

Hello all, this is Vimesenthusiast. Yes, it's been a long time since this story was updated, and I want to apologize about that. I have always wanted to give everyone a chance to vote in the small stories and the large story polls, to give my fans the ability to choose which stories get updated. But in doing that and coupling it with offering so many stories, I think that the quality of some have suffered. Most particularly in this story. I have seen reviews by DaSalvatore and others pointing out mistakes, so I know I am not alone, and I think the most egregious mistake I have made is in the timeline of the story. Everything should really have been spread out way more than it has been, but I got caught up in the usual comic book sense of time, and that's hurt it badly.

Gentlemen, you have been seen. I just haven't had the time to concentrate on this story! Now that it has won once, let us hope it can do so again, so that can change. To help that process I have made the decision recently that it and FILFy Teacher will remain as the sole two stories in the large story poll. Thus it is in the hands of my patty ons which gets updated from one month to another and that will hopefully mean that this story will once again get enough attention to it that it will reach the level of writing that I hope can.

Of course that means that I will throw my weight behind the Ranma fic most likely to win the small story, but it is a balancing act.

If ATP wins again in the next few months I will try to go back and correct mistakes pointed out in the reviews and by Morde24 who has been giving the older chapters a light brushing, responding to those reviews as I can. I am **not** going to put this story under revision, considering that I have yet to discover a single story here on fanfic that was under revision and then still continued. This story **will** continue until it is finished.

Beyond that, I hope you all enjoy this bit of world building for Harry and company, which centers mostly on Emma and those on Earth.

This has been edited by me with Grammarly, and Morde24 with his eyes and an ability to concentrate on editing that dwarfs my own. Hopefully that means that there won't be any immersion jarring mistakes within.

Summary of the last chapter: With Galactus defeated and forced to agree to target planets that don't contain sentient races, Harry and company have a few hours downtime before Deathbird appears with an offer. Deciding to use this to their advantage, Harry agrees, and the decision is made to destroy the Shi'ar Empire through it's computers via a virus, and with the death of D'ken. Meanwhile, back on Earth, Emma runs into trouble at the negotiation table and then runs into further issues when she is (once more) attacked, by a group from the Maggia. The attack is beaten off, and a horribly wounded Emma learns something new and very interesting about her powers. When they arrive, D'ken throws a giant ball to honor the Earthers who helped the Shi'ar beat off Galactus, hoping to poison them through various means. Forewarned, the humans easily ignore these attempts, then when Deathbird's attack begins, fight both sides, subduing Deathbird, while Alex kills the Emperor in a one-on-one duel.

Afterwards, the stage is set before the Virus is released, with the knowledge that humans were involved at all in the fight against Galactus erased from every computer in the system and every mind via magic. The lights go out throughout the Empire, as the Human ship, hidden under magic and technology, jump for hyperspace, heading to a meeting with the Starjammers.

Chapter 45: While You Were Away...

With only a few people needed on the bridge to run the *Long Voyager*, this left the majority of the Custodes time to contemplate events. Despite that, it somewhat grimly amused Jean that only Ben, Reed, Ororo and Stephen seemed bothered by what they had done. The rest of the Custodes saw the release of the virus as a grim necessity, which the objectors did as well, although it was one an action none of the three men would have taken on their own. It was undeniable that the virus removed a threat to humanity whose enmity and actions would have been unpredictable in the extreme and Jean sensed that all three men were almost obscenely pleased with the fact that someone else had made that decision.

Ororo too understood it had been necessary. But in her case, she approved of it, had indeed voted to release the virus. She simply acknowledged that, saying it was a grim necessity and while that didn't mean it was any less vile and was prepared to live with that knowledge.

Harry, however, Jean reflected as the water of their suite's shower cascaded down her face, is keeping secrets, darn it. He spent the first seven or eight hours afterward being morose and brooding, then Ororo said something. He buried himself in a book, and ever since he's been busy with E, Reed, and the ship's computers. Hell he was smiling and um... quite suave last night! Jean bit her lower lip shivering despite the hot water as she remembered what she, Harry and Ororo had done for much of the night. In a good, almost ebullient mood, Harry had wined and dined both ladies, and Jean's questions about his shocking change in attitude hadn't stayed in her mind for long, too busy just enjoying herself.

Yet now, a day out from when they should reach the meeting point with the Starjammers, Jean was thinking about it, and determined to get an answer for his abrupt change in attitude. Some of that thinking left Jean's mind as she reentered the bedroom, seeing Ororo snuggled against Harry, both of them naked as jaybirds, and with evidence trailing down Ororo's thighs and in the air of the room that, instead of a leisurely shower, they had found a more vigorous way to celebrate the morning.

Harry looked up from where he had been nuzzling into Ororo's hair, eyes alight with devotion and a certain amount desire, as evidenced by his wizard's staff standing to attention once more.

Licking her lips, Jean slowly untied her towel, letting it drop, which cause Ororo to turn, looking at Jean with appreciation as Harry let loose a little hum of pleasure at the sight. Smirking at their looks and feeling her body react, Jean moved forward until she got to the foot of the bed. There she got on all fours, prowling to Harry's other side. However, after a brief kiss, she simply sighed and molded herself into his side, smiling as one of her hands found Ororo's on his stomach. Two women exchanged a smile, as Ororo whispered, "Looking forward to getting back?"

"Yes," both of them her bed companions replied, with Jean going on quickly. "It's odd. I hate the physical changes and everything else that came with it from my pregnancy, but I do miss the feeling of those two little lives being so connected to my own, if that makes any sense."

"Considering you're a telepath love, I think it makes perfect sense Harry chuckled, the sound carrying through his chest to Jean where she'd laid her head. "For my part, I think that you are already deserving of a mother of the year award for going through with it at all."

"I don't think I would've embraced being pregnant so quickly if I wasn't the avatar Phoenix, but thank you for your vote anyway," Jean chortled, leaning up to kiss his neck, before looking down at the ring on her finger, then smiling as Ororo's hand once again found her own, her Panja ring gently clicking against Jean's simpler but just as important one.

Then Jean shook her head, waving a finger up in Harry's face. "But, don't expect me to have any more kids Harry. Going through this whole pregnancy thing once was enough. Especially with twins. And I am more than a little scared of what is going to hit me when we get back..." Jean paused then, a stray thought arresting her mind from worries on that score. "I remember reading a series of science fiction books where in-body pregnancies were a thing of the past. In vitro was the main thing. Something else to throw at the medical and science teams when we get back."

On Harry's other side, Ororo let the conversation from her lovers wash over her as she pulled out a data pad and began to read a Shi'ar history she had personally stolen from the palace. She wanted to see if she could discover the moment when the Shi'ar it turned away from imagination and dreams as a society, if such a moment existed.

To think they came so far, created such a large empire without the ability to dream, indeed with such being seen as anathema, a sign of insanity. Strange. The lack of empathy was actually more easy for Ororo to understand. That was a societal thing. Just look at the Nazis, The Kree or the Spartans. A society can be built to reward a lack of empathy. The Spartans concept of we are not of these people, we are invaders and must keep our foot on their throat or be destroyed, or the whole Nazi and Kree concept of a supreme race.

It was disturbing, but she could understand it, even if the Shi'ar had taken it to extremes even the Kree would have found alarming. The lack of an ability to dream, however, there were

so many things tied into that, it defied logic that the Shi'ar could have created an empire without it. *So when did it begin?*

All three lovers looked up as the door to their quarters open, not with alarm, only with a certain amount of amusement. There was only one person aboard the ship who could enter their quarters without one of the three opening it for them.

Hela strode into the room a few steps before pausing, her head cocking to one side as she stared unashamedly at the trio of naked people on the bed. Then with a snort she used a spell to levitate the bedsheets onto Harry. Ororo giggled lightly, pushing away and popping up through the sheets, which had covered her head given her former position. "I would have thought you would have enjoyed the view for longer than that, sister."

"I have already seen what our Seidr man has to offer, Ororo, which is actually more the propriety would allow as it is." Hela shook her head as she now continued her aborted approach. "While I am looking forward to my wedding night most hungrily, I will not dishonor myself by pushing the bounds of decency any further."

Despite her words, Hela' eyes flicked sideways behind her half-mask, and watched the tent now poking up under the sheets, which had twitched at the mention of their wedding night. Giggling internally, Hela turned her gaze away before sitting down, leaning back and crossing her legs languidly, then looked across Ororo and Harry at Jean. "Am I correct in assuming you haven't broached the subject of our interest yet?"

Jean shrugged her shoulders, looking a bit sheepish as she pulled the cover over to cover her legs. "When I returned from my bath, my mind refused to stay on target," she answered dryly. "And then afterwards, I simply decided to wait for you."

Hela scoffed slightly, but then gestured, and another tendril of magic reached out. Several trays of food floated through the air from still open doorway toward the bed, and Harry quickly transfigured conjured shirts for himself and the other two, as all three sat up, allowing the trays to rest on their laps. "And what's this topic you wanted to broach that would require softening me up with breakfast in bed?"

"You were quite maudlin and withdrawn as we left the Shi'ar's capital system. Yet, that seems to have changed. And you, Reed, and E were thick as thieves until last night. None of your fellow conspirators have said anything, but you should know by now Harry Potter, that a curious woman is a most dangerous beast. So, my Seidr Man, talk, or else the honey goes away, and the stick makes its appearance," Hela quipped, a faint smile on her face despite her words. "What plan is going around your head that has you suddenly more upbeat?"

Harry smiled, taking a bite of the pancake in front of him. When he went for a second bite though, Jean elbowed him in the side, and he decided not to keep two of the most important people in his life waiting any further. "Well, for one thing, E and I went over the long-term impact of the virus again while it is self-propagating it should become increasing obvious

as people try to rebuild that it works along the Shi'ar Empire base operating program. Therefore, if any of the other races come up with an entirely new underlying code language they will be able to start rebuilding. And all of the races of the Shi'ar are much more capable of doing that than the Shi'ar themselves."

"And then," Harry kissed Ororo on the cheek. "I was reminded of history, a book that Ororo actually gave to me. That gave me the idea, and with E and Reed, I had the resources to think about it."

"And she hasn't spoken much about whatever this is either," Hela mock glared at her future sister-wife."

"I simply came to Harry to remind him of the need to make friends," Ororo demure. "He is the one that actually found the proper example to follow in this case. With, admittedly, a twist."

"What idea are you talking about?" Hela asked frowning. "I've made a study of history, and I can't imagine what..."

"You haven't quite gotten to the end of World War II and the Cold War love, at least not in any depth as far as I know," Harry answered, making his words a question.

"On the contrary, I studied the Cold War in great depth," Hela objected. "I felt it most helpful during and after the Eurasian War."

"But you didn't concentrate on Pacific history, especially the occupation of Japan, and its postwar rebuilding."

Hela frowned for a moment, but Jean, who hadn't always been the best student of history, but had conversations about history with Ororo even before joining her and Harry's relationship, sat up, the sheet falling away from her chest. Ignoring the staring Harry, she looked between him and Ororo. "You are not serious!? You want us to help the Shi'ar get back on their feet!?"

"No," Harry said shaking his head to ignore Jean's nakedness, something he would never normally do. "Not the Shi'ar, but their subject peoples."

"What are we talking about here?" Hela questioned, her frown still in place. "I remember the war ended with the Hiroshima bomb broke the spirit of the Japanese. But I didn't read about what happened after that, you are correct."

After World War 2 ended, Japan rebuilt its infrastructure with a great deal of help, both material and monetary, from America," Ororo supplied.

Hela's eyes narrowed behind her mask. "America. The same nation that Japan attacked in a time of peace without any warning, helped them rebuild after the war?"

“Well there were a lot of stipulations and a ton of social changes going on in Japan thanks to their total collapse. But yes, essentially without American aid, Japan’s rebuilding after the war would have been much, much slower. But in so doing, America made a friend out of an enemy.”

“And they acted out of the goodness of their hearts?” Hela’s sarcasm was positively scathing.

But Harry simply shrugged. “Of course not. In doing this they also created a base in the Pacific to challenge China and Russia which came in handy later. And while altruism is part of my thinking, I’m afraid it isn’t the totality.”

“Very well, I see the long-term benefit, but I am uncertain how it relates to our issue.”

“Think about it. Eventually, someone’s going to figure out how the virus works. But it will take a while since the Shi’ar’s domination of their empire is so extreme. Yet the whip hand of that domination is gone and isn’t coming back. Without that, the various races in the empire will fall back to their own devices, heck that might already be happening. And if humans can be part of that rebuilding that would put us in a tremendous position to make certain that the Empire doesn’t ever return. It’ll also help us build strong allies the former empire’s remains,” Harry explained excitedly, his eyes gleaming eagerly.

“And where exactly will be getting this largess?” Hela asked tartly. “The last I looked, humanity had all it could handle in the EDF already.”

“We’ll start off small,” Harry answered instantly. “Reach out to planets which desperately need food or a specific type of material. Then we’ll start spreading, helping the non-Shi’ar races to link up and ally in turn.”

“This is a tremendously large project, no matter how small we start,” Hela scowled, shaking her head. “I’m not certain if you really thought the logistics of all this through.”

“Actually I haven’t.” Harry admitted. I’ve had E and Reed crunching numbers for me. By the time we get back to Earth and start setting things up, though, I want to have started the ball rolling. Using Corsair and the Starjammers.”

Hela was still skeptical, though she was thankful Harry wasn’t just haring off to champion a new cause, he had really thought this through and had roped other minds in to do even further thinking. “And you think they will be willing to help?”

“They will,” Harry answered. “Depending on how we sell it to them.”

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As Harry spoke about his plans going forward to help the Shi'ar Empire's disparate species, Emma was finally leaving her bed after several days' convalescence. She had been incredibly weakened after the attack on her led by Hammerhead due to blood loss. Una, who had become the chief medical officer for the Custodes and Camelot, had seen to her care personally, and although the blood transfusion was annoying to deal with, just like being bedridden in the first place, it worked.

On the other hand, Una couldn't do anything about the migraine that had hit after the adrenaline of the attack faded but giving Emma some painkillers. Despite the pills, the migraine had stayed with Emma for most of the time she was bedridden, which she couldn't do anything about, no matter how hard she tried to think through it and use her powers to try to deaden the pain.

Now, standing in front of a full-body mirror, she trailed one finger down between her breasts to her side, where the wounds from the ambush had once been. "Or rather the most recent ambush," she mused, somewhat amused. "I mean, really, am I just a magnet for those things?"

With that thought, Emma's finger left her side, trailing up her body to a tiny scar underneath her armpit. She held her finger against it, feeling the contours of the scar slightly puckering out from the rest of her skin, the memory of a childhood accident. "Now, let's see if this works."

With that, Emma concentrated inward, driving her mind's eye deeper into herself, pushing beyond the edge of her mind into her body on a cellular level. A tingling sensation soon began at the back of her mind, quickly becoming painful. But as Emma kept pushing, she found the barrier between her mind and telepathy and her body once more giving way. The tiny scar slowly faded, becoming smooth skin to match the rest of her body.

Emma raised her hand away, turning slightly to look at the spot in the mirror. Then, seeing the scar was gone, Emma hefted one of her breasts up a touch before placing a finger under it on a beauty mark right below her breast.

That always annoyed me, now to see if I can do something about it. A few moments later, the tiny beauty mark disappeared. Then she moved up to her face, where a few tiny wrinkles could be seen around her eyes. No one else had ever commented on them, but Emma was a perfectionist and had seen them in the mirror after she took part in the Genosha campaign.

They too disappeared under her attention, and Emma released a throaty little laugh at that, turning away, noting that the tingling pain at the back of her mind had faded with time as well. *It's official now. If I can do things like that, I can also stave off the effects of aging if I so wish. Which means I won't be left behind by the others.*

That had been a concern in the back of her mind, one that, while distant, had loomed as a near certainty, even if Harry had only ever brought it up once. Ororo was a witch, and witches and wizards could live well into their second century or longer, depending on how strong their magic was. And seeing that Ororo was connected to Gaia, she would never lack power. Jean was connected to the Phoenix Force, the personification of life, and thus would probably also have a life best counted by centuries rather than years. And as for Harry and Hela, well, enough said there.

In both power and longevity, Emma had been very much the odd woman out. But, of course, she'd never let that bother her, not in terms of her importance to their causes or in the relationship. But the longevity issue had been at the back of her mind occasionally. *And now I have a solution for it.*

"However, right now, I have other things that need doing. And talking to yourself like this is a sign of incipient loneliness, Emma, best to stop before you become maudlin at the fact none of your lovers are around for you to crow at." With that, Emma turned to her walk-in closet and began to dress for the day.

Moving down the hallway to the stairwell that would lead down to the rest of her mansion, Emma found Piotr sitting in one of the small sitting areas set to one side of the staircase. He glanced up from the book he was reading, setting it aside and looking at her closely. "Are you all right, Ms. Frost?"

Piotr was always respectful like that, and most of the time, it made Emma smile, enjoying the bit of formality when Jean and Harry, in particular, were so informal off the battlefield. After so long, however, her pleasure in the respectful term had waned. "I've told you before, Piotr, call me Emma. How many times do I have to tell you? As for my health, I am well enough now, and I was hoping to check in and see what I've missed."

"Just one more time, Ms. Frost, as always," the former Russian farm boy teased gently before becoming serious. "Una will want to examine you, but so long as you aren't going anywhere for the day, I doubt she'll object to you being up and about."

Biting back a retort along the lines of 'Since when did I need permission from anyone to do anything', Emma merely nodded, understanding he was simply concerned. "Fine. I can do most of my work from home anyway. I only use the offices for meetings and running Frost Industries. But what are you still doing here? Don't tell me you all think that the Maggia are foolish enough as to attack me again, and this time in my own home."

"Danielle and I talked about it and decided that for the most part, the rest of the team really doesn't have much to offer when it comes to investigations, especially in cities. If it was out in the countryside, we could have brought in Garm, but with Kitty busy on one of the new teleportation rings with Laura, there isn't a way to make certain that he can't be spotted, or, if they're following a trail through a public portion of the city, doesn't just bump into someone."

The fact that Garm had flatly refused to help on the hunt in the city was another factor. The giant wolf had said that he might be overwhelmed by the smells of the city. And Piotr certainly wasn't going to argue with him. The last time he and Garm had wrestled, the giant wolf had beaten him hollow despite Piotr's metal body.

"Does she have any backup?"

"Most of the team and I are here staying in your mansion, but she didn't want any of us with her, except for Wyatt, and he is busy in San Francisco with Johnny. Apparently, one of the FF's old enemies was seen in California recently, and the two of them are hunting him down. Oddly there, we were able to get Garm to help since the villain was seen in a national park."

Emma's lips twisted into a faint frown, not liking the fact Dani was acting alone. But the Cheyenne huntress was a big girl and had proven herself extremely capable on her own before. *The combination of her suit and her mutant powers makes her quite formidable. Well, that, and she has that Sigyn's Gift weapon. Still, I think the first order of business is to reach out to her to see what's going on.*

With Piotr falling in behind her, Emma descended the stairs, exchanging greetings with several of the others who were moving around her mansion, including an ex-follower of Magneto, Anne-Marie Cortez, sitting with James Proudstar across a chess set. Her presence was somewhat odd but given the number of other Custodes with Harry at present, Emma supposed that Cortez had been brought in to make up numbers. *She also proved herself in the fighting in Genosha, so if Cortez becomes a full-time member, I won't object. Although she will need a codename.*

More surprising than Anne-Marie's presence was her younger sister Cordelia barreling into Emma, nearly taking her feet out from under her as she hugged Emma hard enough to draw a gasp from the older Frost. "I know that Una said you would be okay, but you were so pale for so long! I mean, I know that you're pale normally, you really need more sun. But this was like vampire pale, only not sexy, and not just because you're my sister and a woman." The younger girl babbled for a moment.

Patting Cordelia on her back Emma fought the urge to roll her eyes. *Cordelia has really just completely forgotten all the training that our parents gave us on decorum, hasn't she? Still, I can't deny that our current relationship is far better than the one we had before I had Father and Adrienne killed. Now, if only our mother was responding at all to the help we've gotten her to deal with her alcohol issue, we might actually become a real family rather than the barely contained soap opera we were before.*

The woman had been placed in a separate wing of the house months back and stayed there. Despite numerous attempts to get her help, the woman seemed fully content to be on her own, drink, be waited on by the servants, and not interact with anyone while slowly killing herself.

It sometimes hurt Emma when she thought about it, but frankly, the woman had been such a nonentity in her life that he really didn't matter much.

"Yes, yes, thank you for your affections, Cordelia," Emma drawled, patting the younger girl on her head, much to the younger girl's annoyance. "But as you can see, I'm fine."

The two sisters spent a few moments together, with Emma promising to spend more time with Cordelia later in the day. Then the young girl and Firestar were off to the indoor exercise room, it being too cold here in New York for them to use the outdoor pool, even if it wasn't as cold as it was in Camelot.

At that point, Una arrived from Camelot and moved quickly to Emma's side, gesturing her peremptorily to sit down. "You should be fine, but I want to make certain."

With a sigh, Emma moved over to the couch, where she lay out lengthwise sending her mind questing for Dani as Una began to examine her.

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Dani moved across the skyline of New York, trusting her speed and the fact that she was on the rooftops to help some of the spells that she had asked Wanda and Kitty to put on her rather than activating her full Chameleon array. Moving at night would've been a much easier thing to do, but during the day, especially here in New York? Not so much.

But a hunter had to track wherever their prey went, regardless of night and day. *Although I think it's a little unfair that criminals seem so willing to move around during the day. Isn't that against the rules?* She thought with some exasperated amusement.

Her target at the moment was a man who was currently walking down a busy street, looking like every other New Yorker around him. But Dani had marked him out earlier in the day and wasn't about to let him out of her sight.

Thanks to the information Emma had been able to pass on before passing out, much of Hammerhead's businesses had been hit by police and federal investigators over the past few days. But Emma hadn't told them about two businesses that Hammerhead was connected to, and one of them in particular, a small Italian restaurant (which Dani thought was so cliché it hurt) was a front that Hammerhead used as a base of operations.

The man she was following had shown up at the restaurant that morning. A thin, spare man with sallow features and black hair ordered around some of Hammerhead's surviving men, who had quailed and then left quickly. Then he had taken possession of the contents of a safe from the restaurant and then left. The men he had spoken to weren't Dani's concern, but she had still marked their faces out and would pass them on to the New York police later.

Dani hoped her quarry would lead her to something she could use because she'd had no luck so far in finding any connection to the shooter who had given them all the slip after the

ambush. The Winter Soldier had disappeared so completely that he was out of the US before Dani could find any trace of him, although the trace had also led to the restaurant, hence her interest in this man. *He's not one of Hammerhead's lieutenants, but he sure as heck has clout, a messenger from another Maggia family, maybe?*

But as the day wore on, keeping track of the black-haired, sallow-faced man had proved very difficult. He had used taxis several times, then went underground to take the subway. He even changed clothing a few times. In turn, this had forced Dani to ditch her Ghigau suit, and trying to follow him on the subway had been extremely annoying.

Now it was somewhat easier, and she stepped from one rooftop down to onto another, landing with a short blast of air from her hover skates, then flung herself to the side and over the street to the next building on the other side as the car the man was driving made a turn. Unlike in many spy or crime movies, the car actually wasn't a limo or SUV or, indeed, anything unusual. Instead, it was an old Ford truck, one that is certainly seen better days.

Her next landing, however, was nearly messed up as Emma's voice sprang into her head. *"Dani, how goes it? I'm fully recovered now, and I have to say I was kind of annoyed with your decision to go it alone on this."*

It was only her hover skates that saved Dani from an ignominious crash onto the other building's tilted roof, and she had to scramble for a moment to grab onto the top of it, holding herself there, then using her hover skates once more to regain her balance. *"Your timing leaves something to be desired, Emma,"* she thought tartly, knowing the telepath would pick up her annoyance. *"Next time, wait until you can sense I'm stationary at the very least."*

"Sorry," Emma replied, not sounding at all to Dani. *"But I felt it was more important to check in with you as soon as I could. Now, how goes the investigation? Do you need help? And if you don't want to take the rest of the world guard along, do you need access to code breakers, observation equipment or anything similar?"*

"No, I don't need anything. I'm on the trail of who I hope is a messenger from one of the other gangs to Hammerhead's group. I'm not really hopeful about leading us directly to the sniper. I tracked him to a private airport, so it's anyone's guess where he is. Do you think you could find his mind and discover whatever he knows?"

"I could... but following him would probably do more. He has to report to someone after all, and who knows if that will be in person or not?" Emma mused. *"And if he has been as careful as you sense, he might have access to technology that warns him of his mind being manipulated. I could tear the information out of him, but that might warn our real targets. After all, Hammerhead was merely the local muscle. I want the people higher up who gave the orders."*

That technology, while not common, was much more prevalent than a part of Emma could wish. And given the tech that the Maggia had access to, it was a given they would look into that kind of thing.

“Will he ever be able to eat solids again? Or be able to go to the bathroom on his own?” Dani inquired, amused both by that thought and how hard it was to make conversation even in her head as she raced after the truck containing her targets.

“I hope not. That was what I was going for anyway,” Emma retorted. *“Hmmm... you seem to have a plan, and I sense you have it well in hand for now. But don’t hesitate to call him back up if you need it. But would you object to me piggybacking on your mind for a bit?”*

“I don’t mind much, just don’t jog my elbow unless you have to,” Dani answered, skidding to a halt on a roof and ducking out of sight, the better to help the spells covering her before she looked over the edge of the roof and down to the truck below which had stopped at a red light.

Several minutes later, Dani’s hunt was interrupted once more by a voice speaking up from behind her as she crouched once more on a rooftop overlooking the streets below. “You know...”

By the time the second word was out of the mouth of whoever was speaking, Dani had turned, notched an arrow, and let fly. Now she watched as Spiderman caught the arrow and finished his sentence without pausing. “Normally, when I see costumed people around moving around the rooftops that aren’t me, I get a little nervous. I don’t suppose you could tell me what you’re up to, or should I assume the worst? And have I mentioned how scary that costume of yours is?”

“You surely recognize me Spiderman, I refuse to think you’re that ignorant or was that a rather sad attempt at witty repartee?” Dani grumbled, keeping one eye down on the truck even as she thrust out her hand peremptorily for the arrow. Waste not want not, after all.

“Hey, I’ll have you know that I don’t ‘attempt’ repartee,” Spiderman huffed. “You’d be amazed how many felons get completely thrown by my talking at them.”

“I actually probably wouldn’t, and I’ll note that you didn’t try to defend the witty part of my comment,” Dani retorted, chuckling quietly. “As for what I’m doing, why do you want to know? Again, you must know I’m part of the world guard, so it’s not as if I’m...”

“You’re moving around the rooftops, and if I hadn’t seen you stumble a bit of a moment ago, I don’t think I’d be able to even see right now, which means you’re after something or following someone. And while I don’t like to make that big of a deal of it, New York is kind of my town, okay? Hence the whole ‘friendly neighborhood Spiderman’ bit. So if there’s some big thing brewing some huge anti-mutant rally or a crime being plotted, I’d like to know about it.”

Spiderman cocked his head then, as if in question. "Or is this about the attack on Emma Frost? I know that Frost Industries are a major business partner with Magical Minds, and their hiring policies are some of the best for mutants. So it stands to reason that someone on the other end of that argument might have a problem with her."

"The boy is quite bright," Emma remarked. "But would you like me to make him go away?"

"No, remember? Harry reached out to Spidey in his Peter Parker persona, and he hasn't replied to us yet. So maybe we can start easing him in by having him take part in the investigation," Dani replied. "Even if he wants to stay in New York, Spiderman could do a lot more good if he had Magical Minds backing."

"Perhaps not as much as you might think. Although, we could certainly do something for Spiderman's public image. Even getting a few of the other newspapers to show what really happens during his fights would be better than the extremely lopsided and biased opinion of J Jonah Jameson," Emma ended ruefully. "Still, if you want to see if you can work with them, go with it."

Decision made, Dani motioned Spiderman to follow her as she leaped across to another building, following the truck through a series of turns, before traffic forced it to a halt once more, and they were able to carry on a conversation more normally. "Actually, the individual in the truck is a messenger between two crime families. The attack on Ms. Frost was paid for by criminal types, not terrorists. The crime families apparently want a piece of the Potter Pie."

"Does he really call it that, or did you just come up with that on your own?" Peter asked, and almost faster than Dani could blink, tossed what looked like a tiny spider flew down, smacking into the back of the truck, where it stuck. "If you want to follow it, we can follow it using my little tracker."

"That'd be a good idea if this guy wasn't so damn slippery," Dani began, and then the chase was on once more, the two of them now moving closer together so that they could actually converse on the move and Spidey could stay out of sight. "He's ditched two cars since I started to follow him, gone down in the subway twice, backtracked several times, used those freaking yellow taxis and changed clothing! Have I mentioned I hate those yellow boxes!? There are so many of the damn things."

"Wow. Okay, this guy really does take his security seriously. And he isn't moving toward the docks either, which is where I've normally found groups connected to organized crime." Spiderman paused, then twisted around to swing in an entirely different direction as screams abounded from below.

Dani looked in that direction and saw that a group of thugs had just broken into a jewelry store and in broad daylight no less. Dani estimated their ages as being barely out of

their teen years from their sizes and youthful features, which probably meant they were stupid. *After all, what kind of criminals would rob a bank or jewelry store during the daytime?*

Shaking her head and leaving Spiderman to it, she continued to move after the truck. Spiderman caught up quickly, able to swing his way across the city much more easily and in a straight line cutting off the angle on her and the truck, which had started to double back again before going into hiding.

“You could have helped you know,” the web crawler grumbled as he landed next to Dani on a rooftop. Below, the sallow-faced man had just left his truck, entering what looked like an extremely run-down apartment complex.

“I have my own mission, and I’m not going to set that aside to get involved in local issues unless I have to. Besides, it didn’t seem as if you needed help against a group of common thugs,” Dani retorted. “Honestly, what is it with criminals in New York thinking that they can get away with moving around in the daytime anyway?”

“The previous police Commissioner was really soft on crime, and the budget for the police wasn’t all that good either. It’s changed in the past few months, but that hasn’t quite penetrated a lot of the criminal minds out there.” Spiderman shook his head. “You would not believe the ranting I’ve heard from Commissioner Stacy on that point.”

“You know the Commissioner personally? Dani asked quizzically, frowning as she began to circle the apartment building just in case, not wanting to jump to its rooftop in fear of there being some kind of security. Indeed, she was now looking around for any video cameras and thankfully didn’t see any visible. “Listen, wait for me here for a second. I want to get a little closer, make sure that he’s not going to come out in another direction or something.”

“Why...” Spiderman began, then frowned as someone from across the street moved to the truck, hopping in and driving away. “Okay, was that just a moment of utter irony and a criminal getting his car stolen or...”

“I told you,” Dani began as she moved towards the apartment complex slowly. “This guy is tricky.” With that, she tapped the control rune on her Chameleon cloak, which activated the Disillusion runic array she’d had Kitty add to her suit.

Spiderman gaped at where Ghigau had just disappeared. “What the heck...”

Now invisible, Dani moved around the building, frowning as she didn’t find any other exits. The apartment complex didn’t even have a backyard or anything like that, it was just a tall thin building, graffiti all over its surface, and a lot of trash built up in the areas of the interior she could see through a few smashed windows. Finding a smashed window big enough for her, Dani moved through it silently, knowing that sound was more difficult for the cloaking array to block. As she did, Dani began to feel a little tired from the bioenergy portion of the array

leeching off her to empower the spells. But they should last her long enough for this. *“Emma, is there anyone else around?”*

Using Dani as the center point of her search, Emma spread her mental feelers out, discovering several minds directly below Dani, but only one on the first floor. “Since I don’t want to probe too deeply, I can’t tell whether or not that one person is your quarry or the others.”

Dani nodded at that, then moved down to the next floor, where she heard men and women all talking in a tumble, with some music playing in the background. She doubted the messenger she was following would fit in with that crowd, so she moved down to the first floor. There the huntress found a single apartment set into the opposite wall of an office of some kind.

Before Dani could reach the doorway, the man she had been following came out, once more having ditched his clothing. Before, he had worn a heavy winter coat, along with jeans. Now, the black-haired, sallow-faced man wore khaki pants and a larger, somewhat better-looking winter coat over a good button-down shirt and a tie.

Still using the Chameleon array, Dani faded back into the shadows, watching him as her quarry exiting the building only to find a much better-looking car, a BMW M5, waiting where the truck had been before.

The man entered the car and drove away rapidly, causing Dani to scramble, using her hover boots to zoom into an alleyway and up a fire escape before moving on across the rooftops again.

Spiderman joined her, admitting, “okay, this guy really is tricky. Another guy in a suit came by, dropped off the car then walked off. I marked him with a tracker, figure he might be part of the local crime scene if not as high as this guy is.”

“Good thinking, but I hope we’re near to the end of this trek. Before this, the guy was careful to look like a middle-class man or maybe even poor. Now he’s in a suit and has a rich car, which might mean he’d heading uptown,” Dani answered.

As Dani had predicted, that was the last changeover her quarry did before reaching his real destination. She and Spiderman watched as the M5 arrived at another apartment complex. This one had a private parking lot guarded by a gate and a security guard at the front. The man checked in, and the car disappeared inside.

Here, Dani once more had to leave Spiderman behind. Once again hidden under her chameleon cloak, Dani followed the man up to the third floor to a corner apartment.

Once she knew the name and place of the apartment, she rejoined Spiderman, who had cased around the apartment complex, finding that there weren’t any security cameras facing

the other rooftops around the building. "Even here in New York it isn't normal to think of danger coming over the rooftops, I guess."

With Spiderman's help, Dani situated herself below one of the apartment's windows, breathing a sigh of relief as she began to hear voices from within. "Emma?"

"It's some kind of communication, I can't sense any minds beyond your quarry, and again, I don't want to probe too hard," Emma replied. *"Will your psychometry work here?"*

"Hopefully," Dani answered, then turned her attention to the voices within the apartment. Most of them were male and sounded middle-aged and very self-important. One was a woman, with a low, gravelly tone of voice, like someone who had damage to her throat or lungs.

However, that was all she could tell. The windows seemed to have been treated with some kind of filter or something, so she couldn't make out exact words. *But that was all right. All I needed to know was where the meeting was taking place. My mutant power can do the rest.*

Dani felt her stomach grumble a bit as she hung there, her bio-energy being drained once more by the Chameleon Array.

Luckily, for a given value of the term's meaning, Dani didn't have to hang there for long.

Unfortunately for her current mission, the interruption did not come from Dani suddenly hearing what was going on above her. Instead, it came from a loud crash and several car alarms going off just out of sight through the buildings around her. Appearing in that direction, she scowled, wondering what was happening and noticing that Spiderman wasn't on the rooftop he had been in a moment ago.

Did he spot something, one of his regular rogues gallery? The world guard was aware that Spiderman, and generally speaking New York, seems to act like a magnet for trouble, especially the superpowered kind, and also knew that Spiderman had dealt with several opponents several different times since his appearance. *Although that was before the Vault was replaced by a newer facility. Since then, I don't think he's faced the same opponent more than a few times, only when the opponent was able to actually get away rather than taken into custody.*

Dani's thoughts caught off abruptly as a beam of energy seared through a building to one side, looking as if it was aiming straight for her. She dodged to one side, watching as the beam carved into the side of the building right above where her head had been, cutting into the floor of the apartment that she had been observing.

The energy beam cut off at that point, and she saw another beam flash out straight up in the distance, while she could also start to hear sirens as the police responded to the violence.

At the same time, she heard a shout of shock and sudden fear above her. Then the man's voice shouting, "what was that! Is someone attacking you? Have you been followed! You know the price for failure."

Another male voice answered, sounding fearful, the voice coming closer. "I don't... with all of my precautions, there's no way I was followed, sir. Please wait a moment!"

Realizing that her sudden movement had broken the Disillusion charm covering her, Danielle hastily realized her grip on the windowsill. She dropped down a few feet, aiming her fall further to the side where Dani saw a balcony. Dani hit the balcony feet first, then skidded to one side, and flipped up and over the railing there. Grabbing onto the bars at the base of the railing, Dani hung there, hopefully, unseen from above.

The violence in the distance began to get even louder, but Dani hung there still, waiting, then flipped herself back upright and over. When no attack on her was forthcoming, Dani made her way up the building using a combination of Sigyn's Gift shifted into a rope with a grapple on the end and her hover boots.

A moment later, Dani popped her head slightly above the rim of the window destroyed by the beam of energy. She couldn't see anyone inside, and she scowled, turning back down, racing down the side of the building toward the parking lot.

However, the car was gone, and Danielle scowled. *No way am I going to find him again, number five-minute head start. Still, he was having a conversation with someone up in that room. If so, my powers of psychometry can give me some more information. It's not the whole lead me to your lair thing I wanted, but it is at least another step.*

With that, Danielle decided to turn her attention to the ongoing battle nearby. Moments later, she was looking down at a fight occurring in a busy street. Amusing her, while a lot of people had run for cover, others were sticking around, taking pictures of what was going on. *Idiots. You all deserve the Darwin award for being complete wastes of space.*

However, her attention was mostly concentrated on the three combatants. Spiderman, as she had supposed, was one of them. He was busy dodging around, trying to both defend himself and protect a few people around him from the indiscriminate attacks of a giant spider robot. It was at least two stories tall and loomed over the street, one of its feet stuck through a car whose car alarm was still going off. Around it, several others have been crushed, and the buildings had all been damaged as well. From its eyes came lasers, occasionally from all eight smaller, thinner beams that lanced out in multiple directions simultaneously, while the two main eyes fired a stronger beam.

Fighting alongside this giant robot was some kind of strange amoeba-like creature. It was orange with black striations in a few places and a single blue highlight within its core. As

Dani watched from above, it stretched to one side, blocking a blow from Spiderman intended for the back of the robot, then tried to wrap itself around him.

But Spiderman kicked off the back of the giant spider, gaining distance and then using his web-shooters to swing away. He got in front of the giant robot again to try and use his webs to blind the thing. Yet the amoeba creature stretched itself, its body leaving its feet behind as it pushed itself towards Spiderman once more, forcing him to dodge.

Spiderman's Spidey Sense was working overtime right now, and it was the only reason why he hadn't been by one of the lasers, let alone captured by the amoeba. Now he dodged another attack from the giant robot, leading its main beam into the way of the amoeba, but the amoeba halted in place, the beam passing directly in front of it, causing Spiderman to scowl. "Oh, now that's just not fair!"

Deciding she'd seen enough, Dani held up Sigyn's Gift, which changed into a Bow in her hand, as she pulled out one of her explosive arrows. She was about to aim for the amoeba first but then saw the spider creature twisting around, lashing out towards Spiderman as he avoided the amoeba by ducking low. This had brought him within range of the robot's front legs, and Spiderman was hurriedly dodging this way and that, trying to use his web-shooters to gain some distance. But the amoeba also got into the action again, leaping up off of the back of the giant spider to land behind Spiderman, reaching for him once more.

Yet what had stopped Danielle was another problem. One of the back legs was about to also hit one of the idiots observing everything. This one had crouched behind a car, but the car had just been stabbed through by another one of the robot's legs, and Dani judged that in a second, it would be hurled to the side where would undoubtedly crush the man who had been hiding there, and who was currently frozen in fear.

About to take a hit from the spider robot to use his web-shooters to pull the man out of harm's way, Spiderman watched in shock as the leg disintegrated under the arrow shot from on high, dropping the car right where it had been originally. He was still almost hit, but thankfully, his Spidey Sense sent him rolling forward and then back into the air, the roll having given him enough space to use his web-shooters to pull himself back up into the air and out of the way of the spiders slashing legs. He nearly paid for this a second later by almost taking a smaller laser beam face. A last-second twitch of the head saved him. "That was a close one!"

The spider robot had other things to worry about. Having identified a new threat, it's turned some of its eye-beams on Danny, who dodged this way and that across the rooftops for a moment, shooting back occasionally. But the armor on the spider robot's body was much tougher than its legs, and her explosive rounds didn't do anything.

Time to switch weapons. With that thought, Dani sheathed Sigyn's Gift to her thigh as a dagger, then reached into her combat pouch, pulling out her gauss rifle.

Spiderman avoided the attacks from the amoeba only to stare as Dani did this, only coming back to his danger at the last second, dodging another attack even as he spluttered, "How the heck! Oh right, she's got access to magic. There's nothing unusual about pulling a giant freaking sci-fi-style rifle out of her pouch. It's magic. That would get really annoying over time."

Danielle fired, the gauss bullet slamming into and through the side of the spider robot's head. Instantly, the laser beams cut out, and it seemed to sag before quickly pushing itself back up to its feet, moving towards her in a deceptively fast gate.

"Oh no you don't!" Swinging low once more, Spiderman disconnected from the line he had been using a moment ago, rolling underneath a strike from the amoeba. Spidey shot out a web from both shooters capturing several of the spider robot's legs between them.

As strong as the spider robot was, it wasn't strong enough to break his webs. Those legs were no longer moving under its commands, and the fluidity of the robot's movements immediately stopped and turned back towards him.

The amoeba grabbed him from behind, but Ghigau shifted targets, putting around from her gauss rifle shot through the thing's head, right behind where Spiderman's head was. He could literally feel the course of its passage, yet the shot simply came out the amoeba's other side to bury itself in the concrete, doing no damage. The hole in the amoeba quickly filled in, and Spiderman found himself being drawn back into the thing despite his best efforts to pull himself free.

He looked up at his Spidey sense went off again, and the robot lifted one leg above him.

Dani leaped down from on high, crashing into the head of the spider creature with all her weight, having canceled her hover boots for a moment. Switching back to Sigyn's Gift, she shot an explosive arrow down into the damaged segment of the spider robot's neck. The head exploded, and Dani leaped off to land behind the amoeba. Another arrow came up and was shot into the amoeba, which instantly began to freeze under the impact of the freeze arrow, a little trick that she and Harry had talked about when she was creating various arrows for her quiver.

The creature twisted its legs and head around a full 180 without any effort, reaching for the arrow in an attempt to pull it out, forgetting Spiderman for a moment. This allowed him to turn and punch into the thing, his hands then opening to grab at a small cylinder within. With a grunt of effort and no small amount of pain as the amoeba's insides tried to crush his hand in turn, Spiderman shattered the canister.

The canister must have been working as some kind of body control, or brain maybe. Whatever the case, Spiderman's destroying it caused the amoeba creature to collapse, its substance quickly beginning to dissolve on the pavement.

But to Spiderman's astonishment, his Spidey Sense was still going off. Looking around quickly, his eyes lit on the body of the spider robot, and his danger sense went into overdrive, jangling at him so hard that he twitched in place for a second before shouting out, "that thing's still dangerous. somehow!"

Danielle immediately began to skate towards a few of the onlookers, who had come out of their hiding places thinking the danger was over. She leaped towards them, barreling into them, uncaring of the weight of her armor as she pushed them back into cover behind a large transit van.

Meanwhile, Spiderman had raced towards the robot. Grabbing it from by its front, where the head had once been, he heaved it up into the air with a grunt of effort, then hurled it upward. The spider robot had barely reached the sky above the nearby buildings when it exploded, damaging the nearby buildings severely.

This also sent shrapnel and bits of burning wreckage everywhere, including onto Danielle as she lay on top of a man and a woman, grunting under the impact to her back. When the impact stopped, she turned her head slightly to look upward, then pushed to her feet before turning her armored head to glare down at the civilians she'd just saved. "Perhaps next time, the appropriate response to a dangerous fight between a supervillain and a hero would be to run away, or if not, hide inside a nearby building? Not stay to try to take pictures or just gawk at the action."

Sighing, she turned away, racing towards a nearby building. She ignored calls from behind her, including a few that were actually quite smart, asking if her presence there meant that the world guard was now going to be back in Spiderman or if he was actually now a member of them. After all, that was Spiderman's decision.

After grabbing up the cylinder, and a nearby camera that had followed the action from on high, Spiderman joined Danielle, where she was observing the building again. "Sorry about that. I hope my villain of the week didn't wreck your stakeout."

"It did, but that's all right. I still might be able to get something out of this. But what was all that about?" Dani inquired as she indicated with her hand that Spiderman should help her up to the apartment. "Those were two extremely different robots, but they seemed to be working together against you. Did you perhaps pass off an evil robotics competition or something?"

"You laugh, but with my kind of luck, there probably is some kind of evil robotics competition that decided capturing or killing me is precisely the correct criterion to use when deciding who the winner is," Spiderman answered tartly, setting her down inside the apartment.

"If you need help, you already have the means to communicate with the world guard, Spiderman." Danielle gave his nom de guerre a particular note, indicating without saying it that she knew his secret identity, which caused Spiderman to stiffen a bit. "I think you would be able to do a lot more good with just a bit of backup."

"Um, so... now what? Er, were you at least able to overhear anything?" Spiderman inquired, trying to change the subject as he looked away from Ghigau looking around the room in confusion.

"No, I wasn't. But I have other skills, much like those web-shooters of yours. Are those natural or from some kind of equipment?"

"Equipment, if they were natural they wouldn't be coming out of my wrists," Spiderman quipped, smirking at the gagging noise from the armored Custodes. "I can change the chemical makeup of the cartridges inside my web-shooters, which are stored in my wrist. Actually, that's part of the reason why I am thinking about your boss's offer. The chemicals I need for my web solution are kind of expensive."

"Send us a bill for them, and we could probably get those chemicals for you in bulk," Dani chuckled as Spiderman set her feet on the ground, and she looked around the place. "That's one of the best things about being a Custodes, above the training. When our Jarl says no expense spared, he means it."

"Jarl,? What do you think you are, a Viking?" Spiderman quipped.

"Heh, or something," Dani replied, looking around a faint frown on her features.

This clearly wasn't an apartment someone lived in. There was no furniture but a bar to one side and a single, albeit comfortable chair in the center of the room. Through another doorway was a similarly sparse bedroom, with only a small cot. However, there were a few things she recognized built into the roof and floor – small speakers on the floor and a hologram projector set into the roof. This was paired with a series of controls set into the chair's armrest.

What was also obvious was that the messenger or whatever he was had taken the time to destroy those same devices. The chair was smashed, several segments of it seemed to be missing, and the speakers and hologram projectors had all been stowed in. *I guess he didn't think he could keep this setup a secret once the apartment complex brought in a construction crew to repair the damage.*

With Spiderman watching from the window, Danielle placed her hands on the chair's back and concentrated. Her power of psychometry pulled out the images of what had just occurred here and all around the room, images of what had just been occurring appeared. Thankfully, there seemed to be a lot of emotions in the air, fear and annoyance from the man in the chair. That fueled her power and enabled her to reconstruct events.

Sound was beyond her, but at least she was able to see what had occurred from the side of the man in the chair, which included the faces of those he was talking to, regardless of the fact they were holograms. Two of them she recognized. One of them was the Silver Fox, the man who had warned Emma of the attack. The other was someone she had recently seen in the news somewhere. She couldn't quite place where, but he was some kind of businessperson from the southern US. The others she didn't recognize.

The memory played out, the meeting going for about forty minutes. The man in the chair seemed to be giving a report for most of that, then some questions were asked, the heads of the various gang leaders turned to one another, starting to argue back and forth. The man in the chair stayed silent, the fear visible in his face for a bit. This was exacerbated a moment later by the attack from the robot spider hitting the apartment's outer wall.

The gaunt-faced man hopped to his feet and moved to the window, staring out it for a moment then back. As Dani watched the man's afterimage spoke to the holograms, a decision was reached, and the man ended the conversation, rushing out of the room after smashing the chair and everything else. In his hand, the sallow-faced man held what looked like a black box, and Dani wondered idly what it was.

Hearing the click of a camera behind her, she smiled over at Spiderman. "You realize none of this is going to be admissible in court, right?"

"Maybe not, but if I ever see these guys, I'll know to be on the lookout for trouble," Spiderman retorted.

"Point." Danielle nodded, turning her attention back to the heads around her. "And you did place a tracker on his car, right?"

"Yep, right before that amoeba attacked me and forced me out of the area around here and right into the arms of that robot spider," Spiderman grumbled.

"Good. In that case, I think we've done as much on my side of things. Thanks for your help, Spiderman. If you want to follow up on the local angle, call us, and we'll help however you want. For my part, I think it's time I check-in with the rest of my team."

OOOOOO

While Emma wished to lash out at the criminal organization that had decided it was strong enough to attack her, Emma had a lot of other duties on her shoulders with Harry gone. Not so much Ororo or Jean. Jean was, before her pregnancy, mostly acting as the Custode's weapon's designer. That wasn't actually needed any longer, although she had also worked as a go-between for the various science and engineering teams working with the EDF. Ororo was head of the growing educational department that handled the dependents of the workers on Fortress Mars, Camelot and the Savage Land, but that mainly ran itself now, thanks to Pinoptes.

One of these things was sitting in on a meeting on a series of meetings on the military side of things. Steve was involved in some of these and had a point he wanted to bring up, so he came over to her mansion via a runic doorway early. "Have you heard about the new law that is being thought of in the House of Representatives?"

Emma frowned, thinking. *Mary Jane said something in passing when Emma had got in touch with her a few hours ago, but...* "I'm afraid I've been out of the loop due to my injuries and concentrating on the Potter Enterprises side of things."

Steve looked quizzical at that, and Emma waved her hand airily. "Well, what else am I supposed to call the Savage Land initiative, the EDF, the ongoing mining operations in orbit, Fortress Mars, the ongoing efforts to pressure various nations on equal rights for mutants and so forth?"

"The Potter Movement? The Space First Program and its hangers-on? Huh, there really isn't a single term we can use to cover all of the diverse goals that Harry and you all have been shooting for, can we?" Scott murmured, leaning back in his chair scratching his chin thoughtfully. He was only going to be part of one of the meetings later, but since it was the first one, he too had come over early, wanting to be briefed on the Custodes' response to the attack on Emma. "The Pro-Humanity Movement, perhaps?"

"That will do as well as anything else for the overall label. But you were saying, Steve?"

"There is a law called the superpower registration act that's on the floor of the House of Representatives. It isn't gaining all that much headway yet, but I wondered what all of your positions will be," Steve opined. "To my mind, it sounds too much like profiling."

"Agreed, even without looking at the particulars of the law itself. And it would also give the government a little too much power," Scott added. "And I'm not just saying this as leader of the X-Men. Everyone knows that besides Alex, I don't really have any family to threaten, and at this point, the mansion is a castle underneath its bland exterior. But that kind of thing could still make a lot of problems for other members of my team, Spiderman, a few other heroes heard of. Something fist?"

Steve shrugged. "I know who you mean though I haven't met him. Yet from what SHIELD knew about him, he seems to have a level head on his shoulders, at least. He's not the only one out there, though. Not everyone can be as open with their private persona as Captain Britain or I."

Everyone heard the dry note in Steve's voice, which amused Emma greatly and caused Scott to chuckle a little. Captain Britain took his persona as a lord and defender of Britain a little too far occasionally, and he was also a rather large Captain America fanboy at the same time.

"Harry doesn't like the idea of trying to use his money to back one or other political party beyond his pro-equality stance and anything that will get in the way of the Space Defense

Force. I think we could safely say that this kind of profiling is a little too much like what the late, unlamented Senator Kelly was attempting, so we can step in and throw our support behind its opponents,” Emma went on dryly.

“That’s a horrifying thought. With so many of our powerhouses galivanting off after Galactus, I certainly wouldn’t want to tangle with a revived Sentinel program,” Scott shivered. Thanks to Emma and Harry, they had taken the Sentinels and their Master Mold entirely off-balance, and before they could build up their numbers, but it had still been a hard fight.

“I’ll get with Nick and our own spymaster to make certain that someone isn’t attempting to revive that program,” Emma agreed. “Was there anything else?”

“Yes. Are you, or rather, Sir Neyland-Smith hiring?” Steve smirked slightly, shaking his head as he mentioned the Potter group’s spymaster. “Natasha, that is the Black Widow, has decided that the FBI just isn’t interesting enough, and she wants to work with the Custodes some more.” Steve chuckled. “Unlike Hawkeye, who’s basically retired from active service to take on a training role. Heh, I still can’t believe the guy’s married and has a kid to boot!”

“Some secrets you try a hell of a lot harder to hide,” Scott also chuckled. “He was a great influence on Lance. Is there any sign of him wanting to join the X-men or the Custodes?”

“I don’t think so. Avalanche is happy to be going to college and working part-time with the FBI for now.”

“Well, I think Dennis would love to work with Natasha. Beyond Mystique and Morph, we lack somewhat in terms of competent field agents of our own. Most of our information gathering is based on computers and contacts,” Emma mused.

“Is Mystique ready to get back in the field? I, I heard about Iris. I even sent my condolences, though she didn’t reply. And what about Wolverine? As much as his persona is a bit over-the-top, there was one point where he was one of the Allies’ best agents,” Steve suggested.

“I doubt we’ll need field agents for this operation, but Mystique has said she’s ready to, as she put it, get back in the saddle.”

“The weapon X thing was personal for Logan. Beyond that, Wolverine might be willing to maybe take on an odd job here or there, but he’s enjoying getting to know his daughter, and, though you haven’t heard this from me, he is shacking up with Shanna and Fatale in the Savage Lands,” Scott answered. “They’re trying to keep it secret for some reason, but Laura told me about it.”

“Huh. Learn something new every day,” Steve murmured, shaking his head with a smile. Then again, that sawed-off ass has always had a way with women. I’ve never understood that. Shaking his head, he went on. “But tell me more about what you all are going to do about this

whole Maggia thing. I'm kind of annoyed they were able to rebuild after SHIELD, and the Avengers hammered them so badly."

"We'll be turning over copies of the faces we saw in Dani's illusion to Fury. Some of them we already know to be non-Americans, and those we will be going after personally." Emma answered.

Scott indicated that he would want to be involved in the discussion on that score once they had a target but also felt he had to point out that the Potter Movement didn't have agreements with every country out there. "Heck, we're not even well-liked in some of them."

"Regardless, we will attack any target of opportunity we discover," Emma said firmly. "The Maggia need to be shown there are much bigger threats than they wish to tangle with."

From there, the discussion moved to other matters, mostly dealing with the educational side of things, the second class of X-men, and a few other minor matters. Then, the trio traveled via the runic doorways to Fortress Mars. Emma, in her Diamond persona, talked with General Murphy and Carol about logistics and also some ideas which had come out of the think tank for advanced weaponry. Meanwhile, Scott and Steve spoke to Admiral Whitaker about training exercises and prepared a tutorial on boarding tactics against both powered and nonpowered opponents.

With that done, Emma went on a survey of the nearly finished work on the last of the captured Kree ships. Crewing those ships would be something else entirely. There, Admiral Whitaker joined her, giving a presentation he and the officers who had already served in the battles against the Badoon and Shi'ar had created. Afterward, Emma gave the okay to adding more redundancy to the captured ships - the Kree didn't believe in secondary bridges - and on looking for ways to cut down on the number of crewmen necessary to run each of them.

Satisfied with the work in space, Emma traveled back to Earth to her next two meetings.

Emma strode out of Magical Mind's teleportation room and down the few flights of stairs to her office here, or rather that of her Diamond persona. Inside the office, Emma found her next meeting waiting for her, along with Mary Jane and Pepper Potts. "Ah, excellent. You brought your smarter half along."

Tony Stark rolled his eyes as he stood up from where he had been trying to get MJ to let him access the room's computer. "Excuse me, but who is the genius in this room? I think that would be me. And it's my expertise that you all want to use to create another war machine."

"Which you have shown yourself imminently capable of. Even if you can't point them at the right target," Emma replied, smiling thinly. "Whereas we have a much better track record of that kind of thing."

"Tony's grateful for the chance to be useful. Believe me when I say that he has been wearing a rut in his palace in Hawaii," Pepper Potts interjected, causing Emma to smile.

“Palace? Pepper, please, that modest place? It’s only four stories and isn’t nearly as large as a few other mansions I could name,” Tony argued back dramatically. He did everything dramatically.

“Above ground sure, but below ground? You have at least five more stories of stuff underneath your house, Tony. And I note that you didn’t mention anything about going stir crazy,” Pepper reported, taking his hand in hers and squeezing gently.

That seems to calm Tony down a little, although he was still looking at Diamond with a bit of distrust. A second later, the reason for that came to light. “I know you’re a telepath like the Pheonix, only your telepathy is your primary power. Be aware I took an EKG of my brain before arriving, and I am protected by technological means against any kind of telepathic assault. I won’t be turned into a puppet or whatever.”

So at least some of his ongoing issue with Henry is perhaps the fact that he distrusts telepaths? Well, in that, I can hardly blame him. “Very well. I wasn’t going to try to control you, but would you like a test of your technological defenses? The only one who has developed some form of ability to keep those of our ilk out entirely is Doctor Doom, and a large portion of that is the fact that he is just that mentally powerful.”

The blow to his ego that created led to Tony rather foolishly saying, “Fine, do it. I think you’ll find my...”

He paused as a small box on his waist went off with a loud beeping sound. A second later, the AI Jarvis’s voice came out from a tiny speaker set into its side. “Sir, I am detecting a change in your mental status, please advise, or Operation Retrieval will be activated. Note, Operation Retrieval will be launched regardless in five minutes unless the multiple callsigns are given, and your EKG is taken and sent to my web.”

“That’s fascinating, but it didn’t stop me from getting inside. The rest of your plans though might,” Emma admitted, pulling back slightly. “You played me.”

Tony shrugged. “I wanted to show off, and you thought you could use my ego against me. But if people do that often enough, even someone like me will be able to figure it out. Now,” he said as he tapped in a series of commands on his little black box. “I’m going to need to step into a bathroom or someplace to perform an EKG on myself, so let’s get this meeting over with.

“Four minutes 10 seconds,” Jarvis supplied.

“What could Jarvis do from Hawaii? Literally half a world away?”

“You’ll find out in three minutes,” Tony smirked.

Rolling her eyes, Emma waved a hand languidly. "Fine. Yes, we'd like to commission you to build weapons for us. Specifically, we want you to take charge of creating suits which could be used to drop troopers from orbit."

"Mass-produced? That's not my scene anymore," Tony protested.

"No, but designing it is," Emma rejoined.

"And what will the suit be used against?"

"Alien threats."

"And who will it be used by?"

"A corps-sized force pulled from various nations. All of whom have agreed to provide troops already."

"And you don't think someone's going to walk off with it? Like they did with the whole Ironman knockoffs, the Crimson Dynamo and the Titanium Man and a few others I could name from Japan and China?" Tony scoffed. "You can't be that naïve."

Once more, Emma rolled her eyes. "I assure you I am not. And have you noticed any of our technology getting into hands when it shouldn't? Magic is good for many things, as you can attest to, Mister 'I had to implant a somewhat radioactive battery in my chest to survive'." When Tony scowled, Emma went on in a less confrontational tone. "I will remind you that this is a chance to repair your reputation not only in our eyes but in the eyes of the public. Perhaps if you do a good enough job, we can put pressure on the American government to end your house arrest."

"As fascinating as this is, and while I believe now that Tony at the very least is not being controlled overtly, you only have one minute left before Operation Retrieval is executed," Jarvis reminded everyone.

"The bathroom is four doors down to the left," Emma advised. "And if you attempt to snoop Tony, I will remind you your technological defenses don't keep me out, so you can be assured I can keep track of you just as easily."

Watching Tony leave, Emma shook her head and looked over at Pepper. "I see that being incarcerated has had no effect on Tony's ego."

"Heh, you are preaching to the choir, sister. I think it's actually had the opposite effect. Too much time alone has allowed him to spin his mental wheels. I've only been able to see him once a week for the last month, you know. Before that, he had a limit on how many visitors and how often he could have visitors in a month." Pepper scowled a bit. "You could have gone to bat for him before this, Diamond, you and Potter both."

“Yes, we could have. But you also have to remember that Tony built those Hulk Busters, and the rest of that Army, not just to be used against hulk, but Harry as well.” Emma supplied thinly. “I rather think that a period in the timeout corner was the least we could hope for.”

Pepper scowled but eventually nodded. “You’ve got a point, I suppose.”

Tony soon returned, and he and Emma continued to trade barbs for a while, but eventually, Tony agreed to head the new weapons design program. Anything that he could do to both protect Earth better and get the heck out to mingle with other people sooner, he would do happily.

This meeting, of course, segued into the next: speaking with Sam, Steve, and several other military officers in the headquarters of Magical Minds.

As soon as Emma entered the office the two men were waiting in, Sam spoke up, saying, “You know I’ve never run more than anything larger than a single company, right? Now you’re handing me an entire training program for what amounts to at least a corps-sized fighting force.”

“But one that is built entirely around your own specialty, that of jump troop warfare. Albeit on a larger scale, yes,” Emma admitted. “But with the home countries of the gentlemen sitting around this table and Harry all providing troops for it, I think the orbital drop Marine concept is a good one. So we need to start building the bedrock for it now.”

The other men at the table with Sam all looked at one another, suspicion and interest plain in many of their faces. These men were representatives of parachute troops from practically around the world, some of them coming from experimental groups like Sam’s original team and others from storied parachute regiments. They had all been told to participate in this briefing by their parent militaries, and now they understood why.

“Who are we going to answer to?” Asked a British SAS captain, his tone mild but his face stern. “While my government has no issue with troops leaving our service to serve in the EDF, or retired individuals signing up with you, that is a far stretch from training combatants whose primary purpose will be to attack terrestrial targets.”

“The EDF is a force that controls the orbitals and can bombard the planet from space, and you are going to quibble about dropping Marines,” the Russian man muttered, shaking his head.

“Gentlemen, if Potter alone wanted to wipe out the Earth, he wouldn’t need the earth defense force to do it for him, as I’m certain that everyone at this point is well aware of,” Emma answered harshly, still dressed in her Diamond persona. “If you cannot trust us at this point to have the best interests of humanity as a whole and Earth as a whole, then perhaps your governments did not choose the right man for this job.”

“We still would like reassurances that the men and women we are training, who I assume will be pulled from our various services, will not be used against our governments whatever issue might occur between them and Potter.” A German man said firmly.

Emma nodded towards Mary Jane, who stepped around her and calmly placed a folder on the desk, pulling out sheets of paper, and sending them to each man. “This is the written remit of the Orbital Drop Marine Program. Yes, you all will be trained to drop from orbit on terrestrial targets. But only when extraterrestrial threats have been recognized and pose a threat to the world around them.”

The Russian leaned forward, a scowl on his bearded face. “And if we faced something like what my country did recently? An extraterrestrial threat hidden behind human faces?”

“In that case, the ODMs will only be used against the aliens, not their dupes. Only in recognized and clear signs of extraterrestrial threats,” Emma repeated herself.

“you should also know, gentlemen, that this is also a waiver. Everyone who joins this unit will sign it and be bound by it legally,” MJ warned.

These men were all soldiers, and they understood that their superiors had already signed off on this. So it didn’t take too long to shift the discussion to the nuts and bolts of the matter, assigning training zones, talking about the level of participation each nation would contribute, a timeframe for when training could begin. And finally, why she had met with Tony: The creation of the ODM’s suits, combat suits that, while not as idiosyncratic and lacking in any kind of magic, would in the main match those of Ghigau, Coyote and Uzume’s own.

All in all, Emma reflected, passing by Tony as he entered the room with a salesman’s smile and a personal computer, *this has been a good first day back*.

OOOOOO

The star system that the Custodes and Starjammers had previously chosen for meeting up once more was a slightly out-of-the-way system, but one which could be reached by several Shi’ar star systems, systems which were home to three different races. Two of those races were among the most recently ‘annexed’ by the Shi’ar.

Of course, recently was a bit of a misnomer. Even the latest species to be discovered and brought into the Shi’ar Empire had been consumed over eighty years ago, and that race was not one of these three. Yet, it took centuries to truly beat down any feelings of independence or hatred of the yoke among the conquered people.

Because of this, this system had become home to a large and growing community of exiles made up of people from those conquered races after their amalgamation into the Empire. Corsair had no idea what they had hoped to achieve when he had told the Earthers about it, but regardless, the Shi’ar had found it and wiped the system clean of life a hundred

and twenty years ago. Since then, pirates had come and gone, only to draw more naval ire into the area each time.

The last time that had occurred was 10 years ago, so by this point, most people had forgotten about this place. It was only because of Cho'od that Corsair even knew of this place. Otherwise, it would have been simply another number on a star map.

"I'm reading one gas giant, some wreckage around its northern pole, but otherwise, its rings are minimal," Jean reported, she and Reed pouring over the sensor log of the ship. "Two other planets, both nearer to the sun, in close orbit with one another. They could be a decent source of heavy metals since we're reading some more wreckage on the surface of one of them and in orbit. The sun is yellow, solid class G temperature."

"There is also quite a bit of debris further out near a few asteroids that seems to have been caught but not pulled in by the sun's gravity," Reed added. "They are currently almost directly across from our entry vector. I would estimate this was the main population center of the system... and it was massive. Several dozen kilometers wide, larger by far than any single orbital construction we've seen in the Shi'ar Empire. I wonder what it looked like..."

"A base made by exiles and rebels from several very different races?" Jean hummed, her face thoughtful, and the others all fell silent as well, wondering about the strange amalgamation that might have existed here in the past.

"I am more wondering why," Ororo answered. "Why they came here, what they wanted to do, what they were in fact doing. The last members of three conquered races willing to strike out on their own in order to be free? How much of that has been romanticized? How much was real? What was their society like?"

Harry chuckled wryly. "Anthropological musings aside, where do you think the Starjammer is hiding?"

"I would assume by the asteroids at the out system. Easier to run from there," Hela opined. "Alas, history also shows in that debris that it is also easier to attack if you know where to go before you arrive."

She was proven correct, as sensors showed the Starjammer coming out from within some of the debris. "We're being hailed," Douglas reported.

"Put it up on the screen," Harry answered.

A moment later, Corsair's debonair mustache and the rest of his face appeared on the screen. A taut look was in his eyes, but it went away as he spotted his son at the back of the Explorer's bridge, and the image shifted outwards to show the rest of the pirate vessel's bridge. "I take it that you succeeded in your mad scheme then, Potter?"

"If it worked, it obviously wasn't mad. Both I and the two voices in my head agree on that," Harry replied with a grin, causing Jean to break out into a bout of giggles as Hela and Ororo rolled their eyes. "Still, dealing with Galactus wasn't the only issue we had to face. Have you heard anything about the fallout from that? Deathbird decided to launch an attack while we were prepared to take advantage of D'ken turning on us to attack him in turn. It made everything more tumultuous."

"We actually haven't heard anything, although it does make sense. Do you have any idea which of the royals launched this virus that has destroyed the Shi'ar Empire's... well, Empire? No communication, no ships being able to jump to hyperspace or even move, all of their computer systems no longer working..." Cho'od questioned.

Corsair shook his head. "Whatever it was, it nearly caught us too. Hell, it would have if not for Forge realizing what was happening and cutting us off from the local computer network, and then performing a hard reboot right after."

"What are you talking about?" Harry asked guilelessly. *Thank you, Emma, and all your lessons about politics and the need to lie with a straight face.*

While the Starjammers had been told about Harry's plan to do away with D'ken if they got the chance, only Forge had any idea about the virus that would be their Parthian shot at the Empire. At the time, Harry and Ororo had jointly decided that telling the pirates would serve no purpose, while Harry was concerned that the nature of the virus would be too much for even the pirates, with their smoldering joint hatred of the Shi'ar race, to be okay with.

Judging by the apathetic looks on the Starjammer's faces, though, that didn't seem to have been needed. Indeed, Hepzibah and Raza were viciously amused by it, while Cho'od looked a bit saddened but resigned. If that is, Harry was reading his expression correctly. Of course, since the alien was a giant freaking lizard with a face like a gecko and a mermaid combined into one horrid whole, that was anyone's guess.

"Whenever we exit hyperspace, our computer automatically updates itself via any nearby the navigational computers. It's an automated part of any normal star faring ship's programming. But as we did, we experienced a series of massive shutdowns. Luckily, Forge spotted the problem and cut us off from the source, like I said. After that, we were forced to switch to a copy of your operating system that he provided us," Corsair nodded over to where Forge was sitting in one of the other chairs next to Hepzibah.

"With the new operating system running the ship, we were able to get underway quickly enough. But from what we saw, the Shi'ar Empire's own communications and computer network is turning against itself," Forge commented.

"We jumped into a few systems on our way here to see what was going on and saw the same issue everywhere," the Mephitisoid added, a feral smirk on her face. "Heh, I think that the

Shi'ar Empire's pride in its computer network and 'semi-organic operational system' has come back to haunt them."

While he hadn't heard that term before, Harry decided to ignore it, instead exchanging looks with the rest of his bridge crew. The son of an ambassador, Douglas shrugged innocently, giving away nothing, while Reed studiously continued to look at the readings for the system.

It was Hela who spoke up from the rest, her tone one of mild interest. "Actually, we did see something like that. The fighting on the surface was dying down, and Deathbird was trying to escape after Lilandra reorganized the defenders on the ground. But as we were leaving, didn't all of those ships stop moving?"

She seemed to run through a series of recordings from that moment, none of which had been doctored. That would've defeated the purpose. By the time the Explorer was able to get those readings, the virus they had uploaded into the central control room had done its work, so there was no need to further muddy the waters.

Standing at the back of the bridge, Alex seemed about to say something, but whatever it was, he seemed to think better of it shaking his head. He understood why even his father and his crew wouldn't be told about the real source of the virus which had brought down the Shi'ar Empire's computers. Alex didn't agree with it, but he understood. And Alex also understood that he tried to tell them the Fidelius spell wouldn't allow him to do so. His own mind would rebel against the attempt.

"That's disturbing. Could it be some last gasp from D'ken?" Corsair questioned.

"That would certainly fit his profile," Harry said with a frown. "I couldn't say personally, but he did seem the type to believe that if he couldn't rule something, it should be destroyed."

"He is. Believe me, he is," Corsair growled. "And he is dead, yes? You all said that would be your goal if he acted true to form and gave you the opportunity after you beat off Galactus. Which..." Corsair's lips twisted, "You'll note we're not asking about. The fact you lot are alive shows that you succeeded, as impossible as that might seem."

Now Alex spoke up, at last, stepping forward to gain his father's attention. "Deathbird launching her own attack didn't do anything to stop us from taking advantage of the fact that D'ken was going to betray us. He tried to get away when the fight turned against his loyal troops, and I ran him down and killed D'ken myself."

"After that, we decided to retreat when we could. The outcome of the battle was still in doubt at that point, but Deathbird seemed to have lost her bid for power and was retreating from the Shi'ar's capital by the time we had reached the hyperspace limit," Hela added.

Corsair smiled, and some tension in his face, lines of repressed anger and grief, seemed to disappear as he smiled at his son. "Thank you, Alex. I would not have wished that on you, but having that closure, that is, that is a vast relief." Then he shook his head. "Do you think we can

link up? I think this calls for a celebration, and I'd rather like to talk to my son a bit more. And I'm sure your battle against Galactus is worth a drink or a hundred."

"You have permission to come aboard. We can share what happened with the Emperor and Galactus in comfort, but..." Harry frowned thoughtfully, playing it up a bit as if this had just occurred to him. "If this phenomenon is empire-wide, I might have a proposition for you..."

Corsair looked intrigued at Harry's words, then nodded, and the two ships moved to link up.

Hepzibah walked into the Explorer's cafeteria about forty minutes later, carrying a large crate of multi-colored wines. "Hail to the conquerors!"

She set the crate down and then pulled out one wine that looked like the same orange vintage Deathbird had served Harry and Hela, tossing it over to Alex. "For your execution of the piece-of-offal-in-command. I know Corsair had fond dreams of doing the deed himself but having his son get do it seems to be just as cathartic."

As Alex fumbled to catch the wine, Hepzibah moved forward, making room in the hatchway for Forge as she hefted the crate up, moving to where Hela, Thundra, John and Ben sat at one table. "That was undoubtedly the catalyst for the chaos we've seen. Seeing all the lights go out all around the Shi'ar Empire, that warms my heart immensely! At last, the Shi'ar are getting what they so richly deserve!"

Hela chuckled at that and gestured the alien woman to sit next to her, gesturing to a few bottles of wine from Earth in front of her. "Please, come and sit. I presume you at least brought a few bottles of your own? We can compare vintages."

"Do you have some of that cheese? I found it to be quite tasty the last time I was aboard," Hepzibah answered, sliding into a chair across from the other woman who waved her hand at the plates on the table, which did include cheese, much to the white-furred alien's delight.

All around the room, the pirates began to mingle with the Custodes and their allies, asking questions about the battle against Galactus and against the mad Emperor. Many of them wondered how he had attempted to betray the humans and how it had backfired. They all knew he would, but D'ken wasn't a fool, so he had to have tried something particularly underhanded to fight a group that had beaten the World Eater.

Indeed, Jean and Forge were the only two not discussing what had happened since the two crews had parted. Instead, they talked about the changes Forge had made to the Starjammer, and what he had learned from working on the ship.

Amusing Harry somewhat, Deathbird's attempt to launch a coup simultaneously as D'ken betrayed the Earthers was seen as a sideshow to many. Yes, she was feared as a fighter, and if she became Emperor, they would certainly not have had an easy time of it. But to

everyone aboard the pirate ship, Deathbird was simply just another part of the Shi'ar Empire, and their hatred for her did not run as deeply or personally as with D'ken.

While Corsair had lost his wife, Hepzibah's entire race had been eaten over centuries as a delicacy. Indeed, her own family had been served as a meal to the royal family when she was young, with only her surviving because a particularly greedy governor had not informed the Emperor that there was another Mephitisoid still lived and had wanted her to grow up, so there was more to eat. Cho'od's race lived in slavery, too dangerous to give rights to, to useful to kill off like Raza's race, who had died battling against the Shi'ar, man, woman and child. Indeed, it had been D'ken who led the Shi'ar to conquer the Saurids and wipe out Raza's race.

To say they were happy that D'ken had died in such a fitting manner was to understate things tremendously. To say they were happy to see the Shi'ar Empire now collapsing, due, they thought, to some last gasp of the mad Emperor, was, as Cho'od put it, "Cosmic justice on a scale that would almost make me believe in a destiny-controlling deity like you humans occasionally profess to."

Harry, Ororo and Jean talked with Cho'od and Raza for a time, letting Corsair and Alex get reconnected. While Ororo and Cho'od controlled the discussion on one side of the room, talking about the various races that were part of the Empire, Corsair had Alex go through the entire action from the moment they turned the ambush on itself party to the moment Alex killed the Emperor.

As the wine and food started to disappear, Alex and Corsair came over to join the conversation, and Harry felt it was about time to put his offer out on the table. However, before he could, Alex spoke up. "Harry, Sir, you remember that offer you made? Well, I've decided I want to stay with my father and the Starjammers."

Jean looked up from her own plate of food, frowning. "Are you sure? If this is about Polaris and your 'feelings' for her, then I gotta say, going to the ends of the universe to get away from the girl who jilted you is taking it a step too far."

"I did offer him the opportunity Love," Harry interjected gently. "I doubt his feelings for Lorna are any part of this decision."

"Alex has matured a lot in the past few weeks, love. But, trust me, if I thought he would leap at this just to get away from Lorna and her obvious interest in Steve, I would never have offered it," Harry continued mentally down their permanent link, causing his redhaired lover to shrug mentally, not having spent as much time around the younger Summers as Harry had during this mission or even before that.

"Thanks for that, Harry, and you're right. Lorna isn't factoring into this. Although," Alex chuckled wryly, scratching at his hair. "I will say that getting away from Scott's shadow kind of is? I want to have the chance to prove I can be just as good a leader as he can, and back on Earth, there's no way to do that. You already have more than enough team leaders and

lieutenants to go around. Out here, maybe I can make a name for myself. And I also just want to be with my dad. Can you blame me?"

"Not for that last point no," Jean answered, still looking at him thoughtfully despite Harry's words. "Scott's never tried to overshadow your accomplishments, you know. And I think he would be heartbroken if you just didn't return without a word."

"I'll record something, I guess," Alex said with a shrug before wilting somewhat under the jaundiced looks from both Ororo and Jean. "Honest, I will! Heck, you two can look it over for me if you want. But um, we've never gone into all those touchy-feely moments, and we're not exactly close anyway. Not like warpath and his brother."

While his lovers continued to give Alex disappointed female glares, Harry wasn't overly concerned, not hearing any sadness or jealousy in Alex's voice as he spoke about the Proudstar siblings. "While I think letting at least Jean, or maybe Ben if you think Jean will be too harsh a critic, see your recording, I am fine with the idea of you staying with the Starjammers. I'm the last person to get in the way of someone getting to know their parents again. Corsair?"

"I'll be happy to have my son aboard. I'm proud of the man he's grown into, but a few meetings like this isn't nearly enough time to get to know him, and I want to. I'd even ask for Scott to come and join us, but I understand that isn't going to happen." Corsair joked before punching his son lightly in the shoulder when Alex gasped in mock-betrayal, clutching at his chest.

Chuckling at the two, Harry shook his head. "He's the leader of the X-Men, one of our subsidiary teams, which puts Scott pretty high up in our command structure and has a semi-serious relationship with Rogue going on. So no, that's not going to happen," Harry answered dryly.

"Maybe if Scott still had the stick up his ass he did when Harry first showed up, it might be a good idea. I figure you could probably have worked to remove that. But that operation's already been accomplished," Jean giggled, leaning into Harry's shoulder.

Ororo shook his head her head. "That's unfair, love. Scott had a lot of expectations heaped on him unnecessarily. The fact that he eventually rose to meet those expectations and set aside his pride and ego while doing it is a sign that he too has matured into a fine young man."

"Whatever, Scott's still too regimented for my tastes," Alex grumbled, although he didn't argue the point.

At the same time, Jean caroled, "You know that's not an argument against him having a stick up his ass at first, Ororo."

"Setting that aside," Harry said loudly over the laughter that this had produced, with even Ororo joining in ruefully, "I have a proposition for you, Corsair."

Corsair looked at him in question, and Harry gestured him to sit down with Raza and Cho'od before using a nearby computer to pull up a hologram of the Shi'ar Empire, which swiftly began to shade in segments. Watching this, Cho'od cocked his head thoughtfully. "You are marking out territories where other races predominate the local populations."

Harry nodded, then began a presentation on what he wanted the Pirates to be the front man for. He made it seem as if he had E work on it during the party for Harry, but otherwise, it was the same plan that Ororo, E and Harry had thought up over the past few days.

As soon as he understood that he was basically offered the chance to become head of some kind of aid group designed to help the various races of the Empire, Corsair began to object, as did Raza. "Now, hold on a moment. There are a lot of problems with this. For one thing, we're pirates, so who is going to listen to us at all?" Further, where are we going to get the supplies? And third, how are we going to transport it! Even for a single system bringing in enough aid would mean dozens of trips back to Earth. The *Starjammer's* a warship, not a transport vessel."

"And more importantly, why, by the fiery anus of the universe, would we help the Shi'ar get back on their feet!?" Raza growled, seemingly enraged by the very idea. "Let the feather-skulled, vile scum die!"

"Because we are not talking about helping the Shi'ar. A few individual Shi'ar may benefit from this, but we will be helping the disparate races the Shi'ar have conquered. That is why we will be targeting those areas where other races make up the majority of the population. If we, that is, you in this case, make it clear that your help is incumbent on the locals not attempting to reach out to the Empire, then those races will not do so," Jean answered.

Ororo followed up a moment later, her tone firm and unyielding. "I refuse to paint all the races of the Shi'ar Empire in the same light as the Shi'ar themselves. Just because they were powerless to change the Shi'ar's policy or resist amalgamation into the Empire does not mean they share their conquerors' morals and beliefs. Seeing those races as simple extensions of the Shi'ar, not letting them have the opportunity to prove they can be more than that, would make us as bad as the Shi'ar.

That statement nearly threw Raza over the edge, his hand reaching for one of his blades at the insinuation. But Ororo simply stared back at the angry cyborg, more than willing to match the man with blades if he wanted that. But eventually, Raza backed down.

"We're sitting in a star system where people of three different races once came together to flee Shi'ar oppression," Harry said softly. "They died for it eventually, but they tried to uphold the ideal of freedom for their races. How many other oppressed races out there will jump at the chance to make their own way in the stars without the Shi'ar?"

“What about the Shi’ar military ships?” Cho’od asked calmly. “I will admit that the various Shi’ar garrisons on many planets controlled by other races might not be a problem, but the fleet was always predominantly Shi’ar.”

“Those ships can’t move, power up, or do anything. We saw that for ourselves, Cho’od,” Hepzibah interjected as she came over with Hela to join the conversation. Despite the amount of wine she had drunk – several bottles worth – her voice came out clearly, and there seemed to be a fire in her eyes. “This idea has some merit. But I am wondering where you think we could get the goods we would need or even how we could transport them, as Corsair pointed out.”

“Many of the goods are already in place. What one planet has in abundance, another might need. And I know you all know enough about the Empire to know what goods should go where. That’s how any economy works. What you will need help with is transporting it.” Harry smiled dryly, wagging his fingers, letting a few magical sparks appear there. “But between Stephen and me, that’s an easy task,” Harry opined.

“The Shi’ar’s planets are mostly self-sufficient anyway. They aren’t all going to die Raza, as much as we might want them to. But rebuilding their Empire isn’t simply a matter of the Shi’ar not dying, or removing computer cores or what have you. It will take time. A lot of it. They’ll have to build the tools to build the tools,” Cho’od reminded Raza. “Remember that the virus infected the base operating system.”

“Exactly. And by the time the Shi’ar regain the stars, who’s to say what will be there to welcome them? If enough of the species the Shi’ar had taken over have also regained space on their own and maybe even banded together, do you think the Shi’ar will be able to rebuild their Empire?” Hela intoned.

“And if we help the other races get back on their feet, get back in communication with one another, who is to say what could happen?” Cho’od mused.

It was hard to tell, but Harry felt he was all for the idea, which Jean, with her empathic powers, confirmed a moment later mentally. The large alien was just as much of a scientist and philosopher as he was a fighter. Cho’od and had no desire to see this entire region of space fall into barbarity.

“That’s all well and good, but we're still Pirates. And the whole Empire now is a treasure trove of lawlessness. Do we really want that to change?” Raza asked, with Corsair frowning but eventually nodding in acknowledgement of the statement.

“I suppose the answer is, do you want to build or do you want to destroy?” Harry answered, his voice firm and even cold now as he looked at the two men. “The Shi’ar destroyed as they built their Empire, breaking every race they met to the yoke. You have a chance to reverse that, to bring back these other races, let them build their own futures rather than be subservient to that of the Shi’ar. “Which sounds better to you?”

“Well, when you put it like that, I can hardly argue,” Corsair grumbled. “And do you have anything to start the ball rolling?”

E stepped forward from where he had been standing nearby. As an android, he didn't need to eat, so in his estimation only truly enjoyed about 45% of such social gathering. But the android had still enjoyed the remaining 55% up to this point.

“We do. Forge suggested that the attacks the shared operating system that is the bedrock of every Shi'ar computer system. While the Shi'ar Empire's communication network is always fully integrated, that should not copy over into other systems unless it is part of that underlying programming kernel. A virus that attacks that will be almost impossible for the Shi'ar to even discover, let alone remove. It will not be as simple as switching out ruined parts or doing a hard reboot. Instead, they will have to develop an entirely new programming style.”

“Which is impossible for the Shi'ar,” Cho'od intoned, unknowingly echoing Ororo's comment on the subject. “Imagination is, as we all know, is a foreign idea to them. So the idea of recreating an entirely new operating system will never occur to someone in the Shi'ar's society..”

“Exactly. So offering a proven operating code could be a major trade item. As could simply transporting goods and people from one planet to another in any one system.”

“What's to stop someone using the operating system on one of the Shi'ar fleets and then using it to spread the new OS around, including to Shi'ar worlds?” Raza objected, although his objections were now less vituperative, a sign he seemed to be coming around.”

“You know these races. You've had dealings with them before. You can choose the first few species you approach carefully, so that doesn't happen,” Harry replied mildly.

“Yeah, don't choose my race,” Nightside grumbled. The Starjammers had been eyeing Nightside warily, but she had stayed close to Banshee and Reed for most of the party. “Heck, the Titan folk and my race are probably the worst when it comes to being happy about being part of the Empire.”

“But we'll still be only one ship for a while,” Raza once more objected. “There's only so much we can do with one ship, no matter how enlarged our cargo hold. And with every ship we bring back online, we will be faced with the danger of a captain heading to the Shi'ar to help them too.”

“Eventually, you'll have to start trusting the races you are helping,” Ororo answered with a shrug. “There, you must rely on your own recognizance and hopefully, by that point, the local leadership.”

“But you're right that you will eventually need more ships. Start making contacts now, and then head to Earth in a month, once you know you can do so without being followed and have some allies. We'll have built up a fleet of computer-guided ships that you can use.

Freighters that will fly themselves under your directions. You'll need to provide that direction and defense, but it will let you transport even more resources and goods. You may even be able to branch out and send them on their own eventually, once you have a network of contacts established," Jean replied.

Harry looked at her, and Jean sent, *"Freighters are easy, love, especially remote-controlled freighters. I bet Reed could design one you could then enlarge the interior of."*

That did sound simple enough given their current resources, and Harry sent back a feeling of agreement before looking back at Corsair. "So are you going to hang up your pirate flag and drive the final nail into the coffin of the Shi'ar Empire so that it can never grow again? Or are we going to need to look elsewhere for someone willing to do the work here, Corsair?"

"What about fuel?" Corsair asked. "Putting a refueling station back online would take weeks and parts we don't have."

"So we build our own." Harry shrugged, pointing at Forge and Reed before pointing towards the exterior bulkhead of the ship to indicate the star system beyond. "You've got three geniuses here, this ship's ability to refuel on the fly as a template, and there's a lot of debris out there that me, Hela, Stephen and Ororo can work our magic on."

Corsair scowled, not enjoying being railroaded like this, but then he caught Alex looking at him and the rest of his crew. Even Raza was now looking thoughtful instead of disparaging the entire idea, "Alright, how can we help?"

Work on this project continued for a few days as the two crews broke into work teams.

Forge and Reed worked together to create a design for an HE3 plant in the gas giant. Jean worked with Nightside, Douglas and Banshee on a system survey, gathering a few scattered asteroids to use as material. Ororo and Hela helped Forge and Reed by transfiguring bits of the salvage from around them.

Meanwhile, Ben led a team of the strongest members of both crews to put together a mine and smelter on one of the interior planets. Like the HE3 gatherer, this would be fully automated, using an old Shi'ar design with an operating system created by E. Stephen helped them, using his magic to make the job easier and more comfortable while Harry worked on the runes needed to safely enlarge the *Starjammer's* interior.

And not just the interior of the former pirate ship's hold either. At Hepzibah and Corsair's insistence, both its magazines and several other compartments were given the same treatment.

Meanwhile, the rest of the crews worked on gathering the dead. Like the rest of the debris, the bodies of the various races who had made this system their home had been left to die in deep space. This appalled Cho'od, Raza and Hepzibah when they discovered it. Many of

those dead had just been left to suffocate in the big dark, something that no proper spacer, not even many pirates, would be comfortable with doing.

Despite the passage of time and spacial drift, the crews found several thousands of bodies, all of whom were interred on one of Jean's asteroids, which she hollowed out into a kind of morgue.

Eventually, perhaps they could be returned to their various races for burial. And eventually, perhaps, they would become martyrs, people who had attempted to seek freedom from oppression too soon but whose example lived on after they died to the present day.

After about a week and a half, the work was complete to Corsair's satisfaction. "Magic really is incredible," he mused, shaking his head as he stood in the expanded hold of the Spelljammer, looking around him in wonder as around them, the two crews made their farewells. "Cripes, you could play football in here."

"Rugby, please," Harry scoffed, shaking his head. "Or sorry, do you mean real football and not the American version?" Corsair gave him the finger, and Harry laughed. "Just remember that you'll need to come back to Earth and let one of us magic users renew the array's power, or else it will stop working with catastrophic consequences."

"No worries there. I predict that in a few weeks, this whole going straight thing will have lost its luster, and my crew will need a break."

"Including Alex?"

"Don't worry. I'll watch out for my son, and he'll help us all watch out for one another." Corsair answered, becoming a bit sober himself, although inside, he was looking forward to this.

It would be dangerous. After all, the governments that survived up to this point would know Corsair's reputation and might be looking to blame an exterior source for the virus. It would be hard, and Corsair would need to rely on his wits and silver tongue. In other words, this new mission held the same kind of thrills as being a pirate, albeit without the thrill of stealing from other people.

"That's all we can ask. Well, that and that Alex really did record a message for his brother." Harry chuckled. Ororo and Jean almost sitting on the younger Summers to get him to do that, and then Hepzibah and Alex had forced Corsair to do the same.

Corsair blushed at that. Like Alex, he wasn't all that good with the whole familial affection thing, but he had tried his best to get his emotions across. "Just, um, just don't lose those. And er, make certain he watches it when he's alone? I've got a reputation to think of, you know?"

"On Earth?" Harry smirked, and Corsair grumbled, reaching out to shake Harry's hand.

Looking around, Harry saw that the others had finished saying goodbye, and after a final handshake, Harry joined the rest of his crew. It was time and past to head home.

OOOOOOO

It took Dennis and his new aid Natasha three days to use the faces that Ghigau had seen and his connections to the various spy communities to narrow down their search and find a target. "One which, once the dust settles, I think that Interpol and the rest of the law enforcement community will thank us for."

As he spoke, Dennis stood in front of a small conference room in Camelot, a former classroom converted to this purpose on the same floor that housed the Custodes Mundi and the majority of the adults in the castle. Across from him sat Scott, Steve, James, Dani, and Piotr, with Emma there acting as their overall commander.

Despite having only joined the Custodes Mundi formally that morning, Natasha stood with Dennis at the front of the room. She had helped him prepare the data they had discovered, although only as an analyst. Still, the former spy had been instrumental in recognizing some of the faces they had seen once they identified their target.

"First, I'm going to go over the faces that Dani discovered." Dennis began, and faces began to appear on the screen. "First, this man here," he said, gesturing to a somewhat florid, choleric face, "is Don Fortunato. His family is the one who have taken over in places where Fisk, the kingpin, had ruled previously in America. My contacts elsewhere couldn't add anything more to his file, but the Americans were already aware of quite a bit, even though they haven't moved against him yet. Since Dani's power isn't admissible in court, that unfortunately won't change. Still, we know where his headquarters is, and a few hints to the FBI will point them in the right direction. I understand Steve's already agreed to lead any action against them that need's hero-type aid."

The same went for two other faces. One of them was a Canadian man with links to their crime syndicates, although even Dennis wasn't certain where he was placed in their power structure. Another was a Korean gentleman. "We don't need to worry about him, however. Apparently, he was attempting to get back into the Asian market, shall we say, and the Mandarin decided to remove the issue this morning."

Whether or not that was because Dennis had let the Mandarin discover the man's face, he didn't say. But since the Korean was involved in the drug trade, Emma decided that no one needed to know precisely how the Mandarin had discovered this bit of information on his budding rival.

They came to the fourth face Dani had seen at that point, the only one she had recognized at the time. "And this one, of course, is Silvermane."

Dennis's words invited Dani to comment, and she did so. "My ability doesn't create sound when I use it's psychometry form, so I wasn't able to hear what any of them was saying. Still, from the expressions on several of the others, those whose faces I could see anyway, seemed to be very angry with Silvermane. But he looked to be cool and aloof throughout, and their anger seemed to subside, shifting targets to the man I had trailed there. Whatever he said seemed to have calmed the waters down further."

"We won't be striking at him. Silvermane at least understands the limitations the organized crime cannot cross to survive, and it is much better to have a devil you know in such a position," Emma opined.

Scott scoffed at that, having heard about Silvermane before this. "I could almost believe in a gentlemen thief or low-level criminal. But a gentleman mob boss? And what about drugs? Drug dealers, I mean, and of course, the slave trade." Steve said those last two words in such distaste he looked almost like he wanted to spit.

Although few nations acknowledged it, there was a very lively slave trade across the globe. It was insidious and always on a small, personal scale, which made it much harder to stop. After all slavery was no longer about numbers and cheap labor, but rather power and sexual exploitation.

Emma's smile was extremely wintry as she answered. "Fuck them. Allowing organized crime does not extend to allowing the drug trade or the slave trade. If we discover anyone organizing that last, they will quickly learn that this world is not nearly big enough for them to hide from the Custodes Mundi. Regardless of if we have agreements with them or not"

Every officer there bared their teeth at that, even Piotr.

"Now we come to the two faces that we are most interested in." Dennis took over the meeting once more, and after a few gestures, one of the faces enlarged dramatically.

As Spiderman had figured, these were the two faces that weren't, in fact, faces. The first was the black mask that looked like someone had taken a window blind and made it into a mask. It was black, and the eyes in the center of the two eye slits looked brown, but that was all you could say for certain.

Thankfully the affront to all window blinds was quickly replaced by a full-body view. "This is the Black Spectre at the target area, which is located in Greece. More on that later. He is currently the head of the Russian Mafia despite not being Russian. Where he came from and how he came to control the Russian Mafia is unknown, although it is assumed that he was at one point a lieutenant and then rose to prominence recently. The Greek police have a profile on the Black Spectre but have been forbidden to take action against him at his mansion. He is also linked to what is called the Brute Trust."

"What is that?" Emma asked, frowning. "I've never heard of it."

“That is the name that has reached the ears of Interpol to explain how various superpowered individuals loyal to one criminal group or another have been seen working with other criminal organizations. Basically, it is a growing push to somehow share superpowered individuals between the various Maggia families and others, regardless of which criminal group recruited them initially. It is also, apparently, according to one informant from South Africa that was later found in several different places, in charge of... acquiring more superpowered people for these various criminal enterprises.”

“Brainwashing?” Piotr guessed, a scowl on his face. “Kidnapping? How young do they start?”

“Brainwashing, indoctrination, either/or,” Natasha answered. “Shield and the FBI were watching several names down in Mexico who had survived a recent gang war there. The war was so bloody several of the drug cartels that had been using drugs to brainwash mutant children to turn them into superpowered thugs had been completely decapitated. A few of those names and faces wound up in Greece, which helped us discover this villa in the first place.”

Everyone there grimaced, and Scott shook his head. “I remember talking to Laura once. She was involved in that war. Magneto sent her down there to wipe out those gangs. She won’t be happy to learn that she missed anyone involved in that.”

“This Black Spectre dresses like a supervillain. Do we know anything about Black Spectre’s powers?” Emma asked, getting the talk back on task.

“Unfortunately not. The Black Spectre has been very good about keeping a low profile for the most part. Although thanks to Natasha, we do know a few of his underlings.”

So saying, Dennis gestured to Natasha, who manipulated the hard light computer for a moment, and several other faces appeared. Seeing them, it was Steve’s turn to scowl. “I recognize them. Asp and Black Mamba, right? From the Serpent Society?”

Natasha nodded and filled in the blanks for the others. “The Serpent Society was a mercenary group, basically superpowered individuals, who gained those powers either through the use of various powered suits or mutant-based powers with a serpent theme. They were brought in to work with HYDRA at one point, but most of them were wiped out in a battle with shield and the avengers, during which several of their members turned against the others. These two were among those who had turned, and honestly, we all thought that they were going to try to go straight. The team’s leader, Diamondback, certainly did.”

“That sounds like there’s a story there...” Scott murmured, watching as Steve blushed a bit and looked away.

Natasha didn't give him any respite. "Diamondback actually is now working in Rio de Janeiro as the head of their SWAT teams. She's actually a pretty fun lady, as Steve would know."

All eyes turned to Steve, and he looked straight ahead, muttering, "The Serpent Society was used by HYDRA in our ongoing campaign against them, Diamondback and I met in battle several times, and during those meetings, I might have talked her into trying to use her powers more responsibly. She then convinced the other two young ladies to jump ship, and they helped the Avengers and SHIELD wipe out a HYDRA base on New Caledonia."

Everyone stared at him except for Emma, who reflected that something similar had happened between her and Harry. She certainly hadn't been a supervillain, but she had most decidedly not been on the side of the law before she met Harry. However, the others, with Dani in the lead, began a slow clap for Steve, causing his blush to redouble.

Eventually, Natasha brought them back to earth. "Anyway, it doesn't seem as if going straight worked for these two. Asp has a touch-based power, which is deadlier the longer she is in contact with someone. It ranges from paralysis to death. She can also concentrate her touch into short-ranged electrical bursts. Black Mamba has limited telepathy and dark force seduction powers."

Piotr blinked in surprise. "What? When I think of dark force powers, I think of energy blasts and flight, like Nikolai's sister." Who had, Piotr, reflected, seemingly started to get close to Warren Worthington. *Something that will no doubt annoy Nikolai when he returns and discovers it. Not my problem, though.*

Natasha shrugged and explained how Black Mamba's powers worked. "She takes an image of a loved one from someone's mind, then has that image seduce the individual in question. The attack shuts down the target's brain by overloading his pleasure centers. It is unknown if the attack can work on multiple people, but beyond that, she's a decent hand-to-hand fighter and is a good marksman too.

From there, Dennis took over once more to describe two other superpowered criminals they had noticed in the flyby of their target. Terrence was an expert chemist and disguise artist who specialized in trap-based murders. The individual called the Grim Reaper used a highly advanced scythe of some kind. "Both of them are wanted in several nations for murder, extortion and terrorist acts but have escaped discovery before this. The Winter Soldier was also there, but the only image we got of him was of his silver arm as he entered this building, the one which we assume to be some kind of barracks."

For a moment, Dennis let the camera move around the target area. It looked like a mansion, with a few separate buildings at the end of a long dirt path leading down to the entrance of the small valley the mansion and its outlying buildings dominated.

“This is the place where the brute trust members go between jobs, those who aren’t already affiliated one specific crime group or another. We were able to discover the Black Spectre’s presence via the Grecian Police force nearby, who have several times asked for permission to raid it, but been denied. With that, I used an aerial drone, a little toy that Reed Richards made for me a few months back to scout things out.

As Dennis wound down for the moment, Steve frowned, looking over to where the original heads of the group of criminal masterminds still hung to one side of the front of the conference room. “What about the gold masked woman?” He asked, pointing to the only face that Dennis and Natasha hadn’t mentioned yet.

Frowning slightly, Dennis enlarged it, bringing the woman’s head into prominence as the other pictures shrank back. As Steve had said, the face of that image was obscured by a golden mask, which covered it from the top of her head down to her chin. She seemed to have black hair, and her shoulders were also visible, showing a white and black outfit of some kind.

“This is Madame Masque. She leads what remains of the Italian branch of the Maggia after her father, Count Nefaria, was killed in a SHIELD operation.”

Steve winced. “I remember him, an extremely tough opponent at the time. Although I don’t remember her.”

Seeing Steve’s grimace, Dennis shook his head firmly. “**Don’t** feel sorry for this woman. By the time you killed her father, she was already extremely high up in his operation, an enforcer, assassin, and lieutenant. Setting aside other crimes, she’s been personally linked to at least seven murders and partially linked to thirty more. Madame Masque is wanted in America, Canada, the United Kingdom, Italy and several other European countries.”

“So is she involved in this Brute Trust as well?” Emma asked.

“We’ve seen images of her with our spy plane at the mansion in question, so we assume so.” Dennis showed a few images of the woman outside moving around the extended property that was their target, exercising, practicing her marksmanship and talking to the Black Spectre.

“There have been indications in the past few weeks that the Italian and Russian mafias are attempting to merge into one entity. The general opinion is that Madame Masque and the Black Spectre basically decided that if they tried to fight it out, that both of their institutions, which had been horribly weakened, would simply be absorbed by another criminal organization.”

“But you don’t think that, do you?” Emma stated, looking back at the man thoughtfully.

“I don’t know. Criminal types aren’t normally the kind that can set their pride to one side and think long-term like that. There’s just something off about that assumption,” Dennis admitted.

Dani frowned, thinking over the images she had seen in the image of the meeting she had pulled from that apartment complex. But after a moment, she shook her head. She couldn't see anything unusual and how Madame Masque acted or the Black Spectre. "They weren't at one another's throats, but they weren't all that friendly either."

"Let's set that aside and get down to brass tacks," Piotr suggested. "We now know about our target, tell us about the area, and then let's decide on who is going to go on this mission."

OOOOOOO

That night Sam Guthrie shook his head as he laid out on top of the magic carpet carrying the assault team down to their target. "Ah have ta say, I do believe this is cheatin'."

This assault team consisted of the Custodes Mundi members still present on the planet, Sam Guthrie, James and Kurt, loaned from the X-Men. Both of the younger men would be useful to hunt down any criminals who tried to escape, which all the team leaders had felt was possible. Whereas James, like Dani and Piotr, brought a proven leadership ability to the battle. Despite all of their various technological gear, nighttime battles could be so chaotic normally that Piotr had decided he wanted another squad leader along.

Piotr turned to look at the younger man from where he was sitting at the head of the magic carpet, smirking slightly. "Tovarisch Sam, many a wise man has said throughout history that if you are not cheating in war, you are not trying hard enough."

"Maybe, but this isn't war. This is a criminal operation being smacked down by the equivalent of a Navy SEALs company! And yes, I know SEALs don't operate in company-sized formations. This is overkill by anyone's estimation," Kurt said with a laugh.

"Don't think like that," James said, swatting the slightly younger man upside the head very lightly for him. "That is the kind of thinking that gets people killed." Chastened, Nightcrawler nodded, then went back to talking quietly to Ghigau and page, asking for advice on what to get Wanda. The two of them had recently begun dating, and Nightcrawler wanted something to commemorate their tenth date with.

Soon, they were over the objective, dropping down higher up in the mountains than the sprawling complex where the Brute Trust made its home. It was hoped that this way, they would be able to bypass several of the security checkpoints. After all, why would they want to make more trouble for themselves? And more importantly, give the big targets more time to run. Everyone knew that there would still be tripwires, cameras and other such mechanical defenses, but those were easier to get around than actual people.

Mystique and Black Widow moved forward first with Ghigau. The two most experienced combatants of the teams were also the best at sneaking around, with Ghigau a close second due to simply being that good at moving silently and her suit's abilities. The three women

nodded to the others and moved off, heading down the slope while the rest of them waited in among boulders scrub bush.

Ghigau followed Black Widow and Mystique, looking at their feet occasionally, while Black Widow looked around at the various rocks and other things, ensuring they didn't run into any hidden cameras. She did this automatically, not quite trusting to the magic that was covering all three of them, even though she could feel a slow sense of guilt and tiredness as she moved forward underneath the chameleon cloak.

The tripwires were still an issue, slowing the trio down somewhat. But eventually, they made it through the security grid, to where a few guards moved around the exterior of the buildings.

There Ghigau frowned, stopping in place behind a rock that marked the start of a garden of some kind. "Is there something unusual about those guards, or is it just me?"

Mystique also frowned, staring at several of the guard patrols. Within sight, there were four of them of five men each, but she too could see what Ghigau was talking about. All of them were wearing some kind of bodysuit, but that didn't do much to hide the fact that several of them were women. "Huh. While women can be just as criminally minded as men, look at my own life as an example of that, using them as security thugs is kind of unusual."

"Maybe Madame Masque doesn't trust men?" Black Widow mused although Mystique's point was spot on. Of course, women were part of any criminal or spy organization worth the name, but they were more often than not specialists, not simple grunts. "Still, we need to get moving."

Their objective was simple. Get in unseen, shut down the security grid, and capture Madame Masque or Black Spectre. With one of the heads of the Brute Trust captured and available for Emma's tender mercies, they could roll up the rest of the operation with ease. Meanwhile, the remainder of the team would come in, smashing the estate flat and killing or capturing all the other superpowered criminals here.

The three of them moved forward, skirting between two patrols, and quickly entered the mansion through a doorway at the back, its lock broken by a spy tool Black Widow had brought along. Inside, the trio came out into what looked like a nice sitting room and out into the mansion. As the door closed behind them, Ghigau frowned, looking at it. *Hermetically sealed? What the heck?*

Before Ghigau could question that, Black Widow gestured them on. It was way too open in the sitting room for her tastes, and the guards might double back and see them through the windows at any time.

But as they moved forward, Black Widow and Mystique both began to sweat, licking their lips occasionally and looking around. Even their steps started to stumble as they both started to breathe heavily.

Behind them, Ghigau also paused, frowning as she looked at what looked like a weird Fezephyr air freshener set into a wall outlet. In her mask, she couldn't smell anything, but she wondered about the proliferation of them. *There were at least three of these things back in the sitting room.*

In front of her, Mystique pulled up, leaning against the wall and breathing heavily. Black Widow also seemed to be flushed, staring around her as if she wasn't quite seeing the hallway or the doors leading off it. Frowning, Ghigau raced forward's, clutching Mystique on the shoulder. "What's wrong?"

Mystique shook her head, then began to move forward again. "Nothing. I think, I think that the Black Spectre is this way. We need to go to him."

"Go to him? You mean capture him, right?" Ghigau questioned, thrown by Mystique's word choice. Getting a sense of impending disaster, Ghigau took a step back.

"No! We must go to him, to our man, the only man for me! For us. You'll understand once you remove that helmet," Black Widow interjected, her voice louder than it should have been.

"What..." Ghigau began.

That was when Mystique reached down and canceled the illusion runic array covering her. Turning around like a whip, her hand lashed out in a blow that crashed into Ghigau's temple, a strike that Ghigau knew if she had her helmet on would have put her out instantly. She crashed into a wall, the movement also canceling her own runic array as she shouted, "What the fuck, Mystique!?"

Then Black Widow turned on her, small needles flashing out from her wrists to crash into Ghigau's chest. Her suit beat the electro pulses they could give off, but they still shocked her a bit, slowing Ghigau down. Stumbling back further, she raised Sigyn's Gift in her hand, the weapon shifting into a spear form, the butt of it crashing into Mystique's chest, but Black Widow leaped up over the shapeshifter, a kick flashing out and catching Ghigau in the face. "Take her out! She means to harm our man!"

Dodging to one side, Ghigau was still smacked in the head as doors opened throughout the main building and alarms began to sound all around her. "Why can't anything be simple," Ghigau muttered, even as the Winter Soldier appeared out of one doorway, instantly lashing out towards her with a bionic arm. The soldier's metal fist shattered her chest plate and hurled Ghigau into and through a wall on the other side of the hallway.

From where they were waiting, everyone could see the alarms going off in the mansion below, and Colossus growled. "That's torn it. Sam, shock and awe, everyone else, back on the carpet, let's get in there quick. Cannonball, you're up."

Sam rocketed into the air and then down towards the mansion, his impenetrable shield activating as he moved. Two guards tried to get his way, shooting up at him as he flew down, but he barreled through them, sending both women flying, remarking to himself, "Damn, I hope my mama don't hear about that one, she'd give my hide a tannin' for treating ladies like that. Although given they're thugs, are they really ladies?"

Barreling into the mansion through a wall, Cannonball's fists thrust out ahead of them, and he crashed into the side of the Winter Soldier where he had been standing over Ghigau. The fact that Mystique and Black Widow had been standing nearby and not doing anything was kind of confusing, but he didn't care.

The Winter Soldier was blasted off his feet, tumbling through and into another wall, which created a further dent as Sam continued on his way, barreling through the mansion like a runaway Cannonball.

By the time he exited the other side, guards further down the valley had rushed back towards the three main buildings, but the rest of the Custodes Mundi had also arrived. "Thunderbird, take your team and take out those guards! Nightcrawler, get in there and find our scouts. Evacuate them if needed," Colossus ordered, leaping down from on high to crash through the top of the mansion.

As Thunderbird leaped off the magic carpet, weapons emplacements appeared scattered around the mansion. Lasers and large-caliber machine guns opened up. Then robots of some kind, very simplistic looking but with arms made of guns, began to trundle out of one of the other buildings.

These guns took James and his team under fire as they tried to spread out. "Cortez, suppressive fire! Coyote, Uzume, spread some chaos!" Thunderbird roared as he charged towards the robots. "Cortez, make sure you're keeping an eye on those guards coming around the edge of the building. We can't get caught from three sides."

Cannonball returned then, crashing into the building from which the droids had come from, although two other supervillains had come out of the building by that point. Madame Masque and Trapster were there. Trapster began to hurl grenades towards the attackers. Rushing to one side to gain some range, Madame Masque pulled out two handguns, sending out energy blasts that hit Thunderbird in the shoulder and thigh.

The older Proudstar grimed in pain, the more powerful pulses of energy bothering him a bit. In contrast, the regular bullets and the more diffuse lasers hadn't bothered him all that much, thanks to his armor and general durability.

The gas was much more troublesome. Thunderbird and Cortez both began to gasp and start choking. "C, Coyote, Uzume get us out of here!"

At Thunderbird's order, Coyote returned to their positions, teleporting them both out of the way of the gas, which thankfully began to dissipate quickly in the open air. This was partially thanks to one of the guards tossing out short-lived hurricanes from his arms. Still, he wasn't bulletproof, and Uzume kept him hopping around.

Coyote's short-range teleport put them directly between the robots and the group of guards who had returned from the mansion's perimeter. In the lead, an unknown mutant raised his hands, shooting out what looked like tiny bone razors from his nails to impact the trio. Cortez also gasped as one of them slammed into her forearm, nearly cutting straight through and leaving a dangerously bleeding wound, though thankfully it had missed her main artery there.

That was the last thing that mutant did, as his head disappeared under a railgun around from Uzume. Then the battle was on, as more droids took them from under fire from one side, and Black Mamba and a few other guards raced in to engage in hand-to-hand.

While Madam Masque directed the guards. Trapster turned away as he saw Cannonball coming back towards them. "Oh no, you don't!" He took the youngster under fire, using what looks like a grenade launcher, but the grenades smashed harmlessly against Cannonball's shield, and while he was choking and gasping, the flying mutant's sheer speed pulled him out of the cloud of whatever was in those canisters as he crashed into and through the same building the droids had come from once more.

For his part, Colossus evaded much of this action by crashing into the mansion's roof. But as he did so, a claymore embedded into the roof went off, creating an explosion and hurling him to the side of where he had hoped to land. Pushing through the rubble, Colossus was uninjured, as was Paige, who had also crashed down onto another segment of the roof.

Colossus found himself near to where Ghigau stood over the body of a guard, and he watched as Ghigau disappeared, teleported away thanks to Nightcrawler. This left Black Widow and Mystique, who pushed themselves to their feet, having been hurled aside by Cannonball earlier in his pass through the mansion.

Black Widow instantly turned in Colossus's direction, and instead of looking happy to see him, raised her gauntlets and fired more of the electro stilettos from her gauntlets into them. Colossus ignored them, scowling angrily at her. "What in the world is going on, Black Widow!?"

The flush-faced Black Widow didn't respond, charging towards him. Mystique did the same, and Colossus frowned before his hands flew out, grabbing their fists as they moved to punch him. He pulled them in close, and after a few fumbling moments, got both women into a

headlock and began to choke them out quickly, Mystique's fingers clanging off his nose and chin as he twisted his head away to avoid a finger to the eye.

It wouldn't have done much. Even Colossus's eyes were metal in this form, but it would have blinded him, as did the flash that came from Black Widow's wrist a second later. But Colossus didn't relent, his arms still around their necks. Neither woman was armed with anything that could get through his metallic hide, and soon enough, both of them were unconscious. He debated leaving them there, but then Nightcrawler returned.

"Ghigau said those two were fighting her for some reason. They were talking about the Black Spectre as if they suddenly wanted his babies!" The young German reported to the Russian, a hint of laughter in his tone and confusion.

"Well, they are unconscious now, so we can remove them from whatever influence..." That was as far as Colossus got before a laser blast crashed into them from behind, causing him to grunt and lose his footing, stumbling to his knees.

Nightcrawler found himself face-to-face with the Winter Soldier, the warrior having waited for the internal security of the mansion to come online before attacking. The man's punch caught the blue-furred mutant in the chin, knocking him backward, and if not for his body's enhanced durability, that blow might have knocked him out. As it was, Nightcrawler riposted quickly, one of his blades flashing out.

The blow was blocked by the Winter Soldier's metal arm, and a kick battered into Nightcrawler's leg, causing him to stumble to one knee. His sword now out of position and his other sword still in its sheath on his back so he could grab Ghigau, Nightcrawler lashed out with a punch that caught the Winter Soldier in the chest before Nightcrawler disappeared, teleporting above the man. His second sword came out with a 'Shwing' noise, and Nightcrawler lashed out, intending to cut the man's head off.

But somehow, the Winter Soldier was reacting before Nightcrawler came out of his teleport. He rolled forward to avoid the two sword blows, kicking off of the side of the hallway. Twisting in midair, he came back toward Nightcrawler with a punch that would've taken Nightcrawler in the chest if not for the young mutant teleporting away again.

He appeared to the side once more, thrusting in, but again found his swords being smacked aside by the Winter Soldier's metal arm, and a small ball bearing was hurled at his head, causing Nightcrawler to stumble before he could teleport away. Another blow caught him that time, and Nightcrawler doubled over, feeling a rib go before he teleported away once more, this time catching the Winter Soldier in the side with a slash, though the man had moved so that instead of a killing blow, it merely left a light gash.

Behind him, Colossus had taken out several security guns that had popped up. Unable to move due to the two downed women behind him, Colossus instead used random bits of debris, hurling them at each of the defensive guns as they appeared. But he saw how the battle was

going behind him and ordered, "Nightcrawler, get them out of here! I'll deal with him. Help Cannonball secure the perimeter. We don't want anyone to escape."

Nightcrawler disappeared from where he had been attacking the Winter Soldier, reappearing between the two women and Colossus. Sticking his swords into the ground, he touched each woman on the chest with one hand and disappeared, teleporting all three of them straight up to the magic carpet.

At the same time, a hurled stone had destroyed the last of the gun emplacements that could range on Colossus, and he turned, charging towards the Winter Soldier. "Let us see how you fare against a fully metal man, long-haired one!"

A blow from the man caught Colossus mid-chest as he whirled out of the way of Colossus's charge, but ignoring the blow, Colossus turned on a dime, lashing out with a kick that caught the Winter Soldier in the side, hurling him through a wall. Colossus followed up, and the two of them exchanged punches and kicks in the center of what looked like a large chemical laboratory, glass and metal smashing as they fought. But with only the blows from the Winter Soldier's metal arm able to hurt him, Colossus knew he could win this fight if he kept up the pressure and stayed in close contact with the assassin.

Meanwhile, Husk had found herself in another segment of the mansion. Instead of being in a public area, the room whose roof she smashed through looked like the mansion's main bedroom.

As Husk pushed herself out of the rubble from her landing, a man rolled out of bed, grabbing at a mask and pulling it on his face before Husk could see his features. Then he was standing up, naked as the day he had been born, staring at her through that mask, while on the other side of the bed, the woman Black Widow had identified as the Asp rolled out of bed, getting to her feet and hurling herself forward, equally naked.

Husk tried to dodge, but one of her feet was still caught in a bit of rubble, slowing her down. Asp was thus able to punch her chest with one hand before flowing to the side, bringing up a kick that crashed into Husk's face. But Husk was in her metal form, and though that rang her bell a bit, causing her to stagger, Husk didn't feel any pain from the strike. "Yer gonna have ta do better than that, honey."

She reached forward, disdaining her weapons for the moment, but Asp danced around her arms, lashing out several more times impotently. Then Husk knocked one arm wide, ducking under another blow before returning a punch that would have laid out the older woman if not for her leaping up and over Husk.

Husk turned swiftly, but Asp rolled around and to the side, putting her to one side of the man in the bed, dodging Husk's punches before a shout from the man drew both women's attention. "Wait, Asp!"

Looking in his direction for a second, Husk saw that not only wasn't he armed, he also hadn't taken the seconds Asp had been attacking her to dress, and she hurriedly looked away, shaking her head. *Gawd, if I was in my normal body, I'd be blushin' so hard right now!* "My eyes might not 'xactly be virginal any longer, but come on, man! You could put on some boxers or something, ain't you got no shame!"

"Oh, in a few seconds, the last thing you'll want me to do is to put my clothing on, my dear," the man said with an unseen smile, moving towards her.

Husk scowled, backing away, wondering if he had some kind of touch-based power too, and not wanting the middle-aged and very hairy naked man anywhere near her. *Gonna need some brain bleach after tonight for sure.* "My orders may mean I need to take you in alive, old man, that doesn't mean I can't break your jaw if you come any closer. Surrender, and maybe I won't mess you up too bad for showing me your full Monty."

"Why should you care? This is simply a preview of what you will get. Although I do like your fire. But the more you breathe in the air of this mansion, the more you will succumb to your rightful place at my feet," the Black Spectre said, smiling behind his mask.

"W, what!" Husk felt her back hit the wall next to the door leading out of the room, wondering if maybe Ghigau and the others had fallen victim to something. With that thought, instead of just attacking, Husk decided to act a bit. Her chest heaved as if Husk was having trouble breathing, looking anywhere but at the man. "What, what did you do!"

"You see, I too am a mutant, and I possess a power which is a sign of my fitness to rule, to command. Women, such as yourself, they can never disobey me, once they breathe in my pheromones," the man nearly crooned, his voice low and seductive, although in this instance that just meant it came off as really creepy to the young mutant. "You can feel it, can't you, a desire to submit, to give yourself to me."

"S, so it only works on girls? I g, guess I'm out of luck then," Husk said, backing away further and holding one hand to her nose as if she was trying not to breathe in, her other hand fumbling at the pouch at her side before Asp grabbed her wrist with both hands pulling it away. "Pity I couldn't switch with Colossus..."

"Oh, men are affected by my pheromones too. If a man has any bisexual thoughts, they too come under my control. You would be astonished at how good it feels to break a man who once thought he was a macho killer and criminal but who secretly had a tiny glimmering in that direction, unknown even to the man in question. It might take longer, but they do succumb eventually. If they are fully straight, then they will be repulsed by it, their thinking impaired, and thus easier to break using other means."

The Black Spectre's voice was smug from behind his mask as he spoke about the horrors he had committed with pride. "Although both of those reactions are but pale reflection of the

impact my pheromones can have on a woman such as yourself. You will submit, my dear. It is only a matter of time.”

“I guess, but there is a problem.” Husk straightened up, pulling on the arm Asp has in her hands, a punch sending the surprised woman stumbling before she could recover. “Ya see, I don’t need to breathe. My skin ain’t the only thing that’s metal.” With that, Husk rushed forward as the man hastily backpedaled. Like Asp, he was so surprised that he couldn’t prepare any defense, and a blow caught the man on the chin, hurling him into a wall headfirst. Two kicks to the ribs shattered bones before Husk dropped one of Kitty’s disposable runestones on the man, the sleep array on it knocking the man out.

Asp leaped on Husk’s back, one arm going around Husk’s neck and the other hand pounding into her head. But Husk reached up and behind her head, grabbing Asp’s head with both hands and jerking her up and forward to crash into the wall above the Black Spectre.

Releasing the hold and stepping back a bit, Husk grabbed Asp again before she could try to get away and then slammed her head back into the wall twice more. On the second impact, Asp went limp, and Husk gently picked her up, moving her over to the bed and laying the other woman on it. “Sorry, babe. But hopefully, after you wake up, and can get away from the over-compensator over there and might come back to yourself. At least I know you and Black Mamba at least didn’t choose to be here, yeah?”

Raising a communicator from a pouch on her wrist, Husk called for Nightcrawler to come and retrieve their prisoner. “Before Ah put him out of his misery for good.”

He appeared in a puff of displaced air, only to wince and look away as he had teleported to one side of the Black Spectre’s naked form. “Gah, could you not have at least thrown a cover over him?”

“He don’t deserve that dignity,” Husk growled, her voice unusually serious for the Kentucky native even as her accent came out more strongly than normal due to her fury.

With that, Husk marched out of the room, finding herself striding through the rest of the mansion’s living quarters, smashing down one door after another. Most of the rooms were currently empty, although one woman, who looked almost Brazilian, was in one of them.

She had apparently taken the time to get dressed and came out swinging a rifle at Husk’s head. The end of it shattered, but the blow still staggered Husk back a step, and then, the woman dropped the rifle, pulling out and stabbing forward with some kind of electro-weapon, causing Husk to howl in pain and stumbled back.

A foot came up crashing into the woman’s chest, hurling her back, and then Nightcrawler was there, behind the woman, a small spray can in one hand expelling air into her face. “Have you noticed how many women there are around?”

“Blame the Black Spectre for being a fucking rapist with pheromone powers,” Husk growled, wincing as she touched her chest. “Damn, being the metal in a lightning rod fuckin’ hurts! Seriously, though, I swear that kind of matchup is enough to make me think that the devil exists.”

Nightcrawler grimaced at that, and after dropping another one of Kitty’s sleep array stones on the woman, Husk reported what they had discovered to the others. Not being given an order to pull back out of the building to join the fight outside, the two continued their way through the mansion.

Outside, the battle had continued up to this point, but the defenders simply didn’t have enough quality troops to matter. Normal troops, men and women, were tossed this way and that, their droid smashed, their weapons broken by Thunderbird, and Cannonball continued to smash into and through both buildings and any formation they tried to make. With one of her arms injured, Cortez had withdrawn to one side, firing from the rubble of the main building, while Coyote and Uzume zipped around the battlefield. Combined, the trio provided enfilade fire. Everywhere around the battle, bodies lay testament to their abilities and Thunderbirds, although none of the guards had run away, instead staying and fighting almost fanatically.

Ghigau joined Thunderbird in close combat. After, that is, she tied the Black Spectre’s arms behind him and his legs to his arms. He looked like a very naked piñata laying out on the magic carpet, a feeling which was exacerbated as he was also tied up around the middle with rope.

Thunderbird was still coughing occasionally, and his face was a lot redder than normal, and it felt like it was itching. But he kept on smashing the last of the robots and closing with Madame Masque as she tried to retreat out into the darkness beyond the ongoing firefight. Trapster had been struck by a shot from Coyote, which had nearly taken his leg off at the thigh, dumping him to the ground. He had screamed for a bit but had since died from blood loss, none of his fellow criminals even attempting to help him.

Black Mamba was also down, her limited telepathy not much use against multiple enemies. A gauss rifle had smashed into a rock right next to her, and the woman had been riddled with bits of shrapnel, but she seemed to be alive at least. That could not be said for the mutant who had been launching tiny bits or razor-sharp bone from his fingers. Thunderbird had punched his head off his shoulders.

Among the few guards still fighting was the mutant with tornado-based powers. But unlike the others, as Ghigau joined the fight, he realized that the battle was lost. With a blast of tornado air towards Uzume which sent the woman flying despite her suit, he turned, racing away.

As he got within range of Madame Masque, Thunderbird saw this and shouted out, “Coyote, close with that ass hole and take them out! Cannonball, cover him!”

The Keewazi tribesman replied instantly, teleporting once more towards the tornado-tossing villain, while the criminal concentrated on knocking Cannonball out of the air. The attack pushed Cannonball off course, but a moment later, Coyote's kick caught the man in the leg, shattering his kneecap. Before the man could do more than scream in pain, Coyote had his head in both hands, bringing the criminal's head down into Coyote's armored knee.

The man fell back unconscious, probably concussed. At the same time, the battle around the mansion began to die off as the other shooters took out the last of the regular guards. Their suits, which seemed to be a mix of Kevlar and advanced polymers, were no match for gauss rifles and plasma bolts.

Thunderbird tried to tackle Madame Masque, but she flipped up and over his head, landing behind him. Two blows to his back followed, but he rounded on her, a blow that should have taken her head off whistling over Madame Masque as she ducked. A blow to his chest caused Thunderbird to stumble back very slightly, followed by a roundhouse kick to the face. Again Thunderbird stumbled, but the woman just wasn't strong enough to really hurt him.

The next time she punched him, Thunderbird went with the punch, his own arm lashing up to grab her forearm drag her in. A blow across the face followed, the supervillain's mask nearly cracking under the blow, and then Thunderbird turned, flipping Madame Masque over his head and down to the ground where her back thumped onto the rocky soil with bone-jarring force.

Before Madame Masque could recover, Thunderbird pulled her into the air and then into a sleeper hold, using the same technique Colossus had earlier on the Black Widow and Mystique. Madame Masque gasped, her arms coming up to grab at his, but like the two pheromone-influenced Custodes, her simple lack of strength worked against her, and Thunderbird held the chokehold in place until she fell unconscious.

Then, hefting her underneath one arm, he returned to the grounds at the front of the mansion while the other attackers all congregated, save for Sam, who continued moving around the perimeter just in case. There, he met Colossus, who was dragging the battered form of the Winter Soldier behind him. The assassin's fleshy arm was broken in several places, and his leg was also bent most unnaturally, but Colossus too looked somewhat pummeled, dents covering his chest and face that promised quite a bit of bruising.

Still, the team leader kept his mind on the overall objective, issuing orders crisply, splitting the team up into groups of two, with each team accompanied by someone who wouldn't succumb to the pheromones Husk had reported on. "Remember, taking this place out is just one part of this operation. We want to make certain the none of these people, scientists or criminals or what have you weren't able to escape. Spread out and search for any hidden tunnels or anything else."

“Speaking of,” Husk’s voice came over the team’s coms once more, “I think we’re going to need a lot more hands. And specifically, a lot of counselors...”

Moments later, John, Ghigau and Piotr all stood in the center of the basement of the mansion, a wide sprawling complex that had been turned into a laboratory. A laboratory designed for a very specific purpose: that of brainwashing mutants and other superpowered individuals. There were several such men and women here, none of whom the Custodes Mundi recognized, except that most were young and seemed to come from various nationalities. Of the younger individuals there, two were Chinese, four were Caucasian, and two were Africans.

A few others were criminals, who Spymaster identified when Piotr held up a camera, allowing him to see what was going on back in Camelot. “That one there is the Grim Reaper. I suppose he was due for another dose after we identified him earlier. That one there is Jigsaw, a mob hitman. The woman is named the Vampiress, real name unknown. She’s been a hitwoman for a few years now, though notably one with scruples, unlike Jigsaw. And that other one... huh. That one is Deadeye, a Maggia assassin. Reported dead in a firefight last year. Still alive, apparently.”

Both young people and career criminals were strapped to beds in a long row. Several of them were connected to IV tubes, showing that a mix of drugs was entering their system. Others were simply laying there, their eyes wide and unseeing. Nearby, the same kind of air freshener Dani had seen in the mansion above blew the Black Spectre’s pheromones into their faces.

“Make sure the restraints will hold the criminals, then get the teens up and out of here. We will wake them up in the sunlight above, not in this, this place,” Piotr spat, horror etched on his metal face. “And call in Diamond. This just became a humanitarian issue, not a criminal one.”

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As dawn broke over Greece, Emma arrived with Wendy and her retrieval team, all of whom had become proficient in helping distraught individuals of various ages to come to terms with what had happened to them. She also brought in Una, Amelia Vought – who was serving as the X-mansion’s nurse – and, in a surprising move, Kitty and her parents.

While not having any experience with abused children, the Pryde parents were pretty much the best example of parents accepting a child with mutant powers, and they both were amazing with kids and teens. This worked very well to calm the slowly reviving superpowered teens, and Emma was happy they had diverted any outright disasters there.

However, the decision was made to not house them in Camelot. Instead, they would be slowly brought to Magical Minds, where they would be cared for until the Custodes found out if they should be brought back to their places of origin. Some young men and women professed to wonder where their families were, while others stayed silent on the matter.

With all of that organized and Amelia taking charge of it, Emma turned her attention to other things, breaking the Black Spectre's mind with a certain amount of vindictiveness. Like Hammerhead, he would never function as a human being ever again once she was finished with him.

But she was able to turn over everything she found in his mind to Interpol as hints and 'from an unknown source' to go with the various computers that the team had acquired in the assault, with promises to turn over the criminals they had captured soon after their mental health was seen to. Considering most of those were criminals, it honestly didn't matter if the Black Spectre had been controlling them since most of them were either his age or a little older, and their criminal activity had predated their connection to him and the Russian Mafia.

However, a few of the prisoners they kept. Black Mamba, Asp, and the Winter Soldier.

The two women were obvious. They were probably under Black Spectre's influence, pulled from their attempt to go straight into his control. The Winter Soldier, however, was a bit of a surprise. Emma had fully intended to hand him over to Interpol and watch as various governments argued for jurisdiction as to who would execute the man for his crimes. But when Steve stopped by to look over the prisoners, that plan stopped instantly. Because he recognized the Winter Soldier.

Emma gaped at Steve incredulously. "He's who!? How is that even possible?"

"I don't know! I have no idea how he's still alive, although, given my own experience with being frozen for a few decades, that certainly shows one way. But I am as certain of this as I am of my own name, Emma," Steve barked back at Emma's incredulous question, distraught as he stared through the glass at the prisoner on the other side. "That's Bucky Barnes, my oldest friend and my liaison with the Howling Commandos."

"Is there any record of him after Steve disappeared?" the blonde woman asked, not turning her own eyes away from Steve and the prisoner but addressing Dennis and Nick Fury, who Steve had brought in to make certain he wasn't hallucinating.

Both men exchanged glances, and after a moment, Dennis nodded to Nick. "He was your soldier."

"Bucky Barnes was lost in action during Operation Pinocchio, a joint mission of the Allies and Rommel's Germany to assault a last SS hold out near the Polish border. At the time, he was leading a paratrooper group, the plan calling for them to drop down on the base from on high. His plane had just reported it was under before all contact was lost," Nick declared, having looked up those records in after-action reports of the time. "Rommel's troops still stormed the place, but took a lot of casualties."

"The first time the Winter Soldier, although he wasn't called that at the time, appeared was during the Cold War, three years after World War II ended. At that time, he was involved in

the murder of President Tito in Yugoslavia. The man was known to resent Russian domination of the Communist Movement and was a fierce patriot who wanted to strengthen his country's position. Several other murders were also linked to someone matching this man's description, including an aide of Mao's during the confrontation over Zhenbao Island." Dennis reported.

Nick looked at him, one eyebrow rising, and the older man chuckled. "I started looking into the Winter Soldier long before this, Nick. With Firestar's description of the man to work with, it was relatively easy to find past examples of his work."

Nick nodded understanding at that but said nothing, and then Emma spoke once more. "You have something to add, Fury, but you don't want to. What is it?"

"Did you just..."

Emma rounded on Nick, scowling angrily. "No, I didn't just read your mind. I read your body language, spymaster! Silences can say just as much as words at times. Now, what are you keeping from us?"

Grumbling, Nick reached up to rub at his eyepatch for a moment before sighing. "... There's also some evidence that the Winter Soldier was involved in Tony Stark senior's murder. As in, we know someone matching the Winter Soldier's description pulled the trigger."

Steve grimaced at that, one hand rubbing up at his face, touching the bruise heat taken fighting Bucky the day before. "There is no way that Bucky would have anything to that kind of thing, or hell, even become an assassin in the first place."

"Agreed," Nick announced, throwing off his annoyance about being called out by Emma as he too looked through the glass. Bucky had been one of his men at one point, after all.

"So he's been brainwashed, or perhaps some kind of false personality has been placed over his own. But even with that, how he became a criminal in the first place is still beyond me," Steve admitted.

"The Russian Mafia started as the KGB, remember? Someone probably had his control words or what have you. But in your opinion, the Winter Soldier, Bucky, cannot be held accountable for his actions?" Emma questioned quickly.

"That's a hard affirmative, Emma," Steve answered firmly.

"Knowing what I can do with my telepathic powers, it would be extremely hypocritical of me to push for him to be condemned then. Unfortunately, I've been probing his mind as we speak, and I am not getting through. Whatever mental defenses keep his new personality in place, they are subtle and powerful. Most definitely the work of another telepath of some kind, along with something mechanical device backing it up. Will have to remove whatever that something is before we can do anything else. But if we keep him sedated and in custody, we can wait until Reed gets back." Emma shrugged. "And I can promise we will keep him."

“You realize that part of the reason why I was sent here to help identify him was the fact that the American government wants Bucky handed over to them?” Nick asked sardonically.

Emma rolled her eyes. “I rather doubt that the president actually believes that we will extradite Bucky, let alone any of our other prisoners. Not until we are certain of their guilt and mental cognition. But I will say it firmly now for you, Nick. Bucky will remain our prisoner and under sedation until the mental blocks are removed. After that, he may stand trial, but only for those crimes Bucky committed when he had free will. Is that acceptable?”

Steve nodded firmly, and Emma nodded once, then turned, swirling back out of the room. “In that case, I have other duties to attend to. And don’t worry Fury, we’ll send you any information we get from the prisoners.”

Nick nodded, and Emma left Nick Dennis and Steve there as she exited the room, heading over to the medical wing. Of Camelot There, she took some time talking to the wounded, thanking them for their efforts, exchanging a nod with Peter, and concentrating on Mystique and Natasha who had been affected by the pheromones of the Black Spectre. She then exchanged a high five with Paige, who smirked back at her in amusement, still delighted about her own role in the battle.

After that, alas, Emma had to get back to her own work. The deal with Russia, or rather the multiple deals with Russia, had finally been completed, although they were still going a little too slowly to combat the anti-mutant feeling that had become part of their society. Despite that, the rest of the deals were good to go, and with that, Emma was free to share some of the technology that they had claimed from Reed Richards and from the Kree ships to the various first world governments, along with Wakanda and a few other African nations of her and Ororo’s choosing.

Nothing they shared would allow any of the other terrestrial powers to get into space. Throughout the discussions, Emma, Ororo and Harry had debated that point and finally agreed. The orbital defenses and the fleet would remain solely in Potter’s control. But he wanted the various nations to be able to feel as if they had some measure of defense against aliens, and, beyond the military technology is a lot of other things, medical equipment, new types of metals, and so forth, could be shared with the civilian populace. For a fee, of course.

Besides that, considering the gravity well and the distances involved, it was doubtful that anyone would build a defense that could actually reach any attacking ship. Getting missiles up out of the gravity well took too long, and energy weapons were short-range weapons at best, considering how fast ships moved and how easily they could evade. Plasma-based weaponry was better, but even there, the arc of the firing gun worked against it. Perhaps the hellbore weapons E had designed with Reed and which had been a gift to the Americans for their revamped battleships could produce sufficient power. But even so, the main point of those defenses was to make the various governments or rather, the smaller unions, feel safer, unlike the Verdun defense stations.

She was still busy meeting various government officials in her Diamond persona when the call came in from Fortress Mars. The Long Voyager was back. It had jumped in near Pluto and was even now heading deeper in.

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“Unknown warship, you have entered human space, identify yourselves...” The voice trailed off as the IFF signal, and the two frigates and the destroyer, which had been apparently doing some exercises out here against a squadron of Ravens, broke off their approach, slowing dramatically and moving into a guard position around the Long Voyager. “Apologies, Voyager, your IFF code has been confirmed. Welcome home, Custodes, sir Potter.”

“Good to be home, Taffy 3, good to be home.” Harry read off the destroyer's name, even as he examined the readout on a nearby teleportation ring. That hadn't been there when they left, but he knew Polaris and Kitty could build the things, and sticking one out here was also probably a good thing. Thanks to the gravitational trap on Mars, warping in this far out then moving in-system was the only way an attacking force could get at Earth. *So hitting them right from the start with fighters is a great idea. I just would have built out from Earth rather than haphazardly.*

However, ideas on that score could not stay in his head because as the ship headed deeper into the solar system, Jean gasped, twitching in her chair as her eyes rolled up in her head. A second later, Jean's mental persona found herself in the land of fire once more. The never-ending plain of fire, of life and rebirth, stretched all around her as the Phoenix appeared, once more wearing the guise of a woman.

And in her hands, she held out two bright sparks which Jean instinctually knew were the souls of her children. “Your mission is accomplished, and you fulfilled your end of the bargain, but you are back now. That means that your little ones must be returned. They cannot stay here any longer. Souls cannot dwell forever in this realm without being changed, and I warned you that you would have to pay once more upon your return.”

“Can I say that is just so much bull? I destroy that sword for you, and you still demand more?” Jean grumbled, even as she held out her hands in welcome. The two small sparks flew towards her, through Jean's hands and then into her stomach.

Jean barely had a moment to feel those two lives, those two souls once more next to her own when she was back in her body feeling the change. And then Jean began to scream in agony. “GAAAAAAAAA!!!!!!”

The human body is not supposed to go from being at the peak of physical, athletic health to being on the cusp of the third trimester of pregnancy in a few seconds. And all of the people in the Long Voyager had assumed that the change would occur when they reached the orbit of Earth. Not right now, the second they returned to the solar system.

Harry quickly raced to her, using a spell to deaden the pain through her body, even as her eyes rolled back and she started to spasm, her body changing as they watched, almost like that of Morph or Mystique. Hela and Ororo also raced forward, doing what they could to help deaden the pain, as Reed grabbed up a scanner and began to run it over Jean's rapidly expanding stomach and body. "As long as I live, I will never get used to magic! Teleporting two fetuses back into the mother after removing them and somehow reversing Jean's personal time back to when she was in peak condition? Insane! And what is going on in her body is equally as impossible. Hell, the strain of the change should be killing her."

"Don't tempt fate like that, Reed Richards! Just tell me if the kids are all right, and if Jean is all right," Hela ordered, while Harry was too distraught to speak for a moment, casting another pain-relieving spell on Jean as he sensed the first few fading under the agony she was in.

He tried to avoid her stomach since it was known that using magic on babies before they were born was a bad idea. Despite his power, Harry wasn't the Phoenix, able to wave his hands and ignore such fundamental rules of his craft.

"I'll have to wait until the transfer process is done to tell you if Jean will be all right, but it looks as if the two unborn are well enough. No, it's Jean's body that is dealing with most of the injury. And I don't even want to think of how hungry Jean will be when she wakes up. In fact, we should probably set up an intravenous tube, just in case," Reed ordered.

Leaving Ben in charge of the bridge, Hela teleported Jean down on the med bay. There Harry met her, and the two of them laid Jean out on a bed, trying to get her to straighten up out of the fetal position she had assumed. Ororo soon joined them, crooning softly in the younger woman's ear, whispering words of encouragement which she prayed would get through Jean's agony.

Eventually, they could get Jean to straight up a bit, although this was only because Jean had slipped into unconsciousness. "Which," Hela remarked, "is probably a good thing. The last thing we want to have to deal with is someone of Jean's power losing control of that power."

Harry nodded absently while Ororo stayed silent, simply stroking Jean's hair while her body continued twitching and thrashing as it underwent changes. Watching her stomach distend and her hips and breasts grow so much was somewhat alarming for all three of them and even Reed, watching it happen all at once like this rather than gradually. But Harry supposed that it was even worse for Jean. Especially if she was still feeling pain despite their best attempts at numbing her body from the neck down.

Eventually, Jean's spasming subsided, and her body was back to the way it had been when they left. After making sure Jean wasn't going hurt herself further, Harry pulled away, looking over at Reed as he began to run a diagnostic tool over her body, reminding Harry

somewhat quixotically of the medical scanner used in the Star Trek series Jean had once introduced him to. Only larger and connected to a nearby medical computer.

Eventually, Reed smiled, shut off the device and looked over at Harry and Ororo. “There doesn’t seem to be any lasting damage to her system outside of extreme debilitation. She will need food and nutrients by the bucket load, to say nothing of water, and probably won’t actually be up to moving around at all for days. But beyond that, both Jean and the children will be fine.”

Harry breathed a sigh of relief, and Hela and Ororo leaned against one another. Both of them had been horribly shaken by the initial shriek of agony from their friend and lover, but to hear that she would be all right was a godsend.

As Reed had predicted, Jean was still unconscious hours later as the Explorer reached Earth orbit. Soon after that, Emma reached out to them mentally. Being unable to find Jean’s presence caused Emma to panic, but Harry quickly relieved her of her concerns, explaining what had happened.

“Wow, and I needed another reason to not want to get pregnant,” Emma drawled, her mental equilibrium restored.

That, and indeed all other thoughts, left Emma’s mind as she met Harry and the others on High Note. So relieved to see her lovers alive, she ignored the rest of the Custodes and their allies as they disembarked, even the new alien girl, as she flung herself into Harry’s arms in a way that she would never do in public, or indeed around most people. It was all right for her lovers to see Emma acting like a lovesick teenage girl. It was very much another thing to have her public persona, even that of Emma Frost rather than Diamond, acting in such a manner.

But when her mouth found Harry’s, kissing him ardently, Emma had no thoughts for anything like that in her head. She then turned to Ororo, giving her a similar treatment, before turning to look at Hela, one eyebrow rising and very deliberately kissing her on the cheek just below her half-mask as Hela stiffened.

The Asgardian grumbled a bit even at that, but there was a faint smile on her face as Emma pulled away. Then she was back in Harry’s arm, hugging him tightly, whispering, “Welcome home, all of you. And if you try to leave me behind like this again Harry, be prepared to believe you have turned into a chicken and need to cluck at dawn!”

Chuckling at that, Harry wrapped Emma in his arms, lifting her up lightly as they moved through High Note to the bedroom suite. “I don’t have plans to leave again anytime soon, love, never fear. There’s too much to do for me right here, after all.”

“One of those things better be me, Potter, if you know...” That was as far as Emma got before Harry’s mouth found hers once more, and she felt him using magic to tear her clothing into tiny pieces. Behind him, Hela beat a hasty retreat, giggling like a schoolgirl even as she

obeyed propriety's stern injunctions. Behind her, Ororo simply smiled and joined Emma and Harry on the bed.

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The next day, Jean was still unconscious, her body simply unable to deal with the sudden change. But while Harry would have wanted to spend time waiting beside her or continue to take time with the kids, Emma insisted that they tell the various world leaders what had happened with the Shi'ar Empire as soon as possible. "They all know you're back by now, and the longer we wait to tell them what happened to out there, the crazier the conspiracy theories will be."

With that in mind, Harry gathered the various world leaders together on High Note, disdaining once more the use of normal diplomatic channels. With him went Storm, although Hela too was invited. She decided to not join in, instead spending time with Emma and Garm.

The group Harry and Storm met with hadn't really changed much since their meeting after the Eurasian War. And this meeting wasn't anywhere near as acrimonious as that one. In fact, it really wasn't a discussion at all. Rather, Harry simply told the world leaders everything that had occurred beyond the solar system, bar the true origins of the virus. Beyond the crew of the Explorer, no one would ever know that it had been Harry and his people who had released that virus. Instead, Harry told them that the virus had been released as a final act from D'ken. Given everything else Harry shared about how D'ken acted, none of the leaders here had any issue with believing that he could do something like that.

The only one that seemed a little suspicious was Doctor Doom, whose eyes narrowed slightly behind his mask. But then he simply raised his glass slightly in a subtle salute before setting it down. Whatever that meant, Harry wasn't about to speculate.

Regardless, the meeting went off without much of a hitch, as Harry explained about the humanitarian effort he had set up, which would also give Earth some allies in the future. Not powerful ones, certainly, but any ally was better than none. He then further explained how Diamond had been acting in his stead and the various advances made in his absence on the Earth Defense Force. He also backed the decision to attack the Black Spectre's base in Greece when called out on it by President Northton.

After that, the meeting broke up, and after glad-handing for a time, Harry started a two week vacation with unvarnished delight. He spent most of that time with Melody, Illyana and the rest of the kids, simply having fun, enjoying winter in Camelot and training Illyana to use her magic. That, and spending time with the ladies, the time they weren't organizing the next wedding, which would be Jean's.

Jean awoke near the end of the first week, and after several hours of further medical tests, was declared relatively healthy bar the issues Reed had noticed right after the fact.

She still had to eat twice as much as she normally would even at this stage of her pregnancy, and her body was incredibly weak. No lasting damage had been done to it. Although she did reiterate the point she had made before they had met up with the pirates. "Two is enough Harry, I am not going through this again!"

Harry just laughed, helping Jean sit up in bed, his arm around her shoulders, before leaning in, kissing her ear and then neck as he spoke, his hand coming to rest on her swollen stomach. "Your body your choice love, I'll go along with whatever decision in that area you want. However, I'll remind you that we used both regular and magical contraceptives when these two were conceived. Perhaps before you make any such demands on me, you should check in with a certain higher authority?"

"What is the English term, prat? You prat, Harry! How dare you remind me I'm not exactly in full control here," Jean grumbled, although she did lean into his hug.

At that moment Emma entered the room, the blonde eager to spend time with her friend now that she was once more awake. Of course, being Emma, she showed this in her normal manner. "Oh dear, you're back to looking like a blimp. Well, don't worry, I understand that once the horrid business is done, it only takes a few months to get your figure back."

"In Vitro," Jean grumbled, lifting her arms away from Harry, as in the leaned in for a hug despite her caustic words. "Definitely going to push some more research into that area."

Harry chuckled, stood up, kissed both women, and then left them to their talk, heading outside to join a growing snowball fight.

Eventually, Harry's time off had to end. And the first thing he did once being back on duty was to finally bite the bullet. Over the next month Harry concentrated nearly all his time on finalizing the governmental structure for the Avalon Empire, as his holdings were now called.

"After all, when you're dealing with an empire that is connected to all of its constituent parts through magic and has magic and superpowers as the basis of its existence, what else are you supposed to call it?" Storm opined after she and the other ladies chose the name for Harry from a list of five he had made.

Harry's holdings consisted of the Savage land, Camelot, High Note, the Hanging Gardens, Prometheus 2, the Magical Minds headquarters. While still technically a British-based company, it was now the site of his embassy to the UK. Fortress Mars and the earth defense force also answered to Harry. Most of its people now had secondary status as citizens of their home nations and the Avalon Empire as long as they served in the fleet. The Savage land, Camelot, and the asteroid bases were entirely owned by Avalon Empire; however, as was the majority of Fortress Mars.

The Americans' attempt to start up their own base wasn't going as well as they had hoped, just not having the trained people needed, to say nothing of paying for the use of the

runic doorways. By this point, Harry was cheerfully waiting for them to give up so he could claim their resources for his own.

The government for the Avalon Empire was, at its core, a constitutional monarchy, although as King, Harry retained quite a bit more power than the term constitutional monarchy implied. Even in the United Kingdom, there were a lot more checks and balances on the monarch than Harry was willing to accept.

Instead of having a parliament, each different segment of the Empire would have its own set of laws underneath the overarching laws of the Empire. This set of laws was called the Bill of Responsibility and Liberties and had been finalized only recently after quite a bit of initial work on it from Harry and the others in the time dilation area of High Note. Most of the month was spent on other things, including the creation and issuing of visas and IDs, to say nothing of the creation of a monetary system, banking system, and everything to go with that.

Moreover, each individual clan or tribe in the Savage Lands had their own laws, but those laws would not impact individuals of other clans or tribes, let alone the residents of the burgeoning city that were beginning to grow there made up of dependents of those men and women on Fortress Mars or employed elsewhere by Magical Minds. It was also the only place that currently had a police force. Magical minds had no need of such, nor did any of the asteroid bases, while Fortress Mars made do quite easily with a large MP force.

To create laws, each segment of the Empire would be able to create a Council of Prefects, the name harkening back to Harry's old Hogwarts days, although he hadn't been the one to choose it. Each segment of the Empire would also have a single governor. This post would be chosen by Harry from a list of candidates voted on by the locals. The Council of Prefects would oversee the creation of new laws specific to their area of the Empire, enforce those laws, and deal with local problems so that Harry wouldn't have to.

But he could be called in to do so, and he and his advisers or representatives would have the deciding vote in any single issue. And while he could not simply dismiss a member of the Council of Prefects, he could demand that they stand for a retrial and give his reasoning to the public for that. All of this, plus the fact that the Council of Prefects wouldn't actually be paid all that much - basically the same as a town mayor in America - would stop them from becoming corrupt.

Further, taxes would be very low across the Empire. After all, most of Harry's holdings were businesses, all of whom were making money hand over fist through what would soon become exports to other nations throughout the world. Thanks to that and his owning half the rights to all of the mining going on in space, Harry was far and away the richest man in the world, with Lorna, thanks to her efforts in mining out Fortress Mars and elsewhere, being a surprising second, although she had been quick to become an Avalon Empire citizen.

All of this meant that ninety percent of the money that the government of the Avalon Empire would have for its various municipal projects (one of which was the EDF, technically) came from Harry and his personal holdings. Really, the taxes were more to make the average citizen believe they were connected to the Empire as a whole.

The same went for the Freedom of Movement Law. Any citizen of the Empire could freely move between its various holdings, while citizens of other nations would now need to pay. Not much admittedly for private businesses, but there would be a fee now to use the runic doorways.

Of course, all of that was internal, while externally, a lot of the work had already been done: Visas, the creation of passports, News agencies and so on. Sage had, again, been a godsend in all of this.

But there was one thing that Harry had to see to on his own: presenting the Avalon Empire to the United Nations. Even though the United Nations had lost much of its cohesion and frankly was becoming more and more ignored as time went on, the smaller unions taking over its original duties, it was still a necessary symbolic gesture.

Harry waited in the antechamber for a moment, then, as the ambassador from the United Kingdom called his name, and third. He looked around the room, locking gazes with each of the United Nations Members, nodding to a select few in the rest of the audience, before moving to take the same chair that he and Storm had once occupied during their initial meetings with this body.

“We’ve been told Mister Potter that you have something to share with us? Or rather, you wish to make something official that has long been the case?” The French ambassador asked, smiling very slightly.

“That is correct Madame ambassador. As of 0700 Greenwich Village time, the creation of my nation has been finalized. The Council of Prefects for the Savage land and Fortress Mars have been chosen, voted into office and are currently having their first meetings. While it will be a constitutional monarchy, with myself at its head, I will not be overseeing the day to day lives of the individuals within it. That will happen on the municipal level, with no level of government between the municipal and myself. In the future, when the Savage Land has grown or further colonies begin in space, that might change. But at the moment, this is the method of government that works for us.”

Harry waited a moment, then launched into a somewhat prepared speech. “When America came into being, its forefathers set out to create a nation built on the rights of the individual at two set aside old hatreds. My nation is built somewhat on the second of those. We set aside our differences, we denounce and decry the separation between mutant and non-mutants, white and black, religions, or sexual preferences. All we see is humanity. That is one pillar that the Avalon Empire is built on.”

Harry held up a hand, counting a second point. "The second is defense, the survival of humanity against its extraterrestrial enemies. This blue-white marble of ours is but a small speck in the galaxy, and a very small, very fragile ship, to trust humanities future to. So long as my nation exists, the EDF will as well, and will continue to grow and become stronger due to my efforts and the efforts of the rest of humanity united."

He waited a bit, then spoke softly, although his voice still carried to everyone in the room and out beyond thanks to the video cameras set at the far back of the room. "That is the basis of the Avalon Empire. For mutants, for nonpowered humans, for humanity! For the future and taking our species to the stars!"

Harry's speech did not get a standing ovation. The United Nations was very much not the kind of place that would occur. But there was a lot of clapping, far more than when Harry had initially been stood in front of this body of ambassadors. He would take it. There still remained a lot of work to do, but at least, the foundation was finally fully in place.

And now, I have another wedding to look forward to, he thought wryly, as the floor opened for questions. The ladies had decided that Jean's wedding should happen next, and that it should be in the next few days before the next disaster showed up out of nowhere. *Oh, joy.*

End Chapter

Those of you who have read the old comics know I changed the Black Spectre quite a bit. There's no Mandrill/monkey appearance here, and he's a straight-up mutant instead of coming from radioactive powers. I found his past silly and unnecessary. I'd also like to remind everyone that yes, what happened to the races of the Starjammers is canon as well. The Shi'ar were truly a horrible race, despite their occasional one-sided alliances with the X-men.

And I know that I had said this would be a bit of a recuperation chapter, but I felt that very few people would be interested in the creation of the Avalon Empire's government and everything else there, so pushed that through here. The next chapter will include at least another few weeks of semi-downtime and comedy to go with it...before events elsewhere come home to roost and the next crisis shows up.