

FANTASTIC FOUR:
US AND THEM

DRAFT 1 (8/22-16 - 9/28-16)

LOGLINE

After getting their powers, the Fantastic Four decide to explore the galaxy before their first visit to an alien world ends in disaster.

SIMILAR IDEAS

Interstellar, Star Trek: The Next Generation, and Ghostbusters (1984).

PROLOGUE

The story begins at a government facility where the Fantastic Four are each held in an isolation cell. ANALYST visits the cells with FILM CREW to document their interrogations. REED RICHARDS, 45, scrolls long equations on the walls of his cell with a marker. SUE STORM, 28, struggles to maintain her visible form, apologizing to Analyst. JOHNNY STORM, 23, does push-ups while on fire. BEN GRIMM, 49, sands his jagged rock fingers smooth.

Analyst asks Ben to recount his history with the team leading up to the accident. He starts with meeting Reed as a sophomore in high school in 1983. Reed was a freshman at 12 and the victim of bullies. Ben figured he could improve his physical prowess by fighting other tough kids and fought Reed's bullies. They quickly became friends.

Reed says Ben was the first person to accept him as a person and not a genius wunderkind. They remained friends through college where Ben studied mechanical engineering and played football. Reed learned all manner of sciences, excelling in quantum physics. His work caught the eye of many institutions and was invited to teach while earning his Masters Degree. Ben followed along.

One school was Stanford where Sue describes becoming infatuated with Reed's intellect. They hung out in the classroom after hours to test each other. When asked about meeting Reed, Johnny cannot remember because he partied with CODERS at Palo Alto every other night. Sue continues about how the four of them became famous on campus for experiments they would conduct and earned the name, the Fantastic Four.

Reed goes on about the Baxter Foundation sponsoring them with a grant program, where they toured schools across the country teaching, testing theories, and inventing. They were also given a residence and laboratory at the Baxter Building in New York City. Later they went to Europe and visited Latveria where Reed was reunited with Victor von Doomstadt III, who he met at MIT years ago. Ben describes his aversion toward Latveria being dictatorship, but speaks highly of visiting Wakanda.

Reed discusses their latest breakthrough: a teleport. The first attempt was short range, but he wanted to push the limits. He goes on a tangent about subspace before Sue explains that the teleport was a doorway and they wanted to see within the threshold. In doing so, Reed accidentally created a jump drive capable of warp travel. That was when they designed a shuttle fitted with the drive to test in space. They feared an attempt on Earth would create a slip-space rupture that could endanger the planet.

With NASA sponsorship, the Fantastic Four built the shuttle with the drive, and launched from Cape Canaveral. When Analyst asks the team about what they remember after activating the drive, no one can recall except waking up in a Navy infirmary with their powers.

Reed remembers waking up with equations on his mind and imagining where he wants to go next. Johnny likes the changes and says he will use them to be a superhero. Sue says she wants to control her powers and make sure everyone else is doing okay. Ben thinks he is fine with being a rock monster until he realizes people may not like what they see. He is hit with an existential crisis, thinking he had spent his whole life improving himself that he never cared about how he appeared on the outside.

ACT ONE

When the interrogations end, the team is allowed to see each other in Reed's room. They react positively at seeing they are okay. Johnny makes jokes about Ben, who hides his dejection behind a smile. Sue makes sure to compliment him, but it does not work. Reed is the most energized and talks about taking their jump drive to the next level.

Analyst interjects that they will not do it with government money and the team looks puzzled. He explains that disasters with superhero teams are a financial burden to

regulate. Oversight is the job of the UN thanks to the Sokovia Accords. He says if they want to continue operating with funds, they need to register. Analyst says they are free to go and leaves them speechless.

The team is in their laboratory/home at the Baxter Building. Reed and Ben read through piles of financial paperwork. Sue sands the last of Ben's jagged edges on his head. Johnny paces around tweeting furiously on his phone, his body cooking his clothes. Reed says everything used in the shuttle accident was insured before Ben adds they now have no money. Ben concedes that unless they get regular jobs, their only option for funding is to register and Reed agrees.

Sue protests that politicians have no right to dictate science. Ben says the UN could prevent potential accidents before Johnny says they should stay out of it because Captain America did, referencing the events of Civil War. Sue says they do not have to pick any side because they are scientists. Their specialty is fact and discovery, not opinion and bureaucracy.

Reed is inspired and says they were given these abilities to continue their work as a team. He explains their roles: Ben the muscle, Johnny the mascot, Sue their foundation, and himself the brains. He says they can accomplish anything and are meant to push the boundaries as an independent team.

Ben asks what they will do and Reed answers they will use the jump drive to explore the galaxy. His ambition inspires the team, but they still have the problem of funding. So, they hatch a plan to seek potential investors from people they know.

Reed goes to TONY STARK at Avengers Headquarters. They reminisce about an argument of quantum versus mechanical science in college that turned into a fistfight. Their joking turns serious when Tony asserts that quantum is a fancy word for "not real" and physical science has done more good for the world.

Johnny visits an old coder named TJ at Silicon Valley, the CEO of a search engine. Johnny asks for money and TJ says he stands nothing to gain. Johnny entices him with having his name associated new planets before TJ says he is already famous and more successful than him.

Sue meets with NICK FURY incognito at a diner in Atlanta. He wants to protect people and does not see how a space voyage will help. Sue disagrees, saying they can assess threats to prepare humanity as peaceful ambassadors.

Ben is in Wakanda speaking to KING T'CHALLA about resource support. T'Challa asks what benefit the mission will have for his country and Ben says there is none. He says the team needs materials they cannot get anywhere else then adds Wakanda will be responsible for their discoveries.

Reed's conversation with Tony devolves into screaming over the legitimacy of their respective fields. He says quantum science allows you understand the universe more deeply than mechanical can offer, calling him narrow-minded. Tony retorts that his work actually matters and they start fighting with Tony in his armor.

Johnny emasculates TJ, saying he forgot how to be a man after getting famous, and TJ challenges him to a drink off. If Johnny wins, he will sponsor the project. Not long after entering the bar with a crowd in attendance, he drinks Johnny under the table.

Nick admits he is impressed with Sue, but cannot bring himself to commit with SHIELD's meager resources. He asks her to work for him because she can do more good outside of science. Sue declines, but says she knows where to go if things fall through.

In Wakanda, T'Challa says he wants his people to take their own steps into space, but is content to help if he has access to the team's jump drive technology. Ben agrees and they shake hands.

At the Baxter Building, Reed changes bandages on his face and Johnny nurses an extreme hangover with coffee, while Sue and Ben take account of cargo sent from Wakanda. Reed says even with the vibranium for the heat shield they need more support for the shuttle. Johnny says he tried his best and they do not know any other famous people. Sue jokes about using their powers to rob banks that Johnny takes seriously. Reed alludes to knowing one more potential investor that they are not going to like.

In Washington, DC the Fantastic Four walk to the Latverian Embassy. Ben says taking money from a dictator is a bad

idea, Johnny references stories of human rights violations, and Sue suggests joining Nick Fury to better apply their intellect. Reed agrees the situation is bad, but says all the bad associated with Latveria is from Victor III's father, Victor II, commonly known as Doctor Doom. Victor III is a friend, a moderate, and reassures them he knows what he is doing.

At the embassy doors they are met by armed ROYAL GUARDS. They ask for identification before VICTOR III, 30, comes out smiling. He hugs Reed and Sue, complimenting her looks, and shakes hands with Johnny and Ben before leading them inside.

Alone with Reed in his office, Victor III talks about how he missed him and the team, despite the contention with Ben. He says he is happy for him and Sue, but Reed is confused. Victor III laughs it off.

Outside, Sue and Johnny sit on a couch while Ben paces. He airs his grievances about working with a dictatorship. Johnny repeats rumors of violations and a curfew. Sue says she will not believe it until she sees it. She references Latveria's history of fighting off the Nazis and providing a safe haven for refugees before and after WWII. Ben says she is too hung up, alluding to a romance when Victor III first met the team. Sue blushes to the point she goes invisible and denies it.

In the office, Reed is about to make his proposal before Victor III accepts. He agrees to provide monetary and material support for the project and offers the use of Latveria's facilities to build and launch the shuttle. He presents a contract he put it together while the team was looking for investors.

Reed shares the contract with the team and Ben insists they read it first. While the trio looks over the papers, Reed asks why the generosity. Victor III explains he wants out of politics to do something that matters. His people's needs prevented him from furthering his ambition and saw an opportunity to do both. He thanks Reed and promises to support him as best he can.

Days later, the Fantastic Four and Victor III arrive at Doomstadt, Latveria, a colorful medieval city in Southern Romania. CITIZENS, happy and healthy, welcome the group with a parade. KRISTOFF VERNARD, 26, in an olive military

uniform, the younger brother of Victor III, takes them down Main Street in an open limbo flanked by Citizens. They wave and smile with Ben and Johnny looking awkward.

Reed asks Victor III where his father is. He replies that Victor II was reluctant, but accepted their deal, and hides in Castle Doomstadt. As they speak, the castle comes into view, a massive structure with many towers. On the balcony of the tallest tower stands VICTOR II, 52, obscured in a green cloak. The team waves, Ben taking a while to join in while Johnny flashes a peace sign. Victor III just stares.

Construction on the shuttle begins a day later in a hangar at the launch site outside of town. Ben carries materials by hand while Johnny uses his fire to heat and weld metal. Sue sets up electrical systems as Reed and Victor III build the jump drive with improvements for smaller jumps.

With the frame complete, the group adds the internal workings and systems. The interior consists of two decks: the cockpit above and the engine/storage compartment with the drive below. The cockpit has six seats, four of which with one console each. The front two are for piloting and navigation, the middle two for communications and operations, and the last two for passengers.

Main thrusters are attached to the central body and adjustable thrusters to the wings, making the shuttle a VTOL craft. The group skins the shuttle using vibranium for the underbelly and combo metals for the rest. It is painted blue and white, the nose marked with a "5" in the fashion of the Fantastic Four "4".

On the eve of the launch, the team is out and about. Reed writes in a journal in his bedroom at the site, Sue takes inventory of their supplies, and Johnny and Ben drink at a tavern. At the hangar, T'Challa in the Black Panther suit and his two bodyguards, the DORA MILAJE, step from the shadows. The women approach the bordering tables of loose papers and computers to take pictures while he boards the craft.

As Sue accounts for every piece of equipment on a clipboard, Victor III startles her. He apologizes and remarks that she has not changed since they met at MIT, always making herself busy for everyone's sake. Sue is flattered and Victor III says she should take care of herself more often.

Ben and Johnny stumble out of the tavern, jabbing each other with insults that end in laughter. They comment on how they are spending their last days in a dictatorship. As they stumble back to the site, they come across two CIVIL GUARDS at attention with rifles on their shoulders. Johnny and Ben make fun of them, but they do not react.

T'Challa scans the drive with a device until the screen flashes green and leaves. Outside the Dora Milaje call him over to blueprint on a table. He looks at it before taking off his mask with a look of dread.

Reed finishes writing and stands up with a yawn. He turns and gasps at T'Challa standing behind. He says he does not have time to stay and warns Reed about dealing with Victor III. He says all men of power have something to hide and he is using Reed for his own gains. Reed asks how is Victor III any different and T'Challa gives him the blueprint. He says he is satisfied with his place in the world, and wants for nothing before leaving. Reed finds the blueprints are for an orbital weapon platform.

As Johnny and Ben try to make the Civil Guards react, they turn to RANDOM CITIZEN sneaking through an alley across the street. They rush past and take aim until Johnny melts their rifle barrels. Ben gets in front of them and yells his disapproval. Civil Guards ignore them and draw pistols. Ben grabs their arms and squeezes too tightly, ripping them off. Johnny vomits and Ben apologizes in shock before he notices the arms are robotic.

Victor III continues to put the moves on Sue, saying he hopes the others appreciate her contributions. Sue seems convinced before he adds he knows Reed notices her. Victor III assures that she is the most important member of the team and they love her, Reed especially. Sue snaps back and thanks him.

At the conversation's end, Reed comes in with the blueprint and demands an explanation. Victor III says they are conceptual designs made up by his father before Johnny flies in with one robot hand and berates him for the Civil Guards' actions. Sue asks if there really is an enforced curfew. Before he could answer, Reed chimes in about using science for peaceful purposes and the argument devolves into noise.

Victor III shouts them into silence and apologizes. He explains to Reed that the designs are conceptual and not for real-world application. He asks where he found them and Reed says he was looking for old notes and stumbled upon them. To Sue, Victor III says there has always been a curfew on weekdays since his grandfather's. Johnny mentions the robots and Victor III says the human element is more useful elsewhere. He values his people and uses Life Model Drones to carry extra weight.

Victor III adds maintaining Latveria is his responsibility and had no right to push the burden onto his friends. He apologizes for keeping them in the dark and says if the project is a success, they will do more good for the people and Earth than they can imagine. He tells them to get some rest and leaves the group looking at each other.

The next day just before dusk, the shuttle stands upright attached to boosters on the launch pad. Citizens watch from roofs and camps in the hills as the countdown commences from 60. In the cockpit, Reed sits in the pilot seat, Ben at navigation, Sue at operations, Johnny at communications, and Victor III at the back by a window, all wearing spacesuits.

Ben tells Reed everyone is keeping an eye on Victor III and will act if he does anything suspicious. Sue touches Reed's shoulder and says everything is going to be okay. She says they did a good job and if anything happens, they can fix it together. Reed smiles and touches her hand as the countdown reaches 10.

At one the thrusters ignite and launch the shuttle. Citizens cheer and cry, letting fly flower pedals and doves as the shuttle climbs higher. From the tallest tower of Castle Doomstadt, Victor II watches the craft, gripping the stone banister with hands clad in shiny medieval armor.

ACT TWO

After escaping Earth's atmosphere, the shuttle jettisons the boosters over the North Pole and drifts into orbit. Reed preps the jump drive and plugs in coordinates for Pluto. The drive spools up with a deep synth-hum. Sue projects a shield while Ben and Johnny brace. The tension reaches its pique when the shuttle folds in on itself with a flash.

It reappears in darkness. The drive console turns red with the words "COOL DOWN" and a timer counting down from 33 minutes. As navigation buffers, the team wonders if they actually hit their mark. Reed turns the shuttle until a planet comes into view. Then navigation pings their location outside Pluto's orbit with no time delay between now and before the jump.

They cheer and everyone hugs each other, even Ben and Victor III. Johnny takes a selfie with Pluto. Sue takes off her and Reed's helmet to kiss his cheek. As they contemplate landing to plant a flag, Reed looks through the navigation directory and finds Proxima Centari is only 4 light years away. Reed hesitates, knowing he should wait until the cool down, before spooling up.

The excitement halts when everyone notices the activation. Sue says overcompensating the drive could be catastrophic. Ben adds they could explode and Johnny does not want to explode. Reed, trapped in his own world, and says they need to go further. Victor III remains calm and looks at the consoles flashing warnings. Ben quits talking and pushes through to abort ignition before they jump.

The shuttle reappears in a swirling nebula of purple clouds, jagged asteroids, black and white spheres, and lighting. The shuttle is struck and tossed before Sue puts up a shield. Red lights and alarms come on with collision detection. Reed corrects course to a stop.

Sue says she remembers this place on their very first jump. Johnny breaks down into a panicked sob, recalling an intense burning sensation as he tries to remove his suit. Ben hugs himself and buries his face in his arms.

Sue cries and trembles as the shield falters. Reed stretches to her, placing his hands on the sides of her face. He tries to calm her down as she describes her flesh peeling away in layers. Lighting hits the shuttle, jostling the inside. Victor III stays calm and stares out his window to TALL BLACK FIGURE and SHORT BLACK FIGURE in the distance. Ben regains his composure and notices on the pilot console they are still jumping and hits the abort.

The shuttle folds and reappears in blackness, the hull smoking in places. Reed halts and Sue shuts off the alarms on her console. She says the drive is damaged, hull breached, navigation down, and thrusters offline. Reed

says they appear to be safe before Ben grabs him by the neck. Reed gets small, but Ben is too quick and grabs his head, fury in his eyes.

Sue screams at Ben to stop, saying she wants to beat up Reed too, but they need to work together to survive. Reed says he takes full responsibility and wants to fix things as he chokes. Ben stares and tosses Reed to the back of the cockpit. He catches himself and braces against the back wall.

Ben remains silent then calls Victor III to help him fix navigation. Everyone makes themselves scarce. Sue heads below deck to get tools and Johnny follows. Reed stays braced.

Later, Johnny patches cracks in the hull. Victor III is up under the console fiddling with wires while Ben presses buttons expecting changes. Below deck, Reed tends to the drive with Sue working on life support at his back.

She comes up behind and says she did not mean what she said before Reed interrupts with an apology, audibly crying. He admits he forgot what it means to be human after the change. He was too caught up in testing himself that he forgot about his friends, especially Sue. Reed says the best he can do is fix what he broke. He gets back to work and Sue walks away.

Ben asks Victor III about the robots used in Latveria. He explains that robot is the Czech word for "slave" and because slavery is unethical, his father chose to use Life Model Drones for unsavory work. Ben says it is still slavery and Victor III replies it is only slavery when the oppressed know they are being oppressed before navigation comes to life. Victor III sits up in the pilot's chair. Ben tells him good job and they fist-bump.

As navigation buffers, Johnny radios in that he sees something coming. Sue comes up and asks for information, Reed's head following. Johnny repeats himself before the radar pings three objects. Reed recommends they hail them, remarking they are about to make first contact. Everyone looks at Sue before she takes a headset from the communications console.

Johnny watches three ships approach at speed and circle the shuttle. He waves to them and throws up the Vulkan salute.

In the middle of quoting the famous saying, one ship shoots an energy blast that sends the shuttle spinning. Johnny holds on while everyone inside is thrown about. Victor III grabs the controls and makes them stable while Sue puts up a shield.

Victor III says the thrusters are still down before Ben bolts to below deck with Reed. The two get straight to work on the engine. Johnny crawls along the shuttle avoiding the gaze of the ships as they press the attack. Sue's shield holds.

Johnny gets brash and moves out in the open to coax a ship closer. When one gets near, Johnny tells Sue to make a hole. She protests before Johnny insists and she obliges with a hole big enough for him to stand through. He flames-on and blasts the ship. It becomes disabled and drifts away, but Johnny burned his suit off and suffocates.

Sue quickly puts a shield on him and brings him to the airlock at the side of the cockpit. She asks Victor III for help and he glides to the door, opening the outside hatch, and then the interior to drag an unconscious Johnny inside. Victor III says he is okay. Sue yells at Reed and Ben to hurry.

Back at the pilot seat, Victor III stares at the ships bearing down on them. He looks to Sue struggling to remain strong and Johnny passed out. He listens to Reed and Ben panic then turns to one ship staring back. Victor III unlocks the cuffs of his gloves and secures them in his lap. He raises his hands to the window, pointing his fingers at the ship. Victor III grits his teeth before the ship is hit by something that tears it apart. It explodes with decompressions.

Victor III quickly puts his gloves back on and watches the other ship flee before it is blown up by a speeding object. Victor III struggles to keep track as it hits the disabled ship. Sue drops her shield, fatigued. Ben and Reed come up and ask what happened, Reed going to Sue. They look to the bow and see SMASHER 12, female human, floating outside.

Smasher 12 puts her finger to her Exospex and the shuttle's radio chimes with a hail. Sue passes the headset off to Reed and he asks hello. Smasher 12, speaking English with a British accent, asks why they are out in the middle of nowhere. Reed says they are explorers from Earth on a

mission of discovery and introduces the crew before asking her name. She says she is a Smasher of the Shi'ar Imperial Guard on patrol in the outskirts of Chandilar, the Throneworld. When she offers them assistance to the planet, the team goes silent.

With the thrusters disabled, the shuttle drifts along with Smasher 12 guiding it on course toward Chandilar. They pass dense traffic of space ships of different sizes and shapes, the team in awe. Sue describes what she sees to a recorder. Johnny takes pictures, mostly of Smasher 12 outside his window. Reed smiles to himself and thanks everyone. Victor III stares out his window unfazed.

Before entering the atmosphere, Smasher 12 grabs the shuttle and carries it down. They come to a city with a giant palace standing above smaller structures, surrounded by a slum. Around the slum stands a harbor where ships land and take off without end. Smasher 12 carries the shuttle to the harbor and puts it in free dock where giant mechanical arms lock it down.

Four of the group step out in their suits to meet Smasher 12. Sue, armed with a variety of instruments, advises they keep their suits on to prevent cross contamination. Johnny takes video with his phone and talks to the camera. Smasher 12 pulls up her Exospexs and greets them with a handshake. Johnny takes a selfie with her.

Reed, looking at them through the airlock window, radios them to document as much as possible. Sue asks if he is sure about staying behind. He says he must fix the ship if they want to continue and adds they deserve the honor for their hard work. Sue blows him a kiss and they leave.

Inside, Reed makes for the engine room before navigation chimes with their location. He discovers they are in another quadrant of the Milky Way, 5,000 light-years away from the Solar system. He checks the jump log and finds their last jump was 3 minutes long.

Down a busy street of many ALIENS, Smasher 12 escorts Sue, Johnny, Ben, and Victor III. Propaganda posters cover the walls and spherical cameras on tall posts scan everyone with red lasers. POLICE patrol on hover bikes in packs, stopping people to beat them, and take them away.

Johnny puts the moves on her and Smasher 12 strings him along. Sue asks her about the Empire. She says the Empire is a few centuries old with hundreds worlds in its thrall. Smasher 12 says they are dealing with an insurgency by the Emperor's sister Lilandra and the ships that attacked their shuttle were terrorists.

Ben looks around at all the freakish Aliens with varying forms and body types. He smiles to himself. Victor III, walking behind the group, slows down until he is separated among the crowd of Aliens. He goes up another street, taking off his gloves and helmet. Then he rips out the tracking device sewn over the left breast of his suit and smashes it in his hand.

In an old bookshop full of antique hardcovers, glass tablets, and scrolls sits OLD MANAGER half awake behind a counter. Victor III enters and walks about the shelves, looking at the materials as if he knows what they are before going up to the counter. He asks Old Manager for something dating back to a time before the Empire.

Old Manager says he used to be a censor and knows the Empire scrubs the histories every decade. Everything is regulated to fit the sitting Emperor's narrative, including religions and advertisements. With the edits, he says there was never a time before the Empire.

Victor III says if he knows anything about information control, the State hides the truth elsewhere to keep an accurate account. He asks about a likely source before Old Manager accuses him of spying and tells him to leave. Victor III's eyes glow blue before he grabs Old Manager by the hand. He goes stiff and stares off into nothing with eyes wide. Victor III asks again about a possible source of truth and Old Manager answers the Great Archive in the Imperial Palace. He adds it is heavily guarded and Victor III replies it will not be a problem before making Old Manager pass out with a wave of his hand.

At a crowded bar of PATRONS Johnny flirts with Smasher 12. She offers him a drink of the strongest beverage in the Empire. He sees it as a challenge and takes a sip using a straw through his helmet. Sue, sitting on the other side of Smasher 12, takes video of the bar when she notices Ben is missing. She asks if they saw him, but neither answer. Sue leaves a recorder between them and walks off.

On the upper floor of the bar, Ben sits with the GUARDIANS OF THE GALAXY at a sofa. He recounts the scene from Caddyshack where The Bishop golfs in a rainstorm, but tells it like a real story. STARLORD, who has seen Caddyshack, calls out the punch line where The Bishop is struck by lightning for blaspheming, and everyone laughs. Ben is puzzled, but thinks nothing of it.

DRAX, unable to process comedy, takes it seriously and says The Bishop should not have insulted his god. GROOT says anyone would blaspheme after missing one shot out of a winning streak. ROCKET repeats the sentiment in regular speech.

Ben says he has been blaspheming ever since he lost his looks. GAMORA says the universe is full of ugly people and because they are everywhere it is normal. Starlord says Drax is the most ugly of the group, but they love him. Drax draws his knives before Rocket talks him down.

Sue comes up behind Ben, a little nerve wracked that he disappeared, before he introduces her to the Guardians. She notices how happy he is and sits among them. Ben continues with a story about the Kramer scene from "The Contest" episode of Seinfeld.

At the shuttle, Reed finishes repairs on the drive, and takes a break. He speaks into a recorder about his progress as he walks upstairs and gasps when he notices GLADIATOR, standing a whole two heads taller. Reed panics about cross contamination when Gladitor tells him to exit immediately. Reed makes for the airlock, repeating he comes in peace.

Outside, a squad of WARBIRDS waits with swords drawn. They surround Reed, keeping his hands up. When Gladitor asks for the rest of the crew, Reed pulls out a tablet and pings their trackers a short walk from the harbor. He fails to notice only three showed up on screen.

At the Imperial Palace, Victor III walks behind WARBIRD with his hand on her shoulder, his eyes glowing blue. They pass many GUARDS that do not notice him and come to a tall gate where GUARD 1 and GUARD 2 stand sentinel. They ask Warbird her business and she and Victor III say the Emperor needs a scroll. When Guard 1 attempts to verify the order, Victor III points his hand at them and they let them through. The gates close behind them.

Inside the Archive is a cylindrical library with thousands of books, scrolls, tablets, and electronic media on shelves. Victor III lets go of Warbird and walks out in front of her, his eyes going normal. She regains consciousness with a surprised expression. Victor III thanks her for her cooperation before she draws her sword. He is too fast and puts her to sleep.

Alone, Victor III's eyes glow yellow in beams of light like flashlights. He scans the shelves as he walks between them. He levitates to the floor above where he focuses on a giant tome with frayed edges and metal bindings. Victor III's eyes go normal and he pulls the book out. On the cover is a design in the shape of Galactus's helmet. He places his hand on the cover, closes his eyes, and white light shines between the pages. Once finished, he drops the book and pulls out another to repeat the process.

At the bar, Johnny is wasted and Smasher 12 records him with his phone. The bar goes quiet and Smasher 12 stands at attention when ERIK THE RED and some Warbirds walk in. He asks what she is doing with a foreigner. She replies she was gathering intelligence because they were involved in an encounter with terrorists. Erik says the Emperor calls the foreigners to the Palace following an incident in the Archive.

Smasher 12 obliges and makes way. When ordered to comply Johnny takes it the wrong way, flames-on, and attacks Erik. Smasher 12 stays out of it. Their brawl spreads to the rest of the bar. Everyone fights everyone while Warbirds attempt to control the violence.

Upstairs, when PATRON 1 comes up through the floor head first at their feet, the Guardians cheer and assault the closest person next to them. Ben joins in, ignoring Sue's protests. She tries to avoid conflict, but uses her shields and invisibly to trip PATRONS and defend herself.

Reed and Gladiator arrive. The other Warbirds disperse to help break up the fighting. Reed yells at Johnny to stop, throwing what he thought was an empty bottle at him that was full of alcohol. A fire starts on impact and he rushes to put it out. Erik turns his attention to Reed, coming in with a swing before Reed wraps himself around him, apologizing over and over. With Erik subdued, Reed yells

at Johnny to stop and he powers down. Warbirds tackle him and he likes it.

The first floor is calm until Ben smashes through the ceiling with four Patrons clinging to him. He knocks them off and cheers to the Guardians watching above. With his hands on his hips Ben turns to Reed and the others staring at him.

The team is taken to the Imperial Palace where EMPEROR D'KAN awaits in the throne room. On the steps before the throne Warbird is on her knees, stripped of her armor, and wearing shackles with prison rags. Overlooking the throne room on balconies, SNIPERS track their movements while SOLDIERS stand grouped around the back of the throne.

In front of the Fantastic Four, Gladiator and Erik lead the way with Smasher 12 behind. At the rear Warbirds march in a column, stepping in synch. At the front of the room, Victor III watches the team from cover. He looks to the exit close by and sighs before stepping into the shadows.

At the steps of the throne, Gladiator, Erik, and Smasher 12 kneel. Warbirds follow suit while the team hesitates. D'Kan orders them to rise before Gladiator, Erik, and Smasher 12 move to the side and Warbirds form a horseshoe around the team, hands resting on their swords.

D'Kan accuses them of spying for Lilandra to infiltrate the Palace. Reed says they are just explorers who were brought to Chandilar after they were attacked. Johnny, halfway sober, backs up the statement when he says Smasher 12 said their attackers were terrorists. When asked to confirm, Smasher 12 recounts her meeting the team.

As she gives her account, Ben spots one SNIPER jerked back from the balcony. He is about to speak up before D'Kan shouts at Smasher 12 that she was fooled by the team's subterfuge. He says they are likely Skrull mercenaries posing as Terran explorers and the attack was a set-up. He adds Terrans are too dumb to have reached this part of space.

Sue swears they work for themselves and Earth and their mission is of peaceful discovery, saying their shuttle is equipped only for study. Reed adds they had no intention of causing trouble, despite Johnny and Ben's behavior, as

scientists. Gladiator backs him up with his submissive behavior when they first met.

Ben sees more Snipers disappear. Erik says the best spies play the fool to avoid suspicion and D'Kan agrees. Reed jabs back that he may be foolish, but his team knows better than to insult their host when in need. They want nothing more than to understand the unknown.

D'Kan is impressed, but says one of them does not share their sentiment, pointing out that they arrived as five, but sees four. He says one of them infiltrated the Great Archive and Warbird admits to assisting the infiltrator while under control. He is still at large and D'Kan thinks the team is covering for him.

Reed finally realizes Victor III is missing while Ben says he knew he was always squirrely. Sue attempts to explain, but Ben and Johnny reaffirm their stance that Victor III was bad all along. Reed remains shocked that he was wrong.

D'Kan calls them liars and orders the team to show where Victor III is hiding or he will kill them. Warbirds draw swords. Then, from one balcony to the side of the throne, Victor III reveals himself standing on the bannister, eyes glowing green. He holds a Sniper in each hand by the head, and another lies slumped on the bannister at his feet.

Referring to himself as Doom, he says he hides from no man, and throws one Sniper at the Fantastic Four. It bursts into green energy that forms a shield around them. Warbirds leap to Victor III ready to strike before he throws another Sniper. It explodes into a mass of eldritch snakes that bite and wrap around them. Warbirds fall back to the floor screaming.

D'Kan panics while Soldiers crowd around him and shoot at Victor III. He steps off the banister, grabbing the other Sniper on his way down. The blasts hit him with bursts of sparks. He angles the Sniper toward the floor as electricity licks off its body. Upon impact, the body explodes in a shockwave of lightning and Victor III lands to a knee. Smasher 12 throws herself in front of the wave to defend D'Kan. He stays seated while everyone is thrown back unconscious. He tries to run before Victor III makes a claw gesture at him and the metal of the throne bends to restrain him.

Gladiator and Erik remain standing and engage Victor III in a melee. Gladiator leaps with his fist back, but Victor III dodges, and forces his momentum into the opposite wall. Erik catches him off guard and dislocates his jaw. Victor III is unfazed and takes a point-blank blast of energy that sets him on fire.

Erik pauses to punch, but Victor III grabs his fist and throat, lifting him off the floor. Erik strikes with his other fist, putting out the flames on Victor III's face, revealing a mechanical face in the shape of Doom's mask. Between the jaws loose teeth fall out and contact lenses melt away. The rest of the suit and skin burns off, revealing a body of plate metal adorned with arcane runes, and three glowing crystals in the chest.

His lower jaw moves back into place as he chokes Erik. Gladiator recovers and leaps toward him, but Victor III puts Erik in his path. They crash and collide with the opposite wall. Erik is knocked out, but Gladiator stands and approaches Victor III with a roar, his eyes shooting lasers. Victor III puts up his hand and deflects the beams outward. The green of his eyes fades.

Gladiator stops shooting and they battle with fists. Victor III moves fast, dodging swings that break the sound barrier. He carefully steps towards passed-out SOLDIER and grabs its head just as Gladiator lases him in the face. He burns a slash across his eyes and charges in. Victor III absorbs Soldier, turning him into green energy.

Empowered, Victor III's face restores, and his eyes glow green. He side steps Gladiator and gives him an upper cut on the jaw with such force, it blows out his arm at the elbow. Gladiator flips upward and lands on his back knocked out. The Fantastic Four and D'Kan look on in awe.

As his arm heals, the marble floor breaks and forms on Victor III as grey medieval armor. He takes Gladiator's cape and turns it to a dark green cowl using blue sparks. In costume, he turns to D'Kan and brings up his hand in a tighter claw. The metal wraps around D'Kan and rises above the cracked stone.

He says he will never give up his secrets and Victor III replies that he has nothing he already knows before closing his hand into a fist and throwing his arm towards the ground. D'Kan hits the floor and a streak of blood

splatters across the green shield. Sue screams and grabs onto Reed. Johnny throws up and Ben repels in disgust.

Silence falls as Victor III makes his way to the broken throne. He sits and absorbs the shield, setting the team free. Without moving his mouth, he says he has some explaining to do. The Fantastic Four waste no time and rush in. Johnny flames on, Reed brings his fist back like a whip, Ben leaps with fists raised overhead, and Sue charges with a shield. Victor III stays stationary when his eyes flash a blinding white light.

The Fantastic Four find themselves in a black void on a flat surface. They look around and spot Victor II wearing a green cloak with a matching tunic over shiny armor with his mask. He says hello to Reed and says it has been too long, sounding like an older Victor III. Johnny blasts him and Ben leaps in for a punch, but their attacks pass right through. Victor II says this is a pre-recorded vision built into his Life Model Decoy. Reed does not understand and Victor II says his only son is Kristoff Vernard and there was never a Victor II or III. There was only ever one, referring to himself as DOOM.

The void changes into the swirling purple nebula where they see a shuttle similar to their first torn apart. Lighting rips the hull open and Reed is nearly sucked out, his body stretching. Johnny is set on fire by an exploding console, Sue is struck by a shockwave that strips her down in layers of molecules, and a shower of meteorites hit Ben in the face.

As the incident plays out in slow motion, Doom says this realm is the Negative Zone, a subspace dimension of primordial energy that holds reality together. He says it is a backdoor to our reality and others. Doom explains this event was one of infinite variations. They see a young Doom, sitting in the cockpit with the team, being sucked out into the Negative Zone towards Tall Black Figure. When asked who that is, Doom replies his MASTER.

He goes on about how he learned many things as a pupil travelling the multiverse. Doom describes one reality where they conquered the world and built utopia together, another where Reed and Sue's children are liken to gods, and another where they and Earth's heroes are characters in movies and comic books.

In his travels he learned that everything dies. There is no stopping it, but Doom says he cannot accept the end when there is so much left to learn. Then the void changes to Earth begin cracked and pulled apart by mechanical arms. The pieces are converted into yellow energy and absorbed by GALACTUS, standing with arms wide open on a platform.

Doom describes Galactus as a cosmic being that has consumed planets across the universe for a millennia and he is in the Milky Way as he speaks. After learning this Doom dedicated his life to killing Galactus. Master let him set off on this quest, but gave him one chance in a universe where he did not exist as a test.

He then transferred his mind into the fetus of a pregnant gypsy woman in Romania. Once a young adult during WWII, he carved out a sovereign territory of fleeing refugees, and fought off the Nazis. The void changes to a young Doom battling NAZIS in a ruined city with fists and magic while PARTISANS shoot guns from cover. He later established Latveria and proclaimed himself King Victor I. The void changes to Doom standing on a parade float as Citizens throw flower pedals from their windows.

Over the years he built the country as a scientific haven, going into cryostasis while his Decoys ran the country. Doom made sure to establish a friendship with Reed with his younger Decoy Victor III so he could go into space and recover information on how to stop Galactus.

Doom says if they are having this conversation, then his Decoy succeeded and is making his way back to Earth. He asks the team to join him, arguing they could do more united. Ben and Johnny are the first to disagree, saying he used them. Sue calls him a hypocrite and a murderer.

Reed says there is always another solution and they can find one to deal with Galactus. Doom says they cannot negotiate with a cosmic being and his way guarantees success. Reed calls him arrogant and asks him to take their side. Doom remains stuck in his ways, saying he has prepared for too long. Ben boasts he is ready to finish their fight. Doom retorts that he will have to catch Victor III first. The void flashes white and the Fantastic Four wake up in the throne room with Victor III gone.

ACT THREE

Gladiator, Erik, Smasher 12, Soldiers and Warbirds slowly awaken. Reed helps Gladiator up and tells him what is going on. He promises to catch Victor III and the team departs. Johnny flies away while Sue, Ben, and Reed run. Outside, Ben says he has an idea.

Down the slum street, Victor III runs toward the harbor. A fireball hits him from behind as Johnny charges. Victor III catches him midair and throws him into a market stand. He lands and tells Johnny he does not want to kill him or the team. Johnny says neither do they before Ben comes in like a meteor and drags Victor III into the ground, breaking his armor.

Victor III rolls free and blasts Ben with a telekinetic push. It does not work and Ben comes in with a punch. Victor III dodges and comes in with a left hook, turning his fist to hardened crystal. It stuns Ben, but shatters his arm and reduces power, his eyes going normal. He rushes to ALIEN standing by a kiosk and grabs his head.

Sue throws him off with a shield. She tells Johnny to blast him and traps Victor III in a bubble of flame. Sue closes the shield tighter, but feels herself waver as Victor III's green eyes pierce through the fire and his fingers pierce the shield. She falters and Victor III is set free. He says they left him no choice before kicking Johnny in the groin. Sue goes invisible.

Victor III stops in place and waits before he is hit by a shield and shoved through a store window. She becomes visible and helps Johnny to his feet. Victor III leaps out and puts her in a headlock. He tells her she should worry about herself more often as she loses consciousness. Johnny flames-on before a stiff backhand knocks him out.

Ben comes in with a punch that launches Victor III down the street and lands in a slide. Ben picks up Johnny and Sue in one arm and Victor III says being a team makes them weaker. Ben retorts at least there is strength in numbers before stepping out of the way for the Guardians with heavy guns walking up the street.

They lay into Victor III before he puts up a shield. Drax charges with knives drawn. Gamora follows with her sword. Victor III is over-run before he knees Drax in the stomach and knocks him out with a head-butt. He is about to turn on Gamora when Groot's roots come up from the ground and

entangle him. Rocket and Star Lord press the attack with Gamora raising her sword to take his head.

The blasts break the roots and Victor III grabs Gamora by the neck. He puts her in front of their fire, but they stop in time before he throws Gamora at them. Victor III yanks the remaining roots and pulls Groot into a clothesline. Ben rushes in with a punch that Victor III catches and swings him overhead into the ground. Victor III raises his foot to stomp his throat, but decides otherwise and continues to the harbor.

At the shuttle he opens the airlock and finds Reed waiting. He says he knows what Victor III wants and that there must be another way to solve the problem of Galactus. Victor III retorts that he is too naïve to see there is only one-way. Reed pleads him to understand and he will forgive Victor III if they work together, but he remains content.

The two fight with Reed constricting himself around Victor III. They wrestle about the cockpit, destroying the seats and consoles. Victor III pulls himself free and leaps for the stairway to the engine room before Reed grabs him by the foot. Reed yanks so hard his leg breaks off at the shin and Victor III limps to the jump drive. He stands before it and pulls out one crystal in his chest.

Reed tackles him to the opposite wall and wraps around his remaining limbs. The metal plates collapse and cut Reed. He buckles and Victor III crawls to the drive. Reed hangs on, but the pain is too much. Victor III stabs the crystal into the drive and it forms a sphere of white light. Reed throws himself onto Victor III before they disappear, leaving behind a pock of wreckage.

They reappear in the Negative Zone where Reed suffocates. Victor III puts a shield around him as they drift apart. Reed begs him to reconsider, but his voice cannot escape the shield. Victor III uses the remainder of his power to send him back after saying goodbye, his eyes going normal. He takes a second crystal and breaks it in his hand. Another sphere forms before he disappears.

Back on Chandilar, Ben, Johnny, and Sue make it to the shuttle and find Reed on his knees in the wreckage, defeat on his face. He says he used reason, but could not stop Victor III. Sue puts her hand on his shoulder and says

they tried, but Victor III is no longer their friend. Reed takes her hand and nods.

The Fantastic Four return to the Palace where Warbirds wail over D'Kan's shrouded corpse. Soldiers stand at attention with heads bowed. Reed apologizes to Gladiator, admitting he was too blind to see Victor III's true intentions. Gladiator forgives him and says the Shi'ar Empire is now leaderless. He is duty bound to take the throne as Majestor, but they need Lilandra, a successor of royal blood. Reed promises to fix what Victor III has broken by finding Lilandra and Gladiator accepts.

Days later, the Fantastic Four, Guardians of the Galaxy, and SHI'AR ENGINEERS put the finishing touches on the shuttle. Rocket attaches guns to the starboard and port sides. Engineers update their navigation. Reed and Sue make repairs in the engine room, leaving an open space for the jump drive. Johnny completes the repairs by turning the 5 on the nose into a 4.

When everything is finished, Gladiator, THE SMASHERS, and Warbirds stand gathered at the dock to see them off. Gladiator gives Reed the flight recorders of the three ships that attacked them, hoping it might point them in the right direction. He loans them a stack of books Victor III used to help their study of Galactus. Reed is grateful, but cannot read alien before Gladiator introduces Warbird, who will accompany them to restore her honor.

The team says their goodbyes. Johnny acts as though Smasher 12 will miss him and she plays along. Ben hugs all of the Guardians at once. They board the shuttle and fly off into the great beyond. Reed and Sue sit together at the front holding hands.

EPILOGUE

In a laboratory underneath Castle Doomstadt, a white light twinkles over a round platform bordered by glass sheets adorned with runes in a sealed amphitheater. The light explodes and Victor III drops onto the platform. An alarm goes off and SCIENTISTS behind a large window above rush to observe.

Later, the alarm is off and Victor III sits up on what remains of his body. Through the lone door Doom walks in wearing a green robe with no armor and face exposed. Part of his lips, chin, and nose are gone. Victor III declares

mission accomplished and Doom says he was not created for any other purpose. He asks about Reed and Victor III says he is the same, but on the way to change. Doom hopes he does not and that his naiveté makes him a better visionary.

After a moment of silence, Doom opens Victor III's head and pulls out a crystal ball embedded with circuits and wires. He looks at it and thanks him. Victor III calls him father and says he is ready before Doom takes out the last crystal from his chest, shutting him down. Doom's eyes flash green, and the robotic remains explode into pieces.

THE END