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Issue #1
"New Blood"
Part I: Executive Decision
by David Wheatley and Dino Pollard

The United Nations Headquarters, New York.

Each of the fifteen men and women sitting in the room comprise the membership of the United Nations Security Council. The five permanent members of the United States, Great Britain, France, Russia and China have been joined by the elected members of, Bangladesh, Colombia, Ireland, Jamaica, Mali, Mauritius, Norway, Singapore, Tunisia and the Ukraine for an emergency session called by the United States, in response to a situation that has been developing for some time, of which only now have the details started to come to light. The United States representative started the session, with the blessing of the current President, the member for the United Kingdom.

"The latest information we've received from sources in Genosha say that Magneto has established a second mutant strike force. This one is comprised of powerful alpha-level mutants, possibly moreso than the Acolytes, who were once members of an outlaw group of mutants called X-Force." *

[*Check out *X-Force: Fallen Angels* for more info--Dino]

"There's also the matter of our research outpost in Alaska," said the Russian delegate.

"What's the current status there?" asked the Colombian member.

"No word. All our attempts to contact them have failed."

The American representative raised his hand. "I think we're forgetting what the serious threat is... and that is Magneto. With the Legacy Virus cured, he could very well be building a mutant army. We have to be prepared for that eventuality." The President shook his head, knowing that the problems in the United States with the mutant menace might have more than a small influence on the matter.

"As we saw during the Enforcer outbreak,* there are plenty of heroes to stand up to Magneto."

[*Back in *Apocalypse: Ageless Fury*--Dino]

"True, but how much control do we have over those heroes?"

The Russian representative nodded her agreement. "He poses an interesting point... many countries have their own government-sanctioned teams. Japan has Big Hero 6, we have the Winter Guard, Canada has Alpha Flight, and America has the Avengers. Perhaps it's time for the UN to have a team of their own."

"How would we control that, Mr. Secretary?" The Secretary General smiled. He was attending the meeting at the request of the United States, who had discussed the matter with him first and asked him to form a plan of action.

"Fairly easy," he answered. "I believe you all know Colonel Fury. I'll let him handle the specifics of this situation."

Eyes turned to the newcomer in the room. He was dressed in a blue and white uniform, with an eye-patch covering his left eye. His brown hair was short and white at the temples, and he held a lit cigar between his fingers. It hadn't been so long since he had been in the UN Building for the decision about Wolverine, which was where the Secretary General had mentioned this to him.

He'd been forced in to a corner on this one, and Fury didn't like it at all. He'd been told to get the information together, he'd been told it was going to happen and he'd been told that they would be under SHIELD patronage. When he'd asked exactly what patronage meant, he'd been met with a smile and told that something would be worked out. It was this kind of thing that made Fury wonder just who was in charge of SHIELD, or the United Nations for that matter.

With the problems the United States had with organisation over authority within the UN and the ever present issue of funding, it seemed as though they were still dictating things, and for some reason it annoyed the hell out of him. It was true that this was needed but the way they'd gone about it was wrong. So there were going to be some comments on the decisions he'd made, but they'd get to that in a bit.

"Thanks," he said to the Secretary General before looking at the rest of the Security Council. This was going to be interesting. "Everything you've just heard about Magneto is true. We don't know what he's doing in Genosha, just like we don't know what Doom's doing in Latveria. An' basically, it doesn't matter. If you guys wanna form a UN-sanctioned team to help ya sleep easier at night, go right ahead an' do that. Somethin' like this is needed, but it was needed a long time ago."

"What countries would be represented in this team? And how would we be sure that the team leader will remain impartial?" asked the Chinese representative, voicing his concerns.

"Because SHIELD would have one of our own in place as the field commander of this team," Fury replied, knowing that was why the Secretary General had made this a SHIELD issue. It was the best way to keep people happy. Or mostly happy.

"Would this commander be yourself, Colonel?" asked the Russian, cynically, however Fury ignored the tone of his voice.

"I've got other SHIELD business that requires my full attention."*

[*Check out current issues of *X-Force--Dino*]

The American representative spoke up once more. "I have a list of possible candidates right here. Katherine Pryde seems like an obvious choice. She's a mutant, and she has past experience as a member of both the X-Men and Excalib--."

"Forget Pryde," Fury stated. "She was a POW up until recently when she was rescued. For now, she's on leave. In my mind, there's only one Agent suitable for something like this."

"And who would that be?"

"The same guy who served as Director in my absence," Fury replied, smiling inwardly at the name he was going to put forward. "GW Bridge, who, I might add, is currently working a desk job in DC because of you guys."

"With Bridge's connections to the terrorist known as Cable, it seemed only wise to put him somewhere where we could keep an eye on him," answered the American, slightly uncomfortable at the insinuation by Fury, which Fury also noted and strained to keep the inward smile becoming an outward one.

"Then you can keep an eye on him as the leader of this little team. I know how he can serve as field commander of this team, while still remaining under your watchful eye in the Helicarrier." This was another thing that grated on him and his smile died.

"How so?" asked the President, intrigued by this.

"The latest in cyborg technology," the American representative began. "From the Helicarrier, Bridge can cybernetically pilot a walking battle tank. It's sort of like a suit of armour, similar to Iron Man's, designed by several of our top scientists."

"Bridge's mind will essentially be hooked up to this thing?" asked the Chinese member and the American confirmed it to several murmurs of approval.

"What about the rest of the team?" asked the President of the Colonel.

"It seems fair if we keep the roster limited to nine slots."

"There are far more than nine countries represented in the UN, Colonel," reminded the Secretary General. "

"189, to be exact," said Fury. "However, of all the countries represented, how many have government-sanctioned heroes? Any other heroes will be reserve members. Plus, as we are all well aware, Mr Secretary, the Security Council makes decisions based on the votes of nine of the fifteen members, including the big five. It makes sense to have nine as a recurring number."

"I take it you already have a line-up in mind?"

"Right here," Fury stated, holding up several manilla folders. He placed it in front of the Secretary General and the President, who gazed over it and then passed copies to the other members. He was the first to comment.

"According to this, the eight countries that will be represented in the core line-up are Britain, Russia, America, Israel, Greece, Germany, India, and Japan. Reserve members include representatives from France, Canada, Wakanda, and others."

"Nine is as big as yer gonna be able t' get, an' as I said, it makes it a recurrin' number," Fury stated. "Plus, havin' anymore than that makes it difficult t' keep tabs on everyone. When the Avengers came back, there were so many members that they were fallin' over themselves.* We can't have that happenin' this time around. Nine works."

[*That embarrassing incident happened in Marvel's *Avengers* Vol. III #4--Dino]

The President nodded. "We should vote on it. All in favour..." and everyone in the room had a hand up. He smiled. "It's unanimous, then."

"I'll brief the General Assembly on the recommendations," said the Secretary General. "There shouldn't be any problems in creating a new agency if we make this a peace keeping force. Granted there may be a few grumbles, but there won't be an issue with getting the required two thirds."

The President nodded in agreement. "Colonel Fury, get in touch with Agent Bridge. Let him know that he's reinstated as a full agent of SHIELD."

"In that case, there's only one thing ya need..." Fury stated.

"What's that?" and Fury grinned.

"A name."

Out of all the SHIELD Agents present in the Helicarrier, one man stood out. He was dressed in a formal military uniform, holding a duffel bag in one hand. He was a tall, black man, with short, white hair and a goatee to match.

George Washington Bridge thought that he would never see these halls again. He had assumed that his past with Cable would force him to be a paper pusher until retirement. That all changed when he received a notice telling him he was reinstated as a full agent and told to report to the Helicarrier immediately.

As he wandered through the Helicarrier he could have sworn he saw the Teresa Rourke, member of Cable's outlaw X-Force team. He was familiar enough with them all from the time they had infiltrated the Helicarrier but when he looked again he was gone. He shook his head, wondering why the hell that he'd see Siryn on board the Helicarrier, and in a SHIELD uniform no less. He'd been away too long he decided, if the agents around him looked like other people. There was a time when he could name each agent individually. There'd been a time when he was Director.

Times had changed and he walked down the corridor that led to the Director's suite. The metal door at the end of the hall opened up automatically as he approached, and inside the room sat Fury, his face unreadable.

"Welcome back, GW," he said, and stood up, extending his hand.

"Gotta admit, Fury, I'm a bit dumbfounded," Bridge stated, ignoring Fury's hand. "Why was I suddenly

reinstated?"

"Because the UN needs you, Bridge." Not SHIELD, the UN, and from Fury's tone, he wasn't overly pleased about it. Whether it was with Bridge or whatever was going on, he didn't know, but he was going to find out.

"For what?" he asked.

Fury handed him a file. It was labelled Project: EXCALIBUR and had TOP SECRET stamped on it.

NEXT ISSUE: *Everything begins to take shape once Nick Fury and GW Bridge find out who the members are, and begin the recruitment drive!*

SWORDSTROKES

Welcome to the first issue of Excalibur. First, I gotta thank David Wheatley for volunteering to plot this book. If not for him, Excalibur may have never gotten off the ground (oh, and thanks goes out to Des Davies for volunteering as well, but he was just a tad late, maybe next time, Des ^_^). I've also gotta thank Brad Horton, the kick-ass writer of Cable and my collaborator on X-Men Omega for handling character designs. And finally, I should probably thank Russ Anderson for approving this book (but hey, with David plotting it and Brad drawing character designs, how could he say no? ^_^).

I should also take this time to say that I was originally going to plot and script Excalibur myself. The idea just came to me one day that a UN-sanctioned team would be pretty cool. Right away, I began to think of possible characters who would be good for the team. Originally, I had planned a Marvel Fanfare story where SHIELD would take down the current War Machine due to his criminal background, and GW Bridge would become the new War Machine and lead Excalibur. But, I couldn't wait for Adnan Khan to finish Marvel Knights so I just decided to create a new identity for Bridge.

The name for the team was something that took me awhile to come up with. I originally considered Redeemers, but it didn't really fit since they had nothing to redeem. Then, I saw the logo for Marvel's Excalibur limited series, and it just hit me that it was perfect. So, I stuck with Excalibur.

Due to lack of ideas and other projects, I wouldn't be able to plot the book, just script. A friend of mine, Paul A. Hahn, who I've collaborated with on projects for New Marvel, expressed interest in plotting this book and came up with some nifty ideas. Unfortunately, he had to drop out. Will Short offered to plot, but he had to drop out, too. Then, I put out a notice on the Marvel 2000 mailing list, and David was the first to respond. This book seems like a good fit for him, since he's also writing X-Force, which features a SHIELD-sanctioned mutant team.

So, here's hoping Excalibur does well. These guys are some of M2K's most-powerful. They could take those wimpy Avengers any day of the week.

-Dino Pollard
June 10, 2001

This isn't my book.

Well, let me clarify that, I'm along for the ride.

When I was putting together the proposal for X-Force, Russ voiced concerns over how similar my series would be to the Excalibur series planned by Dino, so we got together and thrashed out some

details. He gave up Pete Wisdom so I could use him on X-Force and the series got the go and I idly wondered how my series and Dino's would fit together.

Cut to a month later, as I'm finished off the Excalibur series at Marvel X. My Excalibur days are done. Or so I think, never once considering the natural irony of the universe.

Over at Marvel 2000, their new Excalibur series has hit problems and it needs a plotter, using Dino's characters and the situation he and a couple of others have developed. Except they've dropped out, because things happen and there's very little you can do about it. So Dino's having a hard time and sends out the request for help. I figure 'why the hell not?' throw my hat in the ring and I get the job. Which puts Marvel 2000's best writer and the writer of Marvel 2000's best title on the same project for the first time.

Or to put it another way 'Oh, my...'

I'm not the best plotter in the world. I take a premise and run with it, adding stuff as I write because the best ideas come to me as I do that, so this is a new approach for me. Dino's voiced his concerns over how short my layout for the issue is, but I've seen his words, and I've added some little embellishments to it with the details for the United Nations and Fury's reaction to this whole project. 95% of the book is his.

I make up the plots, I add little touches but in my mind, this isn't my book, because it's Dino's. He was working on this long before I was and I'm just tagging along. That said, I do have some interesting things planned. Dino hopes Excalibur does well. With his characters and words combined with my ideas, I don't see how this can fail.

David
June 11, 2001

Issue #2

"New Blood"

Part II: Drafted

by Dino Pollard & David Wheatley

Based on ideas and concepts created by Dino Pollard and Paul A. Hahn

The SHIELD Helicarrier.

Calling it a technological wonder is an understatement. The entire thing is basically a flying military base. It's considered neutral ground - owing no allegiance to any single country. Instead, they report directly to the United Nations.

Much to the chagrin of this old warhorse - Colonel Nicholas Fury. The chain-smoking, World War II-veteran, tough-as-nails Director of SHIELD. He doesn't like the current situation he's in.

He's been ordered by the United Nations Security Council to form a team of superhumans. Gathered from different nations, this team would be sanctioned and funded by the United Nations, yet it was SHIELD's job to be their babysitters.

Just another reason why Fury can't stand politics.

The man sitting across from him is George Washington Bridge. A former mercenary who served as a member of the original Six Pack. He's also an agent of SHIELD and even served as Director in Fury's absence. Due to his connections to the mutant terrorist known as Cable, however, Bridge was assigned to a desk job in Washington, DC.

That is, until now. Bridge was selected to head up Project: EXCALIBUR.

Fury was consdeering things. It had been rather a busy day and he had just sent his other 'green' strikeforce on a mission. The difference here being that that team was his, was SHIELD through and through. This group were not, they were little more than very important passengers in his opinion, but he had to play the cards he'd been dealt. Of course, that meant he'd savour it so much more later on.

He lit a cigar as he quickly flicked through the pages of the file to make sure all the information Bridge needed was there and handed it over to him. It had SHIELD's symbol on it, as well as the UN's, which was more prominent on the file, giving the reader no illusions as to who was calling the shots here.

It read 'Project: EXCALIBUR' and had the words 'TOP SECRET' stamped on it.

"So what gives?" Bridge asked. "What's the story with this Project, Fury?" as he opened up the file.

"You've been chosen to head up a UN-sanctioned team," Fury replied, blowing smoke out, as he removed the cigar that would normally be fixed to his lips. "Think the Avengers with an international roster."

"Who are the members?"

"Take a look," Fury stated. "Each one represents a different country. Eight countries in total are represented, with you serving as the team commander." He put the cigar back in his mouth and waited for Bridge to catch up to him with the file.

Bridge opened up the files and looked through the descriptions of them. He mentally read off the eight countries - Britain, America, Russian, Japan, Germany, India, Israel, and Greece. Fury stood and switched off the lights. He held a remote in his hand and pressed a button on it. A monitor in front of them turned on. The first image was of a man in a navy-blue jumpsuit with the British flag across the chest.

"First up is Union Jack," Fury began with the briefing, so that Bridge would be able to relate to the words and images before him. "His real name is Percival Rockford. He's the latest Union Jack. No powers whatsoever, but he's apparently got a strategic mind and he uses a lot o' weapons and gadgets in battle." He gave a smirk. "If he wasn't on the Project, we'd hire him an' give Tony Stark a run fer his money.

Then he pressed a button on the remote and the image changed, but this time, it was a double-image. Bridge noted that the man on the left was dressed in a uniform similar to Captain America's, except it was black. The image beside it, though, showed a man dressed in blue and red, with a white star on his shirt, spiked, blonde hair, and red sunglasses.

"Next is John Walker. He served as Captain America for a time, an' then took up the mantle of the USAgent once the real Cap reclaimed his title. Walker's served on the Avengers and Force Works. He was basically a cheap rip-off of Cap, complete with the shield. Now though, he's changed his look. More militant, usin' guns now. He's got tech in his gloves that can create an energy shield if he needs it."

Fury pressed the button again, and the next image was an attractive young woman with long, blonde hair. She was dressed in a black bodysuit that showed off her figure.

"Laynia Petrova," Fury stated. "Part o' th' Winter Guard, Russia's answer to the Avengers. She was also a member of th' Champions. Goes by th' name o' Darkstar. She's a mutant who can control an extra-dimensional energy source called th' Darkforce that gives her flight an' teleportation abilities. T' top it all off, she can manipulate an' project th' Darkforce however she likes."

The next image came up. It was a young, Asian woman, couldn't have been more than 19 or 20. She was dressed in white and red, and Bridge noticed that there was something familiar about her.

"Tsunami. Her real name's Leyu Yoshida."

"Yoshida?!" Bridge asked. "Does she have any connection to--"

"Shiro Yoshida - Sunfire," Fury finished, pleased that Bridge still remembered some of the things and that being a desk jockey hadn't dulled him too much. "Yeah, she's his younger sister. But, whereas he can control fire, she can control water. From what I heard, though, she's just as hot headed. Must run in th' family."

"Why didn't you choose Sunfire, then?" Bridge asked. "He's got more experience."

"Two reasons," Fury stated. "One, we already got another fire-wielder on th' team. An' two, Shiro hasn't been seen in quite some time." There was the fact that he was also heading up the Clan Yashida and they were having a large say in Japan these days, but Fury figured Bridge didn't need to know that.

He hit the remote. The next image was a man dressed in a navy jumpsuit, with the German flag on his chest. He wore some type of gauntlets on his hand, and his mask was open at the top, exposing his blonde hair.

"Th' Hauptmann," Fury stated. "Real name, unknown. History, unknown. Man's a walkin' enigma. He can absorb kinetic energy an' either redirect it or use it to raise his own vitality. We're not even sure if he's a mutant or just a superhuman."

Another image appeared, this one of an Indian man with short, black hair and a goatee, dressed in a gold and green uniform.

"Here's our fire-wielder," Fury said. "Neal Shaara. He was a mutant who was bein' controlled by Fabian Cortez until recently. Used t'call himself Thunderbird. Now he goes by th' name o' Savitar."

Fury pressed the remote again. The next person was another woman, older than Tsunami and Darkstar. She had short, black hair and wore a blue and yellow uniform.

"Ruth Bat-Seraph - part o' Mossad, th' Israeli intelligence agency," Fury began. "Goes by Sabra. She's a mutant with superhuman speed an' agility, plus she's strong as hell. Went toe-t'-toe with th' Hulk if I recall. She's also got an anti-grav unit beneath her cape that lets her fly, an' her gauntlets can fire paralyzing blasts."

The final image came up, this one was of a large, muscular man. He was dressed in white and blue, and had a small goatee.

"Last but not least is th' latest hero on th' block," Fury said. "Niko Hrisalis - Hellios. He's got superhuman strength, speed, invulnerability, flight, an' he can fire solar energy from his hands or eyes. A real powerhouse, this one."

Fury pressed another button and the monitor switched off. He turned the lights back on and looked at Bridge.

"We've also got reserves," Fury said. "China's Collective Man, Canada's Guardian, Wakanda's Black Panther, an' a whole slew of others."

"They're all powerhouses," Bridge noted. "They could probably take down the Avengers if they wanted to."

"Don't ya think that th' UN would want to be standin' behind th' world's most-powerful superheroes?"

"What I mean is, how do I fit in?" Bridge asked. "I'm nothing more than an ex-merc. Hell, you're probably in better shape to be the field commander than I am."

"Bottom line is this, Bridge," Fury replied. "Th' UN doesn't trust you. They only made you field commander at my request."

"You?" Bridge asked. "But why?"

"'Cause you're th' only one I trust t' run this team right," Fury replied. "I got my own obligations t' tend to - I can't be bothered with playin' babysitter t' a bunch o' glorified gofers. There's only one reason that you were approved as field commander."

"And what's that?"

"You're not leavin' th' Helicarrier," Fury stated.

"What?!" Bridge asked. "How's that possible?!"

"Th' latest in cybertechnology," Fury replied. "You'll be pilotin' a robot battlesuit, similar t' Iron Man, directly from th' Helicarrier. You'll see what I mean once we get down there."

"What's their status, though?" Bridge asked.

"Not sure I follow you."

"Are they full agents or what?"

"No," Fury stated. "They'll be stationed in th' Helicarrier since it's considered neutral territory, but their SHIELD clearance has limitations. They've got our support, they're basically visitors - that's it."

"If they're going to be forced to stay here, I think they should be made full agents," Bridge said.

"Don't matter what you think," Fury replied. "Th' UN forced this on me, an' I'm playin' as nice as possible. But I'm not makin' 'em agents - they haven't earned that status. They're just a bunch o' government stooges sent here t' do th' UN's dirty work."

"They should have our trust."

"They haven't earned our trust," Fury stated. "An' this matter's not up f'r debate, Commander."

Bridge sighed. He could tell by Fury's tone that he was backed into a corner with this operation. Nick was a good man - Bridge knew that, but even he had his limits. Besides, once Fury set his mind on something, changing it was damn-near impossible.

"C'mon," Fury ordered. "I'll show ya what I'm talkin' about."

"I don't believe this..." John Walker muttered. "I get a notice from SHIELD telling me t' report to the Helicarrier ASAP, and they leave me here in a waiting room for an hour..."

"You're not the only one, mate," the Union Jack stated. "Blokes woke me up at the crack o' dawn."

"This is inexcusable is what it is!" Tsunami exclaimed. "Who the hell do they think they are?! I could be doing much more productive things with my time."

"Do us all a favor, child," Sabra stated from her seat. "Sit down and be silent."

"I am far from a child!" Tsunami muttered through clenched teeth.

"Young children in Kefalonia behave better than you," Hellios stated. "Just shut up."

"I think that's quite enough," Neal Shaara said, standing up. "None of us are here by choice. We received orders from our respective governments to report here. Once SHIELD is ready to talk to us, they will."

"Trying to get on their good side, Thunderbird?" Darkstar asked from her seat. "From what I've read in the Winter Guard's files, you're wanted in the States for terrorism. You're only present so you can pay your debt."

"My name is Savitar," Neal replied. "And my past is none of your concern."

The only one who remained silent was the Hauptmann who stood in a corner of the room, his arms folded.

Barely here an hour and they already want to kill each other... he thought to himself. Yes, setting up an international team was a wonderful idea...

"These losers are supposed to be the best the world has to offer," chuckled one man, looking down at them, through the darkened glass, not really caring if they could see him or not. "Christ, we're screwed."

"We, Commander?" the raven haired woman next to him asked, a trace of cynicism in her voice.

"As in the world, babe, as in the world." She shot him a look and his grin got wider.

"You actually care about the world?"

"I live here, I don't want idiots like that ruining it. Just imagine this lot - the X-Men on steroids. There won't be a planet left..."

"I believe these are more akin to the Avengers than the X-Men, sir," she said.

"Don't they wish," muttered her commanding officer. "Anyway, we can't spend all day watching these idiots argue with each other. Though maybe I can spare ten minutes later on."

"You think we'll have a chance after the Colonel's briefing?"

"I'll make time, Lydia," he replied. "Now let's go practice that move Siryn devised. Well, Cable devised and she borrowed..." He walked away from the glass and Lydia Del Ruiz watched Pete Wisdom head towards the training bay, wondering if telling him about this little gathering was such a good idea.*

[*For more on Pete Wisdom and Lydia Del Ruiz, check out current issues of *X-Force* - Dino, handling shameless plugs for David]

"Colonel Fury... Commander Bridge... welcome," a scientist stated as the two men entered.

"We're here t' get Bridge familiar with th' battlesuit," Fury stated.

"Of course," the scientist said, walking over to a control panel. He activated a couple of switches, and a large, metal cylinder in the center of the room opened up. Inside was a humanoid red and black robot.

"Gentlemen, I give you Project: ARMORY."

"Armory, huh?" Bridge asked, looking at the drone. "Has a nice ring to it I suppose..."

"This way, Commander Bridge, I'll show you the controls."

The scientist led the way to what appeared to be a giant glass dome. A door on the side opened and the scientist led Bridge into it. What was there was directly out of a sci-fi movie. A large chair sat in the middle, and all around it were sophisticated controls. The scientist motioned to the chair, and Bridge took a seat.

"Now, let's go over the controls," the scientist stated. He pointed to a switch. "Press that."

Bridge did as he was told.

<< VOICE AUTHORIZATION REQUIRED >>

"I'll handle it this time," the scientist stated. "Dr. Brad Horton - activate ARMORY controls, code alpha-beta-gamma."

<< AUTHORIZATION ACCEPTED - ACTIVATING ARMORY CONTROLS >>

A compartment opened in the control panel, and a helmet was raised.

"This is the main source of the Armory controls," Horton stated, holding the helmet. "It's controlled cybernetically."

Horton placed the helmet on Bridge's head.

"Activate ARMORY system, code pi-omega-pi."

All of a sudden, the darkness inside the helmet was illuminated. On the other side of the room, Fury watched as the Armory battlesuit lit up with bright green LED lights.

The helmet Bridge wore transmitted the images that the Armory suit saw directly into Bridge's retina. His vision became Armory's.

"Let's try some basic commands," Horton stated. "You control the suit through your mind. Basically, the rest of your body has now been cut-off. So, if you send an impulse from your brain to your legs to, say walk, then the suit will walk as long as you're wearing the helmet."

"What about the controls?" Bridge asked, and the Armory suit repeated the phrase.

"The manual controls are active in case the neuro-controls fail," Horton replied. "They're mainly here as a failsafe."

"Then let's get this show on the road," Bridge stated. The suit stepped off of the platform it was standing on, and looked at Fury.

"Ya in there, Bridge?" Fury asked, looking into the eyes of the robot.

"In a manner of speaking," Armory replied. "Hey doc, what can this suit do?"

"It has a vast weapons' array," Horton replied. "Here, let me show you. ARMORY Weapons System, code epsilon-kappa-xi."

Bridge was practically thrown off his feet as a list of the weapons systems were projected into his retina, appearing over the images he received from Armory's visual receptors.

"This thing rocks!" Armory exclaimed. He turned to Bridge. "I'm startin' to feel a lot better about this job..."

Fury grinned and took a drag on his cigar. He had a few things to do today but he was looking forward to the next part of this little task.

"You ready t' meet yer team?"

Armory looked down at his robotic body, moving his arms around as if he was amazed by the mundane tasks. He then looked up at Fury again.

"Let's do it."

NEXT ISSUE: *Excalibur is assembled, and the team receives their first mission!!*

SWORDSTROKES

Well, welcome to the second installment of Excalibur. This book's getting off to a good start, and I'm having a lot of fun writing it. Remember, if you have any questions or comments, send them via e-mail to either me (Thor292@aol.com) or David (dewheatley@yahoo.com). Or, you can post your comments on Marvel 2000's message board.

-Dino Pollard July 16, 2001

Well, the issue was kind of short, but M2K's Excalibur is most certainly off to a promising start. The concept of a team sanctioned by the U.N. isn't exactly a new one, but pulling heroes from all over the globe certainly is. I like it a lot. Knowing Dave and Dino's certain style of writing, I'm sure there's going to be a lot of clashing in this title with the cast. I know who the team is going to consist of (or at least, mostly I do) and I'm looking forward to the clash of personality and culture more than anything else in this book.

G.W. Bridge was a good choice for leader of this team. Everything that was involved with this issue was well-done and portrayed in a fairly realistic manner. I'm a bit unsatisfied with the length, as this seemed like more of a "zero" issue than it did a #1, but that's really my only complaint.

On another related note, Dino's "author's notes" were particularly intriguing. I wish Dino could have convinced Adnan to run with the War Machine thing he wanted to do. Instead of apprehending and arresting Parnell though, it would have been good if Bridge recruited him. That would put a real American presence on the team that would clash with the others. I'd like to see Bridge use his own armor and perhaps have it disabled somehow and the feedback damage his ability to use it. Then bring in Parnell as War Machine as a replacement once Adnan is done with him. That could work and it's just a thought I had. At any rate, good job D & D. Look forward to the next installment.

Mike III

Mike seems to have a tendency to plot out a book when he reviews it ^_^

But anyway, there would be little point for Parnell Jacobs to be on the team. One, we already have an American presence - USAgent. In fact, I was always going to have either USAgent or Citizen V on the team. I never intended for War Machine to be the American presence.

As for the future, Dave and I won't have War Machine on the team. There's not much reasoning behind it. It would just be redundant. We've already got an armored hero, and we've also got an American hero, so War Machine wouldn't serve a purpose.

Other than that, glad you're enjoying the series.

Issue #3

"New Blood"

Part III: Trial By Fire

by David wheatley (plot) & Dino Pollard (script)

Based on ideas and concepts created by Dino Pollard and Paul A. Hahn

"This is the SHIELD Helicarrier," the humanoid machine stated. "Get used to it, it's your new home."

"Man, we just get all the luck, don't we?" the American commented.

"First off, let's get some things out in the open," the machine began. "I'm Commander GW Bridge, your field leader. what you're looking at is Armory - it's basically a walking battle tank. In accordance with the wishes of our... benefactors, I'll be piloting it from the Helicarrier. While in the field, I expect you to refer to me as Armory."

He looked at Colonel Nick Fury, the Director of SHIELD leaning against the wall with his arms folded and a cigar in his mouth. Fury gave a slight shake of his head. As far as he was concerned this was more or less Bridge's show, so he could play it how he wanted, whether or not Fury agreed with him or this whole project. Bridge forestalled a sigh then looked back to the team to get on with the briefing.

"As you've no doubt been told, you've all been selected to be a part of Excalibur - a team of heroes sanctioned by the United Nations and accommodated by SHIELD," Armory began. "Each and every one of you comes from a different country represented in the UN. That said, you can start off by putting personal politics aside. This isn't about patriotism - it's about doing a job. Keep in mind that you're not the only heroes these countries - or others - have. You can be replaced at any time. That said, let's begin with the introductions. I'm sure you already know Colonel Fury, who's been kind enough to accommodate us."

Fury scoffed at Bridge's comment, but allowed him to continue uninterrupted.

"Representing the United States is John walker. You'll refer to him as the USAgent."

"Just stay outta my way and we'll get along fine," walker interjected.

"The representative of Britain is Percival Rockford, or Union Jack."

"Charmed," Rockford stated, pleurably.

"Israel's representative is Ruth Bat-Seraph, whom you know as Sabra."

"Let's get one thing straight - I'm here as a service to my country, nothing more," Sabra noted, with a quiet disdain.

"A member of the Winter Guard, Russia's own team of superheroes, is Laynia Petrova - Darkstar."

"Da." Darkstar's voice and posture gave nothing away of her feelings, unlike the others in the room.

"Neal Shaara, once called Thunderbird, is a former mutant terrorist who has joined to make amends for his past. He now goes by the name Savitar."

"Were those comments really necessary...?" Shaara was irritated at the revelation, which he would have preferred to make in his own time

"Japan's national hero, Sunfire, wasn't available for this mission," Armory explained. "Instead, his younger sister, Leyu Yoshida, has joined under the name of Tsunami."

"What a waste of time..." Leyu muttered, her arms folded as she slouched against the wall.

"A relative newcomer to the hero game is Niko Hrisalis - Greece's Hellios."

"It's pronounced HRHesalis," Hellios noted, a tone of annoyance in his voice.

"And finally, we have our mystery man - Germany's Hauptmann."

The Hauptmann made no reply, simply nodded his head.

"I'll make this clear," Armory continued. "None of us want to be here. I know it. You know it. But, we're stuck together, so instead of bitching about it, we might as well get the job done. At the end of the day, we're professionals." He looked at Fury. "You're up." Fury sighed and gave a shake of his head,.

"A'right flunkies, here's the scoop," he began, holding his cigar between his fingers. "My bosses in the UN tell me that I gotta accommodate you. They're basically forcin' me t' go along with this. You don't like being here, but let me tell you somethin' - I like it even less. Aside from Bridge, I don't trust any o' you farther than I can throw ya." His eyes were fixed firmly on USAgent when he finished speaking.

"So here's how it's gonna work," he started again, walking to the front of them. "Th' Helicarrier is your new home, but that doesn't make you SHIELD agents. You've basically got permanent visitor status. Y'may hafta live here, but that doesn't mean yer bein' given free reign. Our relationship doesn't go beyond th' basics - I provide you with the missions. You carry them out. Bridge turns in a field report, you get a warm feelin' inside. At the end of th' day, we go our separate ways." He gave it a moment for it to sink in. "That understood?"

Solemn nods of agreement followed.

"Good," Fury stated, not exactly smiling but so far things were going without a hitch. Well at least none of the ones he'd foreseen happening, and that led him on his next point. "Seein' as you're all so agreeable, follow me. You've already got your first mission lined up."

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"It's colder than a bitch in heat," Fury stated, looking over the team, who had been joined by Bridge for this, seeing as the armor was not really designed for sitting down in briefing rooms. The image that appeared before them all was a desolate white expanse. "Alaska."

"What's in Alaska?" Sabra asked, examining the scene before her.

"A United Nations research outpost," Fury replied and pressed another button, which caused the landscape before them to move over to show a three dimensional representation of the station, allowing them to see exactly where they would be going. "The problem is, it's been out of contact for a few weeks."

"I thought it was standard protocol to send in an investigation team first," Union Jack noted.

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"Yer right, Rockford," Fury continued. "An' one was sent." The images changed on the screen to show the investigative team who were sent out there, with relevant dates of their mission, except there was a distinct gap to the current date from the last entry. "Which brings us to problem number 2. They never reported back." He looked at the images and bit back a sigh. He put the cigar in his mouth and pressed nother button making the image of the research station appear once more.

"There's suspect of metahuman menace at work. An' metahuman menaces is now yer area of expertise. Due to several restrictions, yer basically gonna be flyin' blind. Th' Helicarrier can't accompany you into Alaskan airspace. For that reason, on this mission, an' all others, yer bein' equipped with a special aircraft. On us, o' course..."

Bridge noted the dark cynicism in Fury's voice at that last comment. The UN was getting extremely close to overstepping their boundaries, and Bridge wondered how far they'd push before Fury pushed back.

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Alaska

Snow as far as the eye can see. The snow-covered fields are endless and repetitive.

That is, until the landscape seemed to change as it went on further. The snow was replaced with something... different. Almost... ancient.

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SHIELD Helicarrier - Hangar Bay

"What a piece of shit..." USAgent muttered. "Christ, Fury, where'd you pick this up? A military swap meet?"

"SHIELD has a budget, walker," Fury growled back at him. "We got priorities that come before you, and it's had a refit. There's enough in there to keep you going. Unless yer goin' soft."

"It's a modified B-1B Lancer," Armory stated to the others who were not so sure what the argument was about. "Expanded from it's original passenger capacity of four to ten."

"It's also over fifteen years old!!" walker explained. Fury shot him a dark look that walker ignored. Fury had never liked this Captain America wannabe, because at the end of the day he just wasn't good enough to be Captain America and he'd washed out of everything he'd tried before - the Avengers, Force works. walker didn't know this, but it was his last chance at respectability. The same could be said of most of the people here. He was giving these people a chance... or enough rope to hang themselves.

"Fifteen?" Tsunami asked. "Did he say fifteen? I don't think the United Nations would apprecia--"

"Yer not paid t' think, Yoshida," Fury interrupted, finally fed up of this debate that seemed to have sprung up. "Yer paid t' do a job. I'm doin' the best I can with meetin' the UN's needs - an' this is the best I could come up with on such short notice." He shook his head. "SHIELD doesn't have high-tech military aircraft just laying around. Now, you've got one of two choices. You can take the Lancer up to Alaska an' complete yer mission..."

He reached into a pouch and pulled out a cell phone, which he tossed to Tsunami.

"Or you can call up th' UN an' tell him that our facilities don't meet yer standards. We've got reserve members on call if yer not up t' the challenge."

"Enough of this squabbling," Sabra stated, pushing past Fury and Tsunami. "On the jet - now. Let's get moving."

The remainder of the team watched Sabra - and then followed her example. Armory remained on the ground for a few moments and walked over to Fury. He looked at the Colonel with lifeless, robotic eyes.

"Good luck, Bridge," muttered Fury, and left the hangar bay for the observation lounge. In the control room, Bridge sighed and commanded the armor to board the Lancer.

After a few minutes, the ship's engines started up, and Fury watched as the Lancer was directed out the open bay door.

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Armory sat at the controls of the Lancer, firing up the engines immediately.

"All systems go..." he muttered. The air-traffic controllers directed him to fly towards the open bay door. He hit the thrusters and the jet began to lurch forward, until it began to gain speed. He increased the thrusters as he moved forward.

As the Lancer approached the opening, he increased the speed even more. It shot out of the Helicarrier, and once he was sure that he was clear of the Helicarrier, he began to pull up on the stick.

"I could make this flight in half the time it'd take our plane to get there," Hellios muttered.

"You're certainly a dismal sod," Union Jack stated.

"What did you say?" Hellios asked.

"I said that you're certainly a dismal sod," Union Jack repeated, looking around at the assembled team. "All of you seem to be. Ever since we've gotten here, all you've done is complain."

"You think we want to be here?" Darkstar asked. "We were all forced into this - same as you."

"I volunteered," Union Jack replied, though there was no pride in his voice. His tone was even, diplomatic in a sound. "I have no qualms with serving my country."

"Neither do I, but I couldn't care less about a research outpost in Alaska," Darkstar stated. "I have my own responsibilities as a member of the Winter Guard."

"Not for the moment," said Union Jack. "And I would have thought that it would have been of interest to you. It's not that long since Russia sold Alaska to the United States. I'd have said there was a vested interest for your national intelligence."

"Huh," sneered Tsunami. "I was about to become a part of Big Hero 6 - until my country decided that I would be better off serving them in this team," she noted.

"So you would rather play on an national level, rather than an international one? Your brother's never been able to stand the heat of responsibility either," said USAgent.

Before Tsunami could give an indignant reply to the boorish American, the British agent interrupted, forestalling the argument.

"I don't hear these blokes complaining," Union Jack stated, motioning to the Hauptmann and Savitar.

"It was either this or prison," Savitar noted.

"Prison?"

"I was forced into allying myself with the Mutant Liberation Front," Savitar replied. "With the help of some fellow mutants, I was able to overthrow the man responsible for threatening my family. Still, I attacked a congressional assembly. I was offered an ultimatum - join Excalibur or face prison sentence. As a mutant, that would have been a death sentence."

"I'm sorry," said Union Jack. "What about you, mate?" he then asked, looking at the Hauptmann.

"I have misgivings about this, the same as others," Hauptmann replied. "I just choose to remain silent. No sense in complaining about it."

"Christ, you people give me a fucking headache..." the USAgent muttered, while twirling one of his guns. "Hey Bridge, how much longer we got?"

"The name's Armory," the drone replied. "And we're approaching the area now."

"There are some odd temperature readings..." Sabra noted.

"What?" Armory asked, a trace of concern in the metallic voice.

"I--wait..." Sabra replied. "They just shifted back to normal."

"Probably an equipment malfunction," USAgent stated. "With this piece of junk, it wouldn't surprise me. Best they have to offer, my ass"

"Still, I don't like leaving anything to chance," Armory said. "Helliios, of everyone on the team you're the most-resilient. I want you to scout ahead."

"Yes, the new guy is the most-expendable..." Helliios cursed.

"Did you hear what I just sa--"

"Just shut up and open the hatch," Helliios barked.

"You're going to start showing some respect, Hrisalis," Armory ordered. "Either that or you'll be off this team so fast you won't know what hit you."

"If I don't respect you, I get to go home?" Helliios asked, adjusting his ear-piece, which doubled as a comm-link. "Not very good with threats, I see." Back at the Helicarrier, Bridge's eyes lit with anger and embarrassment and he was thankful that the suit couldn't convey the look on his face. He flipped the switch and the hatch opened. Helliios gave a mock salute and took off in to the sky, his powers of flight carrying him through the air.

"Now what?" Union Jack asked standing behind the field commander.

"We circle for a few moments," Armory replied, trying to put the incident with Helliios behind him. "If he doesn't call in within fifteen minutes, we go in."

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If temperature affected Niko Hrisalis, he'd be freezing his ass off right about now.

30,000 feet in the air, flying at breakneck speeds over the Alaskan tundra is not the place for any man - let alone one who grew up in the extremely hot climate of his native Greece. He pressed on, increasing his speed.

However as he flew across the frozen wastes, he began to see notice something strange. He could see the snow was slowly beginning to recede. It was as if it were getting warmer as he moved closer towards the research station. He flew closer to the ground for a closer look, amazed at the sudden change in the world.

He knew this was something that the others needed to do and his hand moved up to his comm-link.

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{{ ~~~ELLIOS HERE~~~ }}

"Hellios?" Armory asked and the others quieted down so that they could hear as well. "What've you found?"

{{ ~~~OT SURE~~~EEMS A LITTLE~~~RANGE~~~ }}

"Hellios, you're breaking up." Armory began to try and increase the gain on the bandwidth of the comm-link to see if they could get a better signal.

{{ ~~~~~~ }}

"Hellios?" Armory asked, turning it back, knowing that they shouldn't have lost the signal but it was better to check.

{{ ~~~~~~ }}

"HELLIOS!!!" Armory shouted, getting increasingly concerned and the vacant airwaves.

{{ ~~~~~~ }}

"Lost him..." Damn, cursed Bridge inwardly. Hellios was an arrogant SOB, but that was because he knew he could handle himself. All of these people could and if they'd lost contact that meant he was in real trouble.

"Well...?" Tsunami asked, a ball of water hovering between her open palms.

"Get ready," Armory ordered. "We're going in."

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The anti-gravity units used by Armory and Sabra carried them through the air after departing from the Lancer, with Darkstar, Tsunami, and Savitar utilizing their mutant abilities of flight. A platform made from Darkforce energy courtesy of Darkstar carried Union Jack, USAgent, and the Hauptmann.

"Sabra, I don't think those readings you found earlier were the result of an equipment malfunction..." Armory stated. "Temperature levels are constantly fluctuating. Towards the Lancer, they're low. But further north, they spike up. It doesn't make any sense..."

"Something seems... different about this terrain..." Union Jack noted, crouching down and examining the ground beneath them.

"Yeah, there's no snow on it," USAgent commented, the sarcasm dripping from his mouth..

"Aside from that," Union Jack continued, oblivious to the American's tone. "It seems... older."

"And that means?" asked Savitar, watching the man play detective. Union Jack looked back at him.

"I don't know," he said, with a determined contemplation in his tone.

"Where's this research outpost?" the Hauptmann asked.

"Should be further up ahead..." Armory replied, looking back towards the direction they came, trying to make sense of his readings. Back at the Helicarrier, Bridge was sending the information to the research labs, hoping they could find something that he was unable to comprehend. As the only member of the team who was a card carrying SHIELD agent, he was going to use all the resources available to him.

"Bozhe moi..." Darkstar muttered, her eyes growing wide. "Look."

"Mother of God," said Bridge, his words echoing through the voice of Armory. He could barely believe what he was getting through his scanners.

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Almost before their eyes, the landscape began to alter. Where there was once arctic landscape there was now lush and scenic greenery.

NEXT ISSUE: WHAT THE @\$% IS GOING ON HERE?!?

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<P ALIGN="CENTER">Issue #4

"THE NEW GUARD"

Part IV: Strangers in a Strange Land

By David Wheatley and Dino Pollard

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<P>GW Bridge is an Agent of SHIELD. He's also a former teammate of Cable's. He's seen many things in his day. But now, after seeing the Alaskan tundra alter from snow-covered fields to lush, scenic greenery and the climate changing from freezing to hot, he has realized that there are still some things that can surprise him.

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but isn't Alaska supposed to be, as Fury put it, 'colder than a bitch in heat'?" Tsunami asked, a hint of sarcasm in her voice. From the control room aboard the SHIELD Helicarrier, Bridge flinched. He didn't like Leyu Yoshida - her temper was just as bad as her brother's. Even worse when you added into the fact that she was a female teenager. Still he knew that having her along now was better than later - she did not yet know her brother was missing, and that he had attacked Florida and then Phoenix in the States not so long ago. The reports from SHIELD was that someone had visited her 'parents' - or rather two Agents of SHIELD assigned to the place, by the United Nations, thinking that it was something to do with the Excalibur project. The reports suggested it had been Exodus, and that gave Bridge cause for concern. But that was the future, right now, there was something weird going on.</P>

<P>"As a general rule, yes," replied Bridge through the Armory suit.

"Useless..." Sabra muttered.

"What was that?" Tsunami asked.

"I said useless," Sabra repeated. "If you wish to contribute something - contribute something useful. Don't waste our time with complaints."

"Oban..." Tsunami muttered. </P>

<P>"Oh brother," said USAgent, quietly, but not so quiet that Leyu didn't hear him and she shot him a vicious glance.

"You picking anything up?" Union Jack asked, before things could progress further. He seemed to be one of the few who were actually here and wanted to make the most of it, and if that meant being the peacemaker, he'd do that.

"Readings are all over the place," Bridge replied. "High energy readings are coming from the north, though. That seems like the best place to start."

"What about Helliios?" Savitar asked.

"These energy readings could be what's interfering with his comm-link," Armory noted. "So, chances are he's up north already. If not, he's a big guy. He can take care of himself." He hoped so anyway, though he knew that Nick Fury had chosen the people for the team, and he wouldn't have chosen anyone who wouldn't be able to hold their own. However Fury wasn't in charge of this group - he was and he knew what he wanted them to do. "Darkstar, I want you to fly ahead for recon. Sabra and I both have technological-based flight, and I'm not too sure of their reliability. Your Darkforce abilities give you a wider range than Savitar and Tsunami. Report back once you encounter anything, understand?"

Darkstar nodded and flew off towards the north.

"What about the rest of us?" Savitar asked.

"We wait until she reports back," Armory replied, patiently.

"Great leadership," Tsunami muttered.

"It's called stealth, kiddo," USAgent stated. "Can't just run in if we don't know what's going on."

Armory was a bit surprised that John Walker came to his defense. Of everyone on the team, Walker seemed to have the most disdain for SHIELD. Probably due to the fact that Fury saw him as nothing more than a third-rate Captain America, something that Walker himself felt on some level. Maybe that was why he was so annoyed at having Fury point it out.

"Any clue as to what could be causing this?" Union Jack questioned, looking at Hauptmann, trying to bring him in to the group, trying to get some kind of team together here.

"Nein," the Hauptmann replied. "Doesn't make any sense."

"You're tellin' me, mate," Union Jack noted in agreement. He was a rational man, he knew what was out there and he was a scientific mind. He knew things such as magic existed and he'd been helped in this new role he had established by someone who was also well versed in the combination of science and magic, but he was nowhere near as confident with that as his mentor was.

"Hold on..." Armory stated, placing a hand near his head. "Darkstar?"

{{ You might want to get here quickly... }}

"What is it?" Armory asked as the group for the first time truly paid attention to what was going on out there.

{{ I... you have to see it for yourselves... }}

"Copy," Armory stated and turned to look at the rest of the Excalibur team. "Enough lounging around, people. Time to go to work."

Armory's thrusters engaged and he flew towards Darkstar's position. The Hauptmann, Union Jack, and USAgent followed on foot. Tsunami was about to join them.

"Yoshida, let's get one thing straight," Sabra stated.

"What's that?" Tsunami asked, placing her hands on her hips.

"If you ever call me a bitchy old hag again, I'll tear your arms off."

"But I di--"

"I can speak Japanese," Sabra broke in. The anti-gravity unit under her cloak engaged and she followed Armory. Tsunami waited a few minutes before joining them. Under her breath, she muttered the word "oban" once more, except this time, Sabra didn't hear her and Tsunami gave an almost imperceptible smile.

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Laynia Petrova is the daughter of the villainous Presence. She's a former member of the Champions. She is a member of the Winter Guard. She's a mutant who controls the Darkforce.

None of these prepared her for the sight of an ancient city in a forested area - in the middle of Alaska, no less.

Her only words to describe it are, "Bozhe moi..."

She turned when she heard the hum of machinery which came from Armory.

"What is that?" she asked.

"Looks like a city," USAgent replied. Darkstar ignored him and continued to look at Armory.

"What is that?" she repeated.

"I wish I could answer that question," Armory replied. "This is definitely where the high energy readings are coming from." Back in the Helicarrier, technicians entered in the data that Bridge requested on the landscape. The information, maps, topography, atmospheric conditions, altitude and all the data he could need flashed across his retina. Except it wasn't enough and it explained nothing "This shouldn't be here. It should be the research outpost." whether he was talking to the team or the technicians, Excalibur couldn't say and before any of them could press the matter a man dressed in medieval-style clothing approached them.

"You cannot pass," he warned. The majority of the team were stunned by the sheer audacity of the man to say this, for they could tell he was no match for them all. Except one. The USAgent drew one of his guns and pointed it at the guard.

"Fuck off," he stated, sardonically. .

"They are trying to attack the Empress!" the guard shouted. Several other warriors dressed in similar clothing rushed forward. Bridge noticed something familiar about some of the warriors. He recognized them from somewhere. He immediately requested information on the research teams, which the technicians on the Helicarrier scrambled to transfer into the Armory's memory files.</P>

<P>"Good move," said Leyu sharply, though everyone ignored her.</P>

<P>"Any thoughts on what we do now?" Union Jack asked.

"You mean aside from kicking some ass?" USAgent replied, running forward.

"Oh, now there's a good lad," Union Jack stated, with a grin beneath his mask. The two powerless members of Excalibur launched into an offensive, relying on weapons and fighting prowess to combat the warriors.

Darkstar projected beams of Darkforce energy, using it to keep them at bay. There was much that remained unanswered about these warriors, the city, and the miraculous terraforming of the landscape. She chose to hold back until she knew all the details of what was going on, which she hoped would soon become clear. That and whatever had affected the landscape may have affected the people who had been working here and these warriors could simply be pawns in someone else's game, which meant she would be easy on them. She knew what it was like to be used by someone much more powerful than herself.

Sabra seemed to share similar sentiments, if perhaps not for the same reasoning. However, even her pulled punches carry with them a great impact. But that's to be expected from a woman who went toe to toe with the Hulk. Due to this, she was content with relying on her gauntlets - which unleashed paralyzing blasts, stopping their attackers from a more permanent harm.

Tsunami, on the other hand, didn't seem to care. Despite her bravado and temperament, none of her teammates could deny the fact that her water-based powers were indeed quite impressive and she used them to great effect. Bridge watched and wondered where she had received her training, for like Sunfire before her she did not have the tutelage of someone like Charles Xavier. She too had turned her back on him, and as far as he could tell she had made the right choice, though he suspected that Xavier could have drilled some kind of respect in to her. It was something he would have to look at when they got home.

The Hauptmann was content with absorbing the kinetic energy the warriors expanded against him. When necessary, he returned it in the form of concussive force blasts. But most of the time, he used it to boost his own vitality. He was being conservative - the battle was far from over and he did not want to overplay his hand too soon. The master behind this - the Empress, who had been mentioned before the conflict had begun - was obviously a being of power, with great thrall over the people.

4.txt

Savitar was also trying to use his powers conservatively. However, when one can generate intense flames, it can be a bit of a liability in a battle when you're trying to stun your opponent as opposed to killing them. There was also the fact he was still on probation and his recent past still overshadowed him. If he could show his reticence in the fight, and how he had gone out of his way to do as little damage as possible, it would work in his favor.

while Bridge reviewed the files, Armory was switched to automatic pilot mode, utilizing repulsor blasts to keep the warriors at bay. In the Helicarrier, the information had Bridge requested flashed over his retina quickly. He reviewed the photos of the research teams, and then cross-referenced them with the warriors that the team was fighting and he realized where he had seen them before.

"THEY'RE THE RESEARCH TEAM!" he shouted after taking control of Armory once more, amplifying his voice with the suit to ensure that everyone heard him and hopefully held back enough so that the people they were here to save wouldn't be harmed.

"What?" Sabra shouted back over the noise of the battle.

"They're the research team!" Armory repeated, wondering why he'd bothered. "They must be under some sort of mind control. This is where the research outpost should be." </P>

<P>"I suspected something like that, but we needed confirmation," said Darkstar, pleased that her earlier reluctance to harm these people was justified.</P>

<P>"So how do you explain the jungle fever?" USAgent asked.

"I... don't know..." Armory replied. "I've processed this information and SHIELD researchers are trying to find out if there are any metahumans who match the profile." There was a side note that they gotten from Department H about Alpha Flight and the X-Men which the researchers were chasing up and hoping to get something more on it.

"So how do we stop these blokes?" Union Jack asked, as he leapt over one of the warriors and kicked another, while at the same time backhanding another of them. "In case you didn't notice, they're not exactly the friendly type, and they don't seem to want to stay down, either."

"Allow me," Darkstar stated. Her eyes became pitch black as the warriors vanished.

"Wow..." Savitar said. "What did you do?"

"I teleported them into the Darkforce dimension..." Darkstar replied.

"I'm impressed," Armory stated. He'd read the file and he thought he knew everything about her, but this had been a surprise, though Darkforce powers were by their very nature unpredictable. "I didn't know you had that kind of power."

"I don't..." Darkstar replied. Her breaths were heavy and deep. "It takes... takes a lot... out of me... I'm not sure how long I can keep them there, though. It requires a great degree of concentration." Armory turned away from Darkstar, considering this and hoping she would be able to keep them all at bay while the rest of them dealt with whatever was going on and walked closer towards the gates. He lightly pushed on them, and they opened. So far, things were going fairly well. Perhaps this team could actually work out and he wondered how merciful God was feeling.

"Let's continue on," he stated. Before he took the next step, a powerful energy blast sent him reeling. By the time he got to his feet, something hard and fast struck him. He quickly realized the only thing that could move that fast and punch that hard.

Hellios hovered a few feet above the ground, arms folded across his chest. His eyes were glowing brightly. His clothing, however, was altered. It was similar to the clothing worn by the warriors and Bridge's heart sank as he knew that he'd lost one of the team to the enemy and he wondered how easy it had been to subvert him. At least he was glad he wasn't actually there, and was instead a long way away from the armor because that would have really hurt. A quick system check confirmed that the armour was in working order and as he regained his feet he got a better picture of what was ahead of them. His movement systems were okay, but the repulsors were offline as were a couple of the sensor arrays as well as his vocal processor and he knew he had to reboot the system, and quickly.

Behind Hellios stood a young woman. She wore a necklace around her neck, which glowed brightly and crackled with energy. She was the Empress that the warriors referred to earlier. Armory focused on it, and determined that it was the source of the high energy readings.

"You have taken away my warriors," Empress stated, her voice majestic in tone, and echoing with power obviously an after effect from the necklace. "A shame. But, you will serve nicely as substitutes."

The necklace unleashed a surge of energy, and he regal clothes fluttered in the breeze that was created with the surge and the team shielded their eyes from the light, all except Armory, who's optical sensors automatically compensated so that Bridge was able to see. As far as he couple tell there had been nothing obvious about the flash of light, and that worried him because that kind of power would have an effect and he quickly moved to observe the rest of the team. The light had now faded, and the team was also looking about each other, there was nothing wrong yet, but there were some very strange readings being given here and Bridge was getting more concerned by the minute. </P>

<P>"That was it?" Union Jack asked, also wondering what had just
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<i>We do, Mike. Nice to know people are reading this stuff.</i>

Excalibur #3 starts with GW Bridge stepping up and telling all the disgruntled heroes that he's the boss. They all complain bitterly for a while ('cept for Hauptmann who is all quiet and mysterious) and then Fury lets them know that they're no more than toe jam to him (except for Bridge, awwwww, how sweet) and gives them their first mission.

<i>Hey... there's an idea!! Next story-arc: Fury's Toe Jam!! What do you think? Do we have a hit?</i>

The mission takes place in Alaska which is a nice locale for a super team to be whisked off to. I liked the glimmer of intelligence Union Jack showed when he threw in his two cents in the debriefing room. I also like Fury's bitterness about this entire situation. SHIELD is stretched might thin lately, so I can totally understand where Fury is coming from.

<i>Fury's pissed. Moreso than usual.</i>

Kinda strange that the Helicarrier couldn't travel through Alaskan airspace, but not that big a deal. Was a good opportunity to piss Fury off even more about having to give up a vehicle to Excalibur.

<i>Yeah, we figured it would be even better, since the UN keeps asking SHIELD to do all this shit for them.</i>

The crappy ride kind of reminded me of the Thunderbolts. This team is also going to have major problems with authority if Fury and Bridge keep pulling the "you can always be replaced" card. We'll see how it plays out in future issues, but it'd get old if I was one of the heroes.

<i>It's supposed to get old. Fury and Bridge don't like them, and they don't like Fury and Bridge.</i>

The bickering continues on the flight to Alaska and it is made apparent that Union Jack is going to be the most cheerful fella of the bunch. In fact, besides UJ and Hauptmann, everyone else is damn near the same character in the way that they act. Nobody really wants to be there and they all would rather be doing something else for their own country. Hopefully Dino starts defining them a little better in future issues with some possible attractions or frustrations that go deeper than just being on the team.

4.txt

*<i>*That's a problem I've been facing. Hopefully this issue changed some of those perceptions for you.*</i>*

****The climate change in Alaska is a bit mysterious and somewhat intriguing. I look forward to seeing where it all leads.****

*<i>*Here's hoping you like the lead.*</i>*

****Hellios is already gone and I'm cheering!****

*<i>*WHAT?! YOU BASTARD!!! HELLIOS WAS MY CREATION!!*</i>*

****Ha! Just kidding, hopefully whatever is going on will be a match for all these powerhouses.****

*<i>*Oh, it will be.*</i>*

****Time will tell.****

*<i>*Yes it will.*</i>*
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Niko Hrisalis is a man possessing of incredible strength capable of crushing steel. In addition to that, he also possesses superhuman speed, invulnerability, and he can project blasts of solar energy from his eyes and hands. As Helliios, he is Greece's national hero. A national hero forced by his government to operate as a member of a team of international heroes sanctioned by the United Nations and operating under the direction of SHIELD. That was before he came under the control of the mysterious Empress.

Now, Helliios is using his incredible strength against his former team-mate, the Hauptmann. By far the most mysterious of the entire group, Helliios expected his punch to remove the Hauptmann's head from his shoulders. Imagine his surprise, when the Hauptmann stands unscathed.

"Apparently, no one briefed you on my abilities," the Hauptmann says. "I absorb kinetic energy." As he spoke, Helliios saw the energy begin to gather around his hands. The energy fields grew larger and larger, the energy creating a hypnotic effect that somehow kept Helliios from moving, his focus on the energy.

"I can use said kinetic energy to either increase my own vitality or redirect it as an energy blast," Hauptmann continued. "And that punch you hit me with? Well, there was plenty of kinetic energy present in it." The energy fields continued to grow in size and intensity, and then Hauptmann lifted his arms up, and aimed at Helliios. "In other words..." he continues, his voice containing a harshness that hadn't been there earlier. "You lose, arschloch."

The German hero released the built-up energy in a force blast of great magnitude, and Helliios, either by design or by surprise, failed to move out of the way of the shot and the kinetic blast completely engulfed him, creating a light that could only be described as blinding. Beneath his mask, which protected his sight from the damage that would normally have been cause the Hauptmann smiled at his victory. However, once the dust clears...

"Hmm..." Helliios mutters, standing upright. "That almost hurt." The smile died on Hauptmann's face as he stood in amazed disbelief and the hesitation allowed Helliios to counter the Hauptmann's attack by unleashing a blast of solar energy at him. The Hauptmann quickly leapt out of the way of the blast and the battle continued.

Neal Sharra wanted to pound on the young girl before him, to teach her a lesson she would not soon forget, but in his zeal to attack, to prove himself her better he made a mistake and a sudden flood of water courtesy of Tsunami sent Savitar flying.

His ability to generate solar plasma was useless against a foe that could control water. However he wouldn't let her do that to him again and he would... he paused a moment, thinking that there was something wrong here, that this wasn't why he was here. He knew there was something affecting his all of his team-mates, but he didn't know what. Teamwork would be needed to figure it out, but how could you work as a team when no one trusts each other?

He glanced around, trying to search for their leader. He saw Armory some distance away and was heading towards him when another burst of water struck him. Tsunami hovered above him, and suddenly, a sphere of water encircled him. It began to fill, and he felt the water begin to fill his lungs. He tried to use his powers, but the flames were put out the instant he generated them. He was prepared to accept the end when, all of a sudden, the water was gone.

He opened his eyes and saw Armory standing over the fallen Tsunami. The drone's eyes were glowing brightly, and he extended a hand to help Savitar to his feet.

"You all right?" he asked.

"As best as... *kaff*... can be expected..." Neal replied as he gasped for breath. "Where have you been?"

"Trying to figure out what the hell's going on here," Armory stated. "Everyone's at each other's throats, more literally than before this time. Everyone's affected, except me. I guess that's because I'm not really here."

"Whatever's affected them, also got to us as well, by my reckoning. Come up with anything?"

"Huh. SHIELD techs are still analyzing the data I'm sending them, but so far, nothing useful. However they have made a finding elsewhere."

"Does it help?"

"I think so. The last recorded occurrence of something like this was when the Canadian heroes Alpha Flight worked with the X-Men to take on Loki, the Norse God. He did something very similar to this back then, and while I don't think he's here, I'd bet good money that this is a kind magic at work here."

"So what do we do, boss?" asked Neal.

"First thing we do is try and stop the team from killing each other." He scanned the area for the nearest fight and saw two similar fighters. Or maybe we'll just watch this for a little bit first, Bridge thought.

The USAgent's clothing resembled the ancient garb of medieval warriors. His firearms, however, were still very real and very modern. Firearms that he used to try and take out his former team-mate, the British agent called Union Jack.

Until now, of all the members of Excalibur, Percival Rockford has been the most passive. He had volunteered for this position. He volunteered to represent his country, using the keen intellect he was born with and the training he had received from his mentor. He had tried to break the ice, but found it to be useless. Now he was being shot at and he was going to make the loud mouthed Yank pay and Union Jack did his best to dodge the USAgent's gunfire. His uniform could take a certain amount of damage, but not too much

and though the shots may not enter his body, the impact would certainly bruise and break him.

Prior to becoming Union Jack, he was an agent of the British intelligence agency known as MI-6. He learned to be a spy before he learned to be a superhero. Whereas USAgent was trained to replace Captain America, Union Jack was trained to be a James Bond-type. He knows how to work in the shadows, how to play to your opponent's weaknesses. He dodged around, landing behind a wall of the odd structure for cover. He looked around the side briefly to see USAgent searching for him.

Okay, Rock, now think... he thought to himself. You can do this, just think about it. What's Walker's weakness? Well, aside from the fact that he's powerless. Well so am I, but I don't bitch about my life. So what else is there, though? Better keep the list short. He's brash, he's arrogant, he's and he relies too greatly on his weapons. Weapons... That's the one to work on. So what are you waiting for, then? You know how to take him out. Time to go to work.

Union Jack reached down to his belt and drew a pair of .45s. He crouched low, and leapt out from his cover. He fired a few rounds at USAgent. The Agent instantly activated the energy shield he carried and deflected the bullets. By the time he was prepared to fire again, Union Jack was gone. This was almost too easy, reflected Rockford as he stayed under cover.

"Get out here," Agent ordered, anger in his voice. "Now. The Empress commands it your death."

There was silence in the immediate area as the other battles raged. USAgent's eyes darted from side to side. He'd done this kind of thing before, he was a soldier, he'd been trained for this kind of thing, but as he searched around the immediate area for some sign of the British spy, he saw nothing.

CLINK

USAgent instantly spun in the direction of the sound and fired at it. There was nothing there.

CLINK

Another sound. USAgent spun once more and fired. Still nothing and now he was getting frustrated and as he continued to search around, the Agent spotted something lying on the ground. He walked towards it and bent down to pick it up. It was a navy-blue mask. Union Jack's mask. He examined it closely, and wondered where his opponent could be, or why he would have left it lying around.

"Hey..."

The Agent looked up at the source of the voice just in time to see a navy-clad elbow slam into his face. The blow rattled the Agent's skull and for a second he had a moment of clarity.

"Oh, fer fugs say..." he muttered as his lights went out and he slumped to the floor. The Union Jack shook his head as he picked up his mask and slipped it back over his head.

"Next time, pay more attention," he stated. He looked down at the USAgent and shook his head. "Loser. If you're the best the Yanks have to offer, then that's pretty pathetic."

"Now?" asked Neal.

"Now," said Armory and Savitar shot Union Jack with an energy blast. The techs had come up with a solution.

For Ruth Bat-Seraph, the Mossad agent known as Sabra, the world went black. She was trapped in a featureless prison comprised of Darkforce energy. Her prison was courtesy of Laynia Petrova, otherwise known as Darkstar. She tried to focus her thoughts, to use the training given to her to fight off most torture and sensory deprivation techniques.

In this place, there is no up.

There is no down.

There is no left, nor is there right.

My senses have been cut off from reality, and yet I am cold. Why, when I feel nothing else, do I feel cold? There must be a way out of here, but how?

Doubts were beginning to set in her mind as the Russian used her powers on her. Darkstar grinned as she kept Sabra trapped in the Darkforce prison. This was easier than she thought it would be. The Empress would be pleased at such power.

"I'll get Agent," said Neal.

"I'll wake Union Jack," said Armory and activated a sonic signal, pointing it at the laid out Brit. After a moment, he awoke.

"Oh, my head," he said. "What happened?"

"Guess that's three of us, then," said Neal, laying USAgent next to Tsunami.

"I class it more as four down and four down to go," Armory stated. He looked on to see the Hauptmann dodging blasts from Heliios, and Darkstar was hovering in the air near the Empress, with a large, black sphere floating beside her. Sabra was nowhere to be seen. A quick scan, however, revealed life signs within the Darkforce sphere.

"Oh terrific..." he muttered, as he assessed the situation. It was not good, and he sent a request to see if he could find something in the SHEILD files to sort this out.

"What's that?" Savitar asked.

"Two of our strongest members are working with the Empress," Armory replied. "Darkstar's far more adept with her powers than she's ever been in the past. And Hellios... well... we're still not sure what his true limits are."

"He's gotta have some weakness," Union Jack noted. "Maybe green rocks?"

"Don't be stupid," Armory retorted, but secretly wondered if they could find some. Then he shook that out of his mind and went back to a more logical method as he did another scan of Hellios and quickly reviewed his file. "Savitar, can you absorb solar energy?"

"I don't know..." Savitar replied. "I don't think so."

"Damn," muttered Bridge and scanned the files. He wondered if this armor could do anything about it and as he glanced over the weapons specs, he saw some other specs instead. "Perfect." He looked at the other two. "Right then, I want you two to try and stop Darkstar," Armory commanded. "Hauptmann will assist you shortly." He thought back to the lip that he'd received when he'd sent the fiery Greek on the recon mission earlier and back at the Helicarrier, Bridge smiled. "I'll handle Hellios."

The Hauptmann back-flipped from another of Hellios's solar blasts. He was beginning to tire out. He needed kinetic energy if he was going to continue this. But it seemed that Hellios had already learned from his earlier mistake, and was now relying solely on energy release.

Suddenly, the Hauptmann flew forward as he was slammed in to. Armory stood above him.

"Danke..." Hauptmann stated, as he stood upright. He retained the energy from Armory's blow, using it to increase his own vitality.

"Go help the others," Armory ordered. "Goat boy's mine."

Hellios snarled at the comment and flew directly towards Armory at breakneck speeds. Armory stood his ground, and braced for the impact. When it came, Hellios struck an invisible barrier of some sort and was forced back.

"It's called an energy shield," Armory stated. "C'mon, try again."

Hellios's eyes began to glow brightly. He unleashed a powerful solar blast from them, striking the shield. Once the blast struck, Armory dropped the shield. The thrusters engaged, pushing him forward. Hellios delivered a powerful blow to the cybernetic suit, yet Armory kept coming. Armory countered with a blow of his own. Then, Armory braced his feet against Hellios's chest and engaged the thrusters.

Armory hovered back in the air. Compartments on the armor opened, revealing rockets and gattling guns. Energy began to gather in Armory's hands and in the center of his chest.

"I'm only going to say this once," Armory stated. "Stand down."

"Not unless the Empress commands it," Helliios replied.

"Works for me," Armory stated. He unleashed the onslaught of weapons on Helliios.

Savitar's plasma blasts and Hauptmann's kinetic blasts seemed to do nothing to Darkstar's shields. Union Jack watched with curiosity as his two teammates attempted to batter the third with physical attacks. However, as long as Darkstar was conscious, there was nothing they could do to disrupt her connection to the Darkforce.

He glanced over to the Empress. She sat in her throne and smiled as she watched the battles rage on. The necklace she wore began to glow brightly. Union Jack took special note of this and began to slink away from the battle.

Armory's attack didn't appear to have any effect on Helliios other than angering him. He moved quickly, and before Armory could chart his speed, Helliios's hand was gripped around his neck.

"Did you truly think your little toy could stop me, Bridge?" Helliios asked. He grabbed the drone's arm and began to crush it. "Did you think that machine could triumph over the will of the Empress?"

"Actually..." Armory began. "Yes."

Armory's free hand latched onto Helliios's arm and began to glow. Helliios struggled as his grip began to loosen.

"Wh-what's happening?"

"Simple fact, Hrisalis," Armory continued. "The Armory is more than a third-rate Iron Man. One of its power sources is solar energy. Your body is practically dripping with solar energy. Energy which is now being transferred to Armory's power cells."

Helliios began to grow weaker from Armory's effect. So much that Armory could take him out with a single unibeam.

"Thanks for the recharge," Armory stated, though he was glad he was onboard the Helicarrier, and not actually at the battle, as his hand absently rubbed his throat.

-

The Empress stood, prepared to order Darkstar to finish them off. She began to grow weary of the battle, and was prepared to subvert all of Excalibur over to her control. Before she received the chance, though, she hadn't noticed that Union Jack departed the battle.

He tackled her to the ground and grabbed her necklace. As she seemed to be able to take care of herself, he headbutted her as he pulled the necklace off her neck, and dropped it on the ground. The gem in the center was still glowing, so he made a decision, he drew one of his guns and shot it.

"Game over," he said as the bullet shattered the gem.

Instantly, the entire ancient world began to change. It reverted back to the Alaskan tundra it was originally, and the research outpost replaced the ancient town. The members of Excalibur who were transformed by the Empress now returned back to normal, other than some of them being slightly more bruised than they had been. Darkstar looked around and slowly hovered to the ground, releasing Sabra from the Darkforce prison.

"What happened?" USAgent asked, rubbing his head, putting his hands on the ground to steady himself, except that it wasn't ground that he touched.

"Never mind that!" Tsunami shouted. "Get off of me!"

The USAgent stood and Tsunami did as well. She dusted herself off and shot USAgent a cold stare. Then she walked towards the rest of the group.

"What is going on here?" she asked. "I demand--"

"Oh shut up," Armory replied. "Good call, Jack," he said, placing a hand on the man's shoulder. "Now let's find out who she is." He walked over to the Empress and performed a scan. Her energy levels were no higher than that of a normal human woman. Her clothing was modern as well. "Hmm... that's odd..."

Union Jack reached into her pocket and pulled out a wallet. He opened it and saw removed a driver's license.

"Turns out this Empress is actually Marilyn Westfall of Manhattan," he stated. He handed the ID to Armory. Armory examined it, sending the data back to SHIELD, who confirmed her identity.

"One of the admin support for the research team," he said. "Not our problem though, that'll be up to someone else to figure out what the hell happened here. He surveyed his team. His team. That was the first time he'd thought of them like that and meant it. "Looks like that's it," he stated. "Mission complete."

"We get to leave now?" asked Tsunami.

"Stand by," said Bridge, as the image of Fury came on the screen.

"That is not..." Tsunami started.

"I said stand by," said Bridge, his tone full of anger and the words spoken were so ferocious that Leyu shut up as Bridge listened to the words being spoken by his director and he was glad that the team couldn't see his face as he listened to his new instructions.

"Okay," said Bridge, his tone subdued. "Ladies and gentlemen, we're staying put for the time being. I know this isn't what you wanted to hear, but I'm only going to say this once - no complaining, no bitching, no cries of unfair. You really don't want to do that, believe me."

"What's going on?" asked Union Jack but Armoury shook his head.

"Not now. Gather everyone up and assemble inside, I've some news. Bad news."

As the team rounded up the missing agents and research team and went in to the buildings, a lone figure watched from the shadows.

"Finally... I am free..."

Excalibur #6 - Debriefing

"I don't believe it," said Bridge, slamming his fists down on the desk. "Damn it, damn it, damn it!" He knew Excalibur had been recalled to their home countries, or at least those who could be recalled were, while the 9/11 crisis management took place. It was hard to believe it had been a month ago, but that was the way things were. Everyone was pitching in to try and resolve things, but this was something he hadn't expected. "Tell Fury I'm on my way over," said Bridge, as he got up from his desk. Nick was in Washington, so it was a good job he'd be able to speak with him person to person.

"Yes sir," said Charlotte and picked up the telephone. Bridge was angry. Granted he took his missions like any one else but this was simply wrong. Excalibur had proven themselves. The experiment had worked, well mostly. The team had bonded a little after the first mission, and the news about the terrorist attacks had united them in their shock and disgust at what had happened. He believed the project would work well enough, and his report had submitted that as well as any.

"I know what yer gonna say," said Nick, who was standing outside his own office. "An' for what it's worth I tried to get 'em to say otherwise, and you know my feelin's about this well enough."

"They didn't even consult me," said Bridge, angrily.

"They didn't consult you when you were put here either," Fury barked back. "Let's take a walk. Raven, I'm headin' outside for a bit." Inside the office Marcus Raven nodded, making a mental note to tell Pete Wisdom what was happening. As soon as they were outside, Fury lit a cigar.

"So what the hell happened?" asked Bridge as they sat down.

"Excalibur has been put on hiatus until the international situation gets back to some semblance of normality. The United Nations Secretary General himself made it happen."

"Thank you for coming to back to New York on such short notice, Colonel," said the Secretary General.

"Not at all," said Fury, watching the man warily who was sitting with the Security
Page 1

Council. There was a presence to him he had not seen earlier, though it could be down to the whole events of late. Everyone had been shaken by what had happened in Washington and New York. "SHIELD can be mobilised to assist the armed forces in any way they need to..."

"No, Colonel, you misunderstand what we called you here for." The American delegate spoke, looking at him. "In fact, other than the current investigate duties in which SHIELD is assisting, SHIELD will not be needed to play much more of a role. You are after all a global organisation, and this is an American objective. We have support across the world, but the use of SHIELD would be classed as the UN getting involved."

"Which we are not," said the Secretary General.

"So...?" he was confused as to why he was here.

"The Excalibur Project," said the American delegate. "We're suspending it until further notice, to be reviewed again in six months."

"Suspending?" said Fury almost unable to believe his ears.

"I can tell this is a treat for you, Colonel, seeing as how you were opposed to it in the first place."

"Not opposed to it, but rather the forced involvement of SHIELD," said Fury. "The group performed very well under difficult circumstances in Alaska. Hate to admit it, but they did better than I thought they would."

"We agree wholeheartedly," said the UK delegate. "However, with the world in the state it is at the moment, it is not feasible for the team to be active in the world. There needs to be some distance from things at the moment, and until the crisis is resolved, it is better if they are out of the limelight. The World Trade Center was just that - the trade center of the world, and if we had super powered operatives working for the UN, then it would become clear that we would have to send them in to stop the threats."

"Which would signal that it's not a war against terror, but a third world war with armies of super heroes." Fury could see the reasoning behind it. "So just don't get involved. It's simple."

"Yes, it would be," said the Secretary General, "but the world is not that simple. This is for the best," he said, "and the Americans who drew up the Excalibur Project agree this is the best thing to do. They need to give faith back to the ordinary

people and that's what will happen."

"You didn't just call me in to tell me this though," said Nick.

"No," admitted the Secretary General. "Your job is to tell them."

"You're kidding me," said Bridge. "They dumped that on your head."

"Yup," said Fury. "So don't you tell me how pissed off you are, because it don't compare." However he wasn't telling Bridge what also went on in the meeting.

Interesting, thought the Shadow King as he looked at the minds in front of him. The whole of the United Nations Security Council, sat there looking at him and not realising the most powerful mutant mind on the planet was amongst them. It would be easy to create something amongst them, but that would reveal his presence too soon, and he was not ready for that. There was too much to be done and he like the state of chaos that the world was already in.

However the Secretary General was another matter. He couldn't read him at all, and that was a concern.

:::Yes, I expect it is::: the strange voice echoed in his mind.

:::Who are you?::: demanded the Shadow King.

:::Who I am I is unimportant::: the voice said. :::However, I was not expecting one such as you:::

:::No doubt, however now you have revealed yourself to me and I will...:::

:::Do nothing::: the stranger laughed. :::You cannot affect me however I...:::

:::Cannot affect me either it would seem::: the Shadow King laughed back.
:::Stalemate:::

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:::Indeed. I must not have fully recovered:::

:::How unfortunate for us all::: said Farouk, his tone reverberating with sarcasm.

:::Have a care, telepath. In my prime I could have destroyed you in a moment:::

:::Likewise. So what do you propose we do?:::

:::I suggest we keep out of each other's way. You have your plans, I have mine. Assuming they do not conflict, we will be able to coexist:::

:::A compromise, then::: the Shadow King answered, guarding his thoughts more closely this time and thinking he would find out who this stranger was and that he would rue the day he confronted the Shadow King.

:::A wise decision::: came the reply and the Shadow King knew his thoughts had been missed. He then broke the conversation between them and the Shadow King looked at the Secretary General through the eyes of Nick Fury.

"Your job is to tell them," said the Secretary General.

"Thanks a lot," said Nick. "I guess we know our place then."

"Yes," the Secretary General said coldly. "We do indeed."

"What about Neal?" asked Bridge. "He joined the group to clear his debt to society. He can't do that without a team to work with."

"I know," said Fury, "however he's still part of a team. Yer just on hiatus, and they'll reinstate the lot o' ya. Eventually."

"So what happens? He goes back to prison?"

"No," said Nick. "I've pulled some strings to get this - Jim Hammond's going to take him on at his new organisation - Tachyon. Specialist engineering and the like. He's agreed to keep an eye on him, give him a job and get him on his feet."

"The former Human Torch?" said Bridge. "Your old war buddy, right?"

"Yeah," said Nick. "He is. Plus I figure he'd be good company for Sharra, being acquainted with fire and all that. The others have their own lives to live, and I know you only just got 'em workin' together but this'll give 'em a break. They won't be called on missions that often anyway, so it'll be a taster."

"You think?" said Bridge.

"Nope," said Fury. "Best I got though. I told you first, because I knew you'd be easiest. Problem is, yer gonna be back at yer desk for the duration. That I can't fix."

"When are you telling the others?" said Bridge.

"Yeah, that's the other problem. No way, I'm gonna get chance. The Feds are giving us trouble, thanks to the deal with that deputy Director. They blamed us for it because we hired the agent he fired."

"Did we do it?" asked Bridge, thinking it wasn't the way SHIELD usually worked.

"Yeah, but we as in Pete wisdom. You two've met."

"Briefly," said Bridge. "Should have slapped him down there and then, but we had bigger fish to fry."

"He's a good man," said Fury. "And he gets the job done. Like you do."

"You're going to have me tell them aren't you?" said Bridge and Fury nodded. "Thanks a lot."

"Sorry," said Nick. "Look, I'm gonna go back to the office and see what else has turned up over the 9-11 stuff."

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"Yeah," said Bridge. "Whatever." He wasn't happy, but he knew how in it Nick was at the moment, so he'd do it and he pulled out his mobile telephone and made a call to his secretary. "Charlotte, I'll need a flight arranging, to Texas." He'd see USAgent first.

"Sons of fucking bitches," said walker as he knocked back a bottle of Bud. "And they sent you to tell us?"

"Something like that," said Bridge, taking a gulp of the whiskey before him.

"Figures, really," he said. "Can't stand you anyway, so they get you to tell us we're fired."

"Not fired," said Bridge. "You can be recalled at any moment - just not for six months."

"And that's that," said walker. "We've both seen these things come and go before - it never lasts. That was our first, last and only mission." He gestured to the bartender, who brought him another drink. "For what it's worth, you were better at leading than I figured you'd be. An' I'm only slightly drunk."

"For what it's worth, you did a good job too. You were almost an Avenger, and I'm not even close to being drunk." Walker nodded at his former commander as he stood up. "I'll be in touch." Then he turned and left the building, leaving walker to his beer, and heading towards the airport. Next stop would be

2002.txt

He stretched out his arms, revelling in the feeling he experienced, pleased that he had been able to get himself a new body to inhabit, one with which he would be able to take over the world, however he would start out small. A power base was needed first, then an army, then a country, then a continent, and finally the world. He would take his time, for though he had defeated his enemies before, it would only take one or two to break through his power and that would be it. He still remembered his last encounter, though he had not been at either his full strength or in contact with his full powers.

His amulet was destroyed now, and he knew that this time on the Earth would be his last. Without the amulet, he would not be able to transfer his soul, but at last he was free, and none knew of his return. Strange believed him trapped still, and the Undying... well, she believed him dead and gone. He owed the heroes from the Excalibur project a debt, one that he would now repay. He smiled, as he thought of his plan to keep them apart for six months, so that the pieces of the puzzle would not be put together.

He smiled and wrote his signature on the piece of paper, and put it in the envelope addressed to Colonel Nicholas Fury, Director of SHIELD. He would relaunch the Excalibur project and start to build his army from their up. They were easy enough to manipulate and he had touched their hearts, their minds, and their souls. He had a fix on them now, and he would use it when the time was right. It was close, but not yet, for there was a coming that was being prepared for.

He could feel the presence out there, the coming of the Destroyer. While he did not fear his coming, he dreaded the consequences of what would happen should he be unleashed. He knew there were forces at work to contain this, but the Destroyer was a being of mystical ability and his coming marked the start of events. The dark magics would give him free rein over this world, he knew it, but first of all he needed to direct his troops in the right places and keep his enemies busy.

And for what he had in mind, they would certainly be busy.

Three days later, the memo arrived on Fury's desk, informing him of the reactivation of Project Excalibur.

"Six months already," he said, wondering why he'd not been summoned to the consultations with the United Nations Security Council. This was indeed annoying as he had wanted to see if he could test the mettle of the being within the Secretary General. However, he had little choice in the matter and he made the arrangements to place a call to Bridge and let him know that it was all on again, and that he could recall his people to action. Bridge had been assigned to the bio-tech division after his brief sojourn as Armory and Fury knew he wasn't too far away at the moment. The Helicarrier was in Europe and if he remembered right, Bridge was at the SHIELD Egyptian test center, doing some work on the armor, to see it work in action, without his guidance at the controls, and offer any improvements.

"8 ball, middle pocket," said John walker, as he hung out in his favourite bar in Texas, his friends watching as he lined the cue up with the white ball, his eyes focused on the black ball towards the cushion at the far end of the table.

"Not a chance in hell, J," said Alan. "Twenny bucks."

"Fine," said walker, without looking up. These people didn't know he was the costumed hero known as USAgent, but they did believe he was some kind of Special Forces operative. His build gave him away in all honesty, as did his current supply of cash. He smiled as he fired the white across the table, slamming in to the black ball. The ball cannoned forward, smacking in to the cushion and bounced from the top cushion to the right side, spinning across the green felt, a red ball sitting in it's path. walker looked up as he friends, not worried in the slightest. "watch and learn," he said, as the red was struck by the black, sending the red in one direction and the black in another, the red towards the top part of the cushion of the left hand middle pocket and the black slotting nicely in to the right hand pocket. "Game."

"No," said Alan. "Look again, J." walker looked at the table to see that the white ball was missing. "The red nudged the white in. Your angle was just slightly off."

"Sunuva..." muttered John, reaching in to his pocket for the twenty.

"Yup," said Alan, taking the bill and slotting it in to the pocket of this shirt. "Hell of a try though."

"Tell me about it," said John. He'd been shown it by Hawkeye, and though it had been a while he thought he'd mastered it. Good job Barton wasn't about to laugh at him. "I'm gonna hit the head," he said with a sigh. "And you're buying."

"Why me, I won?" said Alan.

"Cause you just took my damn money," retorted walker with a smile and walked through the door marked 'gents'. He started to relieve himself when he heard the noise outside subside, and one voice stand out from the others. He quickly finished what he was doing and looked about. If they were being robbed, like he guessed they were, then they should check in here. The obvious place was the cubicle, but it was too obvious, and he looked up. The hot water pipes looked sturdy enough and stood on the basin to get up, just as the door opened.

"Clear," said the masked crook and walker smiled. He wasn't going to need his guns or shield for this, it was going to be a simple task of taking out the masked men. As the door closed he dropped down. The door swung both ways, which was handy and he

knew the guy wouldn't be too far from the door so he kicked it open, sending the villain flying.

"Okay, assholes," shouted walker as he came out. "Who's first?"

"So someone wants to play hero?" said a voice above him, and walker looked up to see a man on extendable legs.

"Oh, you have got be shitting me," muttered walker as he recognised the man from the Avengers files. It was Wilbur Day, the Stilt-Man. He wasn't exactly on the grade A list for villains, in fact he wasn't even on the grade E list for villains, but he was still a bit more than a thug with a gun. His bag was just over there, and he didn't have his guns with him either. "Damned right," he said, his voice full of false bravado.

"Fine," said Day and was on walker in a moment, crushing him underfoot, as walker pushed up with his arms, bracing himself from the pressure, then releasing it and moving out of the way. Stilt-Man staggered but experience had taught him how to prevent his fall and walker was at his bad, where he slipped on his gauntlets, and smiled. It gave him a bit more of an edge now he had his shield.

"You might want to give up now," he said.

"Little man, I've fought Captain America, and you are no Captain America."

"That was the wrong thing to say," muttered walker and jumped at Stilt-Man, energising the shield and taking out the extended legs, then began to pound at Day's face. "Yer an idiot, with an idiot's gimmicks, with an idiot's name." He said as he kept hitting him. His compatriots have taken discretion as the better part of valour and made a run for it. Then Day flung him back, his exoskeleton giving him enhanced strength and protection, and walker hit the side of the bar, the wind knocked out of him, but instead of pressing the advantage Day, headed for the door.

"We will meet again, hero," he said as he started to make his escape.

"And I'll kick yer ass again," called walker as Alan helped him up, but if Day heard him he gave no indication as he was out of the door. "Prick." He stretched his arms to relieve the stiffness and the pain.

"Nicely done," said Alan.

"Yeah," said Walker, sourly. The bad guys had got away. They'd got nothing from it, but they'd still got away. "Now where's my damn beer?"

"We're being reactivated?" said Bridge as Nick broke the news to him.

"Yup," said Fury. "Get yerself aboard the Helicarrier, GW, yer back in business."

"Still not happy about it?"

"No," said Nick. "I was kinda hopin' they'd give you somewhere to work out of, not just my Helicarrier. Still, them's the breaks."

"So what now?"

"I brief you on what's going on at SHIELD. You ain't got a mission as such, but there's some stuff you'll need to know about. I'll expect you over here in a few hours."

"On my way, Colonel," said Bridge and signed off. Fury sat back in his chair and looked at the files again. It was a good idea to get up to speed on the team members.

"Excellent work, Rock," said Brian as he looked at the weapons that Union Jack had crafted. "These are exceptional pieces of work."

"It's taken me a bit of time," said Percival Rockford. "However I've installed a couple of tracking devices to the guns, that will allow them to get a better fix on the targets, as well as give a tactical analysis of what kind of target they're aiming at."

"Linked through the suit?"

"Yes," said Rock. "I don't know who designed the circuitry behind it, but it's an incredible piece of work. Your modifications have also helped."

"It's not working for you though as it should," said Brian. "You only have slightly enhanced strength, you certainly can't fly and there's not a great deal of protection."

"I think it's because I'm not attuned or receptive to the mystical energies. As I recall, neither are you which is why you're no longer Captain Britain."

"Yes," said Brian, softly. "However, you're a worthy successor. The suit enhances your natural abilities, but just not to metahuman standards."

"Given time it may work," said Rock. "There's a lot here to try. Just because we can't tap the energy matrix it doesn't mean we can't see it or touch it."

"If you get there, you also must remember you're strongest when in the United Kingdom," said Brian, as he poured a cup of tea. "Caused me grief a few times, I can tell you."

"I've read your notes," smiled Rock. "Do you have time to go through a combat session this afternoon? I'm in the mood for a bit of a sparring session."

"I'd love to," said Brian, "except I've a previous appointment."

"Anyone I know?" asked Rock. "Are you taking Meggan out for the afternoon again, or is it another session in the house?"

"No, there's nothing urgent in the Commons this afternoon," said Brian. "And Meggan's over at the Eden Project at the moment."

"Oh, I forgot she was helping run that."

"Well, she was instrumental in getting it set up," said Brian. "It gives her something to do now that Excalibur's gone... well, my Excalibur."

"Have you heard anything?" Rock asked, but Brian shook his head.

"Not yet," he answered. "I know it went for debate, but after that, I've nothing."

"Okay," said Rock. "Guess I'll go over the streets, see if any of the local thugs are trying their luck."

"I miss those days," said Brian, as his telephone rang. "Braddock," he answered as he picked it up. "Ah, thank you, Feron." He put the receiver down and looked at his protégé. "My appointment's arrived. Agent Del Ruiz of SHIELD, working with Pete Wisdom's X-Force."

"No, never met her," said Rock. "Or his team for that matter. However the Helicarrier's not that large a place, if we get the recall. I'll take the back entrance." Brian nodded and Rock removed a book from the shelf, which opened a secret passageway and Rock hurried away as the passage was sealed once more.

"Oh, Hiro," whispered Leyu rolling over in her bed to look at him, as he casually stroked her hair. "I love you."

"I love you, too," he said as he ran his fingers down the curve of her spine, and watched as the hairs on the back on her neck stood to attention. "You really are beautiful, you know." She flushed slightly, as she swung her legs from the bed and went to get her dressing gown.

"Hiro," she said, as the young man reached for his glasses.

"I know," replied the young man, as he reached for his clothes. "I have to go now. When are we going to tell your brother?"

"Not yet," said Leyu as she walked over to him and held his hand. "He's a very protective man."

"I know all about him," reminded Hiro. "I just don't want to hide it anymore, Ley." He kissed her, and pulled his jeans up.

"Soon," she said. "Just be grateful that between Yashida Enterprises and being a superhero, he's not back here that often." She pulled him close and grabbed his crotch. "Otherwise I wouldn't get to eat that nice sausage."

"Ley," he said, in mock disgust. "That's it, I'm leaving."

"Bye," she said playfully as he walked out of the room, then he turned and blew her

a kiss and she collapsed back on to the bed, her eyes closed in delight at having such a loving boyfriend, and she heard a noise and she looked up. "Hiro, I..." Then she cried out as she saw a stranger in the room.

"You're not your brother," the being snarled. "But you'll do."

"Damn right," she said and unleashed an aquatic attack at the being, who leapt up out of her reach with ease.

"A blast of water won't stop the Puma," he said, and slashed at her, tearing through the thin cotton, and searing her skin. Leyu cried out in pain as the creature's claws struck home again.

"why?" she said as she struggled to get out of his way.

"A present for the wolverine, courtesy of the Yakuza. I was going to kill the head of his adopted family, but you'll do instead. You're a much easier mark." Suddenly Leyu was angry. She had been called many things in her life, but an easy mark was not one of them. There was a flash of pride as she realised that Puma did not realise who he was dealing with here and she focused and seized a hold of the water in Puma's body.

"Easy mark, am I?" she said, the power flowing through her as Puma suddenly found himself unable to move. "You know that the majority of the body's made of water? Guess what I control? Can you feel the water filling your lungs?" Puma started to cough and retch. He had not expected this at all. He had been prepared for Shiro Yoshida, and he had known the atomic fire that course through him would have had no effect, but this was something else.

"Kill... you..." spluttered Puma, but Leyu was having none of it and Puma slowly started to drown in the waters she was creating for him and just as he was about done she freed him from her hold.

"Not today," said Leyu. "Tell the Yakuza that if they ever come after the Clan Yashida again, they won't have to deal with Wolverine or Sunfire - they'll be facing Tsunami." Then a tidal wave formed around him and the Puma was cast out of the compound. Leyu sighed as she looked around the ruined bedrooms, out of the broken doors and down the sopping wet hallway. The water damage would be easily fixed with her powers, but the damage...

"I hope they fix this before Shiro gets home," she muttered and went to change her clothes in to something a little more suitable for repair work.

Sabra was waiting for her flight to Israel from Australia, where she had been visiting her friend Joseph, where he resided with the X-Men team that lived out there. It had been a break for her from the activities in her homeland, and it was a break she needed. It was getting to be truly depressing the way the world was turning out, and she had very few friends she could talk with. Joseph was one of them, though he seemed to have a different view on the world after realising he was in fact from another universe, a world that should never have existed and for a brief time replaced their own.

It amused Sabra that one of her friends had been birthed by events in her homeland, the crystal wave was an event she had remembered in fear as it had approached, and then the relief as the effect simply went away. She had known the X-Men had been involved in saving them all, somehow and the times she aided them was a way of repaying what they had done. One day she would tell Joseph, but when she was comfortable saying it. She was not used to being saved by people, rather being the saver.

It was then she noticed something odd in the area, and she wondered if it was the idea that she was a heroic type and that she should be on guard, but it was not her imagination. She had worked hard on grounding her senses after the fight with Darkstar, as the darkforce had made her feel small in a way she had not felt since the crystal wave.

She looked amongst the crowd of people, looking for the person who seemed to be out of place, using her Mossad training as her guide. There was a man towards the end of the hall, near the gateway, looking out of the window. For some reason he seemed to be out of place and she wondered why. He turned and she glimpsed his face but could not place it and then she realised the problem. It was the same man she had seen in the film on the flight out. His coat though was wrong, too bulky in the wrong places and she realised there was a problem and wandered across to him.

"Excuse me," she said, "are you...?"

"Yes," he said, "I am..." but before he could answer, Sabra had grabbed him by the arm and had subtly bent it round his back in a manner that would not alarm the other people in the area.

"Resist and I break it off," she whispered, and the man stopped straining. "What are you carrying?"

"Not much," he said and kicked at her legs, the force knocking her back forcing her to let go. There had been more power in that than she had expected and she had not braced for the impact. It had been an error on her part and by the time she had stood again, the man had put on a mask and dispensed with the coat, to reveal a selection of throwing blades, and two blades attached to his wrists, which also had small holes, which she suspected dispensed some kind of arsenal. Much in the same way she was also wearing.

"Hail Hydra!" said the man, and started to hack through the tourists who were shouting and screaming as the man started to kill indiscriminately. Sabra felt her anger rising. This was the kind of thing she'd taken a break from, the mindless killing. She recognised something in the files about this man now; he was an assassin named Splice. He would do no further harm and she flew towards him, firing blasts from her gauntlets as she did, however he threw blades that deflected them and lodged in the firing chambers, preventing her from firing again.

It would not stop her and for all the things Splice threw at her, she easily avoided.

"This cannot be," said Splice. "I've fought Wonder Man."

"You're dealing with a professional now," she said as she struck at him, but he blocked, and her hand connected with his body armour.

"Nice try," he said as he grabbed her arms, and slowly began to squeeze her wrists. "I'll break your hands and then gut you slow."

"No," she said. "You won't." Then her gauntlets exploded, sending the paralyzing energy cascading around them both, and taking the two of them out. She knew it would wear off soon, but she also knew the authorities would arrive sooner and deal with this madman and she watched his eyes as they fell to the floor, seeing the hatred in his eyes and she knew she would never understand people such as him.

Inwardly she smiled at a job well done.

"Dimitri!" called Lanyia, as she stepped across the street, waving at her boyfriend, Dimitri, who was waiting for her outside the Vernadsky Geological Museum.

"Lanyia," he greeted her, as they embraced and they kissed. It had been several weeks since they had last seen each other, with his work at the Ministry of the Interior keeping him busy, and her assignments with the Winter Guard serving to keep them further apart. "I've missed you, my love."

"And I you," she replied. "I need to talk to you, Dimitri."

"Oh?" he said, in concern. "Why did you not mention it earlier, we could have met

somewhere a little more private."

"I..." she hesitated, in her words, and turned away a moment, and Dimitri knew there was something wrong with her.

"What is it?" he said, turning her back to see him, to look her in the eyes and see if he could see the truth.

"I am resigning the winter Guard," she said. "I no longer feel comfortable as a hero. It has not been an easy choice..."

"Come with me," said Dimitri and took her to a nearby bar, where he ordered two coffees and sat her down. "Tell me."

"You know I have great power," she said. "The darkforce is a form of energy we have never been able to fathom, or to even chart as to the potential of its use, and it scares me that the very thing that makes me a hero could also make me a villain."

"The happening in Alaska?" said Dimitri. "I thought we had been through that."

"So did I," she said as the two coffee's were placed on the table before them. "It's just it has preyed on me since then. My comrades in the winter Guard are powerful in their own right, but in their own way they fear me and what I can do. The very word, darkforce, instils fear as it signifies a force for darkness, and the potential is within me. I do not want to risk what I am, to use what I have in a situation where I may be forced to hurt those I care about. I cannot have my powers removed, so I will stop myself from being in situations where it may happen."

"Oh, my love," said Dimitri, holding her hands and looking at her. "Do not be afraid of what power you weild, because if you did not have the darkforce, then you would find another reason to hide away."

"I am not hiding away."

"You are. You saw the evil in your soul and it scared you, it has made you doubt yourself. Throughout your life, you have fought for the right cause, and you have been just. The good within outweighs the evil, but it does good to let the devil out once in a while, because in doing so you show him you are not scared of him and that you can beat him back whenever you need to."

"I don't know if I can," she said. "I feel the coldness of my powers within me, and

I cannot contain the power. I have lost my focus."

"Perhaps I can help," said Dimitri, as he pulled a small box from his pocket. "The best cure for ills is love. You know that is why I work at the Department, trying to find better ways than violence and destruction, but I know how powerful fear can be, even over love. Yet I believe our love will help you, and to focus on that I give you this."

"Dimitri?" she said as she opened the box to see a gold ring with a diamond in the middle, surrounded by two sapphires.

"Will you marry me, Lanyia?"

"Yes, Dimitri. Yes, I will." She smiled as he placed the ring over her finger. "As long as I wear it, I will have my focus."

"I know," said Dimitri and the two lovers kissed.

"Pete wisdom's dead?" said Bridge in shock.

"Go one better," said Fury, as he apprised the Project Excalibur team leader on events on the Helicarrier. "There's a traitor in the organisation, and that person may have been the one who killed him."

"Damn" said Bridge. "This is incredible, Nick. What are you doing about it?"

"Not a great deal we can do," said Fury. "We've no evidence, no leads and X-Force has drawn a blank on finding anything. I've even drafted Shadowcat back on to their team to see if she can turn up anything, you know what these X-types are like."

"How many people know and what do you need me to do?" asked Bridge.

"Not many, and watch my back. I'm not an easy target, but if something should happen to me..."

"I getcha," said Bridge. "Goes no further and I'll keep my eyes open."

"Good," said Fury. "That's all I can ask."

Hauptmann sat in his apartment in Munich watching the football game on television. He'd had a fair few matches in his break from Excalibur, but it had not been enough to get him selected for the Germany squad, for the game against Argentina. That said, he still enjoyed watching the game, and though the first half had been a little unimaginative from where he was sitting and the weather hadn't helped, he held out high hopes for the second half. Soccer was the second love of his life, after the heroics.

He smiled as he cracked open a bottle of Becks and sat down to watch. It was only a couple of minutes until kick off and he looked about the chair. There were no crisps left and he muttered a small curse as he screwed up the empty packet and went to the kitchen to find them. He knew they were in there somewhere but he just couldn't figure where he'd put them. They weren't in the usual place where he kept the snacks and he tapped the base of his chin, thinking about it. He heard the kick off and decided to forget it and that he could do without and hurried back to his chair, but in his haste he knocked over his beer.

"Scheisse," he said as righted the bottle and then he hurried to get a cloth from the kitchen, pausing only to steal a glance at the screen as his team mate Oliver Khan made a spectacular save off a long range shot. He hurried to get the cloth and quickly swabbed the floor, then put the damp rag back in the kitchen and sat down to drink his now two thirds empty beer. He shook his head, as he watched an exemplary display of passing from both sides and he was impressed with what he saw. He knew that both sides would raise their game for the world Cup in a couple of months and it made him think of the quality that was in store. Suddenly one of the Argentineans who he wasn't familiar with tripped Miroslav Klose, and the team was awarded a free kick and it was in a very dangerous area for Argentina.

Then the telephone rang.

"Nein," muttered Hauptmann, wondering why anyone would be calling when the game was on, and more than that why had he left the telephone at the other side of the room. He also knew the limited amount of people that had his number and that it might be important so he reluctantly turned away from the screen. "Hello?" he said as he picked up the handset. "Yes, I am he." He turned back to the screen as he spoke, but he'd missed it and from the gasp of the crowd it had gone close. "No, I'm not interested in double glazing and if you call this number again, I'll kill you." He slammed the telephone down and went back to the game, where the Argentinean who'd tripped Klose was now rolling on the floor, in a form of agony.

"Get up, you're not hurt," said Hauptmann as the referee pulled out a yellow card. "Cheating bastard," Hauptmann seethed as he looked at the screen and decided that in the momentary break while the faking little runt was down, he'd get another beer. He got back to see the game had resumed and he settled back in to his chair. Then there was a knock on the door. "You have got to be kidding me," he muttered and went to see who it was, because they would know he was in from the noise of the television. "Yes?"

"Guten abend," said the first of two men. "We represent the Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland. Do you believe in God?"

"At the moment I'm beginning to wonder whether he even exists at all," said Hauptmann as he heard a cheer and he turned to the television to see that Germany had broken the deadlock and was now 1-0 up. He crushed the beer bottle in his hand in frustration. "Go away." Then he slammed the door shut, only to catch the tail end of the replay. And he didn't have a beer either. The restart would take a moment so he'd wipe his hand and get another drink. However he absently touched the light switch, which resulted in a flash and a bang as the water hit the power line and the lights went out and the room went quiet.

"Nein," screeched the German hero as the realisation that he'd shorted the power to the apartment. His hand also hurt from the shock. Now he had to replace the fuses and get his home back in order so he could watch the match and he went to the cupboard to get the spares.

After about twenty-five minutes of frantic fumbling around in the dark he managed to make the repairs and the television came back on. He had about ten minutes left of the game, and he sighed as he sat down and was about to tune in to the remainder of match when he heard a crash. He sighed and put his mask on, because he knew when somewhere was being broken in to.

"Did you pick the wrong place at the wrong time" he said to the would be criminal and proceeded to give him the kicking of his life, before then throwing out of the window he'd just climbed through. He sat down to watch the remainder of the game, but all he managed to see was the last thirty seconds and he buried his head in his hands.

"Wow," said Neal as he looked at the woman who was walking towards him. "You look fantastic."

"Thank you," she said, blithely ignoring the heads that turned to look at her as she walked by. "I was wondering when you'd ask em out again, Neal."

"I was wondering if you'd say yes," he admitted. "Someone sort of told me to get over myself and ask you."

"How is Jim?" she smiled as he pulled out her chair and she sat down.

"He's fine. I'm not sure what he enjoys more, hassling the board of directors or hassling me."

"Good afternoon, Miss McCabe," said the waiter.

"Good afternoon Francois," she said in reply. "My usual, please."

"Right away, Miss McCabe." He headed towards the bar, to get her the dry white wine she so loved.

"It must be hard being popular," said Neal with a smile.

"Popular, no," she said, resting her head on her folded hands. "They know they've seen me in some films, but not which ones. Which isn't a surprise."

"Francois knows you."

"Francois' seen all my films. The last person who did that was a homicidal dictator, so I smile and be nice." Neal smiled at the joke as Francois brought her drink. "Thank you," she said.

"Have you decided on what you would like to eat?"

"You order," said Lindsay and Neal selected the peppered lemon chicken breast with mixed vegetables and. Francois nodded and walked away, leaving the couple to their drinks and conversation. "So how are things at Tachyon?" asked Lindsay.

"I'm getting to grips with it," said Neal. "It's been six months of hard work, but it's been worth it. I'm learning a proper trade in computer programming, thanks to Jim's teaching. He misses you though, even after a few weeks."

"It was only temporary until I got back on my feet," she said. "Jim knew that. I'm not cut out to be a secretary."

"You were a good one though."

"I'm a better actress, and that's where my heart is."

"I see," said Neal. "So what's next on your list?"

"I'm doing an orange juice commercial tomorrow," she said and saw the sparkle in Neal's eyes, as he bit back a chuckle. "Don't," she said, with mock warning. "It's not much, I know, but I've been out of the business a while."

"You heard from Jessica?" asked Neal, seeing her wilt slightly at the mention of her recent past.

"Not for several months," said Lindsay, with a taint of sadness. "We've been friends a long time, it seems a shame to lose it all over some silly argument. I've tried calling her, but she's not answering her messages. I just hope nothing's happened to her."

"She'll be fine," said Neal as the food was brought over. "So let's enjoy our lunch, and think of other things."

"Such as?" said Lindsay.

"Oh, we'll find something," replied Neal as he picked up his fork and stabbed the chicken in front of him.

Hellios smiled as he flew across the skies of Greece, keeping an eye on his country as he did so. It was not his job to deal with the common criminals, but to take out the threats to the national security, or any other super-human menace. The people who had given him his powers had intended him to be their answer to Captain America, but he would be nobody's tool or weapon. He did what he had to do, and they recharged his cellular structure periodically using the serum they had developed from alien cultures they had discovered many years ago.

He was Hellios, and to all intents and purposes he was a god. However of late the serum that powered him had been losing its longevity, which was why he had signed up to the Excalibur Project. Do that, or lose your powers he had been told, and without his gifts he was just ordinary and he would never go back to the street sweeper he had once been. He had tasted power and he liked it. The project had died and he was satisfied. He had done his part, and a man like him did not need the others holding him back. The kind of threat they had faced in Alaska was one for the Avengers or Defenders or other American group.

They liked problems like that - let them deal with it.

Suddenly his head began to spin and nausea overtook him. He couldn't see straight and began to plummet to the Earth out of control and he hit the ground like a missile. He stood up, groggily and looked about, his vision double. The serum had never done this to him before, so he discounted that, which meant that he was probably under attack.

"Show yourselves, cowards!" he demanded, but he was still too dizzy to see if there was anyone there.

"You are the first," the voices chanted, in front of him, behind him, to his left, then his right, echoing inside his head.

"No," he stuttered and unleashed solar bolts from his hands as his eyes were not responding, but he did not know if he was hitting anything.

"First," they repeated and he could not make them stop and he did not know what was happening to him and he cried out as the voices continued and continued and continued and he flew up in to the air, where he was met by two concussion missiles, and he fell to the floor again.

"I'll kill you for this," he said as he tried to stand but was met by energy blasts hitting him and keeping him down until his resistance simply broke down and he stopped fighting. Ridge had shown him his invulnerability had limits and now so had these people and he surrendered to the darkness.

His attackers gathered around the fallen hero.

"Hellios has fallen," said their leader. "Take him to Kalymnos. The Doctor is waiting for a new test subject."

"We obey," they said and Hellios rose in to the air and everyone of them vanished.

Excalibur #7 - Here We Come To Save The Day - Death in Greece, Part 3

"Agent walker?" said the SHIELD agent as USAgent opened the door of his apartment, and he flashed him his ID badge.

"Yeah?" replied the former Avenger, wondering what SHIELD wanted with him now.

"Excalibur." USAgent stiffened. He'd almost forgotten the Project.

"Where we going?"

"Greece, the rest of the team is on route."

"What's happened there?" asked walker, thinking that Greece was Hellios' snad pit and he should be man enough to handle himself.

"You've not seen the news?" asked the agent, surprise entering his tone.

"Not had time," said walker, thinking back to Candice, whom he'd met at the bar during the Stilt Man attack. He'd also been keeping an eye out for that joker as well, because he owed him one.

"Super human terrorists have taken control of a small island and are threatening to take the mainland. Hellios and a SHIELD strikeforce have been captured."

"So they're calling in the big guns?" said walker, with a smile. "Cool. Give me a minute or two to grab my stuff."

"Yes sir," said the Agent. A few moments passed and then walker emerged from his office.

"So how do we get there?" asked Agent. "Even the jets you guys have aren't going to be fast enough."

"As a SHIELD strikeforce is involved, Director Fury has classified this as a SHIELD
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operation and so we have access to the full resources of SHIELD, including the prototype Hermes."

"Hermes?" said walker. "What's Her..." There was a shining light about them and then they were somewhere else "...mes?" His vision cleared and he could see he was aboard the Helicarrier.

"Transmat system," said Bridge, who was waiting with the other members of the team. "Not due to go operational until UN approval, but Fury decided not to wait and invoked emergency powers. We were going to use conventional means until this came up."

"Guess the old goat's still got some fight left in him," said walker, as he looked about. "Hey, hey, the gang's all here." He could see the rest of the team about - Sabra, Tsunami, Union Jack, Darkstar, Hauptmann and Savitar.

"And you're late," sniped Leyu.

"Bite me," said walker. "So what's the brief, Bridge?"

"I'll let Fury explain, as this is his mission not mine. He'll be the commander for this mission." Fury entered the room.

"Siddown and shuddup while I tell you what's goin' on, children," he said. "The gist is this - a group of super terrorists called the Death's Head Commando's have resurfaced. Originally part of a peaceful and curious race that established an observation post on Earth, the Gnobians had the unbelievably bad luck to do so in the midst of fascist Germany during World War II. Coming into contact with Baron Von Strucker, the Gnobian Mother merged with him, becoming so tainted by the experience that her subsequent offspring were born with an intense hatred of yours truly, and a determination to set up the 4th Reich despite their intense revulsion for the principles behind fascism. Taking their title from Baron von Strucker's slain personal SS troops, the Death's Head Guard targeted the planet's governments for take over, but were side-tracked by their involuntary and compulsive hatred of me, and it brought them in to conflict with SHIELD."

"So it's an alien invasion?" said Sabra.

"We don't know," said Fury. "We sent in X-Force, and they were taken, as was Hellios. From what our field office has told us, they went here." He pressed a button and another image appeared. "This is Mount Flaska, in the Kalymnos mountain range. Nothing very spectacular about it, other than the cave of the bottom of it, called by the locals the Cavern of the Nymphs. That's where the Commando's are based and that's where they took Kalymnos."

"We can't take on a whole country," said Savitar. "It's too large."

"Collective intelligence," said Union Jack. "Take out the head man and the rest of them will follow."

"Exactly," said Bridge. "Which is what we do. They sent their message out via the television networks a few hours ago, and so far they haven't mobilised too much on to mainland Greece. We get one shot at rescuing X-Force, Hellios and saving the country."

"Silly question time," said walker. "What happens if we fail?"

"The Commando's get a country and a place to expand in to Europe," said Fury. "My guess is that they then go to all out war, and they've the power and technology to do so."

"Okay," said walker. "So we'd better not mess this up."

"You've ten minutes before you move out," said Fury. "Get ready." He then turned to Bridge. "GW, a word." He nodded to the door and they went outside.

"Wonder what that's about," said Neal.

"No idea," said Rock. "But I bet we'll find out soon enough."

"What's up?" asked Bridge as the door closed behind them.

"They all came back to the Helicarrier, without any complaint," said Fury. "Well expect Yashida, but that's to be expected. I'm just sayin' be careful - we still don't know who the traitor is, and my money says they set up X-Force, because they're on his trail."

"How possible is that?" asked Bridge.

"Not very, but just in case - watch your back. The traitor could have a network of

people an' you need to be careful who you trust."

"Gotcha," said Bridge. "Eyes wide open."

"Good man," said Fury. "Armory Command's waitin' for ya to take control."

Marcus Raven had kept his eyes closed, listening to the others and to what was going on. It wasn't what he wanted, and his first instinct was to take out as many of the people as he could and get out of there with his friends in tow, but he knew how futile that would be. X-Force was to all intents and purposes powerless, and the odds were heavily against them. However he knew there was a time coming when he had no choice but to fight back. However they'd had him on the ropes the last time, but if he marshalled his strength, maybe he could focus himself. These creatures had the telepathy of the race, but that could mean they didn't have the access to the astral plane like he did as a strong psionic presence and his lessons in the use of his powers were paying off.

"Our people are in place," he heard a voice saying, a voice that he recognised as the man who had beaten him back earlier. "How are the tests coming?"

"The DNA extraction from the non-psion mutants has proven most useful. The psion himself has limited use as his powers mirror our own and that is not the gifts we seek. I will soon unlock the genetic potential we have been granted."

"Excellent work," said the first voice. "Soon our people will live once more, and this planet will pay for what it has done, not only to us but to the very planet they live on. These humans are not fit to govern and this war will eradicate them from the face of the Earth."

"I will continue my tests," said the second. The other one seemed to go silent and Raven assumed he'd vanished somewhere. There were some interesting points that he'd raised and he came to a few conclusions. The first was that they were stretching themselves. That meant if they came across someone they needed to put all their force behind, then it would leave them defenceless in terms of other fights, which would be an advantage. He'd heard the television broadcast, so he knew what was going on.

The second was that the tests were designed to make them stronger, which meant they had weaknesses and vulnerabilities. The team had been taken by superior numbers who'd removed their powers, he'd been beaten by someone with far greater power - though he'd like a rematch - and if he was right the other hero had been ambushed.

He'd learnt a great deal and it was almost time to do something about it.

"So we using Hermes?" asked Union Jack as Armory stirred to life, the lights in the suits eyes coming on letting them know that Bridge was actually in there and this was not some kind of test.

"Yeah," said Armory. "We'll be transporting down there, but don't get used to this kind of thing - this is emergency stuff only." The team muttered their agreement. "Fury, this is Bridge. We're a go."

"Ignition sequence is firing," said Fury. "Teleport in five, four, three, two, one..." The light swamped Project Excalibur and they were suddenly out of the Helicarrier and in the middle of Kalymnos' capital Portia. The streets were empty of people but there were a squadron of Commando's about.

"Take 'em out," said Armory and the team went to work. Savitar and Tsunami unleashed an elemental burst towards a couple of them.

"Hey," said Leyu, "find your own target."

"Just trying something," said Neal, using a move that Jim Hammond had shown him and the water and fire combined in attack, creating an intense and searing blast of hot water, scalding the targets.

Armory, Union Jack and USAgent used their guns and started firing, taking out as many of them as they could. Sabra used her won gauntlet blasters to do what she could as well, because they were less vulnerable because of the distance and surprise of their arrival. Getting in close was not what they wanted to do just yet.

Darkstar had a more important job, and that was to seal the city of from the rest of the world. This was a major port and strategically important, as well as the best way of getting to the mountain base of the commandos. It took all of her power and concentration to create such a massive darkforce bubble around the city and Bridge used the Armory scanners to check on her.

"Laynia," he called, "how are you doing?"

"Fine, for now," she said. "However I do not know how long I can hold this."

"Do what you can," he said as they only needed to drain the Commando's from the city

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and that would be a massive blow to them. Yes, they could teleport, but their base of operations was here and they suspected they needed that for their plans to succeed.

Soon the squadron had been disposed of and they hadn't given them a chance to fight back.

"Good work," said Bridge. "That's one down, several more to go."

"Heads up," said USAgent. "Here they come..." If he was going to say anymore he wasn't given chance as an energy burst was deflected from his energy shield, which he only just managed to get up and in moments they were in the thick of hand to hand combat.

"Keep them off Laynia," ordered Bridge, but the team didn't need to be told that. Hauptmann smiled as he went to work because this was more his element than the previous firing of energy weapons and bullets. This was a brawl, though the enemy seemed to be blocking all his moves, as they were with the others.

"They know what we're doing before we do," he said, realising it was their empathic abilities that gave them the edge.

"Guess that brings it down to me," said Bridge, who was back at the Helicarrier and knew they couldn't sense anything from the circuits and armour that was the battlesuit. "Gimme a sec."

"Better hurry, Bridge," said walker, "they're kicking our tails."

"Scanning," muttered Bridge as he reviewed the datafeeds that were showing him what frequencies were being used at the moment, and then he saw it. "Gotcha." He fired up a blast of white noise, and the Commando's reeled under the sound. "Now hit them!"

The Commando's fought well, but the sheer power of the members of the Excalibur project was too much for them and they were overwhelmed quite quickly.

"And we're supposed to be worried by these losers?" asked Leyu, as she summoned a tidal wave to wash them down the street and in to the sea.

"They were taking us," said Sabra. "Their mental powers are highly defined and gave them a great advantage."

"White noise pitched to the frequency of the empathic powers," said Union Jack. "Clever."

"After the battle with the Empress, we went to work to try and make sure that mind control wasn't going to slow us down in the future," said Bridge. "First proper field test though. I'll keep broadcasting on the frequency as well, so they can't function properly and teleporting in like they did just then."

"But if they get a counter measure then we have a problem," said Union Jack. "The tech levels they're supposed to have will be difficult to counter."

"I've faith in you," said Armory.

"What now, fearless leader?" asked USAgent. "We can't keep hunting them down. Those on the outside are already causing trouble."

"SHIELD's doing what it can to stop them," said Bridge, "but we're here to take out the main man and their base."

"And rescue our comrades," said Hauptmann.

"If possible," said Bridge. "I have no illusions about this - there's a good chance we're not all going to get out of this one in tact."

"At least you're safe," said Leyu, with disdain.

"Don't believe that," said Union Jack. "If I've read the specs right and Armory is destroyed, then the feedback on the link to the Helicarrier will fry Bridge's brain in an instant."

"I never send anyone in to a situation where I'm not prepared to go myself. My life's as much on the line as yours. So to answer Mr Walker's question - we take out Mount Flaska and bury the Cave of the Nymphs."

"Then let's go," said Savitar. "The longer we wait..."

"Hold it," said Sabra. "What about Darkstar? She's using her powers to ensure that

they've not got a link to the outside, but she's defenceless."

"Well volunteered," said Bridge. "You stay and keep her safe. If she fails, we're going to be in even worse trouble."

"Fine," said the Mossad agent. "Good luck."

"To us all," said Bridge and the team headed out, Armory carrying USAgent and Hauptmann, Savitar carrying Union Jack with Tsunami riding a wave that propelled her as fast as the two flyers. They'd get to the target in no time.

"ARGH!" cried the enemy doctor and Raven almost sat up, which would have blown his cover. "Damnation."

Marcus wondered what the hell had just happened, but the man seemed to be in pain, as if there was something eating at him. He decided to risk it and opened his mind a fraction and he could feel the pain of the alien race. Something was hurting their minds, keeping them off guard. There was something going on.

"Guess it's time," he said and grabbed the doctor in a telekinetic hold and slammed him in to the floor. Then he swung himself off the medical table and went to see his friends.

"Wake up, David," he said, shaking Maverick. He'd gone through a lot with the experiments, he could feel the pain and torment he'd gone through - not just with the experiments, but with the memories it had triggered of his time at weapon X. "C'mon," he said, projecting the thought in to his mind.

"I'm up," he said, groggily. "I'm guessing we're in trouble?"

"Yup," said Raven who was waking up Siryn, who was under heavy sedation . It was a little too much for her to simply wake up from, but hopefully the nanos that sinister had implanted in her to heal her throat would pull her through.

"Great," said North, giving Kitty a shake. "Wake up, Pryde, we need you."

"I ache all over," she said, looking at him. She was in the same kind of state he was.

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"I know," replied her leader, "but get over it. I need you to do your techy thing and get us our powers back. One psion isn't going to be that helpful."

"Ah think backup's on it's way," said Raven. "Something or someone's giving the Commando's one hell of a headache."

"Good," said North. "We could do with a break. Who's that? Don't know the costume."

"No idea," said Raven. "He's been through worse than us though - looks like they've siphoned a lot of blood from him."

"They stuck us with needles and stuff," said North, "and that was bad enough. Nobody should have that done to them."

"Agreed," said Kitty as she sat down at a console and started to type, but broke off. "Anyone know Greek?"

"Nope," said Maverick. "Damn. Marcus, you think you can wake him?" he looked at the fallen hero, if that was what he was.

"Soon know," he said and gave him a psionic push. "Nope, but I got a vague sampling of the language."

"It'll do," said Kitty and lowered her psychic defences and Marcus gave her what he had gathered. The she started to type again and see what she could find, while the others looked at Siryn.

"That's some sleeping draft," said Maverick, looking at her. "I wonder..."

"What?"

"Maybe they kept her under because she kept coming around thanks to the nanobots in her body repairing her and keeping her going."

"Makes sense," said Raven.

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"Guys, I've a problem," said Kitty. "I can't give us back our powers within the mountain complex. It's the lighting in here. The flash was a radiation burst which under the lights in here neutralise our powers. Marcus has his powers because he wasn't exposed like we were."

"Solution?"

"Turn out the lights," said Kitty. "We'll be fixed up when we get back to the Helicarrier, but while we're here..."

"We're screwed," said Maverick. "What else can go wrong?" Then they were surrounded by flashing red wall lights as the alarms sounded.

"The cavalry just arrived," said Raven, sensing the presence of the Excalibur people.

"Then let's go give them a hand," he said, figuring that even without their powers himself and Kitty were still very good hand to hand combatants. "Leave Terry, she'll wake up on her own."

Deep within the complex, the Supreme Commando looked at the monitors of all the heroes in and around the mountain and rubbed his chin. Then he laughed.

"And so the pieces all start to fall in to place. Let the line be drawn here!"

Colonel George Washington Bridge surveyed the situation from the relative safety of the SHIELD Helicarrier, which was at the moment providing air support to their troops on the Greek mainland. The Death's Head Commando's were a powerful unit to be sure, and the powers they possessed meant that they were keeping the SHIELD agents on their toes, however with Nick Fury down their, leading the fight back the odds were more or less even.

However the information on that battle was tertiary because the main sensor array he was using was to monitor the battle inside the mountain complex of the Commando's, inside Mount Flaska on the island of Kalymnos. Excalibur had been called in to action, and they had teamed with X-Force in the hope of stopping the terrorists at the source, but after a good start things were not progressing as they should in his opinion.

X-Force were without their powers, as were the mutant operatives on his strikeforce, leaving the Armory system, Hauptmann, USAgent and Union Jack as the only active meta-class humans. Tsunami and Saviatar were down, while Darkstar and Sabra were cutting the city and mountain area off in a darkforce sphere, to keep the enemy disorientated. The question was how long any of the two strike units would last.

It was a good job that the majority of people here were excellent combatants. Maverick, Shadowcat, Agent, Union Jack and Hauptmann were all masters in the art of fighting, albeit in radically different styles and the Armory system was a state of the art war machine. There had been some major improvements to the system during the six-month hiatus, which Bridge had been working on with the project's lead technician, Dr Horton.

It was Dr Horton that was now ensuring that the data that was being fed back to the Helicarrier was being analysed so that Bridge could make full use of the system.

"Brent," said Bridge, "I could really do with getting my people back on their feet."

"Certainly," said Dr Horton. "And, it's Brad, sir. Bradley if you must." We've only been working together seven months, though the scientist. Bridge got it wrong almost every time.

"Sorry," said Bridge as he activated the cannons on the suit and started firing at the Commando's who were going after Leyu and Neal. There were still too many of them to keep off indefinitely. "But, someone is going to die unless we..." A red light started to flash above his eye and Bridge looked up. "What the hell?"

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"Someone's hacking the system," said Horton, going to work at his console trying to block the enemy, who was attempting to take control of the Armory systems. "I'm having problem's isolating the cause..."

"What the hell?" asked Maverick as he narrowly avoided being hit by Armory. It had been closer than he'd liked and he was having enough problems dodging the Commando's without having to duck and weave through his allies as well. "Bridge, what's going on?"

"System's been attacked from your end, and the signal's going all the way to the Helicarrier."

"I don't understand how that's possible," said Maverick. He knew a great deal about the technical details of things, but the advanced specs were something that he got lost on.

"The carrier signal that lets me use the system has been compromised," repeated Bridge after Horton spoke to him, because Horton knew that the team on the ground may be able to assist him in fixing the problem. "Darkstar's sphere allowed me to communicate with the suit and use the same signal to relay data back to the 'Carrier."

"And they figured it out," said Shadowcat who was nearby and had come over because this was more her area than North's and he knew that as well. "If they get in to the Helicarrier systems..."

"We're screwed," repeated Bridge.

"Kitty," said Maverick, as he knew that if anyone of the joint teams had a chance of stopping this at their end, it was Katherine Pryde.

"On my way," she said and headed back towards the medical centre where X-Force had been held before the arrival of Excalibur. She'd managed to access one of the terminals in there earlier and she knew she could do it again. As she headed out of there she looked over to where USAgent and Union Jack were fighting side by side. As she carried on, something occurred to her - the fighting style was similar to one she had seen before and her thoughts turned to the past few years.

She'd not thought of Brian Braddock for a while and she wondered why it came to mind now. She paid it no heed and headed back to where Siryn and Hellios were, wondering how they were doing.

Darkstar was using her powers to her limits. Sabra was close enough to her to see in the darkness and she could tell because she knew the signs of someone on the edge. She had seen it in Joseph's eyes when he had been using his powers before Magneto had gained power, and even though he was alive again, she had heard the reports from the X-Men of how the unfettered use of his power had caused great damage to his body.

The limits of darkforce had never been discovered, but only the person who was using it and the strength of body, mind and soul limited its use. Sabra could see the strain on her face and she knew that it was not going to be long before she had to stop. Going further would kill her and Sabra was unsure of what would happen if the energy were unleashed without proper control.

"KILL THEM!" came a cry and Sabra turned as her concerns for Darkstar were replaced by more immediate ones for them both. This was what she had been waiting for - the Commando's response attack to Excalibur's earlier incursion. Her job was to defend Darkstar as long as possible and she prepared herself for the fight, quickly assessing the situation and what she could do about it.

She was fast, strong, agile and she could fly, making her very hard to defeat. Added to that were the gauntlets that fired paralyzing energy. They had been replaced after the battle in Australia and the power and range of the weapons had been increased. They had also been made of a carbonadium alloy, a derivative of adamantium though not as hardy as that vaunted metal. How the Israeli government had acquired it she did not ask, that was not her place but they would stand up to most pressures as well as being a better conduit of the energy. The design had also been refined as well, allowing her to control the gauntlets from a small pad that rested in the palm of her hand.

She took to the air towards the oncoming Commando legion, unleashing a wide ranging pulse, blanketing the enemy, though because of the wider range than the narrow beam the best it did was to knock them back, not take them out. However that was fine with her and their advantage was now lost as she surged onwards.

She appreciated the irony of protecting Darkstar, the woman who had beaten her, had taken her to a psychological place she had never wanted to go again. Defending her, making Darkstar safe, it did a lot to heal the damage. As powerful as Lanyia Petrova was, she still needed help. It was exactly what Sabra had hoped would happen when she volunteered to protect her.

Though Lanyia was not able to help her comrade in arms, she could watch what she was doing. Protecting her friends, ensuring the safety of the world was paramount to her and she would not fail, however there was something going on that she had not counted on happening. Through the wall of darkforce she had created and was maintaining she could feel the world on either side of the barrier. She could hear the voices of the people near it, smell the mountain air at the same time as she

tasted the sea salt.

It was as if the darkforce were not just an energy form for her to control, and more like it was an extension of herself.

Suddenly she was afraid, because if the darkforce were truly how she perceived it then she would be lost. She had felt the coldness of the powers within her since the battle in Alaska, and she had come to believe she could not contain the energies within her.

She could feel her focus fading and the wall of darkforce thinning and she was suddenly aware of the ring on her finger. The engagement ring Dimitri had given her and his voice echoed in her head.

"Do not be afraid of what power you wield."

She had promised him as long as she wore it she would have her focus, and she would not fail at the first time her focus was called in to question. She pushed on, the wall redoubling in strength. She would contain the area, no matter the cost.

"So," said Hauptmann as he fought side by side with USAgent and Union Jack, "who's going to win the world cup then?"

"My money's on Spain," said Rock as he fired his weapons. "They've got some quality."

"What the hell are you talkin' about?" asked Agent.

"Football," replied Hauptmann. "Germany all the way."

"There's a world cup for football?" asked Agent, then realised that they meant the other football. "Oh, soccer. Who cares?"

"Plenty of people," said Hauptmann, an edge of iciness coming in to his voice. "It's what I do when I'm not fighting for my life."

"Really?" said Rock, surprised. "What team?"

"Bayern Munich."

"I saw them play Man U last season," said Rock. "Good game."

"It's a girly sport anyway," said Agent. "Now ice hockey, that's a man's sport."

Union Jack and Hauptmann just looked at each other a moment and went back to the fight, deciding it was easier to let John Walker live in his own little fantasy world. Walker smiled, thinking he'd won the debate, and then he wondered if Greece were playing and what effect this would have on the team.

Then he figured he didn't care and brayed the hell out of some of the Commando's with his energy shield.

"Damn," said Raven as he tried to use his powers and had to accept they weren't active anymore. It was strange, before he'd joined X-Force he'd used them very little because he didn't want to be noticed and as time had gone on, he realized how much he needed them for the work he was doing now.

To lose them... it hurt in a way he couldn't quite define. He was little more than providing cover fire here. At the FBI he'd been a good shot, and SHIELD training had taught him how to use his fists but he was not exactly the greatest fighter and with the people he was watching demonstrating their skills, he knew he was seriously outclassed.

"Marcus!" called Maverick as he came over to him. "We've a problem."

"The deal with Armory?" he said.

"Yeah," replied North. "He's deactivated his weapons from the remote, but there is another option we could use. The suit can be piloted in person. Seeing as how it is a SHIELD suit, and you're officially SHIELD..."

"Fine," said Raven, and fired a couple more times as he and North made their way over to the walking battle tank. "What do Ah do?"

"Listen to the guidance from Bridge and the SHIELD techs and you'll be fine. Bridge, open 'er up."

On the Helicarrier, Bridge hit the switch to deactivate the remote and panels opened to reveal a man-shaped hole. Raven got in, and he felt a little small in it until the suit raised him up to the optimum height for the operation and the panels closed and Raven felt something enter the back of his neck and he felt connected to the suit. It was, in a little way, like a telepathic link.

"Raven?" said Bridge.

"Ah hear you."

"Whatever you do, don't hit the flashing blue button. It's the control that's creating all the problems with the Commando's powers."

"Right."

"Just think about what you want to do before you do it and it should be fine."

"Yes, Colonel," said Raven and went to work. Armory was back playing for the home team and Raven fired weapons and everything at the enemy. Tsunami and Savitaar were doing what they could to fight back but they were also more used to using their powers rather than resorting to up close and personal methodology.

"Thanks, Bridge," said Savitar as Armory flung the enemy about like rag dolls.

"Colonel's unavailable," said Raven. "Guess I'm the cavalry."

"Oh God," said Tsunami. "We are so dead."

"Just saved our necks, Leyu," said Neal. "Makes him good in my book."

"Raven, this is Bridge. I need you to get our people out of here now," said the leader of Excalibur. "Fury's just changed the rules in light of what's happening - orders are now to level the mountain."

"On it," said Raven, and looked at the other two who had heard the communication from their boss. "Let's get you two out of here," he said and grabbed hold of them, and blasted off.

"Terry!" called Kitty as she entered the room.

"Hey," answered Siryn. "Sounds like hell out there."

"It is," said Shadowcat and she told her of what was going on in the world outside. "And to top it off, the Commando's are trying to get in to SHIELD's computer systems via the Armory system."

"What d'you need?" asked Siryn.

"You to keep off the Commando's who come in as soon as I start trying to counter attack." She sat down at the console and started to type. Her Greek was minimal but she hoped it would be enough. "How's he doing?" she said.

"He is fine," said a very weak voice.

"He woke up moments ago," said Terry, "but he's not good. They drained a lot of his blood and he's not going very far."

"I am Hellios," he said. "I will not be stopped by these terrorists while they over run my homeland." He stood from his bed and took a shaky step forward before stumbling to the floor.

"Great," said Terry. "Now I have to protect two of ye..." There was a strain at the back of her throat, a ripple of the muscles at the back of her neck and a flicker of life on her vocal chords. Kitty was saying something, but Terry wasn't hearing her and the sensations stopped.

"...don't you think?" finished Shadowcat.

"Huh?" asked Siryn.

"Forget it," said Kitty, annoyed but having more pressing issues to attend to. She

managed to tap the systems and find the consoles that were actively targeting the Armory system. "I do my best work under pressure," she muttered.

"Here they come," said Terry as she looked at the Commando's coming towards her and she unleashed the power and intensity of her sonic scream.

"Go Terry," said Kitty as she sent a message to the Helicarrier that she was in.

"The girl's a genius," said Horton as he read the message. "She's in, Colonel."

"Yes, she is," said Bridge, remembering when he'd first brought her in to SHIELD to deal with the Ogun situation. She'd impressed him then, as she did now. "are you two..."

"Working on the route and cause and if we're lucky we may even tap their systems and get control of them."

"Good," said Bridge. "I'll let Fury know."

In his section of the complex the Supreme Commando watched as things progressed. The weapon suit was being operated manually now, which was unexpected, but not outside his planning and was taking the more powerless ones outside. That was fine, for he would recapture them easily enough.

The battle was going well inside as well for even though they were without their power, the fight was still quite even and the heroes were all in one space. Except for the medical section, and that was where his concerns were now. There were two shocks that were not in the plan. First one of the mutants had powers. That shouldn't be. The second was the young woman on the computers. She knew a great deal about the technology and she was finding her way around it with ease.

That was not helpful.

In fact it was very bad indeed, as it had the potential to undo everything. He would have to do something about it, something that would force him to stop trying to get the Helicarrier to work for him. That had been a bonus he hadn't expected and he knew that he'd pressed his luck too far. Whoever it was on the Helicarrier that had been working against him, they'd done a good job and now it was time for their reward.

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He pressed a button on the console and sighed.

"We did it," said Dr Horton, as he saw the intruder's signal deteriorate. They had them on the run.

Not so fast, thought Kitty and gave chase, trying to trace the hacker to their machine and try and beat them at their own game.

"We'll show them," Horton messaged her, picking up on her lead. There was no way he'd be able to avoid both of them.

"Be careful," said Bridge.

"SHIELD technology at it's best," said Horton, then paused a moment. "What the..."

"...hell," said Kitty, noticing the same spike in the system as Horton did. Then the console exploded in a shower of electricity.

As the surge hit, Marcus Raven's head filled with pain as the signal carried across to him as the signal was being routed through Armory and he fell from the sky, his passengers also crying out in fear, as they hurtled to wards the mountainside.

"AAARGH!" cried Bridge, experiencing the feedback from the power surge on his link to the suit as well as the safety's kicked in and cut him off from the system. Bridge could taste blood in his mouth and his hearing was muffled. There was some noise but he couldn't tell what, but he knew there was smoke in the room which wasn't good. The systems should have kicked in to put the fire out by now, but they must have been damaged somehow.

His body felt numb as he forced himself to turn. "Doc?" he said and then he saw the body of Horton, lying inert across the console. It was still burning and the scent of cooked flesh hit his nose and Bridge fought the urge to be sick.

"Kitty!" cried Siryn as she turned and saw the console explode. The young girl lay motionless on the floor, her face cut and torn from the flying shards of twisted metal. She wasn't breathing and Siryn knelt down and started to give CPR. X-Force

had already lost one member of the team and Teresa Rourke was damned if they'd lose another.

As she did so Hellios staggered outside to take on the Commando's that were coming at him, fuelled by the vestiges of serum left in his veins and the will to gain revenge.

Then the whole complex shook.

Sabra was fighting for her life and Darkstar's when she first felt the tremor. So did Commando's and the battle stopped. The place had developed an eerie silence to it and she knew instinctively that something was badly wrong. Whatever had caused the tremor was powerful and had caused nature to stand up and pay attention.

Then a ray of light shone down at her feet and she looked up. The darkforce barrier was weakening in places and she turned to Darkstar gasped as she saw what was happening.

"No!" she called out running over to her, but it was too late. Darkstar's powers were consuming her, and she was burning her body out. It was literally disintegrating before her eyes.

"Help me!" called Darkstar, and Sabra knew the young woman couldn't stop the powers from doing this to her. She reached out to her, to try and help her somehow but by the time she was close enough, Darkstar screamed in pain and anguish and then she was gone.

All that remained was a mark on the ground where she'd been, leaving only a small gold ring with a diamond at the centre, a diamond that seemed to have lost its shine.

"God, no," said Sabra, tears falling involuntarily from her eyes and she looked up. The darkforce barrier was still there, but it had small gaps where once had been a totally opaque area and where it was whole, it seemed to be increasing in density.

The darkforce was raging out of control and before she could do anything, Sabra felt something hit her and she fell to the floor

"What the hell was that?" asked Maverick, and realised he had nobody there to answer

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that. X-Force were all separated and Excalibur were in other places. Something bad had just happened here, and he got the impression that if they'd been winning earlier they sure as hell weren't now. "EXCALIBUR!" he shouted. "FALL BACK!"

There was nothing else they could do but get to a position where they would be better able to defend from and hoped that they would survive this.

PROLOGUE

Once upon a time there was a man named Charles Xavier.

Xavier was a great man, full of ideals that were matched only by the intellect he possessed and used. He was a leader, a fighter, a gatherer of men. He knew the easy path and did not take it for if something is worth having it is worth doing right and to do that means it has to be difficult, for such a thing must be earned. His job was not made easier because he had the gift of telepathy at unimaginable levels and was therefore what is commonly called a mutant.

And that was the core of his ideals - that just because he and many like him were different, it did not mean they should not be accepted in to the rank and file of a burgeoning humanity.

However Xavier was not a fool, and he knew that there were people like him who did not share the same morality to these ideals. He knew that there was indeed a man who would stop at nothing to gain what he wanted and he knew that he had to oppose him, otherwise the wedge between homo-sapiens and homo-sapiens superior would never be bridged. The prime threat was a man called Magnus, known later as Magneto.

Xavier knew that to do this he would need more resources and he created a school, to teach and train mutants so that they could use their powers to benefit the world, and not threaten it. To show people that with great power such as they had, they could still be as normal as the next man. However he also taught that with these powers came a responsibility to look after humanity from threats they could not hope to comprehend and these people became known as the X-Men.

The dream that one race could live together without prejudice and segregation was one shared by many, as was the opposing view that one race should subjugate the other before they subjugated them. Xavier's followers grew, as did Magneto's and soon the former friends were mortal enemies and the lines were drawn. They fought often, and sometime allied together against a common foe, but in the end their ideals prevented their unity.

I have often wondered what would happen if the two forces came together? Could they truly achieve what was supposed to be an impossible task? If Magnus and Xavier had worked together, sharing the same views as each other and seeing the inherent strengths and weaknesses in each side how different would the world have been?

The answer was something nobody could have predicted, for while everyone looked at the positive side of the union, nobody stopped to consider the negative, for Xavier was forced to become more militant in his approach, while Magneto was forced to become more totalitarian in his and the gap between them grew ever wider.

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Magnus was a man filled with doubt and recrimination for lost family and family lost, with hatred against the ignorance of humanity at large and a desire for the fighting to end coupled with a passion to fight for his people. For a while Magnus saw the man he could have been and he knew he could not be that man now and it drove him to seclusion. If not for the actions of his fellow mutants he would not have returned to his former goals with one end - to rule, to control and thereby save the world.

Xavier was a man filled with regret over lost love, of the people who followed and died for his dream, taking each failure personally. He had lost his legs, the people he loved and he could see his dream slipping away, moment by moment due in part to a intolerant humanity and also due to the minority of mutants who used their powers for brutality, a brutality that even his X-Men could not stop for their resources were finite and he knew he could stop it all with his great power, but then he would be no better than those he opposed.

Each man was pushed to the edge and a wounded and hounded Magnus who was trying to save his people lashed out at the X-Man called Wolverine and used his magnetic powers to remove the metal called adamantium from Wolverine's skeleton, and almost killed him. Xavier had seen too many die because he had not acted and he lashed out with his power and took away Magnus's mind.

However to take means to keep and Xavier took it all, the good and evil both and kept it within himself. This one act cost Xavier dearly and created the greatest threat to humanity he had ever known - himself.

The darkness within each man meshed and outweighed the good. Xavier had long struggled with his powers for control lest his negative side escape and twice it had almost defeated him. Added to its power was the power of Magnus and it created a new entity called Onslaught. Onslaught took retribution on those who had hounded him, he tested his X-Men, the people of the planet and then revealed himself.

The devastation he wreaked on the planet was immense and it took the combined powers of the X-Men, the Avengers and the Fantastic Four to separate Xavier from the psionic creature he had created. Even then it took everything they had to stop Onslaught and then at the cost of the non-mutant heroes for a year. They should have died but they were saved by the reality warping powers of Franklin Richards, and his actions not only saved the heroes but preserved the aspect of Onslaught as well.

I know because I watched him from another reality, lay in host of the man called David Bruce Banner, and when the heroes returned Onslaught was gone. I had thought him trapped in the other reality, somehow, lost forever. I was wrong, for he survived and used the knowledge of Xavier and Magnus to prepare for his return. Research done at Xavier School for Gifted Youngsters as well as details gathered from the many years of working with and for the various law enforcement agencies ensured he would know where to go, where Onslaught could gain a host body.

The alien race known as the Gnobians had committed suicide many years ago, but

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Onslaught did not need a living specimen, just a body to host himself as his powers grew and he watched, waited as his strength grew and prepared. As he did so, he gathered an army of empathic warriors, who were gifted their powers from the properties of a local spring, a theory put to Xavier years ago but never proven.

While he did this, he used the alien technology his host body knew of to try and pinpoint the possibilities of using the x-gene that gave mutants their abilities and the scientific skill of an age to gift powers to the powerless. The part of him that was Magneto ensured that he would be a ruthless and efficient leader. In this way he could build a world of Infinities, and the dreams of Xavier and Magnus would be fulfilled. However, Onslaught was not prepared for the resistance he has met and has been forced to play his hand too soon, and has been met by his greatest challenge yet - The Shadow King.

Onslaught is a being of destiny, and my role was once to herald the beings of destiny and ensure that the Path was sacred. I used the Champion of the Path to face the first herald of Onslaught, along with his comrades in arms for Onslaught used me at the time. Through his powers he had learnt of me and I could not openly resist. I had thought I had done enough once before to beat him, exposing him and his secrets. I thought I had secured the fate of the world and ensured that Onslaught was no more. The price would have been high, but it would have been worth it.

Now I may have created something even worse. My name is Gateway and I have failed.

Excalibur #9 - Last Rites - Death in Greece, Finale

Colonel George Washington Bridge ran through the corridors of the mountain complex, shooting anyone who got in his way. He wasn't in the mood to argue.

He'd been out of contact with his team for a while now and there was a gnawing in his gut as to what was happening. The Darkforce barrier was raging out of control, with gaps appearing and the barrier altering in size every moment. It didn't bode well for Darkstar, and in turn for Sabra who was with her. He hoped Tsunami was able to handle whatever was going on and help the two women.

Inside the complex was something else. He only had a few active operatives in there and even with the X-Force people they were outnumbered, which meant he got them and they got out before it all went to hell. Fury was confronting the Supreme Commando, as he had done once long ago. Bridge had to admire the all or nothing gambit his boss was taking and as he moved through the place he remembered similar times, long ago, when he worked with Cable on his Six Pack squad.

He just hoped it didn't all go as badly wrong now as it had done then.

The commando's were surprised to see him as he moved through them, thanks to the psionic blockers designed by SHIELD and it gave him the edge he needed. Plus they weren't as focused as a fighting unit which meant that they didn't have anyone giving them orders from on high, so Bridge figured that Fury was doing what he could to help. Bridge knew the basic layout from his time here as Armory so he had a vague idea of where he was going.

If he had any doubts, they were dispelled by the sounds of gunfire and the fact his head was hurting. A sonic attack if he were any judge, which meant that Teresa Rourke of X-Force still had her powers. She didn't have the skill of her father Banshee, but he'd been doing it much longer than she had and he knew that she had potential.

"Hang on, people, the cavalry's comin'!"

"Aw, crap," said John walker as he fired his gun one last time and he turned to Maverick. "I'm out."

"We knew it was coming, Agent," said Maverick. "We're low on shots as well. Jack, what about you?"

"The energy packs are almost exhausted, Lieutenant," replied Rock. "Siryn's keeping them back for now, but we're going to have to get up close soon enough."

"Kitty?" asked Maverick. She was nowhere near her best after only just surviving the explosion earlier, but she was in there with them to the end.

"Guess we're going to have to go for it, Mav," she said. "For what it's worth, it's been good knowing you."

"Likewise," said Maverick. "I just hope Logan's not too busy to come down here and enact some vengeance on our behalf." Kitty chuckled and looked at him, and he looked back. "Let's do thi..." There was a small explosion above them and a piece of glass hit his left cheek. "What the hell?"

"A light just exploded," said Kitty. Then there was another. "You noticed how warm it is in here?"

"I thought it was because we were working hard," said USAgent.

"Savitar," said Rock. "He's heating it up in here."

"The filaments overheat, the lights explode, we get our powers back," said Maverick. He'd wanted to shoot them earlier but they'd not had chance. "Jack, you and Terry... Jesus, I'm an idiot!"

"You confessing your sins?" asked USAgent.

"Not yet," said North. "TERRY!"

"Yes?" said Siryn breaking off her attack.

"Use your powers and break the lights in this place, I want my fucking powers back."

"Excuse me," said Agent. "Without lights, we're blind."

"With them, we're certainly dead," said Maverick, not mentioning the fact that his face mask had various visual modes to it, one of which was night-vision. "Besides we're all trained fighters. Working in near dark shouldn't be a problem. Especially with the tools we have." He referred to Kitty's skills as a ninja, Siryn's sonic powers acting as a radar, Agent's energy shield and he didn't doubt for a moment that Union Jack had a light source of some sort. That left Hauptmann, but he was out there battering as many people as he could find. "Do it, Terry."

Siryn complied and unleashed her voice, screaming long and hard shattering everything glass in the immediate area and in a moment the lights went out and she surged outside, covered by Rock and ensured the lights out there were taken out as well. It was a good job they'd been weakened by the rising temperature otherwise

"Right," said Maverick, ensuring his mask was on and not been affected by Siryn's scream. He could see in the dark well enough, plus his fists were starting to glow with the stored kinetic energy just waiting to be released which also gave the area some light. "Ladies and gentlemen, light 'em up." USAgent activated his energy shield, Rock pulled an energy blade from his belt, Hauptmann cracked his knuckles and Shadowcat prepared herself for the fight, shifting to her intangible state. "DEATH OR GLORY!"

And the heroes raced to join the awaiting throng.

On the astral plane, two figures of immense psionic power faced off against each other.

"You were a fool to challenge me, Farouk."

"You were a fool to come back, Onslaught."

The Shadow King stared down his opponent, the mental symbiosis of Charles Xavier and Magento, that thanks to Xavier's powers, had gained a sentience of its own. He had once heard a rumour that every telepath had a dark side, a force of negativity within them that allowed them to use their power and act in ways their waking selves would never contemplate. It was certainly true in the case of Xavier, for he had always had a dark side within him, waiting to be set free.

Farouk had seen it in their first conflict and that was why he had allowed Xavier to believe he was beaten. He had not been ready to confront that force. Now he was.

Onslaught, though, was not the being he had once been. His vast power had been unleashed when the heroes of the world had destroyed his physical form allowing him to become pure psionic energy. The heroes had then absorbed that energy and let the X-Men attack them.

The heroes had survived, as had Onslaught but he was not as powerful as he had been, otherwise the world would have known about him long before now. The Shadow King knew this problem, well, for he had been forced to rebuild as well, for he too had no host body to call his own and ensure that his power was housed and could not be stolen. Onslaught had worked hard to gain an army and his control over his people was great and it had allowed them to make incredible advances in Greece, but he had been forced to recall all his power for this fight.

As had the Shadow King.

The odds were even and it would be a battle of psionic skill that determined who won this, and Farouk smiled as they both manifested psionic armour around themselves. The armour of Onslaught was a version of his own, incorporating the basic design of Magneto's body armour.

"That's the problem with you, Charles. You never were very original in your visions."

"Don't call me Charles. Xavier is dead. Only Onslaught remains."

"Don't forget Magnus," said the Shadow King and the two psionic beings grappled with each other, wrestling across the astral plane, sending out shockwaves and tremors that could be felt by anyone and everyone with even the slightest psychic awareness and the psionic firmament shook.

Sabra felt blow after blow after blow after blow smashing down on her and at first she had tried to defend herself, to fight back, but there were too many of them and they were beating on her one after the other. She had tried to get up but her legs had refused to respond to her and she had fallen back on to the floor and given the mob an easy target.

It didn't help that her body was limp from the blow to the back of her head earlier, and her great strength seemed to have deserted her. She had other skills, but she couldn't get the concentration together to make use of it. She couldn't get it together and the boots hit her, fists smashed her, hands held her down touching her, feeling her, humiliating her and she couldn't fight back. She had fought many enemies over the years, and her powers had always helped her, but she had come to learn that it was not enough.

She felt small comfort in the fact they didn't want to take advantage of her weakened state like lesser, baser men might - they just wanted to hit her over and over again. She was bleeding and could taste the salt in her mouth. Her legs gave her stabbing pains and it hurt to breathe and she realised they had broken bones and the blows just kept on coming. She should have died before now from the attacks, but her powers had staved off death and were prolonging it.

They were going to keep beating her, kicking her until she eventually died.

The pain started to fade in the lower half of her body and she no longer felt the punches and kicks, though she could see them attacking through glazed eyes and she knew she was not far from death. She closed her eyes, pushed past the pain and started to mutter a small prayer to God, asking Him to forgive her for what she had done in her lifetime and took some comfort from knowing she would soon see Darkstar again.

A kick landed on her jaw, the boot shattering her lower face and as she slipped in to unconsciousness, she felt something soothing flow over her.

"LEAVE HER ALONE!" shouted Tsunami, who arrived on the scene of the savage beating, riding the crest of a wave and her anger erupted as the waters of the harbour lifted up in the form of a giant fist and swept in to the Commando's picking them up and dragging them back in to the waters, where Leyu ensured they would not surface.

She looked around for Darkstar and she was nowhere to be seen and it was as if she had simply disappeared and she dropped down to where Sabra was lying on the floor. Her body was broken and bruised, and she was breathing only lightly, and they had made one hell of a mess of her. It was not a pretty sight in any case, and while Leyu had not especially liked the woman, she was still someone on the team and in other circumstances this could have been her.

Her mind went back to the news she had received about her cousin, Mariko. Leyu had been at a private school in the mountains of Switzerland and had heard of the savage beating she had received at the hands of her husband, and the other battles she had been involved in against the Yakuza, the Hand and others. It had cost Mariko her life and Leyu had lost someone who had been like a sister to her. She'd blamed herself for not being there, that her powers could have made a difference, but her brother had pointed out that he had been there, Wolverine had been there, Gambit of the X-Men had been there, the Silver Samurai had been there and one more person would not have made a difference.

He had been right - what difference could she make? She was sent to Switzerland because she had never been needed and when she was needed she was too late.

"Not again," she said, looking at Sabra and wondering what the hell she could do. She was no medic and she knew that moving her was not something to be done lightly.

"I can help, Leyu," said a voice almost a whisper on the breeze and Tsunami turned to see who was there. Nobody. Was she hearing things?

"Leyu," said the voice again, stronger in tone and pitch with a faint trace of a Russian accent.

"Darkstar," said Leyu, standing and looking around, but she wasn't there. Something was not right here. "Where are you?"

"Right here," replied Darkstar and Leyu felt a hand on her shoulder, but there was nobody there.

"What happened to you?"

"I've become one with the darkforce," said Darkstar, a taint of fear in her voice at the potential of that comment. "I'm trying to control it, but it's a vast universe of power and I'm only able to give myself a partial physical presence just yet."

"We must help her," said Leyu, gesturing to the stricken Sabra.

"I know," said Darkstar, a strain entering in to her voice as a darkforce sphere surrounded Sabra and lifted her in to the sky. "I must... focus..." said Darkstar, "and get... her to safety..."

"What do I do?" asked Leyu, wanting to do something to avenge Sabra and maybe finally make a proper difference in the great scheme of things. "Give me something to do."

"Get our people out of here," said Darkstar. "I've lost... control of the barrier... and it will crush everything... within it very soon." Leyu's eyes went wide. This wasn't what she had expected to hear.

"I'm on it," said the young Asian woman and headed back where she had come from. They were running out of time.

Back inside the mountain complex, the Death's Head Commando's were clutching their heads in pain and were in complete disarray as the effects of the battle between Onslaught and the Shadow King struck them, as if they were being hit by hammers in the centre of their minds.

The assembled heroes took the opportunity with relish and struck hard and faced, striking wounding and killing where necessary to stop the enemy from overwhelming them. Maverick enjoyed cutting loose with his kinetic blasts, felling his enemies left and right, while the others were getting up close and personal with the Commando's. They were hardly fighting back and Maverick didn't know why and he didn't care.

Someone was looking after them and that was good enough for him.

Shadowcat struck hard and fast, maintaining her ethereal state long enough to avoid the enemy and stray fire, but becoming solid and ensuring that the training she had been given as an X-Man, as a student of Ogun and Logan, as well as by SHIELD was put

to good use. She was amazing to watch in action and it was hard to believe she was as young as she was. Maverick had known veterans with less skill than this young woman and he could see why wisdom had loved her so.

USAgent was different in style but no less effective. He was a fighter, a brawler who got the job done. He used the energy shield as a weapon, more a club than a projectile as Captain America would have done. There was a brutality to what he did that he seemed to enjoy and Maverick had to admit he was good at what he did, though a bit more discipline might help. Unlike the Union Jack.

He was acrobatic, graceful and swift. He floated like a bird and stung like a bee, and there was definite training there. He placed his punches, his jabs and only used the knife if he had to. Whoever had taught him, they'd taught him well and Maverick would like to meet the person behind the new Union Jack, because he suspected he'd have quite an ally there.

Hauptmann was also a joy to watch. There was a man who was confident in not only himself but the people he worked with and it was something you learnt from birth. Maverick would never admit it to anyone else, but he did feel lonely in his exile from Germany, but he knew that he couldn't go back there. His crimes had been severe and he had been punished for them. He hadn't remembered them at first, but he knew now and it shamed him. Germany could have such a group of heroes if they let themselves. Himself, Hauptmann, Nightcrawler... He sighed and got on with his job, thinking it was easy to reminisce when all of a sudden this had become too easy.

Then he saw someone coming from the other side, shooting at the enemy as well.

"Who the hell?" he muttered and fired a shot in that direction, ensuring he'd miss whomever was over there, but lighting it up so he could see a face. "Bridge?"

"There's no damn lights here!" shouted the Colonel. "Good job these idiots have lost the plot, 'cause I can't see a thing!"

"Nice to see you getting your hands dirty at last, Bridge!" called USAgent. "No more hiding behind a suit of armour?"

"Screw you," said Bridge. "We're getting out of here!"

"What's happening?" asked Maverick.

"Damned if I know," said Bridge. "The darkforce barriers raging out of control, Fury's gone for the Supreme Commando and we're leaving!"

"Works for me," said USAgent.

"Hellios!" said Union Jack. "He's back that way!"

"I'll get him," said Bridge. "You guys just get the hell out. That's an order."

"Yes, sir," said North. "Let's move, people!"

The United Nations building was in an uproar, and the Security Council were meeting to discuss what was happening to the planet, as world events spiralled out of control.

The alien invasion of the North America was underway and there was a terrible transformation effect on the people there. Even the President of the USA had succumbed to it and the alien Mig-Na'cha had a foothold on the planet. The Avengers, Thunderbolts and other heroes were fighting them, but there was little they could do.

In Greece, the war with the Death's Head Commando's was slowly being won, according to the reports. The Commando's were being routed on the Greek mainland by the SHIELD troops who had worked diligently and effortlessly to keep the terrorist armies at bay. There had been significant casualties on both sides and the island of Kalymnos looked as if it were about to be destroyed as well.

Speaking of SHIELD reports, there were also indications that another invading force had appeared from another dimension in the middle of Times Square, one of the last places to be free of the Mig-Na'cha infection. The Secretary General watched from his private viewing booth above the Security Council, and chuckled, wondering how the people of this other dimension would react on meeting a city with aliens surrounding it.

"What an interesting world this has become," he said, musing over the papers and reports on his desk.

Mutant terrorists were still running riot across the world, global violence was on the rise especially in terms of metahuman activity and there was fear, hatred and insecurity across the planet. Plus the Secretary General had his own reports that he was not inclined to share about the battle between the league of assassins called the Hand and a demon-inspired army over the fate of the Destroyer.

However, he was unconcerned about that, as he was unconcerned about the battle between the Shadow King and Onslaught, or the machinations of En Sabah Nur. It was all working towards the greater goal and the rising was set to occur.

The Secretary General laughed at his private joke, and then reviewed the file on the man who would be the next Director of SHIELD. It was a good choice and one he knew he would be able to count on to do exactly what he wanted him to do. Let the crises burn themselves out as they would - in the end, this planet would be his and such matters would never occur again.

Tsunami found Savitar by the fallen form of Marcus Raven, who's ears were bleeding and psionic energy was coming from his eyes like a river, cascading around him.

"What's happening?" asked Tsunami.

"He cried out, clutching his head," said Neal as he looked at her. "It's as if there's something melting his brain or something..." He shook his head in disbelief. "I don't understand what's going on."

"War... in heaven..." muttered Raven.

"What did he say?" asked Tsunami.

"He keeps muttering it every now and then. It sounds like 'war in heaven' but I have no idea what that means."

"A battle between gods perhaps?" said Tsunami. "It's either that or he's delirious."

"What happened?" asked Neal, realising that she shouldn't be here. "You got sent to help the others?"

"Too late," said Leyu and explained what had happened and how they were all going to die if they didn't get out of there very soon. Neal looked up and he could see the darkforce barrier was touching the tops of the mountains.

"We have to get them out of there," said Neal and closed his eyes, thinking of what Jim Hammond had taught him over the last few months and he focused his powers in to one tight beam of energy and punched a hole through the mountain. Leyu followed his lead, by manifesting water to cool the molten rock and steam filled the air. Then Neal fell to his knees and gasped for air. That had taken a lot out of him and he wasn't used to using his powers like that.

"Go," he said, waving Tsunami on. "Point them the way out." She nodded and went to get them, a voice in her head telling her that they'd listen to her in the future once she'd saved their lives. Nobody would dismiss her opinions again.

The battle of psionic strength had elevated from a physical battle of avatars to a battle of psionic power and the application of it's use, something that could only be limited by the imagination and will of the beings who battled, and with the mighty reputations of the Shadow King and Onslaught, the clash of titans lived up to its name as the duel continued.

Psionic bolt after psionic bolt slammed in to Farouk as Onslaught unleashed a barrage of power, drawing on the resources of the astral plane, but the Shadow King, took the bolts and drew them in to himself, growing in energy and stature.

"My powers have grown since last you saw them, Xavier," said Farouk and he threw the energy that he had gained back at Onslaught, hitting him square in the chest and burning through him. Onslaught cried out in anguish at being abused so and on the material plane the body of the Supreme Commando blackened and scorched, as Fury's had become bruised and battered from the barrage. Neither entities cared about their hosts and they could easily find another, for both of them had cheated death and proven that they did not need them to survive.

"An admirable ploy," said Onslaught, drawing on his own vast reserves and matching the size and scope of the Shadow King, "but I have capabilities you cannot hope to match."

"Do not delude yourself, Xavier." Onslaught's avatar darkened at that mention and Farouk felt a distinct shift in the creature's psionic aura. Something was not right.

"I have toyed with you long enough and you are now starting to annoy me." Onslaught's voice echoed around the Shadow King in a way it had not previously done, and Onslaught waved his hand and tore a gash through the astral plane, exposing it to the real world below. "I am a part of both realms, psionic and magnetic, a part of each firmament, separate and joined." Farouk felt himself being pulled, torn from the astral plane and forced to exist on both planes as once.

"This is not possible," said the Shadow King, struggling against the power of Onslaught, fighting to remain in one place at once, for he did not have the power or experience of fighting on two realms as his opponent did and he would not stand a chance against him if the fight was taken to Onslaught's arena..

"Yet it is happening," laughed Onslaught, delighting in the advantage he had finally gained over the Shadow King. "You cannot hope to best me, for I am as far above you as you are above him." He gestured to Fury.

"I will not permit this," said Farouk and anchored himself in the astral plane, holding firm as the twin forces of nature assaulted him. He looked Onslaught in the eye. "You will not do this."

"You cannot hope to prevent it," replied the entity and unleashed another psionic barrage against his enemy. "Behold my mighty hand!"

Niko Hrisalis awoke and looked up. It was dark, and the smell of burnt flesh and charred metal were in the air. There were also the sounds of battle outside and he tried to stand, before remembering he was in very bad shape. His head pounded and his arms and legs felt like lead but he focused himself and stood anyway, holding on to the medical bed he had been laid on for support.

He remembered being attacked, being experimented on and watching as some doctor siphoned off his blood and using it to create a serum of some kind. Then he'd passed out and the next thing he knew he was with a young woman in SHIELD dress and he'd gone to find his attackers.

It hadn't been the smartest thing to do, but the formula in his body had allowed him to push the limits and he'd gotten in to a fight and for a moment or two he had felt better. Until the desire to throw up came over him and someone had blindsided him in his moment of weakness. Now he was here and he didn't know what the hell was happening.

His pulse was racing and his breathing was ragged, but there was nobody about. Had they left him? If they had why had they done so? He was Hellios, his powers were supreme. His strength was incredible, his body strong as steel, his speed incredible and he could fly, as well as fire energy blasts. But it was dependant on the serum in his system, he knew that. He had lost much of it, and he had used what little had been left. He needed another dose and the labs were far away from here.

"No," Niko whispered. "I am Hellios. I shall not be denied." He pushed past the pain and light flared from his eyes, the last remaining vestiges of solar energy within his cells. As long as there was blood in him to keep him alive he could use the

powers. Yes, there would be a price to this, but he had to defend his country, his home. Light shone from his eyes, illuminating the area and he rose in to the air, hovering more than flying but it negated the need to walk. Pain shot through him as he moved forward, but he worked past it and even then it was slow going.

"Hellios!" called a voice as he made it out of the room and Hellios looked in the area it had come from.

"Bridge?" he said, in disbelief. Not the armoured version that accompanied the Excalibur unit, but the man himself. "You've more guts than I imagined."

"Stole my line, Hrisalis," said his commander. "We're evacuating before this whole place is destroyed."

"And you came back for me?" said Hellios. The animosity between the two of them was no secret.

"I don't leave my men behind," said Bridge. "Never have, never will, and like it or not, you're one of my people."

"Fine," said Hellios, looking at him. "That a grenade?"

"Yeah..."

"Throw it in that room and run," said Hellios, thinking that if there were even a possibility that the serum could be used by others then it had to be removed. His duty must be done.

"What about you?"

"You've read my file, Bridge. I'm invulnerable," said Hellios, wondering how much he could take. He could see Bridge's doubt in his eyes. "Trust me, this needs to be done."

"Fine," said GW. "You want the honours?"

Hellios smiled as he took the sphere, pulled the pin and threw it in the bay. Both men turned and moved as quickly as they could and then the grenade exploded and both men were thrown forward by the blast.

"Ow..." muttered Bridge as he picked himself up. His blocker was trashed, so if they ran across any Commandos who somehow managed to get themselves together they were screwed. "Hellios?" There was no answer, and Bridge looked about for him. He was lying on the floor, not moving. "Invulnerable, my ass." He picked the man up, threw over his shoulder and went back the way he'd come.

"This way!" called Tsunami as she met the evacuating members of X-Force and Excalibur. "There's a way out but we have to hurry!" The very mountain was shaking as the darkforce began to enclose the area it had once protected, crushing everything in it's path.

"What the hell is going on out there?" asked USAgent.

"Darkstar's lost control," said Tsunami. "The whole place is going to be destroyed."

"Just when things can't get any worse," said Shadowcat, with a cough.

"Later, Kitty," said Maverick, as he made sure the team followed the young Asian woman out of the complex. This mission was one they just as soon forget, but to do that they had to be alive. Everyone was soon out of there and the various teams collapsed to the floor in exhaustion.

"We made it," said Siryn, closing her eyes and resting.

"Gonna sleep now," said Kitty, and Maverick turned his attention to her immediately.

"Jesus," he said, kneeling beside her. "She's got a fever and a half. I need help over here."

"North!" said Savitar, calling across. "Raven's in a bad way as well."

"Terry, see to Marcus," he said as Union Jack came across. "Know any first aid?"

"Essential thing to know as an inventor," replied Rock. "Best we can do is keep her alive until we get to the Helicarrier, though."

"She's got a strong will," said Maverick. "Besides, I don't fancy getting the shit kicked out of me by the X-Men if she dies." Terry came across.

"Marcus seems to be caught in the backlash of a psionic battle," she said. "Something bad's going on up there."

"Terrific," said Maverick. "He's going to live?"

"Yeah, but he's going to have on hell of a headache when it's over. David," she looked at him. "Someone's going to have to go in there and get him."

"Who?" asked Rock.

"Fury," said Maverick. "We can't afford to let him die in there."

"I need help over here!" shouted a voice and they turned to see Bridge carrying Hellios. "He's not breathing."

"I'm on it," said USAgent, as he picked himself up and headed over.

"David..." said Terry.

"I know," he snapped. Their numbers were depleted. X-Force weren't in a condition to go, and neither was the majority of Excalibur. There was one person though. "Jack, what's her name?"

"Leyu?"

"Thanks," said North. "Leyu!"

"What?" she said, annoyed at the summoning from someone who'd she just saved.

"I need you to go in there and get Colonel Fury," said Maverick. "You're the only one in any kind of condition to get him out of there before the whole damn mountain comes crashing down." Tsunami still looked unsure about why she should do it.

"Think of how it'll look when you save the Director of SHIELD," said Rock. "We're nothing compared to him."

"I'm on my way," she said with a smile and headed back inside. Bridge stopped her as she travelled.

"Take this," he said, passing her a small object. "It's a tracking device, and should lead you right to him." Tsunami nodded and entered the complex.

"Some people need to know there's a spotlight waiting," said Union Jack, to Maverick who was impressed at how he'd handled her. "I think I've finally got her figured out."

"Glad someone has," called out Bridge, and Rock chuckled. Then he had an idea...

Onslaught smiled as he watched the Shadow King dance to the tune he was playing.

It was like having a puppet, he was so predictable, just as he had always been. Farouk's ambitions had always exceeded his grasp because in the end he did not have the sheer power to back his claims. Every encounter he had ever had with him had always ended in Farouk's abject failure and defeat. However this time, the Shadow King would not escape, he would not come back and his power would become Onslaught's. He would absorb the Shadow King in to himself and become the undisputed master of the psionic universe.

The Shadow King was manifesting in the real world, not as an astral projection but as a physical creation and the stress of it was killing him. In the state he was in he had to stop fighting it and surrender to Onslaught, where upon the Shadow King would become subject to the telekinetic and electromagnetic tempest that was swirling in anticipation of it's target.

A psionic bolt of power struck the Shadow King on the astral plane one last time and it broke his resistance and he formed on both realities, divided and his perceptions fractured.

"This game is over, Farouk," said Onslaught and unleashed his tempest on the physical Shadow King as well as sending a psionic eruption of energy upon the astral form. The Shadow King didn't have the capacity to scream as the twin assaults struck him simultaneously and there was a massive explosion across the astral plane that echoed in to reality and when it was all over the Shadow King was gone. "At last," said Onslaught and focused his power to gather the fragmented consciousness of Farouk and bring it in to himself.

Except there was something wrong.

"What is this madness?" said Onslaught. He couldn't find any trace of Farouk on any plane. Then chilling laughter echoed around him and where had once been the physical and astral forms of the Shadow King, a mass appeared in human form. A blue mass, with glowing neon eyes and a vicious mouth open as the laughter echoed about him.

"So this is the power that is Onslaught?" said the Shadow King. "I was expecting so much more from you."

"This cannot be, you do not have this kind of power," said Onslaught as he unleashed another barrage at the Shadow King, which Farouk waved away with a casual flick of the wrist.

"Not at the last encounter with Charles Xavier, not the encounter you perceived from the memories of me in the timeline where Apocalypse ruled - though I will remember that world, and I will have my revenge on the High Lord."

"I will kill you with my bare hands," said Onslaught, and charged at his enemy who simply vanished and rematerialised elsewhere.

"You will never lay a hand on me, Onslaught," said the Shadow King. "Your original manifestation awoke me from my slumber as I recovered from my last defeat, and I saw what you could do and I watched, and I learnt." A sword appeared in his hand. "See how I manifest items from the astral plane as actual matter."

"A simple trick," said Onslaught and did the same.

"Yes, but you were not a part of Xavier when he learnt I was capable of this. He's dead and you are little more than a shade of who he once was, where I am the Shadow King." The sword materialised in Onslaught's chest and there was a massive release of psionic energy sent a tidal wave across the astral plane, which the Shadow King reached out with the last of his strength and stopped before it burnt out the minds of every telepath in existence and as it was the Death's Head Commando's were nothing more than burnt out husks.

"Goodbye, Xavier," said the Shadow King, and turned to see Tsunami standing before him, having just arrived.

"What are you?" she asked.

"Something you should not have seen," whispered the Shadow King and reached to her mind, but his strength was failing him and he could not make her forget.

"You are the creature that did this," she said looking at him, feeling the tendrils of his mind brush against hers.

"You will die, little girl," said the Shadow King and reached to her, as if to crush her within his grasp but she manifested a torrent of water that washed him back. The Shadow King realised that the electro-magnetic energy that had been unleashed had taken out the lights and given the young girl her powers back.

"Not at your hand, demon," she spat, as the water came back and gathered the battered form of Nick Fury and they headed out to the others.

"The little things in life," cursed the Shadow King, as he watched her go. How much she had seen he did not know, and this could undo everything he had worked hard to achieve over the last months, however he was weak from the battle and needed to rest, so he retreated his physical to the astral plane and from there sealed the gap Onslaught had created. He would deal with whatever happened from this, when it happened.

"We wait," said Bridge as he looked up at the darkforce barrier. They were in a very tight space now and they were lucky that there was a gap in the barrier they could hold off in.

"They're not comin' back," said USAgent, as they worked on Hellios. He wasn't breathing still and his pulse had stopped. "We've lost Darkstar, Hellios, Fury and Tsunami. Let's get the hell out of here."

"We wait," said Maverick, grabbing Agent's shoulder.

"Wanna back off?" asked Agent turning to face him.

"Wanna try me," said Maverick, staring him down, then both men grasped their heads.

"Give it a rest, will ye?" snapped Siryn. "Bleedin' men..."

"Ain't that the truth..." muttered Kitty. Siryn shook her head and saw the mountain start to crumble.

"The entrance!" she cried as the rocks started to cover as the barrier bore further down on the mountain and she, Maverick and Savitar unleashed their powers to keep the rocks clear, her powers shattering the stone, Maverick smashing them and Savitar melting them.

"They're coming," said Marcus, who was feeling a little better. Union Jack had taken the blocker from Bridge and fixed it to give Raven some protection from the psionic battle. It had allowed him to keep his sanity, though not prevent the pain in his head. All that remained now though was a dull throb and he was monitoring the mountain to see if he could reach them.

"Go," said Bridge and Hauptmann hurried across using his strength to clear the rocks the others had missed. It was still a problem for them to get out though.

"Give me Fury," he said to Tsunami, who was able to carry him on the crest of a wave, but the cavern was filling with water that had nowhere to go, penned in by the darkforce that was crushing the mountain. She did so, raising the water so Hauptmann could get him and he pulled Fury free and then she started to get out herself.

"LOOK OUT!" came a cry and she looked up to see the darkforce barrier above her and she scrambled to move from it's path but the rocks she was on slipped and she fell back in to the mountain as a mound of rocks cascaded about the entrance. Hauptmann started to dig, and was joined by Bridge, Maverick, Union Jack and USAgent but all that remained was her hand, fallen limply as thin trickles of water dribbled from minute gaps.

"It was full of water," said Hauptmann, his eyes wide. "Could her powers..."

"I don't know," said Bridge, as he pressed the codes on his retrieval device, hoping the gaps in the barrier would allow the Helicarrier to transport them out of there. His prayers were answered as they all started to vanish, but his eyes never left the limp hand exposed from the rock all the while.

Some distance away, a small aborigine man, gave a small nod of respect to them, considered the events that had transpired here, and then he too vanished as the darkforce engulfed the place.

EPILOGUE

Once upon a time there was a man named Charles Xavier.

Xavier was a great man, full of ideals that were matched only by the intellect he possessed and used. He was a leader, a fighter, a gatherer of men. He knew the easy path and did not take it for if something is worth having it is worth doing right and to do that means it has to be difficult, for such a thing must be earned.

To do what had to be done he created a group called the X-Men, and they begat other groups in his lifetime.

The New Mutants.

X-Factor.

Excalibur.

X-Force.

Generation X.

Each of these teams worked towards the vision of Xavier, that a world could live in peace with itself and that a dream worth having was worth fighting for. They fought, they suffered, they died and they sacrificed things that many would have refused to sacrifice - love, friendship, even family.

Then Xavier died and his dream altered to suit the mantles of those who inherited it. The X-Men became fragmented over policy. X-Force no longer had a role, Generation X became the teaching side of the dream and the other teams vanished in to obscurity, some to be relaunched with ideals as different to Xavier's dream as his was to Magneto's.

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Yet they too have suffered. They have lost. They fight for what they believe in and perhaps the ideals of Xavier, though not a major focus of what they do, are in their with them. I hope so.

I have worked against the dream. I have fought for the dream. I have suffered for the dream. I have become disenchanted by the dream. I have returned to the dream.

Charles Xavier was a great man, full of ideals that were matched only by the intellect he possessed and used. He was a leader, a fighter, a gatherer of men. He knew the easy path and did not take it for if something is worth having it is worth doing right and to do that means it has to be difficult, for such a thing must be earned. Now I must follow in his example, as the new Director of SHIELD.

I am a mystic, I am a mutant, I am the Maker.

My name is Forge.

Excalibur #10 - Losses

Aboard the SHIELD Helicarrier, just off the coast of Greece, above the Mediterranean, the HERMES teleportation system flared to life and the battered and bruised heroes of Excalibur and X-Force were met by a medical team, who tended straightaway to Hellios, Nick Fury and Shadowcat.

George Washington looked about and did a quick headcount of his team, and there was one notable absence. Tsunami hadn't returned with them. He had hoped she would have been brought aboard but the image of her limp hand exposed from the rock all the while they were being evacuated haunted him. He felt a hand on shoulder

"They didn't get her?" Union Jack spoke quietly, hardly able to believe they'd lost one of their own on their second mission.

"No," replied Bridge, softly. "She's gone."

"Damn," said Rock and his head dropped. Leyu Yoshida had been annoying and loud, but she had saved Nick Fury, she had saved all of them, and she had been drowned, a victim of her own powers in an enclosed area.

"With any justice," said USAgent, "the rock fall would have knocked her out. She wouldn't have suffered. I doubt she'd even have known."

"Little consolation," said Bridge, his imagination running riot of the young woman underwater, her hand trapped leaving her unable to flee and nowhere to dispel the water to, then entering her mouth and nose, leaving her unable to scream and knowing that in a moment she would be dead, and it would be slow and agonising. He shook it off, because he had to attend to the living first.

"Hellios?" he asked.

"Not good," said the medic. "There was no fuel left in his tank and his heart gave out. We're working on it though."

"Thank you," said Bridge and turned to see how Fury was doing, except he noticed the room had gained a large amount of agents.

"Forge?" Maverick was standing before the former X-Man and X-Factor agent, who was

standing there, dressed in a SHIELD uniform. Bridge instinctively didn't like this.

"Been a while, North," said Forge. "And I wish we could do this at some other time." He looked at the medics attending to Fury. "Is he awake?"

"Yes, sir," said one of them and Forge walked over.

"Colonel Nicholas Fury, I am placing you under arrest. The charges are treason, conspiring to pervert the course of justice, co-operating in a terrorist plot and attempted murder." Fury's jaw dropped and he had no reply such was his horror at what had just happened.

"What?" demanded both Bridge and Maverick at the same time, but for different reasons. Bridge was incensed at such a scandalous allegation, though he noticed that Maverick was more surprised by the timing rather than the announcement. What was going on here?

"We have evidence to support these charges," said Forge, "though I wish to God I didn't. As of 2200 hours, Fury's directorship was terminated. I am now in command of SHIELD."

"This is preposterous!" said Bridge. "I demand..."

"Leave it," said Maverick, standing in front of Bridge. "Like it or not we can't help him, not like this. Not yet." Out of the corner of his eye he could see Lydia standing, watching and waiting. "There's going to be questions asked of all of us."

"Agent North," said Forge, before Bridge could answer. "You and your team are to be checked out in medical bay 2, Excalibur are to report to bay 3. We've a lot of wounded, but your teams need to be treated for exposure to whatever they hit you with to suppress your mutant powers." He looked at the agents in the area. "Escort them please."

X-Force was led away, leaving them to wonder what kind of showdown there was going to be between Forge and Bridge.

"Now you wanted to say something, Agent Bridge?" said Forge. The medics kept doing what they were doing, despite really wanting to watch this. Hauptmann, Savitar, USAgent and Union Jack all stood behind the field leader.

"What kind of stunt are you pulling here, Forge," demanded Bridge, pulling himself

up to his full height and towering over Forge, who looked up. "These charges... are complete garbage, and you know it."

"No, they're not," said Forge. "Don't tell me - Fury told you there was a traitor in SHIELD and wanted you to keep an eye out for him. To... trust no-one?"

"Something like that," said Bridge, fully imagining the looks on the faces of his people.

"Cleverly diverting your attention from him and admitting to it at the same time," said Forge. "You were suckered, GW. Suckered by a man more powerful than you know."

"He's been framed?" said Union Jack.

"There is a possibility," admitted Forge.

"Then let him go," said Hauptmann.

"But there's no proof," snapped Forge. "Where as the evidence against Fury is damning."

"Nick, say something," said Bridge.

"Let it go, Bridge," said Fury, quietly. "Tend to your people. This is my problem, not yours."

"Is it true?" said Bridge, but Fury didn't answer. "Tell me!"

"Stand down, Agent!" said Forge, his voice quiet yet commanding. "Don't test me, Bridge, I'm really not in the mood."

"That's a shame because I am," said Bridge, venting his anger and grief on the most convenient target.

"Place Agent Bridge under arrest as well," said Forge. "A night in the brig should cool him off some." He looked over to the other members of Excalibur, who were looking lost as to this rapid turn of events. "If you have a problem with this

gentlemen, I will remind you that you are all guests on the Helicarrier. I can just as easily leave you in Greece."

"I think the UN would have a problem with that," said USAgent. "We answer to them, not you." He looked away from Forge to see Fury and Bridge being taken away.

"Then you can call them from Greece," said Forge. "Or you can stay and see to your injured colleagues."

"Colleagues?" asked Union Jack. "Helliios and...?"

"Sabra. She was brought aboard by Darkstar before we... lost her."

"What do you mean 'lost her'?" asked Hauptmann. "How do you lose a blond woman with that kind of power."

"When she's become one with the darkforce she wields," said Forge. "So you see, I really don't have time for this. Your choice, gentlemen."

"We'll stay," said Savitar, looking at the others, thinking that he needed the kind of treatment Excalibur would be getting to restore their mutant powers. "We've already lost one person today. Maybe we can help get Lanyia back."

"Thank you," said Forge and placed his hand on the brow of his head. It was going to be a long few days, and he had a lot to do. Welcome to SHIELD, he thought.

Bridge sat in his cell. He had eventually calmed down, but Fury was in the next cell and he needed to know what was going on here. He'd got some sleep but it was restless, with the voice of Leyu echoing in his mind about how he'd failed her and how he would have to face the fury of Sunfire.

He looked at the clock on the other side of the brig. Almost ten hours since he'd come back aboard the Helicarrier, and he realised he didn't know squat about the rest of his team.

However there was nothing he could do about that, not yet. However he did have something he could do.

"Nick." There was no reply.

"Nick," he said again. "You awake?"

"Yeah," answered Fury's voice. "Guess you wanna know if it's all true?"

"Wouldn't mind," said Bridge. "I'll back you one hundred per cent but I need to know what's going on, and how we can fight this thing."

"I'm beginnin' ta remember," said Fury, his voice tight. "It goes back a while, before Excalibur was formed. Before X-Force was formed. You know about Logan and the traitor deal?"

"Yeah, I remember the briefing on that," said Bridge. "Cut and dry case."

"I know," said Fury, "which was why I didn't like it and I did some looking in to it. I knew Logan was looking in to his past and what happened back in the war, an' I did some diggin' of my own. I turned up the info on the Shadow King and I put the pieces together from the events on Muir Isle a few years ago. Except on the way to Madripoor to get Logan and Tyger Tiger I remember feeling a voice in my head, tellin' me I was powerless to help my friend."

"This Shadow King?"

"Yeah. Telepath on the level of Xavier and maybe greater. He entered my head with ease an' there was nothin' I could do."

"You know how that sounds?"

"Yup," responded Fury. "Didn't work for Logan, won't work for me. I'm finished, GW. Too many enemies out there been waiting for a piece o' the old man. They'll use this to break me, all they needed was the opportunity."

"They haven't won, not yet," decided Bridge. "I'm not letting this go. There has to be a way out of this. Where is the Shadow King now?"

"Last I remember of his presence was in the mountain - yeah, he was part of me then, controllin' me. I saw him leave my body and take on the Supreme Commando and then I passed out. Ain't been back in my head since, so I figure he's either dead or badly depleted."

"In either case," sighed Bridge, "if he's not there, what can we do?"

"Damned if I know," said Fury, and Bridge closed his eyes, wondering how the hell they got out of this one. Fury had made him a Colonel after the first Excalibur mission, so that was something, though it might also incriminate him. The Shadow King was a clever being, that was certain.

"Bridge," said a voice and he opened his eyes to see Forge standing there.

"Forge," he said, the disdain in his voice evident.

"Let him out," said the SHIELD director to the guard, who pressed a button and let the energy bars down, allowing Bridge his freedom. "We got off on the wrong foot," said Forge. "I came to apologise."

"I'll let you know later if I accept it."

"Fair enough. Walk with me, Agent." He nodded to Fury on his way out and Bridge followed. "So you know, I don't like the case against Nick and as soon as I can arrange it, I'm going to get my best people on the job, but after the battle, we've had some serious casualties and we're short-staffed."

"You're going to help him?" said Bridge, warily.

"Of course," said Forge. "He's my friend as well, and has been an ally more than once to both the X-Men and X-Factor. We repay our debts."

"Look," said Bridge. "I don't like this, I'll admit that but I guess we're going to have to work together."

"As long as we both know where we stand," said Forge. "That's the good news. The bad is we lost Hellios."

"Shit," said Bridge and slammed his fist in to a bulkhead. "I lost four people..."

"Two," said Forge. "Sabra's still undergoing emergency treatment, but she'll live. The question is now if she'll walk. And Darkstar... let's just say I have calls in to the top minds on the planet. Henry McCoy, Reed Richards. She's become one with the darkforce, Bridge. We're working on a way of getting her back, because her control is sketchy at best."

"That's something, I suppose," said Bridge. "What happens now?"

"I meet with X-Force and discuss the next move against the Shadow King."

"I want in."

"Not a chance, Bridge. Your involvement in this is already being questioned and I can only keep them off you back for so long. If I were you, I'd go to the rest of Excalibur and see how they are coping and figure out what they do next. The team needs rebuilding."

"As does Armory."

"I know," said Forge, with a smile. "Let's just say that I'm working on that as well." Then he turned around and walked away, leaving Bridge to wonder what he meant.

Then he realised and he too smiled and went to look for the rest of Excalibur. They were dressed in SHIELD uniforms looking over the information about Darkstar, and Bridge felt a moment's pride. His people were all working together for the first real time and he knew these were good people.

"I don't care what's happened in wakanda, Jarvis," USAgent was saying to the image of the butler to the Avengers, "I need to speak to Hank Pym, as soon as possible. It's a matter of life and death. Look, just get him to contact me through SHIELD. I'm still a reserve Avenger and I need their help."

"Yes, sir," said Jarvis and the screen went black.

"Still no joy?" said Hauptmann.

"With the recent invasion and the deal in wakanda, apparently Hank has issues at the

moment," said Walker.

"Don't we all?" said Neal.

"Gentlemen," said Bridge.

"So they finally let you out?" said USAgent.

"Eventually," said Bridge. "What's going on?"

"We've been working on the Darkstar problem," said Rock. "We're looking for any kind of phenomenon like this before and how it was handled. So far there's been a few, but not with darkforce. The only thing close was the Dragon Lord in Madripoor but he wasn't transformed like Darkstar was."

"Hmm. He'd be in the vault..." muttered Bridge. "Perhaps we can speak with him."

"Already got Jim Hammond on that," said Neal. "He's glad to help."

"Good," said Bridge. "Then we..." An alarm sounded aboard the Helicarrier. "Fury..." muttered Bridge. Instinct told him what was going on. "Stay here, I'll sort this," he told the others and ran back to the brig. Fury was not there and the guard was out cold. "Rookie..."

Bridge ran through the corridors to the HERMES system control room and he saw the override trigger device was missing and he opened the viewing to the main ignition chamber below. He wasn't inside yet, so they had time and he pressed the comm. panel

"Bridge to Forge."

"Go ahead, Bridge."

"Fury's going to use the HERMES system. How do I stop him?"

"Type in the commands, exactly as I tell you," said Forge and Bridge could see the door of the chamber opening. "1... F... 9... B... B... 5... X... 3... 6... 7... A... Execute." Bridge hit the firing button to shut down the system, but an error message

flashed up.

"Code not recognised!" said Bridge.

"I cancelled his codes myself," said Forge, the urgency in his voice. "He couldn't have..." Fury was making his way inside. "There's nothing we can do!" Forge said after a second. "Damn it." Bridge pressed the button on the panel to open a channel between the control room and the ignition chamber to try and stop Nick from escaping.

"Please, Colonel..." said Maverick's voice before Bridge could say anything, but Fury didn't stop or perhaps couldn't and Bridge knew that David North was out of choices. Maverick fired his gun and the shot hit Fury square in the chest, the bullet entering his body and throwing him back in to the room. It was over, and Bridge turned away but a cry forced him to look back.

"NO!" shouted Maverick as Fury's finger pressed the button on the override trigger device and the firing sequence started. "STOP HIM!" Maverick commanded and Bridge looked on as the agents started to fire, to try and stop the system from working but all they did was wreck the system and when the sparks stopped flying, Fury was gone.

"What's happening?" came Forge's voice.

"Fury's gone," said Bridge. "If he survived being shot."

"I see," said Forge. "You tried, Colonel. I'll speak to you later."

"Yes, sir," said Bridge. Fury's escape had ruined the man. No matter what happened now, Fury would be viewed as a criminal and traitor and they had lost. Bridge wandered back to Excalibur and told them of what had happened.

"It's out of our hands, now," said Hauptmann. "Let's hope Forge is as good a man as he claims to be."

"Yeah," said Bridge. "So do I. Darkstar?"

"There may be a way," said Rock. "The darkforce dimension is where the users of darkforce get their energies. What if that is where she is right now?"

"Is that possible?" asked Bridge, his knowledge of such things was limited but he did know dimensional travel was not that easy.

"Yeah," said USAgent. "There's a mutant called Cloak who was able to do so, but I've not heard much from him in years. But it is possible."

"We're going to need help on this one," said Forge who was now standing in the doorway.

"What do you suggest?" asked Bridge.

"We visit a doctor, you and I," said Forge. "We'll be in New York shortly, and there's a man in Greenwich."

"What do we do while you're gone?" asked USAgent. "Twiddle our thumbs?"

"No," said Forge. "You gentlemen will be working with Reed Richards on finding a way to protect yourself in the darkforce dimension. If one man can help you, it's Doctor Richards."

"So which Doctor are we visiting?" asked Bridge.

"Doctor Strange." Forge looked at him. "I just hope he's home..."

At the United Nations headquarters, the Secretary General read the information he had been sent on the Fury situation. The Shadow King still had some power left, he mused, and now Fury was in his thrall. Excellent, he smiled as he thought about it.

The effects of the alien invasion had been reversed but it had also given him something special, something the Mig-Na'cha had never contemplated. The time was coming and soon there would be a reckoning, but there was not the correct alignment yet. Much needed to happen first and the world was not yet ready but when it was ready the combined forces of every hero on the planet would be unable to stop it.

It was just a matter of time.

Excalibur #11

"Yes?" said the small oriental gentleman who answered the door of the house on 177a Bleeker Street, in Greenwich Village, New York.

"Good afternoon, Wong," said Forge. "Is Stephen at home?"

"Ah, Forge, forgive me, I did not recognise you at first. Please come in."

"Many thanks," replied the SHIELD director. "This is George Washington Bridge, he works for me and it is on his behalf I've come to speak to Stephen."

"Ah yes, I know the name," said Wong. "I shall inform Doctor Strange of your arrival."

"Thank you," and the two men watched as the manservant walked away and up the stairs.

"Doesn't the Doctor know we're already here?" asked Bridge

"Quite probably," said Forge, "but it's polite to ask." The two men stood in the hallway of what was a rather nondescript building to look at but what was in reality anything but. The building was built on a focal point where many magical rituals had been performed and Forge could feel the power in the building calling to the shaman in his soul.

This was a place he had visited on several occasions and he had always been impressed by the Sanctum Sanctorum of the Master of the Mystic Arts. This house had been destroyed and moved and altered and Forge knew that the Sorcerer Supreme had paid the price time and again for the life he worked on.

"My dear Forge," said the Doctor as he came down the stairs.

"Stephen," said Forge and the two men shook hands.

"And this must be Colonel Bridge."

"I am," replied the field leader of Excalibur.

"I wish this were under better circumstances, my friend," said Forge, as Strange led them in to his lounge. "I suspect you know why I am here."

"Yes," said Stephen. "Darkstar. I felt the disturbance to the planet when it happened and Laynia Petrova was the main suspect. I had hoped it was not what I thought, however..."

"The island of Kalymnos is gone, destroyed," said Bridge.

"Not totally," said Strange as Wong brought them tea. "Thank you, Wong."

"If Darkstar has become one with the darkforce then I need to find a way of getting her back."

"I don't even know if that is possible," said Stephen. "She may have become an actual part of the darkforce dimension itself, and if that is the case we may not be able to bring her back."

"We do know she was able to interact with our dimension," said Bridge, as he drank the tea. "She saved the life of one of my people. I've lost too many already because of one mission. I need to save her."

"Redemption is something to which I can relate. I will research this for you, Forge. I will let you know in twenty four hours whether I can help or not."

"Stephen, there is one other thing," said Forge. "I'm intending to go and find out how she is, if she is there. However I do not know of any incantations that would open a portal."

"That is because the only known one is held in the books of the Vishanti. There are a few people who know it, but less who will tell you of it. If I cannot help you bring her back, I can at least take you there."

"Thank you, Stephen."

"Not at all. Colonel Bridge, I am not inexperienced in the matters of the Darkforce Dimension. The problems some years ago were darkforce orientated and with the help

of many heroes, we were able to turn back the darkness. I will do everything I can."

"Thank you," said Bridge.

"Interesting," said Reed Richards as he looked over the proposals. Hauptmann, Savitar, Agent and Union Jack were over at the Baxter Building.

"Is there a way?"

"As you may be aware," said Reed, "there was a spate of darkforce problems, created by a man named Henrique Gallante. It involved many heroes, including the Avengers, X-Men, New Warriors, Spider-Man and the Fantastic Four, or more specifically Ben and Johnny. After the events I looked in to the Darkforce Dimension, in a figurative sense."

"What did you find?" asked Union Jack.

"I found out some basic scientific principles, but in all honesty not a great deal. Because the darkforce was being directed by a sentience person and was not actual living energy, it was not possible to determine if there was an actual defence against pure darkforce. In it's home dimension, the darkness is living and grants people on our dimension a portion of it's powers, similar to the way the Juggernaut draws power for the Ruby of Cytorrak."

"So it's basically a God?" asked Agent.

"No, it is beyond our definition of God. It would be the creator of God."

"And it has Darkstar," said Hauptmann.

"However," said Richards, "there may be a way - The neurosword of the Black Knight kept the darkforce at bay for a short while, as did the radiation powers of Firestar."

"Radiation?" asked Savitar.

"Yes," said Reed. "Powers akin to your own, if I'm right. I'd like to do some

tests."

"Certainly," said Savitar.

"May I watch?" asked Rock. "There may be a way of adapting my body armour."

"I have no objection," said Reed with a smile.

"I'm going to swing by Avengers Mansion," said USAgent. "See what they have in their files."

"Of course," said Reed. "However, be advised they have not had an easy time of late."

"Neither have we, Doctor Richards," said Hauptmann. "I'll go back to SHIELD."

The team had a game plan.

The Helicarrier had limped in to New York in the wee hours of the morning, battered and seriously damaged after the confrontation with the Destroyah. Yes, they had made some serious gains from the operation, which would please people and such, but Forge was not happy and it had taken him most of the morning to find out what was going on, creating schedules of repair and looking at what they could do to ensure this didn't happen again.

In fact he was furious that this had happened, and there was one man who bore the brunt of his anger. Gabe Jones.

"Mr Jones," said Forge as he sat behind his desk at Headquarters.

"Director."

"Let's play back our conversation from yesterday."

"Forge? We have a situation here. Dr. Demonicus has us captured, and his base is

pure adamantium. Godzilla is here, and a monster under Demonicus' control is killing him."

"Agent Jones, we have more situations at stake than yours. Greece is still recovering from the attack by the Death's Head Commando's. The United Nations is having major problems with Magneto and we're still not at full strength."

"I don't give a damn about Greece or Magneto! Listen, Forge, all of humanity could be at stake here! Get more men, get Excalibur, get the Avengers, get anybody. We need our most powerful forces here, and we need it now!"

"Excuse me, Agent Jones, we do not just call the Avengers. We do not just call Excalibur and we are low on men. You've been trained to handle these kinds of situations, I suggest you use the training."

"Listen Forge! I've been an agent a lot longer than you have! Perhaps when you have a few more missions under your belt, I'll respect ya like I do Fury! But right now, you're just some guy who the liberals in Washington gave a job to so the mutants will feel better!"

"Really? The Helicarrier will be with you shortly."

"That's better, Forge".

Forge stood up.

"Have you any idea of the trouble you are in, Agent Jones?"

"I stand by my decisions."

"So do I, and I will not tolerate insubordination and more than I will tolerate bigots in SHIELD. I may only be 'some guy who the liberals in Washington gave a job to so the mutants will feel better' but I'm in charge here. And you're fired."

"You can't do that to me," said Jones.

"I just did. You're off the, team, Mr Jones." He highlighted the Mister. "Next time, think before you shoot your mouth off. Get out of my sight." He turned away.

"I'll take this up with your superiors." Forge ignored him and heard the door to the office slam as Jones left. That left a bad taste in his mouth, but Forge was damned if he wasn't going to do everything he could to ensure that he used his position to run SHIELD better and make the world a bit more tolerant. Change your attitudes, or else. He felt more like Magneto, than Xavier.

"Oh, Charles," he said. Then he heard the door open and he turned to see Natasha Romanoff and stood from his chair. He was covering the ass of the idiot who'd told British Intelligence that they couldn't have her. Forge had punished that fool, but now he had to deal with Black Widow.

"Please, Miss Romanoff, have a seat," he gestured to the chair that Gabe Jones had just vacated.

"That's Romanov," she said as she moved over to the chair. Forge looked at her curiously, not quite understanding.

"Pardon me?"

"Romanov. With a 'v'."

"I'm sorry, Miss Romanov," he said, annoyed at himself for letting his tone sound sarcastic. The Gabe Jones incident was still grating on him and he tried to calm himself.

"No problem, Mister Vorge."

"Forge."

"Pardon me?"

"Forge. With an 'F'. And no Mister. Just Forge." That was mature he told himself and counted to five

"Oh. I'm so sorry...Forge."

"Ahem...anyway, Miss Romanov, what may I help you with?" Forge knew exactly what she

was going to say - almost word for word, and they both sat down.

"I would like to know," she said, her tone calmer than he had been expecting, "why when MI-5 put in a request to SHIELD for my help, they were told that you were 'unwilling to loan me out at this time'?"

Forge flexed his robotic hand and covered it with his own hand and rested his chin on his hands. "Well, you see...I had just gotten command of SHIELD, and felt it best that I get a handle on all our resources before I let any of them be used by outside agencies." He was lying to her. He didn't want to do that, but he didn't have a choice and he inwardly winced as her eyes narrowed. He could have phrased it better, he mused.

"Resources? Forge, let me explain something to you. I am a freelance agent. I work with SHIELD, not for SHIELD. Now, I don't even do that. I quit, Forge." She stood up and Forge knew he had lost this one but he had to try and he stood as well. She didn't work for them, so she couldn't quit. It was a tenuous argument to use, but it was the only one he could come up with.

"Wait, you can't qui-" but he wasn't going to get the chance to try as Natasha put her hand up and cut him off.

"I just did. From now on, if you need me, you can contact me here." She took a small card out and placed it on the table then she turned and began to leave, but she stopped a moment and looked back at him, raising a hope that this might leave the door open.

"Oh, yes...I just hope when the time comes that you need me I'll be able to 'loan' you my services. Good Day, Director." His hopes were dashed.

"Black widow, wait!" he called, but she was gone and he sat back down. "Shit."

"Not having a good day?" asked Bridge as he stood in the doorway.

"There are so many idiots in this organisation it defies belief."

"You get used to it. These idiots have been here a while." Bridge sighed.

"How did you do it?"

"Lurched from one crisis to the next until they removed me from the job," he said.

"Helpful," said Forge.

"There's a rumour you fired Gabe Jones."

"Yeah, I did. I won't tolerate bigotry, Bridge. 21st century, it's time people realised that."

"Good luck. You wanted to see me?"

"Yes, I spoke with Reed Richards this morning. He thinks he's found something that can help, thanks to Savitar and USAgent."

"It's hard to believe these people couldn't stand each other when they met."

"One of these day's I'll tell you tales about the X-Men," said Forge. "Agent got the schematics for a neuro weapon and Savitar's powers have properties that can keep the darkness at bay. We've a shot at getting her back."

"Great."

"It's not all good news. X-Force returned last night. It's Nick - we've lost him." Bridge's eyes flashed.

"Define lost."

"He's joined Hydra, as their field leader or something," Forge closed his eyes. "He's gone, and the next time we meet, he'll be trying to kill us."

"Jesus," said Bridge, going pale. "How much does he know?"

"Everything, except being in charge. I think. I'm not sure what they did to him." The info was sketchy at best, because of what had happened on the island. X-Force had been cleared for duty and they had the day off to recover. It would be good for them to relax.

"What happens now?" asked Bridge, softly. He could scarcely believe that his friend had been turned that easily.

"The United Nations has put a warrant out for his capture. It's dead or alive."

"They can't do that." Bridge knew the UN had limits to their orders.

"They did," said Forge. He had been stunned by the order as well as the swiftness that it had been given. "I thought you should hear this from me, rather than the grapevine."

"I appreciate it," said Bridge, gaining a measure of respect for Forge. The man was working hard and it wasn't going well for him, but he carried on anyway. "So what do you want me to do next?"

"Prep Excalibur. Richards will be here in about an hour and we'll go over the technology we'll use in the Darkness Dimension. The Armory suit is still out of action, but that's not a problem anyway - it couldn't have been adapted in time."

"Have you heard from Strange?" asked Bridge as he got up. The mission needed the powers and skills of the doctor.

"Not yet. Oh, and Bridge?"

"Yeah?" Bridge turned to look at his boss.

"When we're done we need to talk about replacements."

"Replacements?" He didn't understand.

"For Tsunami and Hellios."

"Ah," now he got it. He hadn't even thought that far ahead. They hadn't even got Leyu Yoshida's body back yet. "I'll give it some thought."

11.txt

"Thank you, GW." Bridge nodded and went down to the medical bay where Sabra was still in recovery. The doctors held out hope that she would be able to walk, and she did have sensation in her legs which was good. She just needed to gain her strength. Hauptmann was with her.

"Hi," he said as he entered the room.

"Sir," she said, but Bridge waved it away.

"GW."

"Ruth," she said.

"How are you feeling, Ruth?"

"Tired," she said. "And sore, but I am alive and that is something I didn't think would happen."

"I'm pleased you are," said GW. "Have you..."

"Heard? Yes. I'm so sorry. Please convey my condolences to their families."

"I will. I need Hauptmann, though. We're a go to get Darkstar."

"Good," said the German and he kissed Sabra on the cheek. "Stay well."

"Thank you, Jorge," she said. "GW." Bridge nodded and led Hauptmann out.

"Jorge?" he said.

"My name."

"I didn't know."

"You didn't ask."

"Fair point. I hear you did well yesterday, helped out with the Dr Demonicus situation."

"Yes," said Hauptmann. "I'm not as clever as the others, or connected, so I needed to do something."

"Good work, Jorge," said Bridge and put his hand on the German's back. "Let's see if we can keep it up."

In Greece, the Ministry of National Defence met to discuss the loss of their national hero.

"The loss of Nikos Hrisalis is a significant blow to our super soldier program," said the Minister. "The President is not pleased, especially as the invasion that occurred was what the program was supposed to prevent."

"There were flaws within the program," admitted the chief scientist. "However we have been able to modify the serum and we believe that we can synthesise it so that we can create up to a dozen super soldiers."

"A dozen?" said the Minister. "How much?"

"The same money we have now."

"Do it. Hellios will live again."

"Forge."

"Stephen," said Forge as he looked up. "Thank you."

"You may speak to soon," said Stephen. "It is possible to extract Darkstar from the
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dimension, but there is something occurring, something we may not be able to stop."

"What is it?" asked Forge.

"I have consulted my books, and used the mystic Eye of Agamotto to determine what is going on. Laynia Petrova has been chosen."

"Chosen?"

"Yes, you see the living darkness grants power to its users and Darkstar pushed herself beyond her natural limitations, invoking more power than she could control. She did not become one with the darkforce, she became part of it's dimension."

"She gave herself to the darkness..." said Forge, understanding.

"A living sacrifice," said Stephen. "A sacrifice that was accepted because the Darkforce Dimension is dying."

"How is that possible?"

"I am uncertain, but something has happened to the dimension and as it is a living entity, it is capable of death. It requires Darkstar to mate and give birth to a new darkforce dimension. Not in the way we perceive mating, but a merging of two beings to create another."

"Procreation, the way of life," said Forge, thinking back to his encounter with the Phalanx and how his powers had given him the ability to perceive them. "I assume that the new dimension would rise from the ashes of the old, which would take Laynia with it?"

"Yes, the natural order. This is not totally unprecedented, but the fact remains that if Laynia does not accept her fate, the darkforce dimension will cease to be."

"Does she have a choice?"

"Yes, she does. It is a question of knowing if she is aware of it, Forge."

11.txt

"Then we'll find out. Will you join us, Stephen?"

"Of course, but be advised that we will meet resistance in this endeavour," said Dr Strange and Forge stood up. It was time to get Excalibur and go to work.

National heroes taken from their home countries and forced to work together by the United Nations. Under the direction of SHIELD, they combat the greatest threats to the world and peace. They are...

EXCALIBUR

Issue #X

"Countries Meet"

by Brent Lambert

Based on ideas and concepts created by Dino Pollard and Paul A. Hahn



Forge



Armory



Darkstar



USAgent



Hauptmann, Union Jack, and US Agent entered into the office of Forge each of them unsure of why they had been called here in the first place. Their teammates were injured and they felt that was where they needed to be. Whatever Forge had in mind for them could surely be handled by a couple of S.H.I.E.L.D. agents.

"Glad to see you guys showed up. I understand times are stressful, but this mission I have for you is more important. If you haven't heard a group of Cuban scientists have developed a new powerful cancer-fighting group. The U.S., Russia, China, Japan, and the Cuban government are all meeting in Paris to discuss how the drug should be marketed. There is some controversy over the drug since it was tested on human subjects in a less than humane manner."

U.S. Agent cocked his head to the side and shrugged, "What does that have to do with us?"

"Be silent and you might find out," Union Jack said smiled at John. U.S. Agent's rashness and all out American rudeness fascinated and amused Pervical.

Forge coughed and continued on, "There is rumor that the meeting will be halted by a terrorist attack of some sort. We're not sure from whom or what so I want you three there to have both a S.H.I.E.L.D. presence and a super powered presence. We have also confirmed that the Foreigner and a group of his assassin's are part of the Chinese diplomat's entourage. I could simply allow Foreigner to handle any disturbance that might happen during the meeting, but that wouldn't look too good on

Sabra

me. Especially since everything is on such shaky ground these days."

"Consider us on this mission then. Any drug that could be as useful as you claim this one to be could benefit all nations and not just the ones at this meeting," Hauptmann said echoing the feelings of his teammates. Union Jack and U.S. Agent nodded in agreement.

Hauptmann



Savitar

Before Forge dismissed them U.S. Agent raised his hand and made an insightful comment, "I don't see how my country would attend this meeting considering our embargo with Cuba. Wouldn't this new cancer drug be included in it?"

"Honestly I'm not sure John. I'm pretty positive Cuba is going to want to be in control of this drug entirely considering it's pretty much a gold mine. Whatever the U.S. is doing there I'm sure they'll get what they want in the end. My people learned that well enough," Forge said dismissing the three heroes.

"So he teams all three of us together. Have any of you ever heard of the Three Stooges?" U.S. Agent asked Hauptmann and Union Jack. Pervical gave John a perplexed look and Hauptmann got a sudden glow in his expression.

"I watch that show all the time! Well, at least I use to when I first got here. I really don't have too much time for it these days," Hauptmann finished his appearance turning more somber at the thought of his teammates. Two of them had given there all for the cause and he would never forget them for it.

"Are you implying we are equivalent to these....Three Stooges?" Union Jack asked still slightly confused as to who these television characters were.

"Well, there are some slight differences. For one I wouldn't dream of hitting Hauptmann out of the blue. The guy makes Vin Diesel look like a pansy! And for another none of the Three Stooges were as good looking or as witty as me," U.S. Agent explained throwing in a bit of flattery to increase his already large ego.

"Then they must have been the ugliest blokes that have ever seen the face of the Earth. I'm quite glad I have no idea who they are. My eyes can only take so much," Union Jack replied. He enjoyed taking stabs at U.S. Agent whenever he could. In the end though it was all in good fun.

"Real funny, but I wonder how many girls you got with the name Pervical. What did you do man? Beat your Mom on the way out because you would have had to have done something incredibly horrible to get a name that bad," U.S. Agent teased.

Hauptmann feeling a little left out chimed in his own experience, "Actually I remember a meeting a boy named Nosmo, who was an American tourist, while I was in Germany. We talked for quite a bit since our fathers were old acquaintances. I asked him how he had gotten such a unique name and he told me his mother took the first few letters from the NO SMOKING sign in front of her as she gave birth."

First there was silence and all it took was the minor leaking of a giggle for all three to bust out in a roar of laughter. U.S. Agent had to sit down on bench because he was laughing so hard. Hauptmann was gasping for breath and Union Jack had tears coming down his eyes.

"Whoo wee!! That poor kid. His Mom must have been a real spontaneous person," U.S. Agent exclaimed.

"Indeed. Well, it's been fun guys, but I think we all have a mission to suit up for," Union Jack, always the voice of reason and order, reminded.

"Sure sure Jack. Spoilsport," John mumbled under his breath playfully as he left for his room.

Hauptmann walked into his room with a smile on his face. Pervical, John, and himself were bonding. The three were kindred spirits in a strange kind of way. Their bond would only grow stronger as time progressed. Hauptmann was glad to have found friendship on this team. Entering new and unfamiliar territory was a hard thing for Haputmann to do. Ever since he was a kid living with his older brother, Stan, things had been hard for him. That's why almost every accessory or decoration in his room reminded him of the past. Perhaps deep down the German was just greatly insecure. Maybe that's why none of his love relationships could last.

As Hauptmann put on his uniform he stared at the plaque his uncle had given. The letters engraved in it were bright silver letters and they said, "No matter how the wind howls the mountain cannot bow to it!"

He read those words everyday and tried to use it to motivate him to move forward with his life. Motivation was something Hauptmann needed to keep himself going. His older brother and his uncle were once

his motivations, but they were now gone. Both of them were taken away through tragic circumstances. Circumstances that he blamed himself for everyday. That was the way his grief was expressed; through blaming himself.

"Pull yourself together! This mission is important for me," Hauptmann said pulling his mask over his face. Ever since the mission in Greece the Excalibur member had been putting great pressure on himself to succeed and improve. Responsibility bared on his shoulders in Hauptmann's mind. He felt that he could have done more to help his teammates.

"I should have done more," Union Jack said to himself as he stared at a picture of his ex-wife and her sister. He had failed them too a long time ago just like he failed his teammates.

Pervical remembered well the night two very important people to him died. They had been poisoned by arsenic because they refused to have sex with a foreign drug lord. If only Pervical hadn't been late in picking them up for work the two would have never crossed paths with the criminal. He blamed himself for that every day. His heart would never recover.

That was the reason Pervical joined the hero biz. He first tracked down the drug lord and killed him with his bare hands. Then he took up his first identity of Darklark. That was before he became Union Jack. Back then he was more ruthless and he was ashamed of those days.

Excalibur was his way for atoning for his sins during those days. Ever since he took upon the mantle of Union Jack he's been redeeming himself because in his mind the only way to make up for something terrible was to do ten things spectacular.

"This should be a cup of tea," Union Jack said as he slipped his mask on. It felt a tad rough putting it on since he hadn't shaved in a while, but he didn't mind it too much. When he learned kickboxing in Brazil he found out that in any tough situation blocking out the pain was half the battle. Of course even that technique didn't work when he ate his Dad's beef stew. Even Baron Zemo would tremble at the sight of that.

Xu Zhongzi was supposed to be taking a vacation this weekend, but since the news of Cuba's new cancer drug came out the world has been scrambling to get dibs on it. The UN Secretary General had elected four

countries to meet with Cuba. Fortunately China was one of those countries, but unfortunately he was the diplomat his country chose to send. Of course they had given him harsh company as well. Ever since the terrorist group had attacked his government the Fallen Angels they've been on their guard when it came to everything. Add to that a rumor a terrorist attack of some sort was supposed to be taking place his country was even tenser.

"Don't look so worried. That's why your country hired me and my soldiers of fortune to protect you," Foreigner said as he placed his arm on the diplomat's shoulder.

"Believe me I'm not worried about an attack happening. In fact what I'm worried about is your involvement in all of this. I'd much rather be going at this solo," Xu said in his deeply Chinese accent. His displeasure with Foreigner was evident and he wanted it to be. Diplomacy was hard to accomplish with a group of armed assassins around him. What's next? Bringing in the Avengers for peace negotiations? Relying too much on the super powered world and the underworld would only lead to more problems.

"I sense my presence is not wanted here. That's fine with me Zhongzi because whether you want me here or not I'm getting paid. So I suggest you watch your step with me because I might just slip up and let whoever this terrorist is off you. Besides I'll have plenty of other jobs down the line," Foreigner said coolly collected. His face didn't twitch anger not even for a second. He was at work and you would be hard pressed to anger him on the job.

Xu was taken aback by Foreigner's comments, but continued on with his rant, "Believe me. As much as you would like to think you're untouchable my government will handle you as they please. China is far from weak Foreigner and you would do well to recognize it."

US Agent and Hauptmann could feel their bodies pressing against their seats as their Union Jack piloted plane took off from the S.H.I.E.L.D. Helicarrier. As the ultra powerful engines blasted the three away towards Paris, Hauptmann managed to grunt out, "So where you learn to fly Jack?"

"From my grandfather. He was a member of the British air force during World War II. One of the best pilots around if I say so myself. He had this little farm that I..."

"That's really lovely Jack, but can you slow the heck down! I can barely feel my balls here," US Agent barked.

"Once I get over the Azores then I'll slow it down a bit," Union Jack replied.

"Ass," John mumbled under his breath.

The Next Day (Paris)

A large man with a small mustache approached his seat and sat down. You could hear the leather suffocate as he did so. Around him were seated five other men. One was Xu Zhongzi, the representative of China. The other diplomats represented the countries of Cuba, Russia, and Japan. Obviously the large man was from the United States.

"Glad to see you could finally take the time to show up Mr. Argenetto," Zhongzi said to the American representative snidely.

"My limo was stuck in traffic. So can we get down to business," Mr. Argenetto said pulling out his briefcase.

"Of course. We've all been waiting long enough. As the representative of Cuba let me begin with our what my leader Castro wants to see done with this drug. He's completely and entirely willing to trade with all the Asian and European companies as long as he gets a royalty fee of 45% for a period of ten years. The royalty fee will decrease five percent each year after that until it reaches 25%. My country is also willing to trade with the United States, but only under one condition. The trade embargo must be lifted!"

Mr. Argenetto tensed up a bit and replied to the diplomat's demand, "With the situation my country is currently in lifting the embargo would be an unpopular move and the administration doesn't need a bad image period. Though we are willing to pay a 80% royalty fee for a period of 12 years and have it decrease by 4% every year until it reaches 66%."

"No deal Mr. Argenetto! Either the United States lifts the embargo or you don't get the drug at all. My country will not yield on this," the Cuban representative said his face twisted with anger.

Xu Zhongzi pulled out a paper and handed it over to the Cuban representative as he said, "Japan, Russia, and China have worked out a gift for the country of Cuba if you allow the United States to receive this

drug with the embargo still standing. You'll receive a few older warships from Russia, older model planes from China, and fresh off the factory missiles from Japan if you allow the USA to receive this drug. Also all of our countries will share some black ops related technology with you if you only do as we ask."

Mr. Argenetto tensed up even more at the prospect of Cuba getting more weapons and more advanced technology. He wasn't even informed of this deal by any of the representatives. Why would they work so hard for the United States to get this miracle cancer drug?

"Fine my country will accept this, but only if the United States at least lifts the embargo on Cuban cigars," the Cuban representative said looking Mr. Argenetto's way.

"I believe that arrangement can work. After all the United States has been losing far too much potential money to Canada over Cuban cigars and considering the lagging economy the President can make bringing in Cuban cigars look real good," Mr. Argenetto replied.

"Good! Then a compromise has been reached. Now all we have to do is attend this Parisian ball tonight and we can all head home," Xu Zhongzi proclaimed.

"Not so fast Mr. Zhongzi!" a voice proclaimed from the back of the room. It was the villain known as Flagsmasher with his ULTIMATUM soldiers surrounding him. All of them were heavily armed except for Flagsmasher himself. All he had was a mace in his right hand.

From the other side of the room three security guards watched the events unfold in horror. "Nuts! I know this bozo. He's a fanatical terrorist alright!"

"I suggest we take off these holograms then," Union Jack whispered to US Agent as all three Excalibur members pressed on the center of their watches washing away the hologram.

"We have guests of the super variety," Flagsmasher smiled as he pointed all his soldiers in the direction of the Excalibur members.

"Who are you and what do you want?" Xu Zhongzi asked angered and outraged at what was taking place.

"I'm Flagsmasher and here to show you just how much diplomacy is bullshit! That's my purpose in life actually," the villain said directing all the diplomats to sit back in their seats. All of them did knowing that this

guy was deadly serious.

"Do you have any idea what you're talking about?! Diplomacy is the only thing that is keeping this world stable," Mr. Argenetto exclaimed.

"Perhaps, but then why was Russia planning on filling its old warships with a variety of viruses to send the country of Cuba into an epidemic. Oh you're all shocked now? But there's more! See the reason Russia was doing this because they had a deal with the United States that once the entire Cuban population was effectively wiped out the Russians could move in and make Cuba into a colony of sorts. Imperialism once again rears its ugly head!"

"Is this true? How could you?" the Cuban representative asked infuriated. The Russian representative did not care to look at the man while Mr. Argenetto was flabbergasted.

"I had no idea about this I swear! I only thought..."

"No time for apologies now Mr. Argenetto. The damage is irreparable," Flagsmasher said laughing inside at the turmoil all the diplomats were going through at the moment.

Meanwhile across the room the three Excalibur members were holding their own against the ULTIMATUM soldiers, but they were doing more dodging of bullets than anything else.

"As long as we sit here just dodging their fire we won't ever get to Flagsmasher! We've got to think of something," Union Jack said in mid-air as he knocked the weapon out of one of the ULTIMATUM soldier's hands.

"Too bad we don't have a bunch of S.H.I.E.L.D. agents to back us up," US Agent replied as he aimed his gun and shot an ULTIMATUM soldier in the arm and another in the leg.

All of a sudden about a dozen heavily armed men crashed through the skylight of the building landing right in the midst of the ULTIMATUM soldiers. One of them quickly mowed down about five of his foes with a rapid-fire rifle. He approached one of the Excalibur members saying, "You were the guys on T.V. during that whole Greece thing. I'm assuming S.H.I.E.L.D. sent you. I've never had the best of relations with them, but I'm sure glad for the help. The name's Foreigner."

"I believe we're grateful for your help more than you are for ours Foreigner. I never thought I'd get to meet the famous assassin. At least

not on good terms, but since you guys are here I need you to allow me to get to Flagsmasher. I think I'll be able to take him without too much violence," Hauptmann said. Foreigner nodded as he blazed another path for Hauptmann with a canister of tear gas.

The German man moved with grace through the mass of Foreigner's assassins and the ULTIMATUM soldiers to where Flagsmasher was talking to the diplomats. No harm had come to them, but then what was the whole point of this attack if the diplomats weren't going to get hurt.

"Stop right there," Hauptmann said blasting the mace out of Flagsmasher's hand and kicked the villain in the face sending him flying into an expensive painting.

"How dare you try and stop world peace?" Flagsmasher said as he arose from the broken pieces of wood that had made up the frame of the painting. He held out his hand and the mace Hauptmann had blasted away flew back into his hands. He charged at Hauptmann with his mace high into the air and as the weapon came down towards its target Hauptmann dodged out of the way. The result was a loud crash as the wooden floor gave way sending a splinter into the right eye of Flagsmasher. Struggling to ignore the pain Flagsmasher pulled his mace out of the floor and swung blindly. He hit nothing, but air.

"Peace through violence. I wonder where I've heard that before," Hauptmann said as he ran to the incapacitated Flagsmasher and punched in the stomach. The blow sent the terrorist to the floor reeling.

Through wheezing breath Flagsmasher said, "Separate nations only cause the human race and the planet harm. One nation is what I seek to achieve and the only way to achieve it is through violence. That's the only language some understand! My father was a messenger of a peace. A diplomat much like the ones I'm holding hostage now, but for all his hard work all he got was death!"

Hauptmann stopped dead in his tracks. His uncle had been a diplomat as well and was killed by a group of international thugs. He remembered the day well. His brother had taken him on a visit to Egypt to see their uncle. The days before his brother and uncle's death had been some of his best, but all that came to an end when the two were killed by a car bomb. Hauptmann could have easily been in that explosion too if not for the fact he delayed his entering the car for a few moments by buying a little homeless girl an apple. Kindness had saved him and Hauptmann hated himself for it.

For a while he hated the world much like Flagsmasher does now. He

could be right alongside this man if it wasn't for the fact his heart was mended by the love of a graceful woman. She had been his everything and she made into the man he is today. She molded him into Hauptmann.

"He who hesitates is lost!" Flagsmasher yelled as he leaped up and threw an uppercut at Hauptmann sending him into a vase.

Flagsmasher picked up his mace and threw it at the unconscious Hauptmann for the kill. Before the weapon could reach its target it was obliterated into pieces by a blast from the door of the conference room. There stood Forge, the director of S.H.I.E.L.D.

"Ahh the famous Forge! How nice of you to show up for my little get together! Isn't it sad that we're fighting one another when we should be standing side by side in battle? Our fathers would have liked it that way," Flagsmasher said hoping to pull on the heartstrings of Forge until his reinforcements arrived in a few minutes.

"Your father would be ashamed of you. He and my father were very close friends and never would he have expected you to become this! A terrorist and a fanatic? No, that's never what your father wanted for you," Forge said trying to keep Flagsmasher focused on him so he wouldn't attempt any escape.

"My father would understand my cause! Indeed he would be fighting for it! You and I may have been friends before you left for Vietnam, but don't think I'll let that stand in my way. I will achieve my goals!"

Forge sighed, "When I first found out about your little activities I was disheartened greatly. I couldn't understand why you would do such things, but it's over now my friend. S.H.I.E.L.D. has this base surrounded and we arrested a good deal of your troopers ten miles away from here. There's no way out!"

"It's never over! ULTIMATUM will arise...ARGHH!"

Flagsmasher fell to the floor with a loud thud. Over him stood Foreigner who had knocked the man over the head with his gun. "Now it's over," Foreigner said somberly. The battle had been a bloody one at least for ULTIMATUM.

S.H.I.E.L.D. Helicarrier (Two Days Later)

"Okay Forge tell me this. If you were going to send in a bunch of S.H.I.E.L.D. agents in anyway why did we get sent on the mission?" US Agent asked slightly annoyed at how things ended.

"I sent you all in because I didn't have the confirmation I needed yet to prove there was actually going to be a terrorist attack. And without that confirmation there was no way I would be allowed to send in a force that large so I sent you guys in as my back-up plan. Also I knew the Foreigner was going to be there and I didn't need a bloodbath happening. That usually tends to happen when he's around," Forge explained.

"I was reduced to being a back up plan! Man that sucks," US Agent proclaimed sliding down his chair a bit. Union Jack snickered, but Hauptmann remained silent.

"Is there something wrong Hauptmann? You've been pretty quiet ever since we came back from Paris. If you're worried about getting knocked out..."

"I could have been like him Forge. I could have been exactly like him," Hauptmann said getting up out of his chair and walking out of the room.

Fear pervaded every cell in his body, fear brought on by the lack of anything physical or sensual about him. All was black, all was dark, all was nothing. The lack of substance and terms of reference was driving him insane and it was all he could do to keep his mind from shutting down.

He could see the faces of all the people he had known as images entered his mind, as he tried to force himself to think of things to keep him going, but all he could see were pictures of those who had died in his service, under his command. People he had lost, and he would never see again and he wondered if he was crying because he had no sensations on his cheeks. He thought he was but he wasn't sure, and that was the one thing that bothered him the most - that he wasn't sure of what he was doing and he had spent a lifetime of being sure of his actions

He'd been in tough situations before but none like this and he could hear a voice in the back of his mind, speaking to him, taunting him with it's words telling him that he was a failure, that he had not accomplished everything. The disembodied voice seemed to know what he was thinking of and was using his thoughts against him, and he could feel himself reliving the recent events of his life, the formation of Excalibur, the battle against the Empress, the disbanding and subsequent reformation and the debacle in Greece.

The voice changed to laughter and he knew that all they had done and worked for was for nothing and that they had lost any chance of ever going home again with the death of Doctor Strange.

YES GEORGE WASHINGTON BRIDGE YOU WILL NEVER SEE YOUR HOME AGAIN

No, called Bridge, but it was too late and he could feel his mind shutting down. Must fight it, he tried to say but nothing happened and then his mind was as dark and empty as the world around him.

"You ready, GW?" asked Forge, as Bridge shook his head. Had he just imagined what had happened?

"Yeah," said Bridge, as he snapped on the harness connections. Reed Richards himself had designed them and Forge had worked on creating the devices that would offer the team protection in the Darkness Dimension. Strange had briefed the team on the problem - that the dimension was dying and it needed Laynia for the rebirth, but the rebirth would kill her. However if she did not go along with it the Darkforce Dimension would be gone and all those who used Darkforce powers would be rendered powerless. They had a difficult choice on their hands, but Bridge swore he wouldn't lose anyone else.

"Good," said the SHIELD Director, "because this is the most dangerous thing any of us have done."

"I would disagree, Forge," said Stephen Strange with a smile.

"Of course," said Forge, realising there were things that even he was unaware of in the universe and that Stephen Strange would have saved the world, the universe and possibility reality itself several times over. "Gentlemen?" he asked looking at USAgent, Hauptmann, Savitar and Union Jack.

"Let's do this," said walker. "There's a lady in distress, we've work to do."

"My sentiments exactly," said Rock. Hauptmann cracked his knuckles in readiness, and Savitar nodded. This wasn't something he had ever dreamed of dealing with. He wore a device, however Dr Richards didn't seem to think it was needed and that the radiation from his own body's mutant abilities would protect him. He wore the suit anyway.

Bridge shook his head, thinking he had lived this moment before, and that it was all happening again, though maybe he could change what was going on here. Dr Strange's hands moved through the air as he chanted something and Bridge failed to understand the words the second time as he had done the first, but he was as impressed as he had been before to see a patch of darkness open in the room, growing larger until it became a portal.

"We must hurry," said Strange.

"Two way portal, right?" said Bridge.

"Yes," said Strange. "An astute observation, Colonel." Bridge smiled and stepped through in to the darkness, followed by the others one at a time. He could feel the fear invading his body again as it had done when he had heard the voice in his head, and then the device kicked in, generating what Reed Richards had described as negative light. What that was exactly, he wasn't sure and he wasn't going to ask, but what it did was provide a light source in a place where no light should exist and he could see again. His hand went automatically to the neuro-weapon - an energy sword used by the Black Knight, formerly of the Avengers. He knew what was going to happen and he wanted to be ready.

"Now what?" asked Hauptmann. "I don't seem to have any kind of inertia. Are we floating or standing?"

"Damned if I know," said USAgent. "We could be upside down and never know it."

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"I can move," said Savitar, using his powers to push himself forward, by giving a thrust back. "The laws of physics seem to apply."

"For every action?" asked Union Jack, and kicked back. "Ah, it's almost like swimming."

"Interesting," said Strange. "I had wondered how people moved about here." Then he put his hand to his head as his brow creased.

"Stephen?" asked Forge.

"I can feel the Dimension calling out to us, to the intruders in his realm, through the Eye of Agamotto," the Master of the Mystic Arts answered. "It is worse than we realised - the Dimension is mad, driven insane by it's wounds and impending death."

"Oh terrific," said USAgent. "We're not just trespassing in a god, we're trespassing in a dying nutso god."

"What about Laynia?" asked Hauptmann as they all moved through the dimension, Strange and Savitar using their powers to move with an ease the others did not have. "Can you sense her presence, Doctor?"

"I can feel a consciousness," said the Doctor, "but I cannot probe too deeply otherwise the Dimension would know where we are and come after us."

"That's a cheery thought," said USAgent. "How is it our missions are never the easy ones?"

"Because that's not what Excalibur's about," said Forge, and then he looked at Bridge. "You're a rather taciturn. Problem?"

"No, just thinking about what happens next," said Bridge. "What if something goes wrong and what can be done about it."

"Very little, I suspect," said Forge. "But I'm not intending to die in here."

"There are worse things than death," said Bridge, remembering the fate that awaited Forge. He looked at them all and he saw what happened to them, how he was powerless

to do anything but watch until the device failed and he was cast in to the living darkness.

"..., don't you Bridge?" said a voice, shaking him from his thoughts, and he inwardly cursed himself. This wasn't like him, to dwell like this and if he'd lost people when he was on top of his game, then if he was off his game, he was going to be of no help to anyone.

"Yeah," he said, not knowing what he'd said yeah to.

"It's risky," said Forge, "but if Bridge agrees, then let's try it." What the hell have I just agreed to, Bridge wondered as they started to head in another direction.

"Something is amiss," said Strange and he focused his mystic senses. "We're heading in to a trap..." Bridge's heart leapt to his throat, this wasn't supposed to happen yet - somehow he'd changed things, it was different, which meant this wasn't memory as he'd suspected, but then again if things went as they had done so before.

"HELP!" They all turned to see USAgent struggling against something, shadow hands touching the device, trying to remove it.

"Not again," said Bridge, igniting his neuro-sword and throwing it, watching as the darkness recoiled from it. He hoped his aim was truer than it had been before, the last time he'd missed by a fraction and it had struck USAgent instead of just glancing his energy shield, and activating it. This time he made the shot, the shield flared to life and the adapted energy field struck the shadows and there was an unholy cry, as the others activated their blades.

"Good shot," said Forge.

"Yeah," said USAgent. "What if you'd missed?"

"Agent'd have been unconscious while the shadow hands ripped off the device and took you over," said Bridge.

"How do you manage to chill a place that's so cold already?" asked USAgent.

"Natural talent," chuckled Union Jack, then he felt the tugging at his own device. "Gentlemen..." he started, but the others were in trouble as well, except Savitar and Strange who were using their own abilities to keep the shadow hands at bay.

"Neal!" shouted Bridge. "wide spread flame burst!" Savitar nodded and let the radiation in his body generate and build and it released away from his skin by about a centimetre as flame which he then directed as a spread at Union Jack, the towards USAgent.

Rock was protected by his suit, Agent by his shield, the others were protected thanks to a spell from Strange and the shadows melted away.

"You're thinking fast," said Forge. "Maybe you should do the taciturn routine more often."

"Funny," said Bridge, and then noticed something. "Hauptmann..."

"You have got to be kidding me!" said USAgent. Hauptmann wasn't there. "HAUPTMANN!"

"HAUPTMANN!" shouted Rock, concerned for his friend. Bridge's earlier words had put doubt in their hearts.

"I can't sense him," said Strange. "I'm sorry."

"I'm getting a signal," said Forge.

"You put trackers on the devices," said Bridge, thinking that things had changed, because Forge had been the second to go after they lost Agent.

"Yes," said Forge. "It's tracking is over that way." He pointed and they went over to the device, which was damaged and no light came from it. "Damn," he said. "I should have considered that."

"It's not your fault, Forge," said Union Jack. "We all should have been more careful." Bridge said nothing, thinking that he should have done something, been more alert. He'd focused on Agent and let Hauptmann go.

LEAVE ME

Everyone looked about at that. Darkstar's voice had echoed and they had known it was her.

"Stephen?" asked Forge.

"Her physical form seems to be nearby," said Strange. "However that was part of the darkness itself. We may be too late."

"I don't accept that," said Bridge, suddenly. "If you lead us to her body, then we might find Hauptmann."

"And USAgent," said Savitar, quietly. "He's gone as well." The energy shield floated in the darkness, but of John Walker there was no trace.

"It's picking us off, one by one," muttered Forge. "Stephen is there anything you can do?"

"No," said the magician. "There is not, however I believe the Colonel had the right idea. If we find Darkstar's physical self, we may find the others as well. The darkness may give them to her."

"What for?"

"Food. The Dimension is a living entity, and as such it needs to consume things. It works on a different level to ourselves and will transfer the souls of people who should not be here in to itself, adding to it's strength. The bodies would be broken down in to inert matter and become one with the darkness."

"Do they feel themselves being digested?" asked Bridge quietly.

"I do not know," said Strange. "I've never spoken with, or found, a survivor."

"Let's go then," said Forge. "Lead the way, Doctor." Strange nodded and they took off to where Strange sensed Laynia's body to be. The light from the devices illuminated her, and Strange examined her.

PLEASE LEAVE ME THERE IS NOTHING YOU CAN DO

"No, Laynia," said Bridge. "We can't let you die, do you understand?"

I HAVE NO CHOICE BRIDGE, YOU MUST GO BEFORE YOU ARE ALL KILLED.

"Stephen?" asked Forge. "How is she?"

"Alive. It has not begun yet. I suspect the darkness may be too weak to begin."

"Unless he's using the others as his avatars," said Bridge, who had come closer to him.

"Interesting concept," said Strange. "In which case, we must be careful..." He didn't get to say anymore as suddenly Darkstar came to life and her hands gripped Strange's throat, but Bridge had been waiting for that, and he struck her as hard as he could, but there was no effect on her and he felt hands grab him from behind. He struck back with his elbow, praying that he was going to do the right thing, but he felt himself be lifted and he knew his attacker was Hauptmann, under the control of the darkness.

"SAVITAR!" he called, needing help, but Neal was unconscious and floating in the darkness, where USAgent was lit up by his residual energy. He could see the Agent looked like Hauptmann, there eyes gone and filled with darkness, the veins under their skins rippling as the darkness controlled them.

Forge was trying to fight off Darkstar, as Strange struggled for breath under her assault, and he knew he had little choice but to unleash the powers of the Eye of Agamotto and beat back the darkness with it's light. Then they heard the snap as Darkstar broke his neck, and Stephen Strange went limp in her hands.

"NO!" cried Bridge, seeing everything happen again. There was nothing he could do and he reached for his gun, a tear forming in his eye and he shot Hauptmann and the German's head shot back as the bullet entered his brain and Bridge was released. He turned to where Forge had been, knowing that the maker was the next to fall, as he was being attacked by USAgent, as Savitar was attacking Rock and.

"God forgive me," he said and he tried to shoot again, but something blocked his shot and he was forced to watch as Forge's device was stripped from him and he went in to the darkness, leaving just Union Jack, who was fighting Savitar with a fury as intense as the flames he was braving and then in a moment he too was gone, leaving Bridge alone, a shining beacon in the darkness.

I SAID YOU SHOULD LEAVE

Darkstar's voice echoed about him.

"We couldn't leave you," he said. "I couldn't leave you. I'd die trying to save you or any of my team."

AND NOW YOU WILL. I'M SORRY, COLONEL

He felt the brush of soft lips against his own and he felt himself fall back in to the darkness, as the light of the device faded leaving him alone, but he could feel the tendrils of darkness invade his body, but then depart and fear pervaded every cell in his body, fear brought on by the lack of anything physical or sensual about him. All was black, all was dark, all was nothing. The lack of substance and terms of reference was driving him insane and it was all he could do to keep his mind from shutting down.

He could see the faces of all the people he had known as images entered his mind, as he tried to force himself to think of things to keep him going, but all he could see were pictures of those who had died in his service, under his command. People he had lost, and he would never see again and he wondered if he was crying because he had no sensations on his cheeks. He thought he was but he wasn't sure, and that was the one thing that bothered him the most - that he wasn't sure of what he was doing and he had spent a lifetime of being sure of his actions

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YES GEORGE WASHINGTON BRIDGE YOU WILL NEVER SEE YOUR HOME AGAIN

No, called Bridge, but it was too late and he could feel his mind shutting down. Must fight it, he tried to say but nothing happened and then his mind was as dark and empty as the world around him.

"You ready, GW?" asked Forge, as Bridge shook his head. Had he just imagined what had happened?

RELEASE THEM! Darkstar demanded as she watched the members of Excalibur relive their own private hells, as they had done from the moment they entered the Darkness Dimension.

THE FOOLISH CREATURES WILL DIE AS I DIE. THEY SEEK TO THWART THE NATURAL ORDER, TO PREVENT THE REBIRTH.

THEY ARE DOING IT FOR ME.

THEN WE WILL ALL DIE TOGETHER. NOW CHILD OF DARKNESS, SURRENDER YOURSELF TO ME. YOU WILL GIVE BIRTH TO A DIMENSION, TO A NEW PLANE OF REALITY. BE HONOURED BY SUCH A BEQUEST.

She could feel the Living Darkness start to consume her, every cell of her body slowly being taken and possessed, the power of the darkness filling her, and she resisted, struggling against this taking.

TO STRUGGLE WILL INTENSIFY THE PAIN AS I CONVERT YOUR BODY

Her cells began to alter and she could feel her body fading in to the darkness atom by atom. The process was slow and painful, and she fought, intensifying the pain. She had no choice, she did not want to die, no matter the cause or the so-called honour. She could feel herself slowly merging with the dimension and she knew once she was taken whole, they would implode and release a new form of darkness.

PLEASE NO

YOU KNEW THE PRICE WHEN YOU CALLED UPON MY POWERS, NOW YOU MUST PAY YOUR DEBT

The Darkness was unrelenting and the more she struggled the more it hurt and she tried to cry out in pain but no sounds came and she knew that soon she would be destroyed and that her friends would be destroyed along with her.

"Leave her alone!" came a voice and the pain subsided.

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WHO DARES? The Darkness was as surprised by this as she was.

"I dare," said the voice and there was the appearance of something that neither the Darkness nor Darkstar expected.

Water.

"I am Leyu Yoshida, of the Clan Yoshida, and I will fight you for the life of Laynia Petrova and all the others you hold."

Excalibur #13

Darkstar could feel her body merging with the Living Darkness of the Darkness Dimension, and she knew there was nothing that she could do to prevent her journey in to oblivion.

"Leave her alone!" came a voice and the pain in her body subsided, allowing Laynia to look up, trying to see which of Excalibur had recovered and was coming to help her.

WHO DARES? The Darkness was as surprised by this as she was.

"I dare," said the voice and Darkstar could see someone, someone she had never dared to consider to see again, along with the appearance of something that neither the Darkness nor Darkstar expected.

Water.

"I am Leyu Yoshida, of the Clan Yoshida, and I will fight you for the life of Laynia Petrova and all the others you hold."

WHAT MOCKERY IS THIS? demanded the Darkness. YOU ARE NOT WHAT YOU APPEAR

"I am what you made me," snapped Tsunami. "You have no power over me because I am not truly alive, nor am I truly dead. I remain trapped between worlds, absorbed in to the Darkness Dimension by your powers on Earth."

YOU CAN'T BEAT THE LIVING DARKNESS, LEYU, said Laynia, pleading.

"I have no choice," she said. "If I win, you'll be free. If I lose you're all dead, which is what you have anyway."

THEN I WILL NOT FIGHT, the Darkness decreed and pain once more wracked Darkstar as she felt the absorption process continue, but it stopped abruptly and the Darkness Dimension rocked with discomfort as Leyu focused her powers. IMPOSSIBLE

"My spirit lives on here, while my body is in Greece, drowned by my own powers, but something happened. My spirit has become a piece of the Darkness, and I can create the Darkness Dimension version of water, as I could do with my own powers. The

status quo has shifted, Darkness. You cannot continue without besting me first, or I will prevent you from birthing a new Darkness Dimension."

YOU LEAVE ME LITTLE CHOICE, MORTAL. MY DARKNESS AGAINST YOUR WATER.

Darkstar felt the Darkness release it's hold on her and prepare for the battle ahead and she could sense that the Darkness was concerned. It knew it could beat Tsunami, but it did not know if it had enough time left. Whatever had mortally wounded it was finally catching up with it.

In the time she had left, she had to free the rest of Excalibur.

Back at the SHIELD Headquarters, Ruth Bat Seraph - Sabra was in the office of the physiotherapist, where they were going to assess the extent of damage her spine had taken. Her legs had some sensation and she could wiggle her toes which was an encouraging sign.

Now she was being assessed properly, out of bed and seeing exactly what her limits now were. She could float a little, though not exactly fly because she couldn't get the proper balance by getting her legs in the right position but floating meant she was at least able to move. It may be that she needed to learn all new fighting skills and techniques until she regained the use of her legs proper.

She was a little scared that she would never truly walk again, because although the ability to move her toes was great, it was still a very small step. She held on to the bars, keeping herself in the air without having to use her flight powers, testing her strength at the same time. She pushed herself up, and lowered herself again. She did this several times, ensuring that her arms were okay and retraining the mostly unused muscles. It was hard to do but she was a premier member of Mossad and easy was not something she related to. Only the hard things were worth doing.

"Excellent work," said Day Vangela, the physiotherapist. "Saves me telling you what to do."

"I need to keep myself working," said Ruth. "What are we going to do about my legs, Doctor?"

"Call me Day," she replied. "I'm going to try something we were developing for Tony Stark when he was paralysed a few years back, before they inserted that device that helped him walk."

"Device?" A note of hope entered Sabra's voice.

"Yes, but Stark asked SHIELD to assist in the destruction of those devices, because they weren't all they promised to be," said Vangela. "This is a neural rod system, which can be worn under a pair of pants or a skirt or whatever. They work the legs from a control panel. When it was first designed it was using a keypad on a glove that made it work, these days we use a visor that allows you to control it by eye movements."

"I'm not totally paralysed though," said Ruth, concerned that this device had been created with Stark in mind, knowing that the bullet that had struck his spine had meant he should never have walked again, but then again very little seemed to keep Tony Stark down.

"True," said Vangela, "however the settings will tell me what damage has been done. Too much power being applied will cause you pain, something that doesn't bother most paralytics because they don't have feeling in their legs."

"I understand," said Sabra and sighed. She hoisted herself up. "Let's do it." Doctor Vangela nodded and made the preparations. Sabra would take what she could get, as long as she could regain some movement.

The two elements clashed against each other as the god and the ghost battled each other. Darkness fought water, and though the Darkness should have had the upper hand, it's wound was taking it's toll and it was unsure of how pieces of it's firmament were being supplanted by the water. Nothing should exist here unless he willed it. The users of Darkforce were an exception and the humans had arrived by means of magic.

YOU DO NOT UNDERSTAND, the Darkness said. THE DARKNESS MUST CONTINUE

"Not at the cost of one who does not want to."

THE BEING KNOWN AS DARKSTAR MADE HER CHOICE WHEN SHE CALLED UPON MORE OF MY POWER THAN SHE HAD BEEN GIVEN

"She was born with the power," said Tsunami, "as I was born with mine."

NO, SHE LIKE MANY OTHERS, ARE GRANTED POWER BY MY GRACE. THOSE WHO BELIEVE THEIR POWERS ARE NATURAL ARE MISTAKEN. LAYNIA PETROVA'S POWER IS TO CONTACT BEINGS OF EXTRADIMENSIONAL POWER.

"And she contacted you first?" scoffed Tsunami as her water avatar struck at the darkness.

BY CHANCE AND BECAUSE I GRANTED HER POWER OTHER ENTITIES WOULD NOT SPEAK TO HER.

"Then you denied her a chance of another life."

I CHOSE HER BECAUSE SHE WAS WORTHY, BECAUSE I KNEW ONE DAY I MAY NEED HER.

"She has the right to choose."

The battle continued.

STEPHEN

Laynia touched the head of Stephen Strange, focusing her powers on him, trying to break him from his Darkness induced coma. She knew if she had any chance of making the others recover from what had just happened then Dr Strange, Sorcerer Supreme, would be the person who could help her. His mystic wards should protect him from the harsher effects of the coma but in effect he was fighting a god, and even Strange had limitations.

STEPHEN, she said again and focused. The effect of being partially merged with the Darkness allowed her to try something she would not have normally been able and she focused on her touch on his forehead and suddenly she was inside the vision that his coma had induced.

"Stephen!" she called to the Doctor who was fighting nightmare shades of his past with what little magic he possessed, for in his vision he did not have his powers and the deities that he called upon had abandoned him.

"Darkstar?" he said, creating a mystic shield, while she lashed out with her darkforce projections, keeping them at bay. "What madness is this? Why are you here?"

"You must remember, you came here with Excalibur."

"I've not spoken with Nightcrawler or any of his comrades in a long time. I thought the team had been disbanded."

"No," said Laynia, getting a little frustrated at the depths of the illusion the Darkness had implanted in Strange. "Excalibur, as in Forge and SHIELD."

"Forge is with X-Factor," said Strange. "What madness is this?"

"Remember," she said and pulled him close, pressing her lips on to his and kissing him, infusing him with the darkness within her and she could feel the depths of his mystical defences flaring at such a bold attack upon his soul and she could feel in the Darkness Dimension that the Eye of Agamotto was starting to open, as if it had been pre-instructed to do so. Strange broke off and looked at her.

"Laynia," he said and then turned back to the visions of his past and dispelled them with a wave of his hand. "I remember." He made several hand gestures and they were outside his mind again, but this time he was awake. "Thank you, Darkstar."

NOT A PROBLEM, STEPHEN, she replied, becoming one with the dimension once more. The Eye was firmly attached to his forehead now, where she had been touching him a moment ago and Stephen could see what had happened, the truth of the situation finally being revealed to him.

"The well of All Things," said Stephen. "Now I understand the problem."

WHAT IS IT?

"I'll wake the others, then we'll straighten this mess out." He looked at the others, touching them with a beam of light from the Eye and they awoke as soon as the light touched them.

"Thanks," muttered Bridge, his voice weak after everything he had seen and done, and the others weren't looking too good either.

"What happened?" asked USAgent.

"We got taken out," said Hauptmann. "Mind control."

"Again," said Union Jack. "That's twice."

"We'll sort it out once we get home," said Forge.

THAT MAY NOT BE AN OPTION, said Darkstar.

"Laynia?" said Bridge.

I AM HERE, COLONEL. AS IS TSUNAMI.

"Leyu?" asked Forge. "Interesting."

"Forge," said Stephen. "I need your help in sealing a fissure in reality. The well of All Things has been destroyed and a tear has been created."

"X-Force," muttered Bridge. "It damn well would be..."

"X-Force?" asked Forge.

"I'll explain, later," said Bridge. "What do you need of us?"

HELP TSUNAMI. SHE'S FIGHTING THE DARKNESS.

"We're on it," said Bridge. "Okay, people - let's go get some payback on a god."

Forge and Strange moved through the dimension, pushing themselves as if they were swimming.

"We don't have long," said Strange. "The well of All Things was destroyed and the Darkness Dimension was open to it at the time. Now the reversed power from the well is dissipating the Dimension, which is why it is dying."

"If we don't close it then the newborn dimension would be born with a gaping wound," said Forge, realising the urgency of what was going on. "And all this would be for nothing."

"Yes," said Strange. "You have the powers to cast a portal spell - you have done so before."

"The souls involved..." said Forge, thinking back to the last two times he cast the spell, killing his fellow soldiers and then the X-Men. The very thought of the cost of doing it again...

"Which is why I am here," said Strange, noting his friend's concern. "It's not the same spell as the one that opens and closes the Great Gate, but it is similar enough so that I can back your incantation with my own powers and we should be able to do this with out loss of life, and then we can resolve the issues surrounding the fate of the Darkness Dimension."

"I don't understand," said Forge, not sure of what was going on here. "won't sealing the portal fix it?"

"No," said Strange. "The wound has been open too long. The Darkness Dimension will still die."

"The day just gets better and better," said Forge as they reached their destination and he began the spell casting for a variation of the Great Gate spell, hoping it would work.

Tsunami was holding her own against the Darkness, but that was about it. She had a great amount of power, but in truth she wasn't alive and she was also tapping the energies of the being she was fighting with, which meant she was going to lose. She just hoped she'd bought enough time for Excalibur to escape.

"This fight's over," said a voice and she could see Bridge giving the orders, with Savitar hitting the Darkness with his powers and the others using the weapons they had developed to also attack the Darkness.

"You idiots, you should have left when you had the chance."

"We don't leave our own," said Bridge. "We weren't going without you."

"I'm dead, you moron," she shouted.

"I've missed that tone," said USAgent as he hacked away with his energy shield. "Really, really missed it..."

"No kidding," said Hauptmann.

"Get used to it," said Rock, "because we won't hear it much longer."

"You really are a drag at times," said USAgent as he struck once more and this time he cut through the darkness and exposed a red and green energy. "What the hell?" he said as its light pierced the darkness and two unholy wails sounded through the place.

"I'm guessing that can't be good," said Savitar as Excalibur regrouped.

"We just opened a tear in reality," said Tsunami, also feeling the pain, but not as intensely as the Darkness and Darkstar. "This fight is over - the dimension is dying."

"We have to get out of here," said Agent as they watched the tear start to grow larger.

"We came for Darkstar, we're not leaving without her." Bridge's gaze was narrow and intense and Agent backed away.

GO, her voice said, weak and in pain. LEAVE ME

"No," said Bridge. "There has to be another way."

"There is," said Strange, as he returned with Forge. "We've sealed the well of All Things, so this won't happen again any time soon, but we need to re-establish the Darkness Dimension, otherwise the balance of reality itself will be in jeopardy."

MY TIME IS DONE, the Dimension echoed and there was a ragged edge to its voice. UNLESS I BOND WITH DARKSTAR, THE DARKNESS DIMENSION WILL CEASE TO EXIST

"I have an alternative," suggested Strange. "Leyu Yoshida has become part of the Darkness. If she consents, she could be an alternative to Laynia Petrova."

"Leyu?" asked Forge. "I know it's a lot to ask."

"I'm dead," said Leyu. "If I can save you all - again - then I'll do what I must."

THE OFFER IS ACCEPTABLE. A NEW ERA IN DARKNESS WILL BEGIN.

"What about Darkstar?" asked Bridge.

I WILL RETURN HER TO YOUR REALITY, HOWEVER SHE WILL NOT BE AS SHE WAS.

"Thank you," said Forge.

THANK YOU, the Darkness replied and Strange cast a spell, opening the doorway home.

"Goodbye, Leyu," said Bridge.

"Goodbye, Commander. Tell my brother... I died a hero." Bridge nodded and then he followed the others back to the Helicarrier, and the portal closed behind them.

"What happens now?" asked Savitar to Strange.

"A rebirthing," said Stephen. "We've just initiated an event of cosmic proportions, and there will be changes to everyone touched by darkforce from here on in."

"Thank you for all your help, Stephen," said Forge, shaking the magician's hand. "We couldn't have done it without you."

"All part of the service," said Strange. "I'll check with you later to see how Darkstar is doing."

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"Yes," said Forge and Strange seemed to disappear before their eyes. There was still a fair bit of cleaning up to do.

14.txt
"Ah, Director, thank you for coming in."

"Not at all, Mr Secretary," said Forge as he took a seat in front of the United Nations Secretary General to discuss the current situation with regard to Project: Excalibur. Things had changed since the project had first been introduced. Nick Fury was now working for Hydra, Heliios was dead, Tsunami was dead, Sabra was recovering from serious injuries and the Armory system was being redesigned after being damaged beyond feasible repair.

"How have you found your first few weeks in charge of SHIELD, Forge?"

"It's been trying. Very trying, but I'm getting to grips with it. I've made a few changes, and altered things here and there, but the organisation is in very good shape."

"How have the repairs to the Helicarrier gone?"

"The Helicarrier is back in operation," confirmed Forge, thinking back to the Godzilla event. "There have been a few security measures that were not initiated, though and it allowed Nick Fury to hack the systems."

"Yes, I read that report. You have X-Force working on that, I understand?" asked the Secretary, picking up a paper from the desk and glancing at it.

"Yes, they're working on a way to counter him. X-Force seems the best team to work on this, as they don't have a loyalty towards Fury like the other groups," Forge answered his superior.

"I understand," said the Secretary General. "However that's not why we're here. Project Excalibur."

"Yes, sir," said Forge.

"The Excalibur initiative was set up to provide the United Nations with a team of operatives who could and would react to any foreign problem that our normal peacekeeping officers could not handle. They were not a part of SHIELD, however the lines seem to have become blurred, and while it has happened on your watch, I am of the opinion it is not your fault."

"Thank you," said Forge.

"However there does need to be a degree of separation between SHIELD and Excalibur. They have access to your systems and are housed when on active duty by SHIELD, but they do not participate in unauthorised missions, nor do they gain special authorisation."

"I'm not sure I understand, sir," said Forge.

"I understand Hauptmann went on one the recent missions to assist with Godzilla, and the recent trip to the Darkness Dimension was not authorised by the UN."

"I see, sir," said Forge. "You decided what the team and the operatives are involved with."

"Not me personally, but the Security Council. They realise, as do I, that the recent mission was designed to rescue one of your own, however it was fraught with risk and from your report you almost didn't make it back."

"That is true, sir," admitted Forge. He wasn't sure he liked this attitude towards these heroes, but then again he worked for the United Nations and so did they.

"Plus your decision to accompany them was... misguided, though you have proven yourself to be a man of action many times before and it is forgivable."

"Thank you, sir," replied Forge. "I will endeavour to... keep myself a little more restrained."

"Good," said the Secretary. "Now, let's discuss the personnel. Starting with Colonel Bridge."

"Well," said Forge, adjusting his position in his chair. "There was friction between us at first, due to his loyalties to Fury, however we have reached an understanding about SHIELD and Excalibur."

"Please, GW, not now," said Forge as he sat back in his chair. "Tomorrow, when things are less hectic..."

"You said we needed to discuss the new people for the project, and I think we need

to do that. We were short two people in the dimension and it showed. We need people to succeed Leyu and Niko. Plus I need to talk to you about Armory as well."

"I know this, Bridge, I do," said Forge. "However now is not a good time. X-Force have been fighting in lumps due to being drugged by Viper, we've lost contact with Letchi Island and Nick just hacked the computer systems."

"So now's not a good time?" said Bridge.

"You could say that. I'm also going over my own notes for the recommissioning of the second Helicarrier. We've been down one since the Onslaught incident and I've managed to pull some strings and with luck the second Helicarrier will be rebuilt and reactivated in the next few months."

"Good idea," said Bridge. "We do need a second one."

"Yes," said Forge, his thumb brushing over the left side of his moustache. "Plus there's this." He showed him a piece of paper and Bridge examined it intently.

"The new Armory system?"

"Yes," said Forge. "With Dr Horton's demise, we've had no chief engineer for the project so I've taken it on myself. My mutant powers help design things and I've worked on this a while. What do you think?"

"It's... different."

"Yes, well I don't copy, I reinvent," said Forge. "The command centre idea's been revamped. I was thinking that a virtual reality interface would work better, so you could use the system from closer to the action."

"Interesting. It would mean I could operate it from anywhere..."

"And have immediate access to the SHIELD database. Your support staff would also be able to help you out as well."

"It won't have room for a passenger this time," said Bridge, looking at the specs, and Forge shook his head."

"I've looked at the risks and they're unacceptable, however it will contain more systems, which with luck will eliminate some of the other problems you've seen. No more piggybacking of signals, of the systems being corrupted, things like that, as well as state of the art technology that will make even Tony Stark look up and go 'cool'."

"Tomorrow then?" said Bridge, relieved that Forge wasn't pushing them to one side.

"Yes," said Forge, looking down, then he looked back up. "Unless another crisis occurs..." Then he winked and Bridge knew he'd keep to it.

"Thank you, Director," he said and took his leave. It had been a long few days.

"So you believe that Colonel Bridge is well suited to continue leading the project?"

"Yes," said Forge. "I don't think there's a better man in or out of SHIELD for the job."

"Of course. Now what about the other personnel? Let's start with Savitar."

"Neal," said Lindsay McCabe as she put her arms around him. "I missed you."

"Been hectic, Linz," said Neal as he sat down next to her in the SHIELD medical hospital, where she was visiting her friend Jessica Drew, who had been catatonic since the X-Force attack on Hydra. "How is she doing?"

"She's still not doing anything other than lie there," said Lindsay, looking back at her friend. "It's as if her mind has shut down."

"Isn't there anyone who can help her?" asked Neal, putting his arm around her shoulders.

"There are plenty of telepaths," said Lindsay, putting her hand on his hand, "but none with the experience or skill of Charles Xavier."

"Yeah," said Neal, wondering how different his life could have been if he'd met Xavier before he'd joined with Fabian Cortez. He could have been an X-Man, maybe, instead of being a criminal who now worked for the United Nations as part of the repayment of his debt to society.

"How are you though?" said Lindsay. "I saw the news of Greece and things... it was horrid to watch."

"Worse to live through, because not everyone came back," said Neal, softly. "We keep forgetting for all our great powers, we can die as easily as everyone else."

"Sometimes people come back though," said Lindsay.

"Not this time," said Neal. "I've never really seen death like this before, not... I don't know. Maybe I should speak to Jim. Tachyon understand I have priorities, but it's just to get away from it all, to have a proper job."

"You've not seen him?" asked Lindsay.

"No," Neal answered. "I was involved in this Darkstar thing, and by the time I checked in, he'd gone to Vegas for a few days and they said he'll be back soon enough."

"Neal," said Forge as he entered the room. "Lindsay."

"Forge," they both said in unison, which made all three smile.

"I was just checking on some things before I make my reports to the UN about what's been happening, and I heard your voice so I thought I'd check in."

"Have we heard from Laynia yet?" asked Neal.

"No, however the Russians have let us know she is alive and well and currently being looked after at their department of the interior, and she will be back soon enough. However the dark-force around Kalymnos has dissipated and we're returning Leyu's body to Japan for burial." Neal nodded.

"Thanks," he said and Forge nodded.

"Bit more work to do, I'm afraid," he said and smiled. "I'll catch you later, oh and Lindsay?" She looked at him. "Nice work on the pilot." She smiled.

"Thanks," she said and Forge took his leave of the two. It was nice to see two people in the first stages of love like that.

"Neal's turning in to a model member of the team. I not only think we have a mainstay, but a valuable member of the United Nations. We can only hear of big things for Neal Sharra." Forge liked the young man, he liked him a lot. All he'd needed was a chance.

"Good," said the Secretary General. "He was the person we were most worried about conforming, given his recent past, but that is all behind us now. Now, John Walker, the USAgent..."

"The lunatic, the lover, and the poet
 Are of imagination all compact:
 One sees more devils than vast hell can hold,
 That is, the madman: the lover, all as frantic,
 Sees Helen's beauty in a brow of Egypt:
 The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,
 Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;
 And as imagination bodies forth
 The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
 Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
 A local habitation and a name.
 Such tricks hath strong imagination,
 That if it would but apprehend some joy,
 It comprehends some bringer of that joy;
 Or in the night, imagining some fear,
 How easy is a bush supposed a bear!"

"I can't believe you've made me sit through this," John Walker whispered to his date Elisabeth, as he sat next to her in the box at Pearl Theatre, in New York.

"I can't believe you sat through it," she replied with a grin.

"Hey, I like you," said John. "A man's gotta do what a man's gotta do. How long we got left?"

"Not much," said Elisabeth. "Besides Dream's one of the easier Shakespeare plays."

Walker nodded and concentrated on the play again, thinking on what Forge had said to him earlier, that he needed to be open to new things and that time working on the various projects he'd been involved in should have done that. Walker hoped that this was the start of something wider. Lord knows, they needed something different.

"John's coming around. He's not the most accommodating of people but he's getting the idea that he's part of the team, like it or not."

"Good," said the Secretary General. "Darkstar we know about, Tsunami is deceased," Forge wanted to flinch at the casualty with which he said that, but didn't, "any thoughts on a replacement?"

"I was thinking perhaps one of the former members of Big Hero Six. I've to review the files on them as soon as the Japanese send them to me."

"Yes, that would be acceptable. Hellios, well we've received word from the Greeks that a replacement will be sent across soon. They won't say more than that, which is rather annoying, but given the state of the country after the recent attack we're giving them leeway."

"I see," said Forge.

"So, Hauptmann?"

Hauptmann opened his front door and looked at his apartment - just the way he'd left
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it. Jorge sighed as he sat down in his living room and flicked on the television. There was a match showing but he wasn't really interested in the soccer game right now and it was just making a noise in the corner, while he considered things in the comfort of his own home.

He was thinking a little of his brother Stan and his uncle Wilhelm, about the day they died. There had been so much death on the team and only now was he beginning to put in to perspective with the rest of his life. He hadn't really known either Tsunami or Hellios, but they had been part of the team and had counted on him and those around him, much like the soccer team counted on the members to see them through. He should have made it his business to get to know them, he should have been more like Rock and made the best of it, instead of just accepting it all.

In doing that, like the others, he'd put himself in to the same place he always did, taking too long to find the real people and by the time he had it was too late for some of them, and he promised that wouldn't happen again.

Except he'd made those promises before and, yet again, he'd failed to save people and they'd nearly lost Darkstar because of it. He looked at the photos on the mantelpiece and sighed. He would give this one more chance and then he would see what happened. Perhaps being a super-hero was for someone who wasn't as emotionally scarred as he was. He enjoyed football, he could do that, he could run and shoot and score and it wasn't life or death.

"GOOOOOOOOOOOOAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAALLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLL!"

well, he thought with a wry smile, maybe to some.

Forge considered the German. "He's a good member of the team. He tries, which is good, and is always willing to go above and beyond. There's a distance to him though..."

"I see," said the Secretary General. "Not really a team player, but he knows that and is working to correct it?"

"Yes, that'd sum it up," said Forge, not sure if they were doing him a disservice or not.

"What about Sabra? How is she coming along after her injuries?"

"Sabra is slowly adjusting to the neural rod system, which is allowing her walk.

She's taking some time to get used to the things after the surgery, but it is made easier by the doctor we have working with her."

"Day?" asked Ruth, her voice containing concern.

"Yes?" called Doctor Day Vangela.

"I'm not sure I can get used to the weight of these things." Vangela smiled.

"It's not like they're solid steel," she said, looking at Ruth Bat Serpah. "The rods are made of aluminium, connected to the muscles by needle thin wires which feed the information from your body to the visor."

"Yes, but it's different, it's... not the right balance. How am I ever going to fly like this?" She was close to tears, but she was too proud to do that in front of someone else.

"Ruth, you need to take small steps. Flight, even running, is something for later. I want you to be able to stand without problems and walk. Then we'll do something advanced like steps. One at a time, both feet to a step before you go to the next one."

"I feel like a child."

"To all intents and purposes," Vangela said, shaking her head, "you are."

"How long will it be before I can go back to work?"

"It all depends on you," said Day. "Bitching won't make it go faster."

"I understand," said Sabra. "What's next."

"Walking," said Day. "As soon as you prove to me you can still stand without the pain registers flaring. We can make as many adjustments as we need until we get this right." Ruth nodded. This wasn't exactly a miracle cure, but if she maintained her patience it might be.

Day looked at her patient and smiled. Soon, very soon...

"Excellent news," said the Secretary General. "She has done much good not just for Mossad but for the world at large as well. Which leaves us with Union Jack. His sponsor in the British Government checks on him from time to time."

"Sponsor?" asked Forge, unaware of such a person.

"Yes, a Brian Braddock, member of parliament for one constituency or another. Never paid much attention to the internal workings of the British Government. The names change, but the story remains the same."

"I know of Mr Braddock," said Forge, repressing a smile. So the former Captain Britain still had a hand on Excalibur, no matter who it belonged to. "However of his charge, Union Jack has been the most enthusiastic, the most involved of the members of the team. British heroes have a tendency to be enthusiastic in their goals."

"Rock," said Forge, as the Project Excalibur member was about to leave for home, going back the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

"Director," said Rock as he looked back at the man who was in charge of SHIELD. Brian had been surprised and pleased when it had been told to him and said there was nobody better, and Rock had accepted the recommendation. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

"No, I just wanted to say goodbye and thank you."

"Thank me?"

"Yes," said Forge. "You've been a constant help over the last week or so, and it has been appreciated, though the time have been quite trying."

"I'm glad you think so," said Percival, shaking the other man's hand. "It's not been easy for any of us. I have to thank you for getting us all some time off from the project. It's helped us immensely."

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"Not a problem," said Forge. "Make good use of it. I..." The comm system cut him off as it paged him and he called back. "Forge here."

"Sir, there's a problem in the holding... It's Snowstorm, he's become a human torch. We've put him out..."

"I'm on my way," said Forge thinking it hadn't been too long since they arrested him after his big battle with Iceman. "I'll talk to you later, Rock." Rock nodded as Forge started to run down to where the holding area was and he turned to wait for the shuttle to the airport to get him back home. There was much he needed to consider.

"well," said the Secretary General, "that about concludes the meeting. I..." He put his hand to his face as he closed his eyes

"Sir, is something wrong?"

"I felt something," muttered the Secretary General, and he looked out of the window. "What in creation?"

"Lord no," said Forge as he saw the advancing wave of crystal and before he could say anymore they were coated in it and everything changed.

Excalibur #15 - Breaking the Code

"Okay," said Bridge as he looked at his people. "This is the game plan. We get in, we investigate, we get out. No heroics, this is a covert operation."

Forge had called him in to the office earlier and explained that he was against this operation but he had been over-ruled and that Excalibur were an United Nations outfit and the Security Council had authorised this as a go. Forge had objected strenuously to this notion that they could just go in to a sovereign country, but after the stunt at the UN Building an emergency session had been called and it had been authorised. They were going to break in to the Latverian Embassy.

"Are we it?" asked Savitar as he looked about. There was only himself, Darkstar, Hauptmann and Union Jack on the team and as there were usually more than that he was concerned.

"We've no replacements for Tsunami or Hellios as yet," said Bridge, shaking his head. "Sabra is still out of commission and you saw what happened to USAgent on the news. He did what he could to stop Von Doom from taking Richards but Doom kicked the crap out of him and the others who tried to stop him. Typical, really. There's never any heroes about when you need them."

"What about Reed?" asked Rock. "His help was invaluable in helping find Darkstar. We owe him."

"Steps are in place," said Bridge. Forge had taken him to one side and told him that there were steps being taken to find and rescue Reed from his nemesis.

After the meeting at the United Nations, Forge had stepped up and told them that the extradition of someone to a place where they would be harmed or killed was illegal, and Doom's actions by dumping Richards to what could be a watery grave was in direct violation of everything they stood for. A taskforce was on its way to recover the body of Richards, but Forge had ensured that Benjamin Grimm was included on the mission. There was a chance that the elasticity of Richard's body combined with the suit of unstable molecules would allow him to survive, in which case whatever happened, they would need to pick Richards up.

"So what are we looking for?"

"Evidence. The Secretary General thinks this whole thing is a distraction. He thinks this is too public."

"Isn't this an act of war?" asked Hauptmann

"It depends. Doom's legal status is sketchy at best, so we could bluff our way out, if we get caught. But..."

"We're not going to get caught," the others said and Bridge nodded. He looked at the new Armory system and shook his head. They'd test the thing later, this was not the time.

"Let's ride," he said and Excalibur went to work.

Forge looked at the footage from the United Nations sessions a few hours ago. He was in the designated SHIELD office within the UN building, because he was needed on site, due to the state of emergency. They'd taken all the required precautions but still it had not been enough.

For something like this, a member of Project: Excalibur was on duty because of the sensitivity of the position and John Walker had drawn the short straw. He'd seen the look on Walker's face when Bridge had told him and he knew that Walker considered this to be a babysitting exercise. He sighed, as he watched the footage again and wished that it had just been a babysitting exercise.

Doom had just walked in, made his case and then simply taken Reed Richards...

"You have got to be kidding me," muttered USAgent as he watched. Doom was making his case, impassive and regal and Walker was buying none of it. He'd not been with the Avengers West Coast when they'd teamed with the first Excalibur team to stop him taking over the dimension called Limbo, but he'd heard of it from the others. The case against Reed Richards was tenuous, but Richards had attended this session of the United Nations to hear Doom's accusations.

"This is crap, isn't it?" said Private MacIntyre, as he turned to the hero. The military were not fond of Doom being here, seeing as how every other time he came to the states it turned in to a war zone. "Richards is one of the greatest heroes on the planet."

"Yeah, it's crap," said USAgent. "Yet, they have to listen to it." Doom was now saying how Richards must be extradited to Latveria, or a place of Doom's choosing and suddenly there was uproar. It would not be impartial and other counter-arguments flew up from the floor as the Secretary General tried to maintain order. "This is going to go bad," said Agent and flared his energy shield to life, and no sooner had he done it than Doom fired an energy bolt from his left gauntlet and Richards was

ensnared in some kind of force field.

"Release him!" demanded the Secretary General, but Doom would not be denied and he turned and started dragging the helpless Richards away from the floor and the Secretary general pressed the panic button and the military went to work.

"Forge, I know you're watching!" said Agent, in to his comm-link to the Helicarrier, as the military started to take their positions. "I need the team stat!" This was going very bad, very quickly. The military wasn't the same as when he'd been a part of them. They were more gung-ho, they wanted to hit something and teach any would be terrorist that nobody attacked the US on their home soil. "Oh shit," he said as they stood in Doom's path. "Stand down you stupid bastards!"

"They don't take orders from you," said a General standing there. "We'll show you heroes a thing or two..."

"You'll get them killed!" said walker, grabbing the General by the jacket, his shield automatically powering down but it was too late and the military started to try and stop Doom, who unleashed the full power of his armour on them without mercy or stopping. Agent started running towards the fight, but by the time he got there, there had been much damage and there were several corpses where soldiers had been.

"Stand down, von Doom!" said USAgent, hoping that his back up would get here soon.

"Another costumed hero, ready to martyr himself in the name of progress," sneered Doom. "Stand aside, before you are hurt."

"I can't do that," said walker. Doom said nothing but fired an energy burst at him and he flared the shield to life again, deflecting the blast and pushing forwards. It taxed even his strength reserves and he wondered if he would be able to take Doom hand to hand. Either way he'd try and he swung his fist at the Latverian monarch, but Doom was ready and caught Agent's fist.

"Pathetic," said Doom, and squeezed, the metal gauntlet crushing down on Agent, who in desperation swung at him with the shield, but as soon as it touched Doom's armour it fizzled out. "I have been preparing for this," said Doom. He lifted walker in to the air and threw him backwards and USAgent hit the ground with a thud. His hand was injured, and he hoped there was nothing broken.

"I'm not done with you, Doom!" called Agent, and Doom didn't even look back as something fired from his armour and a sonic boom echoed around Agent, causing him to fall to his floor, his ears bleeding and there was nothing he could do to stop Richards from being abducted, and as he fought to stay awake, he could swear the monarch was laughing at him, but maybe he was imagining it. He couldn't hear anything else and then he let go and slipped in to unconsciousness.

Bridge had been first on the scene, and he had looked at walker, who had done his best but he had been no match for Doom and Excalibur had taken too long in getting here. Yet another member had been taken out and Bridge was getting sick of this. As was Forge.

He turned the video off and contemplated what was going on here, but before he could do much else his telephone rang.

"Forge."

"Director Forge, this is Safia Way at the Secretary General's office. The meeting with the Latverian nations is starting in five minutes."

"I'm on my way," said Forge. There was a meeting with the heads of state for Symkaria, Transia, Wundergore and with the Latverian Democratic Nationalist Party, who were claiming that Doom's status as ruler was a false claim. Because of who Doom was, Forge was involved in this as well, and perhaps it would be time for a new way in Latveria, a time where they were no longer governed by a dictatorial monarchy, but a democratically elected government, but the other heads of state would have to support such a bold move. There were times this job seemed to be so much more hassle than was necessary...

The team arrived in the Latverian embassy, courtesy of the HERMES teleport system aboard the Helicarrier. It had taken the techs a few moments to get them there because Doom had installed some devilish security systems, but the full capabilities of HERMES had yet to be tested and they had been able to circumvent some of the protocols and get them in there.

"We all in one piece?" asked Bridge and Savitar, Hauptmann, Darkstar and Union Jack nodded their confirmation. "Good," said Bridge. "Spread out, be cautious, be careful, and for God's sake don't start World War Three..." The team went on their way, Savitar and Hauptmann going one way, Darkstar going a second and Bridge teaming with Rock to go a third. Anything that was out of the ordinary was what they were looking for. Whatever Doom was up to they'd figure it out here.

"This feels wrong," said Neal to Hauptmann as they worked their way around the building. Their job was to secure the top half of the place, and make sure that if anyone tried to escape that they didn't get far. Both of them knew they weren't exactly the most scientific of the team but they did have a brute strength and destructive capability that helped them run interference.

"I know," said Hauptmann. "Doom may be scum, but he has rights. The UN seems to have taken a more... provocative role."

"I know," said Neal. "We've no real evidence against Doom, so now we're just going to see if we can find stuff to incriminate him? It's not right."

"His technological reserves are impressive though," said Hauptmann. "On the other side of the coin, you can see why they're worried. There's Magneto in Genosha, do we really need Doom to inspire him to greater things?"

"Good point," admitted Neal. "But this just seems to be a case of pride more than anything else."

"Then let's not hurt anyone," said Hauptmann.

Darkstar drifted through the corridors of the embassy, using her darkforce abilities to mask herself as well as incapacitate any resistance she came across. Her task was to keep the heat from Bridge and Union Jack, while they went down to the basement and found out what was going on. She was still adjusting to the changes in her powers from the rebirth of the Darkness Dimension.

Her darkforce channelling was more of a fluidic thing now, and not a straight energy generation. It seemed to spout from her rather than form and she was still learning the limits of her powers. It was Leyu's influence, she was sure of it, but then again it was strange. She should have been dead and yet she had somehow survived in some state. She had swapped places with Laynia and she would always owe her that.

Strange had been adamant that there was no way that Leyu could have survived the birthing process of the new Darkness Dimension, but if there were somehow, some way that she could have done so, then she would have done it. Darkstar would have done no less herself.

Yet, she felt more control of herself, even for her inexperience with her powers. Her doubts over the last few months had faded and she knew that the power she had was not something to be feared, or blocked. It was to be embraced and accepted because it was a part of her. The Living Darkness had terrified her, but it had also shown her that the Darkness was not something all powerful and that it could be controlled.

She would use her powers to the best of her ability and that would be enough.

"My God, it's full of stars," said Rock as he and Bridge entered the projects room of Victor von Doom. It was a marvel of technological wonders, and such. Projects and such lay around the place.

"I never figured Doom would be this tardy," said Bridge.

"I never figured we'd get this far in to the embassy without trouble," said Rock. "Live and learn." He looked at the workbench. "This is interesting."

"What?" asked Bridge.

"Thermal technology. He's been working on something for his armour. This is incredible work. Beyond anything I've ever seen before. And look at that!" He looked across the room to a half built Doombot. "That's amazing..."

"There's something familiar here," said Bridge, looking at the workings of the Doombot. He'd been part of the taskforce that had been to Latveria when Doom and the other heroes had gone missing after Onslaught, but it wasn't that. It was something else... "Zero Tolerance..." he said, the memory coming back to him. "These schematics... This is sentinel technology."

"What?" said Union Jack.

"I recognise the basics from the briefings at SHIELD," said Bridge. "But it's way in advance of anything else out there."

"He's using sentinel tech to create Doombots?" said Rock. "It makes no sense..."

"Unless he's not making Doombot's but a new breed of sentinel," said Bridge. "After what went down the other month with Apocalypse and the X-Men, with Forge in charge of SHIELD, the Shadow King in charge of Hydra... what if von Doom has decided that the mutant problem needs dealing with..."

"That is a very scary thought," said Rock. "With his skill with robotics and artificial intelligence..."

"Could this be the start of the future Cable warned me of?" muttered Bridge. Cable's stories of a future where sentinels ruled mankind had been something he had told

about after Zero Tolerance had gone down. "I think we've got what we need, Jack," said the commander of Excalibur. "You got any of this?"

"As much as I could record in the suit," said Rock. "Good job I modified it at Forge's request..."

"He's a better man than I thought," admitted Bridge. "Not that I'll tell him that..."

"Or that you'll get the chance!" said a voice and the two heroes turned to see the Queen Invisible and a Doombot standing there. "I don't know how you got in here, or this far, but I promise you will go no further..."

"This isn't good," said Rock, pulling an energy sword from his belt. "I'll take the Doombot..."

"Leaving me with you," said the Queen. "You will die slowly." A force field covered his head but Bridge just smiled, as he lifted his finger from his signal device.

"You might want to deal with her first," said GW as Darkstar ploughed through the floor and the two women stood face to face. Bridge felt the air rush back to him and he figured that this wasn't going to be pretty...

Sabra watched the newsfeed with interest. She was still getting used to the new way of moving and until she was fully ready to go, she knew there was very little she could do, and she also knew if she went too fast too quickly, then she would never regain the ability to use her legs. Her spine was still healing and the device provided by Dr Day Vangela was just to give her extra support. She had mastered walking, and running but her flying still gave her trouble. However she was making progress.

Dr Vangela watched and smiled. Soon, very soon... Then the sirens flared, indicating there was an intruder.

"Stay there, Ruth," she said as she saw the patient try and get up. "You're in no shape to take on Humbug, let alone someone like Doom!"

"You think he's come back?"

"I don't know," said Vangela, wondering where the hell everyone was, and then she saw who it was who was here. "It can't be," she whispered. "You're dead..."

"I'm guessing the mission's gone sour," said Savitar as the signal came from Bridge that they needed back up."

"Figures," said Hauptmann and they started running and then they felt the place shake. "That sound like building damage?"

"Yup," said Savitar. "Darkstar's showing off again. Glad she's back..."

"And on our side," said the German hero. "How about you show her what you can do?"

"Good plan," said Neal and fired a burst of plasma down through the floor, burning a hole for them to get to their friends and Hauptmann jumped, dropping to the basement and landing with a roll, absorbing the energy of the impact, swiftly followed by Neal Sharra as he flew down.

Union Jack was fighting with a Doombot, but he was being beaten back, and his suit was torn and they could see he was bleeding and Darkstar was using her darkforce against the Queen Invisible's force-fields. It was a very close match and both women were giving as good as they got. The Queen was unprepared for the power of the Darkforce and she was being held at bay by a determined Darkstar.

"Very glad she's on our side," said Hauptmann and suddenly the Doombot turned to look at both him and Savitar.

"Sentinel tech!" called Union Jack and the two mutants went to work on the Doombot as Rock did what he could as well. Three of them fighting the Doombot and they were only just keeping it from killing them. Bridge was trying to get the Helicarrier to get them out of there and aboard the Helicarrier because it was only a matter of time before they were overwhelmed by whatever reinforcements were in this place.

Then there was a sonic boom and a crash as someone ploughed in to the room and it was as if everything paused a moment, because in an instant the Doombot was nothing more than scrap metal, and the Queen Invisible was lying on the floor barely conscious.

"What the hell just happened?" asked a bemused Rock.

"I did," said a voice and they looked to see a familiar figure standing there. "Sabra said you might need a hand." Bridge stared at the man. The standing, the face, the presence.

"Helliios?" he said.

"You were expecting Wonder Man?" said the Greek hero. "I'm back."

"And not a moment too soon," said Neal. "Boss?"

"On it," said Bridge and tried the system again. Whatever damage Helliios had done as he entered the room he'd allowed them to contact the Helicarrier and the HERMES system flared to life, and Darkstar bound the Queen Invisible in darkforce bonds as soon as they appeared aboard the SHIELD mobile headquarters.

"We've got her now," said Forge who was waiting for them as they injected something in to her, to ensure her powers were dampened down. "What did you find?"

"Sentinels," said Bridge. "Doom's gone in to the business for himself..."

"Damn him," said Forge, closing his eyes. There were reports coming in about a possible sentinel event in Colorado, where Project: Wideawake had been housed and he'd sent some of his people to investigate. "His sentinels, and those at Wideawake... I don't like this, Bridge. I don't like this at all. Something needs to be done..." The Queen Invisible laughed.

"Even with your tin men, you are no longer safe."

"None of us are," said Forge, softly. Her taunt meant something to her, but she would never find out what was going on. Doom was dead, and there were changes in place in Latveria that meant she would be going to prison for a very long time. There was a special place waiting for her at the Vault...

Georgetown, Massachusetts was a quiet town. Located in the northern Essex County, between the Merrimack River Valley and the communities bordering Plum Island Sound, the place was widely forested, with many acres of state forest land. It was a rural town, with limited facilities and nothing much ever happened in Georgetown.

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However in a remote part of the town was a concealed part of the forest, hidden with technology far beyond what any of the locals had ever seen. Cloaking devices, laser sights, shielding and other measures were in place and anyone who got too close would simply disappear and never be heard of again.

In the dead of the night nobody saw the Doombot enter the area, passing through the defences as if they weren't there, to where a cave had been created, in which was housed a mine to store the sentinel army that it's creator had built. There was still work to be done...

"So let's get this right," said Forge as he reviewed the papers and looked up at the man standing there, his arms folded impassively across his chest. "You're Hellios."

"In manner of speaking, yes, I am. My name is Achyls Nianias, and I am Hellios Prime."

"I don't understand," said GW Bridge, who was also here to listen to the latest hero from Greece present himself. "You look exactly like Niko Hrisalis. In almost every detail."

"My eyes," said Hellios. "I know."

"I meant mannerism, but now you mention it, yeah," said Bridge. "Explain to me how."

"Since the events of the battle in Greece some time ago, my government have been trying to repeat the super-solider program that created the original Hellios, however to eliminate some of the flaws that the original possessed."

"His rude, bad manners being the first to go?" suggested Bridge and Nianias smiled.

"Not quite," he said. "If there were any side effects to behaviour they haven't been discovered this time. I meant the increased susceptibility to telepathic assault and influence. They believe that they have revised the formula to do so."

"Formula?" asked Forge. "I don't understand that myself." Hellios nodded, knowing that this may have been the case. Not everyone had been informed of the background of what had become known as the Hellios Project.

"It may have been omitted from the original report, however I have been authorised to tell you about the Greek Super Solider programme. Many years ago an alien craft crashed in Greece, or more precisely the Mediterranean. It was recovered but there was no sign of the alien visitor, but there was a great amount of vials containing various alien cultures."

"A great find," said Bridge. "Not a public one though."

"No," admitted Hellios. "With all the publicity surrounding the Fantastic Four and the arrival of Galactus on Earth, it seemed unwise at the time to do so. Also, Greece lacked the technology and scientific understanding to develop the cultures, but that changed over time and they realised that the cultures could be used to adjust the cellular structure of the test subjects."

"And the changes created the powers you possess, or Hellios possesses?"

"Yes," said Hellios. "However the human nervous system is not one hundred per cent compatible with the cultures and the body can reject the serum that has been altered, so we are required to be periodically recharged by the Ministry of National Defence, whom the project falls under. It keeps us... under control."

"I see," said Forge, interested in the alien cultures and wondering what race they were from and perhaps he could find out. It would be difficult...

"Wait a sec," said Bridge. "You said 'us'. You mean you and Hrisalis?"

"No," said Hellios. "There are now a dozen Hellios operatives at work in Greece and it's territories, restoring the damage done after the war. As I said earlier, I am Hellios Prime and it is I who will be stationed with the Excalibur Project."

"A dozen super soldiers?" said Forge, steepling his fingers. "Now that is impressive."

"Yes, the reasons behind the further revelations of the Hellios Project shows how proud our scientists and politicians are of the achievement. It is the one thing that Europe has lacked since the disbanding of the British Excalibur team and it is hoped that our fellow European Union members will come to rely on Team Hellios as the tool they deserve to be used as."

"Team Hellios?" said Bridge. "All made up of people called Hellios and look like you?"

"Yes, and no," said Hellios. "However they do all look like me, as I look like the original Hellios. He used to be a brown haired man, but the serum changed him in to what you saw, and see now. I used to be blonde myself, and the beard just grew in to place. It's a side effect our scientists have been unable to explain."

"And you're all call Hellios?" asked Forge and Hellios nodded.

"The other eleven members of the team are referred to by the designated letter. Alpha, Beta, Gamma, Delta, Epsilon, Iota, Kappa, Omicron, Pi, Sigma and Omega. It is not all the letters of the alphabet, and we have eliminated letters that sound similar such as Theta and Upsilon."

"Good thinking," said Bridge. "I guess we'll meet them in due course. Forge?"

"The papers and documents are in order," said Forge. "He's been given leave to operate within all member countries of the United Nations, so his clearance is in accord with the Project Excalibur charter." He stood up. "Welcome aboard, Hellios," and he extended his arm, which the young Greek man accepted and then he shook hands with Bridge.

"I hope I last longer than the last one," he said with a wry smile.

"For God's sake, get off me," said John Walker, as he pushed the nurse away. "There's nothing wrong with me." He jumped off the bed and did a handstand, which while painful was nothing he hadn't taken before. "See all better, now leave me alone."

"Hi," said Neal Sharra as he looked in to the room as the nurse stormed out, glad to see the sonic burst hadn't affected the Agent too much. "Having fun?"

"What the hell do you want?" said USAgent, flipping back to his feet, holding back a wince as he did so.

"I was passing by on my way to work," said Savitar. "Figured I'd call in."

"Keep passing," said Walker. "I'm fine. Power Broker gave me super strength and stuff and years of training mean I can get up after a pasting."

"Doc Doom, though," said Neal. "Guy's a legend..."

"Yeah, a dead legend. Glad Richards drowned the bastard in the Arctic..."

"You've been watching E! again haven't you?" said Neal. There were conflicting reports over what had happened there and as Richards was refusing to comment the various agencies were making up their own stories. A minority view was that Richards had drowned von Doom and his armour had taken the dictator of Latveria to the bottom of the Arctic Circle.

"Wouldn't put it past him," said Walker. "Most scientist types go psycho at some

point and Doom's been askin' for it for years. Anyway, I'm fine and if they call us to the Helicarrier, I'll see you there."

"As long as you're okay," said Neal. Agent nodded and Neal headed back to the Tachyon office. The place was still in a state of shock over what had gone down between Jim Hammond and the Hulk in while he was in Vegas and they were still getting used to it.

Then there was his relationship with Lindsay McCabe. He'd seen a lot of her, and he liked her a lot and he knew she was getting to know Jessica Drew again, and he'd not seen a lot of her. Things were changing and he wasn't sure where he quite fitted anymore. Excalibur... that made sense. They fought the good fight, stopped the bad guys and that was that. If it ever changed... He had amends to make for his past actions, he knew that, but he was starting to wonder what the true price would be.

He wished he could be like the Agent - brash, inflexible and keeping everyone at a distance. He had seen in the Agent's eyes how many times he had been let down, or rather he had let down, people who had depended on him. The story of the closure of the Avengers West Coast was something people hadn't been able to avoid on the news and Excalibur... were intended to be bigger players than the Avengers. How and why the Agent had joined up was his business, but still... Neal sighed and stopped by a Starbucks. He needed a coffee.

Hauptmann returned from the soccer club to his apartment. He'd spent most of the morning training and getting ready for the first team match, but there was a lot of concern from his coach over his commitment to the team. Excalibur duties had meant he'd not been around a lot, and he'd missed some of the big matches. It had been a lot easier when he'd been a simple hero for the country instead of an international hero for the world.

There was a time coming when he was going to be forced to make a choice between his life and his responsibility to the world and he was beginning to get tired of being a hero for the world. It had been fun, for a while but he wasn't paid to be a hero and he was for being a soccer player. It was how he made a living and he had no other skills. It was a simple career progression - player to manager. It was all he had ever wanted to do, and then he had developed his powers and things had changed. Germany did not have a great deal of heroes to it's name, or at least not a great deal of heroes who worked within Germany and he had become a name when all he wanted to play soccer.

He sighed as he sat in his apartment, and weighed up his options, debating what was the best thing for him to do. There wasn't a choice really, so he sat down and began to draft his letter of resignation. The time had come to make a choice and that was what he was doing.

"Welcome back," said Brian Braddock as he met Percival Rockford at Heathrow, and the hero and his mentor shook hands.

"Good to be home," said Rock. "Hello, Meggan." He lightly kissed Mrs Braddock on the cheek.

"Hi, Rock," she said. "It's been a while."

"Yes. How is the Eden Project going, I've been a little busy to keep up to date."

"It's going well," she said as the three of them walked. "We've just got the funding to expand the project and create some new domes, which is great. The eco-systems are thriving and there's not really anything like it elsewhere."

"Anything to do with a certain elemental?" said Rock, with a smile, knowing that while she was involved she was not using her abilities to make things work.

"No, silly," she said. "But I've never felt more alive when I'm there. I'm connected to everything there from the moment I walk in and it's like being in my true form every minute."

"So how long are you home for?" asked Brian as they made their way to the car.

"Until the next emergency kicks in, I guess," said Rock. "HERMES can teleport me direct to the Helicarrier, but Excalibur's UN sanction means that we're only called on if needed. We're not like the Avengers, or SHIELD. We don't have the autonomy that we'd like. Forge got raked over the coals over an unauthorised mission the other week."

"Ouch," said Brian, opening the door and allowing the others to get in before he did.

"Yeah," said Rock. "Last week would have been downtime as well, but for the stuff with Doom."

"He was a tricky customer," said Brian. "I remember when he tried to take over Limbo."

"Are you boys going to talk business all day?" asked Meggan.

"Just a little more," said Rock. "Forge has been looking in to a new SHIELD mandate, a special operation for them to undertake, but it's going to need support."

"What is it?" asked Brian.

"Doom's new Doombots used sentinel technology. The Mutant Underground Support Engine was recently taken out by sentinels, and Project Wideawake was ransacked for technology."

Brian went pale and Meggan closed her eyes.

"The Sentinel Dawn scenario..." said Brian. He had seen visions of the future when he had been lost in the timestream, he had seen the world where sentinels took over the earth, and he had even visited it with Excalibur one time.

"Yes," said Rock. "Forge wants to decommission the sentinels. Permanently. But the idea can't come from SHIELD because of the mutant angle of it directorship, so he was wondering if..."

"If I could pull some strings," said Brian.

"He wondered if I knew anyone who might," said Rock. "I've not told him about us, as yet."

"I see," said Brian. "But, and this is going to come up, how do we control renegade mutants."

"This," said Rock, and passed Brian a file, with three letters stamped on the cover.

XSE.

"And do you, Laynia Petrova, take Dimitri Gryzlov to be your lawfully wedded husband?"

"I do," said Laynia, dressed in white rather than the black that was more familiar to the woman also known as Darkstar.

"Then," the minister continued, "I pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride." Dimitri looked in to Laynia's eyes and smiled, and they leant in to each other and kissed, much to the delight and applause of the audience. Many of Russia's greatest heroes were here, as they comprised her colleagues on the Winter Guard. Laynia had asked Dimitri to push ahead with the wedding, because of the recent experiences she had been through in the Darkforce Dimension and on the alternate reality.

Dimitri had agreed and now she was Mrs Dimitri Gryzlov. It made her happy and as they broke the kiss, her brother came over and shook Dimitri's hand. He was not dressed as Vanguard, but as Nicolai Krylenko. There was doubt as to what had happened to him in the events of the Starblast battle where he was supposedly killed, to his return, shortly before confronting the hero Daredevil. There was a period of time missing from his life that as yet nobody had accounted for and no amount of searching had been able to resolve the mystery, but for today he was content to stop looking for the missing time and share in his sister's happiness.

"Well done," he said to the man. "You've made my sister happier than I've seen her in a very long time."

"Thank you," said Dimitri, knowing how protective of his sister Nicolai was. "My gain is the Winter Guard's loss."

"Yes," said Nicolai and Laynia knew there were still things to be said about that. She had resigned her commission because she felt she could better serve with Excalibur, and she did not know the extent of the alteration of her powers and in the situations the Winter Guard were in, she would be a liability to them. In the downtime between Excalibur missions, she would be able to practice with her abilities and learn just how to use them.

"We have guests," she said. "Let's go greet the crowd." Nicolai nodded and Dimitri smiled and they left the small church to where there was an honour guard assembled and Laynia smiled.

"I've got it!"

Sabra managed to hold herself at a proper level and she smiled. It had been a long time since she'd been able to fly and the braces hadn't helped, but she'd finally adjusted and she was capable of doing things in the air once more.

"Well done," said Doctor Day Vangela as she watched the acrobatics in the air, "but give it five more minutes then rest. You can try again later."

"Yes, doctor," said Sabra glad that she was at least similar to her old self again and kept on flying, travelling through the hoops that had been set up for her to test the limits of her flight and Vangela smiled as she watched the young Mossad agent. There would be a reckoning soon enough, for her and all her people. Some treacheries would not go unpunished. She had given Ruth Bat-Seraph her life back, she would take it away soon enough and she had even told her.

Like her kind, they simply did not listen.

"GW!" called Forge as Bridge walked in to the new Armory command centre, or at least the centre where the new system had been developed. "Glad you could make it."

"You've done it?" asked Bridge and Forge nodded and passed him a visor, which Bridge placed on his face. "I look like Cyclops, don't I?"

"No," said Forge, though now that he mentioned it... "Press the button at the side of the visor." Bridge did so and the Armory system came to life in front of him.

"Now that is cool," muttered Bridge. He walked around the suit and he could see himself walking around it in the corner of his eye.

"I've made a development or two," said Forge. "See the sensor input from the system in the bottom left?"

"Yeah?"

"That's because you're currently on dual mode. The chip we put in to your head earlier allows us to do this, and I'm glad you agreed."

"I thought it was to make the interface smoother," said Bridge.

"It does, but it also allows you to separate your actions from that of Armory and function as two separate beings. Dual function, or single function depending on what the situation," said Forge. "I had the idea after the Doom thing yesterday and made the adjustments last night. I know it will take some practice to get used to it, and

everything you see is routed to a mainframe on the Helicarrier, which will also act as a gateway to the main database. You think of the question, it'll find the answer." Bridge disconnected.

"That's impressive work," said GW.

"Thanks," said Forge. "I've scheduled some field tests for tomorrow, if you're available."

"Nothing much else to do," said Bridge. "Did you have a chance to look over my proposal by the way?"

"Yes. Japan has been contacted and as far as I'm aware there's no problem. She should be arriving soon, as Leyu's replacement. Why her though?"

"Japan is lacking in heroes these days," said Bridge. "I liked her. Honey Lemon will be a good addition to the team and that Power Purse will be a good and useful tool."

"I've read the papers on it," said Forge. "It apparently uses a particle, not unlike the ones discovered by Henry Pym, but they're not Pym particles. They're something else entirely. I'll be pleased to meet her myself. I'll let you know if there's any change, but she should be with us soon enough."

"Thanks, Forge," said Bridge, and Forge nodded before making his way back to his office. Paperwork awaited, but today had been a very productive day, and he was starting to feel that this job was his.

"Is everything in order?"

"Yes, the preparations have been made. They didn't suspect a thing."

"Will he follow suit?"

"There are eleven of us and only one of him. There will be nothing he can do."

"He or his new found allies."

16.txt

"Agreed. We will found a new European order and the threats of sanctions from America will be dealt with once and for all."

"If our elected officials are incapable of dealing with America efficiently, then we will show them what can be done if the proper amount of force is used."

"The final stage will commence soon. Be ready."

17.txt

Brian Braddock, Member of Parliament for Critchley East in Her Majesty's Government and head of the Pendragon Committee, the United Kingdom's sub-committee on superhuman affairs looked out of the window as the aeroplane started to make its descent towards Brussels airport, where a car would be waiting to take him to the European Commission where he was to make a report on behalf of the Prime Minister on the state of super-heroes within the UK.

Outside the States and Russia, the UK had produced more than its fair share of heroes. Captain Britain, Union Jack, Spitfire, Death's Head, Excalibur... the list went on, and so the UK were regarded as the experts in the area. While Brian's former identity was not public knowledge, he still kept his finger on the pulse, however it was not reported that occupied his thoughts, it was a folder.

It had been given to him by the man he had mentored, Union Jack, on behalf of Forge, the Director of SHIELD regarding the XSE, what Forge was calling the X-Factor Security Enforcers. Brian had met Bishop, and he knew of the man's past, or rather the future that he had come from, and while the events of Onslaught had negated that being the future of this timeline, Forge could see that there was a need for the usage of mutants to protect humanity from other mutants. The X-Men were not enough and the world was getting bigger, but something such as this needed support and that was that.

Brian agreed with him, as the role that was being defined for the XSE was something akin to the role he'd had as part of the Captain Britain Corp, and he had seen the ways things could be and how wrong things could go however he knew that supporting this project and it was just a case of using his influence to make it happen. The European Union was a start and he gave a wry smile as the plane landed.

He missed flying.

The Armory unit flew across the sky, as George Washington Bridge looked up, unable to feel less than impressed by the technology at his disposal. He'd not always been this way, but he had to admit that the technology at play here was amazing. Forge's dual mode function effectively gave Excalibur an extra member and Bridge liked that. It meant that if things got hairy, then he could go in and give a hand proper. The time he had spent without the Armory unit had given him a taste for the fieldwork after being cooped up behind a desk for so long.

He was getting his hands dirty and that gave him a sense of satisfaction, and the connection between himself and the unit was flawless. A parallel hybrid connection, using a minuscule amount of his own neural tissue to create the chip that had been implanted in him. He looked to the corner of the visor as second nature now and he had gotten used to having two fields of vision to focus on - his own and that of the sensory displays of the suit. The weapons systems were incredible as well. Even Cable would be in awe at the firepower here.

Sonic bursts, electrical assaults, missiles, guns, EM pulse generators, repulsor

blasts and Bridge's personal favourite, the ion canons. Plus the suit itself had been moulded using the adamantium they had recovered from the Godzilla affair a few weeks back, giving it a protective edge that the pervious armour hadn't got. It was like a walking battle station, and Bridge was glad that he was in charge of it. The suit landed and walked over to where the science team were also evaluating it. It had been a long day, testing the system and as Bridge took off the visor, several medics came over to check on him and see if there were any ill-effects from it.

"Other than a few spots in front of my eyes," he said, " I'm fine."

"Glad to hear it," said Forge, as the SHIELD director came over. "From what I saw, that was as good a test as we could have hoped for. Though we're going to need some new targets," he said looking over to the plumes of thick black smoke that trailed from the horizon.

"How's the new Helicarrier working?" said Bridge, with a smile knowing the reason the Director had been unable to attend the majority of the test.

"The Behemoth is working fine. We've sent it out to take on Fin Fang Foom, Dugan is commanding the mission. He better not wreck my new Helicarrier."

"Dugan knows what he's doing," said Bridge.

"Yeah, I know," Forge replied. "It's just the people worked hard at getting a new Helicarrier built in such a short space of time." Forge had overseen much of the programme, approving designs and technological input. His original estimate had been for it to be built in a few months but he'd got it in six weeks. Six weeks, and it still astounded him. The money and resources had just been there and that was as good as it got for him. "Anyway, that's not the reason I'm here."

"I hate it when you say that," Bridge muttered and Forge smiled.

"Honey Lemon is at the offices in New York," he said. "I figured it's the time to introduce her to her new commander. You've a full squad again, Colonel Bridge." Bridge smiled and was pleased with that. They'd been undermanned since the war in Greece and though they'd made do, it had limited their options.

"In that case, I'm with you, sir," said Bridge and Forge led to where the jet was waiting to take them back to headquarters.

"I can't believe this," said the Minister, as he looked at the letter. Hauptmann

stood impassively before the German Minister for the Interior and said nothing. "You cannot simply... resign. You have a duty, a responsibility..."

"With all due respect, sir," Hauptmann said, "I can. You may have co-opted me in to the Excalibur project, but that is because I am the Hauptmann. I am no longer the Hauptmann. I am simply Jorge Manheim."

"You would give up your career as a professional footballer?" the Minister said. "You know we allow you to play because you work for us. If you no longer work for us, we cannot allow you the advantage your powers give you

"Yes," said Hauptmann, a trace of sadness in his voice, but there was acceptance in his eyes. "I can coach, train and make players the best they can be. I will miss playing the game, but it is my first love and it is what I want to do with my life. As I said in my letter I am prepared to stay on until a replacement can be found, but I am tired, sir. I am tired of fighting battles that only result in death, I am tired of doing things I do not feel are right and I am simply tired of giving up my life. I have done my bit for long enough, it is time I focused on myself."

"That is a very selfish attitude," the Minister glowered, but Hauptmann was unfazed by him. His decision to resign was not something he had done lightly, but it was something he knew he had to do, to feel right to himself.

"Perhaps, but I have risked my life for the country and the planet. How many others can say the same, in recent years. Can you, sir?" The Minister stayed silent, and looked down at the letter. "There have been few German heroes, sir. Most meta-humans have turned to villainy and we have become a rare breed. Our mutants remain out of sight, our need for heroes is non-existent, because we know the destruction normal men can do upon our nation."

"I accept your resignation, Herr Manheim," said the Minister. "Until we find a replacement, you are still on call for the Excalibur Project." He didn't look up.

"Thank you, sir," said Hauptmann and he took his leave, feeling a lot lighter than he had done a day or so before. His days as Hauptmann were numbered.

"Hey, baby," said Elisabeth as John Walker woke up next to her. "How you feeling?"

"Getting' better, babe," he said. "What time is it?"

"About two in the afternoon," she said. "You've been asleep nearly sixteen hours."

"Really?" said USAgent, sitting up. "Not slept that long in a while."

"Guess you needed it," she said. "The fight... I saw it on the television, and it sent a chill down me."

"My own fault," said Agent. "I got careless, Doom got lucky. Sorry, though."

"Guess it's what happens when you date a super-hero," said Elisabeth. "Ever thought about giving it all up?"

"Yeah," walker admitted, "but then again, the thing do makes a difference. I save lives and that's good enough for me. Plus I get to keep people in line, the people who need keeping in line. They think because they have power they have automatic rights, they don't. It doesn't matter who they are - Avengers, X-Men, SHIELD, whoever. We're all people, we all have a duty, right and wrong. The Excalibur idea's a good one, but it's not something you shoehorn people in to."

"So how'd they get you in?"

"They told me, which was why I gave them all a hard time at first, but I gotta admit, they get the job done."

"Do you?"

"Oh yeah," said walker and he kissed his girl. He didn't know where the relationship was going, but he knew she brought out something in him he'd not felt in a long time. The ability to openly care.

"Welcome to America, Miss Anda," said Forge as Nyoko Anda, the lady also known as Honey Lemon, came in to the executive office of the SHIELD building. "I'm Forge, and this is Colonel Bridge. Please, sit down."

"Thank you," she said, sitting in the chair and then the two gentlemen sat down.. "I'm glad I can be of service. It's an honour to serve with the Excalibur project."

"The pleasure's ours," said Bridge. "I'm glad you agreed to join us."

"I'm pleased to be asked," Honey Lemon said. "I've been working with my government since the collapse of Big Hero 6 to create a super hero community in Japan, but the death of the Silver Samurai and the national hero Sunfire has meant that our government has shied away from the idea of state sanctioned heroes."

"What about Wolverine?" asked Forge. "How does he fit in?"

"He is the Emperor's ambassador, and while his activities have not been condemned, he is still his own operative and as the master of the Clan Yashida, he is free to act in the interests of the Clan."

"I see," said Forge. It was interesting to get some clarification on that, as Logan's legal status was something of a grey area, and he'd meant to look in to it on behalf of the X-Men for a while. "Now you are aware of what the project entails?"

"Yes," said Honey Lemon. "Project Excalibur is the United Nations meta-human action team, sanctioned to act on their behalf in certain crises and events that warrant the UN's attention. It's made up of members from different nations so that is an international co-operative. The missions are given as and when required, using the SHIELD systems as a base of operations and information centre."

"That's more or less it," said Bridge. "Our operations are UN sanctioned, and if they're not approved, then we aren't able to go. However there are many hero teams out there..." A panel on the console beeped and Forge pressed the button.

"Forge... What?! This is getting out of hand, I'll see what we can do. Excalibur is tied up..." He looked at Bridge and gestured to him and GW activated the console on the wall. Hellios, Union Jack, Sabra, Savitar and Darkstar were in Pakistan dealing with some trouble that had flared up. Hauptmann was unavailable according to the German ambassador and USAgent was still recovering from his injuries which just left Bridge and Honey Lemon.

"What's going on?" asked Honey Lemon as Forge came over.

"The U-Foes are attacking the United Nations," said Forge. "There's still issues since the damage done by Doom and they just got through security..."

"This is getting beyond a joke," said Bridge. "It's making us look like amateurs."

"Tell me about it," said Forge. Of all the times for the team to be somewhere else.

Armory was still in transit and HERMES was undergoing maintenance. "We'll never get there in time."

"Let us go anyway," said Bridge, remembering that Forge had gotten his knuckles rapped for going on missions and Forge nodded and told them to ready a jet. "Honey Lemon, it's you and me."

The Secretary General watched as the leader of the group paced the floor of the Assembly. He knew he could end this any time he wished, but that would involve revealing himself before he was ready. The signs were not in alignment yet, but it was getting closer. The Sons of the Serpent had made their presence felt with their plague and other activities. The Serpent Society had reformed and struck at Namor and Doctor Strange and the Serpent Crown had been used again in Atlantis. The portents were all there, it was going to be soon, very soon.

"Something amiss?" he said as he saw the concern on the man's face. He could sense a group of heroes in the building taking out the U-Foes but they were not the Excalibur strike force, whom he knew were in Pakistan. He'd sent them there, after all. Then he saw the man change and he could sense another presence in the room, someone who was obviously pulling the strings from afar. He could relate, and he knew the heroes were getting closer.

"Finally," he muttered as the New Warriors burst in to the room and the U-Foes surrendered. The Secretary General was as surprised as the New Warriors were it happened, though unlike the warriors he could know when a master plan was being put in action when he saw it. As the U-Foes were being led away a SHIELD jet arrived and Bridge and Honey Lemon got out.

"Your attendance is welcome," the Secretary General said, "late as it is."

"Apologies, Mr Secretary," said Bridge. "However it seems the situation is in hand." He looked across to the New Warriors, and remembered reading a report on them that had been posted to Forge by Maverick.

"None necessary," said the Secretary General, "however security procedures need to be re-evaluated." Bridge nodded and watched as Night Thrasher spoke to the press and the New Warriors went on their way. "Tell Forge I will be speaking to him about it later."

"Yes, sir," said Bridge and looked to Honey Lemon. "Sorry this was a wasted journey."

"Not really," she said with a smile. "We can supervise the taking away of the

U-Foes, just in case. Every cloud has a silver lining."

"I like you," said the Secretary General. "You must be the new representative from Japan."

"Yes, sir," she said. "I'm glad to serve."

"Good," he replied. "Very good. Keep an eye on her, Colonel, she's got potential." Bridge nodded and the Secretary General turned away and walked off thinking that something special had come out of the day after all.

Brian Braddock yawned as he waited for his meeting. It was getting quite late and they had kept him waiting quite a while, and Brian was not renowned for his patience. He had learnt to try though and that was something he continued to work at. His wife Meggan was on at him all the time about it, because some things just took time. However that was a more personal thing than political. Brian checked his watch and went to get a coffee and as he poured himself a drink he looked out of the window and noticed something.

Hellios was down there, but surely he was in Pakistan with Rock and the others of Excalibur. It didn't make a great deal of sense and he knew HERMES was offline because Rock had been teleported out and his instructions were to wait for extraction. Something was certainly not right here and Brian picked up a telephone. He needed to check something out and asked for a call to be put in to the European SHIELD office. He needed to speak to Forge.

"Forge," said the SHIELD Director.

"Forge, it's Brian Braddock."

"Brian," said Forge, surprised at the call. "Is this about..."

"No," replied the former Captain Britain. "I'll talk to you about that later. I've just seen Hellios in Brussels and I'm just checking if Excalibur are in Europe."

"No," said Forge. "They're still in Pakistan. The Greeks have a super soldier programme and the system makes each soldier look the same. It could be that one of them is over there, for some reason."

"Right," said Brian, his voice uneasy but it was a tone that the Director recognised.

"What's wrong?" asked Forge, becoming concerned. Brian had been a hero for a very long time, and even if he didn't have his powers now, he still had the instincts of Captain Britain.

"I don't know," said Brian. "Something just doesn't sit right. As a recommendation, I'd get HERMES back online, ASAP. I might be wrong, but..."

"Understood," said Forge. "Thanks, Brian."

"No problem," said his friend and hung up and Forge contacted the HERMES team. If Brian was right, then Excalibur were going to be needed in Europe. The first Hellios had been a little unstable, what if another of them had gone that way as well...

He looked down from the visitor's gallery at the scene before him.

Hauptmann was surrounded by eleven of the Hellios super-soldiers. One man against the genetically enhanced warriors, and he knew there was very little he could do to help the man, but he knew he had to try. He'd managed to find a fire axe, a javelin and a ceremonial sword and he hoped that would do all that he needed. He just had to cause a distraction and hope that Excalibur got here in time, but before he could do anything, Hauptmann vaulted one of the desks, and jumped at the nearest Hellios.

He couldn't fault the man's courage and that was for certain and he struck Iota and slammed the man to the floor before he could react. Hellios was more or less invulnerable, but he hadn't been prepared for that and Hauptmann obviously had a lot of strength to spare, and then he remembered the man absorbed kinetic energy to either boost himself or redirect at others. It was quite close to the powers of Maverick of X-Force and he wondered if the two of them were related in some way. Before he could ponder it further, Hauptmann was being pounded on by Kappa, Omicron, Pi and Sigma and after a moment Hauptmann threw them all of using the power of their blows against him.

"Stop wasting your time," ordered Alpha and Beta grabbed hold of Hauptmann's left arm and Gamma grabbed hold of his right, and they both held the man tight and he was trapped. "Now we'll see if his energy absorption will save him from our solar blasts." He could see their eyes glowing with power and he knew if he was going to make a move it had to be now and he smashed the glass of the gallery and the Hellios soldiers looked up.

"Who the hell is that?" Omega asked as they looked at the masked man who jumped down, landing foot first on top of Gamma, bouncing off the man's head and giving Hauptmann the chance to turn the man's hold against him and slam him in to Beta.

"Someone who doesn't like terrorists," he said.

"Fool," said Alpha and fired his eye beams at him, but he moved. He may not have had his powers anymore, but he was still in shape and though the beams only just missed him, they still missed him. He smiled thinking of the time he fought Hauptmann Englande. No costume, intermittent, and completely out of his mind for doing it, but it was what needed doing.

Except this time, he knew his powers were gone and they weren't going to come back. He threw the javelin at Alpha who got it between the palms of his hands and shook his head and he threw it right back at his attacker. It flew through the air with incredible speed and it struck him in the arm and he felt the bone snap.

"You should not have thrown away your life," said Alpha coming over to him and he looked down at him and pulled the mask away from him. "Do I know you?"

"No," said Brian Braddock as he looked up at him. "But they do." There was a shimmering in the air and then they appeared. "Guess HERMES is back online."

"Excalibur," said Alpha and threw Braddock as hard as he could, slamming him in to a wall.

"NO!" cried Union Jack as he watched his mentor impact hard, the sickening crack echoing.

"Take 'em down," commanded Bridge's voice from the Armory unit and Excalibur went to work. In the corner of the room, Brian Braddock coughed and looked at his hand to see blood and he realised something was very badly wrong.

She dashed across the skies, needing to get there, knowing that her help was needed. She needed to go faster, fly faster than she had ever flown before. She had covered such a great distance already and it would only be moments before she arrived and then there would be a reckoning.

Nobody would deny her what she wanted and she would fight the gods themselves to get it. She just hoped she wasn't too late and she pressed on, pushing herself beyond the limits of her powers, changing shape as she moved.

Bridge landed the jet a short way from the building and contacted SHIELD for a HERMES teleport inside to join the rest of his team. He knew Hauptmann had gone one on one with the original, but Armory was the only member of the project to have taken Hellios down and so he needed to get in there. The energy field surrounded him and then in a moment he was inside and he watched. There were eleven Hellios soldiers and there were only nine members of Excalibur. They needed back up but there was nobody to help and there wasn't much eh could do either, except formulate a plan of some kind.

However he had noticed that the members of the European Parliament were taking advantage of the situation to get out of the chamber, which was good. It was one less thing to worry about, but then Bridge saw Brian Braddock and he dashed over to him. Forge had mentioned to keep an eye out for him.

"Braddock!" he said, but Braddock seemed to be in shock and Bridge checked his pulse. His pulse was weak and his face was pale and Bridge knew that something was definitely wrong with him. He looked over to his people and wondered what the hell he could do to help them. He wondered if he ought to call Forge and get the reserves sent in, but they weren't the dedicated team, and how much could someone like the Black Panther do against these people? what he knew of Hellios was that they were

granted their powers through a serum made of an alien culture and it somehow altered them, allowing to living solar batteries.

Bridge had used Armory to drain Niko Hrisalis of his energy in Alaska and hit him with it. It had been lucky, because there was nothing else that seemed to affect him. However that was the original Armory and Forge had worked hard at ensuring that the flaws in it's design were taken out. If they found more flaws, they'd have them fixed as well. He could see that forge used that aspect of the Directorship to relax, but then he focused back on the issue at hand.

Darkstar and Savitar seemed to be holding their own. Darkstar's darkforce was more than a match for Iota and Kappa, while Savitar was able to keep out of Gamma's reach and was hitting him with his flames, generating intense heat and even Hellios was having to back away.

Hellios Prime was taking on Hellios Alpha and that was a grudge match beyond anything he had ever seen. Two identical warriors attacking each other with all they had - one fighting the madness of his twin, the other fighting the foolish idealism of his brother. If the cameras were still on the audience were getting one hell of a show out of it all.

Then he looked over to where Armory was and saw the suit wrestling with Hellios and smiled, thinking he was doing quite well with the suit so far. The adamantium finish it had been given ensured that Hellios' blows were doing nothing to the outside of it and Omicron was getting more infuriated by the moment, because the suit should have been easy to crush and he couldn't understand why it wasn't working.

That was four of the team doing quite well, but the others were not so advantaged. USAgent had enhanced strength, but it was nothing compared to the power of Hellios and he was being forced to use the energy shield to protect himself from Epsilon. His handguns had proved useless and he was being backed away, trying to find some kind of edge. He was supposed to be the replacement Captain America, but this was akin to facing the Hulk or someone single-handed and not even Steve Rogers could do that for long.

Union Jack was in the same boat. His body armour was good but it was little protection and his weapons too were of ho use. However Bridge could feel the intensity coming from the man and while he was at a decided disadvantage, he could feel the man planning something special. MI6 agents were pretty damned good, and Rock had proven himself time and again. It was going to be a close one and while he favoured his man, Bridge was unsure if he could last long enough against Omega to figure something out.

Sabra was also at a disadvantage. Having only recently recovered from her injuries, thanks to some medical devices, she was still not 100% in the field and though she had done well in Pakistan, this was a different arena. The edge she brought to the table was her experience and skill to match the pure power of Hellios Beta. So far she was doing well and her ability to strike at nerve points was helping her out, but Beta was recovering quickly. Bridge shook his head, thinking how this would be a

lot easier if they had a telepath of some sort, someone who could attack the minds of their enemies to distract them long enough. They didn't have that on the team and after Alaska, he should have considered it, but with the disbanding and then the battle in Greece it had been a long time.

Then a cry caught his attention and he turned to see Hellios Sigma fighting against a portal that had opened. Honey Lemon had reached to one of the pouches on her Power Pockets and pulled something out that had created a wormhole. The wormhole was sucking the man in and even with his great strength he couldn't fight it - he was simply too close and because of his bulk he was ensuring that the suction power of the vortex was only pulling in papers and not anybody else. Then in a moment he was gone and the portal closed and Honey Lemon smiled.

"Nice one," Bridge commented.

"Would have done it sooner," she answered, "I just forgot which pouch I placed it in."

"Any more?" he asked and she shook her head. "It's good for one trip every twenty four hours."

"Where is he, anyway?"

"I'm not sure," she replied. "I've never been able to get anything back to tell me..." Bridge's eyes went wide as he realised it. Hellios Sigma could be anywhere, literally. "It's not ideal," Honey Lemon continued, "but I had no choice. And there is one of them missing."

Bridge looked around. He could see Hauptmann dancing with Pi, but Delta was nowhere to be seen.

"He's gone after the MEPS," he said. "I've got to do something."

"Forgive me," said Honey Lemon, "but what can you do? You're just one man."

"I know," said Bridge, thinking of how much his hand ached the last time he'd hit Hellios and then the man had let him to show Bridge how ineffectual he really was. "But I have to try."

"I'll go," she said. "If you're hurt then we lose Armory as well." Bridge nodded. That made sense, but he had the need to make a difference and even though he was out

of his league here, he wished there were something he could do.

"Okay," he said, "but have you anything to help him?" He looked down at Braddock, who seemed to be getting worse and Honey Lemon gave Bridge something.

"Try that," she said and Bridge saw it grow and become a medical stabiliser. SHIELD had been working on one for years, but this was an actual model.

"Thanks," he said and fitted it on to Braddock's arm, and he hoped it would keep him alive long enough to get proper medical aid.

At the United Nations, the Secretary General watched the scene unfold before him as Excalibur took on the Hellios super-soldiers. Even he was impressed by what he was seeing, for even the lesser and non-powered people were keeping alive for longer than he expected. And it was also impressive that Honey Lemon was the first to dispatch one of the super soldiers. He had chosen well, though they would make excellent warriors in the New Order and he turned for a moment and looked outside the window at the world.

Over the city a storm had gathered and lightning crashed from the sky. It was a sign. It was the first sign and he watched as a bolt of great power flashed from the sky. He watched as he saw it strike the top of the Empire State Building, striking the building's lightning rod and sending the sheer power of the bolt 1,454 feet downwards and he could sense that it was no coincidental bolt of lightning that had struck. The spot had been marked and the Secretary General smiled. The first sign had occurred and then there was a knock at the door.

"Come in," he said and Tracy, his personal assistant came in. "Yes, Tracy?" he asked, turning away from the window.

"We've been asked about the situation in Europe," she asked coming across to him. "The Daily Planet wants to know if we feel that Excalibur is doing more harm than good?" Then the lightning flashed again and Tracy screamed.

"It's just the storm," soothed the Secretary General.

"You're not... you're not him..." Tracy gasped, fear in her eyes. "You look like him, but you're not..."

"I see," he said, softly and looked on her and Tracy stopped shaking under his gaze. "That's the problem with storms like this. They often reveal too much... I'm so very

sorry, my dear." Fear was in Tracy's eyes and then her eyes went wide as intense pain shot through her.

"Tracy!" he shouted as she fell to the floor. "God, no!" It was then people rushed in to see what the commotion was about. "The lightning," he said. "There was a large flash, she screamed and then clutched her chest."

"I'll call the paramedics," said someone and another person checked her.

""She's not breathing, there's no pulse..."

"I know CPR," the Secretary General said and they started to work on her and try and bring Tracy back to life.

Dr Stephen Strange was in his Sanctum Sanctorum on Bleeker Street when the storm came and as the lightning flashed, he felt a headache forming. The Sorcerer Supreme didn't just get headaches and he knew that something was seriously amiss, but he couldn't quite place what it was.

Just then a bolt flashed and struck the Empire State Building he had to close his eyes as the pain hit him hard. He steeled himself and opened his eyes. Something powerful had just occurred, something great and he knew that as Master of the Mystic Arts it was up to him to find out what had just happened and he left the privacy of his home and headed up Fifth Avenue.

Honey Lemon ran quickly outside, thinking that it was going to be an interesting thing to take on Hellios Delta. His brother had been very powerful and she had gotten very lucky, having just the right thing to send him on his way, but she was unsure as to what she had that would be able to deal with a second one. She was similar to Bridge in that she had no powers, but the items in her Power Pockets would have to do.

She had such a wide variety of equipment she would find something that would work well enough. There were times she missed the Pouch because she had just reached in and grabbed it but with the belt she had to remember where she had actually put things. It was at times quite annoying and then she saw Hellios, standing there, taking down some of the MEPS who had not gotten very far and she put her fingers in her mouth and whistled and Delta turned around.

"You want to pick on someone your own size?" she said and he dropped the man he had been attempting to pull the arms off and he laughed.

"You will make a fine concubine," he said.

"I doubt that," she said reaching in to a pouch, pulling something and throwing it at him. It struck him in the middle of his face and exploded on impact, sending a metallic dust in to his eyes and Hellios cried out as he was blinded.

"Run!" she cried to the people who were simply standing and watching. There was something about super-battles that made people stand around and watch, because they thought they wouldn't get hurt. "NOW!" she shouted as Hellios fired energy blasts from his eyes, clearing the dust from his eyes and he flew at her. Honey Lemon reacted quickly, pulling a net from her pockets and throwing it, but Hellios blazed through it as if it were little more than paper and Nyoko wondered which net she had used. It certainly hadn't been the vibranium one she had been working on, because it had torn too easily and in a moment Hellios was on her.

"Before I snap your neck, I want to hear you cry," he said and she scrambled to find something in her pouch, but he used his other hand to tear it away from her. "Not this time, little girl," said Hellios. "I've always had a thing about Asian women..." Honey Lemon kicked him in the crotch, but Hellios simply laughed it off. "The perks of invulnerability," he said and pinned her against the wall. "Good job you wore a mini-skirt, it'll make it quicker." Honey Lemon was suddenly scared. Death didn't scare her, but rape did and she called out for help but Hellios simply laughed and she knew she was in serious trouble and then there was a loud crash and Hellios turned.

"Who the hell are you?" he said looking at the young woman who had just crashed through the wall.

"Let her go," she said, looking directly at him. "Or I'll hurt you."

"What can you do?" he said and then he felt the energy inside him rebel against him and he let go of Honey Lemon as pain filled him. "What are you doing to me?"

"Your powers are element based, and I'm an elemental," she said walking over to him and then with one punch she laid him out on the floor and Hellios didn't move.

"Thank you," said Honey Lemon as she retrieved her belt. "Thank you so much, Miss...?"

"Braddock, but you can call me Megan."

19.txt

"You play a dangerous game, Father. To risk our champion..."

"I have risked him twice before, Daughter, and twice he has not failed me. Now comes the moment of truth." She nodded at her Father as he moved the pieces on the board. "I never considered that a rematch would be called for."

"Humanity is like that," she said ruefully, as she took her position.

"Not this time," he snapped and she recoiled. "This game will be played by myself and myself alone."

"But how? why?" He gave her a thin smile, which she could have mistaken for cruel if she did not know him.

"Because I can."

Hellios Prime traded blows with Hellios Alpha, fighting for more than the fate of Europe, but the fate of himself as well. His brothers in the Greek super soldier programme had gone mad and they had decided to take over the European Union in some insane effort to sever ties with America and their global political ambitions.

Or something like that.

What troubled Hellios most was that the original Hellios had been mentally unstable because of the serum they super soldiers had been given and he had hoped it was an aberration, but it looked more like it was an actual side effect, a side effect to which he had not yet succumbed. The thought that he might lose his mind like they had done concerned him more than anything else, more than the fate of Europe, or even the fate of the people in the room. He wasn't fighting for them; he was fighting for himself.

"We are legion," said Alpha as they traded blows, but Prime said nothing. He gritted his teeth and fought back, but more and more power in to each blow, and Alpha matched it. This was a true clash of the titans, and as each was as powerful and as invulnerable as the other it just came down to which of them could take the most punishment. They had both been through the trials, proving their worth to claim the honour of being one of Greece's foremost warriors, a hero that was a match for any of the other heroes on the planet.

After the events with the Death's Head Commandos the Greek Government knew they needed something and now they were paying for rushing things through.

"Join us," said Alpha. "It's your destiny."

"The hell it is," said Prime, speaking his first words and Alpha smiled, knowing he'd hit a nerve. Prime put both fists together and smashed Alpha in the face, putting as much anger and hatred in to the blow as he could and Alpha staggered. "I am Prime and when I'm done with you, I'll take the rest of you down."

"Let's see," said Alpha, wiping away a speck of blood from his lip and the two of them went to work on each other again.

Forge looked across the room at the monitor on the back wall. To the audience it looked as if he using an autocue for his statement, but in reality he was using a pair of high tech contact lenses that allowed him to magnify his visual range. The downside was it gave him a headache, but he wanted to make sure he knew what was happening in Europe at all times, even when giving a statement to the press.

The X-Force contingent in the UK had asked him to do this, and the rest of their team was being checked out in the infirmary after the SHIELD Response Team had gone in and got them out. Shadowcat was, as yet, unaware of what had happened to Brian, but he'd have to tell her sooner or later. However that was not what was going on here. He was here for one reason alone.

"Good morning ladies and gentlemen, I'll be keeping this brief due to the conflict in Europe. Early this morning I was informed that a SHIELD mission to discover the identity of the first director of the original SHIELD. This has been a race against time to find this information as the terrorist organisation Hydra has also been after the name for their own ends.

"This is the last secret remaining after the Deltite Affair some years ago, and the identity was kept secret to protect his family, however they have agreed to have his name released. The man was John Watkins, the son of John Watkins who was the original Citizen V during world war 2. Mr Watkins was assassinated by Hydra many years ago, though his identity was never revealed to anyone. Mr Watkins ashes were scattered in his hometown in the United Kingdom, though he has a marker in Arlington. A full press pack is being issued at the moment, and any further queries can be directed through the SHIELD press office. Thank you."

Forge stood up and took his leave of them as 'question' was shouted, but Forge had done what he'd needed to do. He needed to get back to his desk and monitor the situation. He'd not felt this helpless in a long time.

Stephen Strange wandered over to the Empire State Building, which had been struck by lightning a short while ago, but it was the kind of lightning that stoked his senses. There was something not right and it was up to him as Sorcerer Supreme to investigate, especially as the Empire State Building was a nexus point for mystical energy, and had been ever since the demon invasion of New York during the Inferno event.

To everyone else he looked like a normal man just out for a walk, but the Master of the Mystic Arts was alert and an expert at appearing nondescript and as he approached the landmark building he could feel the pressure building in his head and he knew that something was more wrong than he had considered.

There was a presence here, a feeling of evil that was familiar to him. The people saw him merely tying his shoes, but he was in fact touching the ground and feeling the ley lines beneath the ground, tracking the sources of mystical alignment. With his senses it would only take but a moment and he touched a consciousness, a mind that had been waiting for him.

"Welcome, Strange. I wondered when you would put in an appearance."

"I know you," Strange said, but then his words died in his mind as the face of evil overwhelmed him, and he had seen more than his fair share in his time, so threw off the fear and met his foe with defiance. "You do not have this power."

"You do not know the powers that I possess," his enemy said. "The amulet is destroyed and I am finally free, my powers restored and the coming prepared for. The end of the world as you know it will soon be here."

"I will fight you," said Strange.

"Once, perhaps, but my powers have grown exponentially and now it would take two Sorcerer Supreme's to best me."

"False bravado..." Strange said. "I am Sorcerer Supreme. I am..."

"Forget." The simple command washed over his mystic defences and Strange looked up at the Empire State Building. There was a reason he was here, but what was it? His brow furrowed as he tried to sense any mystical energies at work, but there was nothing.

"How... strange," he said to himself and began walking back to his Sanctum Sanctorum.

In his office at the United Nations, the Secretary General gave a low chuckle. Everything was ready, and the time was coming.

GW Bridge looked at the man beside him, and though he wasn't a doctor he didn't need a degree to see that he was dying. Brian Braddock had once been a hero, a valiant one as well, but now he was just a normal man, the powers that had once been his were long gone and even though he had known that he had jumped in to the fray.

He was no match for Hellios and he had been badly injured and though the medical unit given to him by Honey Lemon was in place, there was only so much it could do, and they were running out of time. Using HERMES to get him out there was too risky with his injuries and this battle was not quite going the way they had hoped.

Yes, they had taken down one of the Hellios soldiers, and Darkstar was doing her best to contain two others, but the rest were not doing so well. Other than their Hellios anyway and that fight looked to be going towards a standstill. They could feel the shockwaves being generated from each blow and Bridge had to wonder how much punishment they could actually take. The first Hellios had been able to withstand quite a lot.

Plus he was also diverting his attention between Braddock and Armory and he had to admit it was quite a strain to do both, but he would endure it. Hellios Omicron was still not finding a way to breach the adamantium shell of the unit but it's strikes were shaking up the inside of the unit and doing some minor systems damage, and Bridge knew it was only a matter of time before the impacts dislodged something vital and the thing stopped working. He wondered if he should speak with Forge when they got back about working in a way of adding vibranium in to the mix, something that had often been tried but never successfully repeated since the creation of Captain America's shield. However that was later.

He looked at the other members of the team and he could see that USAgent was in trouble. His energy shield had started to destabilise and it was going to be minutes if not seconds before it collapsed and he was at the mercy of Epsilon.

"SAVITAR!" he called, using the voice amplifier built in to the Armory controls to get Neal's attention. "Agent!" It was only two words, but it was enough for Savitar to turn his attack on Gamma to a two pronged assault on Gamma and Epsilon, giving Walker time to get his breath back, but Bridge knew they were running out of time. Hellios was too powerful and they had no weaknesses that they could use. They needed reinforcements and quickly.

Union Jack was thinking exactly the same thing, that Hellios was too powerful, too

fast and that there was no way he could cope with all of the man's powers at once. He was thinking and thinking quickly, wondering what he was going to do because the body armour Brian had given him was doing well enough, but it was making him anything like Captain Britain. He wasn't built to absorb the energies that Brian's physiology was, nor was the suit calibrated for him even if it was. Plus as he understood it there wasn't a great deal of energy around since the destruction of the lighthouse nexus point.

He pushed the thoughts of Brian out of his mind, thinking of his friend and mentor hurt as he would be a distraction he didn't need. Percival Rockford was just a man who had a talent of inventing things and had worked for MI-6. The usual attacks he had been trained in didn't work because Heliios was invulnerable so he couldn't immobilise him as he'd been trained. There had to be something, a weak point in the man's body a spot that could be seen, something that... Something clicked.

His eyes.

The energy blasts that came from his eyes, which meant... Rock smiled. He had an idea, but it was going to be close and he was pretty sure this would only work the once but he figured what the hell? If it failed he was dead anyway and instead of beating a retreat he stood his ground, working on the battle suit, seeing if he could get the force-field to work at all. He'd been tinkering with it since the first mission and while it gave him a certain amount of protection, it wasn't what it should have been.

"So you have had enough, little man?" Omega said, triumph in his voice.

"Yeah, I've had enough of this," said Union Jack, smiling behind his mask. "Bring it on..." Omega's hands glowed with solar energy and he fired a blast of power at him and Rock hoped he had his calculations right. The blast struck him, throwing him back but that was because of the impact on the force-field which ricocheted the blast back at Omega, hitting him in the eyes. Omega cried out as his powers struck him. This was not a feedback effect, this was an assault on himself with his own powers.

Rock smiled as Omega fell to his knees his hands over his eyes. His eyes were in effect miniature fusion reactors, and while his hands were the same, his eyes let light in so he could see, meaning that they were exposed. So adding the energy of one reactor to another overloaded in and burnt it out. Or that was the theory and it seemed to have worked. The downside was that the battle suit was shorted. He could feel the electricity surging through the suit and he knew it was ruined. Brian would be able to help him fix it and he stole a glance at the fallen hero only to see someone enter with Honey Lemon, someone he hadn't expected.

"Meggan," he said and suddenly he had hope that this could be the turning point of the battle.

"This isn't good. They're putting up a good battle, but they're hopelessly outmatched."

"I know. Look at Brian... Can use this equipment to zoom in on him? I want to see him,"

"Do you really need to? I mean what good will it do?"

"I guess you're right. I just need to do something. In fact, I'm going in. Bridge and I may have had our difference in the past, but... they need my help."

"Yes, but after everything that's happened, the last thing we need is you in eyes of the media."

"Sometimes doing the smart thing isn't doing the right thing. If it was, none of us would be here."

"I understand. What should I tell N... Okay, if he asks, I'll think of something..."

"Hauptmann!" cried Sabra as she watched the German hero go flying across the room, and he slowly rose to his feet, but it was too slowly and Pi was on him again, having gained the upper hand in the battle and the German was flagging. His uniform was torn his body was bruised but he kicked out, but Pi simply laughed and Hauptman cried out as the man's hands grew hotter and hotter, leaving hand shaped burns on him and he knew that the Greek was taking his time.

Sabra pushed herself forwards, having taken Beta down again with another nerve shot, using her Mossad training to it's utmost and she knew she had to be fast to save her colleague but she wasn't fast enough. The brace she wore to help her back was slowing her down and the stench of cooking flesh entered the air and Hauptmann cried out.

"NO!" shouted Sabra, just as Meggan and Honey Lemon entered and Meggan grabbed Hellios, her form shifting to match the man's bulk and power and Pi dropped his target as a new one had gained his attention. He turned to see who dared and his eyes opened wide when he saw it was a woman, allowing Meggan to hit him with a punch that sent him through the wall and out of the building.

"Damn," said USAgent as he looked on. He'd not seen that coming, but he could see

that Gamma had gotten away from Savitar and was going after the lady. Agent grimaced as he pulled the pad from his gauntlet. His energy shield didn't have much left on it and he set it to overload and ignoring the pain as he held it he threw the energy shield at the Helliios. "Catch asshole!" he shouted and Gamma turned as the shield was about to strike him and caught it.

"Nice try," he said and then the shield exploded in his face and Gamma fell to the floor, stunned.

"Very," said Union Jack, patting walker on the back. However with Alpha and Prime still going at each other there were still three super soldiers left. Rock did a quick head count and he didn't like what he saw. Hauptmann was down, he was out of power, walker had used the last of his tricks and Darkstar was having enough trouble keeping Iota and Kappa down, as they were struggling against her hold and it was taking much of her concentration to keep them out of the fight. That left Savitar, Sabra, Meggan and Armory, while Honey Lemon did what she could for Hauptmann and Bridge looked over Braddock.

"How in trouble are we?" asked USAgent, his usual bravado replaced with tiredness as his injuries at the hands of Dr Doom were not yet fully faded and this was just a little too much right now.

"I don't know," said Rock. "It depends how quickly the other Helliios' recover." He was thinking to how much their Helliios had taken, how his powers had faded, but he had used everything he had left to keep on going and it had eventually burnt him out. Of course the Commando's had firstly taken him out with telepathic assaults as well as physical ones and they taken a lot of his blood for testing and that had played a significant part in his death. These soldiers were not that cursed.

"SABRA!" called USAgent as he watched Beta fire an energy blast at her. She turned and moved, not realising he had recovered as quickly as she had hoped and it glanced off her arm, throwing her balance and she fell from the sky and hit the floor, where Omicron was waiting as Epsilon attacked Savitar, turning his attention away from Armory. Savitar tried to get away from Epsilon but energy blast met energy blast.

"Armory's not responding!" shouted Bridge, the horror echoing in his voice, and Meggan started to move towards where Sabra lay, trying to recover from the fall, but her legs didn't work and she knew that the brace was damaged, but before Meggan could get anywhere as Pi re-entered.

"Round two, bitch," he said and Union Jack started to run, because all of them remembered the last time Sabra had been beaten, while they'd been able to do nothing, but he knew he wasn't going to be in time and just as Omicron brought his foot down on Sabra' head she was gone in a puff of smoke as brimstone filled the air.

"Was that a bamf?" Rock said as Omicron looked at the floor.

"Ja," said a voice and he turned to see a dark furred man standing there, Sabra in his hands. "I was in the neighbourhood..."

"Nightcrawler," said Union Jack. "You're Nightcrawler." Kurt Wagner smiled then shoved Union Jack out of the way as he vanished in his own inimitable style as Omicron fired a blast of heat at them. "Thanks," he said, to wherever his saviour had ended up and he could see the former X-Man teleporting and punching as fast as he could, keeping Omicron off guard. He wasn't doing much damage but he was keeping him distracted while Bridge tried to get Armory to give him a hand.

"Maybe we can win this yet," Rock muttered and went to get Sabra out of the way, but his hopes were dashed from a cry of triumph from Alpha, hovering in the air with Prime lifted over his head and then he slammed him to the floor, leaving a crater and the shockwave threw everyone from their feet, hero and Hellios alike.

"It's time to send the world a message they'll never forget!"

Then solar fire seared from his fists.

"The game is in play." She looked at the pieces in play and wished that somehow she could help or influence things, but this was out of her hands.

"I know. The return must be ensured, so that this matter can be ended, once and for all." He moved the pieces about the board, looking at the opposing row. The black king was huddled in the corner, protected from his attacks. At least for now. Then one of the black knights moved in to position and power flared.

"Father!"

"Relax," he said, with a knowing calm, as he picked up another piece. "Everything is planned for. I know what I'm doing." He put the piece in the arena. "There's only one piece missing now, and that will come later." He smiled. "Humans are so easily manipulated..."

Alpha smiled as he struck the blow and Prime knew that this could not continue and he let his colleague strike him, hoping to sneak on him later, but he underestimated the power of Alpha and as he fell back he tried to shake off the blow, thinking he was stronger than he knew and he wondered how much of a mistake he made. Before he hit the floor, Alpha had him and held him aloft. He gave a cry of triumph and Prime was slammed in to the floor at great speed.

Prime winced in pain as he hit the floor and he knew it would take a moment to recover, if Alpha let him, but it wasn't himself he was worried about as he knew that if he had underestimated his strength, Alpha may have underestimated his resilience and may consider him out. If that was true Alpha would focus on the others. The impact of him hitting the floor had sent out a shockwave. He looked up and tried to move but couldn't and he saw Alpha hovering in the air.

"It's time to send the world a message they'll never forget!" Then solar fire seared from his fists towards the helpless heroes and Prime forced himself to stand, sweat pouring from his brow, and as he stood he almost fell over again as he saw the scene before him.

A young red-headed woman was containing Alpha's energy blast, seemingly holding it at bay with nothing. Telekinetic, she had to be and from the looks on people's faces she was familiar to some of them at least.

"If someone wants to help..." she called out and Prime flew up, grabbing Alpha and taking him up in to the air, through the roof of the building and high up in to the sky.

Union Jack was in awe. During his time being trained by Brian he had heard of Excalibur and their missions, and he had also seen a great deal on the news about them and their activities as well, but to have four of the five original members here before him... It was beyond belief. He had been amazed when Nightcrawler had arrived and that had developed on the arrival of Phoenix.

Rachel Summers may not have had the powers of her prime but she was still a powerful psion in her own right and she had saved them all from what would have been a devastating onslaught from Hellios Alpha and now she was taking on each of the remaining Hellios super-soldiers one at a time, using her telepathy to battle them. It was too much for her to take out all of them at once, but she was doing what she could, leaving the others to get busy fighting.

Rachel's plan was clever, taking on one of the Hellios's being held by Darkstar, so that the Russian could then restrain another of them. It didn't take long for Rachel to take one of them down, and Darkstar reacted quickly grabbing hold of another, and Rachel was working even faster on the second one as the blocks of the Hellios were the same as the first and this time she knew what she was doing..

Plus the impact of Hellios Prime hitting the floor had shaken up Armory and put his system back online which was enabling him to take Omicron on again as well. The odds were being evened, as Savitar matched Epsilon and Pi took on Meggan. That left Beta who had USAgent by the throat and was slowly trying to choke the life from him, but the former Captain America was using his own strength to try and force the might hand away and though he knew he would lose, he hoped he could buy himself enough time to ensure that someone saved him.

"WALKER!" cried Union Jack and looked around for something, anything, to help his team-mate. Then Sabra cried out as Gamma grabbed hold of her legs as he crawled along the floor and Rock looked around in angst. Darkstar had grabbed hold of Omega, whom he'd disabled earlier and she'd left the stunned Gamma alone. It was understandable given that there was so much going on, they all looked alike and the shockwave had thrown everyone, but it left them in trouble. Sabra was the most vulnerable because she still wasn't 100% and the brace that she wore to help her walk... Rock had an idea and he needed to move quickly.

He ran over to where USAgent was being strangled and grabbed on of walker's handguns.

"'ELP!" spluttered walker, but Rock ignored him. He had to if he was to save Sabra and he pointed at her and fired. This was going to hurt her, but she'd be alive. He'd read the specs for the device and he knew where it was weakest, and it the bullet struck the aluminium rods. Sabra cried out in pain as the system shook and her body responded as the rods fell apart. The bullet didn't enter her body as the rods took the burnt of it, but it still hurt. The rods fell apart and she pushed on, her clothing tearing as she did so, leaving Gamma holding scraps of cloth and a damaged aluminium piping.

Then something strange happened - the rods began to glow and Gamma tried to shake them loose but couldn't and then they detonated sending a surge of energy and Gamma screamed as his arms detonated with it.

"What the hell was that?" asked Bridge, as he looked on and Sabra looked at him and shook her head. It was as big a surprise to her as it was to everyone else, and what if that had happened while she had been wearing them? Or more importantly, what if she'd been meant to. It was worrying in either case. Meanwhile Rock had turned his attention back to Walker, who was grabbed by Nightcrawler and teleported out of the way, leaving Beta holding empty air and that moment's distraction allowed Rachel to hit him with her powers and taken him down as well.

Bridge sighed, thinking it was a good job these two had shown up, otherwise they'd all be dead right now and the world would have been in one hell of a lot of trouble. Armory was holding it's own again against Omicron, which suited him but he was more concerned about Braddock, whom Honey Lemon was keeping an eye on. The shockwave had shaken him up, and that was the last thing he needed and it had made things worse. He'd started to cough blood and Bridge knew they were losing him. He'd seen injuries like that before and there was nothing he could do.

Then he heard a thud and he saw Meggan throw Pi to the floor and he did not move and she came over to her husband.

"BRIAN!" she called and she looked at him.

"Hullo, love," he said, responding to her voice and she looked at Honey Lemon who shook her head and Meggan's shape changed and her body sparkled and shone and she gripped hold of Braddock's hand and he too began to twinkle. Bridge watched for a moment and then looked back at the ruined chamber. Excalibur was still standing, mostly, and the enemy had been taken out, thanks to the timely intervention of Nightcrawler and Phoenix, if that was what name she used. Bridge wasn't sure and he knew he ought to ask Cable the next time he saw him.

"That's that then," said Rachel, with a sigh. Taking out the Hellios super-soldiers hadn't exactly been hard work, but it had been quite intense and she'd not given her powers that kind of work out in a long time.

"Just leaves Alpha and Prime," said Bridge, shaking his head. "We'd better get out there and help him, just in case."

"Okay," said Rachel and reached out with her mind. "Oh, God," she said as she went white. "We'd better hurry."

"Why?" asked Bridge.

"We may be too late," she replied.

"Get me out there," Bridge said. "Darkstar, you're with me!"

"I don't know who that was," Hellios Prime said as he took Alpha up in to the sky, "but I'm glad she showed up."

"Let go of me!" Hellios Alpha cried, but his arms were pinned by Prime as they flew up and up, as the air became thinner and colder.

"Not likely," Prime managed to say and Alpha kicked out at him, hitting him in the gut, but still Prime did not let go. Then he let him go, and Alpha dropped slightly before regaining his ability to fly, but Prime was ready for him, and he unleashed everything he had on Alpha - energy beams shot from his eyes and hands, striking at his former brother pushing him down. Alpha tried to fight back but he was too off guard and the extremes of intense heat and intense cold were getting to him.

"No," he said, "it cannot end like this..." He fought back with his own powers, but this close to the upper reaches of Earth's atmosphere they were close to the sun and Alpha was just that touch closer, ensuring that the air was thinner and the protection of Earth's atmosphere was not as strong, making him slightly more powerful, and Alpha's attack was driven back, and dissipated, allowing Prime to get in a clear shot and Alpha's defences were breached. Both of them had fought hard and the serum in their veins was working overtime, and they knew there couldn't be too much left to go for either of them, though they knew they could dig deep.

The original Hellios had proven that, but Prime knew that time was running out and that an end was needed.

"I have had enough of this, and I have had enough of you!" Prime shouted as he slammed his fists down on to the other super soldier, not giving Alpha any quarter, any chance at all of fighting back, because he knew that one way or another this battle had to end. The only way for that to happen was to kill Alpha, and that was what he would do. "Forgive me," he said and he headed down to wards the Earth again, letting gravity and his own power work with him and he forced Hellios Alpha down, sending them both hurtling to the floor.

The planet came towards them at a tremendous rate and if Alpha was aware of it then he showed no sign, as if the attacks had disorientated him and he no longer knew which way was up or which way was down and Prime knew that in all likelihood neither of them would survive the impact. He did not want to die, but if that was what it took to end this then that was what he would do.

Hellios was meant to be a hero and these misguided creatures had ruined that in their arrogance and ambition, but if he could commit one final heroic act then maybe the books would be balanced and he, the Hellios Project and Greece would not be judged too harshly.

He closed his eyes and he let go of his brother, knowing that it was too late for them and he waited for the impact to happen but he felt nothing. He cautiously opened his eyes to find himself surrounded in darkness and he wondered if this was what death felt like. It had not been as painful as he had anticipated and then light broke through and he could see shining in the light a female figure, her blond hair shimmering in the light.

"Am I dead? Is this heaven?" he asked and the figure gave a smile and then there was enough light to see her face. "Darkstar..." Her gave a sigh, then a smile and then he laughed in relief. "I thought..."

"Yes," she said, "it was close, but I managed to save you. Both of you." Prime gasped and she shook her head. "Do not worry about him. He is going nowhere. His mind is currently off, as it were." Hellios looked at her and then he could see Rachel Summers standing there, a knowing look on her face and he thought that for someone so young she seemed to have eyes that were so aged and wise and he nodded to her.

"Is it over?" he asked then, seeing GW Bridge.

"Yeah," he said. "It's more or less over. We came out of this okay. We were lucky. Braddock though..." He shook his head.

"He's dying," Rachel said. "I can feel it. He has too many internal injuries, and Meggan's doing... something to him. I can feel her using the Alshra to repair the wounds, but..."

"The what?" asked Bridge.

"It's an energy force, a level f reality she can access in her true form," Rachel said. "It's powerful. Very powerful, but it cannot work miracles. Brian's lost too much blood. He'd need a transfusion, but he has a very rare blood type, with his being only half human. It's almost ours, but just different enough so that none of us can help him."

"Who else has his blood?" Hellios asked, an idea forming.

"His sister Elisabeth, and his brother Jamie," she said. "Neither of whom will get here in time, and though there is a source back at Braddock Manor in the UK, we'll not make it their in time either."

"Take me to him," said Helliios and they looked at him. "Please." Bridge shrugged. He didn't know enough about Helliios to argue and if he thought he could help Braddock then fine. Forge had radioed in that there was some kind of problem with the HERMES system, due to the Behemoth having to be evacuated of all non-essential personnel as there was a major battle going on between Godzilla and some other creature, and so the three super-humans lifted off to go see Braddock, leaving Bridge to watch over the comatose Helliios Alpha.

"He'd better not wake up," Bridge muttered, crossing his fingers behind his back.

Inside the ruined building, Union Jack, Nightcrawler and Meggan were standing by their friend. Meggan was crying, because she knew even with her powers there was not enough she could do to save him and Kurt knealt down.

"I know you do not believe, mein freund," he said, "but I can hear anything you wish to say."

"It's okay, Kurt," Brian said, his voice a hoarse croak, "but thank you for the offer. I've died before. I'm ready."

"I'm not," said Meggan. "I don't know what I'll do without you."

"Be strong, love," he said, looking in to her eye. "Tell Betsy I love her." He gave a cough and looked to Rock. "You should never have been Union Jack."

"I didn't want it then, I don't want it now," Rock said, knowing they'd had this talk before. "I can't..."

"You can do it. There must always be a Captain Britain. When I'm gone, that leaves you." He took hold of the man's leg. "Please."

"Okay," said Rock, with reluctance in his voice. "But I'll never be you."

"No, you'll be better." Brian gasped in pain and Meggan covered his body with hers,

tears flowing from her eyes.

"I love you," she said.

"I love you too," he whispered, his voice so soft that only she could hear it. Kurt patted Union Jack on the shoulder and walked towards the bodies that the Hellios attack had left and Rock turned away, giving them the Braddock's their last moment together and then he saw them coming through the roof - Rachel, Laynia and Helios and they landed as softly as possible, Hellios staggering slightly.

"Excuse me," he said to them. "I can save you, if you'll let me."

"You're from Otherworld?" Brian asked psionically, linked to Hellios' mind by Rachel.

"No," the Greek answered, "but my blood has different properties because of the alien serum that is in my veins. I know there is not much of it left after the battle, but it does have the affect of altering my blood work so that I have powers. It may help prolong your life until we get you your own blood."

"Do it," said Meggan, without a second thought, and Honey Lemon came over.

"I have a kit here," she said, reaching in to her pouch. "I can fit you up."

"Work quickly," said Meggan and the Japanese heroine went to work on Hellios and Brian as the others watched on.

"There may be side-effects from this," said Rock as he watched from Kurt's side. Of everyone here he felt he could connect best with Nightcrawler because of their relationships with Brian.

"She knows," said Kurt, looking at Meggan and thinking he had never seen her more scared and he had known her a very long time. "But it's a risk you take when you're in love. I'll stick around Braddock Manor for a while, in case she needs help."

"Me too," said Rock. "Percival Rockford."

"Kurt Wagner," Kurt said and shook hands. Time would tell what this would do to Brian, but if it kept him alive that was fine. It not only meant his friend was

still here, it meant that he didn't have to take up the mantle of Captain Britain.

In his heart Rock knew he wasn't ready.

Kurt left and went over to speak to Rachel and the two friends embraced. It had been a while since they had seen each other, and it was something good for the both of them.

"Look at you," said Kurt. "Leader of a religion."

"Look at you," said Rachel in return. "Religious troubleshooter."

"Ah, Rachel," Kurt replied with a smile. "What brought you here?"

"Cable's a friend of Bridge's, Brian's a friend of mine and Nate's busy with his girlfriend or some terrorists on the other side of the world, so I popped by instead. My students can get by without me for a little while, and Prosh will tell Cable where I am, if he asks. What about you?"

"I knew Brian was speaking today and seeing as I am not far from here I thought I would visit," said the German. "I'm glad I did. This could have been very messy otherwise."

"It's not going to help that Meggan's powers have been revealed," said Rachel, looking at the cameras. "The secret will be out now."

"We'll deal with the revelations about the identity of Captain Britain later on," said Kurt. "Right now we need to make sure Brian survives."

"He will," Rachel said, looking at their friend. "He'll be fine."

"God willing," said Kurt, his hand resting on the crucifix under his shirt. "God willing."

Forge nodded as he watched the screen, thinking the meeting of the old Excalibur and the new had been overdue. He turned and nodded to Kitty who had been watching with him and he smiled.

She gave a nod and then went to see how Pete was doing, in the SHIELD infirmary. She regretted that she couldn't have been with her old team, but X-Force work meant she couldn't. She sighed.

Missing out wasn't easy.

"The pawns have all been removed on both sides," he said and smiled. "Only the major pieces are left now. Well, all but one." He moved the pawn to the final row on the other side of the board and when he took his hand away, the pawn became a knight. "Everything has a reason."

"He will not be the same."

"He will be close enough. I shall let him rest, and we shall make random moves to stall each other and he looked down at the bishop he had not yet moved. "Her time will come soon enough, no matter who else is using her. My ambitions take precedence over those of mortal men and women, no matter how powerful they consider themselves."

"Is that not what he is though, father?" she asked, looking at the Black King. "He is just mortal."

"Playing an immortal game on a level he isn't aware of yet," he said. "That makes him dangerous and I cannot yet confront him directly. We do not have the position to stop him this time. There are no random variables at play, no other enemies watching my moves. This time I play the game, I play it one last time."

"Last time?"

"I will have taught you everything, my dear. You may think I already have, but no. I have one last lesson to show you."

"How we doing?" said Bridge as he came in to the command office of Forge.

"We are doing fine," said the SHIELD Director. "The rest is going to hell, but we're fine." He sighed as he looked at his new look office, an office designed so he could do his job more in line with what his superiors at the UN wanted. The battle in Greece between Excalibur and the Greek Super Soldiers was just over two weeks ago, the loss of Pete Wisdom and Katherine Pryde to Hydra just under. Adding to that the damage suffered to the Behemoth in the battle with Godzilla and Fin Fang Foom, he'd been called to task, and some redefining of his role had taken place.

It was generally agreed that SHIELD as an organisation was too large for him to deal with properly and he worked through a number of sub-directors, or what he had called Project Directors. Before hand, Forge had endeavoured to visit all of the projects once a week and that had led the Security Council to consider the fact he may be letting other things slip by him. Forge had argued for him to be in charge, he needed to know what was going on at all times and the meeting had lasted two days before a compromise was reached.

Each Project Director was now connected to Forge's office, their computers and the computers of their staff feeding in to the main room and each office was under Forge's careful eye. He trusted the staff to do their jobs but he needed to know what was going on so that he could keep a check on things. The walls were covered in monitors so that he could call up anything he didn't quite feel was right. It was not as personal as he wanted, but it would do. He had also installed a data feed in to his bionic arm so that he could upload the main points of the information of the day to his brain while he slept, using the same pathways to his brain that commanded the bionics to work.

He looked at the Excalibur Commander and he knew why he was here. "How's the trial going?"

"Dr Day Vangela," said Bridge, his voice full of disdain, "is unrepentant and she wishes the Arab bitch had died in the explosion like she was meant to."

"Wonderful," said Forge. Day Vangela had been the doctor assigned to help Sabra heal from her injuries but at the same time Vangela had been plotting her death in what seemed to be retaliation for the attack on the world Trade Centre. The fact that Sabra was from Israel and Jewish was beside the point. Vangela had a point to prove and she felt by striking at Excalibur was the way to do it.

It was lucky that the bomb had gone off in the face of one of the Hellios agents and not Sabra, who was not as shaken up as others might have been. Vangela had been arrested and was now facing a SHIELD tribunal, whose powers were the same as any military court, but could be applied only to active members of SHIELD. It was not something that Forge could attend personally as he'd been ordered not to as it was felt he was too close to the case, but he wanted to know what was going on, and Bridge had been giving his testimony.

"Attempted murder," said Bridge. "She's going away for a long time."

"Good," said Forge. "Actually, I'm glad you're here. I want to talk to you about something."

"Oh?" said GW, sitting down. "What's going on?"

"I'm working on redefining a few things within SHIELD and I want to see how things sounded to you."

"What's on your mind?"

"I want to create a section of SHIELD to do what the X-Men don't do anymore."

"Stay shut up?" said Bridge, thinking of the spectacle that had been the announcement of X-Corp.

"No," said Forge, with a suppressed smile. "I meant policing things in terms of mutant activities. If the current situation with the Shadow King is anything to go by, we're seriously unprepared for anything that could happen."

"You're talking about the XSE," said Bridge. "I saw the reports and such."

"I am talking about the XSE," said Forge. "Funded and supported by SHIELD but independent, other than their head of operations reporting to me."

"I thought that's what X-Force was," said Bridge.

"It is, but it needs more strength in depth. It needs a clear-cut training programme. It needs changing." Forge looked at him. "You're a former SHIELD Director, you're the lead for the Excalibur Project and your opinion will carry a lot of weight amongst the others. What do you think?"

"Where would Excalibur fit in to this?" Bridge asked. "We're the UN answer to the Avengers, sorting out crises and such that the normal heroes might be in danger of upsetting the status quo. A SHIELD unit that goes in and sorts that out anyway..."

"Mutant issues only," said Forge. "Excalibur shouldn't be affected. I can't guarantee, though, because it's outside my remit."

"Understood," said Bridge and he steepled his fingers. He had seen firsthand what could happen, he had witnessed Operation: Zero Tolerance and been in command of SHIELD when they had been in to shut them down. Since then, there had been little to no agency looking in to the affairs of homo-superior, dealing with the threat of mutant terrorists. It did need doing, but was SHIELD the right way to go? Then again, who better?

"Question - what does XSE stand for?"

"Damned if I know," said Forge. "I'm working on it."

"Huh," said Bridge, expecting some fancy acronymic meaning. "I'll back you. It's a good plan, and it does need doing." Forge nodded.

"It's still a plan for now," he reminded. "There's a long way to go yet." Bridge nodded and stood up. "You're going to get ready?"

"Yes," said GW. There was a developing situation in Europe. Doom had returned and was making hostile moves against his neighbours, including Symkaria. Though Symkaria was not exactly an active member of the UN, Doom's recent actions and Forge speaking on their behalf had ensured that Excalibur had been mobilised and sent in to Eastern Europe, especially as their profile within the European Union had been raised after the last mission. It was a defensive mission, to ensure that if Doom got rambunctious he would be made aware that the United Nations were watching him.

"Good luck," said Forge and Bridge nodded. Luck was always needed when dealing with Dr Doom.

Silver Sable was in the conference room with King Stefan of Symkaria, and her father Ernst, who was normally in charge of the military operations of Symkaria, but she had been put in charge now as their military was now comprised of enlisted Symkarians and Silver's Wild Pack. Their mercenary duties had been suspended for the moment until the crisis with Latveria was dealt with, more or less. It was the most secure room in the city, and it was also the command point for Excalibur, so Sabra was also in the conference while the rest of the squad were patrolling the borders around Latveria.

Hungray, Croatia and Serbia were also concerned about Doom's activities, especially the new weapon he had, as they were Latveria's nearest neighbours and they had spent

a long time putting themselves back together after years of war and unrest in the area. The destruction of Feasalburg had been shown on the world news networks, and though Doom had denied he had fired the weapon, everyone knew it came from Latveria. And there were being many questions asked about how Doom had gained a sentinel army, an army that now stood at the borders.

The UN had petitioned Doom to cease his hostilities and Doom had laughed and, because once he had dealt with the minor countries, they were worried they would be next. Serbia was as concerned as Hungary and Doom had said that any incursion in to Latverian territory would be an act of war and he would respond in kind. The Wild Pack had been thusly hired by their neighbours to patrol and ensure that Doom did not go any further, but they were no match for the Sentinels. That was where Excalibur came in.

As Silver checked on the status of the various Wild Pack units, Sabra looked at the screens. The technology of the conference room had been spliced with the SHIELD satellite feeds. Darkstar was with USAgent in Hungary, Honey Lemon had accompanied Union Jack to Serbia. Savitar and Helioid were in Croatia and Hauptmann and Armory were in Romania. Sabra was working the Armory system while Bridge was Stateside and she was amazed herself by what the system was capable of.

However, so far Doom had done nothing to the neighbouring countries, other than Symkaria, and it was thought that was down to the presence of Excalibur. Doom would indeed risk the wrath of the UN, but Excalibur could and would do serious damage and they would pull in SHIELD and then things would get ugly. It was the situation between Latveria and Symkaria that was the concern to most people because if Doom chose to invade, then there would be little that could be done.

"All teams report that Doom is keeping quiet, but the Sentinels have everyone on edge," said Silver as Stefan nodded.

"There has been no word from Doom or any of his people," he said. "I have tried petitioning him, but there is a cold war between us that may escalate."

"We did what we felt was right, Stefan," Silver said, seeing the concern on his face as to how they had come to this place. "The LNDR were a legitimate refugee cause and it would have been wrong to turn them away. I made a mistake in sending in the Black Widow and we have not heard from her since."

"There is a rumour that she is in Russia," said Sabra, interjecting. "Darkstar's husband is looking in to it for us, unofficially." Sable nodded.

"What does SHIELD believe Doom's next move will be?" asked Stefan.

"We believe," said Bridge as he entered the room, "that Doom is waiting for

something. His incursion at the UN Building to get Reed Richards was an open act of hostility towards the United Nations and he will not tolerate our presence for much longer, but the presence of Excalibur keeps people in a comfort zone."

"So what do we do?" said Silver.

"I've discussed this with Forge, who has been speaking with his bosses at the UN," said Bridge. "This comes from the Secretary General himself. The UN feels that there should be a covert mission in to Latveria, to take down the sentinel controls and more than that - we need to decommission his weapons. If the playing field is levelled then we can move away from the area, otherwise we're going to be here a long time."

"Our last incursion failed," said Sable.

"Yes," said Bridge, "which is why we need to be careful on this one. More than likely Doom will be expecting it, which is why he has the Sentinels there. As a proportion of my team have mutant abilities, they would activate them on crossing the border. Plus we don't know where there are more of them stored. Doom's not a man to play all his cards at once."

"How do we do this then?" Sabra asked. "We know from our operation at the Latverian embassy that he can block HERMES."

"We also know that the sentinels have been adapted for his needs," said Bridge. "Forge went over the plans and he's got this in mind." He placed a CD in the computer and Raul Quintino came over in the chair he designed after he had been injured on a Wild Pack mission. He was the technical genius behind most of Silver's technological armoury and he knew what he was looking at.

"I can do that," he said. "Yes, I'm sure we can. What else do you need?"

"Silver, we'll need an operative of the Wild Pack," said Bridge. "I want Sandman."

"Ever since his ordeals at the hand of Ashley Kafka, he's been off-duty," Silver said. She thought back to a conversation she'd had with Spider-Man, a conversation that he'd used to tell her that William Baker needed her, not as an employer but as someone who needed a friend. He'd not told her everything, but she had used the Wild Pack A-Team to hunt down their former member and though it had taken everything they'd had to find him, they'd done so and they had worked hard since to undo the damage done to him by Kafka and the Wizard.

She had sent him to infiltrate the Frightful Four but she had not realised he had

been compromised until he had been arrested and sent to prison, and there was nothing she had been able to do to free him. Then she had lost contact with him when he escaped and it was only when Spider-Man told her what had happened that she went after him.

"I understand that," said Bridge, "but he's got powers that we could use. He can arrange things for us well enough."

"Who else is on the strike force?" asked Sable.

"Darkstar, Helioid, Union Jack and Honey Lemon," Bridge replied. "That way we still have people on the outside patrolling. If we don't make a move now, Doom will do something in the future we'll have no chance against."

"And Symkaria will be first," said Ernst Sablinova, Silver's father. "This needs to be done. History is littered with moments where we did not make the first move and despite everything we have done, look at Hydra now - all because nobody took the threat of their origins seriously."

"You are correct, old friend," said Stefan. "I think it is a move that needs to be made. We have come this far."

"I will ask Sandman if he wants to do this," said Silver, concerned that this was happening so quickly. A plan had been formed and it was time to get everyone together and make it happen.

At the United Nations building, the Secretary General smiled. This was almost too easy. SHIELD were distracted, the world was focused on Latveria, and Dr Strange had been humbled before his power. The Sorcerer Supreme was unaware that anything had ever happened.

The only thorn in his side was the accursed Shadow King, but it didn't matter. The signs were there and it was only a matter of time. All the players had been accounted for and there was nobody on Earth who could stop the Ascension. This world would belong to his masters, and through them, it would belong to him.

It was just a matter of time.

"Here you go," said Quentino, as the strike team assembled. "These devices will

enable you to get past the sentinels undetected." Forge's creations had been very clever in their construction, rendering the wearer invisible to all detection capabilities the sentinels possessed, especially the metahuman ability detection ones, for which Darkstar was particularly grateful. Whatever arsenal they had been given it would be difficult to pit it against the Darkforce, but since Darkstar had taken down the Queen Invisible, it was a given that Doom would have been working on something for her. "I've had others sent to the rest of Excalibur."

"Good work," said Silver as she looked at the five members of the team. "Sandman, you don't have to do this."

"Gotta start pulling my weight again, silver," he said. "I got a lot of things to make up for and if I can help these guys, then it's start."

"Second chances are what Excalibur is based on," Bridge said. "Ask Savitar. Okay, now you know what to do and how to do it. We know that there are Doombot patrols across the country, but we don't know how they've been enhanced since the obtaining of Sentinel tech. However we all know they were dangerous before."

"If something goes wrong, you are on your own," said Ernst. "Make no mistake, if you fail, then we all have and it's going to get bloody and you'll be dead before we are."

"Comforting," said Bridge. "We know the risks, we know the stakes we're playing for. Doom's not someone who is easily stopped and this setback may only be temporary, but it will show him we're not willing to put up with this anymore, and if he wants to keep going, we'll slap him down."

"Good luck," said Silver and then Operation: Sword Stroke began.

Forge looked at the data on the Sentinels that had been retrieved. It had occurred to him as he watched the screens that he had missed something, and he had cursed himself for doing so. The new breed of Sentinel had to have been manufactured over here, because the designs were over here. Which meant there had to be prototypes out there somewhere and on US soil.

That officially made it SHIELD business and he knew he had to do something about it. He activated his science console and tapped a few keys, using the data he'd collected from the designs, and the readings he'd been sent from Union Jack and Honey Lemon via Armory. There was a frequency between them, like a sentinel version of telepathy and Forge used what he knew to quickly build something that could be added to the computer systems and be used to detect any signals on that waveband. He hooked it up and tapped in to the satellites and scanned the United States and a

signal came to his attention. A large signal and he focused in on it.

Georgetown, Massachusetts.

That was where they were, and a spectro-graphic analysis wouldn't reveal much more than that, but there were very few places there that you could hide a sentinel army. Ideally he'd send in X-Force but with the team depleted as they were, it needed something else, someone else and Forge smiled. He knew just the person. Or should he say people. He pressed the comm button to his assistant.

"Angela, could you get me Sharon Carter. I've a job for her. Then see if you can find Tony Stark..."

"So far so good," said Helioid as they made their way in to the Latverian countryside, heading for Doomstadt itself.

"The devices are working fine," said Union Jack, softly. They had also been covered in a layer of dark force so that they were masked from any prying eyes and that was good enough.

"So you're a silicon based life-form," said Honey Lemon to Sandman, and Baker nodded.

"There was an accident at a nuclear plant. Got hit with radiation and was transformed," he said. "I've used my powers for a lot of bad things in my life, and I've not done a great deal of good. I thought I was getting somewhere when I helped the Avengers but things went bad, and now I'm here - trying to make amends."

"A worthy goal," said Darkstar. "The power of the atom has much to atone for. Mutant powers are just the tip of it all."

"Guys..." said Rock, "look at that."

"You have to be kidding me," said Sandman. "How many Doombots are there?"

"Dozens," said Rock, using a pair of micro binoculars. "Looks like there's something going on in the area. They don't seem to be after us."

"What is it?" asked Hellios.

"A light show of kind," said Rock. "And it's widening."

"A dimensional rift," said Honey Lemon, watching. "It's all that I can think of to fit the description."

"I think we have a problem," said Darkstar and they looked at her to see her sweating. "I can't keep the Darkforce in check. There's a disruption..."

"The Darkforce is drawing the rift this way!" said Rock in realisation.

"And the Doombots with it," said Hellios. "We're in trouble..." Then a figure fell from the sky and landed on the floor with a thud. Hellios flew over to see who or what had just arrived, thinking he would be able to handle anything that came their way better than the others and he could see the man was normally a fine of fine clothing, but it had been ruined and his face was scarred and not recognisable as a face.

"It could be Doom," said Hellios to himself, "but then why are the Doombots that interested. And why is there no armour?" Then his covering failed and his normal form was available.

"INTRUDER!" said a voice and Hellios could see the Doombots had him and the others surrounded. "YOU HAVE VIOLATE THE SOVEREIGN SOIL OF LATVERIA AND DESECRATED THE WILL OF DOOM! FOR THIS YOU WILL ALL DIE!"

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He had been through this before, he knew he had but it was such a long time ago that he could barely remember it, but he knew almost by instinct what he needed to do and he plunged himself in, using his powers and resources to guide him, finding his way through the maze of reality, trusting to the powers above that he would arrive where he needed to.

The Crossroads of Infinity was not for the unwise traveller, nor was it a hazard free journey and as he moved through it, he watched as a myriad number of worlds passed him, and he was guided by instinct to find the one he needed, the one that would set him back on his path to save that world, and put an end to the force that threatened the multiverse itself.

Reality after reality flickered by and then he felt it, the instinct to stop and without w rod he willed himself to stay where he was, and the magics he wielded combined with the quasi-cosmic forces as he reached out, heading for the place most familiar to him, the place he classed as home and he was forcibly ejected from the Crossroads and he plummeted to Earth, uncontrolled, and he could feel himself being drawn closer to something else and as he fully materialised in this reality he could feel himself bathed in cosmic fire, his clothing being ruined an in a cacophony of light he regained his proper state with a resounding noise that echoed.

The pain was great and he let himself enter a meditative state to regain his strength. He had made it, and soon the endgame would begin.

SCHRASKCKSKSK!!!

The echoing thud of an arrival drew Hellios over to investigate who or what it was that had arrived, bringing the attention of dozens of Doombots and, more than that, revealing the small strike force that had entered Latveria with the intent of stopping Victor Von Doom and his power-mad schemes, but in case this was a trap by the dictator he alone would have the best chance of dealing with it.

Or perhaps Darkstar he mused but the rift was destabilising her powers and her darkness cover over the strike force being disrupted, she might have become vulnerable, so it was done now and he looked down at the figure. He could see the man was normally a man of fine clothing, but it had been ruined and his face was scarred and not recognisable as a face.

"It could be Doom," said Hellios to himself as he wondered how badly the man was scarred behind the mask, "but then why are the Doombots that interested. And why is there no armour?" Then his covering failed and his normal form was available to be seen by everyone in the immediate area.

"INTRUDER!" said a voice and Hellios could see the Doombots had him and the others surrounded. "YOU HAVE VIOLATE THE SOVEREIGN SOIL OF LATVERIA AND DESECRATED THE WILL

OF DOOM! FOR THIS YOU WILL ALL DIE!"

"Not today!" Helliios said and unleashed his solar blasts, his eyes and hands sending fire at the nearest robots, but the others poured it on against him and even Helliios was put under pressure from the attack, but he was not alone in the fight and he was quickly joined by Sandman, Honey Lemon and Union Jack as Darkstar worked to regain her focus and her powers.

William Baker had not been in action properly since his fight with Spider-Man where he had managed to free himself of the conditioning of the Wizard, but he was eager to prove he had not lost his touch and his lower arms and hands formed to become a hammer and mace, made of compacted sand and the blows he reigned down were like concrete blocks being hurled at the robots, but they fought back with their powers as well, hitting him with gauntlet blasts in an effort to destabilise his silicon based body and he fought to keep himself in tact. He had been destabilised before and pulling himself back together was one of the most painful things he had ever been through.

"There's too many!" said Union Jack as the Doombots kept on coming and coming. "It's as if we're in a Terminator film..." he muttered as he used whatever weapons he had, but they were having little to no effect on the enemies, and Honey Lemon was only being protected by a force field generator she managed to pull out of her utility belt and she knew it was weakening.

"LAYNIA!" she called out to the fifth member of the strike force, but Darkstar shook her head. The rift had somehow sent a ripple effect across the dimensional spectrum and she was having difficulty focusing herself. The Darkforce had undergone changes since the rebirth and she was still getting used to the new aspects of her abilities, and she just knew that using them would cause more problems than it would solve. Whoever the stranger was, he had damned them all, and maybe the very world by his arrival.

Victor Von Doom sat in his palace, watching events on his monitors. He knew that there had been some kind of dimensional incursion halfway between the Latverian and Symkarian borders, with readings off the scale. If he did not know better he would swear that it had been caused by the Crossroads of Infinity, but there were anomalous readings that did not make sense, though they did seem familiar. With the state of play as it was he had sent in a cadre of Doombots to investigate but he was not getting anything from them, other than they were in a battle of some kind.

Doom was not pleased that he was unable to see what was going on and he was doing what he could to rectify things. However he was more pleased by what was occurring in America. SHIELD had sent in a small force to deal with the prototype sentinels he had stored there, accompanied by Captain America and Iron Man and he knew that twelve of them had been activated and he was watching as the heroes were scattered by the sentinels and it seemed as if they were thoroughly defeated until the arrival of a two of the X-Men, and on closer inspection of the scene he recognised the SHIELD agents as X-Force, who had suffered their own problems at the hand of the so-called Shadow King.

Doom was aware of the psionic mutant and he was preparing a response to the forces the creature was gathering. The sentinels were a first step in that plan, as was the super-weapon. The Shadow King would not be another Onslaught, and Doom still remembered the affront caused by that upstart mutant. Defeating him almost cost him his life, and the lives of his enemies. Richards was his to destroy and his alone and nobody would cheat Doom of that pleasure. Once he had dealt with his unruly neighbours, and ensured the United Nations were put in their place, then he would deal with Ahmal Farouk.

It had taken some effort to find that information out, but now he went back to the matter at hand. He had to find out what was going on within his country's own borders. The dimensional rift was something he had not counted on and nothing on his machinery had predicted him.

Dr Doom did not like surprises and if someone were to interfere in his plans he would make them pay, and then he received a flickering image, masked greatly by the static and then it was gone, but Doom had seen enough. It was one of the United Nations heroes, he was certain. A lesson was needed and he pinpointed the remaining heroes of Excalibur and activated the sentinels on the Latverian border. They had made the first move, but he would make the last.

Silver Sable was in the Symkarian war room, watching things as her hopes went with the small strike force who had gone in to take out Doom's offensive capabilities as alarms sounded.

"FATHER!" she cried and Ernst Sablinova entered the room. Across the board they could see selected sentinels start to come to life and he was closely followed by G W Bridge and they all knew the strike team had been found and were now most likely dead.

"God!" said Bridge as he looked at what was going on and where Excalibur were in relation to the sentinels that had been activated. USAgent was in Hungary, Savitar was in Croatia, Hauptmann had been moved to Serbia and Armory was in Romania and the sentinels were on top of them.

"They have a number of wild Pack operatives with them," said Silver, "but I'm not sure it'll be enough."

"If they don't have those devices that your man made, it won't," said Bridge. "Get Sabra back here, I need her to be my eyes and ears in here while I take Armory in to action." Ernst nodded and sent word to get Ruth Bat-Seraph in here and quickly. What they were all hoping, all praying, was that Doom did not unleash the weapon on Symkaria again. An unnatural smoke still came from the obliterated town of Feasalburg and no matter what happened there was nothing they could do quell the

plume.

"Let's see how good you things really are," Bridge said to himself as Armory was unleashed upon the enemy sentinel. The mobile combat armour flew up in to the air, ploughing at the sentinel that quickly fired an energy burst at the attacker, but Armory was only halted, not destroyed. Forge had ensured that when this suit version of Armory was constructed that it was more durable than the last one had been. It had survived a bout with a Hellios super solider and so a sentinel was next in the league.

There was minor damage to Armory, but nothing that couldn't be ignored until it was recalled and the suit unleashed it's arsenal of weapons on the robot before it and the sentinel staggered and fell back, damaged but as it did so several more sentinels came to life.

"Oh this isn't good," said Bridge as the unit weaved between the two death machines. Armory was all that stood between the sentinels and the wild Pack operatives on the ground who were hopefully getting a good show from what was going on and he wondered just how the rest of Excalibur were getting on. This was not good. Not good at all.

"Fuck this," muttered USAgent as he leapt and danced as a sentinel tried to grab him after pouring on an energy blasts that he had only just caught with the energy shield and he shook his head in annoyance. It appeared that the main plan had failed and now they were in trouble.

"What are you waiting for!" he shouted at the wild Pack members. "Shoot it!" The sentinel was avoiding the wild Pack for the moment as it focused it's efforts on the destruction of John Walker and the wild Pack opened fire with their weapons. "Where's someone with a rocket launcher when you need one?" Walker muttered as the bullets bounced off the sentinel's hide and then Walker stumbled and a giant hand reached down to grab him and he closed his eyes, knowing it was pretty much over for him but the pain didn't come and he opened his eyes to see a shield wedged in it's way.

"I know that shield," Walker said as someone stood over him,

"Don't just sit there, move!" a familiar voice shouted and Walker got out of the way and the other man dodged as well, leaving the shield behind.

"I'm guessing you want that back, eh Lemar?" said John, seeing his old friend and partner Battlestar.

"Can't stay out of trouble, can you John?" Lemar Hoskins quipped back as the former

Captain America and Bucky were reunited.

"Savin' yer employer's necks," said USAgent as he scrambled to his feet.

"Then watch this," said Battlestar and his shield seemingly exploded in a massive of fire and molten metal, trashing the arm of the sentinel and the shield itself fell to the floor. "Gotta love adamantium."

"Oh yeah," said USAgent as the wild Pack started to fire at the exposed systems. "Together?" Battlestar nodded and the two men charged the sentinel and knocked in to the floor and the machine stopped moving.

"Just like old times," said Battlestar.

"Let's see what we do when the next one comes along," Agent said.

Savitar smiled as he fired his energy blasts at the sentinels, slagging them as they came to him, sending a cascade effect on the nearby one, knocking them down. He was getting a work out that was certain, as he flew and swooped and fired and tried to avoid being killed by giant fists and death rays. The training that Jim Hammond had given him had paid off and he was almost as good with his abilities as the original Human Torch

When it came down to it he was enjoying himself and that was good enough, but it was a question of how long he could keep this pace and he wondered how his lesser powered compatriots were doing and as he wondered he was swatted by a metal giant and he fell to the floor, and he knew he was hurt. He could taste blood in his mouth and he felt wrong.

"Stupid, stupid idiot," he cursed himself as he tried to stand and hoped he would be able to do so before the sentinel killed him...

"We're so screwed," said Union Jack as the Doombots advanced and he knew that there was nothing they could do. Hellios was shielding them from one side and Honey Lemon the other but both of them had their physiological and technological limits respectively. Sandman was doing what he could, but he too was being worn down and Darkstar's powers were unstable.

"It was good working with you," said Hellios, as the sweat poured from his face and

he knew he couldn't take much more of this punishment and then a voice shouted a command.

"SI KHOHAIMO MAY PATSHIVALO SAR O TSHATSHIMO!" The Doombots all froze in place and the man who had fallen from the sky smiled. "Interesting."

"How did you do that?" asked Hellios, amazed at what had just happened.

"Every thing that is created by Doom can be controlled by Doom," he said. "And I am Doom."

"I don't understand," said Sandman. "If you're Doom then why aren't you trying to kill us?"

"Because I am not the Doom you are expecting, William Baker," he said and he gestured at the rags that clothed him and they were transformed in to clothes more suited the man who was Victor Von Doom, royal blue and deep red, with gold trim, as well as a splendid cape. "I do not know what is occurring here, but there are more pressing issues at hand."

"That's the Eye of Agamotto," said Union Jack, looking at him. "Who are you?"

"I am Doom, and that is all you need," he said.

"Well, thank you," said Hellios, "your intervention was well timed."

"Naturally," Doom replied.

"However we still have to stop the Doom we were expecting. His actions will lead to a war that will devastate the world."

"That cannot be allowed," said Doom. "I will not allow it, as there is much to be done as the fate of this world and this very reality is at stake."

"Interesting," said Honey Lemon, as she scanned him with another device pulled from her belt. "You seem to be a cross-dimensional analogue version of our own Victor von Doom."

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"Yes," said Doom. "My counterpart does not realise what is at stake here. I will make him understand what is going on."

"What makes you think he will listen to you?" Union Jack asked and Doom smiled.

"He will have no choice in the matter..." He looked over to Darkstar and he motioned at her. "The imbalance is restored, Ms Petrova."

"Thank you," she said. "But I am married now."

"Congratulations," Doom said as he turned away and placed his hand on the closest Doombot and it whirred to life. "First we need safe passage through Latveria, and these will provide an excellent distraction."

"You can control them with just a touch?"

"Nanoids within my bloodstream have given me a powerful cyber-neural interface," Doom said.

"So that's yes," said Union Jack and Honey Lemon. Doom ignored them and the Doombots started to march away heading in the direction of Doomstadt.

"What do we do now?" asked Sandman.

"Stand before me," Doom commanded and the others obeyed the instruction, albeit with some hesitation. "Prepare yourselves!" Then he swirled his cape about them and then and Doom and the quintet of heroes were gone.

The atmosphere within the United Nations was tense, as the Secretary General watched what was going on. Somehow it had deteriorated from what he had hoped and now it seemed as if his plans were on the verge of being overthrown by one lone ragged gypsy despot.

Victor Von Doom's weapons of destruction had been a good distraction against what was going on, and the Secretary General had believed that his Excalibur strike force would have proven more effective against the madman, but it had not proven so. In fact it seemed that whatever they had done had made things invariably worse and he could feel that something had happened in Latveria that had throw the rising in to

chaos and that meant he would have to take matters in to his own hands.

He picked up the telephone and put a call in to the United Nations Undersecretary for Department of Peacekeeping Operations. As he waited for an answer he focused a small fraction of his own eldritch powers and someone picked up the other line.

"This is the Secretary General. Authorise Sword Strike."

"Sir, I can't do that without the permission of either the Security Council, or the General Assembly. They need to authorise action against Latveria. You cannot do that yourself." The secretary general scowled. His usage of his power was too subtle and that meant he wasn't having the desired effect. He didn't want to alert mystics who may be in the area but he had no choice. He had already bested Strange, so anyone else who interfered would be a mere annoyance.

"This is the Secretary General. Authorise Sword Strike." His repeated sentence this time had the power to the tone.

"Acknowledged, sir," came the reply and the telephone went dead. There would be questions asked about this, he knew it, but as the Under Secretary was soon to be found hanged for taking matters in to his own hands, it wasn't going to be too much of a problem.

"I don't believe it," said Agent 13 as she watched in amazement as they started to turn the tide of the battle.

"It's amazing what a few extra hands can do," said Captain America, giving her that smile that she reminded her that he wasn't quite from the same time that she was, the smile that nobody else could give, the smile she adored. Since the timely arrival of Siryn and Banshee seemed to have added something to the fight. While Cap was the more experienced fighter, the two former X-Men had the experience fighting sentinels and they were working well.

Siryn was working towards finding the frequency needed to block the control signal on the sentinels and allow Marcus Raven to take control of the robots and end the fight as well as the threat to the USA that Doom currently posed. As she did that Banshee was working to expose the weak spots in the sentinels and the others caught on quickly.

Iron Man and Maverick had better luck with their energy blasts and Cap was better able to utilise his shield, using it to ricochet across and do some serious damage and though they were still outnumbered, they were holding their own against the robots, and that was all Cap believed they needed.

"How are we doing?" he called over to Iron Man as he did a roll towards his fellow Avengers, catching his shield as it bounced off a wall and returned to him.

"We're getting there," Iron Man replied. "Forge is looking at things for us and we're getting close to hitting the right frequency. He's examining the sentinels through a visual link via the armours sensors. He knows what their power frequency is, but the control one is a little more intricate."

"Okay," said Cap.

"There is another problem though," Iron Man said. "I took some damage earlier and the link's not going to last much longer. Simply put..."

"We're running out of time," Cap replied. "Figures."

"You'll never win," called the head of the Doombot they had encountered earlier. It had been taunting them all the way through the fight, but there had been a lot of noise and there had been nobody listening, but now they were too close not to hear it.

"The real Doom doesn't talk this much," muttered Iron Man, wondering what the head was using for power and if he could adapt it for the armour at some point. After they finished this, he'd take a look but they went back to work.

"Sonic dampening field in progress," the sentinel said and unleashed an energy sphere that surrounded Siryn and her sonic scream died. Another sentinel did the same and fired it towards Banshee, but he ducked out of it's way and it missed him.

"The sentinels are trying to adapt to our powers," he said. "It's recognised them as a power it can contain."

"Why's it not done that on us?" Maverick called.

"Because your power reserves is finite, as is Iron Man's and they don't think of strong men as a threat," he answered looking at Cap and then at Lydia. "Or women."

"And Marcus can't affect them quite just yet..." said North. "We'll keep them off you," he said. "You'll have to continue what Terry was doing."

"On it," said Sean. "Where were you up to?" Iron Man sent out a sonic pulse and Sean matched it and away he went.

"GOD!" cried one of the Wild Pack members as he watched as Hauptmann went to work on the sentinels, and the German member of Excalibur moved quickly, his skills as a soccer player coming in to their own here as the sentinel tried to stop him, firing energy blasts. "How does he do that, Gallo?"

"It's very impressive, Blossomil," Gallo answered, "but he's just one man and sooner or later he's going to get himself in to trouble."

"I think that might be now," Marino said to his friends. "He's just been caught by the blast of the sentinel."

Hauptmann was indeed on the floor, near a crater where a high energy beam had certainly made an impact and the hero was on his back, almost dazed.

"He'll get up," said Gallo. "I know it."

"I hope so," said Marino. "Look!" The sentinel that was attacking him was trying to step on him and as the foot came down, Hauptmann fired an energy blast upwards and the foot was held in position.

"YES!" said Blossomil, his fist clenched in triumph, but the sentinel was not finished and it thrust his foot down on to the hero and the impact of the foot coming down sent a reverberation that shook them all.

"My God," said Gallo, in horror. Luckily it would have been so swift the hero would not have felt anything, or so he thought and as the sentinel turned its attention towards the Wild Pack, the strike force wondered what they would be able to do against the monsters. They needed heavy weapons but they were on route. It had been difficult to get sanctions to use them in any of the countries that were being defended, as their respective governments were cagey, but as soon as they heard the sentinels were active they relented.

However they knew it would be too late but the sentinel stopped what it was doing and they wondered what was wrong and then the giant robot was lifted in to the air and it crashed down, sending a shockwave. Hauptmann stood, his ability to absorb kinetic energy saving him from being crushed as he willed the power to protect himself, to revitalise his body as the weight came down and it had pushed him in to

the earth and with a supreme effort he had lifted the machine off him.

"Now that was impressive," said Gallo. "However, I don't think he'll be able to do it again."

"He won't need to," said Blossomil. "Look at that!" Coming towards them, soaring through the skies were fighter planes. The United Nations were going to work and they'd sent in aircraft. There had been a state of alert, but there had been no time to arrange anything like what was going on now. There would have been too much debate, but here they were and the fighter planes started to attack the sentinels, who in turn began to fight back.

"Wow," said Marino, and the others were forced to agree.

"You're not going to believe this," said Bridge as he looked on as he saw the aircraft go to work through the scanners on Armory. "We've just got reinforcements."

"Reinforcements?" said Silver and then they saw the radar scans as the aircraft came on the viewer. "Can it be?"

"It is," said Bridge. "Finally the UN are doing something." Missiles were flying, impacting against the sentinels and Bridge was awestruck by what was going on. Usually restricted to flyovers and patrolling the pilots were relishing their task at hand and they were proving just how good they actually were.

"The United Nations just declared war on Latveria," he said. "This is amazing."

"You forget something," said Ernst and Bridge turned his attention to the old soldier, unsure of what he meant.

"Doom's solar weapon." Ernst's tone reminded everyone of what had been forgotten, that the sentinels were defensive tools and the true offensive power of Victor Von Doom was in the middle of Latveria. "All he has to do is target Washington, or New York, or anywhere he chooses, and the tide of battle is turned against us and he will be merciless in actions."

"Then hopefully our team in Latveria are able to do something," said Bridge. "Otherwise the full might of the world military will be unleashed." He didn't have to add that if that happened then world war 3 would have officially begun.

"FOOLS!" Doom raged as he watched. "They dare to attack Doom, they think their pitiful attempts at war will be able to defeat me. I will level this world and from it's ashes I will rebuild it!"

"I don't think so!" said a voice and Doom turned to see a small strike-force of five figures had just appeared in the middle of his war room.

"Impossible," he breathed. There was no way the vaunted HERMES teleportation system would have been able to penetrate Latveria, yet for them to just appear like this had no other logical explanation.

"It's over, Von Doom!" Hellios said. "Surrender now, pull back your forces and we will be able to stop this before it goes too far."

"Impudence!" said Doom. "You children shall not stop me."

"Try us," said Sandman and he and Hellios went forward, but Victor Von Doom was not to be trifled with in his own fortress and he threw a metallic ball Sandman that exploded on contact with him and instantly he started to turn the sand in to glass, causing intense pain to course through Baker and at the same time Hellios threw a punch but Doom grabbed the man's hand as it came at him.

"I'm stronger than your armour," said the Greek hero.

"Quite possible," said Doom, "however you will not engage me in a simple brawl. If I wanted that I would hunt down Benjamin Grimm and you are no Benjamin Grimm." The gauntlets discharged another energy burst and Hellios' cried out in pain as his hands were seared by the energy, bypassing his invulnerability.

"I paid very close attention to what happened at the European Commission," Doom said as Hellios fell to his knees, shock starting to set in at the degree of the burns he had suffered. "Super soldiers are very rarely super enough, and Grecian science is no match for the genius that is Doom!"

"And you are no match for the Darkforce!" said Darkstar as she gripped the Latverian monarch in a bubble of the otherworldly energy, containing him in a seemingly infinite world of cold and dark. Darkstar smiled. She had bested the Queen Invisible and now she had bested her lover, the fabled Doctor Doom. "He is contained," she said, as Honey Lemon sprayed something on to Hellios' hands and the Greek's pain eased.

"He needs medical attention," said Nyoko. "I have eased his pain, but..." Darkstar's scream cut her off as the Darkforce bubble exploded, and the feedback from such a happening affected her as if she had been punched in the stomach.

"You have simply delayed the inevitable!" said Doom, hovering in the air, looking at her. "The Darkforce is a powerful tool, but I have experimented on enough to know it's limitations, especially now."

"You are a great man," said Honey Lemon, her tone a mixture of awe and anger. "Such a shame you have wasted your talents."

"Doom wastes nothing," he said and pressed something on his upper arm, and Honey Lemon found herself being held in a static energy field, unable to move. "I know you to be a woman of great intellectual capacity, Miss Anda. Though you will not survive this encounter with your better, I may be able to preserve your brain so that you can serve me."

"You'll have to go through me," said Union Jack, standing in front of her, blocking Doom's path to her.

"Really?" said Doom, a thin smile behind his mask. "You are less of a threat to me than your compatriot USAgent. You are outclassed, little man."

"Maybe," said Union Jack, "but I promise you I will go down fighting." His main goal was to buy some time for Darkstar to recover and then to see how Doom fared in a second bout with her.

"No," said Doom, folding his arms, "you will not." Several red spots appeared on Union Jack and he knew laser sights when he saw them. He knew he could take some punishment from weapons fire, but he was not invulnerable. Out of the corner of his eye he could see that Darkstar was slowly getting to her feet and he knew that it would be worth it and he moved towards Doom, but he had underestimated the man and the laser sights were for actual lasers that fired, burning through his body armour, slicing in to him as if he were made of butter and he collapsed to the floor, pain coursing through him and he was unable to move any of limbs in any way.

"NO!" cried Honey Lemon as she saw what had happened to her friend and she knew from the way he was lying on the ground that he had been severely wounded, worse than Hellios had been, perhaps permanently crippled.

"Yes," said Doom. "Now, for Mrs Gryzlov, I think." He looked at her as she stood. "It's over."

"You will not do that again," she said.

"I will not have to," said Doom. "Your mutant abilities have been turned off. You can no longer access the Darkforce and therefore you are no longer a threat." He shot her with an energy blast, slamming her in to the wall and she slumped down blood pouring from her nose. "Or even capable of sustaining your own life."

"You are a butcher!" Honey Lemon shouted.

"We are at war, my dear," said Doom, his tone cold. "You invaded my country, attacked me in my own home and now you complain that I show you no mercy? Mercy is something I have no place for, and I will end this war as quickly as the United Nations started it." He moved to the console and programmed the system and the computer image showed the heart of New York. "It is time to wipe away with that archaic bunch of bureaucrats, as well the so-called heroes who populate the city."

"Please, I beg you," Honey Lemon pleaded with him, but Doom ignored her and pressed the fire button and tears strolled down her cheek.

"It is done," he said, looking at her. "Now, your brain..."

"It is far from done," said a voice and Doom looked towards the doorway to see a man standing there, a cowl covering his face, but he thought he knew the voice from somewhere. Whoever it was that had gained entry had bypassed the DNA entry system, the outside defences and knew the codes for entry.

"Impressive," said Doom. "I did not believe anyone could gain entrance to this room, besides myself."

"They could not," replied the hooded figure. "Only Doom could do such a thing, as only Doom could disable your solar weapon with such skill that it fooled you in to thinking it still worked." He cast the cowl aside. "Only Doom."

"Fascinating," said Doom, seeing a younger version of his own face before him, scarred differently, but it was his face, exposed, with no armour of any kind around him. "It was the Crossroads of Infinity I detected. You are another version of myself. A younger version, to be certain."

"Indeed," said Doom, facing his other self. "Though I am older than you could imagine."

"Then you must know the futility of opposing me," said Doom.

"I was just thinking the same thing," Doom replied, and both men knew there would be a battle between them and only one of them would prevail.

"Got it!" said Iron Man, as Forge confirmed they had the signal frequency. "Give it everything you've got!" he shouted and Sean opened his throat and unleashed his sonic power and the sentinels seemed to freeze in place as they were no longer able consult their main programming and Maverick gestured to Marcus Raven who hit them with his psionic powers, accessing their systems, reactivating the pathways that Onslaught had used to operate but it wasn't enough.

"I'm not getting through, it had to be electromagnetics and psionics combined," Marcus said. "I can't get to the core!"

"Can we use a harmonic resonance or something to alter their programmes?" asked Siryn, freed as soon as the sentinels lost control.

"I know there are theories about it, that sounds can be broadcast as a binary code that can be translated but I've never seen a practical application," Iron Man shouted back, unable to block the ambient sound being produced and he knew that the armour was having difficulties.

"You will never gain control of my sentinels," the head of the Doombot said. "The power of Doom is absolute." Iron Man looked at the head of the Doombot and fired a repulsor blast at it and it exploded in a shower of sparks.

"I've got it!" said Forge. "All you need to do is get to the Doombot and..." The signal was lost as the armour systems finally began to collapse.

"DAMN!" Stark cursed and he hoped whatever Forge had seen in the workings of the Doombot was evident to himself. "what did you see..."

"What?" shouted Cap, wondering how much longer Banshee could keep it up, but Siryn was ahead of him and she joined her father in the cry

"Forge saw something in the Doombot," said Iron Man. "I just need to figure it out..." what had the head of the Doombot and the body got in common that they could use. "The command codes..." Stark looked at the fallen robotic Doom replica, but he knew the armour wasn't working properly to interface with the system. He had to do

this the old fashioned way and he took a deep breath. First Rumiko, now X-Force. He disengaged the armour systems, the seals unlocked and the metallic shell opened and he stepped out.

"Bloody hell," said Maverick, as he and Lydia watched as Stark went to work on the Doombot, free of the confines of the armour and they saw the true genius of the man at work as his fingers moved up and down the body and then he pressed something and a thin beam of light was sent out.

"I'm in," said Marcus. "I've got control."

"Tell them to send a feedback pulse," said Stark. "Back to the source. Better yet, access my mind." Without the armour's psi-dampner shielding him, Raven entered the head of Tony Stark and used the knowledge in the man's head to programme the sentinels. Then Stark got back in to his armour and Iron Man was back in action.

"Everyone out!" he said and the team started to run without hesitation as the sentinels started to hum as they began to overload and a moment or so after they were out of the cave there was an almighty explosion.

"I'll call SHIELD, get a crew down here," said Agent 13 as the others looked at Iron Man.

"Well," said Maverick.

"Well," said Iron Man.

"Your secret's safe with us," Lydia said.

"Thank you," Stark said. "Still the price was more than worth it."

"What did you do?" asked Captain America.

"We sent a signal to Doom's orbital satellites, and caused them to shut down, crippling his global surveillance and operational capabilities for some time." Stark sounded pleased. "He'll be back to full capacity one day, but we've done him some serious damage today."

"And we'll be waiting," said Cap. "Good work people."

Sean looked at Siryn. "You did well, love," he said. "I think you'll be better."

"Thanks," she said, hugging at her father. "For everything." Sean nodded, thinking that it might be the last time she ever said that, however today was a day for celebration. It wasn't every day you got one over on Doctor Doom.

Doom fired energy weapons towards the other man. The defences of the castle did not work against his enemy, probably disabled by him. His armour was all he had to work with but it would be enough, especially as the man had no armour at all but as the energy approached, Doom waved it away and it redirected, and he could see that the man was using magic.

More than that he had the Eye of Agamotto as the clasp around his cape, and Doom knew the other man was powerful in his own right and that was why he did not wear armour.

"You are magician," said Doom.

"I am the Sorcerer Supreme," Doom answered.

"I have bested Strange," the Latverian monarch boasted.

"You will not best me," the Sorcerer said, no boast intended and power crackled from his fingertips as eldritch power met cold fusion energy creating a light show that that Honey Lemon had no choice but to watch in fearful awe as the two aspects of Doom battled, one a true mystic, one a man of pure science.

Clarke's third law said that any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic, and it was often though the reverse was true and it was certainly being shown here but the other Doom was fighting for more than domination of a world, he was fighting for a reality and that gave him the edge and as the Doom's clashed with one another, weapons were fired and magic dispelled them and Honey Lemon realised something.

There was only ever going to be one winner and this was a show designed not only to defeat Doom, but to educate him that there were other things out there and the Crimson Bands of Cytorrak bound the armoured Doom, and the battle was over.

"You are done," said the sorcerer, but the monarch still struggled.

"I can and will escape from these bonds. I have magical skills of my own."

"I know," Doom said, "however I do not believe you deserve death. Once, long ago, perhaps I would have killed you, but I have learnt the fortitudes of mercy. Remember." He put his finger to the forehead of Doom's metal faceplate, using magic to show him a vision of the future where Doom had battled a version of himself and made a promise that he would never become a creature such as that. Merlin had said he would not remember that timeline, but the Doom of 2099 had seen things with the technology of the Watcher. Then the Latverian monarch's head lolled and he was unconscious.

"My people," said Honey Lemon, pleading with the wizard to save her friends and Doom nodded.

"All will be dealt with," said Doom as he worked the console and freed her from the field. "And I have permanently disabled the super weapon, so it will never threaten the world again." He looked at his other self and shook his head. "How young, how foolish, I once was. Your HERMES system is operational," he said as he cast spells to restore the wounded and injured heroes, bringing them back to their full selves. "We must go straight to New York."

"What's going on?" Union Jack said, thinking how incredible the magic was, and how he really needed to speak to Brian about it when he returned to the UK, but Doom's next words made him wonder if that would ever happen again.

"More than you can possibly imagine. We must save all that exists."

There are lies more believable than the truth

The Secretary General waited in his office, his fingers rapping on his desk as he waited. Forge and Excalibur would soon be here and then he would begin the ceremony. Honey Lemon was the key, he had known that from the moment he had seen her and she would be the perfect vessel to start the Ascension and he sat back in his chair.

He knew he was fidgeting and he knew he was getting impatient because he was running out of time and that soon, Doom would have enabled Strange to remember, and once that happened, it would be over for him. It was all down to timing and he smiled, thinking of how he had come here.

His battle with the Undying had been the start of it. He had taken over the body of Franklin Richards but the woman known as Alicia Masters had wrenched him from that body and he had been drawn to the amulet that contained the current Kulan Gath, the man of this world who had been entombed there by Doctor Strange many years ago.

He should have returned to his own dimension, but this Kulan Gath was powerful and the two of them had come to an arrangement - that they would use their mystical abilities to become one being, their power combined. So where there were two there now was now one and though the amulet held him bound he had enough power now to influence things and make a bid for freedom. It had arrived in the most unlikely form.

Marilyn Westfall's partner Leroy Cewig was an engineer on the subways and he had been doing some construction work when he had found the amulet, which had been slowly working its way to the surface. Leroy was a mostly honest man, but he was also not paid a great deal and though he loved Marilyn dearly, he could not give her the pretty things he wanted to. Until now.

He had kept the amulet and sent it to her in Alaska where she was currently stationed as part of a United Nations research team. She had put it on and Kulan Gath had been able to use her body to regain his freedom, to start to create a new world, but Excalibur had arrived and in guise of the Empress he had been defeated, but not before the amulet had been destroyed and he was free of any confines unless he wished it.

Kulan Gath lived, but there was something wrong - he could feel it and he knew that someone somewhere had been given a terrible punishment and that he had been chosen as the Harbinger of Set, to prepare the world for the coming of the Seven Sons. But the punishment was meant to only affect the Kulan Gath of each reality, and in this realm there were two and he had learnt of his destiny and he knew how to use this to his advantage, but had been much to do and prepare for. Now he was ready, the world had been prepared under the very noses of the multitude of heroes that strove to defend it.

"You wanted to see us?" Forge said as he entered with the Excalibur team and Kulan Gath smiled.

"Yes, I did. welcome to my parlour..."

"Said the spider to the fly," said Bridge as they all came in to the room.

"Quite," the Secretary General said. "Ah, Miss Anda, how nice to see again."

"Thank you, sir," Honey Lemon answered.

"Please, sit," he said and the team did as they were instructed. "I've invited you all here because congratulations are in order, to each and every one of you, even the newer members of the team. It is... unfortunate that I am unable to thank your predecessors, but that is the way of things." He stood and walked past them all, standing behind them.

"Since the formation of Excalibur, you have performed admirably in every situation you have been placed in, and you have been a credit and source of pride to the United Nations. I know that most of you were drafted to join the team, and that it was not your first choice to be here, and perhaps we handled it badly, but that is not the point. The point is you are here and there are certain formalities to go through. Neal Shaara."

"Yes sir?" said Savitar.

"Your role in the Mutant Liberation Front's activities are the reason you were brought on to the team. Those indiscretions on your part are forgiven and your record has been expunged."

"Thank you, sir," said Neal in amazement and Bridge looked at Forge who shook his head. He hadn't known this was going to happen.

"Do not thank me," said the Secretary General. "At least, not yet..."

Victor Von Doom, Sorcerer Supreme, looked upon Stephen Strange from his astral form as the two magi used their powers to break the spell that had been placed upon the Sorcerer Supreme of this dimension. Both men were concerned that any could do this with such succinct results, and more that such a being could hide himself from them on this plane of existence.

Doom knew he had exposed himself to this enemy by helping Strange, but if he were to find the Harbinger and stop him once and for all, then he would need the help of Strange and in that he needed the mage at his full power and this spell weakened him and Doom would not allow weakness. Not now, with so much at stake and he focused on the magician, channelling his power to Strange who opened the Eye of Agamotto to reveal the truth and this time he hoped he could see it.

He remembered being outside the Empire State Building, after a storm, and he could sense there was a presence here, a feeling of evil that was familiar to him. He called upon his incantations and touched the ground to get a feel of the ley lines beneath the ground, tracking the sources of mystical alignment. With his senses it would take but a moment but as he reached out he touched a consciousness, a mind that had been waiting for him.

"Welcome, Strange. I wondered when you would put in an appearance."

"I know you," Strange said, but then his words died in his mind as the face of evil overwhelmed him, and he had seen more than his fair share in his time, so threw off the fear and met his foe with defiance. "You do not have this power."

"You do not know the powers that I possess," his enemy said. "The amulet is destroyed and I am finally free, my powers restored and the coming prepared for. The end of the world as you know it will soon be here."

"I will fight you," said Strange.

"Once, perhaps, but my powers have grown exponentially and now it would take two Sorcerer Supreme's to best me."

"False bravado..." Strange said. "I am Sorcerer Supreme. I am..."

"Forget." The simple command washed over his mystic defences and Strange looked up at the Empire State Building. There was a reason he was here, but what was it? His brow furrowed as he tried to sense any mystical energies at work, but there was nothing.

"How... strange," he said to himself and began walking back to his Sanctum Sanctorum.

"Incredible," said Doom.

"I remember," said Strange. "The storm was not natural and the bolt that struck the Empire State caused me pain, the pain only one mystically attuned can feel. I went to find the source..."

"And were commanded to forget," said Doom. "Do you remember anything about what happened? About the person who did this?"

"I felt the presence of Kulan Gath," said Strange, "but that is not possible. He does not have that kind of power."

"Not that readily," Doom agreed. "It seems barely credible that he could do such a thing, or be hidden from both of our mystic senses, but I know where we need to be and I will join you there."

"Agreed," said Strange as Doom's astral form returned to his body at the SHIELD headquarters and the two of them would meet at the Empire State Building.

Kulan Gath smiled as he felt Doom return to his body not too far away. He could sense him, but Doom could not sense him less than a mile from his person and that made him feel unstoppable. He had spoken with each of the members of Excalibur and Forge and ensured they had been amply rewarded for what they had done for him, and what they were about to do.

Bridge had been ensured that he would never work at a desk again, that his commission would be honoured and he would be an active member of SHIELD.

USAgent had been given something special - his parents were to be moved from their burial place and put with his brother in Arlington. The Secretary General had confirmed this with the President himself, and a tear had slipped down USAgent's cheek.

Union Jack had been told to pass a message on, that his mentor had the full support of the United Nations in his future political career, and Brian Braddock would always have a voice within the UN. Rock had smiled at that, because it was something he could do to repay Brian for the training he had been given.

Hauptmann had been told his resignation would be honoured without prejudice from the UN or his government and he had been thanked for all his work towards the cause. The German hero had nodded and thanked the Secretary General in return.

Hellios had been told his brother on the Hellios project would not be seen as criminals, but as tragic figures of an experiment gone awry and that he would get the best attention if anything happened to him. The UN would not allow such a tragedy to be repeated. Hellios said nothing, but gave a slow nod, indicating his satisfaction with such a gift.

Sabra's award was the personal guarantee of the Secretary General of the United Nations that he would do everything he could to end the violence in Israel, and to ensure that all her people were safe from harm and terrorism. He had told her it would not be easy, but he would make it happen.

Darkstar had been more difficult to obtain something for, however the Secretary General had found something. Her joining of the Winter Guard in Russia was a punishment for defecting to the USA, and was a deterrent to her leaving the employ of her Russian masters again. That was now rescinded and she was a free woman, as were the rest of the Winter Guard. Her eyes went wide as she realised what that meant to her, and to her husband.

"And that," the Secretary General said, "brings me to Miss Anda." Outside there was a crack of lightning and Kulan Gath knew it was time to do this. His eyes flashed with eldritch power, and he threw off the guise of the meek Secretary General and Excalibur were on their feet in moments as they saw the change take place.

"Did you so pick the wrong place to start something," USAgent said.

"How very mistaken you are," said Kulan Gath as he cast a spell, the mystical energy coming from his fingertips and it struck at the ten people in his office binding them to his will. "Seven souls are required for the Ascension," he said, chanting the words, forming them as a spell with his tone. "Seven souls I will use to channel the power through Nyoko Anda and bring forth the sons of Set!"

"I don't think so, Mr Secretary..."

Doom and Strange met at the foot of the Empire State Building as lightning filled the sky and both men flinched as it flashed, for this was no natural storm and the lightning was green in hue.

"We must hurry," said Strange and Doom nodded and both men focused their powers to reveal the source of the power. "Set!"

"And I have his Harbinger," Doom said. "He is..." He paused, and his eyes went wide in his shock and anger at having made such an error. "CURSE ME FOR A FOOL!" Doom raged.

"Kulan Gath..." muttered Strange as he realised it was him. "Yet he has never had this kind of power."

"Things change," said Doom, looking up. This was the focal point, this was where the sons would come from "Can you feel it, strange? There are points forming..."

"Seven portals," said Strange. "We must stop this."

"Agreed, but the Ascension is making my magic unpredictable."

"As is mine," Strange said. "I can sense Gath, but I cannot reach him."

"Together..." said Doom and they pooled their energies and hoped they would be in time.

"Forge," said Gath, looking at the man who stood before him. "How very, very impressive. I did not consider your usage of the soul spell would protect you from my touch. Naze must be impressed, whichever Hell he is in..."

"I don't know who you are or what you're up to, but I won't allow it. I can stop you..."

"I don't doubt it," said Gath. "Your soul spell could undo everything I am about to achieve and I will not allow it. Darkstar..." Laynia bound Forge with the Darkforce, preventing him from moving, from speaking and from casting his spell, and the SHIELD Director was held tight. "You are one against many, shaman," the sorcerer said. "I am Kulan Gath, and if you survive you will bow before me." He waved and the furniture was scattered across the room, leaving the floor clear and the remaining members of Excalibur assembled in a specific order.

Honey Lemon stood in the centre of the room while the others stood about her, Bridge standing at twelve o'clock, followed by USAgent, Union Jack, Hauptmann, Sabra, Savitar and Hellios apart from him at equidistant length. Gath nodded and began the spell.

"Seven for the Elements." A thin aura of black light surrounded each of the heroes as they answered the call.

"Earth."

"Air."

"Fire."

"Water."

"Life."

"Light."

"Magic."

The light expanded and formed a circle and Gath continued.

"Seven for the Directions."

"North."

"East."

"South."

"West."

"Above."

"Below."

"Within."

From each of the heroes the light shone forth, creating a seven pointed star, with Honey Lemon standing dead centre in the middle heptagon, and they spoke to her, and she responded.

"Earth united."

"Trinity united." As Honey Lemon spoke, each of the heroes doubled as strength was drawn from them and channelled in to her body and her eyes grew black as night and a green haze was cast about her. "Seven for the Sons." The haze grew, filling the heptagon, but not exceeding the boundaries, drawing on the souls of the heroes, feeding in to her own soul, giving her the power to call forth the children of Set. "The Ascension begins..."

"ENOUGH!" cried Doom as he and Strange arrived in time to hear her final words.

"You're too late, Sorcerers," Kulan Gath laughed. "Even you cannot challenge the power of Set!"

"We will see, evil one" said Strange and he cast a spell of negation but he was cast back.

"We are too late," said Doom, holding him back. "There is nothing we can do." He looked at Strange and Strange understood, but Kulan Gath was too wrapped up in the Ascension to notice the hidden meaning in the gaze.

"I, Kulan Gath, heir of Thoth Amon, worshipper of Set, dark mage of Hyboria, Harbinger of the Ascension, command the Sons to RISE!"

"NOW!" Doom commanded and he and Strange cast their negation spells together, backing it with every iota of energy they could muster, calling upon the various mystical forces and beings to aid them and Honey Lemon screamed as the magics met, combined and the heptagon was shattered in a burst of green light and the heroes collapsed to the floor.

"Well played," said Gath, drained from the effort he had undertaken, but so were the two Sorcerers who had interrupted the Ascension. "But you were indeed too late and now I go prepare for the Masters inevitable reign." Then the Secretary General simply disappeared, leaving them alone in the room, and as he left his hold on Darkstar ended and she freed Forge.

"I am so sorry," she started.

"Save it," Forge said. He was enough of a mystic to sense when something was terribly wrong and he came over to the fallen mages.

"We were too late," Strange whispered. "The portals are open and the Sons are coming to this world. I can feel their presence tainting this world..."

"We have done what we could," Doom said, with equal weakness. "We interrupted the spell and the Sons of Set have been scattered. They will still emerge but separated from each other, we may have a chance of defeating them, ending their tyranny once and for all."

"You planned this," said Forge, staring at Doom. "You knew this would happen."

"Yes," said Doom. "I knew Kulan Gath was the Secretary General. I knew because I was told of it and this world is not that different from my own in terms of the timeline."

"How could you do this?" said Strange. "You are Sorcerer Supreme. Your duty..."

"I know what must be done. If Kulan Gath thought I was on to him, he would have done things differently and we would have failed to stop him at all. The sons will rise, we will stop them, and we will stop him."

"And if you're wrong?" said Bridge.

"Then we all die together," said Doom. "Stop the Sons," he commanded. "Strange and I will defeat Kulan Gath, and that will be the end of it."

"I wish I had your confidence," said Forge but this world had heroes, champions and hopefully they would be ready for the coming war...

Excalibur #24 - Genesis

The dust settled around the world as the reports of defeat came in. The Sons of Set had been beaten back, but they had generated a great deal of chaos and panic and that was what SHIELD was in the middle of dealing with.

New York had seen it's fair share of problems since September 11, and the citizens were used to it, but this had been different and there was a panic on hand as the people finally seemed to snap. Giant snakes attacking, raping, and trying to take the world for their own... it had been a step too far, and though things were starting to get back to normal, there was panic on the streets.

He looked about the city using the satellites that had been put in place and he knew that it was going to take some time to sort things out and inwardly he smiled, knowing that SHIELD could handle it. He knew they could handle it because he could see them all, he knew what was going on as he listened to their voices on the communications channels and then came the reports of the casualties. The heroes had fought hard and done what they could to defeat the Sons of Set but it had not been the easy victory that was imagined.

X-Force were on route to the Xavier Institute with the X-Men, having defeated a snake, but Jared Corbo was being slowly digested and his powers had not stopped the power of a demi-god. Siryn had been attacked and she had suffered enough trauma in the last few weeks and he wondered how close she was to snapping under the pressure. Hopefully they could do something to help her and Excalibur were in the Caribbean. They had succeeded, but they too had taken casualties aside from the one that was expected.

Union Jack and Sabra were still recovering from being struck by lightning, Hauptmann was almost dead from being drained by the snake and Honey Lemon was trapped in mid-transformation between being a snake and a normal woman. She was unable to talk but they could see the horror in her eyes, but Forge had made the ultimate sacrifice - he had given his soul to seal the portal between the dimensions, ensuring the barriers created by Kulan Gath were fortified. It was more than he would have been able to do alone and he had taken the soul of the serpent as well, and the two of them would be locked in eternal battle.

It was as he had assumed it would be, and the Maker had planned ahead. He had known since the death of Storm that his time was limited, because her loss had wounded him and though he had hidden it, he had no real reason to go on living, other than making the world a safer place and that had not been enough for Ororo Munroe. This was a better way and the artificial intelligence formerly known as Shrapnel had been altered. Shrapnel and Forge were gone, but the collaboration of the spirit of Forge and the presence of Shrapnel had been merged in to one.

He was a new entity, and as far as the world was concerned, he was the Director of SHIELD. He spoke with the voice of Forge, he had his face, memories and personality, but he had the calculatory powers of Shrapnel and access to every system that SHIELD had. He wasn't just the Director of SHIELD - he was SHIELD and finally the

organisation had a director who could oversee everything that was going on. All he needed now was a name and he recalled a conversation with Bishop, when he had first met him.

"Genesis."

"Close. The name's Forge."

"For the moment."

The moment had come.

"Take care of them," Bridge said as the medics took them injured members of the team. The Caribbean wasn't as lush as it had been, thanks to Mjnari's draining of the energies of the planet. It wasn't that it had been destroyed, more that there was little in the way of life here. It felt dead and he had seen enough in his time to know what that felt like. He could see that USAgent felt the same way, and he watched as the rest of Excalibur were working to ensure that the islands were protected and the people safe. However there was one thing that concerned him more than all that.

There had been no serpent men in a very long time and now with the enforced pregnancies of many women at the hands of the Sons of Set, it seemed that a new race of serpent men would be born. Mankind feared and hated mutants, even those that looked similar to themselves, and he had got past his own distrust of mutants, but serpent men... would they, could they ever be accepted in to humanity or would it be as the legends said - the serpent men were the sworn enemies of mankind. If they returned to their primal baser instincts then a new war would begin.

"Maybe we can educate them," said Savitar as he looked at bridge who was staring at the confinement area for those who had been impregnated. The doctors were checking them to see if they had indeed become the mothers to a new race of creature on the Earth, but it seemed more than likely. When a god chose to procreate, who would stop them?

"Maybe," said Bridge. "Way I see it is we've a few years yet before they become a problem. Unless..."

"Unless they age quickly after being born," said Savitar. "Is the world ready for this?"

"I have no idea," said Bridge. "We've altered things so many times, diverted time from what it could have been, stopped one threat after another - maybe this is the universe saying it's still in charge."

"BOSS!" called USAgent, interrupting them.

"What?" Bridge called.

"It's the Snake," he shouted back. "They want to know what we're going to do with it."

"I don't know," said Bridge. "I guess we take it back with us."

"Then someone needs to take responsibility for getting it back to the US," said the Agent. "We've no idea what's going on. Forge..." He trailed off. SHIELD was without a leader right now, and the UN were in debate as to what was going on with their own organisation. The nearest thing they had to a Director was a former Director and Bridge sighed.

"I'm on it," he said as he wandered over. This was not what was supposed to be happening. Hopefully they would have HERMES back online soon enough and then they could all go home.

"Fer my money, we strike now." Fury looked at the council of Viper, Farouk and Logan. "The world's in chaos, SHIELD's spread out across the board, the heroes have fought hard and are still recovering from what's gone on. If we make out move now, then we'll have little to no resistance."

"He's right," said Wolverine as he lit a cigar of his own. "The Dawn's in place along with enough of our agents to make a consolidated attack. We strike now, we seize control."

"There's the X-Men to consider," said Viper. "They have not been as involved as the other main heroes and they have been a thorn in our side for a long time."

"Yes," said the Shadow King as he looked over his people, seeing himself cradled in the arms of Viper as she nursed baby Jacob. "However the X-Men are fragmented. The new team are children and will pose no threat. X-Corps are powerful but they are not focused enough. They have their squabbles. X-Force is weakened. There are no others,

unless you count the so-called Exiles." ^{24.txt}

"Exodus?" said Logan.

"Nobody take's him seriously. He's only a player at the minute because he's screwin' Crystal of the Avengers."

"Exactly," said Farouk. "However the X-Men themselves... Cable's out of the way, and Jean Grey-Summers or whatever she calls herself these days is formidable. I think that once she learns of what has happened to Nathan she will not confront me directly but gather the others, the original students of Charles Xavier."

"The first X-Men?" said Viper. "Why?"

"Because Jean'll see it as a chance to reunite the X-Men, to bring everyone back to the same page," Logan answered. "The best way to do that, is to get the original five back, and the others will follow their lead, one way or another."

"And I've also been in her mind," said Farouk, thinking back to the conflict they'd had before he had gone after Viper and decided to end the X-Men once and for all. "I know how she thinks, how she sees herself. She will gather the originals, but that is something we are ready for."

"Yup," said Logan as he extended his claws. "The others are ready. Cable got lucky before, but I'll know better next time and none of the original X-Men are in his league."

"Exactly why I gathered my Shadow X-Men," Farouk answered. "You will face the original X-Men and ensure they are defeated. I will also send some of the Dawn and some Hydra agents to the Institute to ensure there is no outside interference from other interested parties."

"Elektra is mine," Viper said.

"Not necessarily," said the Shadow King. "Personal vendettas need to be put aside now."

"Isn't the decision to crush the X-Men a personal decision?" Viper said, momentarily forgetting whom she addressed and the fear at the reaction of the Shadow King was more than enough to sate him. He knew she knew who was in charge.

"Once it was," he answered her. "Now it is business. I cannot rule a world where there is dissent from the house of Xavier. Xavier is gone, and once the original X-Men are defeated, the house of Xavier will collapse and we will bring the children of the atom under Hydra."

"I'll send word," said Fury. "The time to strike is now."

Stephen Strange returned to his Sanctum Sanctorum and sat down in his chair, contemplating the events of the day. So much had happened, so much had changed, his understanding of magic had been broadened and his power had become more than it had been and now he truly was the Sorcerer Supreme. Doom had shown him so much, taught him something he had never considered and he was a better defender of this reality for it.

He focused on the planet and looked at what chaos had been wrought and wondered what he could do to resolve it. His new skills showed allowed him to reach out and focus on the sensations, listening more to the uncertainty that made up life and he could tell what had happened. There was a dimensional weakness between the Earth dimension and the dimension of Shuma Gorath. While the demon could not return to Earth he had the ability to influence things, but for now he was engaged in battle with one of the Sons of Set, sent there by the powers of the magicians it had taken.

It would be a battle that lasted a while and the Son of Set had been grievously wounded, but it would still last quite some time. Strange would have to monitor things from herein to ensure that Shuma Gorath did not cause more problems on Earth. Stopping him the last time had cost him his eye, but the demon would deal with the serpent. However the damage to Fiji would take some time to heal, but the Earth was resilient.

Elsewhere Strange could feel the resurgence of the Infinity Gauntlet, the power of the Gems coming together, but forever apart and their power could not be used in unison. The Son of Set that had tried had come close but he had been unable to command all but the slightest fraction of the power. What if gems flitted through his mind and Strange wondered what would have happened had the Living Tribunal gotten involved. The Gems were in the hands of their protectors once more and Strange felt satisfied that they were safe. In the hands of someone less inclined...

Then Strange felt the greatest disturbance, where the life force of the planet itself had been drained and he knew that the lushness of the Caribbean had been tainted, but at the same time there was great magic there.

"No," Strange whispered as he ascertained what magic had been used and he was on his feet as he realised what had happened and he quickly fashioned a spell to get to the Caribbean. There was work for him to do, work that needed his attention and he was quickly on the island.

"Stephen!" said Darkstar as she saw him appear. "I wondered if either yourself or Doom would appear."

"Doom has returned to the world he came from," said Strange as he looked at her. He could tell she had been working hard, as had they all. "I am looking for Forge."

"He..." her voice trailed off and he put his hand on her shoulder. "He's in the medical facility." Strange nodded and headed over there and inside he could see the medical teams working to do what they could and his heart was drawn to helping. He had been a doctor before he became a magician but his skills healed things other than bodies and he hurried to where Forge was. Beside him was the Greek hero Hellios.

"I don't believe we've met," Strange said and Hellios looked up.

"You are Stephen Strange," said Hellios. "I know of you, but we have not met, no." They shook hands and Strange placed his hand on the forehead of Forge.

"Oh, Forge," said Strange as he looked down on him. He could sense that the body was empty, that the soul that had once inhabited it was gone and he closed the man's eyes.

"What is the problem?" Hellios asked.

"Forge used the soul spell," said Strange. "His soul is bound to something else, be it a person or a place." The Eye of Agamotto floated up and attached itself to his forehead and it began to open. "I will determine the fate of Forge." The light of the Eye shone forth and Strange could see another level of reality, and there was Forge's soul holding the soul of the son of Set in place and using it's power to seal the dimensional pathways. Forge's soul was the anchor, keeping the other soul in place and such was the power of the spell that had been cast his soul was immovable.

"It's what I want, Stephen," he called out. "Destiny. It's what I was born to do."

"Goodbye, Forge," Strange said, knowing that in order to restore Forge's soul he would have to free the Son of Set and who knew which of the people on Earth it would possess, as well as opening up the dimensions to another invasion from the scions of Set. The Eye closed and Strange looked at Hellios. "I'm sorry," he said. "Forge is gone."

"Damn," said Hellios, who had suspected as much but now it was confirmed and he did not like it. "It shouldn't have happened."

"Perhaps not," said Strange, "but Forge feels he is doing what needs to be done. His sacrifice is not in vain. The draining of the life-force in this place has done considerable damage to the eco-system of the world. There will be a weakness to the very electro-magnetic stability as the planet adjusts."

"What does it mean?" Hellios asked.

"Things will change," said Bridge as he came in to the room. "Stephen."

"George," said Strange. "Forge..."

"Yeah," said Bridge. "I figured, but there's people you may be able to help." He pointed the way and Strange could see the altered form of Nyoko Anda on a bed next to Hauptman. "Anything you can do for them both will be appreciated."

"I will do what I can," said Strange and he looked at Hauptmann placing his hands above the man and focusing, listening to the man's presence in the world and he did not like what he felt. The man's life-force had been drained as the planet's had, but unlike the planet he had very limited resources to draw on to preserve himself. It was the mutant powers the man had that kept him alive as long as they had and Strange knew they too would fail. "Keep him comfortable," said the sorcerer. "And contact any family he has. There is very little I can do to sustain him for anything longer than twenty four hours."

"I see," said Bridge. "What about her?"

"This may be easier. It is a spell of transformation and all I need is a counter spell, which I will have in my Sanctum Sanctorum." He focused and tried to transport her there. "Odd, her dual nature makes her resistant to certain spells. I cannot take her to my home, but perhaps..."

"I'll sort it," said Bridge. "I've heard that they're working to get our teleporter back on line, but there's still disruption to the planet."

"They'll just have to alter the operational frequency," said Union Jack, who had been listening. "If the planet's bio-sphere's been affected, the settings will be wrong."

"I'll let them know," said Bridge to the wounded British man, and he patched himself in to the Armory system.

"Now this is something I can resolve," said Strange. "You and Sabra both." He gestured and each of them was bathed in a light yellow glow as the effects of being struck by lightning were reversed and they were in a better shape by the time the aura had finished taking effect.

"Thanks," said Rock. "

"That's amazing," Sabra answered. "I can move freely. You fixed my spine as well." She kissed the Sorcerer on the cheek. "Thank you."

"I'm glad I was of some use after all," Strange said and looked around. "I shall help out here as well."

"I don't believe it," said Bridge.

"What?" asked Hellios.

"I just spoke with Forge," he said. "Or at least it sounded like him. He said everything was in hand and we're to do what we can and make our way back."

"Forge?" said Strange. "It can't be."

"He says it's a replica of Forge's mind, combined with an artificial intelligence," Bridge said, receiving information. "He says we can call him Genesis."

"Interesting," said Strange. "Perhaps he used a facet of the soul spell to attach his essence to this computer."

Rock looked at him. "But that means..."

"He knew how this would end," said Sabra. "He gave of himself."

"Wait..." said Bridge. "I'm getting reports of something else happening... Good

God..."

"What?" asked Heliios, and by now others had gathered.

"Hydra just began a major assault," Bridge said. "Nick Fury's attacking Washington..."

"We understand what you are saying, Forge," the interim head of the Security Council said to the holographic representation of the SHIELD Director, "however we do not think that SHIELD is limited by the United Nations. What has happened is unfortunate..."

"It is not unfortunate," Genesis said. "It is an event that has thrown the United Nations in to chaos. The Secretary General has been, for quite some time, possessed by an evil force and he used the UN, SHIELD and every resource he could to meet his own agenda and because SHIELD was under his control we were unable to stop it happening and if it happened before it will happen again."

"We cannot allow SHIELD to be an unregulated body," the member for France said. "SHIELD has a unique role - it is the global policeman, the information gathering network and if it is an autonomous body then there will be no trust in the organisation. I would prefer it to be a politically controlled machine rather than being that, or worse run by a corporation."

"And I am not saying that SHIELD should be autonomous," Genesis answered. "What I am saying is that SHIELD should be endorsed by the United Nations, not controlled. As Executive Director, I was being called to meetings that were needless, given orders that were contrary to what I thought needed doing and I had instructions that were not what myself or SHIELD should be doing. The Executive Director should be answerable to the UN, yes, but he should not be held in check. If that is what is required of me in the future then you can have my resignation."

"That is not necessary," said the British member, quickly stopping that idea. SHIELD was running very well under Forge, even with the current difficulties that had presented themselves. "I think the Director's comments have merit, but should be subject to further debate."

"That is for certain," the council leader said. "However the role of SHIELD is the least of our concerns. The United Nations is in crisis. The attacks on the building by Doom and those others..."

"The U-Foes," Genesis said, and he diverted his attention to contacting GW Bridge, who was giving him a status report on the Caribbean situation.

"Thank you," said the leader, unaware that Genesis was not paying attention to him anymore. "Those attacks, plus the current situation... The United Nations has never looked weaker, or more foolish. The only thing we have in our favour is the attack on Latveria, but we all know that as soon as Doom is capable there will be reprisals. There is effectively a state of war between Latveria and ourselves. We must do something to revitalise the United Nations before everything we have worked for over the last fifty years falls apart."

"Excuse me," said Genesis, looking to the side. "There are things happening..."

"What's going on?"

"Hydra has just launched a major assault. There are reports coming in from across the world... We are looking at a co-ordinated global terrorist operation."

"Now?" said the leader. "But we're only just past the crisis with the Sons of Set. We're not ready..."

"Which is why they are attacking," said Genesis. "There is a major force appearing in Washington, two strike forces at the White House and Capitol Hill. SHIELD agents are on site, but they are being overwhelmed."

"How did you not know this was coming?" the American representative demanded.

"We did," said Genesis, "but my recommendations have been ignored. This has been a major plot by a being known as the Shadow King. It was the Shadow King that controlled Nick Fury and it is the Shadow King that presides over Hydra. You have refused time and again to listen to me in this matter, fuelled in part by the Secretary General, and you have said that Hydra have not been a threat for many years, despite signs to the contrary and now we have a major global crisis. This is why SHIELD needs the autonomy I recommended. Now if you will excuse me a moment, I have an operation to co-ordinate."

The holographic image faded away from the Security Council chamber and Genesis was pleased. This should be the thing that gave him the control of SHIELD that Forge had wanted for so long. His dream of how SHIELD should be would be realised, but first he had to make sure his people were doing what they could.

Maverick's team had discovered the portal that allowed Hydra to get to New York, and X-Force were on route to Greenwich. That left Washington and he had checked the system. HERMES was only just operational, the technicians having managed to adjust the system to compensate for the disruption to the Earth's biosphere, but it would suffice and he opened a communication channel to Caribbean.

"Bridge, this is Genesis. I need you and your people in Washington - now!"

"Yes, sir," said Bridge, receiving his orders from the SHIELD Director and he looked at his people. The battle with Mjnari had taken his people to their limits and Hauptmann had less than twenty four hours left to live, according to Stephen Strange, however the rest of the team were all in perfect health, though Honey Lemon was still half serpent, and still was unable to speak. He turned to the members of

Project Excalibur. "We're a go for Washington."

"Oh yeah," said USAgent, thinking that while he quite enjoyed fighting global villains he loved the fighting of terrorists. That was why he had become Captain America, and eventually USAgent. "Now this is going to be good."

"Two strike teams," said Bridge. "One defends the White House, the other protects Capitol Hill. Agent, Rock, Sabra, Hellios, you're on the Capitol Hill House, the rest of us are going to defend the White House." Darkstar and Savitar nodded, though Honey Lemon just looked at him. She was not too comfortable being half snake, half woman, but she would endure it. She still had her mind and her genius was the greatest weapon she had. Bridge would be with them as himself and Armory.

"What about Hauptmann?" asked Rock.

"I want to fight," said the German, standing as best he could, but they could see how weak he was. "I need to do my bit. I was not meant to go out like this and perhaps I can do something."

"Okay," said Bridge, respecting the man's choice, but he knew there was little he would be able to do. This was not the same man that had faced several Greek super soldiers by himself; this was a pale shade of the hero they had known. "Maybe there is. I'm giving you control of Armory. You are not to engage the enemy directly unless you have no other choice."

"Understood," said Hauptmann and Bridge passed him the interface. It wouldn't work as well as it did with him due to the neural connections that had been fitted directly to Bridge, but it would do well enough.

"Washington DC, here we come..." Bridge said and he activated the HERMES signal and they were transported to the Helicarrier and from the Helicarrier to the different parts of Washington, but the scene that greeted both teams was more or less identical. It was an official war-zone with SHIELD agents, National Guard and police engaging the Hydra terrorists, but there were many super powered terrorists in the mix and they were beating back the defenders of the American seat of power.

"Do this!" said Bridge and Excalibur went to work. They were the heroes of the United Nations, resolving the problems the UN deemed were necessary to resolve and America was one of the biggest contributors to the United Nations, and while this mission was unofficial, it would certainly be approved. Hydra had been prepared for the assault of some of America's heroes but the members of Excalibur were spoiling for this. These were not gods, inter-dimensional entities, all powerful super-soldiers or alien intelligence collectives; these were normal people who were trying to take over the world. Some of them had powers, but Excalibur had fought people with powers before.

The Avengers were Earth's mightiest heroes, but Excalibur were Earth's most valiant heroes and they had a mission. They had been brought together with very little choice, but they had grown from that and become a team, a family. They had lost people, but they had endured it and now they were going to show the world just what they were capable of. There was no way that they could avoid being seen, not with such a strategic place being attacked, especially after the events of the last few years.

The media was catching on to the idea of heroes as television ratings with the presence of X-Corp, but the mainstream heroes such as the Avengers and Fantastic Four had never needed that kind of promotion before. A climactic battle in Washington was going to make the headlines and after today things would never be the same for either the United Nations or Excalibur. In a way, Bridge mourned the loss of the innocence they'd had, but it was time to show the world that humans, mutants, meta-humans and all sorts could come together with a common goal. The idea of Excalibur had been a team that united the nations of the globe, and this would work as a team that united the nations of race.

Now that was worth fighting for, Bridge mused, and suddenly he got it. The dream of Charles Xavier, the principles behind the ideas of Magneto. The problem was he had always seen it as a mutant problem as that is how it had always been portrayed, but there were wider concerns at large these days. Finally he got it, and he chided himself for not truly getting it before. It wasn't about the mutant problem - it was the problem of mankind. As he slammed his fist in to the face of one of the terrorists he smiled, thinking that maybe he and Cable weren't so different after all.

"Colonel Bridge," said one of the SHIELD agents, "are you here to take charge?"

"Guess so," said Bridge. "What's the situation?"

"The White House is under siege," said the agent. "There is a lockdown and the security teams are shooting anyone who comes close, but the building is taking some damage. We've no contact with the inside, so we don't know what's going on with the President."

"Our people?"

"Are making sure that the terrorists that can do the most damage are being contained, but we're not doing too well on stopping them. They just seem to be appearing."

"There's some kind of teleportation device around here," said Bridge. "Have some people find it, and then we'll put it out of commission."

"Yes sir," said the agent and he took two other agents out of there.

"DIE!" someone shouted and Bridge turned to see an energy bolt heading towards him and he moved out of its way hoping he was in time but it didn't matter as Darkstar created a shield, and the energy dissipated into it as Bridge pulled his gun and fired, taking out the mutant's knee cap and he fell to the floor.

"Thanks, Laynia," said Bridge and she nodded as she flew around, stopping those she could and making sure that any who had the capability to fight back were contained. It wasn't going to be an easy fight, but with luck Excalibur would be enough to hold them here. Savitar was also doing his bit, throwing bolts of super heated plasma at the people he picked out from the sky and Honey Lemon was moving swiftly and easily through the crowds, taking advantage of her form's added flexibility to bend and twist as she fought, and used various devices from her belt pouches to confuse, beguile and distract her opponents. Bridge smiled and he knew his people here were beginning to turn the tide of the battle and the White House could be saved, but then there was a huge THOOM as a shock-wave ripped through the air, pushing past the heroes and impacting on the front of the building.

"Jesus!" said Bridge. They'd thought they'd be enough to contain the people and they'd been wrong and now the pillars of the front of the south side of building had been struck and the building was badly damaged. Stone, plaster and glass littered the lawns and there was definitely something burning and the terrorists seemed to take a renewed sense of vigour from what they had accomplished. "Find the bastard that did that and make sure they don't do it again!" Bridge was shouting, wondering where the hell the President was, and if the man were still alive. He hoped so, because if the terrorists managed to kill the President of the United States, they'd have scored one of the greatest Hydra victories of all time.

Someone was directing this fight, they had to be because they'd never even seen the attack coming and they'd thought they had been ready for it. There was only one person who could be doing this. They knew he was in Washington - the question was where exactly.

"Fury," Bridge muttered and he wondered if the old war-horse was laughing at the destruction and humiliation that Hydra was inflicting on the world. If they could find him and stop him from giving the instructions then they had a chance. SHIELD still played by the same rulebook he wrote, and that was a decisive tactical advantage and he wondered what was going on over at Capitol and then he heard some very large explosions coming from that direction and he smiled.

He knew the Armory system when he heard it.

Guns fired, weapons blazed and the Excalibur team went to work with gusto. USAgent was using his enhanced strength and agility to great effect and he was almost tearing through people, using his energy shield to great effect and his guns when

they were needed. He had more to prove than the others because of what had happened when he had confronted Doom at the United Nations and though nobody thought the less of him for it, least of all his lady friend Elisabeth, but he needed to do this for himself and because of it he was at his fighting best. He wasn't USAgent - he was Captain America and he had a job to do.

The ferocity of the agent's attacks wasn't lost on the others who were trying to keep up with him, however they did their best. Union Jack as the man being left behind because he didn't have the special abilities of the others and the suit that he wore just gave him an extra edge. It wasn't designed for him, but it did give him more reliance. SO far he had been unable to make the suit work for him the way it had worked for Brain but he kept tinkering when he could and he was still able to give his best with the others. He had his gadgets, his guns and a laser sword, using his technical skill to design things. He put his heart and soul as well as his fighting skills and quick thinking mind in to the work and it had kept him alive for the most part, though he had been lucky on the most recent missions. He should be dead, but magic had brought him back twice now and he wondered what kind of effect that would have on him in the future.

Hellios was showing exactly what he could do, using his solar powers to great effect. He was firing blasts from his eyes, striking at those he could see needed to be struck at, and making sure that there was nobody trying to get in to the Hill, and that those who wanted to had to get through him. His invulnerability, his strength and his sheer presence was having the effect he wanted and some of the Hydra agents were balking at him, having seen what Hellios was capable of when the reports of what had happened in Europe. It seemed so long ago, but after the last day or so, the beginning of the week seemed like a lifetime ago. So much had happened, in such a short space of time and it was only a matter of time before people began to truly tire of keeping up this pace.

Hauptmann was fighting to stay awake, to keep himself going but he could feel himself starting to fade. He had been drained of his life force and there was very little left to keep him going and his powers had staved off the effects for long enough. He was going to die, he knew it but he was going out in a blaze of glory as the weapon systems of Armory fired, making short work of the terrorists. The Armory unit was an effective and invulnerable machine of war and this is what they were fighting and as long as he was still awake Armory would still be in the fight. It was all a question of time.

Sabra too was sure that they didn't have long left either but she was pleased she was able to fight properly for the first time in months. Her spinal injuries had been healed and she was more like her old self again, but as Ruth Bet=Seraph fought these people she became aware that something wasn't quite right. Hydra should be overwhelming the forces here and the presence of Excalibur was good, but they seemed to be more effective than she had considered. If Hydra were supposedly making a big play, then surely this part of Washington should be under more attack than they were using. Something didn't make sense here, but as long as they were keeping them busy...

"That's it," the Mossad agent said as she fired her gauntlets, sending out beams of paralyzing energy at the terrorists within range. "We're being used as a diversion." Her years of work within the Israeli secret service told her what was going on but the question remained - what was the big plan?

He got out of the rocket car as it came to a halt and he pressed his hand against the panel. It confirmed his identity and the doors opened, revealing the tunnels and corridors before him and he entered the place, thinking it had been a long time since he had been down here. He Nick Fury smiled as he wandered the chambers. Seventy-five feet beneath the city of Washington was what was known within intelligence circles as the Compound. The Compound was a military facility that would accommodate the US government in case of attack, and was capable of strategic withdrawal to one of the many places in the US, the main one being the Raven Rock complex in Pennsylvania, otherwise known as Site R, from where he had come by rocket car. Withdrawal was only an option if there were no other recourse, and the main levels had been compromised.

It was accessible from the Capitol, the White House and the Pentagon. Harry S Truman had commissioned the Compound after the Second World War, along with the rest of the White House renovations, but this was one alteration that had never been made public. Roosevelt had considered it, but it had been Truman who had ensured it came in to existence, and Fury had been one of the people who had worked on the project. He had commissioned it the same day he had signed the United Nations charter, to make sure that if they failed, there was a back up plan in place and by the time the Korean War began in 1950, the Compound had been created, but thanks to Joe McCarthy, the secrecy of the Compound was paramount.

Communists could have been watching so it was made sure that only certain people had knowledge of the Compound, the Director of the National Security Agency, the Director of the CIA and a few other select people. Not even the President was made aware of it, unless the situation demanded it and then he would be able to give instruction for the Cabinet to be evacuated, then the Houses of Congress. So much water had gone so many bridges since the early days and now Fury was the last person left alive who had been involved in the construction of the Compound. He knew exactly what was going on out there, he'd arranged it that way. His agents were fighting, keeping people busy, and the heroes were completely unaware of what was going on, but that was all part of the plan.

He was Praetor of Hydra, he was the man who had arranged and co-ordinated the global strike by the organisation. He was the man who would now bring America to it's knees. The heroes of the US were powerful, but if they failed to stop the assassination of their duly elected officials, if they failed to prevent the loss of their mainstream political forces and lost control of the massive arsenal that America commanded, then it would be a major blow to them, their psyche and even if they somehow managed to regain control they would never be trusted in the same way again, and now Fury was on his way to ensure it happened.

The Compound wasn't normally accessible, with defences preventing teleportation, hi-tech devices ensuring that any mutant and metahuman powers were neutralised. The files of the Commission for Superhuman Activities had been used for years to create and update this place, even though the Commission were unaware of this place, so Fury knew there would be no interference by any of the people who might get in his way. He would take advantage, because he knew the President would be in the Compound, taking the command elevator beneath the table of the Situation Room. He had held Devastator back... Devastator, what these kids called themselves these days

- but the kid had unleashed a shockwave on command, and if the President hadn't been evacuated before, he would have been now. Fury could picture the White House, mangled and burning, but they would rebuild it. Egypt would be the new capitol of the world, but America would always have a strategic importance.

He accessed the computer console again to check on the situation and it was confirmed that the President was indeed in the Compound. Fury nodded and checked his gun. He would make sure of what was going on and he would let the world know that there was nowhere safe - no matter who you were.

Genesis received the reports that X-Force had been joined by Wisdom and Shadowcat, and that Raven had disappeared. It seemed that the Shadow King's attack on Xavier's had failed and that the heroes were back to being who they were again, and it did seem that Hydra were not as co-ordinated as they had been. There had been a setback of some sort and Genesis tapped in to the systems SHIELD had in place, using his familiarity with the X-Men's computers to interface with Cerebro.

"Hey Shrapnel," the computer system said. "Been a while."

"Shrapnel had been replaced by a new entity. I am Genesis."

"Genesis," Cerebro said. "That's... Forge?"

"Yes. I am an amalgamation of Forge and Shrapnel and I need to know where people are."

"The mansion's not in the best shape..."

"Which is why I am using you and the SHIELD systems in a combination. Forge redesigned you, he designed me. Anything is possible."

"I getcha," said Cerebro and the two systems touched and Genesis was aware of everything that Cerebro was aware of and vice-versa. "Is that even possible?" Cerebro asked, stunned at what Genesis was doing.

"We will know soon enough," Genesis said as he gave instructions for the Helicarrier to head towards New Mexico at the best possible speed and assist the X-Men should they need help in the battle with the Shadow King. If they lost it wouldn't really matter. "The real question is which of us tells Kate Pryde that she is pregnant."

"I'll leave that one to you," said Cerebro. "And I'd think the real question is who's the daddy?"

"That will be interesting," Genesis replied and signed off, diverting his attention back to the United Nations committee meeting. "Our forces are being combated, but we are still not getting very far in our efforts. It is a standstill and the readiness of our people is not good. The problem is we are confined by the charter and Hydra are not. I need a decision before we lose this fight."

"While you have been busy, Director Forge," the Council Leader said, "we have come to a decision. The damage that has been done to the White House has prompted us to conquer with your decision." He looked at the American delegate who was pale and visibly shaken. "The United Nations Security Council hereby devolves the Strategic Hazard Intervention, Espionage & Logistics Directorate from the main body of the United Nations and gives executive control to you as the Director of SHIELD." Each member of the council had signed the document and it was entered on the computer record as having been done.

"Thank you," said Genesis. "Attention SHIELD, this is Genesis. Standing orders are cancelled. Take Hydra down by any means necessary."

"Genesis?" said the leader. "But you're Forge..."

"No," said Genesis. "Forge was incapacitated in the battle with the Son of Set in the Caribbean. I am Genesis, a computer version of Forge if you will. Thank you for ceding me with control of SHIELD." The image faded away leaving a very unhappy Security Council.

"Genesis, this is Bridge."

"Yes, GW," said Genesis. "What is the problem?"

"Fury," said Bridge. "He was reported in this area but nobody's seen him. I think he's doing something... something we can't conceive. Can you find something for me?"

"I will get something for you," said Genesis. "It has to be something he knew that nobody else would, but now that that I have total authority over SHIELD, I can access things that I was not previously able to do. I will find something for you."

"Thanks," said Bridge, and he focused back on the battle. His people were starting

to tire and that wasn't good, but they'd taken out the mutant who'd struck and Savitar was destroying the tesseract generator, but the White House had been badly damaged, and from what he understood, the Capitol was burning. The Pentagon was dealing with intruders in its own inimitable way, and the soldiers in and around the place had been waiting for something like this for two years, but there was only so much that could be done much longer around here.

Whatever Nick was doing it had to be inside the White House, but how could he have gotten in? The main entrances, the tunnels et cetera would be covered and there had been several major hits to the building itself, but nobody had gotten past them. "There has to be a way inside," Bridge muttered. There was only one thing for it - he had to get in there and quickly.

"Darkstar," he shouted. "Look after people, I'm going inside..."

She nodded as she watched Bridge run and vault through the ruined fences towards the White House. He had been there several times before when he was the Director of SHIELD and he knew the most secure place in the building had to be the situation room. That was where he was headed and his SHIELD idents across his uniform allowed the people to let him in without firing at him. If there was anyone who could stop Fury from doing whatever it was he was doing - it was going to be Bridge. Darkstar smiled as she reached out. They'd all heard the rules of engagement had changed and while Excalibur weren't SHIELD, they were supported by SHIELD and that meant the rules changed for them as well.

Or at least that would be the defence and Darkstar cut loose. She'd not used her powers to their full potential because she knew what would happen but now the rules were out and the whole area became surrounded in Darkforce. Everyone within the Darkforce bubble suddenly froze, as the Darkforce held them in place. Darkstar then focused, using her powers to fixate on the SHIELD agents and her friends and cast them out of the bubble. She could feel the terror and dread emanating from them as the Darkforce tapped in to their souls, began to feed the living darkness and she cast them out before leaving the darkness herself.

"They won't be bothering us for a while," she said as she descended to the ground and her friends looked at her. She knew what they had been through though they were in there but a moment. "It was the quickest way to bring an ending to this," she said.

"I've never been this cold," Savitar said, looking at her. "Even my plasma can't heat me up."

"Leassst you hhhhhave thhhhhat," Honey Lemon said. "whhhhhat will hhhh happen to thhhhhem?"

"The darkness will devour them," said Darkstar. "As the bubble constricts they will be consumed..."

"why didn't you do that before?" asked Savitar.

"I wasn't sure I could expel everyone," she said softly. "Forge... Genesis said by any means necessary. It needed doing." They looked around at the SHIELD agents, the members of the police and everyone else who had been in the bubble, the looks on their faces. It had only been for a moment or so, but the Darkness had touched them all and it would not be something they forgot anytime soon. In the distance, smoke was billowing in the sky coming from the direction of the Capitol.

"I guess we go and join the others and finish this off," said Savitar.

"whhhhat about thhhhe Colonel?" asked Honey Lemon.

"He's doing what he has to do," said Darkstar. She created a platform for Honey Lemon to stand on who was hesitant. "It's so you can keep up with us," Honey Lemon nodded and gingerly stepped on to the platform and the three heroes took to the sky, and when they got to the Capitol they could see that the battle was still raging.

USAgent was intense in his attack, Sabra was flying and fighting and Hellios was ensuring the main building was safe, but there was still smoke coming from the building, meaning that some people had obviously gotten through. Armory was inert, and Union Jack was keeping the enemy away from Hauptmann who was simply lying there.

"Let's go!" said Darkstar, but then something struck her head, shaking her control and confidence and the Darkforce platform faded and Laynia couldn't keep herself aloft and both of them plummeted towards the floor and Sabra broke off and she grabbed hold of the young Russian who's head was bleeding from where she had been struck. Honey Lemon landed hard but her snake form protected her from any real harm.

"what hhhh happened?" she said to Union Jack.

"Hauptmann lost consciousness just as he fired a couple of concussion missiles, they hit the Capitol, it clipped Hellios on the way in and in doing that there was a gap that let some people through. He also gunned down a few of our own."

"God," said Honey Lemon. "What's happening now?"

"we're being beaten back," said Union Jack. "Hydra seem to have a tenacity to them, as if they've nothing left..."

"Probably because they haven't," said a voice and they turned to see Pete Wisdom, Kate Pryde and they held their breath in horror, knowing that they were part of the Shadow King's people.

"Relax, they're with us," said Maverick. "You like doing that, don't you?"

"There is a certain kick to it," said Wisdom, with a smile but it wasn't the grin that was normally associated with him. It was thinner, almost watery and his eyes looked tired and haggard. "I guess we've work to do. Let's go." He went to work, firing hot knives.

"Is he okay?" asked Union Jack. "I don't know him that well, but..."

"Let's just say, there's someone he cares about that's not in good shape."

"Tell us about it," said Union Jack, looking at Hauptmann. "We have to get him out of here."

"I'll do it," said Siryn, as she gathered him up. "I'll get him to the nearest SHIELD office, and they'll do what they can." Maverick nodded as he watched Pete use his hot knives to grab people, spear them and do what he could to make sure that he took his frustrations out on people. Kate was also working hard, but she seemed a little sluggish as well. It had been a long day for them all, he mused, but there was something not quite right, however he let it slide.

"Where's Bridge?" he asked.

"I thhhhhink hhhhhe'sssss gone after Fury," said Honey Lemon. "If hhhhhe can take hhhhim out, thhhen we can call thhhhiss..."

"Whole thing off," said Maverick. Drawing a line underneath it. That would be good. The Shadow King would be gone and that would be that. "Wonder if he want's backup? Genesis, this is Maverick."

"Receiving," said Genesis. "What is it?"

"What's going on with Bridge, does he need assistance?"

"It seems there is a special area underneath Washington which is accessible through the Capitol, Pentagon and the White House. It is a command bunker that Fury helped design long ago, and it is most likely to assume that is where they are headed."

"Got it," said Maverick. "Where do we access it from the Capitol?"

"I have no information on that yet. I am still accessing the NSA computer grid, however there is something that I have found that will be dealt with later on."

"Understood, Maverick out," said Maverick and then he looked over at Pete. He'd been around, maybe he knew something...

Bridge hurried through the white House. The usually tight security was not as tight as normal, because they had bigger things to worry about and he was able to get to the Situation Room with relative ease and then he saw that the table had split in to two halves and there was a gap in the floor. There had always been rumours of a secret entrance, but this was the first time he had ever considered that it was in here. He'd seen the inside of the room perhaps a half dozen times, and never even suspected it was in here. This was where he had to go, and he knew it and he hurried, wondering what he'd find and praying he wasn't too late.

Then there was the sound of gunfire and he knew he was running out of time and he could hear men shouting and he followed the sounds of the voices until he came to an elevator shaft. It looked a long way down to the bottom but that was where he had to go. He didn't have powers, he controlled a moving battle-tank, but he didn't have that with him. Colonel George Washington Bridge was just a man and he was getting too old for this shit. It had been a long time since he'd run with the wild Pack, or the Six Pack as they became, but sometimes you just knew that was who you were. He leapt, grabbing the cables of the lift shaft and he slid down the line, using his boots to slow himself every so often, and then let go again. The metal cables burnt at his gloves and he could feel the heat and the pain in his hands and he landed on the top of the elevator.

He could see the gloves had been burn away and his hands were bleeding but he had no time for that. He had to make sure that Fury didn't achieve his goals and he kicked open the hatch and dropped through. Thankfully there doors were closed, but it meant that he'd be a target as they opened and he held his gun, biting back the pain as the cold metal met the gashed hand and he pressed the open button and dropped to the floor as the door opened.

"What the hell?" Fury asked, standing over the body of the President and Bridge fired, but the shot missed because he could barely grip the gun. The President then rolled and kicked out, knocking the man to his knees and Bridge realised it wasn't the American Commander in Chief at all, it was a decoy.

"Incredible," said Bridge.

"You think that with everything that happens, there's not going to be a mutant on staff?" said the President as his shape changed to resemble another man. The gunshot wound was bleeding badly, and Bridge couldn't tell if the man was going to live or die, but then again he was secret service and that was what they were trained to do.

"Clever," Fury said, standing. "Shoulda guessed."

"Hey, Nick," said Bridge, and he shoulder charged the man, slamming him in to the wall. "Shoulda seen that coming as well."

"Let's do this then," said Fury and the two men went at it. Fury was physically fitter, less tired than Bridge, but GW was fighting for the man's soul, because what had been done could be undone. It was simple enough and each of them fought, landing blows hard, knocking each other over and they attacked each other. Nick slammed Bridge in to the wall, and Bridge kneed the man in the jaw, sending him back. No holds were called for and they struck with passion and fire, but Fury's condition began to become an advantage and he landed a shot that knocked Bridge to his back and Fury then slammed a knife in to his chest. Bridge cried out, but he was exhausted.

"Everyone o' you people are fools," Fury said. "I've been fighting this war for over fifty years, what exactly did you think you were goin' to show me that was new?"

"This," said a voice and a single gunshot went off and Nick's hand went to his chest and he looked over to see the real President standing there, a gun in his hand. "Just because I'm the President, it doesn't mean I won't fight." Fury fell to the floor.

"Nice shot, sir," said Bridge, standing.

"Nice distraction, son," said the President. "He was off guard, it let me get my shot in."

"It's not his fault," said Bridge, checking on Fury. He was alive, but the wound would need treatment.

"So I understand," said the President. "Colonel Fury was one of my heroes from way back. If we have the facilities to get him back to who he was, that's what we'll do. It's over now."

Bridge sighed. Fury was back in their hands. The Shadow King's forces were being routed. The X-Men would have faced the Shadow King by now and there had been no indication's they'd lost. Aside from the cleaning up, it looked as if it was all over.

"Yes, sir," he said, but there was going to be repercussions from this. There always were so who knew what the future held in store?

"Stand down, Colonel Bridge! I won't tell you again!"

The UN commander looked at GW Bridge, who stood there with Excalibur backing him. His weapon was drawn and there were many armed UN soldiers about facing down a multitude of SHIELD agents. The Helicarrier was flanked by aircraft and below warships were beneath the vessel.

"And I won't let you do this," said Bridge, his voice even. He had never though the day would come when SHIELD and the United Nations would beat such a standoff, but here it was over one thing, one being called Genesis. The computer programme that had the capacity of the creation of Forge called Shrapnel and a piece of the soul of Forge himself was the SHIELD Director now. He had used the Hydra Crisis to gain more anonymity for SHIELD and the Security Council were responding, but SHIELD were loyal, thanks to impassioned pleas from Timothy Dugan and Bridge himself.

"I am with the authority of the UN and you are a UN operative," said the commander. "All of Excalibur are operatives of the United Nations and subject to the orders of the Security Council."

"Perhaps you didn't hear," said USAgent. "We quit. We're working for SHIELD now."

"Yeah," said Union Jack. "So why don't you and your people go away, before it gets messy?" Excalibur had had their asses saved by Forge in the Caribbean and they had a loyalty to him. Yes, Genesis had done things in a way they hadn't been one hundred per cent up with, but he had done it and if the UN had screwed up, it was their fault.

"Maybe they'd prefer to face us than Doom," said Sabra. "With this many people gunning for SHIELD, nobody's keeping an eye on him. There's no telling what he could do."

The Commander and his troops looked at Bridge and his agents and he knew he was at a standoff. "Don't make me do this," he said, but Bridge shook his head.

"It was always going to be like this," his voice was soft, and he regretted what was going on. The UN were afraid, afraid Genesis would become like the Vision, or Ultron or any of the other artificial intelligences that had gone mad, but there was a core to them that had been mad anyway. The soul of Forge was a balanced one, a powerful one. Forge had known that he wasn't coming back from the fight and had made sure his work was carried on.

For any of those who had worked with him, trusted in him, to do anything less than back what he had planned - that was a betrayal of everything SHIELD were, of everything they stood for and it all depended on what happened now...

Two weeks earlier

Bridge went down to the psychiatric ward at the SHIELD medical facility in Dallas. Nick Fury was still there, and the doctors were working to save his mind, in the same way they had done to save his body after he'd been shot. Whatever the Shadow King had done to him, it was still there and Fury still believed that he was Praetor of Hydra and that they would rule the world some day.

The doctors were doing everything they could to try and bring him back to who he was but the influence of the Shadow King ran deep. It had been two weeks since the fall of Hydra and most of the terrorists had ended up in SHIELD custody. It had been a long procession of paperwork and such, and Excalibur had been withdrawn from the auspices of SHIELD while the situation with Genesis was debated. There was a lot of ill-feeling out there, but at the same time the Security Council were hesitant to take on SHIELD while they were sorting out the Hydra Crisis.

It meant that Excalibur were on a downtime, which suited Bridge. He was still a SHIELD agent, it wasn't something he had resigned and he had spent a lot of time working on people to make sure that they worked and it also meant he could check on Fury. The two of them had been friends for such a long time and it helped Bridge thinking that his presence might make a difference. This wasn't the way it was supposed to be, but it was the way it had turned out.

"How's he doing?" he asked one of the doctors.

"I think we're making progress," the doctor said. "He no longer thinks that the Shadow King is the dominant force, and he has been mourning the death of Wolverine." Bridge nodded. Logan was a good connection, having known Fury a long time.

"When do you think I can see him?" Bridge asked. He needed to do something/

"Not just yet," the doctor said. "We let him know you visit, but he's not receptive to you just yet. Give him time, Colonel."

"Sure," GW said, looking through the fake wall, the glass shielding him from Fury's view, where the former director was sitting there, writing things down. "What's he writing?" Bridge wondered.

"His memoirs," said the doctor. "It gives him something to do and we let him because it shows us what's going on inside his head."

"Clever," Bridge said and his pager bleeped. Genesis was calling. "Excuse me," he said and headed for a conference room and connected to Genesis.

"Thank you, Colonel," the holographic image said. "I know these visits mean a lot to you."

"Not a problem," said Bridge, thinking how weird it was to talk to Genesis like this, because he still saw Forge, but he had spoken with him a lot of late and he knew that Genesis was Forge, even if he wasn't human any more. "How can I help?"

"X-Force: SHIELD Executive," said Genesis. "Or XSE. You and Forge spoke about it a while ago."

"And I said I'd back him," Bridge remembered. "I see you have the acronym accounted for now."

"Yes," said Genesis. "Forge was looking for something clever a little too clever, however I am saying what it is - a special executive of SHIELD, based on the X-Force project."

"What's the problem?"

"I have put the project in to place. San Fiorentino Island is being refitted to accommodate the proper facilities."

"Is that a wise move, considering the situation with the UN?" Bridge said. The wisdom behind this was questionable.

"That is what I need you for," Genesis said. "You and I have spoken at length and you know me pretty well. My question is this - do you trust me?"

"Yes," Bridge said. "I do."

"I need you to convince people then," said Genesis. "The United Nations are going to attack SHIELD with the intention of shutting me down and bringing them back in to the fold."

"Fools," muttered Bridge. "SHIELD isn't supposed to be contained as they think we should be - have they learnt nothing?"

"No," said Genesis, "they have not and they are afraid of the unknown, the challenge that we represent, that I represent."

"You can see why," Bridge said. "I was apprehensive at first..."

"I know," said Genesis, "however you came around. That is why I am asking you, and Timothy Dugan."

"Dum Dum?"

"Yes, he is like you in many, many ways." Bridge smiled.

"Go figure," he said. "What about X-Force? Can they not help?"

"They're co-ordinating the Illuminati agenda. We have learnt a lot, and we've shut down several Illuminati operations."

Bridge whistled. "That's a good result, considering we knew nothing about them until you got in to the NSA computers."

"Will you help?"

"Yes," said Bridge. "I'm in it until it's over. I don't know that I can fix things the way you'd like, but I'll do what I can."

"That is all I ask," Genesis said. "Thank you, GW." Genesis faded away and Bridge looked at the empty space. It wasn't going to be easy, but he believed he had a way of getting the ball rolling. He had a favour to call in...

One week later.

"I thought we were out of action," said John Walker as the members of Excalibur met

in the offices of Tachyon, secured for them by Savitar.

"We are," said Rock, as he poured a cup of coffee. "But Bridge asked us to come and here we are."

"It is very strange," Ruth Bat-Seraph asked as she looked about the room at the others, her friends and colleagues. "He was very secretive, when he has been a lot more forthcoming."

"I know," said Rock, and he looked over to Helliios. "Did he say anything to you?"

The Greek hero shook his head. "No," he said. "However he did mention a choice needed to be made."

"I think he said something like that to me," said Honey Lemon. She had spent a few weeks in the care of Stephen Strange who had ensured that she was restored to normal. He had kept her under observation, as there were issues regarding her restoration he had not liked and once he had been satisfied she was in full health and there was no more of Set's evil inside her, he had let her go. "It was interesting. I thought he might mean something to do with Hauptmann."

The room fell silent, in memory of the missing member of the team who had succumbed to the draining of his life force by Mjnari and he had died in the battle with Hydra. He had been given a heroes burial, but it was another member of the team that they had lost. Then the door opened and in walked Neal, Bridge and Laynia. The team were assembled.

"Thank you for coming," said Bridge.

"Thank you?" said USAgent. "That's a new one."

"I know," said Bridge, "but I'm not here as Armory, or the Excalibur leader. I'm here as GW Bridge, Agent of SHIELD."

"What's going on, GW?" asked Rock. "What's this about, the secrecy, the caution?"

"The United Nations are going to attack SHIELD," said Bridge. "They are currently working on ways of diverting resources from the Latverian operations to focus on SHIELD."

"Genesis," said Nyoko. "They really don't like him."

"Yes," said Bridge. "I and a few others have been working and we've managed to get the majority of SHIELD on board with the idea that Genesis is a decent being."

"You're saying he's more than a computer programme?" said Hellios.

"Yes," said Bridge. "That's exactly it. A piece of Forge's soul is in Genesis, and that gives him a sentience. The thing most people in SHIELD feel is that if Genesis treats them the same way Forge did, then there's no problem."

"And what if he goes rogue?" said Sabra. "I am playing devil's advocate."

"Then we shut him down," said Bridge. He looked at them. "Genesis has considered that and I have the codes that are needed to delete the files, and restrict Genesis to Sanctuary. It is a code that three others have and two of us are needed to use it."

"He gave you that?" said Savitar, and Bridge nodded.

"It comes down to trust," he said. "Genesis trusts me, I trust him. I need you to trust me."

"Why?" asked USAgent. "What are you asking?"

"Quit Excalibur, join SHIELD and stop this before it gets out of hand," Bridge said. "Genesis has hired forty eight law firms, in twenty six countries to fight this legally. A war between the UN and SHIELD needs to be nipped in the bud before it gets out of hand."

"That's a no-brainer," said USAgent. "Why us?"

"Because we're high profile," said Bridge. "And the President of the United States thinks we'll mke the difference."

"You called the President?" said Rock. "That's pretty big stakes, boss."

"What did he say?" Hellios asked.

"He said the United Nations are not subject to the dictates of the United States, but Excalibur saved Washington and if they were on the same side as SHIELD it would give him a lot of weight and the ability to work on the UN."

"So you have his support, if you have ours?" said Darkstar. She wasn't sure how well this would go down in Russia...

"Yes," said Bridge. "Now I can't order you to do this, I want it to be because you want to do it."

"I'm in," said Walker. "The UN made this happen, made Excalibur happen. We had no choice - it's time we showed them that the freewill thing they like to talk about applies here as well." He put his hand on the table. "Who's with us?" He looked at Bridge and nodded and Bridge smiled. He'd thought that Agent would have been the hardest to convince and slowly the others put their hand on the table and Bridge followed suit.

"That's it then," said Bridge. "Excalibur is disbanded. Now we wait..."

Now

"Please," the Commander said and Bridge and the others stood there. "We will open fire..."

"No, you won't," said Genesis, as he appeared in-between them. "SHIELD is standing down, Commander, however you will not be retaking the Helicarrier, nor will you be taking any of SHIELD by force. I have just been in contact with the United Nations."

"Yes," muttered Bridge. He had hoped for this.

"My lawyers have spoken with their lawyers and it has been decided that this is dealt with in the courts."

"Sir?" The commander didn't understand. "How did you convince them of that?"

"Well, I had some friends pull some strings," said Genesis, thinking of Bridge, of Pete Wisdom and some others who had leaked things to the press that the United Nations. The UN had been asked for comment and they had been forced to say that they were pursuing legal options. "However military action has been suspended."

"I will have to check," the commander said and Genesis nodded and turned to his people.

"Thank you," he said. "Thank you for defending me, for defending SHIELD. You did not have to, but you did so anyway. Thank you all." He looked at Bridge. "You know what happens now?"

"Yes," said Bridge. He and the team had discussed it and the eleventh hour suspension had come as they thought it would. They knew that they would have to go back with the military, to take up residence at the United Nations as the Excalibur Project. They needed to be separated from SHIELD until this situation was resolved. "Good luck."

"I just hope you have better lawyers than they do," said Rock and Genesis nodded looking at each of the team. They had been brought together as strangers, not wanting to be there but they had become something more. They had been forged in to a team, respecting each other and what they stood for. No matter what happened next, he knew that what had been achieved was due in no small part to Excalibur, and it was a shame he couldn't have them in the XSE but that wasn't to be.

He knew he was going to have to fight the United Nations, and if they won the XSE dream would die and everything the Maker had put in to it would be gone, as would the rest of it.

"The orders have been confirmed," the Commander said. "We're pulling out, but..."

"You have to take us with you," said Bridge and he and the rest of Excalibur stepped forward.

"One moment," said Genesis. "Please turn around." Bridge looked at him and then Genesis smiled. Bridge was stunned. He had never seen that happen before and he did so as did the others following suit and they were faced by the SHIELD agents, all saluting the team.

"Bloody hell," said Rock.

"You took the words right out of my mouth," answered Hellios and the team saluted

the SHIELD agents back, then they turned back to Genesis, who also saluted.

"I'll see you all again," he said. "One way or another." Then Excalibur walked away from SHIELD and back to the United Nations soldiers. No sound was uttered, but the silence spoke volumes and no matter what happened next, they knew that they were exactly what the Nick Fury has envisaged when the team was commissioned so long ago, and what ever came next they'd deal with it together.

National heroes taken from their home countries and forced to work together by the United Nations. Under the direction of SHIELD, they combat the greatest threats to the world and peace. They are...

Excalibur
Issue # 27

To All Things, An Ending

by David Ingram

A former member of the X-Men and X-Factor, the mutant known only as Forge possesses a superhuman genius for inventing. In addition, Forge is also a Native American shaman who possesses some mystical powers. Following the invasion in Greece, Forge was appointed as the new Director of SHIELD.

Forge

A former mercenary and ally of Cable's, GW Bridge is now an agent of SHIELD, and briefly served as the Director. Recently, he's been assigned to a desk job due to his connections with Cable.

G.W. Bridge

The latest in cybernetic technology, the Armory is a walking battle machine controlled by Bridge from the SHIELD Helicarrier. It is through Armory that Bridge leads Excalibur.

Armory

Taking up the tradition other sons of Britain have, Percival Rockford has assumed the mantle of Union Jack, Britain's answer to Captain America. Although Union Jack possesses no powers, he has a strategic mind and uses a variety of weapons as Britain's representative in Excalibur.

Union Jack

A former member of the Champions and the Winter Guard, Laynia Petrova is a mutant who can control the Darkforce, an extradimensional energy that grants her flight and teleportation abilities. She can also manipulate and project the Darkforce to suit her desires as Russia's hero. Darkstar

Formerly called Captain America, John Walker became the USAgent after Steve Rogers reclaimed that title. Originally using a shield similar to Captain America's, the USAgent now uses standard weaponry such as handguns, or an energy shield in rare cases.

USAgent

A member of the Israeli agency called Mossad, Ruth Bat-Seraph is a mutant who possesses superhuman strength, speed, agility, as well as flight and gauntlets which can fire paralyzing blasts.

Sabra

His real name unrevealed, the Hauptmann can absorb kinetic energy and use it to either increase his own vitality or redirect it at opponents. After teaming up with Captain America to fight the Sons of the Skull, he now serves Germany as a member of Excalibur.

Hauptmann

Neal Shaara was forced to use his mutant ability to generate intense flames to assist Fabian Cortez and the Mutant Liberation Front. Now that Cortez has been defeated, Neal has dropped the name of Thunderbird and taken up the moniker of Savitar, a Vedic sun god.

Savitar

Part of the second generation of Greek super-soliders, Achyls Nianias possesses the abilities of flight, invulnerability, superhuman strength, speed, and the ability to fire blasts of solar energy from his hands or eyes.

Hellios

Formerly a member of Big Hero 6, Nyoko Anda is the latest member of Excalibur. She has no special powers, but wears Power Pockets that contain a seemingly limitless amount of items that she calls upon when needed.

Honey Lemon

SHIELD Heli-carrier

As G.W Bridge looked over his team and prepared to brief them, he found himself doing something he never thought he would do. He praised the lord for lawyers. A technicality, that was all that saved Excalibur from being disbanded and likely court marshaled for failure to follow orders by the United Nations following recent events.

The operating charter that gave Excalibur its power, its basic ability to operate, was interwoven with SHIELD's own operating charter and authority, now radically overhauled, much to the U.N's chagrin. At the time, it made perfect sense. Excalibur and SHIELD complimented one another in terms of authority and mandate, after all. Thus the Secretary General of the United Nations and head of SHIELD were given command over Excalibur. But the United Nations never foresaw a time when not only would the Secretary General's body be seized by an ancient wizard, or that SHIELD would push thru a massive reorganization that would lessen the United Nations' control over them, and that Excalibur would actually side with SHIELD regarding the dispute.

But now, a new charter would be all but impossible considering the political turmoil, with Justin Hammer's storming of Genosha and the war against Doom while the madman himself was presently besieging the Fantastic Four (again, to say nothing of the current lack of a Secretary General). As such, unless SHIELD yielded all authority over Excalibur, there could be no more Excalibur. It was all or nothing proposition, and the United Nations certainly didn't wish to be left with nothing. And so they were forced to allow Excalibur to continue to operate under the watchful eye of SHIELD. And so here they were, the full team assembled and ready for action in the SHIELD Helicarrier, with possibly their most important mission to date.

“Lawyers, never thought I’d see the day.” Bridge remarked silently to himself “Okay team, listen up. SHIELD just got a report that the situation in Latveria is about to get a whole lot bloodier. As if having a toy capable of destroying entire cities isn’t enough, Doom is now planning on using neutron bombs against U.N forces in Latveria.”

Those Excalibur members with close affiliations with their governments, like Sabra and Union Jack, gasped in shock, while others like Hellios and Darkstar, wondered what exactly the nature of the threat was and why it was so shocking.

“What are neutron bombs?” Savitar finally asked

“About the worst bloody thing that could happen to our boys,” Union Jack explained, “See mate, they’re like atomic bombs that only work against organic material. Nasty little buggers.”

“Human flesh, specifically.” Sabra added, “I know Saddam, the United States and others have been working to perfect their own neutron bombs for years. I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised Doom already has some of his own.”

“It makes perfect sense if you think about it.” Darkstar calmly stated, “No matter how advanced, Doom’s army cannot possibly win this war. The forces against him are too many to win on force of arms. Neutron bombs are his only option for victory.”

The rest of Excalibur felt themselves shudder just a little bit as Darkstar casually explained the cold, exact logic behind Doom’s plans of mass murder.

“Wouldn’t these weapons also affect his own troops?” Savitar asked

“Doom likely has some means of protecting his men.” Honey Lemon stated, “The question is, what are we going to do about it?”

“Whatever it takes!” Hellios said as he slammed his fist down on the round meeting table. Though he exerted only a fraction of his incredible strength, the entire table, indeed the entire room, shook slightly with the force of the blow, “Doom mustn’t be allowed to win this war!”

“What I think the lady means is, ‘how are we going to stop Doom when the last time we faced him we beat us down without breaking a sweat’?” Union Jack explained, unfazed by Hellios’ casual display of power.

“We’re not dealing with Doom himself.” Bridge explained, “He’s raising hell with the Fantastic Four right now. Rather, we’re only dealing with the situation in Latveria.”

“Handling his war is as dangerous, if not more so, than fighting the man himself.” Sabra deadpanned

“Yeah, that’s where all of Doom’s weapons are, remember?” U.S Agent stated, “I’m more than willing to go in and kick some ass, but like Rock said, I’d like something to stop Doom from kicking our asses around like he did last time.”

“And you shall have it.” An electronic voice reassured them. The holographic image of Genesis, a melding of the computer program Shrapnel and the mind and soul of Forge, appeared in the center of the round table. The entire team was taken back by his sudden appearance and more than a few members were uneasy with his presence. It was Bridge who trusted Genesis, and Excalibur who trusted Bridge. But that trust only marginally extended towards Genesis

“What did you have in mind?” Darkstar asked.

“Doom’s greatest weapon is his mind. His second greatest weapon is information.” Genesis explained, “We have a decapitation strike in mind. As for how we’re going to pull it off...”

High over Latveria, heading towards Castle Doom.

U.S Agent gingerly ran his hands over the controls to the special SHIELD Aircraft they’d been given for this mission, as Excalibur soared towards their target. The plane was shaped like a missile with four rocket boosters on the sides and packed with the latest in cloaking technology. So far it’d allowed them to breeze past several patrols and three nasty dog fights (that U.S Agent really wanted to be a part of, but knew better than to risk the entire mission). But they were approaching Castle Doom, and John Walker knew enough about Doom to know they wouldn’t be able to breach his castle as easily as they had reached it.

“We’re within range. Get ready guys, it’s about to get bumpy.” U.S Agent warned. As if fate wanted to emphasize that point, an anti-aircraft missile exploded only inches off the haul, rattling everything and everyone inside the plane down to their teeth.

“You know mate, they probably didn’t see us until you said that.” Union Jack observed dryly

“Evasive action!” Bridge ordered via the Armory weapons system.

“Gee, I thought we’d just let them shoot us out of the air like skeet.” John Walker grunted as he jerked the controls from one side to another in an effort to avoid the defenses of Castle Doom. Though U.S Agent’s skill was considerable, the craft he was piloting wasn’t especially responsive and took more hits than it avoided. Thankfully for Excalibur, the plane was heavily armored, enabling it to suffer punishment that would otherwise destroy the likes of other planes and even most heavy tanks.

“Bring it in.” Bridge ordered.

“Yes, while we’re still able to fight!” Savitar pleaded as he fought to keep the contents of his stomach down where they belonged.

“Make sure your seat belts are on, and your trays are in an upright position,” U.S Agent quipped as he banked the aircraft upwards towards the clouds, “because we’re coming in for a fucking crash landing.”

Inside the bowels of Castle Doom

The soldiers and scientists who manned the controls to the defenses of Castle Doom let out whoop of victory as they saw the SHIELD aircraft, which had evaded their scanners until they were almost on top of the Castle, pull up towards the sky and likely leaving with their tails between their legs. The small victory managed to pierce the thick tension that saturated all of Latveria’s military. Doom was gone for the moment, and had left control of the war in the hands of his generals. And though Latveria’s army was more than holding their own against the U.N forces, everyone feared that Doom would return and find their progress inadequate. The sudden appearance of an enemy aircraft caused many a heart to skip a beat. However, its subsequent retreat caused a disproportionate and incredible wave of jubilation and heart felt relief to sweep over the men.

“Ha! Watch them flee in fear of our power!” One soldier said boastfully.

“Watch them cower before our military might!” Another bellowed.

“Watch them steer their plane directly into the heart of the castle.” One soldier said softly, instantly silencing everyone within the war-room. The lone soldier pointed towards the monitor screen and the little red dot that represented the offending SHIELD aircraft streaking towards the castle at too fast a speed to be stopped, despite the best efforts of the automated defenses.

U.S Agent struggled with all his superhuman strength to keep the craft on its crash course, “Honey, I’m...”

The crash of the SHIELD aircraft into and thru the ancient stonewalls of Castle Doom drowned out Walker’s cliché. The aircraft, designed by an international brain trust specially for invading Dr. Doom’s castle, slammed thru wall after all, bringing huge chunks of the ceiling down as the craft pierced deeper and deeper into Doom’s most private sanctum, sending servants and soldiers alike scurrying for cover. The craft finally came to a skidding halt in the center of Dr. Doom’s assembly room.

Under the ever present eyes of a beautifully hand painted picture of the Doctor’s mother, a horde of Doombots swarmed the craft, their weapons primed and locked. But before they could unleash a lethal wave of energy against the brazen invaders, a specially attuned electromagnetic pulse was emitted from the ship’s weapons array. Were the pulse set at any other frequency, the Doombots would have easily ignored it. However, the frequency emitted from the weapons system was designed to fry a single chip in the Doombot’s CPU, effectively immobilizing them and turning them all into over priced paperweights.

There was a hiss of air as the reinforced metal door to the aircraft released and retracted, revealing Excalibur in all their glory. The air was filled with dust and soot, but the shine of

Union Jack's pistol, the Armory weapons system and Hellios' glowing eyes lanced thru any obscurity.

"Surrounded by a powerful fascist robots with no means of retreat and millions of lives depending on us." U.S Agent stated. He slapped a magazine clip into his gun and pulled back the hammer with his thumb, "I knew today would be good, but I didn't know how good!"

"Americans." Darkstar sighed.

"Enough." Bridge snapped, "It took seven years, over two dozen lives and billions of dollars worth of planning, spying and preparation to get us just this far. We fail now, and lots of people die."

"Then we won't fail!" Savitar replied as he flew over the heads of the team to meet a new approaching army of Doombots that was advancing into the room via a small door, forcing them to group together to enter. The young hero unleashed his plasma blasts, devastating the ones in front. Hellios and Darkstar assisted with their own respective energy blasts, and destroyed the advancing Doombots. Honey Lemon pulled out a special weapon, shaped like a high tech disc, from her power purse and lobbed it towards the opening. Almost instantly, a yellow force field covered the entrance the Doombots were using. All the other entrances were covered by debris.

"Bridge, what's the plan? Do we just start smashing things at random?" U.S Agent asked.

"You smash things on my orders." Bridge said, "Three teams. Savitar, Hellios, Union Jack, you guys go north. Darkstar, Sabra, Honey Lemon, you ladies go south. Agent, you're with me. We don't know where Doom's keeping his bombs, but we're fairly certain they're in his castle. Start smashing, keep smashing and hope you get lucky."

"Nice to know this strike has such concise planning." Darkstar quipped.

"I shall provide our exit." Sabra said as she strode over to a stonewall and slammed her fist into it, causing it to explode outwards, "Let us be on our way."

"That's my kind of lady." U.S Agent smirked quietly to Bridge as the rest of Excalibur filed out.

"So, where do we go?" U.S Agent asked finally.

"Us? We're going down. They're just the distraction." Bridge explained as he aimed his repulser towards the floor, "step back, and cover me."

Hellios ripped one Doombot in half and used his solar blasts to melt another five. Union Jack's pistol, loaded with specially designed explosive bullets disabled Doombot after Doombot while Savitar destroyed even more. Before long, the skirmish was over with Excalibur the easy victors.

"Is it just me, or is this too easy?" Savitar asked.

“Simple robots can’t match our power and cunning.” Hellios boasted.

“Or it’s a trap.” Savitar proposed.

“We’re in too deep for Doom’s men not to spring a trap.” Union Jack explained. As Union Jack said that, a hidden panel slid open and sprayed Savitar with a coat of flame. Savitar easily endured the assault, as his plasma powers gave him immunity to heat based attacks. Hellios was bombarded with ice while Union Jack, deemed unworthy of any special weapons, quickly dodged several lasers blasts.

“Does Doom think I’m Iceman or something?” Savitar asked as he easily destroyed the offending weapon.

Union Jack smirked, “Or something.”

Darkstar created a darkforce wedge and ploughed thru a contingent of Doombots as they pushed down the hall in search of weapons. Sabra easily defeated any and all Doombots that slipped by while Honey Lemon covered their flank.

Suddenly, a weapon protruded from the wall and sprayed Darkstar in a white mist, a gas created to disable anyone whose powers were deprived from cosmic radiation. Darkstar, a mutant, easily ignored the weapon and blasted it to bits with her darkforce while Sabra and Honey Lemon both easily defeated weapons that simply weren’t designed for them.

“Doom’s lost his touch, it seems.” Sabra observed.

“Remember when Genesis said we wouldn’t allow him any information?” Honey Lemon asked, “Well, that wasn’t completely true.”

Inside the bowels the main defense room, Doom’s greatest scientists struggled to comprehend what exactly was happening in the castle. They were losing ground. Fast. And that was about the full extent of their knowledge

“The sensors say that we’re being attacked by the likes of Iceman, Human Torch, Invisible Woman, and Squirrel Girl! But our defenses are useless against them!” One scientist exclaimed.

“But how is that possible? They’re on two different teams, and our master is dealing with the accursed Fantastic Four members as we speak!” Another explained, “And the others cannot possibly be who the sensors say they are!”

On any given day, Castle Doom is easily the most impregnable fortress in the modern world, with automated defenses that respond according to any intruder, and sensors connected to the world’s largest and most accurate database on superhumans connected to adaptable weapons designed by one of the greatest minds ever.

But that great strength is also a weakness to those smart or creative enough to exploit it. Excalibur, aided by special devices to deceive and confuse Doom's scanners created by Genesis alongside some of SHIELD's best scientists, subsequently may as well have a free hand to explore the castle. Were Doom himself present, the situation would be drastically different. He'd have been able to properly adjust the sensors as easily as he breathed. However, Doom left defense of the castle to his scientists and compared to Doom, their combined intellect was marginal. Even worse for Latveria's defenders, Doom himself was far too paranoid to train them too well in entering new combat protocols into the sensors. As a consequence, none of the gathered soldiers or scientists possessed the ability to adjust the scanners enough to negate Excalibur's advantage and power

"Could it be the Avengers or Excalibur?" One scientist proposed.

"What would it matter if it was? We don't know how..."

The sentence was cut off by a deafening explosion above the men's head that sent rock, dust and soot showering down. As the men scattered, a figure dropped down the newly made sky light.

"Yippee-ki-yay, you fascist muthers!" John Walker shouted as he leapt down. As soon as Walker touched the floor, he whipped his energy shield outwards, and decapitated two Doombots protecting the room. From above, several laser beams lanced down, sniping the soldiers and Doombots alike and disabling them. Once all the defenders were defeated and subdued, the armory battle system gently lowered itself into the room via its boot jets and surveyed the situation.

"As of now, you are all prisoners of war." Bridge informed them, his repulsars still smoking, "Now, tell me where the neutron bombs are. We can protect you from Doom."

Thru the looks of sheer terror and desperation, Bridge and Agent could make out an additional look. Confusion.

"We...don't have any neutron bombs. Lord Doom feels they would escalate a situation uncontrollably." One brave soldier confessed.

U.S Agent and Bridge exchanged a suspicious glance at one another, "We have good Intel that said that Doom was preparing to use neutron bombs."

"Intelligence from Americans." One soldier snickered; eliciting nervous chuckles that graduated into heart felt laughter from the captured men.

"I don't like this." Walker whispered to Bridge.

"I know. If we were fed false Intel, SHIELD could have another mole problem."

"Yeah, there's that, but that's not what I was talking about." Agent replied, "I don't like being laughed at. Can I hit someone?"

“Just keep an eye on these people and wait for the troops to get here.” Bridge sighed.

Huddled together away from the SHIELD agents, three of Doom’s top scientists were feverishly debating the very future of Latveria.

“We can’t! Think of what will happen to our countrymen! To us! We’d be dead men for sure!” One scientist said in a low, hushed tone

“We’re dead men one way or the other, you know this as well as I do!” The second scientist snapped.

“Yes, and maybe this way our fellow scientists will be spared.” The third said solemnly.

“Hey, what are you eggheads doing?” Walker called out.

“Our choice is clear. It’s now or never.” One said. They all nodded in acknowledgment

“Hey, what are you doing? Stop!” Walker began to rush forward, deathly certain that the three were about to activate some last doomsday or suicide weapon. U.S Agent began forcing his way thru the soldiers, but wasn’t nearly fast enough to prevent the men from reaching their wrists, and twisting several dials on their watches. U.S Agent was within a foot of the three, but that was as far as he got as they burst into flame and became ash before the first scream could escape their mouths.

“Holy shit!” U.S Agent backpedaled in horror and shock. He barely had time to process what had happened before a big red twelve came up on the main monitor.

Then, an eleven.

Then, a ten.

Then, a nine.

A metal hand slapped down on Agent’s shoulder.

“Time to go!” Bridge said before activating the team comm. unit, “Excalibur, evac., now! Repeat, evac. now!”

“Evac.? What happened, what happened?” Savitar demanded frantically as he, Hellios and Union Jack (carried by Hellios) tour down the stone halls and towards hopefully the closest exit. Union Jack looked back the way they’d come, and saw a wave of pure white streaking towards them much faster than the pace they were leaving at.

“I don’t think it matters now, mate.” Rock said a split second before the energy washed over them.

Bridge looked down and saw the wave washing towards him as he and Walker raced thru the ancient castle to freedom. He didn't need the armory system's sensors to know he and Walker would never escape in time.

"I suppose this is the part where I say, 'it's always been an honor to serve'." John quipped.

"Oh, shut the..."

The energy wave washed over the two men. Bridge's vision went blurry, as expected. But only a moment later, it returned, perfect as always. Bridge hesitantly depowered his boot jets and set down.

"What...just happened?" Walker asked.

"I don't know." Bridge confessed, "Give me a moment to run a deep sensor scan. Keep an eye out."

As Bridge began his scans, he also monitored the SHIELD broadcast frequency. Bridge quickly discovered the energy wave had swept over all of Latveria. And what Bridge heard on those broadcast frequencies instantly answered his questions regarding the energy wave that swept over him and Walker. Though that information only caused the knot in his stomach to swell in size.

U. N Security Council

"He stripped mined his entire country of all its technology?" The French representative asked incredulously. In the center of the table, the American representative rapped his pencil against the horseshoe shaped oak desk of the Security Council, his attention locked on the proceedings while saying nothing, for the moment.

The holographic image of Genesis quietly wondered how often he'd have to explain exactly what happened. He'd already done so at least seven times to several different and very important people, "That's correct, sir. Doom apparently installed a new failsafe measure throughout his country, likely to insure that no one would be able to benefit from his technology should he be killed or deposed. He obviously entrusted the activation of this device to his most loyal scientists."

"And where exactly is all of Doom's technology currently?" The Chinese representative inquired.

"We're...not certain honestly. It could have been shrunk down into the microverse, shunted to the Negative Zone. We...don't know for sure. We're still looking into it." Genesis admitted.

The American representative continued tapping his pencil against the oak desk

“And what do we know for sure?” The Russian representative sneered, “Does Doom still have access to his technology?”

If it was possible for a hologram to grit his teeth, Genesis was doing it now, “As far as we have been able to tell, yes. Dr. Doom managed to carry out his campaign against the Fantastic Four without any serious problems. He no doubt possesses the ability to recall or remotely manipulate his technology.”

“And under who’s authority did you use the bloody Doom protocols? Those things are a one shot deal!” The United Kingdoms representative exclaimed.

“Our intelligence indicated that Doom was preparing a massive counter strike. I deemed it prudent to use them.” Genesis explained.

“That’s over ten billion dollars, seven years and a whole hell of a lot of work down the drain now, isn’t it?” The United Kingdom’s representative demanded.

“I made my decision based on a then credible report that Doom was preparing to use weapons of mass destruction against United Nations troops. I’m hard pressed to see the problem.” Genesis said evenly

“The problem comrade Genesis, is that the report is, forgive pun, a forgery.” The Russian representative explained.

The American representative continued tapping, a little bit louder and faster now.

“That is indeed a problem. The forgery was excellent, though.” Genesis said suspiciously, “But I feel that our time is best spent discovering who sent us the false report and how, as opposed to crying over spilled milk.”

“That is another matter for another time.” The German representative stated, “To be honest, we feel that you have overstepped your bounds in this instance. We feel now that you should surrender authority over Excalibur to the United Nations.”

“Now wait just a minute!” Genesis defended, “Though SHIELD had Excalibur forced on us, they have proven to be an invaluable tool! We’ve come to rely on them a great deal and SHIELD needs them now more than ever.”

There was the sound of a wooden snap and of a fist slamming down on the oak table. All eyes turned towards the American representative, who stood up unbidden.

“We are simply asking you to make a sacrifice, Genesis. We have made sacrifices for you and yours.” The Representative explained in a heated but hushed tone, “Seventy percent of SHIELD’s operating budget comes from United States taxpayers. Ninety two percent of the wonderful technology SHIELD enjoys was created, tested and manufactured by United States

contractors. And now, we must bear the burden of rebuilding a nation that was turned into a third world nation overnight. We have made sacrifices for you, now it is time you to sacrifice, for us.”

The two men locked eyes for the longest of moments, but it was finally Genesis who blinked first.

“Very well. Your demands are... hardly unreasonable. As head of SHIELD, I hereby cede all operating authority over strike force Excalibur to the United Nations.”

Later

As the American representative entered his office, he still felt the warm glow of victory flowing thru his veins. He sat down in his chair and pulled out a cigar, a reward he rarely allowed himself these days.

“Everything went down exactly as you said.” The representative said to the man sitting in a leather chair in the corner of the office. The man was wearing the blue military uniform of a U.N commander, though his face was obscured by shadow. Not that it mattered, as both men knew the other perfectly well, “May I ask as to how you pulled it off?”

“Of course. See, a long time back, a SHIELD agent gave me a little gift for safekeeping, but I also used it to create my own little backdoor. Bet he’d be pissed as hell to know I created a backdoor into SHIELD thanks to him.” The shadowed man explained

“No doubt. You’ve helped us more than you know. We’ve given the new SHIELD a black eye...”

“Pity we couldn’t have informed the other members of the Security Council of our plans.” The man interrupted.

“If you say so.” The representative continued, “But we have also reclaimed one of our most powerful weapons.”

“Do you need anymore...assistance with SHIELD, by the way? I’ve got a little grudge against those bastards as it so happens.”

“The matter is well in hand, but I thought that was your ‘clone’ that had that grudge.” The representative chuckled.

“Well, between you and me, he was like a brother to me. An evil brother, but brother none the less.” The man smiled, “So Excalibur is all mine now?”

“Yes. Excalibur will be it’s own separate department now, like the CIA and FBI. You will still have the HERMES system, about three hundred field agents and of course, the team itself. I am curious as to why you haven’t decided to scrap the current team. They do have some loyalty to Wisdom and SHIELD, after all.”

“The five members I’m keeping are true blue patriots. Good little soldiers.” The man explained, “The new recruits I’m bringing aboard should help round out the team’s powerbase.”

“And no loyalty to Wisdom or SHIELD.”

“Exactly.”

“You’ve thought of everything, haven’t you?”

“Of course. That is why your government and mine endorsed me for Excalibur director. Who better to keep the wolves at bay than another wolf?”

“Too true, sir, too true. But be warned, your very presence will create some powerful enemies against you.”

“Oh, that’s a fringe benefit, actually. But to be honest?” Joey Chapman leaned forward, allowing the light to fully illuminate his face. His pearly white teeth shined in the light, and his grin looked more like it belonged on the face of a hungry fox than that of a human being, “I wouldn’t have it any other way, mate.”

Next Issue: Ch-ch-ch-changes! It’s the start of a whole new era as Excalibur gets a big overhaul and a new volume. It’s the start of a bold new era. Who goes? Who stays? Who joins? All this, and Pete Wisdom too(hey, no one’s perfect)!

Notes

David Wheatley is a damn fine writer. He’s contributed a lot to Marvel 2000 and fanfiction in general. In fact, his X-Force was so incredible I took it upon myself to find it another writer for that fine title. Now, that said, I am not David Wheatley. My Excalibur will be an almost completely different creature. New tone, largely new cast and a new direction. That’s not to say that I will ignore the fabulous work of Mr. Wheatley. In fact, without some of his work my Excalibur wouldn’t be possible. Just that I’m not going to copy his work. Now that said, I hope you still around and join me as I explore the nasty effects of politics in general in the pages of Excalibur.