

I... am really not happy with this chapter. It's taken me so long, and yet, the Chinese segment is lacking, the Thanos v. Harry fight is lacking, and everything just feels hurried along so to speak. UGH. But with everything going on in RL (I'm moving guys. It takes a lot of my time) I just can't devote more time to this work. That's why it hasn't been sent to any editors or Grammarlied!!

I recommend if you want to read a finished product, you wait until the next chapter of this work is out. I will hopefully have had time to go back, redo things, and edit this chapter and the rest of this arc. I think the overall timeline of this arc needs work as well.

On the other hand, that next chapter will be the last of *A Third Path*... wow.

In other news, I have around 20,000 words of Bhaalson Remodel written via Dragon Naturally Speaking. Another day of that (I can use Dragon Naturally speaking while in my car) And I should be able to then take two days to finish it. After that, it will be on to the small story poll winner.

### Chapter 55: Titan Fall

With his throne using its defenses to once more send series of missiles coming in through one of the open portals, Thanos turned, staring in amused interest as two bolts of energy came through from the portal leading to the front controlled by Corvus Glaive. *That is the capital of the strongest nation on Earth, which is also home to the Fantastic Four and many of Guardian's followers. It makes sense they have some interesting toys.*

A simple touch of a button activated a mass replicator at the back of his throne as he watched a report on where that bolt of energy had come from. Several seconds later, several small helix-shaped devices appeared there. Moving under their own power, these devices flew forward to hover around that portal, ready to intercept the next series of energy strikes. Luckily, those first two bolts hadn't smashed into anything vital, although one had come dangerously close to penetrating one of the habitation hubs on the massive gas giant-sized space station that was the home of the Chitauri.

Already Thanos could see an energy shield flickering around the station. But his small devices would work just as well.

Looking around the three dimensional mustering zone, Thanos was amused to note that he could actually see a difference in the numbers of the Chitauri around him thanks to how many had already gone through the disparate portals. Ebony Maw in particular was funneling hundreds of thousands of Chitauri through every few minutes, using smaller portals connected to the main beacon he had created a dozen forward reinforcement points for infantry, spreading out quickly as he created the defense in depth the beacon required throughout the mountains the humans called the Himalayas.

The next one who was drawing in the most people were Corvus Glaive and Nebula. Corvus was drawing in a well-rounded mix of units, and was now bringing in more Rippers on top of that. Nebula was bringing in as many skimmers and infantry as she could in large crowds.

Thanos shook his head at that. Nebula was always a disappointment to him, and the haphazard grasping way she was handling reinforcing her front showed why. *Nebula has no real understanding of command, of tactics, let alone strategy. I wonder indeed if she is exerting control over that battlefield at all, or if the Super Skrull has taken it over.*

And yet despite the armies that had been sent forward so far, that was but a pittance of the dimension-traveling Chitauri's full numbers. Fighting across the entire planet, Thanos knew that millions would die in the purge of the humans. But the Chitauri had billions.

Once, the Chitauri had been a small but still expanding star-spanning empire, before dealing with several different catastrophes that forced them to retreat into the dimensional gap they had been using to cross space. There, they eventually met Thanos, and quickly aligned themselves to his goals. After he had broken their government and spirit, anyway.

What mattered if millions of them died? Indeed, to Thanos, the more that died on both sides, the better it was to help him in gaining his Lady's attention. *If a billions of souls snuffed out clinically and quickly is not to her liking, then perhaps the slow, artistic slaughter of a few billion will garner more of my Lady's attention. Although of course, even that is but the appetizer, the start of the full course meal the offering of the Phoenix Avatar's soul will be. To say nothing of Guardian's soul...*

Shaking that thought off, Thanos went back to contemplating humanity. "They fight hard. Although separated into single states that should be barely worth a mention, only the main portal is not under military style attack. And their base technology is actually proving somewhat effective against the Chitauri troopers. I had assumed the local militaries not worth investigating, but it appears that the human infantry is a match for the Chitauri, if the losses we are seeing is any indication."

The purple-skinned tyrant shook his head, continuing to talk to himself. There wasn't anyone else around to have an actually intelligent conversation with, after all. "They lack the aerial assets to fight Rippers and Death Claws on an even footing. But even there, the humans have some surprises. It honestly makes me wonder if there is much of a difference in capability between the land based militaries of space going species and those like the humans, who are on the cusp of that level. I had not anticipated that, nor the proliferation of the power armor concept that we are seeing on Nebula's front. Still, more annoying than any of that is the fact that the Skrull fleet has been completely sidelined."

Thanos scowled, a sight that sent any of Chitauri leadership around him to shivering and as one they moved further away from him in fear.

In the original plan, the Skrull were supposed to be the hammer coming in from on high. Thanos' information on the space-based defenses of earth had been far better than on the land-based militaries, or so Thanos had believed, having made them the target of his limited espionage operations. But not only did the reports he was getting from both the Fleet Overlord Len'Dok and Black Maw tell him they were facing magic users, but the humans seemed to have far more combat capable ships than he had anticipated. The small pinnacle-like attack craft had apparently had an impact on the Skrull fleet well above their weight class. And the human's magic users there were proving to be unassailable.

*Is that Guardian himself? Could he have felt the Skrull fleet was the main threat? That is a thought but I do not believe so. Guardian did not strike me as the type to warn his enemies off as, apparently, this magic user did according to Len'Dok. "I could wish that Black Maw thought to describe his enemies for me, but I suppose that is behind his mental faculties. Regardless, the Skrull have failed me on a scale that will need to be address. Incompetence, cowardice, a simple unwillingness to pay the price my orders demand? Whatever is going on there, I will discover it later, and mete out the appropriate punishment."*

Another blast of energy came through the portal leading to Washington DC, and Thanos looked in that direction, amusement crossing his face banishing his scowl from a moment ago as he watched one of the small hexagons move to intercept, absorbing the energy and firing it back out the portal. He doubted it would hit anything, but he had been quite amused to see the report on where those bolts of energy came from. "So strange to consider that a race which is able to get to space has elected to continue its use of blue water ships for anything let alone militarily. I wonder... there was a certain artistry and beauty to the ship to ship combat in the various historical recordings I have seen of earth before this, is it as interesting in person?"

Thanos crossed his arms, leaning back in his throne, once more redirecting his errant thoughts this time to the preparations he had made to defeat the one called Guardian. Thanos had later learned, the human's real name, but did not care to make use of it. Guardian was the most powerful magic user the humans had access to, the one who had defeated him the last time they'd met, forcing Thanos to run away, horribly wounded and disfigured.

Despite the measures he had taken to not seem weak to his followers, Thanos knew how closely he had come to losing his life then. The skin grafts had taken well, although Thanos knew that was a small blessing. So much of his body had needed such grafts, no visible portion had been available for a color comparison. His arm had been amputated just above the elbow, replaced by a robotic arm the equivalent of his original. Sanctuary, his flagship, had wanted to replace his original arm with a gene-spliced equivalent grown in a cloning vat. But Thanos had decided against that, believing the arm could be useful in many ways, and wanting a reminder at all times of his loss.

Thanos now raised that same arm, the bionic hand, covered by synth-skin moved this way and that before his eyes, which narrowed dangerously, the white light in them becoming even more

violent in its intensity. "I have prepared as best I could, consulted with Loki as freely and openly as I possibly could given his duplicitous nature. I have come up with several scientific counters for Guardian's power and energy, and tested them against Loki. Much like with Ebony Maw and other telekinetic to prepare for the Avatar. My throne also as ready as we can be for both offense and defense. I have high hopes for my necro-tech, but Potter's power... if I cannot block his magic, then..."

It was unusual for Thanos to feel concern over any physical contest. But this was one contest he'd lost once already. There was no doubt the battle to come would challenge him, but in the end Thanos knew he would prevail. After all, did he not serve the Endless, the ultimate ending? How then could he lose?

*And Luckily, Potter's magic and my own abilities draw energy from the same source. With that, I can hope to truly block his abilities at least in terms of direct attacks on my body. I can even mitigate damage done from stray hits.*

Movement from above and to his right drew Thanos' attention out of his thoughts, and he turned his head in that direction only to stare in surprise. One of the portals had just gone dark.

This caused consternation among the troops all around Thanos, and for Thanos to look up in shock, staring at where the portal had once been. It took him a mere second to realize which portal that was, and then Thanos' blood ran cold. *Gomorrah. My daughter!*

If Thanos could be said to have a heart at all, let alone a soft spot, it was shown in his relationship with Gamora. While she was merely his adopted daughter, Thanos having never fathered a physical blood relation, Gamora had long been a cross between a Black Order member and an apprentice almost. Gamora was smart, intelligent, dangerous, driven, and unafraid to get her hands dirty while at the same time not taking any joy in it.

Quickly shifting his attention to one of the screens on his throne room's armrests, Thanos inputted a series of commands, bringing up several beeping lines on a screen. Like the rest of his Black Order, Gomorrah had a small monitor installed in her spine, which could allow Thanos to know if she was in distress or not. Not that before this Gomorrah ever had called for such aid, but Thanos didn't just use that kind of monitoring passively. It was an excellent way to keep track of people, as not just the Black Order had them. Nearly every officer, captain, and above within the Skrull and the Chitauri had the same kind of m.

Quickly he pulled up the data from Gomorrah, and breathed a faint sigh of relief. His daughter was alive at the very least. She read as unconscious at present, which meant that whatever had happened on the other side, someone had not only shut down the portal, but overcome Gomorrah, which Thanos knew would not have been an easy achievement even at long range.

And with the portal closed, Thanos had no ability to appear on the scene and make my anger at this effrontery plain. I would have to go through one of the nearby portals, nebulae I believe is

the closest one. With that he looked in that direction just-in-time to see that portal also shutting down.

Putting up a good fight is one thing, actually stopping the invasion is entirely another, Thanos thought to himself, now getting angry. He pointed to one of the highest-ranking Chitauri around, a person whose title would translate into something like Primark priest, a mixed militant and religious position. "Remain in constant communication with me. I wish to know the moment the Phoenix Force's energy signature has been seen on the battlefield. Beyond that, hasten the troop deployment as much as possible. All remaining portals are to receive reinforcements of every type of combatant, regardless of the local commanders personal preference."

The Primark priest nodded obsequiously, actually going down to one knee and bowing towards Thanos in obeisance. "It will be done, my master!"

Thanos directed his throne forward as he stood on the edge of it, the floating platform underneath the iron like throne. For moment he debated which battle he should join, before deciding that the main portal was obviously the most important. *It is also the battlefield where several of the Asgardians have made their presence known. If I can slay several of their number, perhaps I can keep the rest from interfering.*

While Thanos had full belief in his own powers and abilities, there were some fights he didn't wish to pick. Fighting with Odin was one battle Thanos did not wish to have, particularly at the same time he would be battling Potter or the Phoenix force.

A verbal command this time sent his throne forward towards the main portal, as behind him, the Chitauri began to push forward through the remaining portals even faster than before.

**OOOOOO**

Thanks to the number of smaller portals which had been opened gradually over time as the Chitauri spread out away from the main portal, Ebony had created a defense in depth, complete with scattered shielded defensive points that were strong enough to take even a blow from Fenrir and numerous technological traps which serve as a deterrent even against Fenrir or Hela, let alone their companions. These came in the form of mines which exploded in the attackers faces, heavy anti-air guns that were strong enough to redirect Hela despite not actually hurting much, and gravitic traps that could catch even Fenrir, holding him in place despite his mighty strength. It had only been luck and the fact he had been ranging ahead of the others which stopped the others from being seriously wounded by that last.

Thus, Hela had decided to change tactics. Instead of simply bulling ahead as they had hoped, the group sent to do what they could on this front took to hit and run tactics, slaughtering bands of aliens or smashing hard points and then retreating under her spells. Even with the aliens controlling the skies, they could make their way around the mountains with impunity, countering both the nature of the mountains themselves and the many, many aliens that were

constantly coming through the smaller scattered portals and the larger main one in the distance.

That main portal was massive, it's aperture five times the size of any of the other portals spread across the planet. This allowed large numbers of Rippers and Death Claws to come through, along with construction equipment designed to build more anti-air and automated weaponry. And as the defenders spread out, they created smaller portals on Ebony's orders. These were the size of individual aliens so while the main portal was being used to bring in a lot of equipment, the smaller ones brought in infantry or skimmers.

Lots of them, infantry and skimmers both. The infantry dug into positions spreading out over whole mountains with a speed any native military would have been astonished by. These hard points and the portals at their center became the typical target for Fenrir, Garm and the rest.

But while Hela could use her magic to swat even a Ripper out of the sky with ease or whole flights of skimmers at a time, and did every few minutes, she could only be in one place at a time as well. And Hela could not direct her magic out beyond her admittedly amazing line of sight. The rest of the group with her were even less capable of stopping such from spreading out quickly.

Thus as Hela and the rest did what they could to slow Ebony Maw's expansion of his real defense zone, whole flotillas of skimmers, many times the size of the units being used by super giant in China or Nebula in France, were now spreading out beyond the mountains of the Himalayas, and hitting the nearby nations.

Thanks to being connected to Pinoptes, Dennis and Sage's network, Hela was well aware of the carnage this was causing India Burma, and even as far as the Bay of Bengal. While most of those nations had some type of air force, they were small and outside of India, not very well maintained or at a technological level sufficient to fight even the skimmers let alone their bigger brethren. The best defense for the area was a United States carrier group which had remained in the Indian Ocean after the Eurasian War. And even having taken up the same tactics as their counterparts in France and America, of launching from out of range and then turning away when they ran out of missiles, was being slowly overwhelmed in the skies over India.

*It is a numbers game, and it is one that the humans are losing here. Blast this commander and his defensive depth! If we had been able to get here before he got so situated, things would be different. But that and the terrain has worked against us,* Hela thought, scowling as she leaned against the side of a mountain, standing on a tiny path that even a goat would have thought impossible to traverse.

Garm and Fenrir both had some trouble moving across the mountains occasionally, and even Hela was finding the going tough at times. It was almost enough to make her think of adding the kind of hover boots Dani used in her combat outfit.

“We’ve broken contact,” Dani reported from the back of the group. “That illusion you just cast is leading away the last group of skimmers that were trying to follow us.”

“Very good. In that case, it is time to think smarter instead of harder. Initially we had wished to draw out the enemy commander and the remaining wrecking crew. That is not working any longer and the aliens are still just spreading out, digging in further. Instead, we will need to infiltrate, push past their outer envelope to get to something vital,” Hela answered, scowling underneath her half mask.

“I dislike that sister. These creatures are prey, no matter how many millions of them there are, they cannot be a true threat to me, or even this old wolf beside me,” Fenrir half teased, pushing his shoulder against the shorter and far older Garm. “We have slain thousands today. We can slay thousands more if we keep attacking.”

“I will have you know pop, that I probably have killed even more of the enemy than you have. There is something to be said for guile and experience against youthful enthusiasm,” Garm retorted. “Listen to the mistress.”

“Why not break the group in two?” Dani asked, shrugging. “Let Fenrir and Garm go wild, the rest of us sneak through their lines until we find the main portal.”

“It might work, but it would also separate two of our heavy hitters from the rest of us. While I myself can slaughter even as many as my brother here, my raw physical power is not up to doing both that and fighting the two remaining members of the Wrecking Crew,” Hela answered, not dismissing the suggestion, but calmly explaining why it wouldn’t work. “I can face one, mayhap both, but i would have no ability to do that and aid you or Gerda against the other aliens. No, we stick together for now. If we do meet with either of those two, then mayhap splitting up will become viable.”

Dani nodded thoughtfully, reaching over and stroking Fenrir’s side. Watching them, Hela was against astonished at the connection Dani had formed with her prickly younger brother. Then she shook her head and concentrated on the hear and now. “Gerda, come here. I will cover us with illusion once more. And remember, from now on only attack when I say” Hela ordered.

Gerda had been scouting out ahead of them, and then came down towards them, pushing through under a series of boulders, having hidden herself amongst them almost as well as any huntress born. Thankfully, the aliens didn’t seem particularly good at spotting single people on the move in a natural environment like the mountains, or else even she would have been easily spotted simply because of the number of skimmers above them.

The two wolves however, were, while a massive benefit to the groups combat abilities, were simply too large to be anything but threats even in their currently human- sized forms.

At Hela’s direction, magic encased all of them, first in an obfuscation charm that covered all of them at once, which would allow the group to communicate with one another through their

communicators and through hand or eye motions. Second, each of them was individually given a spell that would stop anyone from trying to scry their presence magically or otherwise.

At least that was the hope, but Hela well understood that there were powers in the universe that were beyond her understanding, and thus beyond her magical ability to counter.

The group quickly began moving once more. Following the direction given to them by Pinoptes, in the direction of the energy source of the main portal, traversing several hundred leagues of some of the most horrible terrain the world had to offer, with jagged cliffs, huge granite walls of raw mountain, and snow deep enough that if you walked over a hidden crevice and fell in, you would suffocate before you could get out. And despite their monstrous strength, the wolves had problems, a lack of hands hampering their ability to climb dramatically.

Now was Hela's turn to tease her brother, asking him aloud, "I would wager you have never wished to have our father's ability to transform and shape shift more than now, brother. At the moment, turning even into a werewolf would make your ability to move around in these mountains far easier."

"Personally, I think it's a matter of opposable thumbs," Gerda announced. "Surely the fact that we have opposable thumbs has helped humans and those like us to evolve past our primitive origins. No longer do we need to fear the animals of the forest."

Fenrir scowled at that, fangs showing along one side of his jaw. "Keep talking like that, and I will show you that even being a chooser of the slain is not enough to save you from my bite! There is a good reason why your ancestors feared wolves like me."

It fell to Dani to play peacekeeper for a time, but the magical illusions that Hela occasionally sent out and their own invisibility to their enemies worked. They passed over the mountains as quickly as they possibly could without taking to the air, which at this point would've been dangerous simply because there were so many skimmers flying through the air over the mountains, they were sure to hit some of them and thus break Hela's magic.

Eventually the infantry posts also became so thick on the ground, such as it was in the mountains anyway, that the presence became known to the enemy once more.

Two aliens turned from where they had been working on setting up another small portal at a noise behind them. At first they saw nothing but the scree of the mountainside, leading up and out of sight above them. But as they watched dozens of rocks came clamoring down.

Most would have simply dismissed this as something up above them causing a small cascade of rocks, not seeing any danger in it. But the Chitauri had run into invisible enemies prior to coming to Earth. Both infantrymen raised their blasters and began to pepper the area where the rocks and seemingly come from, hitting Gerda and Hela. Although the hits dispelled her illusion, Hela simply ignored the strikes. Even a ripper's beam couldn't hurt her, although it could toss her off course.



Caught mid-step, Gerda grunted, collapsing onto her side and then rolling down the mountainside towards the two enemy infantrymen.

Both of the aliens fell to shots from Dani before any of the others could even move, and then she was racing down the hill after her friend and trainer.

As a Valkyrie, Gerda was made of quite stern stuff, and her armor was among the best she could wear without hampering her movement. Thus she was not overly injured by the strikes, although the initial impact of the green energy bolts from the enemy infantry had stung her thigh and knee under her armor. The resulting fall had only wounded her pride, and she waved off Dani's hand, even as dozens of skimmers twisted around in the air above them and began to fire down at them, creating a rain of energy bolts such that Hela had no chance of raising another spell to hide their presence before they struck.

"Blast it all! Fine, if these fools wish to die, slaughter them all!" Hela snarled.

Dodging around the fire as best they could, Dani and Gerda began to fire arrows up at the skimmers while Hela started to use her magic once more. Bolts of raw magic shot upward, downing fourteen skimmers with her first magical blast, Hela being far too annoyed at present to concentrate on any specific spell.

To one side of where they had been traversing the mountains was a small path. And now along this path, hundreds of Chitauri infantry skittered across the sides of the mountain like so many spiders scaling a wall. Above them came two skimmers containing Wrecker and Thunderball. "Hah! Ebony was right, they were trying to sneak past us. Fuck them up!"

Seeing that, Hela smiled, much of her earlier annoyance disappearing. *Perhaps Dani's plan to split us up will become viable momentarily.* "Fenrir if you could concentrate on the two Wreckers. Garm, getting close with those infantry. Gerda and Dani, give them cover fire if need be, but keep your distance. If we can break contact and leave Fenrir and Garm here then..."

But unfortunately, Wrecker and Thunderball had learned from Bulldozer's ignominious end. They had been further outfitted with alien technology to let them move through the mountains far easier, and Wrecker used his now. Antigravity belt active, Wrecker leaped forward, which allowed him to hurl himself past Fenrir and Garm before they could react. Normally he would have a leaping power to match a normal Asgardian, but with the anti-grav belt, he covered a distance that even Hela would've had trouble doing landing several hundred yards below where Dani and Gerda were standing.

He slammed into the ground next to Dani, a fist punching out. Dani was already dodging even before he landed, but even so a glancing blow nearly broke her arm. Grunting in pain, Dani moved with the blow letting it twirl her around before using her hover boots to kick off a rock behind her. Then she was in his reach, the sword she had been training on with Gerda since returning to earth from Asgard coming up and stabbing toward Wrecker's eye.

“Gah, you bitch!” he hissed, dodging losing an eye by the skin of his teeth, her blade opening up a cut just below his eyes across his nose.

Then his foot caught Dani in the side, and she could feel her armor crumple bit under the blow as she was hurled down off the mountain side, to crash into a tree below.

Thunderball wasn't nearly so lucky because from where he had been charging behind Fenrir, Garm had seen Wrecker fly overhead. Unlike Fenrir, who hadn't stopped his headlong charge into the oncoming infantry, and was now hurling the aliens away like so many small toys, Garm had stopped his initial charge. When Thunderball tried to leap over the tumult, Garm leaped upwards, intercepting him. “Got you!”

Garm's teeth bit into Thunderball's leg as he was still jumping upward. Thunderball's momentum continued for a moment before his belt fizzled out due to the added weight. The crashed into the side of the mountainside tumbling as they hit, with Garm releasing his first bite and scrambling at Thunderball's chest and side as the pair followed after Dani in her own pell-mell dissent.

Shaking his head to get rid of the blood coding hit his nose and mouth, Wrecker charged forward again, leaping up towards Hela instead of helping his comrade. “You're next you stupid bitch!”

Turning from where she was sending out blasts of explosive magic up into the Skimmers above, Hela sneered at him, deflecting his crowbar with her sword, grimacing only slightly at the reverberations of the impact. Wrecker was strong, stronger physically than Hela, but he knew she he was a brawler. He swung his crowbar like he was a club, all strength, no finesse. *I need to keep him at sword length, can't let him get a hand on me.*

This fact was quickly proven as Hela was nearly overcome in the next few seconds, Wrecker's blows coming in fast and furious enough to nearly make Hela lose her footing and sword in that order. She was able to keep a hold of her blade and turn a fall into a leap away, but couldn't dodge a strike that got through to her leg. As she landed, the limb collapsed under her, causing her to fall to her side. Another blow to her shoulder got through before she could recover, but it wasn't her sword arm and her sword came up cutting at Wrecker's forearm.

He flinched back then tried to bring his crowbar down on her chest. “Not this time, bitch!”

A blast of magic though dumped him to the ground. This let Hela get to her feet, but she was somewhat annoyed to see how quickly Wrecker had gotten to his own feet. *Blast it, were he an Asgardian he would have had trouble shrugging that off. Does he have some more magic resistance thanks to how he gained his power?*

Hela dodged backwards, then dodged backwards again as rippers appeared among the skimmers in the air above the battlefield. Many of them started to fire at Fenrir and Garm, uncaring of the fact Thunderball was locked in combat with Hela's companion. That was all she

had time to notice before four more began to open fire on her. The heavy energy strikes staggered her and Wrecker both.

But the blasts hitting Garm smashed him off of Thunderball, who instantly took advantage. Leaping forward, he landed on Garm's back. "Got you!" Before Garm could twist away or buck the former doctor off, Thunderball wrapped his wrecking ball's chain. Gripping the chain tightly he began to pull, choking Garm.

Fenrir noticed this and turned from where he had just bit a alien in half. "ARROOOOOO!!!" he howled, the sound causing the aliens and the two Wreckers to flinch. The infantry actually began to retreat, while all the rippers within hearing range began to fire at him exclusively. They were soon joined by the majority of the skimmers as Fenrir just laughed wolfishly hurling himself forward.

This took the pressure off a hiding Dani and Gerda. "Target Thunderball!"

Nodding Gerda did so, her arrow joining Dani's gauss rifle round. Thunderball had barely a second to blink before he took the arrow in the shoulder. It didn't penetrate but stuck there, and right after it a boulder the size of a tank round going far faster than any human made tank could fire slammed into his head. "GAHHH!"

The blow didn't do much, but it did force him to loosen his grip. That was all Garm needed to twist around, fangs biting. Thunderball tried to flinch away, and a Ripper landed nearby, Fenrir having leaped upward and tearing at it's throat. The combination of the flinch and the ground jumping underneath him sent Thunderball tumbling to the side down the mountain toward the very, very distant ground below.

The two shooters were then forced back into cover as the Skimmers all turned away from Fenrir, who had been ignoring their fire. The rippers kept on striking him though, twisting away and rising higher into the air. None of the infantry around them bothered to try and go to the plummeting Thunderball's help, instead firing at Dani and Gerda.

Higher up the mountain face, Hela and Wrecker were nearly ignorant of all this, locked in their own battle. Wrecker's speed and strength was such that Hela could barely concentrate enough to call forth her own magic for a series of small spells, but that was enough to even the playing field along with her own skill with the blade.

And then, as Hela stumbled back from a strike at her shoulder and Wrecker overextended just slightly to aim at her head. When Hela dodged instead of blocking the blow, Wrecker became well out of position. A point black blast of magic blinded him for a second, and he didn't pull back his arm fast enough.

Like Gerda and Dani's blades, Hela's sword had been forged in Asgard. It had been forged not to kill humans, but to fight Jotun, beasts of similar strength and other Asgardians, to deal with their armor and their physical durability. And unlike Dani's earlier desperate struck Hela's blow

struck true, the side of her blade slicing at Wrecker's wrist. While she couldn't separate the limb entirely, she could cut halfway through.

Blood spurted as Wrecker cried out in pain, his crowbar falling from his now worthless hand. "ARGGH!!:

Years ago, when the Wreckers were just starting out, simply physically separating Wreckers crowbar from his person would've been enough to deep power the Wrecker, let alone the rest of his crew. Now, it wasn't, yet even so, that crowbar represented a lot of the Wrecker's offensive power, and he tried to lunge forward as his eyes cleared, his useless hand flopping at his side. "No!"

Hela allowed herself a sneer, as she pirouetted around him, and stabbed upwards into his armpit. Again the sword couldn't penetrate very far, but now Wrecker's other arm fell useless, the tendons there also cut as he screamed in agony. The armpit was one of those places that, human or Asgardian, no matter how tough you were getting hit there **hurt!** Let alone getting stabbed.

"GAH, no, no!" Doubly crippled, Wrecker cried out, shifting away from Hela, losing his footing. He pinwheeled in place, completely open, and a second later, paid for it with his life.

Hela's sword came up and around again, aiming for his throat, cutting across it from one side to the other. "No! I was promised so much..." He gurgled, blood flowing from his open mouth.

"Perhaps then you should have looked up the historical manner in which traitors are paid," Hela sneered, shaking her head.

Hela kicked body away from her, and was about to turn and leap down towards where she could see ongoing fighting going on in the distance, when she felt as if a giant fist had suddenly picked her up. A second later, Hela was hurled against the mountainside. She grunted at the impact, not hurt exactly, but certainly getting the wind knocked out of her.

Then Hela found herself being lifted up into the air, and literally hurled through the sky so fast she could barely use her magic to slow herself. "A telekinetic, blast it all!"

Hela had occasionally sparred with Jean after the redhead had gotten back into combat shape and knew the signs of fighting a telepath. That didn't mean she was any happier about it, of course. Because this telepath had done so out of her line of sight. *And I can't send my magic out past my line of sight here on Midgard.* In her own realm that would be a different story, but the point was mute, really, something to while away the time before the feeling of being tossed away faded and she could fly back under her own power.

But Hela was not the only target of the currently unseen telekinetic. Fenrir and Garm soon joined her, hurled away from where they had been fighting. This was not in time to save Thunderball, indeed, it merely hastened his demise. Garm had been in the process of biting his

head off when he was pulled away. Garm's bite hadn't given away. Thunderball's neck on the other hand, had.

As blood gushed from the now headless corpse of the last member of the Wrecking Crew, Gerda and Dani went to ground, hiding themselves as best they may. And soon enough from the same direction Thunderball and Wrecker had initially appeared, came a flying humanoid. He was very much not human, and from her place down below in the forest lining the bottom of the large valley they had been fighting in, Dani had to shake her head. This alien looked almost exactly like one of the gray skinned aliens from the X-Folders, and for just a moment, Dani had to fight back an inappropriate snort of laughter at the idea of agent Mully popping up out of nowhere to demand the truth from the alien.

He was short, almost at Dani's own height without her suit, and thin, almost emaciated in terms of his body type. Yet his head was quite large for his frame, his eyes were wide and almost circular, and his skin grey. He had white hair, which did kind of mess with the overall X-Folders alien image, but even so, the resemblance was uncanny.

But as spindly and unassuming as the alien was, there was no denying his telekinetic powers.

Raising his hands, the alien gestured and telekinetic power blasted down into a quickly returning Hela, Fenrir and Garm, and even the two hiding members of their impromptu team, attempting to crush them to the ground, creating an effect not unlike a massive tornado. While Hela lost control of her hover spells and let both wolves drop, Danny and Gerda found themselves picked up and hurled like so many pebbles out of the valley and further down the mountainside. If not for the armor they wore, they would have been dead many times over.

But as it was, even through their armor both Valkyrie and mutant huntress took a pounding, and it was only the fact that the alien wasn't concentrating on them at all that saved them from dying so quickly that even the emergency medical array wouldn't have saved Danny's life. Instead, they had been caught at the peripheral of the field that the alien had created to capture the two giant wolves and the Asgardian.

Snarling and falling away from Hela, Garm and Fenrir each reacted in the same exact way. Both of them released their hold on their human-sized forms, and began to grow and grow until both of them had regained their natural sizes. And when they did, they began to fight back against the force pressing down on them even as Hela did much the same, trying to create a magical barrier around her to defend herself from telekinetic power.

Hovering several miles over the battlefield, the Black Order member Ebony Maw scowled ferociously. He had come forward to engage these enemies when he had seen a report from the Chitauri in charge of this group which seemed to indicate the humans had been trying to sneak through his defense in depth. The fact they were here, barely one mountain away from the beacon, meant they had been succeeding at that tactic in a most disturbing manner. Now it

looked as if the only reason they hadn't been trying to simply blast their way through was it might take them too long.

Angrily, Ebony used his powers once more, picking up boulders and hurling them at each of his enemies one after another, sonic booms echoing across the mountains. But while the Asgardian female cried out in pain and crashed to the mountain side below, only the older looking of the two four-legged creatures seemed to even feel the hits. But that snarl was one of animal fury rather than pain if Ebony was any judge. And as Thanos' chief torturer, he was indeed a good judge of the difference between an angry snarl and a pain filled one.

*It would take me quite a bit of time to smash through even that one's normal endurance and durability. Whereas the human female is quite clearly a magic user as well as being Asgardian, which makes her doubly dangerous.* The Chitauri had some information on that group, and she certainly fit the mold. To say nothing of the other four-legged beast, which was even now breaking out of his hold on it again!

*Perhaps I should have retreated, reinforced the defenses around the main portal? But no, that would've given the tactical initiative to the enemy, and I would've never been able to regain it. Doubling down on this point of contact was the best idea!* Ebony thought to himself, even as skimmers and Rippers began to fire down into the trio.

It was time, Ebony decided, to put his other gift into action, the one that gave him the name 'Maw' in the first place. With that in mind, he zoomed down towards the younger of the Four-legged beasts, understanding and seeing him as the main threat. And thus, the one whose turning would most benefit him.

He flashed down, and quickly bound the beast in another set of telekinetic shackles blasting away his older companion and sending him flying down the mountainside into a large copse of trees. The young creature instantly began to break out of them once more, causing Ebony to grimace and straining mentally to keep the bonds in place. But he could still speak as he did so. And that was enough. "You are so strong, such a magnificent beast, so powerful. So worthy. Worthy of acting as you will... But your will is my will, my pleasure, your pleasure..."

The wolf at first seemed to ignore his words, but feral intelligence was no match for Ebony Maw's second power: a mental manipulation based on his voice. Only the most powerful mind could avoid falling under his spell, and it had little to do with telepathy, bypassing the normal defenses as it was carried not through the Astral Plane, but physically through his voice.

Fenrir began to succumb. His eyes glazed over, his willpower crushed by this oblique assault.

Nearby Hela also felt the impact of that voice, but she was far enough away that she realized what was happening quickly. She raised a hand to her head and intoned a spell she had learned from her Seidr Man during one of their impromptu magical prank duels. "Mufilatio!"

The impact of the alien's voice instantly ebbed away, and she launched the same spell towards her brother and the alien both. *I hit one, he stops being able to hear, I hit the other, he stops being able to talk!*

Ebony Maw saw the wavelike spell coming his way and hastily leaped away. He didn't stop his insidious assault on the four legged one, instead speaking to it even as he sent dozens of telekinetic spikes towards the magic user. "My will is your will! You want to attack the female! You want to attack your fellows."

The spell hit Fenrir and as it wasn't an attack spell of any kind, bypassed his magical resistance, deadening his sense of sound. For a moment, Ebony didn't realize something had changed, but then, Fenrir's glazed eyes snapped back to normal, and he snarled soundlessly. Instead of attacking the female he turned his claws and fangs on Ebony Maw once more, forcing him to retreat in alarm. "Some kind of sound based spell!? Magic! Damn all it's users to the depths of space!"

Even so he nearly lost a foot to Garm as he had stealthily closed to where Ebony had been trying to influence Fenrir. Ebony's hasty flight brought him within snapping range, and only a hasty change of direction meant he had a gaah down his leg rather than no leg at all. "You, you beast, my power will end you!" Again he created telekinetic bonds around both fore legs, but before he could try and ply his powers on Garm, a cutting spell from Hela forced him up and away. A second later, he watched as Fenrir and Garm both tore through their bonds and began to stalk along the ground, staring up at him.

Something about the way these animals were treating him as simply prey infuriated Ebony, and he gestured. All of the debris from the battle up to this point, bodies, rocks, or trees, rose into the air, and he sent them down like a monstrous rain, carpeting the area.

Hela hastily created a Protego over her head, holding it even as she returned fire, forcing Ebony to block. His brand of telekinesis wasn't strong enough to block or redirect her magic, unlike Jean's, and instead could only absorb her magic for a few seconds before coming apart.

Meanwhile, Dani and Gerda were forced into hiding, utterly forgotten by the clash of monsters. Garm grimaced as various things hurled at just below the speed of sound struck him, while Fenrir howled in laughter, unheard by any thanks to the Muffilatio still covering him. Unlike most spells, the Muffilatio could not be dispersed by too much movement, only time or a cancelation spell.

A snarl on his face, Ebony reached through the ongoing rain to grab at Hela, and the battle continued. He kept his distance, and kept hurling things at the attackers, but simply couldn't damage any of his three opponents enough. Only once was he able to get an attack past Hela's magical defenses to score across her side, doing nothing. And the skimmers and Rippers still in the air around him were next to useless.

Despite his earlier thoughts on this point, after several long minutes of this stalemate, Ebony began to contemplate retreating for a time. *I can hold at the beacon, or hide myself high in the sky, wait for the magic user's guard to drop...*

A sonic boom from above and behind him broke Ebony out of his thoughts. He hastily twisted around, believing that he would see another enemy, and hoping to use his voice on it before the magic user could interfere. Instead, Ebony's wide eyes widened further and he bowed deeply towards the hovering throne of his master, his power disappearing from his voice, a quaver of fear replacing it. "Lord Thanos, please forgive this foolish one's actions. I am horrified and humbled that my lack of ability has..."

"Enough, Ebony. In point of fact, you are performing as well as you possibly could against enemies such as these. Retreat back to the beacon for now. I will deal with them." Thanos ordered. He saw no need to mention that two of Ebony's fellow Black Order had been beaten off by this point. Nebula, ever the disappointment to her father, had been slain even before her portal beacon had been destroyed. Luckily before that occurred thousands of Chitauri had passed through into Paris.

"Relay orders to the Chitauri as they come through to continue to maintain a defense in depth. The humans cannot be allowed to close this portal or destroy the main beacon."

With that, Thanos gestured, and several components of his throne went to work just as the larger of the two four-legged creatures below broke Ebony's telekinetic control yet again and leaped upwards. It soared through the air, impossibly fast and high, clearing the equivalent of a skyscraper in an instant.

Only to slam into the defenses of Thanos' hovering throne. "Damn you! At least let me kill that little one before you appear and interrupt my meal!" The animal snarled, trying to bite and gouge his way through the energy shielding around Thanos.

Thanos slowly stood from his throne room, staring at the creature with his head to one side, a sneer on his thick lips. "A beast you appear, and a beast you are. Is this truly the best you Asgardians can produce?"

With a wave of his hand, the shield disappeared. Fenrir tumbled forward, although he righted his course enough to thrust his maw forward seeking Thanos' body.

But instead, Thanos fist hammered into the side of his head hurling Fenrir to the side with a gasp of agony. Fenrir slammed into the mountainside below with enough force to actually shatter the mountain. There as a massive booming noise as hundreds of tons of stone cracked underneath them impact, sending up a plume of dust and debris as trees and rock alike were shredded by the backwash.

"Throne, takeover defense." Thanos ordered, as energy the power cosmic began to form around his hand.



This was the basic energy of the universe, which Thanos called the Power Cosmic. His race had all been born with a connection to it that allowed them to be nearly ageless, able to use it on a near instinctual level as offensive and defensive powers. Once Thanos had opened his connection to that power more, he had become a Titan. It was the same power source which magic users and gods could only interact with peripherally, although even that was enough to allow them to do a lot, like the Asgardians who had a natural connection to the power cosmic much like Thanos' own people did. But only Thanos and higher level deities could connect to the power cosmic in so raw a manner as to manipulate it like this.

Thanos could not manipulate it like a magic user, could not order the power cosmic to say, shift into a physical form under his command, but that did not matter to Thanos. Nor did it matter to his victims.

The energy blast took Fenrir in the side and shoulder causing him to howl in pain for the first time since his fight with Surtur.

Garm, had also broken out of his telekinetic bonds. He was not as fast or as powerful as Fenrir, but he too leaped upward now, aiming for the bottom of the hovering slab of stone that contained the throne of the enemy commander.

He didn't reach it. Instead, he too crashed into a shield, as a mechanical voice intoned, "Kinetic force dispersal shield online. Impact analyzed. Within parameters."

And as it spoke, the shield that Garm had just impacted blasted outwards, not allowing him the ability to try and fall back gracefully, instead hurling him down to join his younger companion. This forced Garm to use one of his mistress's favorite curses. "Blast it!"

Hela been using her magic to try and dispel Ebony's hold on her, only succeeding when Ebony began to retreat. Now she turned her own attention towards Thanos, recognizing him as the Mad Titan, the one behind this entire war. "What!? A shield of science that can block magic?"

Black fire arose from her hand and streaked through the air towards Thanos, but once again a shield protected him. He stood there in front of his throne, his arms crossed behind him now as his throne informed him of the magical powers inherent in that spell. "Did you think I would come back to, to this, the scene of my defeat, without having prepared?"

Thanos was not just a monstrously powerful warrior or tyrant, he was also the last survivor of a highly advanced race, one that had been advanced long before even the Shi'ar had taken to space. And while the AI aboard his hovering throne had no personality whatsoever, it had access to Sanctuary. This gave it **far** greater computational power than any system even Doctor Doom or Reed Richards could have contrived, and entire planets worth of stored data in order to analyze, and overcome anything Thanos encountered. It also had access to Thanos' technology, a technology that had been brought to a level where humans would have termed it the equal of magic.

“Gravity web,” Thanos ordered calmly. A small gun aperture opened at the side of his throne, revealing a gun with something that looked like a radar disc at the end, pointing towards Hela. A wide web of black and brown energy flashed forward to fast Hela could not dodge, and she found herself instantly trussed up like a shark in a net. Try as she might, her magical abilities could not cut through whatever energy made up the net, the magic folding around it. And as it wrapped around her, Hela groaned in pain as she felt herself dragged down to the ground, where she crashed into the mountainside. The gravity web held her there with the gravity of a black hole and Thanos lashed out again with an energy beam.

Helpless to move, Hela could still call on her magic. With a snarling growl, she conjured up her own spell, the spell appearing an inch away from her chest and shooting out and up towards the incoming attack.

Roiling lightning intercepted Thanos’ energy beam, the backwash of energies covering nearly half as many leagues as Ebony Maw’s earlier attacks had covered in his attempt to overcome the Asgardians. Once more, Gerda and Dani were forgotten, and had to basically button down and try to avoid the stray bits of energy that cascaded around them, disappearing quickly, but deadly for all of that.

For more than ten minutes this went on, the two of them striving against one another, pouring out their energies into this one clash of brute force against brute force. Hela grimaced, seemingly pushing all her will into the spell as she tried to physically fight through the gravity web, having little luck, her bones grinding against one another with every attempt. While behind and around her, another spell began to coalesce.

In contrast, Thanos looked almost amused as he continued to hold out his fist, sending the energy of the universe towards Hela in its raw destructive form while Hela used magic, in Thanos’ mind the bastard child of the power cosmic to block it.

But this clash allowed Garm and Fenrir to collect themselves and close once more to the point they could leap up and attack Thanos once more. Fenrir was hurting a bit from the twin strikes, but his durability was such that even Thanos’ energy bolt hadn’t been able to hurt him all that much. And Garm had avoided anything but the explosion of kinetic energy back into his face from his earlier attack and being choked by Thunderball earlier in the battle.

The impact of the two hits from below overcame the kinetic absorption shield around Thanos’ throne. The AI gathered what kinetic energy it could to release on command, but the shield fell, letting the two wolves claw and bite at Thanos and throne alike.

Thanos quickly turned, his other hand coming up a beam of power coalescing there to match the one he still was sending down at Hela.

Garm was quick, and leaped out into the open air, dodging away from the energy beam. In contrast Fenrir attacked, lunging towards Thanos so fast he couldn’t strike him away this time,

nor could his throne raise its shielding again. Slathering triumphantly, Fenrir bit down hard on Thanos' forearm, fully expecting to bite through in one chomp.

Instead, he found his bite stopped. The metal of Thanos' gauntlet groaned under the force of his bite, and warped in places, but metal and Titan alike endured his bite.

"For all that you are an Asgardian, all your abilities are purely physical," Thanos mused as a small trickle of blood appeared between where his armored forearm was clamped within Fenrir's fangs. "Superlative in that frame in comparison to other Asgardians perhaps, but it can be overcome. And if my first strike did so little damage, then perhaps another one will."

However, Thanos wasn't the only one who could concentrate on several things at once. Even as she had been striving power against power with the mad Titan, Hela had been concentrating on another spell, this one a long enchantment. From the air above the battlefield roiling black energy began to appear, washing across the sky then coming down in a cyclone cloud towards Thanos. "%Power of Hel come to thy Mistress, bearing the lamentation and grief as thy strength, Wind of the Damned%!"

The energy of this attack appeared in the air almost like lightning and fire whose form had somehow shifted into a spiral of smoke. Covering the sky from one horizon to another, it then spiraled into crash into Thanos and his throne, overcoming the shielding of the throne once more and battering against both Mad Titan and his seat of power.

Fenrir also took some hits from the spell, but as Thanos flung him away, he was able to avoid much of the damage done. He fell through the air back down towards the mountainside, now massively changed from what had been due to the numerous impacts of Thanos and before him Ebony hurling the defenders around the place like so many soccer balls.

Yet once the spell cleared, Thanos and his throne stood, almost undamaged. And once more, the robotic voice of the throne spoke. "Anomalous energy analyzed. Energy exceeds storage parameters. Redirecting stored probability differentiation inducing cosmic energy."

From the side of the throne again came a blast of power which caught Garm, who had just leaped up into the air once more. All the power that had been contained in Hela's spell was concentrated on a single fist-sized bolt of energy, which shattered Garm's back leg as Thanos turned, launching his own attack towards the ancient wolf. The kinetic blast caught him, and this time, Garm had been unable to get out of the way. Ribs cracked as he was hurled down words to slam into the ground once more with enough force to cause the mountain to quake, the ground underneath him cratering as he struck it.

Although alive, Garm was out of the fight for now.

The sight of her heavily injured companion, her dearest friend, caused Hela to lose herself to fury. "I will have your soul under my bootheel for that, Thanos!"

Flying up into the air, Hela closed, lashing out with magic as she came, flying towards where Thanos stood still on his throne, blasting aside Fenrir as he too tried to close. Her spells, however, were all intercepted by the throne's strange defenses. Two of those defenses blew out under her continued onslaught, the energy redirecting system unable to fully encompass the spells she was hurling at it. Smoke billowed up in separate segments for a time, and then the throne's shield came down.

Thanos jumped forward, crossing the intervening distance rather than waiting for Hela to attack him. This caught Hela by surprise, as up to this point, he had been seemingly happy to remain at range. His fist came down like a piledriver, and Hela hastily raised her blade to defend herself.

The edge of the blade did not dissuade Thanos however, and although she kept her grip on her sword, the impact drove her back down towards the ground once more even as her blade shattered under the strike, leaving Thanos' hands uninjured.

A second later, Hela was forced to use another spell to teleport herself to the side to avoid an uppercut that would've undoubtedly done some real damage. Thanos followed, his throne relaying Hela's current position to Thanos the instant she appeared again. An energy bolt caught her in the side, finishing the job of Thanos' initial strike to send her crashing down into the ground below.

Before she could right herself, Thanos was on her, a double fisted blow coming down. *He's so fast!!* It was all Hela could do to raise her arms and use her magical energies to reinforce her body like the enchantments Harry had on his crisis suit and raise her hands up to block. "Magia Erebea eighty percent!"

The sound as Titan flesh met reinforced Asgardian was like no sound heard on earth since the dinosaurs had been wiped out. A rolling booming noise that shattered the eardrums of the Chitauri still within sight of the battle.

The reverberations from the impact shattered the surrounding mountains along with the one Hela was standing on, causing an earthquake heard for hundreds of miles and blasting them into ruin. Where before a series of mountains had stood, now was a series of jagged hills and scattered fields of rock, the remnants of mighty mountains laid low by the power of the Asgardian and her opponent.

And at the center of this destruction, Hela found herself driven to her knees and deep into the ground which cratered underneath her as it had Garm earlier. Thanos stood above Hela, his fist once more rising into the air. Blood was running down his forearm where Fenrir had earlier bit it, some of the stress of the hit having blown back into the limb just slightly enough to cause the earlier wounds to reopen.

But Hela was far worse off from the clash. Both her forearms had broken under the strike, her defense doing nothing to stop Thanos's hit. Her mask too was shattered along with her jaw and a few of her teeth. Hela's eyes also weren't quite tracking.

Thanos could well have finished Hela right there and then if not for Fenrir howling and charging forwards again. He alone had withstood the shockwave of their strikes, and now charged forward none the worse for wear. "Do not think to cast me aside so easily creature! I am Fenrir, I am the wolf that will eat the sun! I am the creature that the Shadows used to put fear in the hearts of all of Asgard!"

"And what does that matter to me, beast? To me, you are a minor threat at best!" Thanos taunted, turning to prepare himself against Fenrir's charge. Beast of Ragnarök and Mad Titan met, the two of them exchanging punches, paw strikes, and fangs as Fenrir pushed Thanos away from his sister.

Each time flesh met fur there was a shockwave of sound and kinetic force, scouring the already denuded area. Mountains outside the immediate conflict zone still trembled, cracks beginning to appear in the raw stone of the mountains.

How long this went on, none of the watchers could tell, but it did allow Hela to slowly regain her senses. She grimaced then, grinding already ruined teeth to keep from groaning at the pain, slowly pushing it aside in order to concentrate on the ongoing battle.

As she watched through pain-filled eyes, Thanos finally got the better of Fenrir. A blow knocked Fenrir off-balance and Thanos quickly reached forward, and grabbed at both sides of Fenrir's jaw, gripping it top and bottom as he strained against the muscles of the mighty wolf. "Know your place!" He boomed, as he began to force Fenrir's jaws wider and wider.

Dani and Gerda had survived up to this point by being fast enough to get away from the epicenter of the ongoing battle thanks to Dani's equipment, specifically her hover boots. Now she turned back, and seeing Fenrir in such dire straits and Hela at the foot of the Titan, she dumped Gerda on her rear. "Sorry, Gerda, duty calls."

With that, Dani charged forwards, her hover boots allowing her to cross the difficult terrain created by the earlier impact of Titan and Asgardian. Not that Dani had any real idea of what to do when she arrived. Even though she had an Asgardian sword, that was a far cry from being able to wield it with enough strength to get through Thanos' skin. *At least from what I've seen so far. Still, isn't this the essence of being a hero, mindlessly charging into danger?!* So despite being terrified, she charged forwards now, reaching out instead to her mutant powers. *And it isn't as if I'm out of tricks.*

Dani's mutant powers allowed her several things. First the one she used the most, was a high empathic ability with animals. The second was the ability to pull out images or memories from an area or person. She had tested this ability on Emma and Harry both, and while Harry could

defend against it, Jean could only do so after a lot of practice. So as her mutant power reached out, Dani found Thanos' strong mental defenses unable to stop her.

As apparitions rose from the ground all around him, Thanos' eyes widened.

He recognized some of them. One of them was his father. Another was his best friend, before he had found the love of his life, before he had dedicated himself to Death. Before he had slaughtered the other Titans. Even now, several thousand years later, those deaths still at times came back to Thanos. Not because of any grief, merely a lingering sense of regret that those closest to him had never understood his destiny.

Other images appeared, other actual regrets over his lifetime, including Nebula, and others appeared as well, reaching for him, trying to drag him down into the same mediocrity they had embraced. "What, what is this..." Glaring through the shade, Thanos stared at the approaching figure, then hurled Fenrir to one side, leaping up and away from Dani, scowling in anger. "Some kind of telepathic power that somehow bypasses my defenses?"

As he did, the images faded, which caused Thanos to almost breathe out a sigh of relief as he landed up above on his throne again. "I see, it is some kind of distance based ability as well. And yet, you assaulted my mind. And I will forgive no such trespass!"

He held up his hand, and began to lash out down towards Dani, who grunted with effort as she tried to dodge away from the strike, pushing off with one leg so hard she felt something in her leg twinge. Luckily Thanos was so far away that it was kind of telegraphed, and she was able to dodge the first blast. But not the one after that. Or the ones following it.

Then Fenrir was there, crouching over her, taking the next strike on his back and side. He howled in pain, but endured it, as Dani lay under him.

Now having pushed through her own agony, Hela slapped her hands down on either side of her, ignoring the added agony this caused her from her forearms. Spikes of earth arose and shot towards the bottom of Thanos' throne, causing the kinetic energy shield to appear. But a second spell grabbed at the debris created by the impact, and she used it to create a global of soil and dirt, a makeshift smoke bomb to blind Thanos. "Fenrir, Dani, move!"

While Fenrir and Dani were indeed able to move away from Thanos' area of attack, this did nothing to blind the sensors on the throne. A second later, Hela cursed as she was forced to shield herself again from another blast from Thanos.

However, Hela and her team were not the only things that the throne were sensing now.

"Warning, incoming life forms. All life form signatures concurrent with the main enemy target already present on the battlefield."

Thanos snarled at that, and then turned his gaze upwards to see a portion of the Asgardian host charging down towards him. "Ah, I do believe the Asgardians have chosen to side wholly with the humans. Predictable, if annoying."

At their head was Thor on his chariot, pulled by the mighty goats Tanngrisnir and Tanngrjóstr. In his hand he was whirling his hammer. Behind him, Balder flew, while Hogun and others rode flying horses charging down towards Thanos.

“Have at thee!” Thor bellowed in laughter, as he leaped from his chariot hammer lashing out towards Thanos.

Even as he did, the throne opened fire on the incoming Asgardians. It was too slow to intercept Thor, yet behind him, Tyr and several others reeled under the strikes, and two were even knocked entirely out of the air.

This forced Thanos to raise a hand, and while he caught the incoming hammer, the impact nearly sent him out of his throne while creating yet another shockwave that rolled through the shattered remnants of the mountains around him.

“Impressive!” He grunted, before reaching up with his other hand and grabbing Thor’s arms. “But not enough!”

For a moment, the two of them strove strength against strength, with the hammer out of position to do anything, and the two of them standing at the front of Thanos’ throne as it attacked the other Asgardians. The throne’s weapons were so potent and it had gathered so much energy from the previous battle that it was able to smash several of them out of the sky, while also nearly finishing off both Garm and Hela.

But the throne’ concentration on pounding the Asgardian host at range had allowed Skadi to close. She had landed even as the throne sensed the approaching Asgardian host, and now raced along the ground, nodding to her lover and Fenrir but staying silent and nearly unseen until she was right below the throne. It took her some time, while above her, Thor and Thanos hammered one another in a series of blows that made even the former fight with Fenrir seem low key.

But finally Dani was in position. She leapt upwards, traversing the distance as only an Asgardian could as the throne began to lose altitude from Thor’s continued pounding of Thanos.

Even as Thanos began to push Thor away, to wrench his arms out of position to either side, Skadi’s dagger bit deep into the metal of his throne. At the same time, Hela and the other Asgardians began to fire back, causing the throne’s shields to appear again and again.

Wincing at the play of energies so close to her body, Skadi hung there, ironically protected by the back of Thanos’ throne for a second, then flipped herself up and over, landing behind the throne on the tiny area surrounding it there. She watched as Thor was overcome in a contest of strength, then his head was blasted backwards with a punch so hard it shook the world for a second or so it seemed to her anyway. She clung onto the back of the throne for dear life, then leapt up and over it, her dagger seeking the back of Thanos’ head.

At a warning from the throne of an unknown presence there, Thanos turned. Smacking the dagger out of her hand with one hand, Thanos then grabbed her throat. So strong was he that Skadi felt like a small kitten in the maw of a grizzly. Then he was twirling Skadi around, slamming her into the recovered Thor, sending them both off the throne into the air.

Snorting in amusement, Thanos ordered. "Throne, release all accumulated energies, targeting the hammer wielder the sword wielder, and the wolf. Let us cut down on the serious opponents." Of the other Asgardians, none seemed to have enough magic or long range striking power to be any threat to him.

All of the accumulated energy that had been absorbed through the various shields the throne had been using since the Asgardians arrived had been repurposed by this point similarly to the earlier attacks from the two wolves. Such a thing would surely have sealed the throne's place as a magical creation rather than a technological one for any bar Thanos himself, but scientific marvel or magical construct, it worked. And now beams of raw kinetic energy, almost like Cyclops' beams but far stronger, crashed out across the battlefield targeting first the twosome of Skadi and Thor, and then the more distant Hela and Fenrir.

Thor and Skadi were blasted out of the sky, hurled hundreds of miles away to crash into a still standing mountain. Which was no longer standing after they struck it, the entire thing shattering around them. So great was the impact that Skadi instantly passed out, her bones shattering under the impact and something else in her stomach giving out, while bits of stone and tree flew so far, they landed in the capital of Nepal, Kathmandu, and even further in some Indian territories.

Back at the battlefield, two great craters were now torn out of the ground around Fenrir and Hela as Fenrir's durability met and then was exceeded by the onslaught and Hela's magic barely sustained her long enough for her emergency medical evacuation rooms to activate. Even the backlash was enough to cause several of the other Asgardians to fall out of the sky, bleeding from the nose, ears and eyes.

Surveying what he could see of the shattered remnants of the mountain range around him, Thanos scowled a little, knowing that in that clash he'd also heavily damaged the defenses of the main portal that Ebony had been working so hard to propagate. Indeed, he could see the remnants of hundreds, perhaps several thousand aliens and their creations all around them. Here half a Ripper stood out of from the ground, there a dozen arms and legs all tangled together and very obviously not connected to living bodies lay scattered like children's toys. Here and there the remnants of anti-air guns stuck out of the ground, the guns long since torn away by the force of the sonic booms nearby, their owners pulled out of the solid rock that had been so disastrously flung about.

Above the battlefield, Ebony still flew, having weathered the storm of constant crashing thunder remarkably well. And the aliens were still coming through the portal and the portals further away from where Thanos had clashed with the Asgardians.



“Incoming communication.” Thanos heard, and he turned back to his throne, frowning a little before his eyes widened as he remembered the orders he had left behind him in the dimensional gap.

He sat down in his throne quickly, completely forgetting his concerns about the portal’s defenses and the fact that there were still quite a few Asgardians out that he had yet to engage. Indeed Thanos didn’t even bother to see if he had finished off Thor or Skadi. “Report.”

“My Lord, the energy readings you told us to be old on the lookout for have appeared in super giants conquest corridor. The Phoenix avatar has appeared.”

**OOOOOOO**

Several hours before Thanos had come through the main portal and engaged Hela and the rest of her team, Jean had begun her intervention in Asia.

Given the chaos that the Chitauri had caused somehow in the Chinese High Command, that meant trying to stop further conflict between China and its neighbors. Whatever emergency plan the Chinese were operating under had launched several naval units and the fighter squadrons of numerous bases around the China Sea towards Taiwan. Several elements of the American 7<sup>th</sup> fleet had also been attacked, as had Japan, but those attacks had been somewhat smaller, and had mostly ceased in the case of Japan. The battle in the Formosa Strait was still raging as Jean flew down from Babylon. Or rather, the battle in the air over it.

In all honesty, Jean would have preferred to come straight down toward where they assumed the portal was, considering the movement of the invaders. But given the fact they weren’t certain, she agreed with Dennis and Harry that trying to contain the madness that had sprung up among China’s military leadership from infecting other nations was the immediate priority.

This proved even more true when, while still high up in the ionosphere, Phoenix’s earbud went off. A second later, Pinoptes’ electronic voice echoed in her ear. “Phoenix, we have verified ICBM launches. Nukes are launching towards Taiwan currently. We have intercepted internal reports of fighting around several other nuclear missiles silos nearer South Korea and elsewhere, but most still seem to be under the CCP’s control.”

“So much for the Mandarin cutting the compromised officers out of the command loop, damn it! I know he ordered the nuke silos locked down, but it looks as if whatever invader is spreading this madness was able to bypass that,” Jean snarled in return, her words carried into a pickup that was part of her half-mask, which covered the lower portion of her face, leaving her eyes free, but moving up and covering her ears. “Are you any closer to figuring out how they are doing this?”

“The Chitauri skimmers are incredibly fast, almost as fast as a jet fighter in a straight line. If they can keep unseen, the individuals doing this could traverse a large portion of China without much trouble. As for how they are infiltrating the Chinese military command structure, other than telepathy the only suggestion we have comes from Sage, who says that it could be some kind of psychometry, the power to pull specific memories from objects.”

“Well, I suppose it doesn’t matter how she’s doing it, so long as we can stop it,” Jean grumbled, speeding up her descent to a speed that would have put Cannonball to shame.

*We should have pushed harder to take nukes away from China! But I suppose at the end of the Eurasian war we couldn’t. Not when China had been an ally in that war.* The last thing they wanted to do at the time was to further isolate China. But that thinking had backfired badly before this invasion began, and now it was coming to a head even further.

Moments later Jean came close enough to see the ICBMs. Instantly, massive fiery claws reached out from the aura around her. Such was the size of her telekinetic form for a moment, that it was actually visible like a shadow high above the earth far below in places in China and Taiwan. And then, those telekinetic claws reached their targets snagging the ICBMs aimed at Taiwan out of the air. All twelve of them overkill in her mind, were snatched like a sparrow on the wing. *Damn, this is a lot easier using my own eyes rather than drones and without my pregnancy’s hormonal shit getting in the way.*

With a mental twitch, Jean carried the nukes straight up, holding them still in her grip until they were out of Earth’s atmosphere and away. The Verdun class stations, a few of which were in orbit around the real earth rather than moving with the magical illusion, would deal with them.

Thankfully there didn’t seem to be a second wave, and Jean allowed her fiery bird of prey aura to shrink down until it was only about as big as a jet fighter around her, flying further downward until she reached the area where jetfighters normally operated. There, Pinoptes, having already discovered the Seventh Fleet’s command network, gave her suit’s gear the correct security protocols to link Jean into their local comms net.

“This is Phoenix. I am on the line to help, for now as you probably saw just now. But I won’t be in the area for long. The actual alien invasion is going to call me deeper into China. But the Custodes would like to get a sitrep from whoever is in command down here.”

“This is Admiral Johnson, U.S. Navy. Ah’m not gonna look a gift Phoenix in the mouth,” a drawling southern voice said from the intercom set into Phoenix’s ear. “I’m gonna presume that the president has activated Operation Overguard?”

That was one of the contingency plans that the Avalon Empire, or rather, Dennis, Steve and Carol, had worked out with the Pentagon to deal with another alien invasion, one occurring on foreign soil and with possible partisan aide. Jean hadn’t been part of that loop, but she understood the question, and knew the correct response to give before Pinoptes could prompt her. “The Custodes Mundi guards all, and works with the few and the proud.”

Honestly, even as American, Jean thought that code was a little much, but since she knew Steve and Carol both felt the same, and had decided to humor whatever pencil pusher and come up with it on the other side, she was willing to go with it. *And given the reports coming out of the area around Washington, say what you will about the American gung ho attitude, it certainly has an upside to it.*

By this point the battle in Washington had been going on for more than an hour, and showed no sign of slowing. But Jean was certain that Cyclops and the rest, already on station there, would do their best.

Any residual tension in the man’s voice, barely there but easily picked up thanks to Jean’s empathic powers, disappeared, and he gave her a brief overview of what was going on in the area even as she

raced down towards where she could sense several dozen jetfighters dueling in midair in the Straits of Taiwan. The American carrier group pulled out of the Straits and to the south after hammering several troop transports of all things that had pushed out into the straits with no air cover. Whether or not those troop transports had been actually full of troops, Jean nor the Americans had any way of knowing, but they had sunk them to the bottom, before being jumped in turn by fighter squadrons from the mainland.

“Whatever is going on in China means that this assault on Taiwan isn’t very organized. The bases launching fighters across the Straits might all be playing by the same rulebook, but it’s more like each base got its orders at the wrong time or something,” the admiral reported, even as Jean came within visual sight of the ongoing dogfight.

F-15s and MIGs dueled in midair several kilometers of airspace alongside the Taiwanese equivalent, whose name Jean couldn’t remember... if in fact it was a different jet fighter than the American one at all. Hawkets backed up the F-15s, armed for more anti-missile defense, shooting down whatever missiles got through from the MIGs, which had a distinct numerical superiority against the Americans and Taiwanese fighters. Whatever local superiority the base up at {} and the carrier group had first had long since disappeared by this point although experience and training was still on 7<sup>th</sup> Fleet’s side.

Even with the example of the Eurasian war and how poorly the Chinese army had done, there was only so much that the Mandarin had been able to do to change the society of the military in China before this point. That meant that while many units really were as strong in reality as they were on paper, other’s weren’t. And China still had a massive quality control issue.

Nonetheless, there were a lot of MIG fighters, with more coming in from the mainland. Diverted here, Jean new, instead of fighting the real enemy over China’s own airspace. Whether or not all of the reinforcements were acting on orders from subverted officers, Jean again didn’t know, and frankly didn’t think possible. *Not unless the Chitauri were somehow able to infiltrate China before the portals opened. Even their skimmers can’t cover that much area that quickly, and each infiltration would also take time.* “God dammit why is it that humans are so quick to turn on each other?”

Shaking that thought off, Jean reached out. Telekinetic energies caught more than a dozen Chinese fighter jets, crushing wings and tearing open canopies to pull the pilots out, not even letting them use their emergency parachutes. Jean combed through the area, destroying every MIG in the airspace around her and then some, reaching out over the horizon occasionally to grab at hastily retreating MIGs, feeling their presence easily thanks to the minds of their pilots. Above and behind her she gathered the various pilots, all of them hanging there encased in orange and red globes of Telekinetic power looking for all the world like ripened fruit on a tree.

At one point, she had to smack aside bullets coming from one of the American fighters towards the group of captured pilots, and she glared with all the fierceness of a predator towards that pilot. *“I don’t know what you are thinking of, but those are my prisoners, and we do not allow prisoners to be killed like that! Try that again, and you’ll join them.”*

Either Jean’s telepathic shout or his squadron commander’s over the squad’s coms net did the trick. The man’s fighter pulled out of its attack run, twitching up and away then down towards where Jean could sense thousands of minds clustered together. No doubt that would be the carrier group.

satisfied that no other MIG fighter was coming into the airspace here between China and Taiwan, Jean turned her attention back to Admiral Johnson, who gave her full report on the rest of the conflict going on in the sea of China. The Chinese submarines had taken a toll at first, but the American destroyers had eventually begun to run them down, although they had taken a fierce pounding as they done so. Of the carrier group, seven ships had been sunk out right, two of them going down with all hands. But in return, China's local submarine force had been decimated, and the pack of surface ships they'd sent out had been wiped out.

"You're certain that they're not going to try to push their way across the Straits again?" Jean asked, already turning towards the distant shore of the continent.

"Positive, ma'am. Like I said, all of this seemed to come from a good operational playbook, but they hadn't set everything up in time for all the various bases to work together. If they had more submarines in the area, we would've had a very bad way of it. And if their MIGS had come in as one giant fist rather than spaced out into different groups, that would've been just as bad for us. As it is, I think I'm going to find the engineers who put together that newfangled Phalanx system of ours and buy them as many drinks as my credit card can handle. Sure is shit saved the bacon on many of our ships."

Jean nodded at that, as it made sense. She'd heard of the Phalanx system and even knowing what she did of energy weapons, it still sounded amazing. Although the admiral's continued mutter of, "why the hell did they just keep on coming? Why didn't they retreat before you arrived on the scene?" made her wince.

It brought to mind what Dennis had been saying in the meeting before she had left Camelot. Even if the upper echelon of the Chinese Communist Party understood what was going on - that aliens had somehow begun to infiltrate their command structure and take over their officers - they might not have bothered to try to override the orders given. The more Chinese who died fighting American and Taiwanese forces the better their internal propaganda machine could build up the kind of 'us versus them' mentality that The Party needed in order to keep control of its massive population.

Jane passed instructions for her prisoners, and then after about ten minutes of flight began to deposit them on a beach in Taiwan, where several companies of Taiwanese infantry were waiting for them. She hovered there for a moment, making her opinion on mistreatment of the prisoners clear by telepathic voice (shout) and physical presence, then turned once more towards China, visible from where she hovered in the air from here. *Damn, that really brings to mind how close Taiwan and China are to one another. It's not quite like the Straits of Dover, but its close enough.*

Before she could fly in that direction, Admiral Johnson contacted her and told her that there was another group of MIGs and other Chinese flying units coming towards them now. Several submarines were also detected at the outskirts of his destroyers patrol around his flagship, a Nimitz class carrier.

That was bad enough, but the next report on the heel of the admirals came from Pinoptes, saying, "Phoenix, more bad news I'm afraid. For whatever, the North Koreans have finally begun to respond to the chaos spiraling out of China. And they have decided to take advantage of the situation. Missiles have been launched towards Japan and South Korea, and North Korean forces are surging forward into conflict all along the border with South Korea."

Jean winced, remembering what she had read about the Korean War, which had ended while she was still a toddler. That meant more humans were about to die fighting other humans when there were invading aliens around. "Is anyone at the command level still in communication? I need some advice here."

At her question, Storm's voice came online. She reported she was still busy in America, teleporting massive amounts of civilians out of DC and troops inward. "I am in no way prepared to make any kind of decision on this point Jean, I'm afraid it's all you."

Only Sage, Sir Dennis and Pinoptes were both still in the command loop and able to make a call on this one. Between them and Jean, it was decided she should head to South Korea first. It was hoped that if they gave it another hour or so, some kind of central location for the chaos going on in China could be found. "And barring that, I am close to breaking into the Chinese military's communications system's highest security encryption. If we cannot find the center of the chaos going around, some kind of special forces unit for the aliens are presuming, then we can at least discover its ultimate target."

This conversation had taken but a few minutes, and then Jean was back online with the admiral.

"Admiral Johnson, I'm afraid I'm going to have to leave the straits to you. North Korea is just proving its led by a mad man, and from then I'm going to have to push into China."

"Miss, you already gave me more than enough time to reload my fighters and get my pilots some coffee."

It had been about an hour and a half since Jean had intercepted the ICBMs.

"And it's not like I've not been doing anything on my end," Johnson drawled, his southern twang showing more than before. "Seventh fleet might've been scattered all around, but we're all in communication, and I'm pulling in all of them here bar a few destroyers up towards Japan. We've even got some jet fighters coming in from Manila and the Philippines to be restaged out of Taiwan and {base}. They were slow off the mark, but they're coming in hot. I can't say its going to be pleasant for a while if the next batch of subs my destroyers are reporting actually decide to attack, but even if they do, seventh fleet can handle it here."

Jean heard the pride in his voice, and hoped that it wasn't misplaced. But she also sensed through her empathic powers that he was speaking not only for her, but for the officers around him in his bridge... or wherever it was an admiral was during a battle. *Isn't there a special word for that?*

With that in mind, she simply told him to keep this line open for Pinoptes. The Many Eyes which would add tremendously to his radar and ECM. With that done, Jean then turned her flight to the north.

Twice as she flew north she saw American ships out to sea heading southward towards Taiwan, and once, she saw more MIGs flying out from another base in China, only to swat them out of the air. Once more she did so gently so the pilots live, although this time, she allowed them to then use their parachutes rather than collect them to drop them off elsewhere. She just didn't have time to waste on doing so as she had before.

And even then, by the time she hit South Korea, the reports from the border was bad. The South Korean and American forces stationed along the DMZ were holding, but barely. It had apparently taken the local South Korean high command a while to realize that this was a real push across the borders rather than

another attempt to force the South Koreans to fire first. Thus they had stupidly not allowed the defenders to fire until actual casualties had been reported.

Flying higher up into the stratosphere, Jean then boosted her speed as hard as she could, crossing the intervening distance between South Korea's shoreline and the border within twenty minutes. Once there, Jean, no longer in any mood to take prisoners or forgive these people for their stupidities, hammered the North Korean Air Force out of the sky with claws of fire.

Then, with Pinoptes and her own telepathic powers guiding her, she moved along the border aiming to remove North Korean artillery positions across the whole front. Giant beams of superheated air slammed into the artillery positions, or claws of fire stamping down like the talons of a monstrous bird of prey tearing entire artillery units apart by simply removing the artillery gun's batteries and engines. And still, she tried hard not to kill, not to take the lives of people who were just following admittedly stupid orders.

**"I am the Phoenix!"** She shouted, using both her telekinesis to make certain her words were heard well beyond where they would otherwise have been and telepathically hammering out the words to every mind she could sense... which included quite a **lot** of people who were miles and miles away from the border. Several million, in point of fact. *Damn, this isn't going restart that Phoenix worship crap is it? Fuck it, too late now.*

Setting that concern aside, she continued to shout aloud and mentally. **"North Koreans, your leader has decided to use an alien invasion as an excuse to try and make war on your southern neighbors! He is wrong, this is not an opportunity, this is an act of stupidity! And all of you will pay for his stupidity, and for your willingness to follow him into it."**

In the next few moments hundreds of jet fighters were smashed out of the air, both by her, and by the defenders, who, with her aide, quickly began to overwhelm the attackers.

With the North Korean artillery seemingly being wiped out systematically from on high, the southern forces pushed back hard. And unlike Jean, the locals had no choice but to kill their opponents. Not that she was going to say anything about it one way or another.

Over the next few hours they stabilized the front, and then began to dig in once more. In other places, local commanders began to push over the border, although Jean suspected they probably wouldn't get very far considering how large the various minefields were. In the air was a different story, and now that they had no North Korean units to complain of, and segments on the border US and South Korean aerial forces were also pushing him in.

But that didn't all matter to Jean. She had done her part, and if she stayed around to use her powers in more minute detail, it would just suck away more time. The time in which hundreds, thousands of civilians were undoubtedly dying across China. *And while I know it is isn't a fair comparison, I'm always going to put the lives of civilians over that of the military. At least the military have training, even if they aren't where they chose to be. Civilians don't even have that.*

Thankfully, the hours that she had spent dealing with this conflict had actually allowed Pinoptes and Dennis time enough to extrapolate a very vague idea of where the Mandarin was. Along with the fact that whatever was causing the chaos in China, turning its officers against itself, was making for the

military base that the Mandarin had taken over as his command center. It wasn't a straight progression, but it wasn't an obvious one, but once you had all of the data and a mind like Pinoptes and local knowledge like Dennis to help understand it, the pattern became clear.

What Jean heard as she reached the border with China though was even more gratifying. "We've even been able to contact a few local commanders: Generals and commandants who have realized what are going on in some fashion and are willing to listen. With Pinoptes getting them each in contact with one another and what remains of the Party's High Command they are slowly starting to build up small segments of order scattered around China. And we have access to their radar systems too, which is giving us a much better idea of what is going on the ground and in the air directly above it."

Alas what was going on wasn't good. Jean halted in midair for a few moments to examine the image that sprang up from her wrist, which held a small computer screen on the inside. It had been designed by Reed as an upgrade for her and a few others to try out.

Now, she shook her head as she saw the sheer amount of carnage going on across China. It hadn't reached everywhere yet, but there were huge groups of skimmers, several hundred strong, moving around in various areas of Chinese airspace almost entirely unimpeded. Each group could easily overpower any local air defense since China had yet to organize a country-wide response, and were simply killing or causing carnage wherever they want.

Cities in particular were being targeted ruthlessly by the bastards, and towns and villages had been shot to pieces from one end to another. And the less said about highways, the better. Skimmers were like jet fighters mixed with helicopters, and anything moving on the highways near a skimmer was just a sitting target.

There didn't seem to be as many of the large air-based forms, but what there were, were staying in and around the main portal. Backed up by a few of the manta-ray things, they were protecting groups of infantry that seemed to be building a forward defensive position there.

*As if that will save them when I get there!* Jean nearly snarled to herself, flinching a bit at the sight of what must have been an elementary school being shot up by skimmers caught on camera and posted to the internet. *I am going to tear them to pieces! Each and every fucking Chitauri I find!*

That didn't even count the reports that Pinoptes were now getting from their local partisans of infantry units spreading out in every direction. They would use their skimmers to move around, then descend on the civilians or military targets, going to ground as they did so.

"What's worse is I think that the reinforcement doctrine of the aliens have been using up to this point have just changed. Before this, there was a noted difference between each of the battle fronts," Sage interjected, and Jean could almost visualize the black-haired woman shaking her head in anger. "Each of the local commanders had their own personal style of command and organization that the reinforcements were designed to meet. Now, they're simply pushing in as many troops as possible through the still open portals in America, Russia, and China. Evidently, closing two of the six portals means they are no longer willing to allow the local commanders to slow things down if they can help it."

“Preblematic, but not important. Unless you’re telling me, they have something that can slow me down when I get to that portal?” Jane responded with a shrug of her shoulders even as she began to speed forward once more. “There’s a reason Harry sent me here to China after all.”

Jean wasn’t being arrogant. There was indeed a reason why she had been sent here solo like this, although she wasn’t so arrogant as to believe that there weren’t threats out there that could handle her. The campaign against Galactus had shown that there was a limit to her powers, and she and Harry had talked a long time about his battle with the Mad Titan, Thanos. Someone like that, Jean would rate her chances as sixty/forty at best if Thanos had time to prepare, which he had going into this campaign. But anything below that threat level, Jean would fuck up but good, and she was very much in the mood to do so.

“China is looking to be a major issue regardless of your presence given how France, Russia, and America all were quick to start working with us when we responded to the invasion. Those battlefields at least are going to be confined to one city per nation,” Dennis grumbled.

He had looked at the casualty reports from France and the US, and it made for very grim reading. The battles there were now almost entirely contained, as he had said, within Paris and Washington. And the surviving civilians had been teleported out in job lots thanks to Ororo. But that didn’t mean the dying was done. All it meant was that the dying was now confined to the fighting men taking back their nations’ capital cities house by house.

“Although we are getting some reinforcements now,” Sage interjected, seemingly to keep her fellow spy master’s spirit’s up. “Asgard has responded, and their army is on the move. Their first attack groups already on the way down into Russia as we speak,” Sage answered. “Another is going to be redirected towards the biggest portal we’ve discovered so far, the one in the Himalayas.”

Jean smiled at that, and then asked Pinoptes and Dennis to make certain that the locals wouldn’t fire on her to the best of their ability, before pushing her speed even higher. While it was good to know that the war was slowly turning against the invaders, she still had her own role to play against them, and now could finally strike at them directly.

OOOOOO

Supergiant liked to think that when it came to using her Telepathovore powers, she was a bit of an artist, not so much one of paint and color, but like a master playwright, creating a performance for the ages. With every bit of chaos she created, with every moment of confusion or carnage, she painted a greater spectacle, a greater show for her lord and master. And here on earth, in this quaint little country, Supergiant had discovered a perfect canvas for her work. The paranoia, the self-interest carefully hidden under loyalty – fear – of the strangely named Chinese Communist Party, all of it made the country’s military magnificent soil for the seeds she planted.

At first, after taking over the minds of several base commanders and using them to launch attacks towards Taiwan, Supergiant had traveled randomly across the country, using her skimmer to crisscross the country almost randomly. She sent most of her troops elsewhere so that they were not linked in the locals’ minds to the troubles that she was causing with her infiltration of the high command, which just served to add another note to her performance.



At times it had been tough to get to any kind of flag officer, the security at military bases in this country were quite paranoid. But more often than not she was able to find a way, taking over one or two victims first, then moving in deeper into the bases.

All in all, Supergiant felt she was performing excellently. The local military and civilians were united in paranoia against the outsiders already before she arrived, and now, she was simply spreading both carnage, and more paranoia of their fellow man.

It had, however, taken time, something which she was somewhat annoyed by at this moment. More than half the day had gone by since she had arrived here, and she had yet to infiltrate the truly high command of the country. Although, thankfully for her mission, she had discovered where the General Secretary had retreated to.

This was a simple military structure, small seemingly, but easily the most high-tech base that she had yet seen on this world. Indeed, some of the scanners she could see from where she was hiding in the forest nearby showed scanners that wouldn't have been out of place on any Skrull or Kree planet. It almost looked impossible to sneak in without some form of backup, and for a moment, Supergiant wondered about the feasibility of calling in her troops for to reinforce. Or at the least, to make enough noise for her to slip in unnoticed. Then, she saw an officer leave, and grinned to herself. "I do believe I have my way in."

She retreated, and for the next fifteen minutes she moved along a road that led to the hidden bunker. At first, she thought that was rather foolish, but then again, she reflected that the humans would need to bring in construction equipment after all, so having a road made some sense in that case if this place was new. But what she found at the other end of the road was a massive helicopter pad and more security. The security here was obviously still being put in place, something that made Supergiant thankful, as it allowed her the opportunity to sneak in.

When she saw another officer arrive and hastily get into the same jeep the first officer had already vacated heading towards a helicopter, Supergiant moved in quickly. Not five minutes later, she was hidden in the back of the truck, having taken over the minds of the two guards and the officer, refraining from eating their brains entirely, just enough to make them her puppets for a time.

This worked to allow her entrance into the security zone around the bunker, but the scanners there still spotted her when she tried to sneak out of the truck.

Two automated laser guns popped up from the sides of the entryway, and after a second, they opened fire. Not just on her, but on anyone in the area, sending the driver and codriver of the jeep to the ground as Supergiant ducked aside. While she wore armor, she wasn't about to let it take any hits that she could avoid. *At least these humans have a good understanding of the need for security. Kill the interloper and whoever is responsible for them being there.*

As a purple-lipped smirk crossed her face, twin pistols appeared in her hands from a holster at the small of her back, and she fired in both directions, showing that she was both ambidextrous and able to concentrate on multiple things at once. *I might enjoy using my powers more, but there is a different kind of art inherent in the expression of physical violence.*

Three guards who had been stationed at the door leading into the bunker had also opened fire on her. Unlike the vast majority of the troops her own Chitauri had faced, they were armed with energy weapons, cumbersome things that had quite large battery packs. Their power was decent, punching through the jeep Supergiant had been using as cover but she had already rolled away from it.

Supergiant's return fire did not miss. All three went down, their chests exploded from precise pistol fire. *It would appear their armor is still not worth the weight it looks to be.*

From where she had been lying on the ground, Supergiant hurled herself forward through the opening into the bunker where her latest meal had remained, holding the door into the bunker open as per her last order. But just as she did it two shots rang out, blowing the man's head apart and putting a bullet in the back of his body, causing him to fall forward out of the way of the door.

But too late. Supergiant leaped over his falling corpse, taking a glancing blow from one of the guns as it tried to traverse to follow her, but getting behind its arc of fire. Her pistols fired again and two more guards fell. Then she was in the bunker, rolling along the ground for a moment before hopping to her feet. Ahead of her was what looked like a short hallway, with several panels open along it. In each were more guns, but they weren't hooked up just yet.

Not that Supergiant was willing to take that at face value. Precise pistol shots rang out, destroying each gun before she moved forward.

Nor was she surprised when the elevator controls did not work. With a surge of strength, she wrenched one of the doors to the elevator open, finding the elevator cart wasn't there, only the shaft. With a mental shrug, she began to rappel down the side of the elevator. Another tool came out a moment later as the elevator cart came back up towards her, no doubt intending to crush her against the ceiling. A laser scalpel allowed her to cut a hole in the top of it dropping downwards.

There, she found three more guards, all of them with their guns pointing up. They tracked her as she came through the hole, hitting her armored legs and lower torso rather than her unarmored head. Two shots hit her stomach, but even there, the heavy armor weave she wore absorbed the heat of the energy bolts and deadened the impact.

Her return fire killed all three of them before her feet touched the ground, but a last bolt hit her shoulder and neck, causing both to sting something fierce. "Blast it, there is a reason why I like using my telepovore powers more than this brute force nonsense," she grumbled. "There's always a chance things can go against you."

Once more, the elevator did not allow her to communicate with it. But Supergiant easily hotwired it, opening open the control panel and connecting a small portable computer to it. The Chitauri tech easily overrode the simple halt order on the elevator and began to head downwards under her direction. She grimaced a little at the pain to her legs, but was otherwise eager for the next challenge.

Supergiant had no ability to measure how deep the elevator went into the earth, but it could not have been more than eight stories before the elevator came to a halt. As it did, Supergiant dropped two small smoke pellets. They filled the elevator room with gas. And then Supergiant leapt back up out of the hole she had made previously as the door to the elevator cart opened as they were programmed to.

Lasers and now physical bullets flashed through the opening as soon as the elevator opened, peppering the bodies of the three dead troopers there. From her hiding place back on top of the cart Supergiant through several more smoke pellets such they bounced out and into the hallway beyond, before dropping back down quickly, raising one arm to guard her head to avoid any lucky shots.

Then Supergiant was on the ground and charging out of the elevator. Able to see through the smoke herself she marked out the targets for a brief second. Then her pistols spoke, downing several more guards. Although here, most of the defenses seem to be automated turrets set into the walls and ceiling. Regardless, they were not armored enough to stop the pistols that Lord Thanos had designed for her personally.

When the smoke cleared, all the defenders who had fired at her were down, man or machine. At the far end of a short hall stood a massive hatch, the door a type that would recess into the wall when opened, adding more strength to the door than a normal door would have. To most, even if you got this far, the door would seem a immense obstacle.

But Supergiant had plumbed the depths of her initial victim's brain, savoring it like fine wine, and she had thought about ways of getting through it. *He knew how thick that door was, and to me, it is not thick enough. Still, best to add a bit of theater to this...*

With that in mind, Supergiant retreated back to some of the destroyed gun turrets that she had taken out a moment ago, and began to pull out their emergency batteries, stringing them together. With that done, she moved back over to the bunker door, and laid them on it in a small pattern. Meanwhile, as she was doing all of this in clear sight of two security cameras up above, Supergiant was also reaching out with her powers.

Supergiant preferred to use line of sight to control her targets because it gave her more dexterity with her Telepovore powers, allowing her to savor each memory or piece of information like a full course meal and because it let her create false memories to a far greater degree. But here, she wasn't looking to have a meal, only for a way past this final obstacle. Instead, she was looking to take over a mind and to give it a single order. The taste of her target's mind barely register to her as she found the mind of a low ranking human somewhere within the control room beyond, and then her own thoughts slid into his like a dagger between the ribs. *"Open the doors. Do not be seen."*

Everyone within the bunker was concentrating on what she was doing on the video screen, or still trying to give out orders to the rest of the CCP's military. This included the Mandarin, who was keeping one eye on both the small and the big picture currently. She was also giving out a few specific orders to those officers who had apparently been in contact with foreigners. For now, he would tolerate that, but their names would be known to him, and after these invaders had failed like all the others throughout China's history had, they would be punished for their disloyalty.

Even the Mandarin didn't notice as one of the security soldiers within was slowly making his way to the control panel for the door.

Outside, Supergiant put on a show, grumbling and muttering as she tried to put together her bomb, heading back to the elevator to make sure that they would not be interrupted. In this manner she helped keep the attention of the people within the bunker on her, giving her pawn more time to covertly move into position. And then, when her makeshift explosion went off, he opened the doors.

The Mandarin turned quickly at the noise of the door, shouting, "What, get that soldier away from the controls!" but too late and Mandarin raised his bejeweled hand towards the still open doorway.

Supergiant dove inward, barely dodging a hasty shot of some kind of energy beam the likes of which she hadn't seen before, a gold yellow kind of color with a very slight greenish tint to the edges. Her pistols spoke, and two more guards went down, before either could get their guns up. Even so, another killed her first pawn and hammered her side with two rounds before a return fire blew his head apart.

A second energy blast caught her this time, far more powerful than the energy weapons the Chinese had been using against her before this. The strike lifted her up, hurling Supergiant back into the wall of the command room, through two of the consoles there linking this hidden bunker to the rest of the Chinese military.

Supergiant groaned under the impact, but then rolled away from a third blast of energy, taking in her attacker as a dozen radar and communication specialists raced past her in panic. She was almost tempted to take over their minds for a second to cause more of an issue, but then had to dodge back and out of the room into the hallway beyond ducking to one side of the doorway as several more smaller blasts of energy followed her. *"Dammit, he is just barely out of my range!"*

The size of the command room had foiled her attempt to simply take over the mind of the Secretary Chairman, or whatever his official rank was the moment she entered. And now that same individual was defending himself quite well, not allowing her to close.

The Mandarin was a middle-aged man, fit, but not overly so, with a thin, sallow face expression, his face clearly showing mixed Chinese and Mongolian blood for those who could understand what they were looking for. A long flowing goatee in the ancient Chinese style along with long black hair done up in a topknot, showing white specks here and there throughout it, along with long, carefully manicured nails, normally gave him the air of an ancient emperor who had somehow time travelled to the present.

At present, his face was lined with tension and anxiety, his mouth a rictus of anger, watching as his country began to collapse. Whatever else he had ever been, the Mandarin was a patriot, and seeing China coming apart like this was horrifying.

Yet despite those obvious signs of age and concern, there was nothing wrong with the Mandarin's reaction speed. Nor his lungs as he shouted over the tumult of the fleeing operators, tone showing a certain glee at having something to take his frustrations out on. "You will not conquer here alien! China belongs to the Mandarin!"

Another blast of power came from his hands, or rather, from the rings of power that the Mandarin always wore. These were his true claim to fame, the true reason behind his rise to first power in the underworld, and then in China's political battlefield. The Mandarin had found these rings while fleeing out into the back of beyond after having been found thieving. The rings had been in a crashed alien spaceship, an alien which had looked remarkably like the ancient Chinese dragons in myth and art.

The Mandarin had killed the wounded alien, claiming the rings for his own. With them and the technology of the ship, he had carved out a criminal empire, controlling the underworld of China from one border to the other. The rings gave him knowledge of the technology, helped his mind grow to a frightening degree, and gave him command of various types of attacks, along with strengthening his

body to an incredible degree. One even made him immune to mind control, although that was not a power he was ever enthused about trying to test.

But first a run-in with the Black Widow and Hawkeye, and then his meeting with Harry had curbed his worldwide ambitions. The first two had nearly killed the Mandarin as SHIELD helped the South Koreans beat off his attempt to take over their criminal empire. The fact two seemingly unpowered people had beaten him and his people had been infuriating. As for Potter/Guardian, the fact there was real magic out there, and Potter's simple aura, had terrified the Mandarin.

For the Mandarin, taking over China had originally been set simply a step to something greater, and he had in many ways been forced to simply settle for second best. That galled him, but more than anything else, the Mandarin was a survivor. If staying to China would let him not come into conflict with the Custodes and retain control of China, that was good enough.

A blast of kinetic energy came from the Mandarin's other hand, exploding the side of the doorway where the Supergiant was taking cover. It hurled both doorway and Supergiant down the core door, but Supergiant was able to roll out of the way before she was flattened, cursing as this opened up her up for another blast of energy from the Mandarin as he remained where he had been. *Blast it, he's still out of my range! But his people aren't...*

Several of the operators have been caught in the crossfire, gunned down by either Supergiant trying to return fire or the mandarins overpowered beams, but two of them had thrown themselves to the floor Of the core door between the two combatants and were huddling there now. Reaching out with her telepovore powers, Supergiant took control of one of their minds, caused him to crawl towards where a soldier lay nearby, discarded in death by one of the original troopers.

The Mandarin continued to fire at Supergiant, but he was now watching the guards closely, much to Supergiant's chagrin. He gunned down both of the operators with short blasts of energy, then continued to fire at Supergiant himself.

It was with some chagrin of that Supergiant realized she couldn't close with the man into her power's range, and her armor was beginning to fail, the energy shield be being overcome, and the armor covering her body beginning to melt away in places. *Dammit, I suppose I will have to call in help.*

Luckily for Supergiant, a group of skimmers was in point of fact quite nearby. As she retreated back into the elevator, and then up into its shaft the Mandarin continued to fire at her, those skimmers moved into position, assaulting the exterior defenses of the complex. Most of those defenses were automated, which had contributed to the fact she faced so little in the way of defenders inside the bunker itself. And unlike the defensive guns inside the bunker, all the exterior guns were online.

Heavy machine guns and energy beam filled the sky as they fired at the incoming skimmers.

More than a dozen skimmers fell before the guns began to get knocked out of the fight one after another. Ten minutes later, the skimmers began to disgorge their infantry onto the ground while others began to patrol the area, seeing off several dozen attack helicopters as they tried to move in on the attackers.

Before the Chitauri could enter the bunker in strength however, the Phoenix arrived.

Searing claws of telekinetic force dealt with the skimmers as if they were so many gnats. A second later, the infantry were similarly dealt with, hurled away or simply crushed into the ground in groups of telekinetic energy. A second later, Jen entered the bunker, only to run right into Supergiant as she came out of the elevator shaft.

Supergiant instantly reacted, several decades worth of experience allowing her to use her telepathic powers before Jean could, Jean having been unaware of her presence, as that too was part of Supergiant's telepovore powers, hiding her from other telepaths like the predator she was. When she launched her attack, it didn't work.

It should have. The Phoenix avatar in front of her was not the first telepath that Supergiant had fought. And thanks to the work that had been done on her powers by Lord Thanos, she was always able to get that first all important blow in if she was in range. Indeed, when attacking telepaths was the only time Supergiant really saw the Astral Plane, as her ability let her bypass it to eat the minds of her victims directly.

Telepaths however were not only connected to the Astral Plane, but conscious enough to feel and even fight her assault on their minds. It was at times a lengthy process, but the battle always started and ended the same way. First, Supergiant found her mental projection pulled into the Astral Plane, sometimes standing touching the other telepath's, her fingers long tendrils burrowing into the projection of her victim. No matter how they screamed, the projection could never get away, and soon, it would fade, dissipating into Supergiant's memory by delicious memory.

But this time, she ran into something she hadn't ever before. Automatic telepathic defenses that were not constructed like a shield which her touch would've simply burrowed through, but mental constructs given near-life, the belsham-trees that Jean had long ago created under Harry's tutelage in Occlumency.

Jean reeled as the telepathic probe slammed into those defenses, coming up almost from the 'ground' of the Astral plane, tentacle-like, but lined with barbs and mouths, able to rent and feed at the same time trying to burrow through her defenses only to be grabbed in turn by the tentacles of her Belsham trees.

They held and Supergiant reeled backwards shocked. And then as her Astral form faded, the telepovore not having the strength to maintain that projection. A second later, Jean's eyes exploded with power and she snarled, "My turn!" An instant later, her own telepathic assault washed over the astral plane and into Supergiant with all the force of an exploding nova.

"NOARRGHH..." Supergiant tried to fight back, but couldn't, nowhere near powerful enough.

A second later, she fell, her mind literally turned into mush under the impact of Jean's telepathic assault. A second later, Jean, being in no mind to take chances, reached out telekinetically and snapped the woman's neck before tearing her heart out of her chest. While the suit of armor weave she had been wearing had stopped any energy or impact related damage before, but Jean's power easily overwhelmed it, tossing the alien's heart against the far wall of the tunnel.

Leaving the blue skinned alien's corpse there on the ground, Jean moved on, floating down the elevator shaft.

Her shield flared as a strike from within lanced up at her, and she shouted, "I am the Phoenix! I just dealt with your attacker, Mandarin. I'm assuming you're the Mandarin anyway. That energy bold matched the information we have on those rings of powers of yours."

The fire below stopped for a moment, then the Mandarin's voice spoke. "And I am simply to assume that you will not use the opportunity this alien invasion has granted you to, shall we say, create a regime change here in China? We did not ask for help and you Americans tend to want to do that whenever you think you can get away with it."

"The carnage and chaos spread across China says you need the help," Jean retorted, fighting the urge to reach out mentally to the man and do what she had done to Supergiant above. *It would be wrong, even if I doubt that one ring of his could stop me from doing it.* Instead, she continued her way down, alighting in the elevator and staring at the door where the Mandarin stood, backing away quickly.

"Come no closer American!"

"I actually don't have an American citizenship anymore, but I understand what you're trying to say, you paranoid bastard," Jean said, her tone almost light and jocular for a second despite her taunts, before she shook her head as she stared across the intervening distance at the man. "And I'm not going to stand here and shout at you, let me come within at least speaking distance. And if you think that you would be safer there than you are now, you should probably think again. Or maybe just outright fire your spies."

The Mandarin snarled a bit, but he had long since gotten used to the fact that he was in no way the biggest dog on the yard, even as head of China. With a curt gesture he allowed Jean to come closer without firing on her, although several of his rings did twitch a bit on his fingers.

"I don't like you either," Jean retorted to that look, shaking her head. "In fact, a large portion of my mind wants to turn you into a torch right now. But we need to work together to close the portal and shut down the rest of the invaders. I can't be everywhere at once, and even with my telepathic powers I can't spread out my powers on such a wide range. So get off your high horse, stop seeing everyone not Chinese as an enemy, and let's get a move on."

"Never become a politician, you would no doubt cause heart attacks across the globe," the Mandarin muttered, before shaking his head and leading the way back into the control room. Much of it had been destroyed, but the main screen across from the entryway was still in relatively one-piece, and still gaining information from elsewhere in China. With Jean relaying what Pinoptes could, the Mandarin began to piece together the Chinese high command once more. He even called off the ongoing conflict around Taiwan.

Not, Jean thought internally, that there was much of that force left. While the carrier group there had taken losses, with the help of Taiwan and the bases on {}, they had chewed up every force that China had sent out into the Formosa Straits.

"That was a good gesture on your part," Jean allowed, shaking her head a bit as they turned their attention back to China, the attempt to be diplomatic leaving a bad taste in her mouth. "And now, you need to get in touch with North Korea and tell them that Big Brother is very angry with them right now."

The Mandarin actually snorted in laughter at that, before something else on the screen caught Jean's eye. At the same time Pinoptes shouted warning. "Phoenix! The Chinese have just launched nuclear weapons... At a site within their own borders. It's aimed at the portal!"

Jean's eyes widened, and she whirled to look at the Mandarin shouting, "What have you done! Didn't you hear me when I said I'd..."

"I have done what needs to be done! The people of China are no strangers to sacrifice. If I have to create a radioactive wasteland around that portal in order to close it and make sure no further aliens come through, the thousands of lives that takes will be a small price to pay in the great scheme of things." The Mandarin waved her off, staring at the screen as it changed to watch the trajectory of the missiles rather than the overall conflict across China. "You forget the Chitauri have already done a very good job of killing my people in that area. If more than one out of every ten civilians in the area that would be impacted by a nuclear explosion is still alive I will be surprised."

"That might be, but the Chitauri have stopped this kind of thing before. The portal in Paris and the portal in Russia were both..." Jean began, before things changed once more and the image on the screen caused her words to stumble to a halt.

The Mandarin had not only worked on trying to raise the technological level of China's military forces and create a better system of quality control, but also revamping their internal security. And part of that security force was a series of drones, much like the even smaller ones that the orbital drop Marines were now being given for in combat use. These drones, which had been created in groups of a hundred, had been handed over to the local police, and were normally used to spy on China's own citizens.

And in times of war, the Mandarin could override the local controllers, using these drones as he saw fit. Several dozen of them had been sent towards the portal when the Mandarin started to piece together what was going on. Now, they were supposed to serve to watch and see what happened right up until the nuclear weapons hit.

Now, Jean watched in horror no less than what she had felt a moment ago at the news of the nukes as she watched Thanos, the Mad Titan, come through the portal. He was sitting on some kind of floating throne, and seemed to hover in the air for a moment, his eyes, glowing like small dwarf stars even through the video, turning this way and that before seemingly staring in one particular direction.

"Call the nukes off!" She shouted. "Those things won't..."

But it was too late. Thanos was already aware of the incoming ICBMs. She watched as Thanos tapped at his throne's armrests a few times, and then, the information displayed on another screen changed. That console was following the ICBMs via local radar. And within a few seconds, the trajectory of the missiles instantly began to change. And as Jean and the others in the command center watched, the trajectory of each rocket shifted toward where a different nearby city lay.

*Wh... no way Thanos was able to target each of those cities so quickly! Some kind of automated targeting device, or something more?* Desperately, Jean set aside that mystery and closed her eyes, raising her hands above her head. Her aura of the Phoenix appeared once more, muted but still lighting up the area around her in red and orange reflected glory, causing the Mandarin and several others to back away.



For a second his rings glimmered, but he paused, watching her stare at the console showing the flight of the ICBMs. Realizing what was going on, the Mandarin ordered the drone controllers to shift their control to any other drones in the area, trying to follow the missile, trying to give Jean a visual to better concentrate on using her powers long range.

But this wasn't like using the sensors Pinoptes had given her access to so Jean could look down from on high as she had done during the Eurasian War. This was much harder, and there were so many minds nearby and between her and the target that concentrating on finding something that didn't have a mind was far harder.

Yet even so, despite the distance in her earlier words, she was still able to grab three of the five missiles that the Mandarin had launched at the portal out of the air. All three of them were turned upward, blasting up high into the sky and beyond, held now by her powers rather than being directed by their rockets.

But the other two evaded her best efforts. And both of them found homes in {look up nearby cities}.

Nuclear clouds rose from both {above} as China's own nuclear devices were turned against it. And the Mandarin and his officers stared in horror at what he had wrought.

Slumping to the side, Jean had to shake her head several times to recover herself. That had taken a lot of concentration, reminding her in many ways of the savage telepathic battles that had been waged during the Asgardian war. Visuals, good ones without any kind of break, were immensely necessary to use telekinetic powers on anything long range. *Damn it! How... how many millions just...*

Anger rising in her mind, Jean recovered quickly, and she snarled at the Mandarin. "You, you did this! And when this is all over, your people will know the truth, that you were willing to sacrifice hundreds of thousands of them to close that portal, and that it was your fault that **millions** just died! If I were you, I would probably seek asylum in some other country. I rather doubt the mob will have any pity for you."

The Mandarin seemed to gather himself, but his tone was lacking in energy, and his shoulders slumped a bit as he answered, giving his words the lie they were. "You, you make the mistake of many throughout history. You believe a hard truth will be believed over a soft lie chosen to fit into the worldviews of those targeted. Regardless of whatever else happens, the Chinese people will never turn on me. Nor would I ever let myself fall so low as to need to throw myself on the largess of others."

"You just keep telling yourself that," Jean drawled, shaking her head and turning towards the entrance. "Meanwhile, I'm going to go out and handle the real problem." Moments later, she was in the air over the Mandarin's command post, racing towards Thanos and the portal. "Pinoptes, Dennis, if you haven't already, tell the others: Thanos is here. I'm going to do what I can but I would really like some emerald-eyed help right about now."

It took her a little over an hour to cross from where the Mandarin's bunker was and where the portal lay. In that time, Thanos had seemingly done nothing, content to simply sit there, directing the forces as they came through the portal and giving out a stream of constant orders, possibly directing troops through the other portal elsewhere on Earth. The forces around the portal quickly built up under his direction. Several hundred Rippers, an equal amount of the manta ray things, divisions of skimmers and even more infantry, finishing off any human within several dozen miles of the portal.

To any regular army, that would have seemed a formidable army. Yet all of that, it was but a sideshow to the real threat. The threat of Thanos, and Jean knew it.

Jean was barely within sight of Thanos before he became aware of her, and stood up from his throne, stretching his arms out to either side before crossing them across his chest, his glowing white eyes lighting up with fire for a moment. Then, as Jean's soared towards him, he gave out a single order unheard through the wind to her, but a shield of power enveloped him.

Phoenix's initial attack struck, with all the force of several nukes going off all at once, condensed and directed onto a single target. Heat and Telepathic energy bloomed from the point of impact, spreading out. This consumed much of the forces around the portal. It even flared back into the portal, acting almost like a solar flare, the heat and energy released reaching into the mustering zone and slaying thousands, hundreds of thousands of Chitauri on both sides while the sound of the impact between the shield around Thanos and his throne and the Phoenix's power also blasted outward, covering an even wider area.

It was only because Thanos had taken the time to bury the actual beacon underground and covered it with several layers of ablative armor that allowed the portal to stay open for now.

Jean strove against the shield for time, and then it abruptly went down and she was forced to dodge as Thanos took her under fire, energies flashing through the space she previously occupied, before coming back again as she tried to dodge once more. And then, the battle was on, Thanos leapt off of his throne, power cosmic coalescing around his hands as he batted aside her attacks while Jean raged at him, her Phoenix Form all around her, making her look for all the world like a bird of prey.

**OOOOOO**

After Thanos left, the entire battle around the main beacon changed, and not for the better for the Chitauri. Garm was badly wounded by Thanos, and Hela had been forced to retreat entirely, while Thor had been knocked unconscious. But Balder, Hogun and the rest of the Asgardian forces were relatively uninjured. This in turn meant that the attacking Chitauri were left to face a group of individuals who could shrug off their infantry's weaponry, cross dozens of leagues with relative ease even in this terrain or simply outright fly while ignoring the skimmers. Only the Rippers still in the area could hurt them, and some of the Asgardians did fall back, injured.

But Thanos hadn't realized how much of the air force that had defended the main portal had been caught up in the catastrophic conflict he had been faced with against first Fenris and then Thor upon his arrival. The entire area from where the battle had occurred to within four miles of where the beacon was now secured behind heavy steel and concrete bunkers had been practically flattened, and denuded of any Chitauri forces. Unlike the Asgardians not even the Rippers had been able to weather the backlash of the competing powers.

Ebony did his best, but even as powerful a telekinetic as he could only truly concentrate on a set number of things at once. And the Asgardians had been quick to adopt Hela's use of spells or other methods to block their ears. Only a few times was he able to turn them against one another through use of his voice, but each time it was fleeting.

He had, however, some decent sub-commanders available via the Chitauri. They to reform the defenses he had been put in charge of, the defense of the single most important portal on the planet. Even as reports came to Ebony that the portals in Washington, Paris and Russia had been shut down, that the portal in China had been subjected to massive amounts of kinetic impact and heat, he knew he had to keep this portal open.

Throughout dozens of miles, the Chitauri infantry and ground based troopers dug in. The anti-air guns could at least sting and slow the Asgardians, and with Ebony using his power on any group in the open, that allowed the rippers to do some damage. The Skimmers, Death Claws and infantry more disrupted and annoyed the Asgardians, but even that helped.

Balder led the Asgardians now. Well... to be fair, Balder had led the Asgardians before this too. His brother Thor was not a leader of men in terms of tactics or strategy, rather in example. Balder organized his folk into groups of four, moving everywhere probing into the defenses, slaughtering the Chitauri so much their green blood began to stain the mountains. Two of each group had a magical attack, such as Njord's wind or the arrows of the Valkyrie to fight off the aerial invaders, while the other two concentrated on closing with the enemy.

All of the Valkyries had lost their horses by this point. It turned out their normal immunity to physical weapons did not extend to backwashes of Power Cosmic and magical energies mixed together.

Regardless, except for numbers, all the advantages lay with the Asgardians, bar Ebony's telekinetic powers, which few of them could defend against. For a moment, with the reinforcements continually reinforcing the Chitauri, the battle seesawed in both directions. The Chitauri's losses mounted, but the Asgardians made no headway.

Both sides had forgotten the greater strategic picture. For one thing, the battle in Russia was slowly dying down. That would eventually free the Asgardians under Baldur to join their fellows here. With the other portals closed, the main beacon and it's far larger portal was now the sole strategic target remaining. The Chitauri in Paris and Washington DC would eventually be ground under by the Custodes and the locals defenders.

Even closer to hand though, Ebony had been forced to recall the skimmers sent out to disrupt the neighboring country's military response.

And as the Asgardians slowly began to push him, this had a much faster impact than the reinforcements coming down from Russia.

Balder looked up in the sky as he heard the sounds of the sound barrier breaking in numerous directions. As he saw the cause, the Shining One began to smile. The aerial units humans had arrived. *I have seen them in pictures in my trips to Asgard, and while he will always see one-on-one combat as the greatest test of a man, there is something to be said for the humans creations, they looked magnificent in many ways. It is good to see them here though. Perhaps they will let us break this bloody stalemate.*

The fighters arriving were mostly F-16s, American made and sold to its allies, crewed by Americans, Indians, and Nepalese. It was an ad hoc force in many ways, but it was well-led by the same admiral who had headed the Balkan front of the Eurasian War.

Sidewinders and other missiles flashed from almost over the horizon to even Balder's eyes, a mass missile launch into the remaining defensive envelope. Those missiles were locked onto various Rippers, Death Claws, and points on the ground, with several being sent toward the bunker the Chitauri had created to defend the beacon.

Snarling, Ebony knew he had to choose where to exert his powers. Let the missiles hit and therefore further deplete his remaining units, possibly endangering the beacon. Or turn his attention away from the Asgardians.

He chose to smash the first wave of air units. More than four wings of human jetfighters died as Ebony seemed to reach out with his telekinetic powers and grab each of them slamming them into one another or hurling them down to crash into the remains of the mountain range below them. Similarly, the missiles were blasted out of the air.

And as he feared, the Asgardians took advantage of his lapse. "Foreword! Leap ahead and close with them!" Balder bellowed gesturing to make certain his orders got through. Many of the Asgardians were using magic or, in many cases, just things stuck in their ear – bits or rock, head coverings pulled down, and so forth. So gestures were necessary. Even Balder's general immunity to being hurt could be bypassed by such an insidious type of mind control.

Skadi was the first act. Now free of the paralysis that Ebony had been holding she and her team in, Skadi leaped up and over a small hill that had once been part of a massive mountain, racing forward and trying to close with the distant bunker holding the beacon. Legs pumping faster than any human sprinter could've moved, she crossed more than four leagues in an instant.

Balder and several other Asgardians passed her quickly, being more powerful physically than she was. Unlike Skadi, Balder, Hogun and Fandral could ignore all but Ripper strikes, and Balder could ignore even those. Only Ebony's telekinetic powers could bother him, and not actually hurt him, but simply continually throw him away from the sight of the battle.

By the time Ebony turned his attention to the Asgardians he could see out in the open, they had reached halfway to the last battleline. He snarled as he picked them up once more. His inability to simply crush or otherwise hurt many of them or get them to hear his voice infuriated Ebony, but he could still hurl them far away once again, and began to do so one after another.

Right up until Thor, groggy but recovered somewhat from his injuries done by Thanos, raised himself up from the ground at the bottom of the crater his impact had caused into a mountain. Still without his hammer, he snarled, and charged forward, calling it to him. The hammer, which Thanos had buried in the ground during their brief battle, tore its way out of the ground. Seeing it coming, Thor laughed boisterously and charged towards a point near where he could see

Ebony Maw hovering in the air high above a mountain side. “Just wait little man, my hammer will make a nail of you yet!”

Only Skadi realized the danger this represented, and her eyes widened. “By Odin’s hairy backside, no!” But held in place by Ebony’s power, she could do nothing but shout. For she had realized that Thor hadn’t heard about the alien leader’s secondary power.

Grinning triumphantly, Ebony flew down, dodging Thor’s hammer as it sped back into his hand, then closed with the thunderer. Before Thor could swing at him, new manacles of telekinetic energy wove around him, slowing the man down. Like Garm, Fenrir and Balder, those bonds could not keep him still entirely, and Thor immediately began to overcome Ebony’s power. But that was enough. “Look at you, so certain, so powerful, enjoying this violence so much! Why not enjoy it more, enjoy it to your heart’s desire. Come now, enjoy it! Enjoy subsuming to my will, your joy is my joy, my will is your will...”

By the time he finished speaking, Ebony’s insidious persuasiveness worked its wonder.

As the other Asgardians watched on in horror, Thor turned and launched towards a group of nearby Asgardians, Dagur, Bragi and Vali. Dagur cried out in agony as he was smashed aside by a blow that lifted him up and sent him hurling away. Bragi was smashed to the ground, his armored chest dented and ribs broken from a blow from Mjolnir. Vali’s blade shattered at a second strike, but he was able to duck away, shouting, “Thor! Blast your berserker nature, this is not the time to be unable to tell friend from foe!”

For a few moments, Thor rampaged and Ebony pressed his advantage. Then Fenrir howled.

He had been knocked unconscious earlier by Thanos, and even now, he couldn’t see out of one eye, so swollen was it. He was also limping badly. But he was still the beast of Ragnarök. And he barreled forward, howling, “If thou wish to fight Thunderer, I will give you all the fight you can handle!”

The crash between them once more echoed throughout the Himalayas, sending hundreds of tons of rock, snow, and dirt cascading away, while elsewhere more avalanches occurred, burying Chitauri and Asgardian alike. Although the Asgardians could at least pull themselves out. Skimmers were knocked out of the air by the backwash and Ebony nearly lost control of his telekinesis to the point where he had to scramble to catch himself a mere hundred feet above the ground.

Balder hastily gestured to Hoenir, motioning with his free hand as if he was covering his ear. Hoenir, who had a moment ago been saved by Hogun from a manic Thor, nodded, and then gestured. The god of silence could use Seidr in limited amounts, specifically due to his purview as the god of silence and contemplation. He could create areas of silence or completely silence the sound around an individual if need be. Balder thanked his lucky stars, and Odin, that he had been assigned to Balder’s attack force.

With the Shining One and the others rushing forward once more, and more human jetfighters arriving, Hoenir turned aside. His mouth opened but no sound came forth. Instead a nearly unseen ball of magic appeared there, floating forward toward where Fenrir and Thor strained against one another. It struck and the sounds around them disappeared. That would keep Ebony from trying to control either of them.

After recovering from his near fatal crash, Ebony had turned his attention to the charging Asgardians. Many of the Chitauri units on the ground between them and the bunker created around the main beacon had been smashed off their feet, crushed or buried by debris. Several of the automated guns still remained, but none were powerful enough to do more than knock an Asgardian off his or her feet.

Once more, as human jetfighters closed and launched more air to land missiles, Ebony was forced to try and shift his attention from one group of foes to another.

This group of American, Indian, and now even German and other nations Jets were coming in. It had taken them a while to put together permission not pass through one another's airspace and refuel when they arrived.

But they were coming in hot now, eager to take advantage of the destruction that had a part of the interior of the defenders.

Ebony was finding himself pulled in too many directions at once, he swatted rockets out of midair, but this allowed Thor to launch another attack at him. He stopped the Asgardians in their tracks among the defenders down below, letting one of them get so badly injured by a series of Ripper strikes that she was forced to retreat entirely, literally burying herself under a group bunch of rubble to hide from further fire.

But this in turn meant the humans could retreat without being attacked. And a moment later, their missiles landed, smashing through the last remaining gun turrets and several of the rippers were smashed out of the air.

"Curse you I will not fail my master, I will not!" Ebony roared, trying to reach out to the retreating jets and keep the Asgardians in place, cursing about the fact the Death Claws had failed so miserably. That unit had proven susceptible to sonic shock from the earlier battles between Thanos, Fenrir and Hela. Every one Ebony had seen since was down now, and without them and the rest of the damage done, his anti-air defenses were not up to the task.

But this time, the humans had decided to attack from more than one direction. Another wing of makeshift strike fighters flashed in from the direction of the Bay of Bengal, another carrier group's worth. Not as many as in the previous strike, but still more than sixty planes, all loaded for land-based assault.

“RAGGGHH!!” Ebony roared, about to reach out to them before Balder, Frandral and several other Asgardians broke their telekinetic bonds. He turned in that direction, hastily redoing them, before his eyes widened. “NO!”

The fighters closed again and now launched anti-ground ordinance down into his defenses and at the Rippers and Skimmers still coming through the portal. With no defenders remaining to defend against them, the missiles streaked in, destroying the reinforcements as they came and the last land-based defenses. Two even struck the bunker around the beacon. And unlike the last human force, these fighters were accompanied by cruise missiles fired by their accompanying ships.

Ebony desperately twitched his attention in that direction, stopping several of the missiles in place, targeting the larger ones that had seemingly been fired from well away to coincide with this fighters strike. And he succeeded. Even as blood began to drip from his nose and his fingers twitched, every missile entering his area of control froze in midair.

Yet in doing so, he released the Asgardians.

Near the bunker, Balder saw it, the damaged bunker. “THERE!!!”

It was a sign of how much time had passed that most of his fellows heard his words, the bits of flotsam filling their ears having long since fallen out. If Ebony had been able to notice that, he might well have been able to take advantage of it. But as it was, he couldn’t and Fandral was in position to do something about it. The somewhat effete warrior hurled himself forward, and before Ebony could stop him, his sword smashed into the side of the already damaged bunker.

The concrete shattered at the point of impact, bits falling away, and even as Fandral found himself hurled away, Skadi fired an arrow into the gap that appeared there. Her enchanted arrow struck with all the force of a tank round, and the device exploded.

Above, the portal winked out, leaving behind a bright blue sky as if it had never been there. The remains of five rippers who had been cut in half anyway, and were currently falling toward the ground, trailing blood and gore behind them gave that image the lie. But the reality was far worse for the Chitauri.

Skadi barely had a few seconds to feel some joy before Ebony’s telekinetic grab picked him up and hurled him into several of her fellows. They wound up in one large, bruised ball, and he roared as he hurled them up towards the human fighters. “**Damn you!**”

That was the last thing Ebony did. For Thor had finally broken out of his mental domination.

“No, damn thee and thy cowardly tactics, alien!” Thor bellowed, raising his hammer and lashing up towards him with Mjolnir.

A blast of lightning came from the hammer, rushing up towards and slamming into Ebony. He screamed as the heat and electrical energies of the lightning fried his body, sending him falling toward the ground. He was still alive, and was able to right himself.

But the pain of it was such that he didn't even notice a series of Indian jet fighters closing in on his position. All three of them opened fire with machine guns, tearing Ebony into pieces.

The main portal, the one connected to the single most important beacon was gone, and with it, the portal China also closed.

**OOOOOOO**

Harry Potter came back into his physical body once more, his face slowly shifting from the snarl of rage and anger it had held as he fought Krakkan. And as he became aware of the physical world around him, the crystal under his hand, the crystal which had connected directly to Krakkan and his realm, began to turn to dust in his hand. For just a moment, Harry clung to there, shivering and shaking as the magic taken from the ancient primordial god and repurposed according to the ritual's design finished... changing him.

Not that he really had much time to figure out how those changes had shown themselves beyond the obvious. "Huh... I think I'm at least... a foot taller or so?" Shaking that thought off, Harry pushed his way out of the array, stumbling for a few moments before he got his feet under him.

His hands shook as he moved towards the door, but by the time he reached the door into the portion of the configured Room of Requirement that he had used for this great undertaking, Harry was back to normal.

Ten paces later, his voice boomed out for the first time since he came back to himself, and Harry idly noted that it sounded deeper, stronger. "Dennis, I need a sitrep. How are we doing?"

"Overall, I think we are doing relatively well, although it's cost us. Storm is utterly exhausted from teleporting the civilians out of Washington and then Paris even with chugging Pepper Up potions like they were water. Fighting is still going on in both of those cities and in the Himalayas, but the main battle has shifted into China. It's the only battlefield that is still in doubt, and it's thanks to Thanos. He took the field several hours ago. He basically crushed Hela's team. All of them were pulled out via emergency array. He held the Asgardians, even Thor, back too before shifting to China."

"Then I'm heading to China," Harry announced firmly. "The rest of the custodes have already stopped this invasion. It will be up to me to crush the mind behind it before he can either retreat or cost us more than we've already lost."

"Then I suggest you move fast, sir," Dennis responded, his voice somewhat strained. He was in communication with Pinoptes had had been constantly since this invasion began. And currently, the AI was in turn feeding him data taken from the Chinese spy drones the Mandarin had



designed. Many of whom had moved back into the area around the portal after the initial clash between Jean and Thanos. "Jean's fighting Thanos right now, and it isn't going well."

OOOOOOO

Truthfully speaking, Jean Grey should have been more than a match for Thanos. Mad Titan or no, Jean wielded the Phoenix Force, the primordial force of life and rebirth in the galaxy. That was a level of power that put her on same plane as Galactus, Greater Deities and the Externals.

However, there were a few problems. One, despite her unique connection with the Phoenix Force, Jean Grey herself was still only human. There was a severe limit to how much of her power she could use at any one time without burning away her physical body.

For another, unlike Galactus, Thanos had known he would face an Avatar of what his people had called the Everfire. And he had sufficient technology to do something about it. Just as his throne's shields could absorb or redirect various types of energy, magical kinetic and so forth, so too could his throne absorb the telekinetic force that Jean exerted. Although it was a near-run thing despite his preparations.

Thanos grimaced as he fought the urge to crouch or protect himself from the waves of energy crashing over the shield his throne's AI had erected. "Throne, estimate how long until the shield's reach critical failure."

"Four minutes and counting. Eenemy unit seems to be able to output energy exceeding that of a solar flair every five seconds. Observation: Such energy would sear this planet twice over if released. Death total..."

"Enough. Unimportant at present. Are you absorbing or simply enduring the majorityYYY!!" Thanos grimaced as a blast of TK energy crashed up from below this time. As the female zoomed by Thanos tried to return fire, only for his shots to go wide. The Avatar was fast and while he was now actively blocking any intrusions into his mind after the earlier assault from the other human female, she seemed to somehow be able to read his shots despite that.

Another blast rocked the throne, and Thanos reached for a small locker built into the floor of his hover throne. Inside was a bracelet. Quickly he put it on the wrist of his one flesh and blood hand, watching as the metal of it shifted, spreading out over his hand. He grimaced as a feeling washed over his hand and wrist, then when his AI answered once more, ordered, "Release the absorbed energy on my command."

"Warning: absorbed energy is only 39.9999995% of the total energy striking the shield. More refinement of the energy wave algorithm is needed for full usage," the AI warned. "Further uses of the shield will result in total material degradation of the absorption mechanism in..."

"Do it," Thanos ordered.

The already blasted out, seared area around them, which by this point had grown to stretch from horizon to horizon, was subjected to another burst of ravaging energy. This time it flashed out from the shield that Thanos' throne had put up. It went out in a globe, above, around and down, and Jean could not dodge it. Instead, she was forced to protect herself in turn. The moment the somewhat weak wave of kinetic energy ended, she lashed out again, a raw blast of telekinetic power from directly above the hovering throne.

Thanos responded this time with the arm now encased in the metal gauntlet. The energy blast in question was a dark, almost sickly looking green. In fact, Jean's eyes widened as it reminded Jean strongly of a spell Harry had described to her once, the Arvada Kedavra.

Perhaps it was because of that memory that instead of trying to just block the strike Jean dodged, bobbing to one side in midair. The greenish beam flashed over her shoulder, only to be joined by several more.

And as one came close, disrupting Jean's own attacks, she watched as the greenish beam cut through her aura like a hot knife through butter. "What the..."

Thanos sent out another purple beam of power from his other hand, hitting Jean's weakened shield with pinpoint accuracy, forcing her away. She flew higher into the air, trying to use the sun to blind her opponent for a second before sending out another series of attacks down at Thanos. *That shield can't last forever, you ass-FUCK!*

The sun did not blind Thanos at all. He had stared unblinking into supernovas. This was nothing in comparison.

Jean should have been well above where Thanos could see her, hidden both in the sun and the Phoenix Form which enveloped her. Normally Jean would be in the center or the head in that form, but she had instead shifted it around so she was in one of its wings. Yet Thanos was still able to strike the edge of the Phoenix Form with ease.

While Thanos' regular purple rays of energy were absorbed or ignored, the green bolts ate straight through. Jean yelped and was forced to dodge, but one nicked her arm even so, having passed entirely through her Phoenix Form. "FUCK!!" she howled in pain, feeling as if something had reached in and pulled something out of her just then. "What the hell!?"

Thanos smirked as he watched the telekinetic form surrounding the human female fall apart, and then kept firing. "Throne, the Death Energy Weapons system seems to work. Prepare the secondary and tertiary weapons systems."

"Preparing. Warning: there is a 90% chance that overuse of Death Energy by the living will be hazardous to even the health of the owner."

"That is within my own calculations." The throne was rocked by another blast from the side, and Thanos grimaced slightly at how quickly the female had recovered. *And she is now keeping her distance even more. If I cannot close, even with my throne to aid me, I will lose this battle. I*

*have more strength physically but distance hampers my offensive punch more than I had anticipated against this Avatar.*

“Warning! Shield overload imminent. Energy wave absorption is failing. 28% impairment... 29% impairment...”

“Teleport, now!” Thanos ordered, and his AI, reading his mind to a certain degree via a chip Thanos had installed in his brain, did so.

Jean had barely a second to react before the throne appeared to one side of her. This time Thanos’ green energy beams struck out first, sizzling through Jean’s defenses. She tried to fight back, but another near miss tore at her mental control, and for a second she floundered.

“Fire weapons system three,” Thanos ordered.

From the front of the throne’s platform two large webs of green energy flew out towards Jean.

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

“Warning, absorption system impaired 47%.” The AI droned.

The web-like form of the greenish energy seemingly did not travel as fast as the plasma-like bolts did, and Jean was able to dodge them relatively easily at range. But her defenses were only slowly reforming, and Jean could sense some kind of disconnect between her powers and herself. Something seemed to be disrupting her ability to use her powers. *I can’t use my telepathy on him, I can’t get through his natural defenses, and now I’m having trouble with my telekinetic powers!*

For just a moment, Jean’s mental avatar zoomed out past her mental defenses into the greater Astral Realm surging forward towards Thanos’ presence there. Here on this realm, most people’s minds were unformed blobs, more resembling gas or something similar. Wizards like Steven were shown by a pair of floating eyes, which became aware of those around them, but were slow to respond to assaults on this plane simply because they had to use spells to do so. Another telepath like Charles or Emma would have their own constructed forms, like Emma’s Diamond avatar, or the godlike image that Charles evoked.

Thanos was built somewhat on the lines of the last one. Here in the astral realm he was even larger, even more imposing looking, a giant statue made out of purple, dark green and orange energy. But while its eyes were open and staring, the statue was immobile, meaning he could not reach out and interact with the Astral Plane under his own power. But in turn, Jean’s own attacks on this realm didn’t do anything.

Jean was one of the most powerful telepaths in known space, both on Earth and elsewhere. But such was the power of Thanos' mind that she could not overcome its natural defenses.

Then Jean's attention was back in her physical body as she dodged and ducked aside. By this point she was below the hovering throne of Thanos, which was not a pleasant place to be. Every time she tried to remain directly underneath, it would shift, letting Thanos take her under fire.

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

Looking in that direction, Jean saw that troops were still coming through. At this point they were mainly skimmers and Rippers, but that was still enough to annoy. The rippers launched attacks at Jean, which now, in her somewhat weakened state, she had to dodge rather than simply take on her telekinetic aura shield. A series of blasts wiped out the Rippers, and to Thanos' annoyance, shown by a loud grunt of irritation, did not distract Jean's attention from him. But he was still able to keep her from regaining any of her previous altitude.

For a few moments, Thanos used his throne's maneuverability, which, despite its shape, could move like a Chitauri skimmer, to batter Jean from on high, forcing her to play a deadly game of cat and mouse to avoid any further hits from the greenish energy. Another green energy weapon, this time something like a shotgun fired down from the sides of the throne's platform.

Again and again Jean was forced to dodge rather than attack, allowing further skimmers and rippers out of the portal. But Jean no longer could afford to care, instead concentrating on hammering Thanos and his throne.

Neither of them could gain an edge despite Thanos having the height advantage, but Jean still had a power advantage. Even though the throne released the absorbed kinetic energy, that aspect of its shield continued to fade until it failed utterly.

The next time Jean launched a massive attack, the attack blew backwards away from the shield, enveloping the entire area once more, wiping out the Chitauri units still in the area, turning even the rippers into large piles of molten metal and seared flesh.

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

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

"AYEEEEEEEE!!!!" Jean screamed, losing all control of her powers for a moment as she felt pain unlike anything she had ever felt before. It was like her very vitality and her connection to her powers had both taken a major hit.

She fell through the air, with Thanos following on his throne, blasting her now with his original purple rays of energy. But just before she would have hit the cracked ground below them, Jean recovered. A shield of telekinetic energy appeared all around her, and this time, it was a simple sphere, with none of the reddish energy from her connection to the Phoenix Force. Ducking to one side, and flying along Thanos's right flank in an effort to turn him, she fired a blast of telekinetic energy up at him.

This time, it got through, and Thanos grimaced as he was blasted off his feet into his throne. "AI, raise the shields!"

"Negative. Shield unit has been badly damaged in the destruction of the Energy Wave Absorption system. Taking evasive action."

Growling, Thanos moved to his feet, still somewhat pleased by how this had gone. *A few more strikes from the necrotic energy bolts and the Avatar should be cut off entirely from the source of her power. With that done, I can close and finish her.* "Continue taking evasive action for now. Look to get closer if possible." *At range, she still has an advantage.*

The battle spiraled out from where it had begun, raining death and destruction in every direction over hundreds of miles as both sides now tried to dodge more than strike at one another. The landscape paid for this, but so too did Thanos' throne. Durable though the metal it was made out of was, as Jean's assaults continued it began to fail, segments blasted off, others melting.

Then they began to fly over an area still inhabited by living humans. Many were fleeing the destruction had wrought elsewhere, but the original inhabitants were still around, not having known they were in any great danger, this area somehow being overlooked by the skimmers that Super Giant had ordered to spread chaos.

Seeing this, Thanos smiled, and issued a single order. "Fire weapons down into the ground with as wide an area as possible. Kill the humans."

"Acknowledged."

From the bottom of the throne, several panels opened. More than a few of them were fused shut, or their contents had been destroyed in the battle so far. But there were still a few missile launchers a few energy weapons that began to fire.

Jean snarled as she spread out her telekinetic energy once more, defending the locals. "FUCK! God damn it, of course this asshole would go for the civilians!"

"You humans, so predictable." Thanos snorted in humor. Renewing his attacks on Jean, he ordered the throne to ascend into the air, the better to spread the destruction. He knew now it was only a matter of time until Jean's power wore down. "It is almost as if you have no idea of the term, sacrifice."

“Funny how it’s always the people who don’t lose anything that talk about sacrifice!” Jean snarled, Thanos words carrying to her over the wind. And then she felt her connection to the Phoenix Force renew itself. But she kept from using it just yet. *Better to keep from doing so until I can really hurt him.*

Thanos allowed himself a smile of victory as his attacks started to wear the avatar down. No longer could she see use the normal form she had chosen to express her mistress’s powers. And while his gathered necrotic energy weapons were slowly losing charge, they were still doing their job.

Thanos was a little premature.

The throne slowed for a moment, and that was all Jean needed. A single attack flashed up from her form, fiery and concentrated with all the power her natural powers and the still weak connection to the Phoenix Force could give her.

It blasted upward catching Thanos’s throne platform near the center of the square and searing straight through right under his feet. Thanos howled in sudden pain and fury leaping clear, bits of the molten metal hitting his back but barely noticed as he kept his eyes on Jean, raising both fists to fire his attacks on her.

A moment later, another green bolt caught Jean just as she forced Thanos away from the settlement below. She cried out in pain, but this time not as much as before, and she was able to hit back, blasting Thanos and his throne both this time.

The second attack wasn’t nearly as powerful as the first, but it still hurled Thanos away and finished the destruction of his throne.

Hovering in midair under his own power, Thanos recovered quickly, and another purple blast of energy struck Jean as she tried to retreat, sending Jean tumbling to earth. She struck with such force the bridge she hit nearly exploded as she hit it, then Jean was falling down into the river below, sending up a mass of water as she struck.

Spluttering, Jean pushed herself out of the water, blood dripping from a cut on her forehead. With the water no longer diluting it, the blood quickly blinded Jean in one eye. She could also tell she’d twisted her knee something fierce.

Then a massive hand was grabbing at the back of her neck, lifting her up. A squeeze caused her to groan in pain as her bones ground against one another. “You gave me quite a lot of trouble, Avatar. But now, at least I have one of my prizes.”

Jean tried to turn her head but couldn’t, and felt his hands tightening around her neck despite her limited armor. When she realized she couldn’t, Jean allowed a blood speckled smile to cross her face. “At least I fucking destroyed your throne, you bastard...”

“True. That is a setback just as annoying as the loss of all my Black Guard.” For just a moment something more than dry arrogance was audible in his voice, some hidden pain. Then it was gone and a greenish energy seeped out of his gauntlet as it held the back of her neck. “You will be the first to pay for that effrontery.”

Jean spasmed in agony, something deep inside of her buckling under the touch of that energy as she gasped.

“Necrotic energy, the energy released by souls at death. It took me many years to understand how to gather the energy and experiments that saw the slaughter of dozens of worlds. But it was well worth it,” Thanos mused. “And your death, the death of an Avatar of the Phoenix Force, will finally see my Lady returning her attention to me! Lady Death, she will look upon me and smile once more!”

“You, you really are we, well, named. Mad Titan...” Jean grunted through tightly clenched teeth. And as she did, a voice resounded in her mind, one she hadn’t heard since this invasion began.

“Love is called the original form of madness by many races for a very good reason,” Thanos answered almost philosophically before bringing up his other fist. Releasing Jean he allowed her to fall a few feet to the ground before a blow hammered into her side. So strong was he that the thin Orichalcum armor that was part of Jean’s suit was no help, the impact alone conveying force enough to shatter bones as she cried out and was flung away to imbed into a hill.

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

Jean smirked though, as she looked up at him, her hair lank and matted to her face, her eyes though glaring angrily at him. “Heh, the thing about targets in the real world? They rarely move the way you think. And they can hit back...”

And then there was a booming noise as a blow blasted Thanos off his feet and away from her, and a voice Jean had been hearing for the last few minutes in her mind arrived in physical form. “Round two, you ruddy fuck!”

For a few moments Jean lay there recovering her breath, then she sighed, and pushed herself to her feet, feeling the presence of the Phoenix Force returning agonizingly slowly. She slowly rose into the air, relying only on her usual telekinetic powers for now. There was still work to do though, and she reached out telepathically for Emma and Charles, grimacing as the use of her powers caused her no small amount of pain. *Damn, those blows to the head have messed me up.*

Shaking that observation away, she spoke to her fellow telepaths. “Emma, Charles, my coms gear was wrecked. I’m... not up to any large-scale battle right now, but I am still ticking. Just

*don't expect miracles. Unfortunately, I think that China's gonna need some. Spread the word, we're going to need as much humanitarian aid as we can get..."*

OOOOOOO

Thanos recovered from being blind-sided quickly, flipping himself to his feet, finding himself standing in the middle of a road somewhere. Around him a few dozen cars lay where they had been abandoned as he and the avatar had moved over the area.

That was as much as he could notice before he returned a blow that caught a spell from Guardian, snarling as his energy blast intercepted the magic coming his way. "Finally, Guardian, you appear before me! I have long prepared for this day!"

With that, his other hand came up, and at a programmed set of eyeblinks, a shield began to cover his body from a device he had installed in his metal arm. This, like the various shields of his throne, was specially calibrated to create an anti-energy field to stop any changes created through use of magic from impacting him. Without his throne's power generator it would not last for very long, but it could be used in spurts.

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

At that, there was a brief second of peace between the two combatants.

For his part, Harry was intensely grateful for the added speed and durability his titan transformation had given him. He had teleported up to High Note and then flown down from orbit, but even so, if he had been limited to his prior speed, Harry would have been too late to save Jean.

*I knew that there was a limit to how fast I could move without adding wind resistance or general durability enchantments to something, but I never realized how **much** faster I could go. I took barely a minute to travel from High Note to Jean's position. Although it shouldn't have surprised me that using magic to slow myself down canceled out the shockwave I had been building up. Still, I wish I had a few minutes to figure out the rest of the changes I've gone through, and I'm still dealing with some tiredness despite the Pepper-up potion I quaffed up on Babylon. I just know this is going to throw me off.*

Harry wasn't complaining, not really. He knew that he had gotten both lucky in the fact he arrived in time to save his lady-love and the fact that Thanos had seemingly been too damn arrogant to really lead this invasion as he should have. If Thanos had led the various assaults, Harry and the Custodes would be mourning dead of their own and undoubtedly a **much** higher death toll among the rest of humanity. Only Rogue, Strange, Fenrir and maybe Clea could have



held Thanos off, which wasn't even considering his damn throne, which Jean had thankfully taken out of the equation.

As it was, that death toll was going to give people WW2 flashbacks for certain thanks to what happened here in China, but it could have gone far, far worse. *And if half of what Jean and Hela reported, if I let Thanos go, he would undoubtedly make it so very quickly.*

Across from him, Thanos had to stop his eyes from widening as he in turn became aware of the changes that Guardian had gone through.

The human was at least a foot taller than he had been during their previous battle, which was not normal for his race at his age. His shoulders were wider. Indeed Thanos felt the human was more powerfully built in every direction. His forehead scar, which Thanos had seen after tearing his helmet off in their previous battle, was gone, replaced by two strange symbols he had never seen before. One seemed to almost gleam a deep, dark green, the other a fiery red before the colors faded.

The human's eyes were also deeper, a shade of deep forest green now rather than emerald. Those eyes seemed to glow with a dim, yet intense light and around him was an aura of power, much like that which Thanos knew himself to have.

Indeed, as Thanos stared at Harry, he realized that comparison was perhaps more accurate than he had initially thought. "You... Guardian, what have you done..."

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

Although not caught off guard by this ruse, Thanos' eyes widened at his speed. And then they were exchanging punches at a rate that none of the Custodes could have kept up with, not even Hela or Steve, their most skilled hand-to-hand combatants. And despite the speed of those blows, they struck with such strength that they created shockwaves which shattered trees, broke the asphalt and blew out windows for miles around.

With each touch Harry tried to get a spell to stick to Thanos, but the Mad Titan was now exhibiting some kind of energy field that was stopping his magic from taking hold. Harry's Drill of Light spell fired point blank dissipated, letting Thanos strike Harry with blow that rang his bell despite his Titan transformation. A charm intended to make him weightless simply fizzled out. An explosive spell worked when Harry set it at the Titan's feet, but didn't do any harm to Thanos. A lightning spell, in the shape of sword crashed down, but this time while Thanos was struck, the lightning did little harm to him, barley burning his skin in places and causing him some pain from the few wounds he had taken so far, but that was all.

It did, however, blind Thanos for just a brief second, and Harry took advantage quickly. Ducking under a punch from his opponent, Harry created a wave of power and force behind his elbow as he went for a punch, marveling internally at how much easier it was to manipulate raw magic in

this form. The blow caught Thanos on the chin, and there was a monstrous 'BOOOM' like a bomb going off as Thanos was smashed up and off his feet.

Soaring into the air, Thanos recovered quickly, remarking aloud, "That blow was stronger by far than the punch the Thunder God sent my way!"

Looking down he saw Guardian coming up after him, and twisted down, zooming down in turn, a blast of energy coming from his synth-skin covered hand. At the same time a bolt of necrotic energy flashed out from his other. It was at least worth a try.

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

Both of them now were using shields at various intervals, blocking or redirecting one another's attacks. Back and forth they went, with Harry using his greater facility with flight to dance around Thanos, trying to get a spell through his shields, but finding that Thanos was too quick to turn it on or off. And Harry, unused to his new body's dimensions, was making mistakes that Thanos capitalized on. *But that shield needs to have a limit, and when it falls...* Harry thought even as he was pummeled again, the blow so strong it blasted him backwards, creating a large enough shock wave that the air seemed to actually shiver for a moment.

Falling through the air, Harry had an idea to both turn the tide, and get Thanos further away from anyone their battle could harm. *After all, I can't use a lot of my high end spells here, not with so many people still around.* He could actually see people still hiding in the rubble nearby for goodness sake.

From behind him, the spell began to form, the magic within Harry acting almost like a third arm, so easy it was to manipulate. And as he sent several raw magical attacks up at Thanos, the spell created an area of effect teleportation spell, almost like he had created an enchantment to duplicate the spells on the runic doorways.

Thanos' speed surprised Harry and he barely had time to end the enchantment before the Mad Titan broke through his offensive spellfire, tanking several strikes rather than dodging. Harry's spells cut off, and he grabbed at Thanos' arms twisting them around and then pushing hard. For a moment Thanos didn't notice what Harry had done, not having seen the glowing runes behind Harry thanks to Harry's spells. Then there was a sudden flash as they crossed the threshold of the spell, and then darkness, as they came out the other side.

Harry was surprised to find his stomach didn't bother him, and hurled Thanos away before the Mad Titan could get his bearings. The two of them were now in deep space, an area near one of the hydrogen scoops over Saturn. The area had come to Harry's mind as he had been out there for a brief safety inspection near the end of the hunt for Loki.

Thanos recovered quickly, and charged in, the white lights of his eyes gleaming in the dark of space, equal to Harry's own green eyes. The two of them once more began to fight like two brawlers, with Harry's offensive magics dissipating on Thanos' shield. Yet even as Thanos proved the better, more experienced hand to hand fighter, Harry was gradually escalating his spellwork once more.

After Harry took a blow to the side of his head that sent him blasting away, Harry was able to create one of his Bloody Insane spells, the same one that Harry had used to help end his battle with Galactus.

Antimatter appeared in front of Thanos, right outside his anti-magic shield. The explosion caused Thanos to cry out in pain as his shield finally failed and he was sent tumbling through space down into Saturn's atmosphere.

Harry followed up instantly, but Thanos' shield had held long enough to block some of the impact from the antimatter. A blast of his own caught Harry in the chest, searing Harry's side, hotter and nastier than before as Thanos, throwing all caution to the wind, opened his own connection not the power cosmic to further empower his might.

"GAAHHH!!" Harry howled, his voice torn away from him by the winds of Saturn.

Thanos eagerly took the initiative, and a punch sent Harry crashing through the atmosphere of the planet heading downward. But while Harry was hurt, he wasn't out of it entirely, and as a spell washed over his form, Harry returned fire. A searing beam of power nearly took Thanos' leg off at the knee. While the Mad Titan had more natural durability towards spellwork than Galactus had, Harry's transformation had given him far more power than he had during their previous meeting, and while Thanos had upgraded his own resistance, Harry's power was able to overcome it.

The strike nearly burned all the way through one of Thanos' legs just below the knee, leaving the limb hanging by the barest margins and pulling a howl of pain from Thanos in turn.

"GRAAaaa!"

Pushing through the pain, Thanos reversed course, pulling several small spheres from his belt and tossing them in front of himself. They went off, a mix of insanely high powered flashbangs and gases. The gases created a chain reaction around them much like the Bloody Insane spell Harry had used in their first battle on Mars. This one wouldn't last nearly as long, but it was enough to send Harry reeling for a moment.

By the time Harry got through the fire and flames, Thanos had reached deep space once more, and was now sending beams of ravaging purple energy down towards him. Thanos had no real belief these attacks would be enough to finish Guardian off, but they would weaken him for a bit while Thanos continued to utilize his prepared tricks, further attacking Harry's senses.

But Harry surprised him by retreating further into Saturn's atmosphere, then, when he could, Harry teleported up to the same point the two of them had arrived at. Thanos had drifted near it during his artillery-like barrage of Harry's previous position, and now an overpowered punch caught Thanos in the side of his jaw, breaking teeth and launching him further away from Saturn.

OOOOOOO

Elsewhere in the star system, this tremendous clash drew the eyes of the EDF and Skrull Fleet alike. The Skrull Fleet had, up to this point, been somewhat sidelined. At first, their campaign to slowly move through the system seemed to have worked. Without using their hyperspace drives, they couldn't be pulled towards Fortress Mars and the massive defenses there. They were dealing with continuous Raven strikes, made all the worse by seemingly coming from all over. The spells hiding the Runic Doorways defeated the Skrull sensors entirely.

But the Skrull had come up with anti-fighter doctrine quite quickly. It was not unlike fighting the smaller varieties of Shi'ar ships when they attacked in shoals. And even better, the defenders had been forced to send out their capital ships to help their attack craft. And at first, Black Dwarf had proven his worth, destroying the first few human ships, caught out of position and unwilling to retreat to join the main fleet elements.

But soon after the first real clash with the humans' purloined Kree ships, trouble began. Because it was at that point that the human's special combatants arrived. One of whom could, seemingly create massive shields behind which the human fleet could sit, inviolate even as they in turn fired back.

It was only the size of the Skrull invasion fleet that allowed them to absorb the losses they had taken in that clash. And since, the Skrull Fleet Overlord had tried to keep his distance, pulling back and splitting up his fleet, something he had hoped not to do, fearing a defeat in detail. But the humans had proven smart, and had ignored the force sent to raid Mars, keeping their own fleet together to hammer the largest segment with their capital ships and sending their superpowered troops after the smaller groups along with flights of the small attack craft.

Black Dwarf was no help, indeed he wasn't even around anymore. He had charged out to do battle with the human's special forces, and been completely slaughtered by the Human Torch and others. Indeed, the fiery-looking human, the one who looked like a star made into a bipedal form, was still causing trouble. Only the largest ships in his fleet had sufficient shielding to ward him off, and he was continuously making attack runs throughout the fleet.

At this point, any other fleet would have been forced into disarray, fear, confusion and simply not having any weapon that could get through the enemy's... magic... forcing the Skrull fleet into a fighting withdrawal. Magic was not a term that the Skrull were mentally prepared to accept, but with the evidence of a shield of magic many lightyears across The humans kept after them,

and by this point the fleet had lost twenty-two Equalizers, eighty-nine battleships, two hundred and forty cruisers of various sizes, and more than half of his destroyers.

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

Now however, as their scanners told them of the colossal exchange of energies by one of the gas giants, the Fleet Overlord made a decision. "Send a request for ceasefire to the humans. We are but a sideshow here, and I will not let anymore Skrull die for nothing."

"B, but sir," one of his officers hissed as the others all turned to stare at him. "We, we have our orders."

"I rather think that our lack of progress here is not the only thing that has gone wrong with this invasion, officer. Indeed, I cannot help but believe that even if the Mad Titan wins against whoever he is fighting out there,, we will still have lost this campaign." Fleet Overlord Len'dok shook his head with a sneer. "Thanos believed in his own power, his own intelligence and goals with all the faith of a fanatic. And he kept power to himself with the same kind of intensity, yet did not keep as good an eye on his subordinates or the reality of the battlefield as he should have."

Len'Dok shook his head. "No, for now, we are best served by looking out for ourselves. And if the humans win, who knows?" He smiled very slightly. "We might just lose one tyrant titan and gain a... titanically capable ally..."

The groans of his people made the Fleet Overlord smile. Although not as much as the sight of the enemy fire slackening off and then stopping entirely.

**OOOOOO.**

The longer the battle went on, the more it seemed to fall into a almost predictable pattern. Thanos was Harry's better in terms of experience and hand to hand skills. Harry's sword, the sword of Gryffindor had made an appearance by this point, but could not penetrate Thanos' skin or the metal of his amputated arm. Meanwhile, Harry had the advantage at range, with his magic easily overcoming Thanos' use of his power and battering Thanos. Further, Harry was quickly proving to be more durable. Every time Thanos got in a good hit, Harry simply kept on coming. He was even getting better at using magic to cancel the momentum of any strike which hit him, although Thanos still continued to toss him around more than a bit.

Bursting out from the atmosphere of Jupiter, Harry realized that his air bubble had been gone for a while. *Huh, so much for the need to breath. That's interesting. Still, it seems as if Thanos is the same, so no air-based attacks. Pity. Lightning, fire, ice, water, Thanos' shield seems to block all of it. Fine. Keep lulling him into a false sense of superiority when it comes to my magic. Let him think only the raw magical attacks matter.*

For his part, Thanos was feeling it more than a bit. His fight with Thor had hurt him a bit, and while he'd come through his fight with the avatar unscathed, she had destroyed his throne. Without it, he had lost much of his defensive abilities. His Power Cosmic abilities could mitigate Guardian's unformed magical skills, and his formed magic could be handled by his shield, but that shield was slowly losing power. Thanos too was slowly being pummeled, and he knew it. *Potter's Titan transformation... and how he achieved that I have no idea... seems to have given him even more durability than I possess. Blast it, I need to change this battle.*

Two of them fought across the solar system, moving from the middle planets and further out, covering light years in moments, moving faster than all but a handful could have even seen. To the watchers on the human and Skrull fleets, it was as if the two were traveling in the blink of an eye from one place to another. Even Steven Strange could not keep up with their movement after a certain point.

For a time, Thanos seemed to be holding his own, then suddenly, Harry shifted tactics. Between one raw magical attack and dodging a blow from Thanos, Harry hit his shield with the Shield Breaker Spell, overpower so much it could have shattered the shield of a planetoid. Thanos' reeled, and Harry grabbed his outstretched arm, the elbow of which had just erupted in fire for a moment in the vacuum of space. A cutting spell launched into the arm sliced it in two.

This caused Thanos no pain, and he was even able to smash Harry in the face with a powerful blow. But Harry moved with it, twirling in place and getting behind Thanos. For a moment Thanos thought that Harry's hand had hit his back, but Thanos turned quickly lashing out with a blow that smashed Harry back.

As he was hurled backward again, Harry released a blast of magic in every direction. Thanos howled in pain as the explosion picked him up and hurled him away. He was in no position to block the Piercing Fang spell Harry hurled his way, the same spell Harry had created during his fight with Galactus.

The mix of Light, raw, and piercing magic didn't penetrate Thanos' skin, but the spell still caught him in the side, shattering ribs and hurling Thanos down into the planet of Pluto. He struck with all the power of several nukes going off, creating a massive plume of dust and rock, a crater appearing under him the size of South America.

Groaning, Thanos knew he had lost this fight. His whole body was aching, his throne was gone, the weapons he had made to combat Guardian had not worked against his new Titan form. And none of his Black Guard were around to help. *But if I retreat, I can always come back again. "Sanctuary!"* He sent, via a mental link to his ship, the same ship that had saved him the last time he clashed with Potter. *"Sanctuary, come help me!"*

He blocked the next few strikes desperately, retreating as he did, his immense jaw locked in a rictus of pain as he called on all his Power Cosmic reserves to redirect Harry's spells. *I know of weapons, technology that can harm a Titan like myself. And there are other races out there,*

*other forces I can... It occurred to Thanos then that he should have heard a reply by this point. What... why isn't Sanctuary...*

His thoughts were interrupted by a kick to the side of the head. Carrying an explosive spell with it, it sent Thanos hurtling sideways, right into a prepared antimatter block. The block exploded, searing him from head to toe, extinguishing one eye and searing his side so badly that Thanos' one remaining arm was turned to ash, blowing away from another strike from Harry which finished the work of shattering Thanos' chest.

Thanos hit back first and lay there for a moment, his thoughts only on escape now. *"Sanctuary! Come to me! I need, I must retreat..."*

"You might be wondering why your ship isn't responding to your hails," Harry remarked almost conversationally, working his jaw and neck and wincing at the pain of them. This battle had not been easy by any means, and he was feeling it immensely. If Thanos had been able to dodge more of his blows and especially the last anti-shield spell, Thanos could well have just out endured. But he hadn't. And Thanos had not picked up on the other spell Harry had latched onto him after his shield had shattered. *Well, that and Jean destroying his throne gave me a major boost.*

"There is a human saying, fool me once, shame on you, fool me twice, shame on me," Harry continued. "I wondered how you escaped the last time, and decided you had to have called for help somehow. Possibly via telepathy, as from what I remember from our first fight, your outfit wasn't exactly in one piece. I have put a lot of thought into magical means of creating telepathic shields, the magical equivalent of the type that Tony and others have come up with to protect their minds. And I had several telepaths willing to help me experiment. I cast a spell on you that will cut you off any signals from your body to your ship. And without that signal, your ship can't track your movements or find you. Well, not fast enough to save you anyway."

Harry raised his hand and a hammer of roiling magic appeared above his head, growing until it went from horizon to horizon, then shrinking, condensing until it looked almost solid with raw magical potential. "You brought war and death to my world, Thanos, not once but twice. You launched your followers like a pack of mad dogs at the head of an army of hyenas. But there is another saying among us humans. Pride comes before the fall..."

Thanos glared back, teeth bared, and he slowly pushed himself to his knees. Whatever else, Thanos would not die on his back.

And it was now, as Thanos realized that he had lost all chance of escape, of all chance of living through the next few minutes, when he accepted his fate, that he saw his Lady.

Death herself appeared to one side of the titans, an image that, despite Harry could see through it, seemed so real as to make all reality bend around her. It was as if she was a black hole, warping everything around her. But this was not the first time Harry had dealt with Lady Death, and he simply bowed his head respectfully as she looked at the two of them from the side.

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

Obviously the Mad Titan did not see it that way however. "Lady, at last! At last I see you in person. You, you are even more beautiful than I dreamed... your eyes, the, they draw me in. I..." he coughed up blood, before reaching his one remaining arm out to Death beseechingly. "All this, all I have ever done, for you..."

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

Although much of that last had been pulled out of the ether, it seemed to satisfy Death, although obviously her expression could not change.

"Wh, why do you speak to him!?" Thanos cried his hand slumping back to his side, anger giving him some strength but blood loss and pain keeping the man on his knees. "Why do you not even look at me, please! I, I know I failed to give you the ultimate prize, this one's soul and that of the Phoenix Force's avatar, but surely, surely there must be a reason you have appeared before me despite my shortcomings! Please, tell me what I must do to gain your favor, to have you look at me as I do you!"

Only now did Death indeed turn her attention to her would-be suitor. That was a strange thing, one she didn't understand, even now several hundred years after she first became aware of Thanos. It was then when he had slain his race, starting with his family, and had done so in some kind of misplaced belief that she would look favorably on it. That she cared about the trillions of beings he had killed in the centuries since. Thanos had somehow come to believe she could love him back, if only he could gain her attention.

Such was far from the truth, but given what he had done supposedly in her name, Death had deemed that, she should appear in person. And, although it annoyed her, she also needed to speak.

"PLEASE!" Thanos cried now, staring back. "I, I have slain worlds, star spanning empires, all for you, all for the glory of Death!"

Death flicked a single finger at her side, the motion enough to fill both men with dread. Then she spoke. To Harry Death's voice sounded as it always had, like the slamming of a tomb's



doors, or of two grave stones banging together. By the expression that crossed Thanos' face, he did not share Harry's opinion, although he also didn't seem to like what Death was saying. "When have I ever asked for such?"

Death waited a brief second, showing some knowledge of conversational mores, surprising Harry somewhat. But then she went on. **"I AM DEATH, THE ENDLESS, THE END OF ALL THINGS. SUCH IS MY BEING, SUCH HAVE I BEEN SINCE THE START OF TIME. WHY WOULD I COME TO LOVE ANYONE? I CANNOT. FURTHER, WHY WOULD I COME TO LOVE ANYONE WHO WISHES TO SIMPLY BRING MORE DEATH? IT WOULD BE LIKE THE COLOR BLACK FALLING IN LOVE WITH A PAINTER WHO ONLY USES THAT COLOR. ONE HAD NOTHING TO DO WITH THE OTHER."**

She stared at a now gaping Thanos shaking her head with all the finality of scythe going through wheat. **"I HAVE NEVER WANTED MORE THAN MY DUE. NEVER FELT LOVE, NOR WANTED TO. EVERYTHING YOU HAVE DONE TO GARNER MY ATTENTION HAS MERELY BEEN A REFLECTION OF YOUR OWN SOUL."**

Wincing, Harry watched as Thanos stared, before slowly shaking his head, unable to believe what he was hearing, but also unable to disprove the Endless' words. And as that revelation hit him, Thanos, for perhaps the first time since he had slain his parents in cold blood, stared at his actions, and knew they had no purpose. Knew he was just as much a madman as a common killer, one who had never had a real justification for what he did. All of it had been in his own head.

And then he began to scream. "AAHHHhhhhhhhaaaaaaaa!!!!!!!"

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

For a moment, Harry waited for something to happen, some final last gasp trap, or for the universe to acknowledge the Mad Titan's passing in some fashion. But for a second there was nothing. Then from Thanos' corpse an image rose, an image made in black, red and dark purple, with ice blue eyes. It was an extremely detailed, well-formed soul, showing how powerful Thanos had been in life. It seemed to be saying something, but what it was, Harry could not hear.

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

For some reason, Harry knew that meant that Thanos' soul was simply... gone now. There would be no return to the wheel for it, to forget its past self and be reborn. Death had judged him, and, perhaps because of everything he had done to gain her favor, felt it within her right to judge Thanos' soul permanently.

At that, Harry had to suppress a shudder, but said nothing, simply bowing from the waist this time towards Death, who, to his surprise had not yet disappeared. "With your leave, Lady. Cleaning up after this war will not be an easy chore."

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

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

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

The Titan War was over.

**End Chapter**