always have leftovers from dinner, MJ and Sage are in Magical Minds tonight, and my sister is not going to be good company right now. But Dani and the others might...*

Emma's thoughts broke off as someone knocked on her office door, and her brows furrowed in annoyance as her secretary entered. "Yes, Hans?"

"Sorry Miss, but there's someone at the front desk who says he wishes to speak to you. He has a Hellfire Club card, and your standing orders are..."

"Yes, I know." Emma's frown deepened, wondering who among the Hellfire Club would come here to talk to her. Most of them would wait until she was at the club itself and actively looking for them. Someone lower-ranked coming to see the White Queen, after all, was not done in Hellfire Club circles. *Someone facing financial disaster perhaps? Or something along those lines, something time sensitive.* Regardless, she sighed, then nodded gesturing the man. "Once the card has passed its security check, you can have security pass them through. I'll meet with them here."

The cards of the Hellfire Club had a series of security measures on them that made the cards unusable by anyone not of the club itself. And anyone trying to use them without permission... well, the Hellfire Club might be a legitimate business, but that didn't mean the club was lacking in people willing to break legs or bury the unwary in the nearest body of water.

Instantly upon the man's entrance, Emma knew that this man was indeed a member of the Hellfire Club, and why the clandestine, illegal side of the club had sprung to mind just now. Emma had seen him a few times in the club, but she didn't know his name offhand, only the name he went as at the club, and the fact he was known as a mover and shaker on the illegal side of things. "You would be the Silver Sable?"

"Silver Fox actually, but close enough given we have never been introduced Miss Frost," the man replied, taking off an old-fashioned fedora, which matched his coat perfectly, it being somewhat chilly today. He made no move to remove his coat, which gave Emma some hope this meeting wouldn't be overlong and she gestured him into a chair in front of her desk.

"In that case, what can I do for you Mr. Fox?" she asked, a tiny, wry twist to her lips.

The older man smiled. He was rake-thin with a very elderly, wrinkled face and gray hair. In many ways he looked like an affable grandfather. But there were scars on his hands, and what looked like some kind of silver body armor under his coat. Combine with a certain hardness of the eyes, it gave the impression that this was not someone to cross.

But that was fine by Emma. After all, the same could be said for her.

"That is actually a nickname more than anything else. I am here as the spokesman of the united crime syndicates called the Maggia. Call it a, well the equivalent of the Hellfire Club, but

purely for criminals, and with no equivalent of the Club's Royal Table. After all, what criminal organization would allow another to assume such a position, hmm?"

"That is an actionable admission of guilt, you know," Emma said, keeping her face set in the same cool, wry look as before, while mentally, she prepared her telepathic powers. A mental whisper also warned Sandman of trouble. *If this man thinks to catch me unaware, he is grossly mistaken.*

At the same time, she reached forwards with her telepathic powers, reaching into the man's mind. What she found, astonished her. The armor under his clothing was not, in fact armor at all, but a sign of the man's cyborg body. His mind was partly organic, and partly computer, predominantly the portion that dealt with memory. *Damn, there goes any chance of me simply shutting him down and then pouring over his mind for what he knows. Well, it was just a thought anyway. I will still be able to tell if he is lying or not, as well as his emotions.*

"Please miss Frost," the older man shook his head in amusement. "You are not a government agent or a policeman, you are a businesswoman. Who, further, owns companies who have acted at times well beyond what is allowed by law? We both know how this game is played."

"I will neither confirm nor deny that," Emma retorted, and the man laughed.

At that point her bodyguard ducked his head in, asking, "Boss, most of the workers are heading off. Do you want me to get anything, or can I start warming up the limo?"

"Wait a moment on that Flint," Emma answered. "Although I doubt I'll be long."

Sandman nodded and moved away from the door.

"That was subtle," the silver fox said with a smile. "I didn't even see you signal him. It's always nice to deal with someone who has a sense of style about these things."

"Thank you. But to get back to the reason for your visit, if you expect to be able to threaten me, in any way shape or form I would require you to think again. I did not become the White Queen of the Hellfire Club through lack of willpower. Nor through any unwillingness to get my hands dirty," Emma drawled.

"Oh, I know," the older man chuckled. "And you, and Magical Minds and Harry Potter, have been very good for the world. And when businesses profit, so too does the underworld. But not everyone in our little group believes that is the case. You have been making waves recently. Specifically, the execution of the Kingpin. Jumped up bully that he was, he was by far the biggest fish in the pond. And even more recently, you gave the Russian government enough information to help shut down what has so far amounted to two-thirds of the Russian mafia. The men and women who have been able to escape from that organization are not happy with you, to put it mildly."

“I have never heard of the Kingpin, nor do I understand why you would blame the Custodes Mundi for his death. And even if the Custodes Mundi had somehow been involved, I am not part of Potter’s action teams as it were. I am simply a business partner, that is all.”

“If you wish to say it I suppose I will allow that bit of fiction,” Silver Fox chuckled once more. “However, I came here as a... politeness, I suppose. I knew your father, and he always knew how the game was played. There will always be crime, but so long as crime is organized, and does not become obvious, does not bother the governments of the world and are not open about our activities, we are allowed to keep going our way. And part of that performance these days is pushed by the need to have superpowered individuals on our payrolls. Many of them are not... gentlemen... no matter how hard I could stretch the term. But they are a necessity.”

“If you think that mentioning my father to me will get you on my good side, I must disabuse you,” Emma said, her tone noticeably chillier as she shook her head. “While I mourn his passing, he and I were not close. As for the rest of your statement, I take it that the EDF’s recent workings have infuriated these non-gentlemen? If so, why are you here?”

“I am here to give a warning. My fellows believe that I am here to demand payment for leaving you alone. Greed in our line of work is a necessity, and often brings with it a certain amount of ego, and before you take umbrage, no, I do not think we will ever be able to coerce you into paying protection money. I am an old man, with little time remaining to me, and I do not wish to waste any of it on such stupidities. Besides,” the man’s smile turned grim. “I would wager that if someone were stupid enough to push you, your response will be rather biblical. Wherein I will be waiting to step in and pick up the pieces. As I said, there is always crime, so it might as well be organized crime.”

“So you are here to warn me, and then assume because of that I will let you and your holdings alone,” Emma’s lips twitched in what only the truly charitable could call a smile. “The word chutzpah comes strongly to mind.”

“Hahaha, perhaps. I tend to believe I am a very good judge of character, and I have watched the movements of Magical Minds, and of your own Frost Industries closely. Coming from a man who is used to moving in the shadows, that has not been easy at all, and much of my knowledge is supposition. But I believe I know well enough how you all deal with threats.” He waited, locking gazes with Emma. “I do not wish to be a friend, that is too much, and you would not trust such. Rather, I would like to feast upon other carrion who attempt to act beyond their station.”

Emma frowned internally while her face remained its normal cold, unemotional mask, feeling the emotions of the man in front of her. It was good to know that her own mutant status was still a secret, it was one of her greatest assets. But Silver Fox had still discovered more than most in the business community knew. *And he is letting me know that too. Even carrion can be dangerous if they know when to strike. But he is also smart enough to know that*

he would not survive the experience. Fine. Like Harry did with the Mandarin, I can accept that here.

“I of course cannot confirm that I have any such close affiliation to the EDF. But if you are here to give me a warning, do you have any specific, actionable information, or are you just giving me generalities.”

“The Russian mafia in particular are annoyed with you and are joining with a young man who has been making waves here in New York. You might have heard of the gangster, Hammerhead?” When Emma nodded, Silver Fox went on. “They cannot strike at Diamond or the one known as Sage directly. Diamond is a near nonentity, her features invisible to all recording devices, her voice and face never staying in the minds of those who meet her. Sage never leaves Magical Minds headquarters except for extremely well-defended meetings elsewhere. That only leaves you, an ally of the EDF, and further, one that is not directly connected to any government.”

Silver Fox shrugged, his entire attitude showing a certain contempt and amused condescension. “So they will attack you personally sometime soon. When I do not know, but it will be soon. The young are always so quick to act, even when doing so is perhaps the worst thing they could do.”

“I see.” Emma still didn’t let her face react to that, but it did make sense, even as she was annoyed that, from what she was reading in his mind, Silver Fox didn’t know any more than that. Emma’s alter-persona as Diamond was indeed entirely different from her personality as Emma Frost, despite how closely Frost Industries was now aligned with Magical Minds and the EDF. That distance had served them very well in the buildup to the creation of the EDF, Avalon, and the rest of Harry’s holdings. But now Emma was in danger due to that separation. *Although that distance isn’t nearly as far as people might think. Hmm... so the question is, should I attempt to avoid being attacked, or should I try to encourage it...*

“Well, I suppose that all makes some sense, if these felonious types were truly acting in such a manner,” she mused. “And if they do perform this heinous act, know that we will indeed do what we have to. Within the bounds of the law, of course.”

Silver Fox nodded and stood, smiling affably. “Of course. Have a good day, Ms. Frost.”

Emma smiled and stood, walking the man through the offices to the elevators, bidding him farewell there, before turning to look over at the Sandman. “You listened in?”

In reply, Sandman lifted his hand, several fingers having grown into sand extensions up into the air conditioner, and along it to her office. “That guy’s playing two different games here.”

“Oh definitely. Time for us to head home, I think, and quickly. If there is an attack coming, I would like to face it the position of strength rather than weakness. And from now on,

you and some of the other bodyguards can take the limo in, I will start using other means of transport. Perhaps Kitty can install a runic doorway here in the offices as well as at the mansion," Emma mused.

Unlike the mansion, the Frost Industries building had yet to be upgraded to Magical Minds standard, and while she had a four-man guard detail here to back up Sandman, the actual security of the building was suspect.

"I called Firestar in, she should be arriving on the roof shortly. I've also got the security teams grabbing some of the building's security people, they'll be using the other limos we've got stored here as decoys," Sandman reported. He'd taken a few tests and passed a few exams made by Emma's chief security officer and had come through them very well. "Should we wait here or..."

Emma shook her head firmly. "No. These mafia types might not attack a building like this in broad daylight, not unless they have to, but I don't want to chance anything like a bomb."

"Good thinking ma'am. Especially since the Rhino was broken out of prison a few days ago," Sandman said, shaking his head. "I don't know what that hothead'll do, but from what I remember he's Russian and tied to their mafia, so it's a good guess he might be involved. And if I have to throw down with him, I don't want to do it in a building."

At that moment the elevator dinged, and Angelica walked off the elevator before pausing, the crimson haired girl looking at them both quizzically. "What's up?"

Over the next ten minutes, several limos, all the same type as the one Emma routinely used, left the building in different directions. Each of them had two of Emma's security team on hand, bolstered by men from the building's own security guard. They weren't nearly as well trained as Emma could wish, but they could at least drive the cars.

Among them, Emma, Sandman, one security man, and Firestar also left. They did not go straight home, instead moving around the city for a bit, then leaving as if heading down towards Pennsylvania before pulling off and turning back heading for home. This added an hour to the trip but should have fooled any attackers. And indeed, the security man reported that they had thrown off at least two cars who had attempted to trail them.

The other limos reported similar things and one of them had even been attacked by the Rhino, only for Spider Man to interfere. The back of the limo had been totaled, and the two men in the front had vacated it quickly, letting the Rhino use the rest as a weapon to try and beat Spider-man into submission, possibly forgetting his reason for attacking the limo in the first place.

For all of her willpower and preparedness, Emma was still human. Having almost reached home, Emma had allowed herself to relax, as had Sandman in his position in the front

of the car, while Angelica had leaned back reading a fashion magazine. She had forgotten that, as many limos as she had sent out, there was only one road which led to her mansion.

The limo paused at the red light which, if you turned right, would let you head towards the Frost mansion and a few other, similarly sized properties. And from below the limo, there was a click.

“BOOOOOM!!!” The bomb placed under the road exploded upwards, shattering concrete and hurling the car into the air. It fell into a bed of sand hastily made by Sandman, but even that wasn’t exactly a soft landing.

Emma had barely a flash of pain before she and Firestar were thrown around the car. Sandman had instantly turned into sand the instant the explosion went off, but the driver was dead, his head smashed in as the top of the car crashed down front first. As the limo rocked back onto its roof, Firestar and Emma were thrown against each other and against the side.

Emma somehow found the glass she had been drinking ginger-ale from caught between the side of her head and the side of the limo. It shattered, cutting her face superficially and spreading sticky soda into her eye and hair, while she felt something in her shoulder break. At the same time, Firestar had smashed her head against the top of the limo.

Thankfully, the limo had actually remained in one piece despite the size of the explosion. The metal of the limo was made of military-grade steel after all and had included a steel bottom plate to protect the undercarriage.

Now Emma groggily pushed some of this blood out of her eyes, wincing at the pain, while Firestar clenched her hands, fire igniting from them, with which she began to burn her way out of the mangled side of the limo. “Be careful, keep up your flame aura entirely,” Emma ground out, as she closed her eyes and began to use her telepathic senses, reaching out as she slowly shunted aside the pain of the crack to her skull she had taken.

This is the last fucking time I travel anywhere in the normal way, I swear to fucking god. Why do people keep attacking me when I’m driving, honestly?! “There’s bound to be a second part to this trap.”

Their attackers were easy to find. Twelve men were hiding inside a nearby house, and Emma made a note to send around someone for the owners of the house, who she could tell were tied up and very, very scared, but largely in one piece. The father of the house, or perhaps the son she didn’t take the time to make certain, was injured, but still alive, and the women had not been molested. That was all Emma could tell at the moment, and she warned Sandman. *“Twelve men in the house on the left, they seemed to be armed with some kind of weapon they think will deal with you.”*

Feeling Sandman acknowledge that, Emma reached out further even as several large caliber bullets began to pepper the wreckage around her. It was some kind of bullet that she

hadn't seen before which slammed into and almost through the car's armor, not like the gauss rifles of the EDF and Custodes, but quite powerful despite that. *Perhaps a Barrett or something similar?* Closer in, Emma could detect another car racing towards them with six more attackers inside it, their violent thoughts easy to discover, unlike the man with the long range gun, whose mind was somehow slippery to the touch.

"Ten men in the house on the corner to our right, six more attackers coming in from a car to our left. One of them seems to be the leader," Emma reported, then frowned. "More attackers incoming, two news helicopters just turned and are making for this position, but they are not coming to record the news. And there's a sniper out there with a very powerful gun. I'm going to concentrate on him, he seems to be the most dangerous."

Sandman was already taking fire from the men in the house, regular bullets for now which passed through him doing no damage as he created a thick dome of hardened sand around the vehicle to defend Firestar and Emma. Just as he finished, several of the men inside the house raced out thrusting some kind of large-barreled gun over the top of the house's stone fence.

The guns looked almost like super soakers and true to that look they sprayed out some kind of substance, impacting Sandman's outstretched arm as he turned, punching out towards them with a hand that now resembled a mace.

When the substance hit, it adhered to Sandman's sand, freezing everything it touched. Instantly Sandman lost control of those portion of his sand form, causing him to fall back. But one foot stamped down on the ground, his sand grinding against and into the concrete in order to turn it into more sand. This worked quickly, allowing Sandman to pull himself out from the glued portions. But more of the men in the house came forward, shooting him with the glue guns, keeping him busy, while the shooter kept on firing into his globe of sand.

That left Firestar free to act, while Emma contacted the Custodes Mundi and requested clandestine assistance. It would take them a few minutes to arrive, though.

Firestar burst out from the top of it, growling in anger as she began to lob down fireballs at the attackers. The men in the car barely had a second to scream before the front of their car was slagged, her thermo-concussive blast tearing through the engine so fast it didn't even have a chance to explode in reaction to the heat of it. But then she had to duck aside as three more shooters opened up on her, having completely forgotten to create an aura around herself.

But Emma was in communication with her now and had warned her the attack was coming, while the telepath had also lashed out, knocking one of the attackers unconscious and convincing the other to shoot at some of his allies. Not much really, but Emma was both concussed, and concentrating her attempts to shut down the sniper. Without much success, Emma was having severe problems trying to grasp the man's mind. *It's almost as if he has some kind of mental defense, but not quite. Could it be an artificial defense in some way?*

The next second, another fireball flashed down, incinerating several of the glue-gun users. Immediately a battering ram of sand slammed through the wall into one of the others, cracking ribs and hurling him backwards almost bent in half all over himself.

Nor was all this going on unseen by the locals. Screams and shouts began from the nearby houses, and the rest of Emma's security team began to rush out of their house. However, they didn't go far before the two helicopters Emma had detected raked the gateway to the mansion with weapons fire. The mansion's defenders instantly returned fire, and Emma was certain that those attacking her mansion were going to regret it.

Yet at the same time Emma was concentrating on trying to get into the sniper's mind, and having trouble doing so. He kept on firing, finally penetrated the outer edge of Sandman's sand barrier. An explosion rang out, his bullets seemingly exploding now after penetrating, creating a hole in the sand. And an instant later, the next round followed on the same exact trajectory. This round penetrated the limo, although the armor did deaden much of its velocity and changed its course. The bullet then ricocheted around the interior of the limo before slamming into Emma's stomach.

"AGGH!" Emma gasped, her mental connections to Firestar, Sandman, and the Custodes ready force led by Ghigau collapsed into agony.

Agony, pain unlike anything she had ever felt before shot through Emma, overwhelming her mind in a way her earlier wounds had not, but she started to push through it almost at once. *I've been gut shot!* she screamed internally. *Those are normally fatal, even if we were right outside of the hospital my odds... I'm dying... I'm dying, and Harry isn't here to help. None of them are. She thought, I know I insisted on even Ororo going with them, but this is rather harsh irony...*

But after that momentary sense of panic, Emma's cool mental control came back to her. *Fine, no one else is going to be able to help me here. So I will have to help myself.*

Pushing through the pain, Emma gathered her telepathic powers and shut down the pain receptors in her own mind. It wasn't easy through the agony, but Emma was used to manipulating a body's perception of pain since flaring another's pain receptors telepathically was one of her favorite tricks. Meanwhile, her hands had been busy, staunching the wound as best she could, tearing up her skirt to use as bandages for a moment.

And as she did so, her mind continued working busily, her thoughts now clear and concise once more. *Jean, Harry, and I had a discussion on this point. The difference between telepathy and telekinesis. The difference between the mind and the world around it. And in this case it's an even thinner margin of difference, since I don't want to affect the world, just myself.*

Then, she started to focus inwards, trying to bridge the gap between the telepathic, the mind, and the body beyond. *Jean said I might have a latent telekinetic power, now is the time to discover if that's the case,* she thought, her fingers scrabbling against the leather of her chair as

blood continued to pulse out of the wound. *Remove the bullet, and, and then heal the wound... remove the bullet, take control of the thing, and just...*

It was hard. The hardest thing that Emma had ever tried. At first, there was nothing there, her telepathic powers were just... slipping off and around, not finding anything to push against and impact, simply delving deeper into Emma's mind. Again and again she tried to narrow her focus, to keep the image of what she wanted to happen in her mind, to impose it on the reality of her wound. Again and again she failed, but desperation and sheer willpower kept her at it as milliseconds turned into minutes, and then finally, she felt it, a wall in front of her telepathic powers.

Pushing through it was hard, but Emma had no choice, it was do or die, and Emma refused to die like this. She pushed harder and harder, bearing down with all her significant willpower and expertise, and finally, finally she felt it. Through the pulsing of her heartbeat and the echoes of pain still impacting her body, Emma felt the bullet move. And then, despite the pain, Emma Frost grinned a bloody grin.

Outside, Sandman had roared aloud in anger seeing his defensive work shattered and had shifted his attention to creating another. At the same time, Firestar went after the distant sniper. Her thermo-concussive attack exploded the top of the office building whose roof the man had been hiding on. She kept up the attack as the man appeared out of the fireball, racing from the burning building and firing up at Firestar with a rifle on full auto.

Her electromagnetic aura however, now on full blast, melted the bullets well before they could impact her body. This redirected them as she closed, a flare of light and fire ratcheting out towards him. He was a seemingly young man, mid-twenties, maybe early thirties, with coarse brown hair down to his shoulders and stubble of his face, but what was strange about him was that he had a silver arm.

Meanwhile, someone that Sandman had met before as a small time gangster had pushed out of the wreckage of the attacker's car that Firestar had destroyed. Now, while Sandman finished off two more of the glue-gun users, he raced towards Sandman shouting out, "So you really have gone straight Sandman, I didn't believe it when I heard it. How about this, a hundred million right now, to let us off the stupid bitch in the limo! That'll tell Potter and Diamond they don't fuck with La Costa Nostra."

Sandman reformed his head, pulling the arm he'd been using to deal with the attackers back to him while leaving the other in place for a second to keep creating another layer to the protective dome. "No chance Hammerhead. Miss Frost gave me a chance to go legit. I'm not going to waste it!"

"Damn shame man, you coulda been rich!" Hammerhead closed, his fists slamming into sand man's head, but Sandman didn't even flinch. Instead, his sand became soft, and two maces appeared out of his body, crashing into Hammerhead.

The next few blows came fast and furious, Sandman's body exploding all around him into spiked maces, crashing into Hammerhead from every angle. The gangster grimaced, realizing at last that the glue guns were not doing nearly enough to slow Sandman down. The glue guns had been a nasty surprise, but the gangsters hadn't used them as well as they could have. There was always enough of Sandman's body free in order to create more sand out of whatever stone was on hand.

Nearby, Emma's security had finished the fight with the circling helicopters, and now were rolling out with a full-bore US army-style APC towards the battle. But Sandman knew that guns wouldn't matter to Hammerhead, he had to put him down hard. This Sandman proceeded to do, holding Hammerhead from the legs down in sand, keeping him still and just raining down sand blows from every direction, trusting in his own ability to soak up damage to see him through the other man's return blows or the continuing fire from the house.

Elsewhere, Firestar barely dodged a grenade hurled towards her that would have exploded right in front of her face. Another round from the sniper's grenade launcher caught Firestar despite her best efforts, blinding her and throwing off her course so much that she crashed into a house nearby and tumbled to the ground. As she crash-landed, Firestar's aura flared up even more just in case the asshole continued to fire at her. But when she opened her eyes again, the young redhead wasn't surprised to see that the man had decided to run away instead.

But then, Emma's telepathic voice was once more echoing in her mind, directing Firestar back to the Emma where she had remained inside the protective wreckage of her vehicle. *He just tore off a manhole and dropped into the sewers. Don't follow, we'll have Ghigau and her team do that, fall back to my position here.*

"Emma, you're alright!? You, uh, you went off the air there for a moment," Firestar replied, worry tinging her mental tone.

"No, I'm not alright, not really. I can't create blood, and I am going to need a major blood transfusion," Emma answered weakly, her mental voice almost sounding soft and thready to Firestar. *"But I think today was a success regardless."*

"Successful how?" Firestar asked as she hovered next to the limo and began to cut a larger hole that she had already made out of the side of the wreckage. Sandman reached over with one hand, wrenching half of it off in order to let the medic from the security team have access to Emma.

At that point, Ghigau, Colossus, and Husk arrived, seemingly appearing from of nowhere as they came out of a magically cloaked shuttle. "Are you alright Emma!? Oh my god, Harry and the others are going to kill us for letting you get hurt!" Ghigau nearly whimpered as she interrupted whatever answer Emma might have given, her normal self-control gone seeing Emma with so much blood on her.

A mistake Harry had made when deciding on who to take with him was that he had taken the vast majority of his magic and flying people with him. Without them, transport reverted to shuttles if Lorna and Kitty were busy, which they usually were these days, mostly staying on Fortress Mars with Wanda. The runic doorways still worked of course, but that didn't help here.

"My fault. I should have called you lot in the minute I learned this might happen. Wanted t, to prove I was a big girl I guess, didn't need the Custodes to ride like the cavalry to my aid, st, stupid really. Although the payoff is kind of huge...heh," Emma chortled, then her eyes hardened, and she glared at Ghigau. "You. I'm going to have some orders for you soon enough. Don't bother heading back home just yet."

By the time they got back to the mansion, leaving Firestar and her chief security officer to see to the wounded among the attackers and talk to the police, Una had arrived from the castle and Emma swiftly found herself hooked up to an IV tube while resting in her bed. It was nice, but she was far too keyed up to rest as the doctor ordered.

So she was still awake when they returned. "Hammerhead is in custody and heading to prison. I have no doubt the federal government will want to offer him some kind of deal..." Firestar began.

"They won't have to." Emma smiled thinly. "I've already pulled out quite a bit from his mind, despite it being addled from Sandman's punches."

Nearby, Sandman grinned at his boss, shaking his head. "Am I supposed to apologize for that, boss lady?"

"No," she chuckled evilly. "No you're not. But, you have more than repaid my initial investment in you, Sandman, twice over now."

Sandman shrugged uncomfortably. "Ehh, I prefer to call it protecting my livelihood. After all, I doubt there are any others on this side of the law who'd be willing to give me a chance even after I've been guarding you for so long. But what now boss? I know you too well to think you are going to take this lying down."

"Indeed not, although technically I will be lying down for a few days. So I won't be doing anything but getting ready to be a little gloating and giddy in front of Harry and the others. And you, my bodyguard, get a well-earned vacation." She looked over at the waiting Dani, who had taken off her Ghigau helmet in the meantime.

"Danielle, you proved yourself already in independent action, and I can give you a very strong starting point with what I ripped out of Hammerhead's mind. I want that sniper dead or in custody, I don't care which, although I am curious why I had so much trouble finding his mind. And I want a message sent to organized crime. Evidently they haven't learned from Kingpin's example yet. They will do so now."

Sandman winced, knowing that her use of the word rip was very deliberate, and very descriptive too. His old gang leader and drinking buddy was now probably closer to a vegetable than a human being. *Then again, I didn't exactly go easy on him either*, he thought, with some amount of amusement.

"Take Piotr, he's been moping around High Note with Amara gone. And a few of the others, including that giant dog of Hela's. No doubt he would like some walkies."

While Dani groaned at the joke, Sandman, who had once met Garm, only had one question. "Miss, do you always have to act as if you are wearing a hairy vest on the inside, or is that just because you got hurt?"

"Eh, I have to keep up with the others somehow," Emma said dryly, before giggling and looking down at her stomach. "Although, I don't think that's a problem anymore." *So much for waiting for the scientists to isolate the age-recessive gene! If I can close a wound like that, what else can I do?*

OOOOOOO

As the welcoming greeting from the Orbital Space Control finished, Harry nodded firmly over to Jean. "Get in touch with Nikolai but keep it short. No need to chance anything at this stage with Oracle."

"When the ambush happens, I'm going to deal with her first," Jean grumbled. "I dislike all this cloak and dagger stuff, especially on the telepathic level."

Harry chuckled at that, turning to the rest of the Custodes. The trip back to the Shi'ar capital system had been good for the group, letting everyone who needed it to get some rest, as well as practice their various roles. In turn, Harry and Steven had created the items that could help to protect them against anything poisonous or narcotic they could come in contact with via touch or their food.

For blocking out air-based assault, though, they had been forced to turn to science. Every charm that could defend against that kind of thing was visible to the naked eye and would give the game away. Reed had come up with a solution, a small, utterly invisible set of nose plugs which would filter out anything but, in Reed's words, "The appropriate mix of oxygen and other gases that we as humans require to sustain ourselves."

As he slipped his nose plugs in, Harry looked around at the others who would be taking part in this action. "We are on, ladies and gentlemen. Everyone to their places, get that makeup on and get everything else ready. Let's put on a show."

Warpath and Havok both laughed while Reed moved over to his own position in the bridge, with the others following after. Harry helped get Havok ready, while Ororo did the same with Banshee, and Warpath was very methodically wrapped up by Amara and Ben.

Jean saw none of that. She was too busy. First, Jean sent out a message to Nikolai below, finding his mind with some ease. The connection was as tenuous and as invisible as she could make it on the Astral Plane, but Jean still kept the connection short, just five words sent into Nikolai's mind, accompanied by a sense of urgency. "We're back. It's a go."

Nearby, Steven teleported outside the ship, covered by an illusion that made him look like the rest of the space around him as he waited for his own part in the battle to come. The spells he would need began to form in his mind as he moved out towards the edge of the system.

OOOOOOO

Near the Shi'ar's Imperial palace, Nikolai blinked awake as Jean's voice blared into his mind like a foghorn that had somehow connected to all of his synapses at once. Rolling out of his bedroll where he had been taking the opportunity to catch a nap as Morph was on watch, Nikolai kicked Psylocke's side. "Come on, up and at 'em. Time to do our part at last."

Psylocke nearly took his foot off with one of her T.K. blades, the pink energy blade appearing connected to her hand and wrist with incredible speed, but he ducked aside just in time to avoid it. "None of that now, luv," he quipped, making fun of her British accent, the type of which seemed to change over time.

The British woman glared up at him, shaking her head about, muttering with a Yorkshire accent how the "Ruddy Russian wannabe Captain America knockoff not even worth the price of a ruble," even as she scrambled upwards, grabbing up a packet of instant coffee nearby.

They had learned over the course of this mission that Psylocke was not a morning person and to interact with her before she had at least three cups of coffee was to court death. Regardless, she was still cognizant enough to look around at the others, while Nikolai feigned a wound to his heart at her almost unheard comment. He rather thought that he had stopped trying to be a Captain America knockoff several months ago, thank you.

E instantly came online, blinking his electronic eyes at them all. "I had anticipated our being contacted given the radio transmissions I have been intercepting mentioning the Long Voyager in orbit, but not our being given the go-ahead so quickly. Should we reopen communications with them? I would assume that Harry and the others would like to have some warning as to what they are running into."

Since the Emperor had decided to hold the victory gala outside, the infiltration team had seen most of the party's preparation as it was set up. And they had also seen the arrival of more than a hundred Imperial Guard of all sizes and types. They didn't know the exact nature of the coming ambush, but they knew it was there.

Psylocke shook her head. "I'm not strong enough to keep Oracle from detecting any telepathic communication I tried to send," she admitted. "I'm strong enough to protect us from her own probes and to hide us from her, but that's it. And Jean is going to be busy."

"Besides, you really think Harry and the others don't know that crown Emperor Moron is trying to play them?" Morph said as he stretched and then kept on stretching, his features twisting into that of Reed Richards. "Hmm, yes, it is a scientific fact that an individual who believes that he alone is the sole arbiter of all that is right and just must, perforce, have his derrière abused several times before he learns the lesson that he too is mortal."

The others all laughed, but there was a certain gravity to their movements as they prepared for their coming role. Soon, they were off, with Psylocke in the lead for now. They would switch to Morph in the lead when they got back to the palace environs.

For most of the time they'd been on the planet, the group had found a single hiding place among the palace grounds, a small culvert which had at some point been part of a training ground for the Imperial Guard. It hadn't been in use when they arrived, making it ideal for a place to hide. However, several days ago, around the time more Imperial Guardsman had arrived the spot garnered significantly more use. Needless to say, they needed a place to practice.

However, they couldn't retreat too far from the palace, which meant they'd had to find a new place to hide out. After spending a full, very nervous day on the move, the group had found a small copse near an outbuilding, where several hundred palace servants lived. No one seemed to use the woods, and during the day, there were few people around.

Now they skirted out and around, heading to a small riverbed that ran back towards the castle. The river was set in a small defile, arched over by several, somewhat pretty if rather plain, bridges. This allowed them to get close to the palace without being seen once more, skirting around the area of the gardens that had been turned over to the victory banquet. They had taken a route they had mapped out several times before, with Psylocke and Morph always in the lead, making certain that they didn't run into any of the locals.

This time they were in luck and made it all the way to the palace before they ran into anyone, thanks to the gala being held in the front lawn area of the palace. But once inside, that luck nearly ran out.

With E now in the lead, they moved to one of the small side entrances used by servants and gardeners. The sentient android had just begun to use an access code they had taken from a worker earlier that day – the palace security changed the codes every day – the door opened. A Shi'ar man came out, looking utterly miserable with a large handkerchief over his nose. "Ugh, I, I hate being sick, I...w?"

Before the man could speak, Nikolai was on him, Hissing out, "The Cameras!" there were cameras inside every entrance trained on the doorway, which E would have had to take

command of anyway, regardless of the code they had taken to get the door open in the first place. As Nikolai grabbed the man by the shoulder and pulled in such a way his hand was hidden from within, E used his nanites to reach into the door's security system and from there to the camera taking it over.

As Nikolai held the rather sick-looking man against the wall, Psylocke moved over and eased a probe into his mind, trusting that skin-to-skin contact would keep her work hidden once more. The man struggled feebly, but Nikolai held him there easily while Psylocke erased the man's memory of the last few seconds. Then the man sneezed, and Nikolai twisted away, grateful he was wearing his mask. Ugh."

"Done. The camera is under my control, and no alarm has been raised," E reported. "And yes, that is rather disgusting. You fleshy types are truly not the best-designed things in the universe if you can be downed by the common cold."

Morph moved over to the guy, frowning. "This is one of the faces I was going to take over before we got to the SOCC. I've memorized others, thankfully, but what do we..."

"I can implant a suggestion to him to keep going on his way back to his quarters. I've already erased us from his mind. So long as you didn't leave bruises?" Psylocke looked at Nikolai interrogatively.

He snorted. "Girl, give me some credit. He won't have a single black and blue mark. Just tell me when to release him."

E and Morph entered through the doorway, moving to the end of the short entranceway, keeping an eye out while Psylocke and Nikolai twisted the man to face away from the palace. Nikolai followed, leaving Psylocke behind the man for a second as she finished creating the mental command. Then she ducked inside, closing the door as she released the hapless prisoner.

The sick man stood there for a moment, blinking in the sunlight, then sneezed, stumbling. Shaking his head, he made his weary way back to his home, cursing his overseer all the while. "If you didn't want me to sneeze all over my console, maybe you should have listened to me when I said I was sick as a tretak, you waste of air!"

"What's a tretak?" Psylocke asked the others as she joined them.

"Small flying batlike creature. Now come on, let us get a move on," E whispered. "My nanite program is controlling the cameras. We are good to go."

Inside the palace, the four of them relied heavily on Psylocke and E to warn of anyone coming towards them. They often had to backtrack or go to ground in an adjoining room to avoid servants or guards. With the gala now underway, there weren't as many guards at specific posts as there would have been, but Vin'car had not allowed all of the palace's security to be gathered around the party.

Moments later, they were at their initial target point: a cafeteria that served the SOCC operators. It was not part of the SOCC's inner defenses, thankfully, which allowed for their mission. Hiding nearby in a small dining room for officers, they waited. Luckily, even with the ambush being planned outside, the Strategic Operations Command Center's work continued and had to be liberally lubricated with the Shi'ar equivalent of coffee.

This was a horrifyingly tasteless gunk that had the viscosity of a smoothie and the taste of dried chalk to a human palate. It was almost enough for Psylocke, who had tried it, to feel sorry for the Shi'ar. Almost.

And like any workplace, underlings were sent out for this precious commodity. Psylocke and Morph had been here before and knew there was a certain rhythm to these things. Every other hour or so, someone would be sent out from one of the various sections of the SOCC, and today was no different. The two Shi'ar women in question passed by the door the team was hiding behind, and an instant later, were unconscious, their bodies being dragged into the room and set against the table as if they had just stopped in to take a nap.

Not that anyone was going to assume that would fool anyone. No, the chaos which would erupt the moment the ambush was sprung on Harry (or the Custodes trap was sprung on D'ken depending on who you asked) would cover this portion of their activity. That, and the fact that the two individuals in question would be seen on camera as having returned to the SOCC, even if the originals remained here.

Hands on their foreheads, Psylocke took a moment to capture a sort of psychic copy of the two individuals' minds. This took about five minutes each, but it would be necessary to let her and Morph act in such a way as to fool anyone who knew the two of them.

Meanwhile, Morph took on the face and form of one of the women. When his transformation was complete, Morph stared down at her chest, sighing as she patted it dramatically, then let her hands fall to her hips, which were actually quite big. "Ugh, I think this uniform makes my hips look fat. What do you guys think?" Morph asked in the woman's voice.

"Yes, it does, but that's the woman's fault, not yours," Nikolas soothed mockingly. "You are what you do, and that form certainly doesn't do enough."

Snorting at her companion's antics, Psylocke leaned away from the two captives. She then placed a small circlet around the head of one of them, which connected to a small image inducer at her waist, copying the other woman's features. *I'm glad Morph remembered to take the one with the flatter chest. If I have to bump against anyone and give the game away thanks to my honkers being bigger than hers would have been the most appalling cockup in the history of cockups.*

She looked at the two men, pointing to the doorway. "Face that way, boys."

Chuckling, Morph and Nikolai did so, and with E's help – he was an android and didn't have reproductive organs even if he identified as male – Psylocke quickly undressed her captive. A second later, she was dressing in the woman's uniform.

Placing the circlet around her own neck, Psylocke then began to speak, shifting her voice to match that of the woman thanks to the memory of the woman Morph was replacing. No one ever sounded like the way they thought, and so using the individual in question herself would never have worked. After another few minutes, she was satisfied. "I'm ready. But we'll have to move quickly, or else we might be forced to answer some questions about how long this took."

"You dropped the first handful just this side of the security checkpoint and had to run all the way back," Nikolai advised. "When it comes to that kind of lie, you need to keep it simple. Now, go get the coffee supplement. That'll let me and E get into position."

"Calling it a supplement for coffee is an insult to the honorable bean without which all of human civilization would collapse," Psylocke replied in a drawl.

"I thought Brits were all about tea," Morph complained as he headed towards the door. "Stop bursting my stereotypes, damn it!"

Rolling his eyes, Nikolai quickly led E out of the room, racing ahead of the other two. They soon split off, no longer heading towards the Strategic Observation and Communication Center but to an out-of-the-way corridor. This led to a maintenance shaft for the weapons that made up the last defense line for the SOCC.

Here E once more went to work, his hands coming apart into hundreds of tiny electrical tentacles, reaching into the systems he spoke up, his tone almost sepulchral. "Now, don't worry, this won't hurt a bit, my dear."

Nikolai looked at him, and E smiled, making the Russian youth wonder once more what strange chance had created such a human-seeming electronic entity as E. "It's just a joke, I'm still getting the hang of humor, but I thought it was funny."

"It was good. I just wasn't anticipating it right now," Nikolai answered.

The two of them waited there for a moment, with Nikolai watching the passageway in either direction. Then E murmured, "they're passing the checkpoint, and... they are at the last security zone."

The weapon systems E had taken over would activate if anyone looked as if they had too high a heat source, weighed too much, or any of a dozen other sensors discovered anything out of place. With E providing test sensors, Morph had proven to be able to shift himself well enough to fool them all. But he couldn't fool people who knew the individual whose face he wore without Psylocke nearby able to telepathically relay things to him. And she had to be nearby, because as she had said earlier, Psylocke wasn't good enough or strong enough to hide her telepathic signature from Oracle for any long range actions.

But with E controlling the weapons, this was no longer a concern, and minutes later, the two 'women' were back in the SOCC, handing out the caffeine drinks before going back to their own stations, waiting. While in their pockets, the computer virus lay, waiting to be uploaded into the very heart of the Shi'ar Empire.

They did not have to wait long.

OOOOOOO

The palace gardens where the Explorer touched down had been completely changed. Gone were the numerous busts of past emperors and other important Shi'ar past and present. Gone were several bits of landscape artwork that the Shi'ar had seen as the height of art with their disdain for all things imaginative.

In its place was left an open plane of grass with several different zones spread out. One area seemed to be marked out for eating with several dozen rectangular tables. Another had a wooden floor that looked like it would be used for dancing, though Harry had no idea if the Shi'ar danced or not. *Then again, judging by the scantily clad ladies there, perhaps the Shi'ar simply have an appreciation of certain specific types of dances?*

Everywhere there were clumps of Shi'ar moving about, several hundred or more. They were all dressed in what looked like formal clothing, which looked like slightly tighter versions of the same kind of formalwear that Harry had seen on occasion when interacting with the Hellfire Club and Emma. Except the only colors they seemed to come in were silver, black, and gold.

As they approached, the ship was directed toward a specific landing zone by several live Shi'ar gesturing them down with colored flags. Indeed, Harry could see many more servants around than he had seen in the court when they first met D'ken. *"So, are those extra servants all wearing Electron-style suits underneath, or are the added servants something they do when it's a formal party?"*

Reed replied to Harry's almost rhetorical question with a simple, "Yes. Recall this is an ancient culture, a culture that has been ancient and unchanging for thousands of years. They have technology that we on earth cannot match on a commercial level available at their fingertips. So a sign of wealth is using live servants. The more servants, the more wealthy. And the more servants seen here, the more imperial favor is on display."

"Right, and no music either, or if they do have some, it will not have come from the Shi'ar themselves. So we should all expect a lot of bowing, lots of scraping, but like I said, no music. Maybe some marching bands, but no cadence or anything else. It will be entirely boring to us, I feel, but remember what is really going on here behind the scenes," Harry said, shivering internally. He would never admit it, but a major part of his decision to act against the Empire had been made long ago when they had first learned that imagination among the Shi'ar was seen as a mental defect and ruthlessly stamped out. It was a kind of mindset that was so

foreign to Harry as to be utterly and completely alien, above and beyond the fact that they actually were another race.

When the group who would be taking part in the festivities in person exited the ship, this theory was proven. Instead of someone beginning to play the equivalent of God Save the King or the Star-Spangled Banner, the various instruments began to play simple thunderous noise. First, the drums, a rolling cadence, followed by a bugle, then a string instrument. One after another, they were played, becoming a cacophony of noise rather than any kind of music that Harry had ever heard.

“What the hell?” Warpath muttered, shaking his head, his words distorted by the wrap that covered him from jaw to thigh, a visible sign of his wounded state. “We just said they might have music from one of their subjugated races. Why the hell would they not have come up with an anthem instead of that, that aural assault?”

“Because they don’t care,” Storm answered grimly. “Because to do so would show the subject races that they have something the Shi’ar do not. Instead, they revel in their lack of imagination, making it a sign of their dominance that they do not look to other races for aid in this area. It all comes back to that lack and the fact they do not see it as such.”

The group made their way forward, and a group of Imperial Guard, mostly of normal Shi’ar height but coming from several other races, lined up in formal lines leading away from the ship. As the rolling cacophony ended, there was a moment’s stillness, the entire party turning in the direction of the humans. Then the two lines of Imperial Guard slammed their heels together and raised their right arms in salute. “Hail, Hail, Hail!”

At the heels of this shout, D’ken’s voice called out, amplified somehow from the head of the longest table there. “For the glory of the Emperor and the Empire, welcome our honored guests. They gave us the key of the three against Galactus the World Eater and his mad Herald.”

As the crowd cheered with the eagerness of true sycophancy, the humans made their way forward, with more than one of them wondering if these people understood at all how weird this all was, even if they didn’t know what was hidden under this forced frivolity. More than one person there wondered if they were just supposed to have forgotten the throwdown they had here before fighting Galactus. “I mean, I’ve heard about fair-weather friends, but this is ridiculous,” Ben Grimm muttered.

“For me, I’m kind of annoyed at the whole ‘gave them the key to victory,’” Harry quipped under his breath to Storm as Hela and took her position next to them on his other side. “Really? I don’t recall any of the Imperial Guard being involved in fighting Galactus, and I could’ve sworn it was our own Warpath who finished off Morg.”

“There is no delusion like an Imperial delusion,” Storm quipped, reaching over to take his hand in hers and squeezing gently as they reached the crowd of party-goers through the lines of Imperial Guardsmen. “Something I would love for you to remember whenever you think

of getting a swelled head,” she teased, although there was a core of seriousness to her words, as she looked around, shaking her head at the odd panoply on display.

“With you and the others around to burst my bubble, that would be an impossibility. Although, oh weather goddess, perhaps someone who once lived in a glass house should refrain from throwing stones,” Harry retorted, winking at her.

“Ah, but that just makes me all the more qualified to say such, does it not,” Storm answered with a laugh, joined by Hela on his other side.

The goddess sobered quickly as she saw Lilith moving through the crowd towards them. “Game face on my dears, let the show commence.” Yet even as her face shifted into a serious and formal expression, Hela was doing capers on the inside. *Oh, Father, if you could see the joke your daughter is playing now! I would wager that even through the influence of the Those Who Watch Above in Shadow, you could feel the call of like to like!*

OOOOOOO

Elsewhere in the galaxy, the trickster god Loki looked away from his work on his aspect of the upcoming assault on Earth, finding allies among the powers already existing there. Staring out over the capital city of the Skrull empire, his brows furrowed in confusion even as his lips quirked into a wry if confused, smile.

Across from him, Thanos looked up from his own work in the plan – combining several fleets of the Skrull Empire into one unstoppable hammer, his eyebrow rising. “Are we boring you somehow, Loki?”

“Your pardon, I just felt for some reason inordinately proud just now for reasons I cannot quite understand.”

“Just another day then as I would wager you feel overly proud for no reason all the time,” Thanos answered, and the trickster god acknowledge the point with a wave of the hand as he bent back to his work.

OOOOOOO

D’ken stood at the front of the long table, smiling benevolently as Harry and the others joined them. “Ah, my friends! Word of your deeds reached us here long since. I cannot thank you enough for the good you have done my Empire and the galaxy as a whole. Please, sit at my own table, be my honored guests!”

Harry nodded back as if he was fully aware of the honor being dealt them when in reality, he was anything but. As Harry came closer, D’ken leaned forward, his whole body language showing remorse or something similar. “I hope this goes to some lengths to address my debt to how I treated you all. My apologies. Gladiator was a powerful asset to the Empire, and I overreacted to his loss. Your actions were that of an emperor yourself, and I should have

treated you and the rest of you humans as such regardless of the age of your people or single-system status.”

“I accept your apology, and may I offer my own condolences on your losses in the battle,” Harry answered, keeping his tone formal as he bowed his head toward the Emperor, biting back any tart or unnecessary words. One does not warn the wild snake you are about to stab him after all. “They died with honor.”

Turning away from the Emperor as a server laid a plate down in front of him, Harry waved one hand over the meal in front of him, looking as if he was performing a benediction almost, which caused the Emperor to frown for a moment. But catching his eyes, Harry shrugged his shoulders. “It’s a thing we do before we eat, a farewell to the fallen. I apologize if it made you uncomfortable.”

“Ah, I see, and not at all. We Shi’ar are used to dealing with other cultures,” the Emperor said.

He was completely unable to see the color of the magic around Harry’s hand glowing first green and then black as it warned of the narcotic substances in the meal. “*Well, ladies and gentlemen, we have a winner,*” Harry snarkily announced through Jean, who was now connecting the entire team via her telepathy. “*The food is laced with some kind of drug, but not with anything that will eventually kill us. The wine might be just purely poisonous, but the spellwork can’t tell the dosage, so I’d recommend sticking to the water. As for the food, I would imagine another kind of psychedelic like whatever is in the incense. Reed, are you certain these nose plugs will filter it out? Now would be a bad time to discover they won’t.*”

“*Don’t worry, I have used those nose plugs for years. They are very old technology to me. I am certain they will work,*” Reed replied.

“*Good, the smoke honestly is the aspect of this drug-based assault I am most concerned about,*” Harry answered. He had known that before but hearing it once more relieved him.

“*And we are certain the magic on our bracelets or gauntlets will be able to protect us from the food and drink?*” Banshee asked through Jean, deliberately using the same words Harry had a second ago. “*And if so, Harry, for faith’s sake, you might have found another major seller. I ain’t even thinking about dignitaries, but people in drug or alcohol rehab programs!*”

“*Essentially, yes. Anything that would affect your brain at all or negatively impact your body will be eliminated. So long as you use the hand with the enchanted item on it to eat with and take your time between bites. I would still stay away from the wine, as that could be something immediately poisonous, and they might become suspicious if we don’t start keeling over because of that,*” Harry warned once more, even as he filed that idea away. It was a good one, and if Hela or Steven, who had been the ones to design that enchantment, had any need of money in the future, he would be certain to relay that.

Nearby, incense burners were also sending up wafts of pleasant scent, but Harry knew that was just another avenue of attack.

“You speak of our losses first, yet I can also see you are missing companions as well, and several injured. What happened to Reed Richards, the one we initially reached out to, for example? D’ken asked politely, not knowing Harry’s mind had turned to other things for a moment.

“I regret to say that Reed Richards died in the battle. A stray bolt of energy caught him in the back of the head, and he was dead before any help could come to him. Magma too passed on due to the backlash caused by her part in weakening Galactus,” Harry answered. “My companion Phoenix was also badly hurt due to the final stage of the conflict, that resulted in the star exploding. She will recover in time but is not in any position to join us now. We also lost our other companion, Stephen Strange, in the last moments of the battle against Galactus.”

The Emperor made politely commiserating noises, asking if perhaps the gala should be postponed to allow the humans more time to mourn. When Harry demurred, D’ken then changed the subject very slightly, expounding on the losses that Deathbird had told him, speaking of a few of the dead as if he had known them personally, and if Harry hadn’t already had a good idea of the man’s personality and known that he was already inebriated, he might have believed him. As it was, it was taking all of Harry’s considerable self-control not to stab the man every time his eyes glanced towards Storm and Hela where they were sitting with Deathbird and Lilandra slightly further down the table. Like Harry, they were dressed formally, and the dresses they wore were doing an extremely good job of accentuating their forms. But the way that this man was looking at them both made Harry wonder if he could get away with covering them both in sackcloth for the rest of the day.

“When do you think he’s going to spring the final trap?” he asked, both to keep his minds off thoughts of violence for the moment and actual curiosity.

“It depends,” Jean replied. *“While I can’t break into his mind just yet, given what we know of his personality D’ken might not spring it at all when you consider that he is right here, right where things can go wrong. And if we aren’t visibly being affected, he might call it off...”*

Sighing in annoyance but knowing that Jean was right, allowed her to pass on that information to the others. After all, they weren’t just preparing for this betrayal. They wanted it to happen. *“Everyone act like the gas is affecting you first, then the food. Not the poison, though.”*

“This makes me wish we could have asked more about what the various drugs are supposed to do from Deathbird,” Storm interjected. *“Do you think you’re close enough to the Emperor to negate his mental defenses?”*

“Reed?”

“No, you’re just at the edge, I think. If you could get within another foot, it might be possible. But the signal isn’t strong enough to cover two yards between the device and the target,” Reed answered promptly.

Sighing, Harry began his acting, setting down his fork and stretching his neck, then leaned back as if he was getting comfortable, a lazy, almost dirty smile on his face and a certain gleam in his eyes as he looked over at Storm and then from her to Hela. He normally would have a lot more control than that but given that one of the drugs was supposed to make humans horny, he figured it was a good way to show that he was being impacted by the smoke.

Hela did not respond to it, turning her face away from Harry, a faint blush visible under the lower edge of her half-mask. *“Grah, my Seidr Man, that is unfair. I know thou art acting yet still, such a mixture of mischief and desire is enough to make me think very wrong thoughts with battle soon to be joined.”*

“Should I apologize?” Harry retorted with the mental equivalent of a snort. Glancing back at the Emperor, Harry saw his bit of acting seemed to have done the trick. D’ken was now smiling thinly, his eyes narrowed with predatory anticipation. *“Still, this seems to be the right track. Acting skills, people. Put on a performance.”*

Banshee was the first to follow in Harry’s footsteps. He began to flirt with one of the servants, then began to ask about some music. *“And no’ of that shite you all were playin’ earlier. I mean some music we could dance to. Dancing uses a lot of hips and thigh muscles, y’know, it’s advertising, is what it is, and I’d like ta return the favor yer outfit be doin’ me,”* he slurred to the Shi’ar woman in question.

She, and the other servants nearby, wore the Shi’ar equivalent of a maid outfit. Instead of being white and black, this uniform was black with gray, and the skirt was replaced by leggings. The top was literally skintight, without any of the silver edges or folds of cloth that the other Shi’ar women in the party had to keep their formal wear from being too sexual, and the servant women were very obviously not wearing a bra.

The Shi’ar in question answered by simpering and smiling, and D’ken turned back to Harry. *“I, of course. The Empire does have a few other races who make music. Would you all like that in the background, do you think? As I said, this party is mostly in your honor, and if it would make you more comfortable, then so be it.”*

“I think that would be lovely, and then we can all show you some human dances,” Harry acknowledged before turning back to his meal. He conversed with the Emperor about the Empire and the other aliens that Earth had met with before, but his eyes kept on straying over to Storm and Hela, then slowly, with a fervent mental apology to the three of his ladies who were present, Harry started to let his eyes wander.

Soon, music began to play, and Banshee was up and dancing, with Storm soon following along with Havok. She and Hela were not nearly as at home with flirting in public, so their

acting consisted of letting their own eyes wander and acting somewhat drunkenly. But Storm was the first of them to act as if she had been weakened by the drug in the food. She stumbled halfway to the area that had been quickly cleared for dancing before continuing her walk as if she had merely lost her footing for a moment. Meanwhile, Warpath was making a big show of not moving very well, grimacing occasionally and keeping to drinking rather than eating. Ben just kept eating a lot, slowing down a tiny bit with each plate he consumed.

Nearby, Hela was doing a great job acting like someone who was both slowly succumbing to an LSD and a powerful muscle relaxant, twitching her head this way and that as she caught sight of moving objects while slumping further into her chair. "Mmm, the colors are, they look tasty, and ooh, that one is shiny and blurple. HMMM... but I am so tired right now. Jus, just want to go to bed..."

From where he was sitting at the head of the royal table, D'ken watched all this in glee. He was a bit confused about how each of the Custodes was being affected differently, and none of them seemed to have been affected by the actual poison. Still, that was alright. It looked as if whatever defense they had against poisons didn't work on things that weren't actually fatal. And this way, D'ken would be able to... have fun with them later.

Finally, it looked as if Warpath and Ben, the biggest of the humans and the ones with the strangest physiology, were also beginning to succumb. He watched then as Harry, the one he was most concerned about, stood up, his eyes locked on Storm as she swayed to some music played by a group of young-looking aliens of the same race as Astra, the Imperial Guard's equivalent of Kitty.

But as the human male stood up, Harry stumbled, nearly going to his knees. And it looked like he wasn't nearly as affected by the LSD drug as the women were. Which again made sense, as that particular drug had never been tested on a human male, just like the aphrodisiac in the smoke. Although that seemed to have worked on all but the two super-strong humans.

But what was most amusing to D'ken was the sudden widening of Harry's eyes and how he instantly turned his head to glare at D'ken. "What did you do!?"

The Emperor smiled, then began to laugh wildly, shaking his head in delight. "Hahaha! Ah, I knew you humans would let your guard down, but to this extent, I could not have asked for better!" he looked around, waving his hand airily. "Take them."

Instantly several Imperial Guard did so. Several of the strength enhanced variety made for Ben and Warpath. Many were of the Warstar variety, leavened with a few Titans and Smasher variety. Several of the smaller robotic symbiotes carried large nets with them as they rode their larger partners. Elsewhere in the party, several dozen Shi'ar servants and party-goers also began to move. One of them, an Electron, led the way onto the dance floor as the female servants all scattered. Given what they had been wearing, there was no way for the female servants to be replaced by further Imperial Guard.

“W, we trusted you,” Harry said, his voice warbling as he apparently tried to fight off the effects of the drugs. “You, you, we helped you!?”

“We needed you to deal with Galactus, true. And perhaps if you had come before me humbled and awed by my Empire, eager to help your betters, I would’ve treated with you fairly,” D’ken intoned. “But your arrogance, your slaying of my messenger, made this inevitable.” His face seemed to shift in an instant, becoming almost a parody of anger and haughty disdain. “Did you honestly think that you humans could be allowed to live after treating **me** in such a manner, after killing such an asset to the Empire as Gladiator!?”

He laughed then, shaking his head as he took several steps back away from the table, waving his hands around. “Take them,” he repeated. “The ladies to my seraglio, and the men to the prison cells. Make certain that the intravenous devices are prepared. I will deal with Potter personally later tonight. But I have other things on my mind right now...”

D’ken made to leer towards Hela and Storm. But as he did so, Hela straightened up, pushing Deathbird away from her with one hand while her other fist took Blackthorn, an Imperial Guardsman who looked almost like an android, in the throat, her blow exploding the droid’s neck. “Enough of this farce.”

The Imperial Guard and their masters had barely a second to stare before Harry shouted out, “Now!”

An ambush turned against itself is among the worst situations a military force can find itself in. The Imperial Guard learned this now.

Magma dropped from below the ship, slamming her hands down onto the ground. An earthquake hurled many of the Imperial Guard off their feet as Banshee leaped into the air, screaming his way up to the flyers above them. Two Manta-type men screamed and grabbed their heads, their species being more susceptible to sonic-based assault.

At the same time, Jean, released from her duty as ‘the glorified communications device’, as she had once sarcastically put it, lashed out. Oracle barely had time to widen her eyes before she screamed as all of her telepathic defenses were torn asunder like a glass house in a tornado, and Jean growled into her mind, *“I honestly can’t understand a woman who would be willing to help in the rape of other women, let alone someone who thinks that is simply their duty if a pleasurable one. Really, seeing your mind like this, I think I am doing the universe a favor.”*

Oracle continued to scream as Jean Gray tore her mind apart until the pain became too much and her heart stopped.

The screaming of Oracle and the suddenness of the violence threw Lilith for a moment, as Deathbird leaped to her feet, shouting, “They were prepared! Call in the reserves!”

Then she raced towards her brother, ignoring the fact that she could've taken Havok in the back, claws out and reaching.

One of the few Titans had paused in reaching forward to pull Warpath away from the table. But now Warpath exploded back into the man, pushing himself up and away from the table so fast the table was sent flying, while his feet left a crater in the ground. Warpath had hit the man before the Titan could grow too large, taking him in the chest, smashing him off of his feet. At the same time, Warpath tore through the paper-thin wraps covering his neck and chest. When it and the outer clothing he had worn with it fell away, the Apache warrior stood there in his armor ready to go, smirking at the dozen mixed Warstar, Smasher, and Binder troops around him. It was a good mix, but it remained to be seen if Binder's powers were strong enough to hold Warpath or Ben.

"It's clobberin' time!" Ben roared, smashing the table in front of him to splinters and hurling bits of it towards a nearby Flashfire trooper, then barreled into a Neutron troop, before hurling him bodily into a Smasher. Two Warstar symbiotes leaped on him in turn, and the three devolved into a massive super-strong brawl.

From above several dozen Imperial Guard of the various flight-capable troops, Manta, Kytes, Arcs, and Electrons, began to pour down fire, but Banshee was already rocketing up towards them with Storm following. At the same time, Havok had rolled with the earthquake and now blasted an Electron off his feet. Like Warpath, their own 'wounds' were proven to be nothing but disguises.

An explosion of magic that looked like an over-powered Expeliarmus blasted everyone near him away, and Harry stood up, showing no sign of the various drugs that the humans had been given as D'ken glared at him. "And I can't honestly believe you didn't think we'd be prepared for betrayal. Only this time, D'ken, **we** don't need **you**."

The Emperor had quickly retreated behind one of his force bubbles, watching as his Imperial Guard, gathered here at such strength as to take a planet, hurled themselves into the fight. "Dammit! Starbolts, destroy their ship, trap them on the planet."

Even as a twelve-man squad of flying Starbolts dove down towards the Long Voyager and the Astra troopers raced forward, a shield appeared around it. Their blasts of plasma struck but didn't do anything. Then Banshee attacked them from behind while Storm lashed at them with a blast of condensed air that shattered bones and flung them out of the sky. They, in turn, were attacked by another group of Electron-suit clad Shi'ar.

But as they did, the group seemed to fly into a spot of the air that was entirely black, like someone had just dropped a container of ink into the world. Their cries of shock and dismay didn't last for long as Banshee dove down on the former musicians, their intangibility proving to be no defense against his sound-based assault.

Meanwhile, Storm tossed some kind of balled lightning into the area of blackness. There were many screams, and Shi'ar fell out of the cloud, their suits overloaded by the intense bolt of energy. A few seconds later, the blackness covered the ship entirely, Nightside doing her part to help her new friends.

"Jean, how are the others doing?" Harry asked mentally as he slammed his hands onto the earth. *"Shi Jundai!"* Instantly, a horde of golems appeared, who started to grapple with the Imperial Guard all around the palace grounds.

One in particular nearly sliced Lilandra in two, but a quick dodge and an even quicker hipshot took the golem in the face.

"They're in the SOCC and waiting!" Jean reported while maintaining a watch over the battlefield and the massive space battle that had just erupted in orbit. *"And Deathbird's fleet is on the move."*

Harry took a moment to look at the twitching, spasming corpse of Oracle, then around. He saw Deathbird through the tumult as still more Imperial Guard began to arrive. She looked back just as Havok, who was launching an attack D'ken's way, took a blow from a Warstar before he could get away.

Harry turned away from Deathbird to turn the symbiotes into so much smelted iron before turning back towards Deathbird. She looked at his work, dodging under a blow from a golem, then nodded, once, and a second later, raised her head to the sky, giving out a cry that a shriek would envy. *"KRRREEEAAAAAAAAA!!!!!"*

Instantly, Deathbird's allies among the Imperial Guard struck out at their fellows. *"Down with the false Emperor!"*

Turning back to D'ken, Harry was unsurprised to see that for all his megalomania, the man did actually learn from past mistakes. In this case, the instant the battle had begun, he began to retreat. That was the last thing Harry could see before a Mammoth got between him and the Emperor while several Mantas fired down at him from on high, blinding Harry momentarily even though a hasty Protego allowed him to ignore their actual attacks.

Seeing some of his reinforcements beginning to fight amongst themselves, D'ken knew what had happened. *"So, you betray me at last, Deathbird!? I knew that you were power-mad, but to work with the humans? I didn't think you would debase yourself like that. You know that you have no chance! None! The Orbital defense platforms will..."*

"Do you think I have planned so poorly, brother!?" Deathbird howled in laughter. *"At this moment, those self-same platforms are battling it out with my forces in orbit. As for down here, they would never interfere without being certain you were safe in the bunker beneath the palace. Until they have that,"* Deathbird shrugged before dodging a blow from a sword of all

things in Lilandra's hand, then ducked under a blast from her pistol. "And you fight for that madman sister?"

"As if you are any better, sister!" Lilandra made that term an epithet. "As much as I might loathe our brother and everything that he stands for, he is the proper Emperor. If you take the throne through force and external allies, where does it end!?"

"It will end with me on the throne!" Deathbird retorted, lashing out with a kick, then a slash from her talon-like weapons that nearly opened up Lilandra from throat to crotch. She dodged, and then there were a golem and a Neutron between the two women, rolling around on the ground.

With Deathbird busy with her sister, D'ken had taken the opportunity to bring in some of the Starbolt and Electron units, trying to clear an avenue of retreat. Seeing that, Harry let the Mammoth guardsman's corpse fall to the side, half of its head removed by a Reducto, and glanced around. He saw with some satisfaction that the Shi'ar were running into the same problem as in the fight in the throne room. The Imperial Guard had quantity, tremendous amounts of it. Looking around, Harry saw at least forty Electron type armored units, a dozen Warstars still in the fight, and an equal number of a lot of the other types. D'ken had even thought to simply not include many of the more useless variety of Imperial Guardsman, like the Fang type of alien.

Yet Harry and his fellows had quality. Without Gladiator, there wasn't anyone on the other side who could really hurt the Thing or Warpath, although some could match them in strength. Hela was simply too skilled and too strong for most of them, and Storm and Banshee were flying rings around the flyers among them, cutting down a flying Imperial Guardsman every few seconds, while Magma's tectonic energy bolts were able to make hash out of any armor they touched. And it was in the air too where Deathbird's betrayal seemed to be felt the worst at this point, many of the Starbolts and Kytes turning against their fellows, shattering the Guard's cohesion, which they might have been able to use to, if not win, then certainly hurt his people.

Worse, they hadn't thought to plan in terms of indirect warfare, as Harry had against Morg and Galactus. They hadn't even brought in a replacement for Nightside. The Imperial Guard unit brought together here was built for power, capture, and energy attacks instead of abilities that attacked their opponents' senses, having trusted in the various narcotic concoctions. And against the Custodes, that wasn't going to be enough.

The battle was chaotic and god-awful, but even as Harry used his magic to crush a segment of the Imperial Guard who had fallen back to try and create a firing line to target Hela, Harry knew that his side would win it. With that in mind, he began to think about their objectives for this battle beyond sticking D'ken's head on a pike.

"Good, freeze them. We have this fight in hand, I think."

"If that just jinxed us I will never kiss you again!" Jean grumbled, even as she obeyed.

OOOOOO

Down below in the SOCC, work had continued unabated even as violence erupted at the party above. Whatever was going on elsewhere, the work of communicating with and running the disparate portions of the Empire could never stop. Only an imperial mandate could stop communication out from the Empire's capital.

That was what happened now.

Jean's voice blared into Morph and Psylocke's minds, a soothing kind of heat in their heads. *"Okay, folks, Harry says the time is now. Are we ready?"*

"We're ready," Morph answered, staring up at the central command spire.

As Psylocke replied in the affirmative, information flooded into her brain, a series of codes and numbers that Jean had found in Deathbird's mind during the meeting she'd had with Harry and her sister-wives (regardless of if Hela had officially joined them, that was what she was to Jean). After all, most of the Imperial planets were in constant communication, or else their plan with the virus wouldn't work. But they needed some time to work without any other Imperial force arriving to mess things up.

A second later, the individuals working at the consoles all around Morph and Psylocke suddenly stopped all movement, their brains simply shutting down, their bodies held rigid by Jean's telekinetic grip. It was tough to use telekinesis this far removed so far out of your own sight range, but Jean had practice reaching out further than this during the Eurasian War to deal with nuclear missiles. Doing so now through however many meters of rock was difficult, but not impossible.

Looking around in shock, Morph shook his head as the person he'd been talking to, a close friend of the face he had assumed and one who seemed to have some romantic interest in him, froze solid. *"Okay, that was creepy."*

He quickly looked over at Psylocke, who was dealing with something of the sort herself. But she had actually been communicating with some distant planet and had to interrupt herself. Nor was she alone in this. Several dozen other workers had to do the same, with Jean controlling their minds and compelling them to act in the same manner. *"Hold one, repeat hold one. An Imperial Edict has been issued, code number Zed Four Niner Tango Edith Alpha Orange Five Ten Eight Seventeen. Blackout commencing. Repeat, Empire-wide blackout commencing."*

The individual at the other end of the line seemed to take this in stride, to Psylocke's surprise, and Psylocke hung up on the man without any other words. *"Say what you will about them, but the Shi'ar have created a very regimented Empire."*

“Yeah, well, that’s about to bite them on the ass, and it couldn’t happen to a nicer group of idiots,” Morph said, winking at her as he turned into Reed Richards, raising his hands up toward the distant control tower, his legs and hands both stretching like the man whose face he was now wearing. “Besides, you know I’m all about flexibility, baby!”

“Ugh, you couldn’t leave that one alone, could you?” Psylocke groaned, before leaping to her feet and racing up her body to the central tower whose primary computer could interact with all of the other computers around them at once. With that, they would send the virus out all at once across the Empire, where it would quickly propagate.

“You signed, sealed, and practically delivered it, so no,” Morph laughed as he joined her, moving to pick up the Vin’car’s head, opening his eyes and sticking one finger into a specific small opening in the system there. A moment later, the screen in front of Psylocke flashed green, and she began to input commands into the system...

OOOOOOO

Outside, D’ken had been able to extract himself from the battle and was now racing on surprisingly fast feet towards the castle. But Harry, who had basically removed himself from the fight at this point, the better to rest if one of the orbital defense stations did fire on them despite D’ken being there, saw him break out away from the tumult. “After him! Havok with me, Storm, Hela, you two are in charge here.”

“*How goes it, Jean?*” he asked, even as he slapped his hands down on the ground, creating hundreds of golems who rose and continued to fight amongst the shattered remains of their fallen brethren.

“*The SOCC is ours, and Morph and Psylocke are downloading the virus now,*” Jean reported. “*I’m readying the memories to be implanted in them now. I’ve also found a few that seem to be among Deathbird’s agents. We want to really muddy the waters, right?*”

“*Right,*” Harry blasted aside an Electron, then ducked under a punch from a Smasher, lancing out at him with a spike of stone that took the man in the face, piercing his head and sending him flying. But something in Jean’s mental tone had him ask, “*What are you thinking, love?*”

“*I am thinking of maybe setting them and a few diehard D’ken followers with mental orders to attack one another,*” Jean replied coldly.

Harry winced. He knew the price of using Imperio, the need to dominate and control that the spell demanded. That was why he had used it so sparingly, And to do the same to someone via telepathy might be even worse. “*Jean, you don’t have to...*”

“*Tell me this won’t help with the plan. Tell me that, and I won’t do it,*” Jean challenged.

Harry said nothing for a second. It would, and he knew it. Any chaos would help their plan immensely, further screwing things over for Lilandra or Deathbird, whoever took over the capital after today. Harry was leaning toward letting Lilandra have it, with Deathbird retreating, trying to control the outer reaches of the Empire and Lilandra consolidating her hold in the Shi'ar populated center. That, with the virus, would help the chaos keep on growing, making certain the Empire could never come together. Having the SOCC operators' loyalty come into question would just further slow Lilandra's assumption of power further. *"It would, but not enough to..."*

"To what, to make me use my power in such a villainous way? Deathbird's agents were already primed to start some violence among their fellows. And besides..." Jean's mental voice softened, becoming an almost caress. *"It isn't just you who has to sacrifice their personal sense of honor for this plan, husband of mine. At least in this way, I can know the kind of burden this will put on your shoulders."*

"I, I understand, and I love you for that, Jean, and for so many other things I can't even count them. But if you do it, do it well. Make certain that Vin'car is dead at the start of the violence. And time it so that the virus starts to activate at the same time," Harry replied, his own mental voice warm and loving at first before becoming grimmer as he went on. *"That way, we can modify their memories from thinking it was definitely a last-minute thing from D'ken to being able to blame one another for it, maybe."*

Jean answered in the affirmative, and Harry turned all his attention to the world around him again, noting they had nearly reached the palace, where several automated defenses were coming online. A quick Protego protected him, and Harry returned fire, noting that Havok had rolled to one side and was doing the same, trying to use the dead body of a Titan as cover.

"Deathbird's going after him too, but Lilith just cut her off," Havok shouted, over the slowly dying out sounds of battle, pointing to one side. "That isn't a matchup we want, right?"

Harry turned and saw that Havok was correct. After their initial clash had been interrupted by a Neutron trooper, Lilandra had been very careful to stay away from her sister. But now they were both racing for the same doorway their brother had just passed through and looking at their speed, Lilandra had little chance of getting through the doorway in one piece.

"That just won't do," Harry muttered and then shot both of them with the Stupefy spell, knocking both sisters out.

This instantly shifted the fight's dynamics. Deathbird's remaining followers started to attack the scattered Custodes while fighting their former brothers in arms at the same time. But the golems turned on them just as quickly, and Harry knew both sides had lost too many troops to turn the tide against the Custodes. Banshee, one of their few vulnerable members, had retreated to the ship to join Magma in close defense, but Storm was still fighting well up in the air, and the ground battle was turning against the Imperial Guard as they lost members to

Harry's golems. And Ben and Warpath were just too strong and too durable for even the Imperial Guard's toughest to deal with.

Ahead of Harry's charge towards the palace, a troop of mixed Neutron, Blackthorn, and Starbolt-type Imperial Guardsman tried to interpose themselves between Harry and Havok's position. This was courageous but not wise.

A wave of his hand slammed several of the Starbolts to the ground as he muttered out a spell which blasted the Blackthorn trooper into pieces. The last one, the Neutron, took Havok's energy wave attack and used it to power its own blows, nearly sending Havok flying along with the corpse he had been using as cover.

"Accio hotheaded Summers kid," Harry shouted, lips quirking as he used the Accio spell to grab Havok out of the air. His other hand conjured up a Protego, then, as Havok was pulled towards him, Harry reversed the spell, tossing Havok over towards a window above the entrance D'ken had barreled through.

"Oh, you bastard!" Havok shouted, even as he put his hands together, blasting out another kinetic assault, shattering the window. A second later, he flew through the shattered remains, entering the palace.

"Jean, do you still have a read on where D'ken's going?"

"He's apparently making his way to the SOCC. Why I don't know, but Nikolai is in a position to block them off. I'm contacting him now."

Despite her earlier suggestion and the fact she could have simply reached out telepathically to shut down D'ken's mind, Jean didn't offer to do that now. That wasn't the way this was supposed to go, in her opinion. No, he deserved to die while awake. And Jean also knew that Harry wanted to give Havok some closure. *In this, justice and vengeance are one and the same.*

"Good, direct Havok in that direction, too," Harry requested, blasting the door to the palace off its hinges, idly noting it was the same entrance they'd used on their first visit here.

As he raced through his palace, D'ken was furious not just with the humans but even more so about how his own sister had betrayed them. *She betrayed me, betrayed the Empire. This cannot be allowed to stand! Still, her use of the humans means they will win this battle. Especially since Deathbird must have warned them about the drugs!*

But if I can get to the SOCC, I can activate the Primus protocols. The palace will be bombarded from orbit, which will slaughter at least some humans, if not all of them, and cover my escape. Simultaneously, a signal would be sent out to a fleet on the Empire's borders facing towards where Earth was supposed to be. On his orders, that fleet would move in and scour the Earth of human life.

He was almost to the corridor leading to the SOCC when a man dressed in a palace guard uniform stepped in front of him. "What are you doing? You should have joined the other place guards to fire on the Custodes. Now get out of my way!" D'Ken growled angrily.

Across from the Emperor, Nikolai smiled grimly and raised his rifle, pointing it at D'ken. "I think not, comrade target."

D'ken instantly pulled out two pistols, moving faster than Nikolai had anticipated. Still he brought out his mutant power, absorbing and quickly redirecting the bolts back towards D'ken.

Swiftly, the Emperor ducked out of the way, rolling back around the corner as the 'Fizz-crack' of the gauss rifle filled the corridor. "Traitor! Are you one of Deathbird's agents?"

Behind him, Harry had arrived at the end of the corridor, with Havok on his heels. D'ken turned, staring at them in shock, then glancing back around the corner towards Nikolai. "Damn it! I, I will not, this is my palace, I will not..."

Harry smiled grimly at him but then stepped to one side, patting Havok on the shoulder. "Havok, he's yours."

The younger man acted as if those words were the equivalent of releasing a dog from his leash, lunging forward, howling out his battle cry. "Cry Havok, you bastard!!!" As he raced forward, Havok thrust out his hands, and from them blasted out his mutant power, the circles of coruscating energy barreling down the hallway like a battering ram of repressed fury.

The energy crashed into D'ken's hastily raised shield, doing little for a moment. But the shield started to overload as Havok continued the assault while also racing forward. But while cornered, D'ken wasn't without defenses, nor had he lost the ability to think. D'ken quickly redirected some of its energy with a few taps on a controller set into the wrist unit of his suit, and the shield compressed until it blocked just the area right in front of D'ken. Then from his waist, he pulled out a pistol he ritually carried, along with a sword. He now pointed the pistol around the shield that had shrunk, unloading several shots towards the young man.

Reflexively Havok canceled out his own attack, throwing himself sideways away from the fire. Then he bounced off the wall, using his arms to blast off behind him with his power like he was using a rocket.

A second later he crashed into D'ken, taking the Emperor to the ground where they rolled together, the pistol flying away as the two men grappled. D'ken tried to push Havok away with one hand as they rolled, reaching for his waist to grab at the short sword there. But Havok, despite not being as strong as D'ken, was the better brawler. He kept a hold of the Emperor, pinning one arm against his body while hitting everything he could with his other hand. This caused D'ken to release his grip on the sword, which was kicked away a second later.

“Enough! I am an Emperor. I will not wrestle in the dirt with a primitive like you!” D’ken shouted, finally breaking his arms free from the grip and using both hands to crack a blow into Havok’s head, sending him to the ground and rolling away. The Shi’ar was quick to capitalize on the breathing space, swiftly grabbing up his sword again.

Havok quickly put his hands together and fired off another kinetic blast, which lifted the Emperor off his feet and slammed him into the far wall before he could activate his shield again. The Emperor cried out in pain, blood bursting from his mouth as he fell to his knees, some of his ribs having cracked under the blow. Yet D’ken somehow kept hold of his sword and pushed himself back to his feet.

“N, no!” he shouted, raising his sword, his eyes wild, his hair feathers unkempt, all his hauteur and rage gone, leaving only desperation and a growing fear that he, too, was mortal. “No, this is not how the Emperor will die... I...”

“Oh, it most definitely is,” Havok growled. Disdaining his mutant power for a second, he moved forward, pulling out a dagger that he had added to his uniform’s expanded pouch after meeting his father. The blade was made out of Orichalcum and cut the tip of the Emperor’s blade off easily. Before the Emperor could retract his arm, Havok cut his wrist with the backswing, causing the Emperor to cry out in shock, reeling away.

It was a shallow cut, but enough to cut all of the arteries and tendons there, the hand becoming useless. Thanks to the Shi’ar physiology being different than humans, he wouldn’t bleed out as quickly, but that hand would be useless unless he saw a healer that could repair the damage.

As he tried to lunge forward with his one remaining hand, Havok caught the Emperor with a kick in the chest, causing him to stumble away. Still, say what you would for the man, he wasn’t giving up, and he wasn’t begging for mercy, which a part of Harry had actually expected.

Now he watched as D’ken stumbled to his knees, glaring up at Havok then over at Harry. “Too scared to your own do dirty work? And I thought you were a leader!”

“I am a leader. And normally, I would indeed do my own dirty work. But this is personal for my young friend. So I figured in this, he could act in my stead.” With that, Harry turned, looking at Havok sternly. “End it.”

Scowling slightly, Havok breathed in raggedly. Part of him wanted to just keep wailing on D’ken, killing him slowly. *But that would make me no better than him, wouldn’t it?* So after a single tense moment, he nodded. “Right, I don’t want to stoop to his level.”

Havok stepped forward, gripping the dagger in a knuckle-white grip.

When he stepped forward, the Emperor’s bracer, the one with the controls for his shield projector, changed shape. From the palm portion, a dagger flicked out, and he lunged, nearly catching Havok, slicing across his stomach but not penetrating the light armor he wore. Havok

just took the blow, stabbing the man's forearm and forcing him to scream again before he whipped the blade around, aiming for the man's throat.

The attack slit the Emperor's throat, and he gurgled, his hand lifting to his throat as he glared up at Havok with all of the anger he could, even as his life's blood began to pour out from between his fingers. While the arteries in the wrist and forearm were not as important to a Shi'ar's blood flow as it was to a human, their necks were just as important, and D'ken had but seconds to live.

But there was one thing Havok had to do before the man could be allowed to die. D'ken had to know why Havok was the one doing the deed. He leaned forward and whispered, "This is for my mother, Katherine, you son of a bitch!"

And then he rammed his dagger through the man's heart, staring into D'ken's eyes as the life faded from them.

Reaching forward, Harry pulled at Havok's shoulder, pulling him away from the corpse as it fell to the floor. Havok didn't struggle, just staring at the body as Harry pulled him away while reaching down the telepathic link Jean was sustaining between them all at the moment. *"Jean, we're done here. Make certain the fight's over. Then it is time to start the cleanup..."*

OOOOOOO

While the battle on the ground had, generally speaking, gone the way Harry and his fellows had thought it would, i.e., a horrifying bloodbath of the Imperial Guard from which few had been spared, it turned out that Deathbird had been bluffing when she taunted D'ken by saying that her forces would be able to deal with the orbital defense stations. Three of the defense stations were slag and quickly falling into the planet's atmosphere, but Deathbird had perhaps greatly overestimated how much of the home fleet would be willing to follow her lead or how much of an edge surprise would give her forces in space. Many of the ships she had taken into battle were now heavily damaged, and her remaining bombardment ships had found their longer-range defenses no protection against the guardians of the Shi'ar homeworld.

Worse for her forces, many of the captains that might have joined her had been attacked by the remainder. The rest of the Home Fleet had apparently decided to stay neutral in this conflict, and after punishing the traitors within their ranks, they had broken away from the battle, moving into a position around one of the gas giants.

By the time Steven's spells went to work, doing much the same in space as Jean had done in the SOCC, the fleet units which had followed Deathbird had been forced away from the planet having lost several dozen ships of all classes. This had made it somewhat easier for Steven to snare the attackers and remaining defenders in a single spell, once he reached them anyway. By that point, the rest of the outer system and the portions of the home fleet which had stayed out of the fighting were already under his spellwork.

Hela and Harry joined him as soon as D'ken was dealt with. They spread out now, making certain that the rest of the Shi'ar home system's population were found and entrapped. Thanks to the fact that no communications were heading out of the system, this was much easier than one could have supposed, but that didn't mean it was at all an easy or a fast operation. Indeed, even at the speeds they could fly, or the *Long Voyager* could move, it took more than two days to make certain that they had put everyone within the system under magical control. Part of this was simply distance. The rest was numbers and power.

Harry and Steven, the strongest in terms of magical ability, could only enspell a few hundred million Shi'ar at a time. When the system's population was measured in the hundreds of billions, that was not a large number, thanks mainly to the ecumenopolis that was the Shi'ar's original homeworld. Luckily, Jean could do much the same thing as the magic users with her telepathy and could use it on a similar number. And honestly, what they were actually doing: knocking them out as safely as possible and modifying their memories, didn't really take much in terms of energy for the magic users.

It still added up, and all of them were utterly exhausted by the time it was done. But the magic users were able to do it. When the spells, which had all been tied together and would activate as a single monstrous spell, any information about the humans would disappear from their minds. None who knew about the humans in the first place, which was a surprisingly small number once you moved away from the palace, would remember anything about them.

To the citizens of the home system, Galactus had been forced to retreat by the sacrifices of the Imperial Guard and the brilliant tactics of Deathbird and the death of his herald. But then, disaster. Riding her success, Deathbird launched a coup. Those in the court knew that this occurred before D'ken, fearing Deathbird's sudden spike in popularity, could remove her, while to the majority of Shi'ar it would simply seem like a natural thing to expect from the genetic throwback.

Now D'ken was dead. But Lilandra, who, according to Jean, was much better thought of than her siblings among the common Shi'ar, had survived the coup, beating off Deathbird's attempt to grab the throne. Which would, in turn, mean Lilandra's ascension to Empress.

Of course, this was just a broad overview of the memory which Harry and the others had come up with. Each mind had to have this new reality colored by the personality, job, and knowledge of the mind in question. But that was the brilliance of magic. While telepathically, Jean would have been hard-pressed to create and insert those memories en-masse, magic could do the same thing by, to continue the coloring analogy, pushing a paint by numbers outline into every victim's mind, and then have the individual minds do the coloring in for them.

By the time they were done with the mental side of things, the virus had spread throughout the Empire. Every system, every ship, every space station. Every piece of technology connected to the central communications grid, all of it.

Surprisingly, there weren't any secret holdouts or private systems. None at least that D'ken knew of from what Reed could find in his personal databanks. Researching that and working with Ororo and Betsy on what technologies they wanted to ahem, acquire, was how Mr. Fantastic spent his time while the others were busy with the rest of the cleanup.

Even as the ship slipped under its various cloaking spells, Harry and Hela were still not really happy with what they had done. It wasn't perfect, and the Shi'ar, for all their problems, were not fools. If they suspected anything, then perhaps, somehow, they might look to Earth as the reason behind their current issues. But it was the best they could contrive, and Harry knew it. So he looked over at Steven, the other wizard sweating as much as Harry knew himself to be doing, then over at Hela, who was showing even more strain in her face despite the upper half of it being covered by a half-mask.

All around them, reality shimmered like the top of a shallow pond in an earthquake, all three of them straining to contain the magic they had been doing until finally, Reed announced, "Alright, we are fully hidden under cloaking and are hugging a worthless lump of asteroid rock the locals call the CIN4847. You can release your magic."

The magic users did so, nearly collapsing as the strain of holding the magic back left them. All across the solar system, minds whose memories had been modified began to awake, and Harry breathed in deeply before wearily slumping into the chair next to Jean, putting a sweaty arm around her shoulders despite her protests. "Now we figure out if this all worked, for better or worse..."

OOOOOOO

On her flagship's bridge, Deathbird found herself waking up, with no memory of the fact she was doing so. Instead, she, like those around her, simply kept on doing what they thought they had been doing for a long while. The pose that Deathbird had been placed in, with one hand over her eyes, kept her from seeing a few of the crew who were slower to come back to themselves than the others.

There would be other examples of that throughout the system: people feeling groggy, looking around in confusion before the new memories that had been emplaced in their minds could fill in the blanks for them. In any other circumstance, perhaps someone might have noticed how many instances of this kind of thing there were. But soon enough, the individual citizens and soldiers in this system and every other system of the Shi'ar Empire would have other things to worry about.

Lowering her hand from her face, Deathbird growled to herself, wondering how it had gone so badly wrong. She had been ready! With the death of Gladiator in the fight against Galactus and his Herald, and with herself able to ride the winds of that victory, she had everything in motion. **Everything!** Her Borderers, the adoration of the naval fleet who had

stood with her, her agents inside the palace, inside the SOCC, inside the Home Fleet, all of it had been ready. **All of it!**

But somehow, her brother had been ready for her. He too had called in Imperial Guard units and had extra protection woven into the festivities to celebrate the defeat of the World Eater. *Perhaps, perhaps he feared my popularity after becoming the one who would be touted as the one who defeated Galactus. He wasn't prepared for my agents within the palace for certain.*

The party had wound down, and then had come the betrayal, when her brother had begun to demand she give over her position as Minister of War and head to the distant border of the Empire, and Deathbird had reacted by springing her trap, only to walk into D'ken's own. I was astonished that Lilith fought so well in D'ken's favor. *She was able to rally the Imperial guard after my Borderers turned on their fellows far too well. And her retreating from the palace to personally oversee the orbital defenses was a master stroke. I had hoped to knock them out of the battle early on, but with Lilandra stiffening them, that was impossible.*

Still... Deathbird looked down at the talon-swords at her side, reveling in the blood she saw on them. *Still, D'ken is dead.*

That sight caused Deathbird to become a little more upbeat even as the remnants of her fleet retreated out of the orbital defense's range and started to come under attack from the various other units in the system. The victory against Galactus was because of Deathbird. Her fleet, her plans, the scientists she brought in, and the sacrifices that her troops had made, along with that of the Imperial guard. This would be huge in the hearts and minds of the empire.

Moreover, Deathbird knew she could rally the outer edges of the Empire. She was much more popular along the borders than either of her siblings had ever been. Lilandra would probably be able to rally the majority of the Shi'ar planets to her side, but not on the military side of things. *And the other races which make up our Empire will probably split right down the middle.*

She watched impassively as another ship exploded before it could get out of range of the orbital defenses, snarling in joy a second later as two battlecruisers were blown out of space in front of her fleet, the Home Fleet unable to get more of its larger units into place to stop them leaving the system from where it had retreated.

It would become a civil war, but it was a war that Deathbird knew she would win. Lilandra had no stomach for war. She was a diplomat, a stateswoman rather than a warrior. She would lack the willpower needed to truly wage an intergalactic war, especially against their own people.

Deathbird had that will. *If I have to burn half the Empire to control what remains, I will!*

Moments later, Deathbird's fleet jumped out to the nearest system. And because of that, Deathbird did not see the beginning of the end.

OOOOOOO

Lilandra too awoke as the spell went off, and once more it was as if there had been no break in the events around her. She continued to bark orders, demanding that the orbital defenses continue to try and hit her sister's ships as they fled their attack on the orbitals. "Harry them! Harry them dammit!"

As she shouted, tears began to drip from her eyes. D'ken might've been a monster, he might've been an arrogant Emperor, but he had allowed Lilandra to run portions of the Empire for him, had given her real power, and had been her brother. And her sister Deathbird had killed him. *And she tried to kill me too. May the blackness of space claim you, Cal'syee, no **Deathbird!** I knew you were a throwback, but to think that on the eve of our greatest triumph, you would betray the Empire and your family so? You are no better than a beast!*

Of course, Lilandra knew that D'ken had been planned to undercut Deathbird and send her to the hinterlands because of that the very victory, but that was simply good politics. Removing a rival to the throne like that was something that any good dynast should do, and both D'ken and Lilandra had known that Deathbird resented D'ken's power over her.

Deathbird's own actions though, killing the Emperor, that was opening the door to chaos. It threw the very idea of who was worthy to lead the Empire into question, making it a thing of personal power and charisma rather than heredity. That could not be borne.

And then, to strike at the strategic operations command center? That was piling pure madness upon insanity! How else could they govern the Empire without the SOCC whirring away in the background? And yet, Vin'car was dead, along with several dozen operators, many of whom had apparently turned their weapons on their fellows.

Civil War she thought grimly, *Civil War will happen if she gets out of the system.*

Moments later, she repeated those words to the officers who had remained neutral, glaring angrily into the pickup. The Fleet Admiral was dead, slain by one of Deathbird's agents. This had thrown the choice of what to do in the face of violence within the royal family onto the shoulders of all the various captains. This, coupled with how close the fleet had been had allowed the captains who wanted to stay neutral or loyal to easily destroy the dozen ships who wished to join Deathbird.

"She must be stopped! If she leaves the system, we will not be able to stop this chaos from reaching out for the entire Empire! Deathbird must be slain, here and now!" Breathing in, Lilandra tried to rein in her temper with mixed results. "If I had an ounce of evidence in front of me that any of you knew this was going to happen prior to hostilities commencing, I would be

asking for your removal. However, given your loyalty," she bit off the word, because it really hadn't been loyalty, "up to this point I have allowed you the benefit of the doubt. But I will only continue to do so if my sister is stopped from jumping out."

"My lady, we are too far out of system too..." one officer began hesitantly.

"Your ships all have emergency boosts built into their systems! You can! Deathbird cannot be allowed to leave this system alive. If she does, all of your positions are in jeopardy, as are your heads!"

Just because Lilandra was softer than her two siblings, did not mean that she didn't know how to threaten someone. Although D'ken would've made it long-lasting, and Deathbird would've wielded the talon-swords herself. Lilandra disdained such. The Imperial family had perfectly acceptable executioners after all.

As the captains cut off the communication and began to obey her orders, redlining their engines dangerously, Lilandra sighed, knowing that whatever else happened it was out of her hands. If Gladiator had survived the battle against Galactus this would never have happened. *But it has, and I need to think about what to do now.*

She watched the screen for a time, until it became certain that alas, Deathbird would, get away. The captains hadn't been entirely lying to save their skins, the Home Fleet had been badly out of position to catch Deathbird thanks to the direction they had taken after pulling away from her own forces. Battlecruisers and other smaller class ships could catch Deathbird's fleet, but lacked the firepower to do much damage.

Lilandra was still watching when Deathbird jumped, and she sighed. "Get me the Minister of Assassinations. As I warned them, the lives of the captains who could not catch my sister are now very much in jeopardy."

She stood up then looked around at the SOCC. "Pass the word throughout the Empire. Deathbird is a traitor, kin-slayer, and regicide. She and all those with her are enemies of the Empire and will be dealt with accordingly."

With that she powered up the system in front of her, wondering where her sister would go, while going through the names of those fleet admirals who could be recalled. Loyalty was a question now, when it had never been before, but Lilandra knew she needed someone in command of the Strategic Operations Communication Center. Commanding it and ruling were too much, even with the various Ministers, most of whom had survived, to help her. And then there was the need to organize her coronation. Which was something that had to be done soon.

How many hours Lilandra spent pouring over the first, and perhaps most important choice in her reign, she didn't know. But eventually her progress was interrupted, as the lighting in the SOCC went out. Emergency lights came on, then flickered off, then on again, then

off, as screen after screen that she could see from the royal pillar began to go black. "What's going on!?" she shouted in the darkness, lit now only by emergency lights, noting idly that she really had been shouting too much today.

"I, we don't know mistress, something is going wrong with the computer system! Everything's shutting down shorting out, it's like the computers are trying to slag themselves!" Suddenly even the emergency lights went out, and Lilandra bit back a strong sense of panic.

"Get me a report on what is going on please," she said, now keeping her voice cool and calm with difficulty. *But she already suspected what was going on here. A last gasp effort from Deathbird perhaps? Or some kind of failsafe left in the system?* D'ken was a vindictive sort she thought to herself, a new fear roiling in her gut.

Moments later, she had her answer. All of the systems were down, every computer system connected to the intergalactic web. The SOCC was completely cut off, and no one was able to communicate. Thankfully the doors in the palace all had manual control systems, and they were able to exit out into the rest of the palace, only to find it similarly affected.

Lilandra let the ministers attempt to discover what they could of what was going on in the palace, her feet carrying her almost unbidden outside and to a nearby hill that was incorporated into the gardens. There, Lilandra climbed up a single massive tree that was left there to grow in solitary majesty.

From the top of it, Lilandra stared out towards the nearest city, shaking her head as she saw the lights gleaming there. "Oh Deathbird, what have you done?"

OOOOOOO

Elsewhere at much the same time, Deathbird was coming out of hyperspace into a nearby system, one populated by Shi'ar. She knew that word was probably set ahead of her, but Deathbird knew the fleet commander in this system, and knew she could possibly suborn him.

But only a few minutes after they exited hyperspace, one of the sensor operators frowned, raising his voice to get Deathbird's attention. "My lady, there's something going on."

"That is Majestrix to you!" Deathbird growled out, hopping from her admiral's chair and moving towards the man. "What do mean something is going on? Be more specific in your reports or..."

"The computers, the communication system in this system is..." he paused, frowning as surges began to go through the computer system, and suddenly, the computers started to die, sparking ,flaring and just dying out all around them.

“What the! Is this some kind of attack?” Deathbird shouted, her hand on the man’s shoulders gripping like talons.

“I, I don't know my lady!” The man said, stammering the words now, unwilling to meet her eyes. “It's, it's possibly some kind of virus but I...”

“Trying to restore from backup, backup failed.” Another officer reported, panic starting. “I can’t get the engine room at all!”

“We might have to switch out the ship’s computer cores. Doing it physically will take time,” another officer reported, slightly calmer than the others.

As emergency lighting flared throughout the ship, Deathbird scowled angrily. “Launch shuttles, we’ll need eyes. We need to know if the rest of the fleet is all right, and if we are under physical attack as well.”

This of course led to the problem that the shuttles had no way of communicating back to the ship, but this proved to be a small problem. The shuttles flew out to the other ships, doing a visual inspection of each of them, then moved out past the fleet towards an incoming force which had been moving to engage them. There though, they discovered something shocking. Not only was the attacking fleet not commencing its attack Deathbird's fleet, but they too seemed to be afflicted by the same kind of virus.

Several hours later, Deathbird finally had a report of what was going on beyond what the shuttles had reported. First of all, all interstellar communication was down, and any attempt to communicate with anyone else in the system failed. Second, there were no electronic emissions larger than the shuttles themselves anywhere in the system not even from the planets deeper into the system. And third, the attempt to switch out the cores failed. The instant the cores were implanted, something in the rest of the system infected them too. Life support was still on, as was weapons, but nothing that was to move the ship, or to communicate functioned.

The implications of all this terrified Deathbird more than even facing Galactus had. And there was only one thing she could think of that could have happened, only one man to blame. “D’ken you madman, what have you done...”

OOOOOO

Harry, his friends and followers watched from the bridge of the Long Voyager as the lights of an intergalactic empire went out. First the energy emissions the ecumenopolis died, followed by the lights on every other space station and everything else inside.

A feeling of sickness wound itself through Harry’s guts as they waited, watching for several hours as nothing happened. But Harry pushed aside his guilty feeling, knowing that it

had been necessary. *And maybe, just maybe, what rises from the ashes of this Empire will be better than what came before. That is all I can hope. Rebirth through the ashes of death.*

Shaking his head, Harry turned to Ben, ordering him to plot the course to their meeting place with Chris Summers and his crew. "Let's get out of here people. One more stop to meet up with the Starjammers, then we are going home. Missions accomplished..."

End chapter