



Avengers
36

THE AVENGERS



Captain America



Iron Man



Beast



Hawkeye

**MARVEL 2000 & JLU 2001 PROUDLY
PRESENT...**

**The Aerie
Mt. Annapurna
Nepal:**

It was cold...

Not the simple cold of winter or that bitter chill that the first winds of autumn bring, but the devastating, deathly cold that only the purest lands truly experience. The air outside was crisp and clear, a stiff breeze washing over the mountains and swirling the newfallen snow into great, misty clouds. The sun was dazzling, huge and bright in the clear blue sky doing little to warm the icy wastes of the Himalayas, rather sparkling golden rays over the frozen sheets of crystalline white.

In the relative warmth of his Aerie, the Demon's Head did not care. True, like all of his citadels scattered about the world he had chosen this one secreted deep within the wastes of the rocky Himalayas for not only its solitude but also its stark and barren beauty. Another day he might stand there, outside and hip deep, naked in the freezing snow to marvel at the great beauty that still could be found- even now- in the ravaged world. Another day he might have watched the bloated sun crest the great mountains and sigh in awe at the majesty of Mother Earth as she was reborn. Another day perhaps, but this day however, he was preoccupied.

Ra's Al Ghul barely moved as he stared at the computer screen, his right hand twitching only slightly as he quietly scanned the procured files scrolling across his monitor screen, his left stroking the hybrid African Lynx just behind its tufted ears as it curled up beside his chair. The great cat purred at his touch, growling only slightly as he paused to consider something on the screen in greater depth. Like so many of the animals at the Aerie and his other citadels scattered throughout the world, the particular African Lynx at his side was the last of its line, the last of its breed. When this one was... gone, there would be no other. That pained him more than anything, really.

So much of the world's natural beauty was lost due to the ravages of mankind; its flora and fauna pressed into extinction by the six billion human carrion that devoured all in their path. Even the land itself was failing; the very atmosphere spent more every second. The blight left in the wake of humanity was devastating, the blasted, broken lands taking decades to recover. It was debatable if the air and waters ever would, but it was definite that the animal kingdom would suffer the most so long as mankind stormed their way across the face of the Earth. Like the Do Do and the Ring-tailed Cat, the African Lynx would fade away barely remembered by a select few, those poor fools that pretended to care- and



Black Panther



The Wasp



Warbird



Thor



Scarlet Witch

himself...

"Shhh..." he cooed, ruffling the cat's fur as he focused on the screen before him, the Lynx stretching and snapping as he shifted position slightly, leaning closer. He saw discrepancies in the Martian's physiology and wondered if the Detective had noted the anomalies. Scrolling down the page of course he found the appropriate notations concerning the fluidity of the alien's molecular structure. The Detective was thorough of course. He had done his work well, as had Talia.

The Daughter of the Demon had braved Olympus, stealing into the very stronghold of the self-proclaimed defenders of the Earth, the Gods viewing the world from on high from their own unattainable citadel on the surface of the moon. She had stolen their secrets, their most dark wants and needs and desires. Like Prometheus she had brought fire down from the mountain, a fire that would ultimately burn them to the core.

The Detective himself, one of their trusted own had been gathering information against his pantheon, his allies. 'Just in case', Ghul imagined, a contingency plan that had come to sprout its foul seed after the intrusion of the alien Agamemno. That particular alien had transferred the identities of the hero's worst foes into their superior forms and reciprocated, placing the hero's collective beings into the bodies of the villains. The result of course had been pandemonium, and humanity ever quick to turn believed that their icons had turned evil. It had not lasted long, and in the end the heroes had triumphed of course, but the seed had been sown- not only in mankind, but in the Dark Knight as well.

As a result, the Detective had gathered information on all of his allies and comrades, not only in the Justice League, but those others as well. In his arrogance he had created failsafe files that mapped out in detail the most expedient way to eliminate all of his peers.

All...

Those files now- thanks to his daughter- belonged in full to Ra's Al Ghul!

He would use them of course. A diversion at least while he implemented his latest scheme to pare the Human Race to a more manageable size, a lesser percentage of mass that he might guide and lead to a better world. If a few of the Meta Gods died along the way, all the better. Most were beneath his contempt, fools and idiots with delusions of grandeur, aliens and freaks distorted by their own foul sciences gone awry. Those select few who were worthy of his notice- like the Detective- would either concede his brilliance or be eliminated with the rest. Simple enough...

Ra's Al Ghul stood, his hand brushing the sensitive keys before him, transferring the accumulated data of his enemies throughout his own computers the better to implement his plans. It took seconds for the



Quicksilver

THE JLA



Superman



Wonder Woman



Batman



The Flash

Detective's files to be analyzed and absorbed and all about the world within instants his subordinates set about the task of creating the Batman's fail-safes. Within the space of days, perhaps hours he would be ready-

"Are you pleased, Father?"

Ra's Al Ghul turned and saw his daughter standing just a few feet away. There in the shadowy corners, her dark hair loose and flowing she seemed almost an angel, a specter awaiting his final breath. The Demon's Head smiled-

"Of course, daughter," he said, striding forward to take her hand in his own. "You have done well, as always. We are free to proceed."

"Then you will implement 'Babel'," she asked, glancing at the monitors that displayed the many regions of the Earth that her father desired to watch. She saw the gleaming constructs, towers erected of metal and plastic scattered about the Earth that would be the downfall of Humanity with the implementation of her father's latest scheme.

"Of course," Ra's Al Ghul smiled, following his daughter's gaze. "Mankind must pay for the damage they have done to the world. They must be culled, pared to a manageable population, which I might direct lest they destroy us all."

Talia sighed, staring at the imagery of Manhattan displayed, the teeming crowds going about their daily, day-to-day lives without a clue that their world was soon to change. She had never agreed with her father on all things, nor agreed totally on his means to achieve the ends he so desired. She did share his goals; a better world where all lived in harmony, but to wantonly slaughter so many in the process to achieve that end.

Too, there was more. When she had infiltrated the Watchtower she had been surprised to find members of the All-Star Squadron there rather than the Justice League itself. She had listened of course as she had gone about her task, surprised that those older heroes gathered were waiting-somewhat impatiently, worriedly for the return of the League from the future. What they were doing there she had no clue, but the fact remained-they were gone. Forever perhaps? When Fate had changed, attacked his fellows; Sentinel, Flash and Max Mercury he had stated as much. 'A disruption in the Time Stream' he had said, 'an anomaly in the Speed Force'. Ra's Al Ghul would want to know that. Use it-

"Father," she began, licking her lips, not quite sure just what she had to say or how to say it. "I-"

Light!



**Green
Lantern**



**Martian
Manhunter**



Firestorm



Zatanna



**Black
Canary**

Brilliant, glaring light erupted throughout the chamber. A blinding glow that made her eyes water even as she turned away, a silver radiance that seemed to sooth even as it burned it was so pure. Talia staggered, gritting her teeth as she raised her hand to shield her eyes, staring up at the source of the brilliance. She saw her father doing the same, and more...

He seemed perfect, one of the blessed with his bronzed, silvery skin rippling with an unearthly light. He was standing in midair above the floor, his bare feet not sullied by the dirt of the land, his great wings barely fluttering, holding him aloft. He wore armor, slight but effective, a helm and breastplate gleaming. He held a sword of flame licking at the air as his eyes scanned the chamber, considering almost, finally falling on the Demon's Head-

Ra's Al Ghul... The Lord has promised that there shall be no other tests until the final days, he said, his voice low and melodic. The promise is the Rainbow, yet you seek to thwart the Plan and Order. Why?

"And who are you to question me?" Ra's said rising from his chair to confront the intruder. "I have seen you about," he gestured at his monitor array, "and I know you arrived from space some time ago landing in Siberia in a star ship of sorts. You faced the Justice League and their Russian counterparts Red Square, but again- who are you?"

I am but a simple messenger, Herald and Harbinger. I am Zauriel of the Eagle Host and again I ask you- why?

Ra's Al Ghul stared at the winged being hovering before him, his eyes finally adjusting to the sudden brilliance. "Your Lord has abandoned his children," the Demon's Head said, stepping forward defiantly, his daughter at his side, clutching at his arm. "His great plan is a failure, his order lost to Chaos. His favored run amok. Change is needed."

Who art thou who knows the Will and the Way?

"Just a man," Ra's said bowing slightly, "But a man with vision. A man that might bring your Lord's true plan to fruition given the means. Your Lord- if he is the Lord of Man has suffered his children before, long ago. Sodom and Gomorra, the great Flood, the Crusades, how many more acts of man can be attributed to your master's whim? I seek only to aid, to further the dream-"

For your own ends...

Ra's Al Ghul smiled slightly, "The sheep will need a shepherd. Those that remain will need guidance. Who better than I? Perhaps I am simply a part of your master's plan, in the end."

It was the winged man's turn to smile, and when Talia saw the coldness



Plastic Man

there she could not help but shiver, clutching at her father's arm.

"Father--"

Ra's Al Ghul ignored his daughter, pulling from her grip as he stepped to his computers. "I have already set into motion the means to cull the masses. As soon as I distract those who have set themselves above Humanity so they might not interfere with my plan--"

"They are gone, Father," Talia said, her voice a whisper and hoping that the Angel- if that was what he truly was, as he appeared to be- would not hear. He turned however too at the sound of her voice.

"What?" Ra's Al Ghul asked, obviously surprised, and Talia suddenly wished that she had held her piece. "Daughter, what do you mean- gone?"

Talia nodded, "Truly, while I was on the moon I saw members of the Justice Society; Sentinel, the original Flash and Max Mercury, Doctor Fate. They spoke that the League was on some mission in time, in the far future."

"Why did you not tell me this before, daughter?" Al Ghul asked, his face stone, his dark gray eyes smoldering. She knew that his mind was spinning, contemplating how this news might benefit him best.

"I was about to--" Talia started then glanced at the being Zauriel. He was still hovering there above them, listening his silver eyes sparkling in wonderment. "When I passed the Hall of Justice again I found those JSA members defeated, on the ground and unconscious at least. All save Fate, and he was changed."

"How so?" her Father asked and Talia thought a moment, remembering--

"He seemed almost another," she began, "His very body was tall and gaunt, dark-skinned and damaged, his costume and raiment were gone. All save the medallion and the Helm, and that seemed dented and charred--"

Nabu... the being said with almost reverence. His gaze seemed to drift. ***I had not realized...***

"What do you know of this, Herald? Tell me! Ra's Al Ghul would know!" The Demon's Head strode boldly forward, right up to the 'angel' without pause or care. Zauriel looked at him, but Talia thought that the alleged 'Messenger of God' was not really seeing her father at all.

Look to the stars, mortal, he finally said, his body glowing brighter as he slowly drifted skyward. Talia had to raise her arms again, splaying her hands to shield her eyes from the glare.

Seek Redemption if you would truly follow the WORD! Ignore thy petty ambitions and save thyself! Your judgement will soon be at hand...

And he was gone...

Ra's Al Ghul stared at the spot where the emissary had been, watching the tiny spots of silvery lights that danced and winked out in his wake one by one. When he finally turned Talia shrank back and away to see the tiniest spark of madness blazing in her father's eyes. He had the look of the damned, that look that came over him whenever he first emerged from the Lazarus Pit.

"Put 'Babel' on standby daughter, but tell Kant to continue his work," Ra's Al Ghul said as he locked his hands behind his back and strode towards the door. "In fact, redirect resources to aid Kant's efforts in Development. Regardless of Babel's status, his work in establishing counter-measures can be employed in any number of ways."

"And what of you, Father?" Talia asked, watching as he father strode from the room. She knew his many moods well enough after all these years to know when he was in deep contemplation.

"I have much to consider, daughter. I shall be in my retreat, not to be disturbed."

Talia said nothing more as the great doors to her father's private council chamber slammed shut behind him with a metallic echo that was a long time fading away. She wondered at the words of the supposed 'angel', and just how much of his cryptic words her father truly believed. She wondered too just where the Justice League might be, when they might return.

And of course she worried for her beloved...

The logo for 'The Avengers' is displayed in a stylized, white, blocky font with a blue outline. The word 'THE' is written in a smaller font inside the 'A'.

VS

JUSTICE LEAGUE OF AMERICA

The logo for the Justice League of America (JLA) is shown in a bold, 3D, metallic gold and white font. The letters are thick and have a slight shadow, giving them a three-dimensional appearance.

Prelude Two:

Assembled!

Written by Curt Fernlund
Story by Chris Munn and Curt Fernlund

Space
The End of Forever,
Near the Edge of Reality:

Once he was the most feared being in the known universe- almost...

There was a time when the intelligent races knew what his sudden appearance meant, what it did portend. They might cower and hide to see him, to hear that he drew near. They would try to escape their fate, dread and despair their only companions. Some might even try to fight- futilely- for a time. Once upon a time there were few that might stand against him, a handful that might dare. Once...

But that was then, a time long past.

Sleek and swift the Silver Surfer soared along the endless expanse there at the very limits of the cosmos, the so-called End of Forever. It was calm there, peaceful, a place in the vastness of space that few came, a place where any that might brave the journey might think and consider, undisturbed. The great construct deterred most that dared venture so far into the endless depths and those that did brave the rigors of the cold and heartless void often left swiftly, humbled and disgraced by the sheer magnitude of that final barrier there at the end of all. Occasionally there would be someone of course. Space is not so infinite after all, but they were few and usually fleeting, defeated by something far greater than they could possibly comprehend or defy.

The great Wall was simply that; a massive, infinite edifice stretching far and wide into the known realms. It was a construct obviously composed of the calcified remnants of a bygone age, the detriment and refuse of what had gone before. Built by someone, but so enormous as to defy description, stretching seemingly forever it was almost beyond comprehension. Who might have built it, and why, the Silver Surfer had no idea. The star-spanning Celestials perhaps, to keep something out- or in, he corrected himself. It was all point of perspective. No matter the rhyme or reason however, it was there and would thus always give him pause to wonder.

So he soared along its length again, his shadow flitting across the rough and crude surface worn by time and erosion on a cosmic scale, a fleeting flicker of darkness barely a speck beside the enormity. He came here often for the solitude simply to contemplate as was his way. The journey was not long for one who sailed the solar winds, one who spanned the spaceways and could bypass that flickering harbinger of Time. Lesser men shunned

the Wall, and those that dared did not tarry or linger, many all too often dying in the attempt, the journey simply to reach their final destination. There were fewer still that dared to stay when that goal was at last reached, such was its imposing, overwhelming presence. Fewer yet, a mere handful were there that might dare strive to breach the Wall, but it seemed that there were always signs that someone had tried since his previous visit. There, the remnants of a starship that had strayed too close, and there the charred markings of some weapon that had failed to pierce the barrier like so many before. How many had tried he wondered in the eons since-

"Norrin Radd..."

The Silver Surfer turned drawing his gleaming board about to pause, his concentration broken to hear the voice- more so to hear the voice speak his true name there in the void of space. He had not heard the intruder's approach, and that in itself seemed miraculous for one who could perceive the rage and fire within the core of a star or the sifting of sand on a deserted asteroid, the soft breath of the cosmic winds. The Silver Surfer turned, his shining form glistening in the majesty of far off stellar light, the crackling fires of escaping energy dancing across the Wall, his gaze fixed on the approaching form, a most unexpected visitation and visitor even here.

"Thor..."

Earth's Norse God of Thunder nodded slightly as he spiraled closer, his hammer spinning wildly at his direction, slowing his approach until the Thunderer was floating near. The Surfer noted that he seemed somewhat different since their last encounter. His armor had changed slightly of course, but his very being seemed changed as well. He wore a beard now barely hiding a scar, and he seemed somewhat pallid, almost gaunt though still a being of imposing might and glory, though perhaps just a bit overwhelmed. It was as though the weight of the world now rested on his broad shoulders, and the Surfer would know why. The Silver Surfer stepped back, offering his shining board as a place for his old ally to rest and recover from his long travels.

"I am... surprised to find you here, Odinson. So far from the Earth, what brings you hence?" The Surfer saw the Thunder God sag just a bit, shrugging, almost unnoticeably. He sighed-

"I have had my fill of mortal affairs of late, Surfer. Mine best efforts were for naught it seemed, unappreciated by those I do favor most. Too, the halls of fabled Asgard were not to my liking. I sought the solitude most often found here so far from all else where I might consider my future in peace."

Norrin Radd nodded in understanding, "Then I shall not distract you, as I too have come so far, though my own contemplation is not quite so involved as your own it would seem-"

"Nay, wayfarer," Thor said, his hand falling on the Surfer's shoulder. "I had thought that I did require solitude absolute but upon espying thee here I do now realize that the Son of Odin would share thy company, if not thy wisdom. The Norns themselves must have led me hence to find thee

waiting. It is fate indeed."

"How so, Odinson? What wisdom might I humbly impart to one such as you?"

The Mighty Thor turned his gaze sweeping along the unending Wall, his expression soft and filled with wonder for a time. Finally though he turned to regard his old comrade, his friend. They had battled before, side-by-side and against one another and Thor knew that the shining Silver Surfer was both a vaunted warrior as well as a staunch and true being. He had seen much as the Herald of the Great Devourer of Worlds, and perhaps even more since he chose to break from his old master, Galactus!

"Decisions I have recently made have found me wanting. For a time I did lead the Mighty Avengers, but mine abilities at such caused much turmoil and left the team in whole bitter and resentful. Too, mine own personal affairs, my duty to the Golden Realm have I neglected and 'pon my recent return I did find my brethren seemingly guarded against me, almost jealous 'twould seem." Thor sighed again, his gaze shifting to the far away stars. "I know not the reason for the Asgardian's hauteur. I know not what I might have done- or not. My question to thee; thou were't once Herald to mighty Galactus! Thou were't once shunned above all, yet you continued unwavering 'pon your course, thy task never forgotten nor faltering. How did you cope, Surfer? What fire spurred you on to ignore the slings and arrows of thy fellows?"

The Surfer stared at the Son of Odin, his gaze fixed and penetrating, though confused. It was strange, almost as though the Thunderer was addled. The answer was obvious-

"I had no 'fellows'. I had no peers. In all the galaxies there was only one Herald of Galactus, one Silver Surfer. One Norrin Radd, and as the Surfer shunned his past and emotion to soar the stars and learn the final truth, so too did Norrin Radd shun his past- his love and life to save the world of his birth. That Zenn-La might survive, Norrin Radd sold his soul and the Silver Surfer knew no emotion, and no regret. At least until he met the tender vision of a delicate blind woman on Earth..."

"Aye," the Thunder God nodded in understanding. "Earth and its inhabitants have captured mine own heart as well in a way that my fellow Asgardians might never understand. I have loved a mortal woman, and I have allies there that I would trust with my very being, and have. In truth it was this reason that I chose to lead that mighty assemblage. Rather than see the hallowed name of the Avengers fade into obscurity I sought to lead a new team to greater glories. I failed..."

Norrin Radd smiled slightly, returning his own attention to the Wall. There seemed to be a growing unease about him, a building sense of energies emanating from the construct. A natural enough occurrence, he had sensed the like before, and yet...

"We all fail, Thunderer. It is in those failings that we grow. The death of billions upon billions rests upon my shoulders, yet that burden pales beside the mistakes I have since made. With each failure however comes insight. With age and experience comes wisdom. Of course in the end none of it will matter.

"Take this Wall, for instance. Whoever created it, built it, has been lost to the annals of time. They are forgotten, a mystery to all who live here and now. Is it some divine act of Creation? The last act of a mad god or the simple device of beings so far advanced as to make our greatest seem infantile?" The Surfer shrugged. "Even mighty Galactus does not know. My former master came here often though as he sensed that particular spark, the sustenance to end his craving beyond, mayhap forever. Galactus is perhaps the greatest being of our lives, the eldest being originating from that time before our own, yet his best efforts paled as he sought to breach the Wall time and again. Whatever spark he sensed remains unmolested beyond. I sense Chaos there, seeping through the slim cracks, that primordial essence that dominated just before the birth of this reality. I have encountered it before-"

"And your point?" Thor asked gruffly, his voice impatient.

"Life goes on, Thunderer," the Surfer said, his eyes focusing on a small point on the Wall. "Despite our best efforts, all we do now will be forgotten one day. Earth will fall, swallowed by a cold and bloated sun. Our friends will die. There will be other heroes to take our place, others who will ask our same questions. Hopefully we may strive to make their answers more easily found. Hopefully they will learn from our mistakes. We are all but a small piece in a gigantic puzzle, a part of the overall plan."

"Thy words ring of truth, Norrin Radd," Thor said turning his gaze to the Wall again, that point that so fascinated the Surfer. There seemed to be a dazzling display, energy coursing, flaring skyward as though something beyond were about to erupt and break through, though that of course was impossible. "My Father, Lord Odin spoke often of this barrier beyond the stars. It was his belief as well that the very spark that first created life exists beyond that great edifice, its very power forever growing until that time when it might burst free once more wiping away the old in order to create a new and glorious existence on the ashes of what had gone before. 'All we do in life prepares the way' my Father has oft said, and when Ragnarok one day claims us all, others will stride forth and continue the struggle. Let us hope that day is yet far away-"

There was a sound, a cracking noise as the shattering of eggshell, the snapping of a dried twig that caused both Surfer and Thunderer to turn to the great Wall. Light came streaming from some small point, a spot barely visible as they were yet so far away, a blinding light exploding forth that made Thor wince and squint, tears streaming from his eyes.

"Zounds! What devilry is this-"

Norrin Radd stared into the radiance, his mouth slack, open and agape as he saw the bubbling wellspring of Creation itself spewing forth from a crack in the Wall. It was slight, but he could see it growing as dark energy flowed forth burning, blasting out into space, the force of the primordial energy wiping away whatever lay in its path. It was light, blatant and pure, yet also an absence of light, a radiance of alternate energy. It was the glow of lack of substance, a negative, anti-matter without form and mass, a devastating flood of something that was not.

It was Chaos unleashed...

That he should be here, now, to witness this! To be here at the very rebirth of all reality- for what else could it be that might breach the Wall that had stymied so many? The Thunder God was correct. It was fate-

"Surfer!" Thor shouted over the rising wail of energy released and unbound. The floodtide of negative energy, the wave of Chaos unbridled was spreading quickly with a building, deafening roar, nothing to stay its path. "We must stop this! Join me! Together our combined powers might stem this flow of decimation."

Thor was right in that there was decimation. Wherever the energy spread and touched, that that was vanished, wiped away as though it never had been. There were no words to describe that lack of 'being' that remained in the wake of the devastation. It was a null, an empty place quickly filled by whatever sprang forth, that crackling anti-energy swelling to fill the vacancy. It was awesome-

"Surfer!"

He had to learn more. Here was the answer to all. He had to know!

"Norrin Radd!"

The Silver Surfer shot forward, his Power Cosmic boiling within as he called upon his energies, engulfing himself in all that Galactus had bestowed so long ago. He heard and ignored the screaming curses of Thor as he left the Thunderer tumbling behind, spiraling away from his board before the wash of spreading annihilation. Mighty was Thor, a God perhaps in truth if not in name, but he was not the greatest Herald of the Devourer! Thor was the Son of Odin, but he was not the master of the Power Cosmic. The smallest spark of Galactus' flame and fire yet burned in the Silver Surfer's breast as was decreed. A punishment once upon a time, now and forever both bane and boon. Now he would know...

Now he would learn the ultimate truth...

"Nooooo!"

Thor watched as the Silver Surfer vanished into the growing maelstrom. The raging storm swallowed his glistening form, a point of light dwindling into the inferno spewing from the crack in the Wall. There was no explosion, no fanfare to mark the warrior's passing but a simple sparkle of light flaring in the growing shadow. The Surfer would find his answers it appeared, if not in this life then the next.

The God of Thunder hefted M'Jolnir, gripping the strap and started to swirl the mighty hammer. The Silver Surfer would not be lost without a fight, and the Son of Odin, the Lord of Lightning would not allow one so esteemed to simply vanish. With the Uru Hammer burning, blazing with unbridled might Thor drew closer, the power of the gods at his beck and call as he espied the crack, the widening breach in the Wall at the End of Forever.

He saw the shadows then as he drew near. They scurried from the hole, flitting, fleeting forms that skitted about the ancient surface. Dark and slick

they were, scurrying about, monstrosities birthed of the edifice so old, or perhaps from the Chaos beyond. They were born of the Wall, that barren life that would mold the greatest warrior to survive its deserted wastes. Their numbers were small but formidable in their own stature, Predators created to protect the Wall, and more-

Thor stared as another came through the breach, huge and foreboding, grappling with the Predators. He was armored, his body cast in a gray fur so dark and deep as to appear almost black. He was a brute, huge with a wild mane glistening in the abhorrent glare of Chaos unbound. He screamed, beams of energy firing from his thick fingers as he struggled to pull his great, muscular form from the crack. Energy crackled and spat about his eyes as he surveyed the void before him seeking aid perhaps, sanctuary from the dark creatures trying to drag him down. He screamed again to see the Thunder God there, drawing near, even as the jet-black monsters of the wall drew blood- and that was enough.

Blastaar disappeared in a tide of ebon bodies and slashing limbs. Even from so far away he could hear the denizen of the Negative Zone's cries of agony as the Predators rent his flesh. Thor spurred forward, but he knew that he was too late as the creatures calmed. The Thunderer paled, realizing soon enough. Blastaar was dead and the creatures were devouring their kill...

Manhattan:

Saunders glanced up, his meditation broken. There was something wrong in the realities, an angry wave of energy sweeping through the realms. He sensed the devastation, the annihilation springing forth. It was not magic, but it whispered of the arcane, the slightest essence caught up, carried along in the tide.

Doctor Strange, Master of the Mystic Arts, the Sorcerer Supreme stood and strode to the glowing, pulsating orb that hovered in midair just a few feet away. His whispered something as he approached, words long forgotten by mortal man and the radiant sphere sparkled, misty clouds of eldritch energy coruscating within. He stared in disbelief, his skin growing cold as he realized what was happening, what had been unleashed.

He swore to gods long dead and forgotten...

Milwaukee:

Richard Ryder ripped the helmet from his head, screaming as the sudden noise and static became unbearable.

He wore the armor of a Centurion, a warrior and protector of Andromeda, one of the fabled Nova Corp. His was the power of the human rocket, great strength and speed, near invulnerability. He could fly, but all of that was as nothing as his mind flooded with the horrific cries of the masses, the screaming of people he had never met but had sworn to protect when he had accepted his mantle.

Something was sweeping out across the universe. He could hear them dying in his head by the millions, billions! There was nothing that he could do.

Richard Ryder, Nova hovered over the great devastation that had once been the city of Milwaukee, the huge, gaping pit where millions had once lived and thrived and he shivered. A cold, creeping hopelessness washed over him and he paled, hopeless...

London:

John Constantine looked up, his hands shaking, the flame of his lighter wavering in the breeze. He trembled as a wave of hopelessness washed over him, something devastating that his meager magicks could not begin to combat.

He bit at his cheek, trying to stop from shivering, to hold the tip of his Silk Cut steady in the flame. He breathed deeply, exhaling finally a swirling cloud of wispy blue smoke that dispersed on the wind. He cupped his hands over the cigarette's tip against the surging breeze.

It was starting to rain...

Coast City:

The silent man clad in black and shadow glanced up at the new star that suddenly blazed, growing in brilliance there in the black of night. He sighed, tipping back his fedora as his eyes became distant and soft, the darkness edging away as tears welled, running down his face.

"So soon..." he said, his gaze locked on the radiance above.

The ghosts cried out about him, millions screaming for revenge.

Souls spiraled upward, free at last.

There was a spark of green flame but he ignored it. Someone called his name, but the word fell on deaf ears. He knew no one here. He was after all...

A stranger...

Los Angeles:

Hawkeye sighed as he drew back the string of his bow, pulling it tight, taut against his cheek. His arm was steady as he aimed, the point of the arrow unwavering as he held his target in his sights. He smiled, laughing-

"Give it up, Creel!" he shouted over the blare of sirens, fire trucks and police cars converging on the scene. Smoke roiled up caught on the warm breeze and blowing away towards the ocean, caught in the backdraft of the

Santa Ana winds. The fires raged, the Absorbing Man's rampage having destroyed cars and buildings as the West Coast Avengers fought to stop him. The man was brick, a walking façade of the building's rubble, his ball and chain hanging limply at his side.

"How many times do we have ta put you away, Crusher?" Hawkeye smirked drawing a bead on his foe. "When are you gonna learn?"

"Fuck you, asshole!" the Absorbing Man raged pulling his weapon in close. Hawkeye noted that his target was tensing, his muscles bulging as he let the ball and chain spin ever so slightly, twirling in his grip. He was getting ready to attack. Hawkeye the Archer licked his lips, focusing on his target.

"Carol?"

"I got him..."

Warbird hovered over Creel, standing in midair seemingly, the sash of her belt fluttering in the wind, her long blonde hair wild. She was unafraid, the likes of the Absorbing Man far down on her private list of potential threats. She could have taken him alone, but glancing about the scene of carnage that Creel had created in trying simply to rob an armored car she saw her allies in the West Coast Avengers ready to help. The Beast, Hank McCoy formerly of the X-Men sat perched and ready to spring at Hawkeye's command. Iron Man hovered in the background and she could hear the power building in his armor, his Repulsor Rays brimming with energy. Crusher Creel, the Absorbing Man was surrounded, and at his slightest move would be beaten down by the heroes without hesitation. He had destroyed stores and cars, created a mess in the street without a care on Rodeo Drive in the simple hope of scoring a store of cash and jewels to stoke his coffers. He would never learn.

"We all got him, Hawk," the hollow voice of Iron Man echoed over the scene. Creel glanced up and saw the Golden Avenger aiming his metallic gauntlets at him, saw the building power within the gloves. He looked away, sweat on his brow and saw the Beast ready to spring.

"We've done this before, Creel. Why not simply surrender? The Clippers are playing the Knicks tonight, and if you give up I guarantee you'll be in Central Booking in time to see the Tip-off."

"Fuck you too, ya Mutie freak!"

Crusher Creel crouched, his hand probing the ground at his feet for something that he might absorb. Something stronger than brick. Hawkeye shook his head slightly, and with a sigh he fired.

The arrow struck Creel full in the shoulder and the Absorbing Man screamed. It was not the pain, but the process as the Absorbing Man's powers kicked in. He had been about to absorb steel, his fingers brushing at the wreckage at his feet, but the arrow had pierced his skin as he had started to concentrate, the brick fading to flesh as he drew in the properties of the arrow-

First titanium designed to pierce stone, then fiberglass...

Crusher Creel looked up in shock and horror as he heard Warbird's raging scream of triumph. He saw the fist driving at him, but it was too late. His Norn-born powers were surging as his body took on the aspects of Hawkeye's pseudo-wooden shaft. His skin morphed, shaping and shading as the mass of brick faded away only to be replaced by some form of prevaricated wood. It almost felt like plastic, just for a moment as Warbird's fist smashed down into him too fast to avoid or change. He screamed as his body splintered, exploding with the force of her blow. He heard the hum of Repulsor Rays as Iron Man scattered his remains, his consciousness fading towards oblivion...

"Well, that was a bit anticlimactic," the Beast said as he dropped to the charred and broken asphalt. Water spewed from a shattered hydrant not so far away and Tiffany's roof collapsed as a fire raged through the buildings behind him. He drug his long fingers through the shattered wood, kindling that had been a man just a few heartbeats before. "Not a fate I'd wish on my worst enemy, I dare say."

"He'll reform," Hawkeye said as he plucked his arrow out of the ground. He ran his thumb over the blunted tip, frowning. "He always does-"

"Unfortunately," Iron Man said as he floated down to earth. His boot jets churned with the effort, one of Creel's blows having upset his internal gyros. "Creel's one of those foes that we'll never get rid of," he said, a panel opening on his gauntlet as he tapped out commands on a tiny keyboard starting a diagnostics on his system. His propulsion was off just a bit, and his Repulsors were only running at eighty-three percent. The Absorbing Man had done some damage, apparently. Nothing serious, and nothing that could not be fixed.

"Well, I think we did good work," Carol Danvers said as she stepped through Creel's splintered remains, kicking at the debris as her high-heels broke more of the tiny fragments beneath her feet. "Despite the damage," she said, hands on her hips as she surveyed the damage along the streets. The local fire department was moving in now to contain the blaze and the police were in the process of moving the crowd back. "It could have been a lot worse."

"Indubitably," the Beast agreed as he slipped his glasses onto his nose to better examine a shard of wood up close. "Luckily mister Creel decided to leave his better half at home. I suppose it is inevitable that Titania will eventually come to call however."

"We can take her," Danvers said with a conceited smile, brushing her long blonde hair back over her shoulder. "Hell, right now I feel like we could take anybody. I didn't even work up a sweat with-"

"Wish not for greater foes, warrior, and celebrate in thy victories no matter the ease lest thy wishes be granted!"

As one the Avengers moved into action at the sound of the booming voice coming from on high. They ignored the sudden gusts of swirling, driving wind, the pounding rain and darkening sky. They ignored the peal of thunder booming in they background as Iron Man and Warbird both took to the sky arching up and around to encompass the new attacker. Hawkeye drew an arrow from his quiver, charging right into open ground to draw fire

as he swept his gaze skyward, his shaft easing back on taut string. Hank McCoy, the blue-furred Beast leapt aside, his form ricocheting across the rubble caused by their recent battle with the Absorbing Man until he finally came to a defensive rest atop a stalled city bus, ready to spring to the attack or leap away as needed.

They all scanned the sky, their eyes locking finally on the target, the source of the voice and it was Hawkeye that at last ordered them to stand down. He sighed slightly relieved, finally recognizing the booming, basso voice, the speech and words sinking in and making sense. There were few men he knew that spoke like that, with such an overblown confidence and authority, though of those the mighty Thor was perhaps the last he expected to see.

He came down from on high, his arms outstretched, his magic hammer spinning rapidly overhead to slow his descent. His huge crimson cape was fluttering out behind him, flowing in the backdraft and Hawkeye could not help but notice that it appeared ripped and tattered, charred in spots. The Thunder God's armor was battered as well, and this was the heavy-duty armor he had taken to wearing from time to time with the reinforced leggings and armbands, the thicker chestplate. One of the wings had been snapped off of his tarnished, dented helmet.

"Jeez, Goldilocks," Clint Barton joked as he lowered his bow. He left his arrow notched however, noting the raging storm behind the Thunderer, the swirling, diminishing hole of purplish energy. The Asgardian had been dimension hopping apparently, and Hawkeye knew that the Avenger usually saved the spectacular entrances for the bad guys. "Give a little warning, would'ja? You about got your godly butt skewered from four sides."

"Hawkeye's right, Thor," Iron Man said, his own hollow voice booming over the roar of thunder that had yet to diminish. Seeing that things were in hand the Asgardian Avenger would usually have turned down the fireworks by now. Something was definitely wrong. "You know the protocol. Hell, you helped write it! What's going on?"

The West Coast Avengers gathered about the Thunder God as he landed in the midst of the carnage that was Rodeo Drive. Warbird noted that the huge Avenger seemed even grimmer than usual of late, his eyes dark and his brow knitted with worry. Iron Man too saw that there was something troubling his friend. Of them all- of all the Avengers- he had known the Mighty Thor the longest, along with Henry Pym and Janet Van Dyne, and of course the Incredible Hulk. Tony Stark however felt that he and Thor were friends at the very least as throughout the years they had shared far too many adventures together to be considered anything but. They had guessed each other's secret identities years ago, long before the rest of the Avengers had divulged them willingly. They had saved one another time and again. They had shared much, and now at a glance, despite the pyrotechnics of the grand entrance the Invincible Iron Man could see that something worried the Thunder God. Almost scared him...

"Forgive mine abrupt entrance, Avengers," Thor said as he knelt to one knee, tapping the haft of his war hammer to the ground to still the raging storm that followed in his wake. Almost immediately the wind and driving rain slowed, the dark clouds started to disperse, the hole in mid-air closing

with a wink. Thor stood, shrugging his shoulders to shed the water from his cloak. "In mine haste I did not think, did not e'en consider that you might be preoccupied. I fear recent events far and abroad have clouded my best judgement."

"No harm, Thunderer," the Beast said glancing at the queer sparkling effect left behind in the sky where Thor had stepped back into real space. Henry McCoy was a scientist at heart, a biologist really, but still he had that inherent need to always learn more. Since he first learned of his mutant powers and joined the Uncanny X-Men years ago he had seen the effects of teleportation in many of its miraculous versions. From his initial encounter with the Vanisher, to his ally Night Crawler years after, and even Thor himself he had wondered at the physics of it all. He understood the principals based on Einstein's early theories of course, but all that had been thrown out the window the first time that the Fantastic Four had journeyed to Andromeda and the very heart of the Skrull Empire. Since then matters had been complicated by the appearance of the Kree and later the pilfered expertise of the Shiar and their interstellar Warp Gates and Jump Drive. Add into the mix the technicalities of time travelers like Kang and Immortus, Doom and even Bishop and the scientific applications became mind-boggling. Even more so with Thor whose powers were derived from magic rather than science. It was confusing, but in all his experience the Beast had never quite seen the after effect that he now witnessed:

There seemed to be a blank area where the Thunder God had appeared. A negative, null zone bereft of light and color that he could not quite focus on. It pulsed oddly, and he could only denote it in his peripheral vision, but it seemed to be there none the less. What was it, McCoy wondered, but his question went unanswered as a member of SHIELD ran forward, two men in Guardsmen armor just behind and equipped with some type of vacuum-like devices strapped to their backs-

"Avengers!" the agent shouted as he ran forward, his eyes lighting on each before settling on Hawkeye, known leader of the West Coast branch of the Avengers. "Agent Hunt; SHIELD! I hate to interrupt," he said as he looked about the scene with worry, "but we must start clean-up procedure. The fire department needs total access to the area, and we do need to 'contain' what's left of the Absorbing Man before he reforms any further." The agent of SHIELD pointed to the ground and they all saw that the splintered wood that constituted Crusher Creel's form was already inching along the broken asphalt, larger pieces forming from the smaller remains. Carol Danvers frowned and stepped back-

"Eewww, gross!" she said, stepping aside as a piece of slimy, liquefied wood slithered over the toe of her boot.

"I agree, Avengers," Thor said nodding to Agent Hunt and all saw the SHIELD agent sigh in obvious relief. "What I must needs say should be for thine ears alone. We should make haste to thine West Coast Compound and in truth let the call ring forth once more, as I feel that powerful as thee might be, e'en thy combined might will pale beside the evil that now confronts the very fabric of the universe.

"Avengers Assemble!"

The West Coast Avengers watched as the God of Thunder spun his hammer overhead and swiftly shot skyward. They looked from one to another then; Hawkeye the Archer, the world's greatest marksman, Warbird imbued with the former powers of the Kree warrior Captain Marvel, the bouncing, bubbly Beast, former X-Man and Mutant, and Anthony Stark, billionaire and the armored Avenger known as the Invincible Iron Man! Together they were the core of the West Coast branch of the Mighty Avengers. There were others of course, but at the moment they were the heart and soul, and together they all knew that they would follow the Thunder God to the ends of the Universe if need be, to the very Gates of Hell itself!

Of course they hoped it would not come to that...

The African Nation of Wakanda:

Klaw whimpered as he stared at the stub of his arm. His Sonic Horn lay just a few feet away, severed from his being and mangled, a twisted wad of metal, useless. He felt no real pain of course, there was no blood, but the psychic trauma of watching as his arm was cut from his body had sent him into a fit of panic and hysteria. Worse, the damn savages were not through...

T'Challa, son of T'Chaka, Chieftain of all Wakanda and the Avenger known as the Black panther stood over the self-proclaimed Master of Sound. His face was grim, his countenance a stony mask as he stood over his foe, his regal robes fluttering in the warm breeze. The monarch of Wakanda hefted the battle-axe in his hand, considering, the golden Vibranium blade glittering in the dying sunlight. A light rain was falling and the steamy jungle was all but silent as though anticipating the horror to come.

"You can't do this!" Klaw cried out, screaming and squirming in the grip of the African warriors. He had come to Wakanda once more hoping to steal the mythic metal Vibranium from the savages as he had in the past. He had heard that the panther was away and had thought that he would have an easy time against the blacks, but his information had been wrong. They had been prepared, actually waiting for him. They had beaten him easily, the Black Panther not even sullyng his hands as he directed his minions with their Sonic Dampeners and their Null Weapons to cancel out sound. One of them had sliced away his horn, another, a mere slip of a girl smashing his weapon into pulp while the warriors wrestled him to the ground, holding him, binding him with cord woven from strands of the Wakandan mystery metal. Klaw had struggled of course, fought as best he could but they were too many, too strong. Then the Panther had strode forward finally, his Vibranium axe in hand-

"The time has come to end this, Ulysses Klaw," T'Challa said without emotion. "Time and again you invade my sovereign realm, ignoring my laws, flaunting your own nationality with immunity. Never again, as I have had enough."

T'Challa raised his axe high, his dark eyes smoldering with hate as Klaw whined and screamed. The Black Panther almost smirked as he stared down at his oldest foe, "Burn in hell, murderer-"

"My Chieftain!"

T'Challa, Son of T'Chaka paused as his most trusted aide ran forward. Taku was a childhood friend, one of those that had learned abroad, returning later to the land of his birth to help further Wakanda and help bring the nation into the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries. T'Challa trusted Taku with his life and thus paused in his rightful duty, glancing back at his friend-

"Forgive me, Milord, but I have received an A-1 Priority Alert on the special frequency of the Avengers. You have stated that you should be informed of this at any time, no matter the circumstance."

T'Challa stared at his old friend curiously, "Really..." The last such call had gone forth when Korvac threatened the very fabric of reality. To implement that distress alert, "Who sent the call?"

"Thor, Milord..."

T'Challa lowered his axe, rolling the haft in his grip. Thor had quit the Avengers the last he had heard. What might spark the God of Thunder then to gather the assemblage?

"Respond affirmative, Taku," T'Challa said as he stared down at Klaw. The villain seemed at sudden ease, thinking he had earned a reprieve. "I shall answer the call accordingly after I have concluded my duty here." Taku nodded as T'Challa raised the axe once more and Ulysses Klaw started to whimper and squirm once more-

"No!" he screamed, trying to break away but the Wakandan warriors held him fast. "No! You can't-"

"Shut up..." T'Challa said as he brought the axe down silencing the Master of Sound with one swift blow...

Hopefully forever...

San Francisco, California:

Janet Van Dyne frowned to hear the all too familiar beeping noise of her Avengers ID card. She sniffed, glancing about as she held up the flimsy negligee before her body admiring the lace and detail, the way the sheer fabric accentuated the color of her eyes and the way that the silky weave laid smoothly over her bosom. It was Dior, the latest from Paris imported by Victoria's Secret and quite risqué. It left little to the imagination, accentuating her more obvious attributes in the process.

Hank would love it...

Her frown turning into a scowl, the Wondrous Wasp tossed the flimsy nightgown back over the clothes rack and reached into her purse. She heard a whimpering, whining noise as her hand drifted into the dark

confines and with a quick grin her fingers brushed against the tiny, shrunken form of her ex-husband. She glanced down and saw Henry Pym writhing, bound hand and foot by dental floss, gagged and struggling as her fingernail scratched at his four-inch frame, arousing his helpless form. It was a little game they played, one they both loved, a fetish that Hank had developed over the years and one that excited her no end. Janet let her huge finger drift between his bound legs, scratching just a bit before her fingers closed on her Identity Card and withdrew leaving her tiny, helpless husband screaming for release. She giggled, folding the flap of her bag closed, muffling his cries.

"Sorry, lover," she said as her thumb keyed up the distress signal, her eyes focusing on the abrupt message that was displayed at her touch. An A-1 Priority Alert! She wondered what could make Thor panic to the point of calling that and knew immediately that her vacation was over.

They needed her again, and like they said, 'Once an Avenger'...

London:

Dane Whitman dug through his bureau trying to find the source of the annoying, beeping sound. He knew exactly what it was though he could not believe that the Mighty Avengers would stoop so low as to call him again. He found it hard to believe that they were so desperate as to call on the Black Knight!

He found the ID Card finally, buried in a drawer back behind his stockings. It was blinking and beeping, the image of Thor's symbol flashing as the one who had sent the call. It was A-1 Priority he saw at a glance- something threatening the very fabric of reality. Kang proportions no doubt, or Ultron...

Whitman passed his thumb over the card to silence the alert and tossed the card back into his drawer. The audacity they had after the Kree/Shiar War. He still remembered the aftermath of that, their grandiose opinions and the way they had all- almost- chastised him for what he did. He had only done what had been necessary, but they as a whole, holier than thou had not seen that. He had slain to save the universe, but all that they saw was that he had slain.

Hypocrites all...

They were Avengers in name only.

It would be a cold day in hell before he answered their call again...

Wundagore:

Pietro Maximoff stared at the blinking card in his hand, wondering just how the humans could be so callous and uncaring. Granted it was Thor, and the

Thunderer had never been one to consider the feelings of his mortal comrades beyond the task at hand, but still...

Quicksilver had indeed rejoined the fabled ranks of the Avengers, but he had also requested time away with his wife and child amongst the Inhumans in far-off Attilan. He had thought that he had made that perfectly clear. Too, his sister had taken a leave of absence from the ranks after the recent fiasco as well as the death of her one-time husband the android Vision. Did they have no heart, no soul?

"Pietro?"

Quicksilver spun about at the sound of his Mutant sister's voice. Like he, she was possessed of great power, hers perhaps potentially far greater than his own super speed with the ability to alter reality at a whim. In truth the Scarlet Witch was one of the most powerful beings on the planet except that her powers were fragiley sporadic and untrustworthy. There were times when Wanda's powers had deserted her all together, and other times when she seemed almost unstoppable. Thus was the legacy of their father he supposed, the two of them the progeny of debatably the most powerful Mutant on the face of the Earth; Magneto!

"What is that sound, my brother?"

Pietro Maximoff-Magnus glanced at his sister, his thumb sliding over the slim plastic card in his hand. He depressed the cancel button, hoping that his speed had not failed him-

"It's the Avengers, isn't it?" Wanda asked as she stepped lightly forward running a towel through her long auburn hair. She had another towel wrapped about her body, her skin glistening with water after her hot, steaming bath.

"It is nothing-" Pietro said, but despite his great speed the Scarlet Witch was able to snatch the card from his grip. He frowned as her eyes focused on the emergency beacon and he knew just how she would respond. It had been easy for him to cast aside his old life, but his sister's was too tightly intertwined with the ways of the Avengers; the Vision and Wonder Man, Hawkeye and Captain America. She would want to help, to answer the call. She looked up at him with a worried look and Quicksilver sighed, nodding-

"Respond then, sister," he said, flopping into an over-stuffed chair in disgust. "If you don't I know I'll never hear the end of it."

Brooklyn, New York:

Steve Rogers depressed the thin stud on the plastic card without hesitation. He had severed all ties with the Avengers of late, but he had yet to cut them entirely from his life it seemed.

They had saved him after all.

He still remembered that day, awakening in their submarine after he had been plucked from the frigid Atlantic wrapped in ice. He had been trapped, suspended in time after his final confrontation with the Baron Zemo- at least up until then. Bucky had died, but he had survived the explosion of the experimental Drone Plane, his unique physiology keeping him alive and young throughout the years following World War Two. The Avengers had saved him from his icy imprisonment, dragging him kicking and fighting from the ice, allowing him to join their hallowed ranks with little question. He had joined them likewise.

What else did he have to do?

The Mighty Avengers had been a major part of his life since his rebirth and he had been at their side, at their forefront for what seemed now like decades. He had led them time and again, through their best and worst. Lately however there had been some doubt, some question...

He had left the team, following the tragedy in Wakanda that had ended with another Avenger dead. T'Challa had recently asked him to rejoin, and he had accepted, but things were strange in the Captain's personal life. The family he had formed was now gone, and Steve Rogers had been left with nothing.

Nothing...

Nothing but the Avengers. It was high time that he returned. Forget the past, he had to look to the future once more and as they had been in the past the Avengers were there. As always...

If they needed him again, he would respond as he had in the past...

As he always would...

Avengers Assemble!

To be Continued...

Next Issue: Things start to heat up as the Mighty Avengers assemble to deal with a universe-threatening disturbance. But just what does Ra's Al Ghul have to do with the Avengers, and what might Annihilus be up to with his scurrying little Predators? For the answers head on over to JLU 2001 and read the next chapter of the greatest cross-over of all time-

JLA vs. the Avengers continues in one short week over at JLU 2001! Be there or be square...

Story © Curt F

Plot © Chris Munn and Curt F



Avengers
37

THE AVENGERS



Captain America



Iron Man



Beast



Hawkeye

**MARVEL 2000 & JLU 2001 PROUDLY
PRESENT...**

**The Aerie
Mt. Annapurna
Nepal:**

Ra's Al Ghul watched as the images flickered and flitted past, his steel gray eyes bright as the world passed before him. The pictures appearing on the monitors showed various places scattered about the globe; the major cities of course like Gotham, Tokyo , Metropolis but also less inhabited places. The rain forests of Brazil where the constant stripping of trees wiped away the years of evolution as another plant or animal was erased from existence, the atmosphere despoiled a little more with every choking breath of every machine. China , where the Yellow River steadily rose, submerging flora and fauna alike the better to provide the chattel with more power. Nearby Quarac where men worked feverishly night and day to produce more and more weapons of mass destruction to use against their neighbors. A tanker near the Mariana Trench dropping drums of radioactive waste. A volcano erupting on Iceland .

They were satellite images for the most part, his own computer technicians pirating the signals broadcast around the world locked down by a dozen different countries. Some were news broadcasts- he had stock in CNN and WGBS after all, not being a fool. There were images however that were of his own design, his own cameras broadcasting pictures from around the world of things that caught his eye and interest. Three of those were centered in the array of monitors even now, side by side, the better that the Demon's Head might focus his attention.

The three monitors showed relatively the same image, though the broadcast locale of each was almost as far from the next as it could possibly be within the planet's atmosphere. Rips, tears in the very fabric of the sky.

Roiling, reddish clouds of negative energy seeped from each, though only one was visible to the naked eye. One, the largest was centered over Antarctica about the geomagnetic South Pole though nearly a mile over the continent. The next was high over the Pacific Ocean, above Kiribati and the tiny isle in the Phoenix chain named Orona, nearly the center of the legendary Circle of Fire. That one was just at the edge of the stratosphere. The last and smallest was over Manhattan, just a tiny rip spewing crackling, pink energy for those that could see it and nestled just a few yards beyond the reach of the tallest skyscraper. Red clouds. Crimson skies.

It appeared that the Crisis had returned. It seemed different however. Not the sweeping storms of several years past that had swept across the sky



Black Panther



The Wasp



Warbird



Thor



Scarlet Witch

and land decimating and eradicating anything in their path. These were isolated events and seemed more to be streams of anti-energy escaping from somewhere. But from where? Qward perhaps, or that mirror universe that held those odd and evil doppelgangers of the Justice League that they had fought some years past? Somewhere else? Impossible to say without more information.

It was interesting however, and no doubt deadly. He had already sent volunteers to investigate the two more remote locations, fodder to sacrifice but laden with more than enough equipment to relay the information he needed before they expired. Manhattan was a bit too congested to examine up close as yet. He would keep that particular rip under close scrutiny from afar however, and have his agents gathered nearby just in case. He would send his daughter-

"Talia!" he called into the intercom on his desk. He received no reply, but he knew that she was on her way. She was ever at his disposal, ever ready to please and follow his slightest whim in all but one aggravating circumstance. That being the Detective of course.

The Batman was gone however, luckily, fatefully. He would not be a distraction to Talia this time, nor would he disable the grand schemes of Ra's Al Ghul again. The Detective and his allies had been a collective thorn in his side for far too long, but with most of the League apparently missing- lost in time according to Sentinel and the original Flash- The Demon's Head knew he would suffer no resistance, no defeat. It was almost pitiable knowing that there would be no test of skill this time, no matching of wits. He would simply implement his plan and succeed. At last.

At long last...

"Father?"

Ra's Al Ghul spun about in his chair, his eyes quickly adjusting to the darkened room that had been at his back. Queer shadows danced and stretched along the walls and floor, shifting and changing as the monitors flashed behind him. The room was sparsely furnished; a Victorian Age table with refreshment on a sterling silver setting, a communications console cast in gun metal gray, a map of the world as it is, was, and hopefully would be one day. And there was his daughter.

Talia stood in the doorway, an angelic silhouette cast in shadow from the brighter florescent of the sterile hallway beyond. She was dressed in skintight lycra shaded blood red and black, gloves and short boots of tough leather, her hair tied back in a tail. He had interrupted her training session apparently, her sparring. Drops of blood fell from her knuckles as she loosened the velcro straps lacing her wrists.

"You wished to see me?"



Quicksilver

THE JLA



Superman



**Wonder
Woman**



Batman



The Flash

"Yes, Talia," Al Ghul said as he turned back to the monitors. Lightning split the sky, trailing from the rip over Antarctica . "I wish you to take a team to the United States , to New York City to monitor the rip in the sky first hand."

"Of course," the Demon's Daughter said as she strode forward peering at the myriad screens. Her brow wrinkled to see the energy unleashing into the sky. "I- I shall take my squadron, technicians for study. I... "

"It is impressive is it not?" Ra's Al Ghul said with a grin, his eyes sparkling, reflecting the flickering displays. "All that power just waiting, waiting for someone to tap it. Use it. Negative energy whose merest breath of contact could wipe away the world if left unchecked. In the proper hands, the ability to erase God's greatest, growing mistake."

"But, how to contain it?" Talia questioned, leaning forward on the back of her father's chair. "Surely such devastating energy is beyond control."

"Only for the moment daughter," Ra's Al Ghul sighed easing back in his chair and steepling his fingers beneath his chin as he contemplated all that he saw. His mind was awirl with ideas swirling and already a plan was taking gel, formulating, growing.

"Only for the moment."

THE AVENGERS

VS



**Green
Lantern**



**Martian
Manhunter**



Firestorm



Zatanna



**Black
Canary**

JUSTICE LEAGUE OF AMERICA



Chapter Two:

Accentuate the Negative!

Written by Curt Fernlund
Story by Chris Munn and Curt Fernlund

**Los Angeles , California
The Avengers West compound:**

"Though he be the basest of villains when he doth appear in our worlds, Blastaar is a warrior in his own realm. This I know, and would not stand idly by to see him overwhelmed by the foul, dark creatures that did assault him."

The Mighty Thor stood before the oval table, his great hammer upended, the head resting on the top of the huge red 'A' adorning the shining surface. His wounds had been treated, though his own uncanny ability to heal- an act of gods- had dealt with the worst of the damage. Still his left arm was wrapped tightly in a long bandage of gauze and a padded poultice was taped to a weeping gash just below his chin. His heavy armor of plate and chain had been patched in the worst spots, but it still had charred marks from burns and dents that mere mortal tools could not hammer out.

He stood before the assembled heroes, obviously tired and near beaten yet there was still an air of magnificence about him, a bearing that made those others sit up and take note, paying careful attention to his tale. Thor was not known for his ability to spin a yarn, he was no bard but a warrior through and through. Still, when he spoke it was for good reason and all would listen.

The Norse God of Thunder cast his gaze about the great table, locking eyes with each of his comrades in turn. He knew them all, knew them well he



Plastic Man

thought and it gladdened his heart that these- his allies- had answered his call, and so quickly.

Hawkeye the Marksman sat at the far end of the table as was his right and honor. As current leader of the West Coast branch of the Mighty Avengers he had led his team to great victories and even greater glories. He was dressed in his usual pair of black and purple; his cowl cast back among friends as he waxed resin on his bow. He seemed preoccupied, but Thor knew that he heard all, the brash and arrogant archer well aware of his station and duty.

To his right sat Iron Man, one of Thor's oldest mortal friends on Midgard-Earth. Iron Man had helped found the Avengers, one of the original members now in his armor of red and gold, but more in his alter ego of Anthony Stark he provided the financing for the awesome assemblage; their halls and crafts, their weapons and more.

To Hawkeye's left was Carol Danvers, Warbird. She was an old acquaintance of the Avengers, once being an ally to the exiled Kree warrior Captain Marvel. Fate had decreed that she might carry on that proud warriors' name and granted her great power and knowledge too. The Danvers woman had had many trials over the years, many tests of heart and soul yet she had always triumphed, and was thus a true Avenger proven.

Next to her sat Henry McCoy, the Beast. He was a Mutant by birth, granted abilities beyond mortal ken yet setting him apart in the eyes of humankind. Once he was an X-Man, one of Xavier's greatest pupils, but he did strike out on his own and was dealt an even more bitter hand. His body mutated even more, becoming in kind more beast-like; sprouting fur and fang in a devilish mane. Undaunted however, McCoy strove on and now found himself an Avenger once again and more than welcome.

To Thor's immediate right sat the beautiful Scarlet Witch, his most recent comrade in the eastern version of the Avengers. Thor had been that group's leader most recent, and Wanda Maximoff had been a staunch ally by his side. Despite their efforts however, that group had stepped down that another might take its place. Thor had returned to fabled Asgard, and the Scarlet Witch had simply tried to blend into a normal life for a time. Of all the Avengers, her life had been perhaps the most convoluted. Like the Beast she was a Mutant, her power to alter probability. Too she was a witch in skill as well as name, commanding the Chaos Magic. Her powers had never truly been stable however, mirroring her own troubled past. For a time, she and her twin sibling- Quicksilver- had thought themselves orphaned, then children of the legendary heroes the Whizzer and Miss America, then the offspring of a gypsy named Maximoff and finally the get of that Mutant Master of Magnetism, Magneto! She had married the Avenging android, the Vision in turmoil. They had sired children, which were apparently manifestations of her very powers. Those two boys had died, and later the Vision as well. Her life had been a mass of confusion and heartbreak, yet there she sat awaiting Thor's words and commands. A true hero.

The last member at the table was another of the five original Avengers. Janet Van Dyne had been called the Winsome Wasp once upon a time due not only to her ability to shrink in stature and sprout gossamer wings thus

to fly, but due to her spirited attitude as well. Over the years the heiress had proven her worth and ability time and again, both as an Avenger as well as the partner to Henry Pym and his ever-changing guise. In time the Wasp even led the mighty assemblage through some of their darkest hours and proved herself to be one of their finest leaders ever. Of late she had retired, but when the call to assemble rang forth she had been one of the first to answer the clarion.

Thor stared at them all, each and every one, his friends and allies. He was honored that they had come at his bequest, and he was proud that they might stand at his side. Truer comrades he might never find-

"So these... creatures... were swarming over Blastaar and you went to help."

Thor blinked, turning his attention back to Hawkeye at the far head of the table. The archer was sighting his arrows now, replacing the fantastic heads created by the likes of Stark Industries and Wakandan Technologies over the years for his sole use. Hawkeye- Clint Barton looked up with a slight smile, his face and body totally relaxed as was his demeanor. A far cry from the angry man he once was years ago.

"Aye," Thor said with a nod, sighing again as he thought back on the battle just a few hours past. "I could see even from afar that Blastaar's concussive blasts were waning, losing power. The warrior himself was beaten and bloody as the dark creatures did swarm over his form. He struggled valiantly, but I pledged then and there that he would not fight alone. I did hurl mighty M'Jolnir and hie my way through the barren limits of space, speeding to his side. I was not half way there however when I saw that mine efforts were for naught.

"The creatures did rip and tear, flashing ebony claws slashing at the deposed king's very flesh. His blood did fly free as the monstrosities bit deep and drank of his blood and life's energy. I heard his screams of agony, of desperation, but I was found wanting as before I could reach the brave warrior I saw him fall.

"It was then that the creatures did espy mine approach and threw caution to the wind. They did spring forth to meet mine advance in force, just a handful of their seemingly countless growing numbers disappearing in the Wall's breach with the devastated body of Blastaar. I met their numbers head on, filled with rage and the fury of the storm as is my right. The monsters sprang forward, riding the cosmic winds propelled by their own muscles and force. They were on me in instants, and though I swung my hammer as ne'er before I did quickly realize that I had never faced a foe of the like.

"They were savage, animals with little mind beyond their desire to rend my form. Their lust for death and destruction seemed without bound, and though I did fight like a warrior of Asgard, as the Son of Odin must I quickly found myself in the direst of straits, mine own fate in question. Many a foe did fall before my might mind, but their sheer numbers and ferocity were overwhelming even to a scion of Asgard blessed. In truth I had hoped to beat my foe aside, simply to follow Blastaar and the Silver Surfer before him, both who had disappeared back into the chaotic breach. Even as I struggled however I saw more of the creatures spring forth to

scurry over the Wall, others springing forward and out into the very rigors of barren space to join in the assault on my personage. It humiliates me to admit that they were too much for me alone."

Thor was silent for a time, and none of the gathered Avengers seemed willing to break into his thoughts and melancholy at first. It was the Wasp who finally reached across the table and put her hands over Thor's.

"It's okay, Thor," she said with a frown, perfect white teeth worrying her lower lip. "We understand. We've all faced overwhelming odds before. That's part of why we're a team, remember? To deal with those foes that no single hero could defeat." Thor forced a slim smile on his lips, nodding-

"Aye, Janet Van Dyne. There is wisdom in your words, as always."

"I just can't get over the fact that there's actually a wall at the end of reality," the Beast said. He was leaning back in his chair at a hazardous angle, his huge feet flipping through the pages of a star atlas as he adjusted the slim glasses positioned on the tip of his nose. "It boggles the mind when those things we have taken for granted suddenly come crashing down around us. I was taught through many sources that space is infinite. To hear that at some point it actually ends... " he shrugged. "And the Silver Surfer went beyond. *For the world is hollow and I have touched the sky ...*"

"Shakespeare?" Warbird asked looking up.

"Star Trek," Beast answered with a wide grin. "Never discount the current media."

"Be that as it may," Iron Man interjected, "Just what is our next move? The Silver Surfer is lost to us, and Blastaar as well apparently, but by your description Thor, these Predator creatures don't fly and seem little more than hive-like drones. They're at the far end of the universe and little threat to us. At least for the moment."

"For the moment, aye," Thor agreed. "But do not underestimate their guile, old friend. We would do best to hie to the Wall and stop their advance while we still may."

"And just how are we supposed to get there?" Warbird asked, splaying her hands. "It's one thing for you to bop around the universe, but it's a little bit harder for us `mere mortals'."

"The power of M'Jolnir may transport us all to the battle, where we might face the dread creatures and stem their tide with our righteous wrath. I am prepared to bridge the gap at a moment's notice--"

"That might not be necessary," the Beast said, spinning his chair about as he glanced at a monitor screen that had sprung to life behind him. The monitor showed a scene just over Manhattan 's skyline and a spewing geyser of energy situated in the skies over Midtown. "By your description Thunderer, I would say that your 'Wall' is a line of defense against the Negative Zone. Your colorful descriptions of the coursing energy aside, the clincher was Blastaar's unfortunate appearance. I might theorize that

beyond your 'Wall' is that universe of negative space that Reed Richards discovered several years ago. If that is indeed the case, we might be better off taking that short leap cross country to New York and coming at this problem from the rear, entering the Negative zone from Mister Fantastic's patented portal."

"That makes sense, Beast," Iron Man said even as he glanced at the monitor in question. "Granted Thor could get us to this 'Wall' in the blink of an eye, but I think these Predator creatures are just a symptom of a greater disease. It appears that something is coming out of the Neg Zone, manifesting in energy that's off our scale to measure. Whatever it is, I think it's inside, and I vote we head for the source."

"What he said," the Wasp added with a smile. The conversation in general had gone over her head for the most part. She was familiar with the Negative Zone; Blastaar, Annihilus, the Mad Thinker's Awesome Android. Rick Jones had been trapped within the Zone when he had been linked to Captain Marvel for a few years, at least until Mar-Vell had transferred the Super Adaptoid to the Zone and freed his friend, the Avenger's side-kick. The science and physics of it all were a bit much however, and Janet Van Dyne was not too proud to say so.

"Shouldn't we contact Reed Richards then?" Warbird asked. "Seems he should have some useful input."

"Already on it Carol," Hawkeye said, his hand casually flitting over the Communications Console. "He's already on scene, with SHIELD. Seems our old friend Doc Midas sent a ship into the Zone not so long ago. Not too long after the hole over Manhattan started spitting negative energy to beat the band. He's keeping watch."

"Curiouser and curiouser..." the Beast said as he stared at the monitor, adjusting his spectacles. "There seems an inordinate amount of energy spewing from Richard's portal, where the Baxter Building used to be. One assumes that Professor Richards has the situation well in hand, but--"

"Richards lost the lease on the Baxter Building site awhile back, Hank," the Wasp said, turning to the monitor as well. "Susan told me that Midas, or one of his corporations bought the property outright, debts and all."

"I remember that," Iron Man added. "Stark Industries tried to block the purchase, but Midas seemed to have unlimited funds for the transaction. Reed's stock holdings weren't enough to override the shareholders, even with outside backing. Midas purchased the property where the Baxter Building once was as well as the 'Fly Zone' above it- that area over Manhattan that allows for FAA stipulation."

"So Midas has the Negative Zone portal," the Scarlet Witch finally said. She seemed almost disinterested as she glanced at the monitor, then back to her fellow members. "I can't imagine that Forge would allow him to have domain over that. SHIELD must have protocols. Where's the rest of the Fantastic Four?"

"Milwaukee," Warbird said, and that was enough. The Scarlet Witch nodded.

"Cap's heading to the scene, Wanda," Hawkeye said turning from the Communication Console, "along with your brother. He just called in. The Panther's en route too, but it'll be awhile before he gets to New York."

"Cap's back?" Wanda asked, sitting a little higher in her chair. Her dark brown eyes seemed to sparkle as a smile crept across her face.

"Apparently so, Witchy," Hawkeye smiled slipping his arrows back into his quiver, each in its own special slot that he knew by touch. "Cap's kooky quartet's about to have a reunion, and then some."

"A most auspicious occasion," the Beast said with a laugh, and one by one the others made their jokes, laughing. All save one.

Thor stared at his friends, his allies and comrades and wondered where and when they had gone wrong. Now was not the time for levity. Now was the time for all good warriors to come to arms. To fight. To die!

It would be a glorious battle. Of that he was certain.

He would make sure...

Manhattan :

Reed Richards held the small device in hand, his dark brown eyes smoldering with concentration as he scanned the tiny liquid display screens on the surface of the compact energy analyzer. He had cobbled the thing together years before, redesigning a much larger machine with technology he had invented prior combining the latest advances at the time not only in ether-spectroanalysis but also in micro-technology coming out of Japan and his own computer expertise implementing the robotic achievements of his old friend Henry Pym. The advancements in those fields since had been phenomenal of course, but some times the old ways were still the best.

The readouts on the handheld analyzer were widely varied along the entire spectrum of known light, both visible and beyond the human eye's ability to perceive. Oddly there was a spike in the Gamma wave, and an equivalent jump of gargantuan scale in what had been determined 'cosmic' rays; the fluctuating combination of various energies that had originally helped to create the Fantastic Four among others. All monitors showed a rise in output, thus accounting for the sporadic displays of ambience, but the thing that concerned Richards the most was the negative display- or lack there of. He had created a way to monitor the wavelength of anti-energy some time ago, after his first ill-fated journey into the Zone of Distortion that had ended at the Exploding Atmosphere with the death of the mysterious man that had taken the place of the Thing. The disturbing thing was that though there seemed to be a steady flow of negative energy seeping from the untended hole between the two dimensions, the resultant flare-ups could not seem to be fully analyzed and deciphered. It was as though the bulk of the energy was of some form that Richards had never before encountered. Not necessarily a unique event, however a troublesome one.

Worst of all, Doctor Midas who had instigated the entire affair by sending a ship into the Negative Zone seemed oblivious to the potentially hazardous situation. As far as Reed Richards could tell the man had put up no safeguards of any kind to protect the city and its inhabitants should conditions grow beyond his ability to control. Should a wave of negative energy be unleashed with any overwhelming proportion it was quite probable that not only Manhattan, but also a good portion of the entire Eastern Seaboard of the United States might be washed away as though engulfed by a tsunami. If left unchecked, that wave could possibly grow exponentially, theoretically. Where or when it might cease was a quandary that even Richards could not comprehend without more data. Like it or not, he was going to need help this time.

"More problems, Professor?"

Reed Richards almost jumped at the soft sound of the now familiar voice. He had been so lost in thought- a bad habit according to Susan- that he had all but forgotten that he was not alone on the rooftop facing the construction site where the Baxter Building once stood. Richards turned and saw his associate looking him over with the slightest concern, his dark brows slightly arched over slick black glasses.

Special SHIELD Agent James Woo had been assigned as liaison to Mister Fantastic not even a week past when both Richards and SHIELD first, separately, formed an idea as to what Doctor Midas might be hoping to accomplish. SHIELD had been monitoring Midas' activities for some time apparently, even before his last encounter with the West Coast Avengers some months ago. They had tracked his purchases on a global scale, the redistribution of exorbitant amounts of capital, all directed into the holdings of Argos LLC, a shadow corporation that owned the Keystone Building across the plot of land between here and there. Argos was one of Midas' many front companies Richards had come to learn, all of which, around the world were designed with the sole purpose of filling the Doctor's coffers to better finance his needs. His quest for power. The clincher that had first drew Richard's attention was the salvaging of the old Star Core shuttle out of Jamaica Bay in Brooklyn. Had Midas not been quite so flamboyant Richards might never have even noticed until it was too late, but that particular shuttle held a special and dreadful significance. It had once been the ill-fated tomb of Jean Grey, Marvel Girl of the X-Men, and it had also served as cocoon and chrysalis for her transformation into the Phoenix.

Did Midas somehow know that? Was he hoping that some residual energy still resided within the damaged shuttle, or was there something more? Doctor Midas was well known for acquiring disused and obsolete mechanisms and artifacts once related to Marvels. His very armor was a modified version of a type once worn by Iron Man years ago when he had first help form the Avengers. Everything that Midas did of course was some integral part of his mad scheme to gain personal power on a cosmic scale. He wanted to be a Marvel- *the* Marvel, and he would stop at nothing. The lives of millions meant nothing to him should he succeed.

"Your expression changes with the wind, Professor, yet puzzlement seems the dominant mask," Woo continued, lighting a fresh cigarette. Reed Richards puzzled over the fact that the man never left his side yet he never seemed to run out of cigarettes despite his tendency to chain one after the other. Several times Richards had considered explaining the ill effects of

the bad habit to Woo, but he refrained. It was his life, after all, and second-hand smoke aside none of Richard's business. "Should I be worried?"

"Honestly, I don't know." Reed Richards returned his attention to his analyzer yet nothing had changed, at least not enough to mention. The energy readings still fluctuated within a moderate margin of safety. "The most spectacular energy flares don't seem to register oddly, and that more than anything gives me pause. There seems to be an unknown quantity within the bursts of negative energy that I cannot account for- something unknown and far beyond anything that I've ever encountered, even on a larger and more comprehensive spectrograph. Unfortunately," he added, holding up his hand-held, "this is all we have to work with at the moment."

"Perhaps SHIELD has something more advanced," Woo said flicking at a bit of ash clinging to his trim black suit. "Forge is not without his own resources and well-respected for his ability to create on a whim."

"Maybe," Richards said staring at the device in his hand. The current Director of SHIELD was a Mutant with the ability to create scientific and technical wonders. Once upon a time he had created a device to null mutagenic properties, shutting down the very gene that sparked mutation somehow. It was nothing Richards had ever investigated, though perhaps he should have given the numerous failed attempts at reverting the Thing back to Ben Grimm over the years. Forge was a genius, but since taking over SHIELD, Richards wondered just where his loyalties truly lay. The man was no Nick Fury after all.

"Regardless," Richards continued, "I believe I will need some assistance in this situation. The bulk of my technology went with the Baxter Building and Four Freedoms Tower. Given time I could recreate what we might need given any circumstance that might arise, but it's a matter of time, or lack of it to be precise. Whatever Midas is truly planning may come to fruition at any moment and I just don't have the ready resources on hand to create on the fly."

"Not to worry, Reed," another voice said from behind. Both Richards and Woo turned, the SHIELD Agent's hand dipping into his jacket as Reed Richards willed his body to go pliant. Both men froze in mid-motion however as they saw the two familiar forms across the rooftop, stepping from the stairwell. The closest had the silvery white hair of his father, that same look of knowledge and determination. His sleek, muscular body was clothed in blues and white, a silver lightning bolt emblazoned across his chest. His name was Pietro Magnus, the son of the debatably strongest Mutant on the face of the planet, Magneto. The world however knew him better by his avenging nomenclature; Quicksilver! Behind him by just a few steps despite the Mutant's super speed strode perhaps the most recognized Marvel on the planet. He was all pride and glory wrapped in the flag as he was, displaying the red, white and blue colors of the country he loved so much. A fierce white 'A' stood out on his cowl and a brilliant white star upon his massive chest over a band of red and white stripes. In his hand he carried a shield painted in the patriotic colors as well, that same star shining, one of the greatest weapons ever created. It was this man that had spoken, and though it had been some time, Reed Richards would always know this man, his voice. He had no real powers to speak of; he was simply the best that he could possibly be, the best of them all-

"Captain America ..."

Captain America stepped forward with a tight smile and shook Reed Richard's hand. He glanced to the side and nodded to the SHIELD Agent as well, Jimmy Woo standing aside and aloof but nodding, almost bowing in return.

"Captain,"

"Hello, Agent Woo," Cap said, his smile never faltering. "It's been awhile."

"Too long," Woo responded, his head shifting as he eyed the Mutant Quicksilver standing at roof's edge and staring at the spectacle in the sky. "Not since our brief encounter in the Deltite Affair?"

Captain America nodded, his own gaze shifting to the hole in the sky. There was a constant flow of pinkish energy trickling from the anomaly in the sky and that made the Avenger nervous as he pointed.

"Why is that still happening?" he said, looking to Richards for some explanation. Reed Richards swallowed, glancing in turn at the energy flux.

"Legally there's nothing to be done at the moment. The energy pouring from the portal is non-threatening as yet, and Doctor Midas is not without his own resources. He attained all legal permits for everything he's done thus far; the FAA, FTC, Homeland Security, even the Department of Energy. Midas has a team of lawyers that are really on the ball—"

"But there's obviously unstable and potentially dangerous energy leaking from- what- the Negative Zone? Surely you have the authority to shut him down?"

"My patents have lapsed, actually. I still own the rights concerning the portal itself, but the Zone is considered 'undiscovered country' much in the same way that Antarctica and the Savage Land are viewed. Anyone with the ability to access the Zone has the right to explore, mine, salvage, whatever they want. It was a long and tedious battle that I lost Cap, and the Zone was designated as 'open sea' much like the oceans beyond the twenty-mile limit. Congress in its infinite wisdom never assumed that anyone would ever pierce the veil so to speak. Of course, at the time I had not considered that the Baxter Building or Four Freedoms Tower might be destroyed. My mistake I suppose."

"No harm done, Reed," Cap said, his gaze scanning the far rooftop of the Keystone Building. "At least not yet. What's Midas doing?"

"Nothing that I can see, Cap," Reed said, turning his own gaze across the expanse. "He disappeared into the building some time ago. We haven't seen him sense. He sent his ship through the portal and not long after the energies started flaring from the hole. I assume he has some grand scheme to gain power, but what that might be..."

"No matter," Cap said with an air of authority. "We'll stop him as we always do, as we do all of them. Never fear Reed. The Avengers are on hand now."

"Glad to hear it, Captain," Woo said as he flicked his cigarette butt away. "I have to question just what you and Quicksilver might do, however."

"Don't sell us short, Woo!" Quicksilver snapped spinning quickly back from the roof's edge to stand with the group. "Captain America is the Avengers, and there's not a crisis he can't conquer."

Woo snuffed, lighting another cigarette. "I am the last to question Captain America's abilities, Magnus," Woo said with a sneer looking the Mutant up and down, "but this reeks of a cosmic calamity, and frankly Captain America and yourself are not fitted to deal with the like."

"Others are en route, James," Cap said cutting across the two before Pietro might escalate the discussion into an argument. "Thor contacted several members with a high priority alert. I've received word from Hawkeye that a full compliment is flying in from the West Coast, and the Black Panther is coming from his native Wakanda--"

"T'Challa?" Reed said.

"Yes. I imagine that between you, he and Iron Man, this situation will soon be well in hand. Still, I would feel better if we could secure the area."

"I have a SHIELD Assault Team at my beck and call, Captain," Woo said pulling a cell phone-like device from his pocket and flipping it open. "Give the word based on your government clearance and we can shut Midas down in minutes."

Captain America stared at Woo for a moment, then turned back to the building across the way. He wondered what Midas might have in reserve, what forces he might employ should they attack. The man was mad, not stupid. He had to think of the populace he was sworn to protect, the innocents that might be harmed in a full-scale SHIELD assault. The thought however, and the decision were quickly taken from him as Quicksilver shouted, pointing-

"Look!"

Energy was spewing from the hole suddenly, a great roiling pink cloud expanding from seemingly nowhere, engulfing all. Cap saw a bird vanish into oblivion as it flew too close, the strange mist, lightning crackling as it expanded, thunder rolling in its wake. The portal grew brighter, an eerie light emanating from the rip in the sky. The air seemed charged with static, and Cap could feel his short hairs standing at attention. "Reed?"

"I don't know," Mister Fantastic said, holding his analyzer skyward again. The readings were spiking off the scale all across the spectrum. "I hazard to guess, but I suspect something is coming through the portal. The shuttle perhaps--"

"Or something worse maybe," Quicksilver interjected. "Lord knows there's plenty of villains in the Negative Zone; Annihilus, Blastaar, is the Super Adaptoid still trapped there?"

"No," Cap said, shielding his eyes from the glare with the back of his hand.

He stared at the portal, wincing at the brilliance, his eyes starting to tear. He saw shadows moving about, taking shape, and becoming sharper, closer.

"There's something in there," he said, his shield slipping into hand casually. "Something's coming. Some one..." His eyes widened as the flickering silhouettes swirled and took shape. Distinction. Cap recognized the lead form, a huge burly man in a cape flying in the lead. Behind him was another man in a cloak, trimmer and athletic. A woman, two more men all glowing green..."

"It's the Squadron Supreme!" Quicksilver said as the silhouettes thickened, the swirling, crackling light receding as they got closer coming from their alternate reality. Cap stared.

"I don't-"

"Supreme?" the voice rumbled as the lead form stepped from the light into reality. He was huge, muscular dressed in blue with a red cape that swirled and billowed behind. "Maybe supreme- definitely- but we're not a squadron,"

Beside him was another who took a defensive stance immediately, crouching, his eyes scanning the rooftop they were landing on, his gaze focusing on Cap finally. He started to smile, twisted and cruel-

"We're a syndicate," the big man continued floating down to hover next to the other, not quite touching down. He could fly, apparently. Behind him the others came forth, other shadows taking shape and form; a woman in a tight swim suit-like costume of black leather, high, spike-heeled boots and a cape, a man dressed in red that was a blur, hard to focus on, another man garbed in green and black, verdant energy crackling about his hand, a tall creature with ashen white skin and an elongated head, his body rippling and morphing as he descended with the others-

"The Crime Syndicate of Amerika! Please, don't surrender."

Captain America stared at the six beings that had joined them on the rooftop. He sighed, shifting his shield ever so slightly, easing his weight to attack or defend as needed. They were impressive, but he had faced worse odds, sensing his allies tensing behind him, ready to fight; Quicksilver, Mister Fantastic and Jimmy Woo. Not the Avengers- two out of three- but men he trusted.

"Surrender?" Cap said, a smile creeping at the corners of his mouth. "Not in my vocabulary, son."

"Avengers Assemble!"

And again the battle was joined...

To be continued...

Next Issue: Okay, the inane drone is over. Time for the BIG BLAZING BATTLE issues to commence! Head on over to JLU 2001 for the next installment as the JLA takes on the Squadron Supreme! Then come back here to M2K where the Avengers assemble to confront the Crime Syndicate of Amerika! Be there!

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Editing © Chris Munn



Avengers # 38

THE AVENGERS



**Captain
America**



Iron Man



Beast



Hawkeye

MARVEL 2000 & JLU 2001 PROUDLY PRESENT...

The Keystone Building, Manhattan:

Doctor Midas stood safely in the shadows of the rooftop stairwell watching intently the scene unfolding just a few blocks away. His recovery team was still scurrying about the tarmac roof cleaning up after the launch of the Star Core Shuttle just a few hours before. A flurry of activity as they prepared the launch mechanism and landing area for a potential return of the shuttle- not that they were counting on it. Midas had already written off the obsolete shuttle as a tax break and loss for Argos Corp, not really expecting it to make the return trip in anything resembling one piece.

It was not important of course in itself. It had served its purpose years ago. Its contents were of a bit more concern, however. Midas had filled the spacecraft with every conceivable form of energy analyzer and consumption device that he could think of. Better, every machine that he could get his hands on, beg, borrow or steal. There was an obsolete Ionic Converter that he had purchased through the Latverian Embassy years before that had never quite lived up to its potential. There were bits and pieces of the original Cosmic Distortion Device that he had bought at an auction when AIM was in need of finances. There was the Stane Stabilizer he had purchased on E-Bay for a song just last month. Bits and pieces of rag tag equipment in general, each with the potential ability to make his dreams come true given proper circumstance. He had yet to put the pieces together however, and circumstance remained ever elusive.

Too, possibly the most important equipment on the shuttle was his daughter, Oubliette- and the Count Nefaria of course. His daughter was piloting the Star Core craft, right into the heart of Richard's Negative Zone in hopes of finding both the vaunted and dangerous Exploding Atmosphere- where the Neg Zone met reality and Earth, and/or the self-proclaimed ruler of the Anti-Matter Universe, Annihilus himself.

It was not Oubliette- his Daughter Exterminatrix that held the key to success this time, but rather Nefaria, for once playing the flunky rather than the vision- the antagonist in this little drama. Nefaria had been bathed in Ionic energy years ago; a reconfigured experiment based upon the original designs of Heinrich Zemo himself that had created Wonder Man even years earlier. That same experiment had proved too unstable to use on Midas himself, unfortunately, but it did leave Nefaria with a sampling of powers stolen from the likes of Power Man, the Living Laser and that Mutant freak, Whirlwind. Nefaria had been transformed into a veritable Super-Man, and though his powers had waned over the last few months his body was still like a sponge, simply waiting to soak up raw power under the right circumstances. Hopefully those circumstances would present



Black Panther



The Wasp



Warbird



Thor



Scarlet Witch

themselves in the Negative Zone, in the form of Annihilus and his Cosmic Control Rod.

There was always the chance that Nefaria would choose to betray the mission, to steal the sought powers for his own ends. Little did he know however, was that the modified Mandroid Armor that he had been fitted into was designed not only to defend him against the rigors of the Zone, but to transfer those energies he encountered into a similar apparatus housed in one of the more secure laboratories deep within the Keystone Building. A simple signal from Oubliette and Midas would hurry to the machinery downstairs, strap himself into the exo-skeleton and receive Godhood. Oubliette would then dispose of the nefarious count in the best, villainous fashion.

Midas chuckled, drawing on the cigarette hanging from the slit in his golden helmet, watching in fascination as the sky beyond sparkled a dark and girly pink. It was beautiful, but not truly the source of his good humor. He knew that even if the Mandroid Armor failed- for whatever reason- there was still the Cosmic Control Rod that Oubliette would return with, if she knew what was good for her. There was also the pure and unadulterated force of Anti-Matter itself, should the count be unfortunate enough to get himself drawn into the Exploding Atmosphere. His own morphing Ionic energies would channel that power back to Midas' machines in transition. There was no way in all the Nine Hells that this plan could possibly fail.

He had prepared for every contingency, at the figurative cost of an arm and a leg. Maybe his own first born, but he could live with that with success. And he could not fail, that was the beauty of it all. There was no way-

A crackling, thunderous noise drew his attention from his reveries and Midas casually glanced back across the expanse towards the far building, beyond where the Baxter Building once stood, where the Portal now sparkled. Gouts of energy were spewing forth, the pinkish red mist crackling lightning as a great cloud came swirling forth. Shadows stretched and danced, an eerie glow sweeping over all. Midas spat his butt away and strode forward, grabbing close the first scientist he passed-

"What the hell is that?" he shouted, his amplified voice echoing around his golden helmet. "What's happening?"

The scientist shuffled along in Midas' grip as his employer dragged him towards the roof's edge. Midas could sense the man's anxiety, smell his fear in getting closer to the strange phenomenon, but he did not care. He was paying damn good money and he wanted answers-

"Th-there seems to be a radical spike in the energy curve, sir," the man said trying to free his arm from Midas' grasp. "The Anti-Energy in particular



Quicksilver

THE JLA



Superman



Wonder Woman



Batman



The Flash

seems off the scale, resembling the energy we recorded in Palnau some years back. And there's a pulse beneath the Gamma signature that we have never recorded-"

"And what does all that mean?" Midas snapped, finally releasing his lackey with a shove. His gaze was fixated on the energy spewing from the portal, only glancing at Richards and his SHIELD agent and the two recently arrived Avengers in his peripheral vision. He could taste the power seeping out of the portal. Wasted power that was simply evaporating...

"Something's coming through-"

"Oubliette?"

"No sir," the scientist said shaking his head as he stared at a bulky handheld display. "I read five, possibly six separate entities."

Midas watched as the Portal erupted, the scientist's droning voice fading into the background as figures began to come through from beyond. There was a big and burly man dressed in blue with a red cape, swiftly followed by another man in darker grays and blues. A woman in a swimsuit and cape, stiletto boots and a whip- no a golden rope. A man dressed in all red with a big, bulky helmet, another in black, his hand surrounded by a green glow that tinted a few of the others with a protective shield. The final was an alien, with pale, sickly white skin and an elongated head. Who were these? Where had they come from?

"Dammit!" Midas cursed as his hand shifted to his helmet, activating the parabolic receptors built into his audio receiver. Captain America had stepped up he could see, probably dictating his democratic banter to the burly man-

"Surrender?" the Captain said, his voice crackling with static as Midas adjusted the gain. "Not in my vocabulary, son. Avengers Assemble!"

"Shit..."

Midas cursed as all hell broke loose...



**Green
Lantern**



**Martian
Manhunter**



Firestorm



Zatanna



**Black
Canary**

THE AVENGERS

VS

JUSTICE LEAGUE OF AMERICA



Chapter Four:

CSA and Punishment!

Written by Curt Fernlund
Story by Chris Munn and Curt Fernlund

Ultra Man took a long deep breath of air in this brave new world and smiled. He could taste the pollution, the stench of industrial smog filling his lungs. He could see it there on the horizon, the corruption lingering, roiling on the wind. He could feel the fear, the hatred boiling just on the edge, ready to burst forth at the slightest provocation. This was a world he could understand. Not the pristine Alter-Earth of the Justice League, but another in the myriad parallel universes recently



Plastic Man

restored by the odd force in the cosmos that had so recently repaired their own continuum. The Man-Killer had been right after all...

"You see?"

Ultra Man sneered at the raspy, scratchy voice that hissed in his ear. The breath was almost more than his Ultra Smell could stand, but he turned to the sickly white freak and nodded, giving the skinny alien that much credit. The Martian Man-Killer was almost giddy with his success, thinking this might free him from banishment. Little did he know-

"I was right! A new world to plunder!" The Martian squealed in delight, his long, spiky tail flicking, his forked tongue lashing about, licking his lips. Ultra Man smirked. His fist shot out at Ultra Speed, his hand wrapping about the slimy alien's throat, squeezing just hard enough to get the creature to squirm and gasp.

"You got lucky, Sm'th," he snarled, flexing his fingers cruelly. "Don't push it. I have the means to send you back."

"Yesss..." the White Martian hissed, squirming, gasping for breath. "Yesss..."

Ultra Man smiled and released the alien, ignoring it as it skulked away, turning his attention to the little man standing before him on the rooftop. He was dressed in a flag; red, white, and blue. That was obvious. No one dressed so gaudily unless they were espousing their dedication and beliefs. There had been a vigilante back on Earth Two years ago that had wrapped himself in an archaic flag. Major something... Major Pain in the Ass Man they had labeled him. He had burned well.

Ultra Man shifted his Ultra Vision, scanning the combatants before him for potential threat. He could have simply shifted to Flash Vision and disintegrated them all of course, but where was the fun in that? They had leaped through the bizarre portal that had opened on the satellite hoping for adventure after the whining Martian had told them of the odd happenings in the N-Zone; strange energy fluctuations and scabbling critters flitting through space. Something was up, in the air, and it would not leave the Crime Syndicate of Amerika behind.

Not like the Crisis...

That had been a disaster. But then there came that other odd battle on the Justice League's Earth where they had gotten a new lease on life. That had been a disaster too, in the end, but they were alive again and back on the world they knew. In charge, everything was right with the universe again. Boring as hell...

When S'm Sm'th, the Martian Man-Killer had sent his psychic message from his banishment in the N-Zone they had been hesitant. It could have been a trick, but then they had slaughtered the bulk of the White Martians before. What was one? They had listened, and S'm had prattled on about the strange energies in the Zone, the fleeting form of the silver man he

had seen as well as the strange creatures that were flowing forth like ants from the Barrier at the edge of all. He had seen other worlds- or so he claimed, through rips in the very fabric of space. New worlds that they had not seen before. As one they had jumped at the chance for a bit of excitement.

New worlds to conquer. Another Earth with new heroes...

The Flag Man was nothing. Just a man, top of the line, but nothing special. The shield he held was an anomaly, composed of metals apparently unique to this Earth as they did not register to his special sight. No worries there.

The silver hair was a speedster. He could see the man vibrating, itching to move. Energy warped and crackled about him, and he was moving fast enough that Ultra Man had to look twice. Not a slug, definitely-

"Quick," he said, scanning the others. "The one in blue with the silver hair- he's yours."

"Yowsa, boss..."

Ultra Man sneered as Johnny Quick and the other Earth speedster vanished in a violet blur. Junkie bastard...

The older man in the blue suit with the '4' on his chest seemed bursting with power. Something was blocking him though. His body had failed him. A stroke maybe, or heart attack? It did not matter. He was crippled and useless, perfect.

"Owl Man," he said with a chuckle. "Take the cripple."

"Son of a bitch." He heard Wayne grumble under his breath, but move forward none the less.

The suit however, he was an anomaly, a mystery. He did not read, like he was dead almost. Fine, let the rest figure him out. That would leave the patriot to him. "Super Woman, Power Ring, Man-Killer... take the dweeb in the suit. Flag Man's mine..."

"Think you can handle him, big man?" Lois sneered as she unlashd her magic lasso. He could hear the contempt in her voice, but ignored it. She would not egg him on today. Ultra Man planned to enjoy this...

Make it last...

Captain America could hear the high-pitched whine as the red-suited speedster confronted Quicksilver. They exchanged words, like gnats buzzing in his ear, but before he could react they were gone in a streak of violet-

"Pietro, wait..."

Too late. Too late all around.

The villains- the Crime Syndicate moved forward choosing their opponents. The man in blue and gray headed towards Reed. Cap glanced at Richards, backing away, stumbling. Cap had little faith that Richards could meet the man physically- not since his stroke. His powers were suppressed, and even his limited movements were handicapped. Still, Reed Richards was the smartest man on the planet and leader of the World's Greatest Fighting Team. He would hold his own.

He was more worried about Woo. The SHIELD agent was just a man after all, but for some reason three of the antagonists had chosen him for prey. Why? Oddly, Jimmy Woo did not look concerned in the least. He had not even bothered to draw his weapon, rather continued smoking his cigarette.

PAIN!

Cap winced, whipping his shield about to block the twin rays of heat raking his body. Hovering above him, just out of reach, Ultra Man laughed-

"C'mon, 'son'," he chortled, eyes blazing. "Keep your mind on your work. Your fight's here."

"I know that," Cap said, standing and ignoring the pain. He could feel the burn of his chain mail through his undershirt, but he had to blot it out. He tensed. "I've been fighting authoritarian thugs all my career. You're just one more in a long list."

Cap reared back, shield in hand. He flung his weapon, the red, white and blue disk spinning forward at blinding speed to slam into Ultra Man's throat, rebounding away even before the man could react. He heard the alien choke, gasping as he clutched at his throat, leaping forward even as he floated back and away. Cap slammed the heel of his boot into the man's neck, the wound. It was like kicking a brick wall.

Captain America flipped and arched back, landing ready to defend or press the attack. He held out his hand and his shield slid into his grasp, instantly slipping before him to guard. The alien's eyes were wide, but there was no time to respond. He had to press the attack.

Cap threw the shield again, aiming for the man's genitals even as he dashed forward. He was ready this time however, and the alien's hand whipped down to catch the shield before it hit its mark. Cap stopped short as the Ultra Man smiled.

"Nice shield," he rasped, holding the disk up in both hands. Cap watched, holding his breath as the man applied pressure, squeezing. He was trying to compress the shield, mangle it, something that too many others had failed to do; Hyde, Nefaria, the Hulk. This Ultra Man was a stranger however, an alien with a variety of bizarre powers and there was always a chance he might succeed. He heard the alien grunt-

"Wha-" Ultra Man stared at the disk in his hands, marveling that it was still whole and in one piece, not even bent in the least. "Incredible," he said, his voice still sore, looking at Captain America with a newfound respect.

"This is some piece of work, Flag Man." Ultra Man laughed and heaved, flinging the shield away. Cap watched as his weapon sped off into the distance, arching as it dwindled, vanishing from sight.

"Let's see just how good you are without it."

Cap watched as the alien stretched, flexing his fingers at arm's length, cracking his knuckles. He was arrogant, this Ultra Man, and that would be his downfall.

Quicksilver let the bricks and rocks, sticks and stones come closer before he plucked them from the air.

In the distance, Johnny Quick's arms were a blur as he gathered debris, flinging it in his direction. He was fast, probably faster, but there was no finesse in his attack, no style at all. He was doing things that Quicksilver had done years before while fighting the X-Men.

It was pathetic, really. The man was pathetic. Quicksilver could not tell if he derived his powers from within, or from some drug that he took. Pietro had seen the man pop pills a half-dozen times already, though nothing seemed to change other than the man's blur seemed to focus just a bit-

"You're fast, shiny," Quick said as he chucked bricks. "F-f-faster n' the Flash maybe. I'll give ya that..."

"Not faster n' me, though."

Quicksilver watched as the man disappeared in a scarlet blur, shunting the last hail of brick safely to the ground before giving chase. It would not do to let the debris fly free. At the speed it was flying, unattended, it could kill any that it encountered, destroying all in its path. The man, Quick, had no conscience apparently.

He was easy to track though, even with a head start. His trail was clear, staggered footprints pointing in his wake. Quicksilver had to beware however, as perhaps the man was not as stupid as he seemed. He doubted, but there was always that chance.

They raced uptown, through Times Square, the blazing neon of Disney guiding their way. Through the thickening traffic of oncoming Rush Hour, drivers and pedestrians not even aware of their passing until both speedsters were long gone.

Past Central Park, through the Sheep's Meadow and up around Belvedere Castle, along the Reservoir then, arching out onto Fifth Avenue, weaving in and out of cars, more traffic seemingly standing still.

They shot through Harlem, past the new Pathmark and veering west along 125th. They ran by the Apollo, heading north again, Quicksilver gaining inches with every step. They crossed the Harlem River, racing up and around Yankee Stadium twice before Quick shot across the Bronx.

They ran back down the Grand Concourse, people screaming in their wake at the sudden wind of passing. Johnny Quick led them back down through the South Bronx, through the blur of debris and devastation, Quicksilver hot on his heels. Closer with every step...

Closer...

Almost, Quicksilver was reaching out, trying to grab his foe, throw him-

Quick stopped. They were on Second Avenue, back in Manhattan. His momentum simply ceased, his backdraft billowing past as he braced, his arm jutting out. His elbow raised, shooting backwards at lightning speed. Quicksilver's eyes went wide as he tried to dodge, to sidestep. The elbow arching back-

Pain as Quick slammed his elbow into Pietro's nose. It took a moment to register. He heard the sound of bone snapping as his momentum carried him on. He staggered, falling, skipping along the concrete. Blood trailed behind as his vision blurred and he felt the pain in his neck and shoulders as his head had snapped back. Gray washed over him as he skidded to a stop, his eyes blinking, trying to focus.

"Bitch..."

Quick was standing over him, sneering and leering, looking down. Quicksilver tried to move-

"Not shit... Nothin'!"

Quick dropped, his hands a flurry as he rained blows on Quicksilver, pummeling him into the ground. He tried to fight back, but Quick had the upper hand, leverage, batting his blocking hands away.

It was over in a heartbeat. Johnny Quick stood, looking down at the smoldering form at his feet. He crouched, slipping a hand into his boot pouch and pulling a hypodermic free, staring at the compressed amber liquid within.

He jammed the hypo into his arm, shooting the 'Rush' into his veins. He felt the surge of power, energy, speed...

Johnny Quick sighed, quivering as he gathered his fallen foe over his shoulder and sped off towards Midtown. He was ready to rumble...

"So," Super Woman hissed, hovering there above, playing out her rope. She smiled cruelly at the skinny, yellow skinned man. Smirking as she kept her partners at the edge of her sight. Power Ring floated back and out of reach, throbbing green and distracted, probably listening to the mocking babble of his ring. The Man-Killer was holding back as well, licking his lips and clicking his long claws. His tail whipped about anxiously, smelling the coming kill, but he was nervous and tense she could tell. Afraid of going back to his prison, not that she could blame him. "Just what are you

supposed to be? A psychic of some sort, or a magician maybe? I know. A spook..."

The skinny man said nothing, simply kept puffing on his cigarette as though not concerned in the least. He did not smile or even breathe heavily like most men did to see her. He just stared, his dark eyes flashing slightly from behind the dark glasses. It was almost unnerving, his coolness, like he did not even care he was about to die. She would have to make it hurt then-

"You're under arrest," he finally said, exhaling a thin cloud of blue smoke. She saw him glance at the other two, quietly returning his gaze to her. "All of you. I suggest you surrender peacefully."

Lois Lane, the Super Woman of Earth 2 laughed. The balls on this one, she actually felt a tear in her eye it was so funny. She let her lasso dangle at her side, willing a loop to form on the trailing end. She cocked a hip, showing some leg-

"I like you. You make me laugh," she chuckled, her leather gloved fingers flexing about her rope. "Tell you what, you surrender to me and maybe I'll keep you- for awhile. Until you bore me..."

Super Woman tossed her magic lasso at the thin man, the loop dropping easily over his shoulders and torso. She jerked, just enough to cinch the bonds tight, pinning one of his arms to his side, that hand still in his pocket. He glanced down at the rope, ignoring the cheers and heckling of the Ring and Martian and took another drag from his cigarette before finally flicking it away.

"You had your chance," he said, and just for a moment Lois saw his eyes crackle the slightest red. She gasped, a dread clutching her heart, making it skip a beat. She almost came, goosebumps rising on the skin of her legs and arms. She had not felt such a... passion, not since Clark had taken her that first time.

"Wha-"

"What'ssss he doing?"

Lois Lane felt the rope go slack in her hands. She stared, trying to focus and saw that the man was paling, his slick black suit fading to gray as his body turned to mist. The glasses fell away leaving the burning red coals that were his evil eyes-

"Oh shit..."

"Vampyr!" she heard the Martian scream as the mist swirled past; ignoring the breeze as easily as it ignored her swatting hands. She spun about in time to see the gray envelope the Man-Killer, the alien screaming in panic as he writhed trying to hold the monster at bay. Vampire! She should have seen that one coming.

The Martian tried to shift, and apparently that was what the thin man had been waiting for. Lois watched, intrigued as the mist swirled, seeping into

the White Martian's near liquefied form. She saw S'm Sm'th's glassy eyes bulge as his body started to spasm and jerk, panic washing over his face. The Martian screamed...

That quickly it was over. The Man-Killer fell to the rooftop with a wet thud, his body and tail twitching, long tongue lolling. Lois had no idea what the Vampire had done, but she suddenly wanted no part of it. She reeled in her rope as she backed away, as the mist started to rise again like an early morning fog. She shivered to see those glowing eyes lock onto hers-

A glowing bubble of green suddenly encircled the mist. Lois glanced back and saw Power Ring drifting closer, that sniveling cackle just escaping his lips, knowing he had done something right. She paused, watching as the sphere contracted, compressed, compacting the fog into a smaller and smaller space-

"Watch this," the Ring sneered as he held his arm, steadying his aim. There was a sudden flare of light- almost blinding and she cursed rubbing at the spots dancing in her gaze-

"Idiot!" she snapped, blinking and she heard the fool's tight apology. When she could finally see again however, she saw the thin man lying next to the puddle that was the Martian, his body steaming in the alien's excrement. His skin was pale, scorched in spots. He looked dead.

"Concentrated sunlight through the Ring," Power Ring giggled. He was very proud of himself. "Cute, hunh. He was a Vampire so I figured-"

Lois drifted away, ignoring the idiot's raving. He had stolen that kill, and now she was mad- and hot. She needed to find another foe, and quickly...

Owl Man looked at the cripple before him. He was thin, weak looking. He could barely move as he leaned on his cane, half his body twisted from some disease or a heart attack, perhaps a stroke. He did not seem scared though, to his credit, though he would be.

The Owl Man thought of the many devices in his belt that he might use to take the man out, but even as he inched closer he paused, his hand wavering. Why waste the ammo? The man looked as though he would crumple with the slightest tap. Owl Man grinned-

"What's that '4' on your chest for? Some insignia I assume?"

The skinny cripple nodded, his face twisting as he tried to smirk. "Something like that." He raised his hand, holding a gun of some type, small and paper-thin. A gadgeteer then. Owl Man gripped the edge of his cloak, ready to throw it up to defend. The man fired-

Owl Man batted the missile away, just barely; the kevlar mesh laced into his Owl Cloak protecting him from the burn. He watched as the tiny rocket veered off wildly, spinning into the sky where it finally exploded with a bright, lingering flash of magnesium. A lopsided '4' drifted lazily in the

thickening light, dropping below the roof's edge and out of sight.

"That could have hurt," Owl Man sniggered, returning his attention to his foe. "Nice try though," he said stepping forward and grabbing the man by his shirt. He drew his fist back, preparing to end the fiasco when the man grunted.

His face twisted in sudden pain as he sucked breath through clenched teeth. His body spasmed in Owl Man's grip, his hand jerking as his cane clattered to the rooftop. He choked, gasping, then dropped limply in Thomas Wayne's grasp, dead?

No, Wayne felt the pulse, fast but weak in his throat. He was alive, but unconscious, useless. A waste of time.

Owl Man dropped the limp form to the roof and shook his head, turning finally to Ultra Man and his foe; the man in the flag. He saw Quick appear on the rooftop then, depositing the silver haired one by the man in the suit and Sm'th. Ring and Lois were drifting closer to Kent, flanking, hyenas ready to pounce. Apparently Flag Man was the last of the pathetic little group- what did he call them- Avengers? Well, if there were any more of them they were about to have something to avenge all right.

Owl Man was about to join the others for the final act when a sound crackled to life on his long-range radio receiver. He tapped at the controls at the ear cap on his helmet, turning slowly, trying to gain a fix on the noise. He blinked, his visor shifting through the light spectrum, skipping a few bands not evident here and zeroing finally on something far down beneath the bottom of visible light-

"Magnify, ten... twenty..."

It was a ship, small and fast, cloaked. All but invisible, he could barely make out the outline of the swift, compact craft. He could see a black shadow moving within, but no heat registered and it was all but noiseless even though it had to be approaching the speed of sound.

Best of all, it was aimed at Ultra Man, and Kent and the others were far too wrapped up in taunting the flag. They had not even noticed.

Owl Man smirked, and ducked behind the rooftop's stairwell, crouching low for protection-

"This ought'a be good..."

Ultra Man let the Flag Man have his little moment of glory. Now that he had his measure, he knew that the little man was no real threat. Granted, he was a good fighter. He was probably better than Wayne in that respect. Despite all his high kicks and chop suey however, the little man just did not have the strength needed to really hurt Ultra Man when he was ready.

He did have to admit that his neck was a bit sore. He would have to look

for that damn shield when this was over.

The Flag Man was dancing about him now, his blows obviously aiming for pressure points, a few of them actually tickling on impact. He did persevere, the Flag Man. Ultra Man smirked, watching the ballet until he heard Lois rasp-

"Need a hand, big man?" Again...

Kent looked about him and saw Quick and the Ring watching, laughing. Lane was smirking too, showing her contempt. He saw that the others were down- including the Martian. No loss there. Oddly he did not see Wayne, and that worried him more than anything. Time to end this.

Reaching out with Ultra Speed he grabbed the Flag Man by the throat, squeezing just enough to cut off the oxygen to his brain quickly, causing him to blank out just long enough. The star-spangled body went limp at the end of his extended arm until Kent eased his grip just enough, jiggling slightly to wake him back up. he wanted Flag Man to see it coming. He wanted to hear the man beg and scream.

"Look's like this is the end, 'son'," Ultra Man said with a chuckle. The Avenger blinked, trying to draw breath and clear his head. Kent felt a kick to his groin and winced, unprepared-

"Never the... end..."

"Little shit," Ultra Man snarled, flexing his fingers. "I could pop your head like a grape. Beg and I'll do that- give you that much respect. C'mon..."

He squeezed, just a bit for emphasis and heard the man gasp. His lips flapped as his eyes rolled back. He was trying to speak, staring off...

Behind...

"Avengers... Assemble..."

"What?"

The vectors were correct, locked into place. Momentum sufficient for the task. T'Challa flipped the switch to steady the pitch and clicked the auto pilot into place, compensating for the sudden decompression to come. He took a final look ahead and jettisoned-

The hatch exploded, shooting out and up, hopefully to land in the Hudson blocks away. The pilot's chair followed quickly in the blast, arching high and carrying T'Challa along with it, already clawing at the safety harness. His costume protected him from the sudden wind and pressure, the heat of the explosive charges propelling the Ejector Seat, but he had to be out of the straps and ready for action before the anti-grav disks initiated to carry him away to safety. Captain America needed him-

He strained as the chair rose to apex, watching as the ship ran on its deadly course. He saw the big man holding Cap turn, but unless he was smarter than most villains he would be caught flat-footed by the ship coming out of stealth mode. That was T'Challa's greatest edge in any fight. He was fast to be sure, but it was not always about speed and power. It was about reaction time, and he and Captain America both excelled at that, where most villains were woefully lacking.

He freed himself from the chair's restraints even as the big man realized what was about to happen. His mouth opened in shock, but as T'Challa had anticipated he moved too slowly to react, holding Cap conveniently behind him as the jump ship careened straight at him. The villain would take the brunt of the blow, his very body shielding Steve Rogers while the extraneous backwash of the impact took out the others- hopefully without fatality or injury to any bystanders. Hopefully too SHIELD had cleared the area.

The Black Panther leaped, his body stretching like the great cat that was his namesake, his icon. He angled for the roof's far edge, his lithe form sailing as he heard a scream of denial and rage. He chanced a glance sideways, watching as his ship slammed into the big man holding Cap, wincing as the light of explosive fire blotted out the sky...

Kent shook his head, his ears ringing after the sound of the explosion. The ship had just appeared out of thin air, too close to even do anything about it was moving so fast. It had hit him harder than anything had in a long, long time.

He blinked, his vision dancing with spots from the resulting explosion. He could not hear a thing, and the odors of smoke and sizzling grease clogged his Ultra Smell. Even his skin was tingling. He cursed, rising higher, trying to blink his sight back, and knuckling his eyes. He had lost his grip on the Flag Man, dammit!

He saw vague shadows, slowly, blurring into clarity. There was a rushing sound as his hearing started to clear, the ringing echo diminishing ever so slowly. He blinked and saw Lois struggling to rise on the rooftop, tiny flames flickering here and there, smoldering debris scattered everywhere. Power Ring was on his knees, shaking his head and vomiting and Quick was whining, a jagged chunk of chrome jutting from his thigh. He still did not see Wayne.

The Flag Man was there though, and he had been joined by another; a man in a black cat's costume. Ultra Man sneered. Good, he needed a challenge.

"Brought- brought in reinforcements, eh?" he said, shaking his head, cupping his ear, almost recovered. "Bring an army, it won't help."

"We don't need an army- Ultra Man was it?" the Flag Man stood tall with the help of the cat man. He was shaky, his voice weak, but he still radiated pride. "Just some friends..."

Ultra Man turned to see where his two foes were looking. He saw the odd jet in the distance, just before he caught a glimpse of the hammer that slammed into the side of his head.

Kent hit the rooftop like a ton of bricks, the impact of the first ship forgotten at the fresh pain that washed across his face. He spat blood, his tongue automatically drifting to the shattered remains of his tooth. He glanced up, squinting as his face started to swell about his eye.

The new man was tall and muscular, wearing some form of dark armor and big, golden boots. He wore a stupid looking winged helmet on his head, barely containing his long wild mane of yellow hair. He was hefting a huge, stone hammer in his over-sized fists, slamming it over and over against his palm. He looked pissed...

"Pray to whatever gods might listen to thine whining, cur, that thou hast not injured mine allies. If thou hast, mine vengeance will be swift and fierce and ye shalt surely know why we are named... Avengers!"

Like he needed this. Kent spat... stood...

"Bring it, long hair-"

Owl Man watched wondering, marveling at how the tide of battle could turn so quickly.

The big man with the hammer was strong, and easily beating the shit out of Kent. No loss there of course, but with Ultra Man out of the picture the CSA would be done. These Avengers fought like a team- something that the Crime Syndicate would never manage to do. It was the Flag Man. They all listened to him with some type of awe and respect that he had never seen before. Something that Owl Man could only dream of.

The obvious solution then. Cut off the head, the body would die. Owl Man drew his side arm, the Teflon .44 more than enough to pierce the man's chain mail. He checked the chamber, catching a whiff of powder and oil. Aimed...

The hand appeared out of nowhere, dropping from above to encircle his fist suddenly. It was small, slim; a woman's hand. It squeezed. The Owl Man screamed to hear the bones of his hand shatter, the metal of the gun cracking underneath. The shells exploded and he felt new pain, burning. Owl Man looked up through tear-filled eyes at the smiling face of the beautiful blonde hovering above him-

"Ah-ah," she grinned, waggling a finger in his face as she squeezed his burning, broken hand all the harder, driving him to his knees. "Momma doesn't like guns," she mocked as her other hand slammed into his jaw. He saw gray, fireworks as he reached for his belt-

Owl Man dropped unconscious.

Johnny Quick was whimpering, holding his leg, crying. Blood was gushing from the ragged wound around the chunk of metal rammed into his thigh, though not pulsing. He had heard somewhere that pulsing blood was bad.

He saw the others coming, piling from their jet as though in a dream, moving, swimming in slow motion. The blonde woman sexy as hell, a man in gold and red armor, a gorilla in a bathing suit, even some guy with a bow carrying some hot chick in scarlet. A fuckin' army all right.

He had to get up, get away. Ignore the pain and run before they caught him, screw the others. He was shaking though, his vision blurring in and out again. He needed a hit, but he was out. Rush...

Quick braced, trying to lever himself up on his good leg. He would fucking hop away at super speed if he had to, but-

The arrow slammed him back down, the big metal clamp locking his leg to the rooftop and bending the shard stuck in his leg back at an odd angle. He fell on his ass, blinking as he watched the shaft vibrate, the blood gushing forth all the harder. Then he felt the pain. Johnny Quick screamed-

The huge, hairy fist slammed squarely into his nose. It just came out of nowhere, and Quick saw a scarlet haze of blood spew out. He blinked, his eyes rolling back into his head as he tried to focus, staring at the mocking leer of the big, blue gorilla with the sharp teeth. He saw a blue blur as the beast cocked his fist back-

"Good night, sweet prince-"

Johnny Quick fell back, mercifully unconscious. The second blow did not even strike.

They were falling apart, damn it! Ultra Man had led them to failure again.

Lois Lane cautioned a quick glance about the scene, the war zone of the roof top. There was burning debris everywhere, the remnants of the aircraft that had slammed into Ultra Man and taken him down initially. Credit due, he had stayed awake, but Lois knew him well enough to know that he was rattled, and now the big, muscular, gorgeous hunk of long hair was bashing him mercilessly with his hammer. God, she loved it. She hoped the brute killed him. Life would be so much simpler for her and Thomas if-

She saw Owl Man lying unconscious, his body slumped up against the stairwell in the midst of charred tarmac and the bodies of Sm'th, the suit and the cripple. The blonde bitch that had crushed his hand had already flown off to help the armored man that was blasting away at Ring. Power Ring was holding his own, but the metal man had reasoned that some form of light- other than green- was probably the Ring's weakness. He was hovering there now, shifting through the spectrum while Blondie

hammered on Ring's force field. He was done, just a matter of time.

Quick was done too, and he would be lucky if he ever walked again, let alone ran. The gorilla and the archer had taken him out no problem, and now they were looking at her, bow cocked, ready to pounce. Lois fingered her lasso-

"How about it, Legs?" the archer smirked, an arrow pointed at her chest. "Care to take the easy out? I won't tell your friends you surrendered."

"She doesn't seem the type, Hawk," the gorilla said, grinning as he hunkered, his eyes drifting up and down her legs. Automatically, Lois cocked a hip, striking a pose.

"You're right, monkey," Lois sneered, feeding out line, shifting her grip as she licked her lips, letting her ample bosom thrust forward. "I like it rough."

"I tried it rough once," a tiny voice said, buzzing in her ear. Lois swatted at empty air, the slightest flash of light bringing sharp pain to her cheek. "I didn't like it much, but to each her own I guess."

A miniature woman with wings flitted past, her hands sparking as she fired stinging blasts at Lois' skin. Lois staggered back cursing, more annoyed than hurt. The blasts were blinding though, the little flickers of light bringing spots to her eyes-

"Stop it!" she shouted, swinging blindly, but the tiny winged woman was too fast. All she needed was to connect. Just once-

The arrow slammed into her wrists, locking them together as the gorilla leaped over her head, his fist smashing down on her skull. Lois screamed her rage, straining, flexing to pull her hands apart as the monkey flipped her cape over her head, his big foot slamming into her back, propelling her forward. She staggered, breaking free of the arrow that had clamped about her hands, ready to fight, to kill-

The world twisted away...

Lois stumbled, flailing blindly as she tried to keep her balance. She could feel her magic bonds wrapping up and about her legs, her thighs with every step. The rope was snaking as though alive, and no matter what she did, how she moved it got tighter and tighter. She felt her arms pinned, her legs useless as she tottered on her heels, the lasso binding the cape over her face as an effective blindfold-

"I'd hide my face if I had your hairdo too, sister," she heard someone say.

Stars exploded in her blocked sight as something smashed into her nose. Again, something connecting square in her mouth. She felt blood, her lip split.

"The bouffant is so dead, dear." The tiny woman again, buzzing.

"Stop taunting her," another voice said, another woman. "End this."

"Your wish, Witchy," the gorilla...

"Our command!"

Something slammed into her stomach and a shock of electricity wracked her body. Pain washed over her, her teeth chattering. She bit through her tongue, spitting more blood. Lois fell to the ground, spasming, flopping about in agony like a fish out of water-

She saw stars, then nothing at all...

Ultra Man saw Lois fall and knew that he was alone. Fine! He didn't really need those losers anyway. He had taken long-hair's measure now, sucked up his best, healing. A little Kryptonite and this would all be over. He saw the long-hair winding up for another blow-

Kent reached up, caught the hammer. It felt like his arm had shattered with the impact but damned if he would show this faggot weakness. He looked up, struggling to rise, pushing the hammer back-

"That... That the best you got?"

He saw the long-hair's eyes widen with awe and that gave him all the more power. He could smell the shock, the fear. He was done, he knew it. Kent would take that hammer and shove it up his-

Flag Man was there, his hand on the big man's arm. Long-hair looked at Flag Man and just stopped, just like that, stepping back. Kent looked at the Flag Man and smiled, spitting a bit of tooth at his feet-

"Finally realized you can't... beat me, hunh? Fuck you! Too late! You're all dead..."

Flag Man stepped over to the side, angling slightly as he frowned. "I told you before, son," he said, glancing at the sky. "Surrender's not in my vocabulary."

He heard the whistling, his Ultra Hearing detecting it first. It was a simple sound, pure and sharp. It took him a moment, something he had heard before, and as he was turning about he realized what it was...

The shield...

It hit him full in the face, the force of his own strength driving its momentum. He had hurled it away, but it had come back, the setting sun sparkling off its gleaming surface as it arched back down out of the crimson sky. Ultra Man simply sagged, nothing to do, nowhere to go, no time to even gasp. He was done...

Owl Man felt the surge of adrenaline as it coursed through his veins, forcing him awake. His eyes snapped open, quickly closed to slits again as he scanned the rooftop. Things did not look good for the Bad Guys...

The Avengers were standing about, obviously wondering what to do next, two of them just inches away from where he lay, unmoving; the scarlet bitch and a woman he had not seen before, short in a stylish costume. They were fawning over the cripple, trying to bring him around- or kill him maybe, it was hard to tell. The suit was sitting, back against the stairwell, watching as he sucked on another cigarette. His eyes shifted, looking in Owl Man's direction.

Owl Man tried not to move, his eyes focusing on one of the tiny devices before him, one of the gadgeteer's weapons- one he recognized. An energy analyzer; it was beeping and Wayne could see the energy bands spiking, fluctuating wildly on the liquid display. He glanced up-

"I know you are awake..."

Wayne ignored the man in the suit, watching as energy flared, crackling from the rip in the sky. Something was happening. Something was coming through. He looked at his body, his hands and knew what was about to happen. Nothing he could do, he was starting to fade away...

"You may have beat the second string, Avengers!" he shouted, struggling to rest on his side, wincing with the pain. He hoped the transfer would heal his hand back. "But here comes the cavalry!"

"He's awake!"

"Watch it!"

"Fan out! Stand ready!"

Blah... blah... blah...

The man in the black suit was staring at him, his lips twisted in a knowing smile, like he knew what was happening. He blew smoke...

"The Justice League... Our boys... kick your ass..."

Flag Man was running up on him, but it was too late.

"They're disappearing-"

"Some sort of trick-"

"Molecular transfer-"

"Spread out- pair up!"

"What's happening?" The woman in scarlet was helping the silver haired speedster to his feet. Her eyes were wide, staring...

"Eat shit, suckers..." Owl Man said as he winked out of existence.

"Well that was fun, and pointless," Hawkeye said staring up to the crackling portal. "Anyone got a clue?"

"The First String, Hawkeye," T'Challa said as he stared at the portal. Pink energy flashed and crackled, spewing forth. "The Justice League..."

"They're coming..."

To be continued...

Next Issue: Head back to JLU: 2001 for the Battle of the Century! Finally, the Justice League of America meets up with the Mighty Avengers and all Hell breaks loose. Be here for the one you've been waiting for- written by Chris Munn! You miss this issue you will be kicking yourself for the rest of the year!

Story © Curt F
Plot © Chris Munn and Curt F
Editing © Chris Munn



Avengers # 39

THE AVENGERS



**Captain
America**



Iron Man



Beast



Hawkeye

MARVEL 2000 & JLU 2001 PROUDLY PRESENT...

The Aerie Mt. Annapurna Nepal:

Ra's Al Ghul stood on the windswept slope, the cold just edging through his layers of protection, watching through fog-misted binoculars the activity on the slopes of Everest miles distant. The sun had just crested the Himalayas , the air fresh and clear, clean at the top of the world. Even without the glasses he could see for miles- leagues, but he was keenly interested in the operations on the world's tallest mountain, and he wanted a closer look.

A Grav-Pulse freighter was just departing, the last of the non-essential personnel aboard, the extraneous materials that would no long be needed for the project; steel and circuitry, plastic and the excess Promethium from the core containment shell. He watched as the ship tilted wildly in the wind, fearful of a crash that might scar the mountainside, lose delicate and expensive hardware. His fears were premature however, and unnecessary. The pilot was the best of his followers in the particular skill, totally devoted and willing to die for the cause of the Demon's Head. He watched as the transport swiftly righted, soaring out and away from the jagged slopes of the Everest relay station and started the long, sweeping curve back to the Aerie's lower holding facility. Still, there had been that brief moment of tension, almost exciting-

"Master?"

"Yes, Ubu?" Ra's Al Ghul did not turn at the sound of his servant's chattering voice, his clacking teeth. They were dressed the same- more or less- yet despite his body guard's additional bulk the giant Ubu sounded as though he were freezing-

" Lund h-has signaled, Master. H-he is ready t-to commence."

Al Ghul nodded, sweeping his magnified gaze over the mountainside until he centered on the small specks that were his riggers. They stood in the shadow of the slopes, the Tower rising high above them, a monument to one man's ingenuity- His own. Its original purpose had been to broadcast in unison a series of hypersonic pulses that would effect various brain activities in the bulk of humanity. It had been his idea to blanket the Earth with his otherwise harmless harmonics designed to attack humanity; to shut down those centers of the mind that controlled man's ability to communicate. The ability to speak, to read would be forfeit, and the resulting chaos would quickly cull the masses; the weak and helpless, the timid. Mankind would be reverted to trait, once more ranking low on the food chain by sheer stupidity and their inability to cope in a world that they



Black Panther



The Wasp



Warbird



Thor



Scarlet Witch

could not understand. They would slay one another, inadvertently at first, then on purpose, finally as a matter of gene. Man was an animal, and the least desirable in the visions of Ra's Al Ghul. The plan had been sound, and would have worked, especially with the Justice League suddenly missing. It was a plan worth saving of course, just in case- there was always a margin of error.

Things had changed...

The Demon's Head watched as Lund led his team away from the Tower proper. The Babel Tower had been converted- quickly- for a new and singular purpose, based on recent events. It was a simple matter really, using data gathered and transferred from an operative working within the more secure areas of STAR Labs. STAR had done the groundwork, and in end had provided a majority of the raw data on the current anomaly. Ra's Al Ghul tilted his head back, his gaze falling on the roiling storm building from a pinprick in the clear blue-sky overhead.

He watched the pink, churning clouds pouring from the tear in the very fabric of space. He saw the darkening patch of sky, a slash of blood on pristine blue. The crackling, arching lightning that flashed magnificently, thunder rolling after. He had been fortunate indeed that a rift had appeared so near, that point where the ground met the sky there above the Himilayas; a stone's throw from his home. It had been a simple matter thus to erect one of his Towers atop the spine of the world, converted to draw the strange negative energies into his grasp, for his use. It was so similar to the Crisis effect of several years past, yet at the same time different. In most cases, the world at large, the bulk of humanity was not even aware as yet that anything was amiss.

They would be however, and soon...

"Master?"

Ra's al Ghul sighed, "Commence, Ubu."

Ra's Al Ghul returned his view to the Tower, most specifically the control rod situated at the very pinnacle. There was a moment's hush, then he saw the gouts of steam as the internal mechanisms of the machine began to churn. There was a sparkle of dazzling light as the Tower's crystalline prism began to refract the varied negative energies passing through; collating data, coalescing and converting power. The deadly, dark pink energy began to swirl-

Al Ghul winced as a flare of light exploded within his gaze. He staggered back, his binoculars falling into the knee-deep snow as thick-gloved hands went to his eyes knuckling at the spots flashing there. He felt Ubu's hands on his shoulders, his bulk keeping him upright-



Quicksilver

THE JLA



Superman



Wonder Woman



Batman



The Flash

"Master!"

The Demon's Head blinked, hissing, "What- what was that? Get Lund- "

"He is calling now! He wants-"

Blindly Al Ghul ripped the headset from his servant's head, his eyes watering, tears freezing in the sub-zero winds as he jammed the earpiece to his ear, shouting into the microphone-

"Lund !" he snapped, still blinking, his sight a white, swirling blur. " Lund ! Report!"

He heard static. Turning away he wiped at the tears in his eyes, trying to see. There was a flashing, swirling pink high above and he could hear the thunder churning, echoing off of the high mountains.

"...surge! Nega... off the scale!"

Lund 's voice sounded frantic, panicked. Al Ghul winced again as a thread of lightning etched itself upon his inner eye. He cursed, something he rarely did, hating not knowing as he adjusted the gain on the radio, trying to clear the feed of static-

"...man. Fell through the hole!"

"What?" Ra's Al Ghul shouted into the microphone. "Repeat that! What man?"

"He fell from the hole, smoldering. Landed almost in our midst, unconscious. He seems injured, dead-"

"WHAT MAN?"

"The silver man..."



**Green
Lantern**



**Martian
Manhunter**



Firestorm



Zatanna



**Black
Canary**

THE AVENGERS

VS

JUSTICE LEAGUE OF AMERICA



Chapter Six:

The Cosmic Bond!

Written by Curt Fernlund and Chris Munn
Story by Chris Munn and Curt Fernlund

The Edge of Infinity...

Eric Arcane stared at the... the rip in the very fabric of space, the tear in the air. Except there was no air, or ground for that matter. No skies of blue or fields of green, just the endless cold black of the void.

And the Wall...

He had heard rumors of course. In his line of work- if you could call it that- there were always stories of the Realms Beyond; alternate dimensions and worlds within worlds. Hell, he had been to Dream on occasion, stood face



Plastic Man

to face with Nightmare once. Of course he had heard of Dormammu, and to hear Frank Drake tell the story, the Dark Dimension was a cold, miserable place.

It had nothin' on the Wall though...

It just stretched on, impossibly, forever in every direction. The last great barricade at the end of infinite space, huge could not begin to describe it; gigantic, gargantuan, and vast. Nothing compared, there were not words. Still he stared, his gaze sweeping, his neck craning as he looked up and down, left and right trying to take it all in. It boggled the mind.

Eric Arcane winced, shaking his head and pinching the bridge of his nose trying to ease the pain of his suddenly throbbing head. His mind was swirling, trying to comprehend, his brain threatening to explode with the overload of input that his senses- both natural and magical could not process. It was too much-

"Impressive, is it not?"

Arcane looked to his left, trying to focus on the dark and ghostly image at his side. Doctor Strange smiled that cool practiced smile he had and drew on the filter of his cigarette. He was dressed in black, a dark woolen longcoat hiding his apparel of office, his black hair slicked back with the silver at his temples sparkling in the eerie gloom. His face was all arrogance and omniscience, his well-trimmed mustache shifting only slightly as his condescending smile became an all-knowing smirk, as though he had seen it all before. Just another day at the ranch for the one-time Sorcerer Supreme and Master of the Mystic Arts.

Doctor Eric Arcane was no slouch when it came to sorcery and mysticism of course, but he was no where near the same league as Stephen Strange. Arcane was a Hedge Wizard, all of his spells learned and remembered as needed, kept in his throbbing head and scattered memory as intelligence allowed. His learning had been the quick and easy route, the best course of action at the time, not the long and laborious process that the likes of Strange and even the Baron Mordru had taken to learn their craft. There was no discipline, no honor, just instant gratification that of course took its toll in the long run. Every spell took a bite out of Arcane's essence, his soul. Every Conjuring or Feeling, every Flame and Lightning Bolt tugged at his lifeline, snipped just a little more from his thread. Now, the simple spell of Projection- even with the aide of Doctor Strange- well, Arcane was feeling his age.

His hands appeared withered and pale, though the ghostliness was an affect of the Astral Projection. His own long overcoat seemed ratty and worn, old blood stains glowing as his spirit struggled to hold form, drawing power wherever it could. He could see the tails of his dreadlocks, snow white and frizzed. He was tired, and needed to get back-

"You all right? Holding up?" Strange asked, but did not really seem concerned as he returned his gaze to the hole in space.

"I'll live," Arcane answered, "but we need to get back soon I think. I-"

"Just a few moments longer, Eric," Strange said. "Humor me."

"I don't even know why I'm here," Arcane said, his voice starting to rasp. He needed a cigarette of his own, but he could not conjure one here for some reason. "No way I have the kind of power to deal with that-"

Arcane pointed at the rip even as a gout of pink energy spewed out like a geyser. Dark clouds churned forth amidst crackling bolts of lightning that stretched far and away into the void. Oddly, he heard the 'thunder' that followed, some side effect of the Astral spell no doubt. He felt the pain, it was all in his head.

As overwhelming as the Wall was, Arcane imagined that Strange had brought him to look at the hole rather. That was the true anomaly, the apparent danger waiting to happen. He could see the results of the queer energy that had been pouring out for no little time it seemed. The void near the Wall was spotless of the usual debris and dust that clouded space, and even the edifice itself seemed charred and cracked in areas. The pink storms had scoured the Wall, scorching the surface. He could see blank white spots and cartoon like craters where spacecraft had been imbedded but were now missing. The odd metal gleamed in places, reflecting the crackling energies, while in other spots was black like soot and crumbling, breaking away...

"It's eating away at the Wall, isn't it?"

Strange turned, that smile back in place as his dark eyes sparkled. He nodded, reaching into the folds of his coat and producing another cigarette, which he lit with a touch and handed to Arcane-

"Very good, grasshopper," he smirked. "You see, we are not so far apart as you care to think. I believe recent failures- alleged failures on your part have clouded your judgement and self-esteem. Once you put your mind to it, however-"

"What is it?" Arcane asked, impatience lacing his voice, sighing as he took a long drag off the imaginary smoke. The pain in his head seemed to ease a bit as he pointed at the hole. "The energy I mean. It's coming from the other side, right? But what is it? I can't get a fix, though I can see some traces of magic in the mix. It seems old."

"Older than space itself, at least as we understand it in our limited way. Perhaps older than time as well. That is the primal magic you see, the last lingering spark of one small part of what came before, that uncontained maelstrom from which all else sprang; Chaos..."

"The Wall you see is that first and final barrier that holds back the powers of creation and calamity. Beyond resides all that was and will be again, one day. The Wall too replicates itself, ever twisting and winding throughout the multiverse, recreating itself in every dimension that sprang from the one as Chaos is unique and central-"

"Hold it," Arcane said as he clenched his eyelids tightly, wincing as he rubbed at his temples. "Too much data, old son." He heard Strange chuckle-

"It's simple really," he said flicking ash into the void, watching the sparkling, cosmic light show. "Science actually has the right of it, with their 'Big Bang' theories, they simply do not understand the full scope and magnitude. Our one universe is just a drop in the cosmic sea, a grain of sand on the beach of infinity. And beyond that Wall, and the myriad duplicates in countless other realms lies the one true unique quality that all share. The 'Cosmic Bond' so to speak-"

"Chaos..." Arcane said finally understanding. "Chaos is breaking through."

Strange nodded. "Recent events in this reality- as well as others- have weakened the Wall. Your own inclusion, the battle with Dracula trying to pierce the veil and return his beloved, the recent activities of the Dark Dimensions and stages of Hell trying to break through, and more. Like circumstances elsewhere have done equal, if not greater damage; to the Wall as well as space and time itself. These rips in the fabric of space are appearing everywhere with a dramatic frequency, the Negative energies of Chaos eating away at the very being of Infinity, bringing the other realms closer with every heartbeat-"

"Merging?"

"No, Eric," Strange said shaking his head. "Should the dimensions breach, the opposite energies would clash, the resulting 'explosion'- for lack of a better term- ripping asunder reality as we perceive it. It would be the end of everything, Eric. The pink storm of anti-energy is the first sign as the negative wave spills forth like a tide, rising then receding. Eventually it will swell to a flood when the barrier cracks and the Walls come tumbling down. Already there have been near misses, crossings of beings that do not belong. Your own Frank Drake nearly caused the calamity during his jaunt through his Dark Dimension of the Obsidian Mirrors. The Silver Surfer too-"

"And others, Strange..."

Arcane actually saw Doctor Strange flinch, his head turning just a bit quicker than normal. His own heart was hammering in his ethereal chest as he turned to follow Strange's gaze to see the other man who had joined them without a sound, snuck right up on them-

"Mysterium..."

He was tall, wearing a wide-brimmed hat that cast his face in shadows for the most part, a long trench coat of his own trimmed in gold and dotted with archaic symbols and runes. He had those glowing eyes of awareness and that same look that Strange usually wore, like he knew a helluva lot more than he was letting on-

"Doctor Strange," he said, his voice cold and hollow. "We meet at last."

"Under dire circumstance of course. Such is usually the way."

"It's our lot in life, Doctor..."

Arcane gasped as a woman stepped from behind the man, though he

would have sworn that this 'Mysterium' had been alone. She was pretty, though she looked weary and worn, like the weight of the world rested on her shoulders. Her long, blonde hair seemed faded, her skin pale and her frame thin bordering on gaunt though she was dressed in a bulky wool overcoat, the apparel of fashion for the edge of reality apparently.

"Our kind draws calamity and death like a magnet, both for ourselves as well as the ones we love."

Strange frowned, nodding. "I heard of your recent loss, Miss Jones. I am sorry."

Miss Jones nodded in return and Arcane could sense the hitch in her voice as she sighed, trying to keep her composure. Who was she, and the man too for that matter? Things seemed to be spiraling out of his reach at a quick pace.

"I fear that my alternate has taken steps, Doctor, steps that shall inadvertently quicken the disaster we all fear. Oddly, it goes against my own once purpose, the calling of restoration that he has taken upon himself."

"The Nth Man..."

"Benjamin," the woman said like she knew him- whoever the Nth Man was.

"I don't-" Arcane started, but the man Mysterium cut him off.

"The Squadron fought the wandering heroes when they appeared, drawn by the Scarlet Centurion's Cosmic Escalator. There was a death, and my replacement took a hand, rather directly."

"I sensed the recent surge," Strange said in understanding, ignoring the sudden flare of light spewing from the rip overhead. "That was the heroes?"

"Benjamin shunted them to your world through a convenient tear, passing them back through the Negative Zone ignorant of the consequences. Their passing did not go unnoticed, I fear. He is just a child after all, despite his metamorphosis-"

"Just a baby..." the Jones woman said, near tears. Arcane could not stand it-

"What the fuck are you all talking about?"

"Forget it, mate-"

"Ahh!" Arcane spun about at yet another voice and saw three new forms taking on a ghostly shape before him. They were misty however, ephemeral, all wearing long coats: a man in a hat holding what looked to be a Hypno-disc like they used to sell in the old comic books he read as a kid, another taller man in black hat and coat wearing a golden medallion, the third blond and ragged with a cigarette butt dangling from parched

lips. It was he that spoke-

"I been dealin' with the 'Trenchcoat Brigade' longer 'n I care t' recall an' they don't never give a straight answer." The blonde man smirked, taking a drag off his cigarette as he glanced sideways at his two companions, then shifted his gaze to the Jones woman, his eyes lingering.

"Who the hell are you, now?" Arcane asked stepping forward. He seemed the only one taken aback by the sudden appearances, though he saw the blond man scowl and shake his head-

"Bloody 'ell... 'Ere we go..."

"Many think that they know me, Eric Arcane," the tall man in black said. "But in truth few do. To most I am, and ever shall be-"

"Here it comes..."

"A stranger..."

The blond man hissed, shaking his head as he strode forward. He extended his hand, ready to shake with a smile as the man Mysterium shouted warning-

"Do not touch! The contact could-"

"Piss off, ya ponce," the blond said with an annoyed sneer. "You think bein' civil's gonna bring down the house y' great git? Maybe if you'd shook a few 'ands in yer day we wouldn't be in this bloody mess in the first place." The blond turned back to Arcane, taking the black mage's astral hand despite his hesitation, shaking it as he leaned in to whisper-

"Y' gotta put these poofs in their places once in awhile, luv. They do tend t' get uppity, know what I mean?" Arcane nodded feeling more lost and confused with each passing moment.

"John Constantine, mate," the blond continued, stepping aside as he chained another cigarette, then another that he handed to Arcane when he noticed that his own had vanished in the confusion. He motioned with a thumb over his shoulder-

"The tall bloke's the Phantom Stranger. Don't get him started though. Me other mate's Doc Occult. He's alright, though a bit fixated with monster bashin'." The blond stared at Arcane, raising his eyebrows-

"I'm Eric Arcane," Eric finally said to the growing crowd of apparent mystics. "Doctor Arcane, and that's-"

"We have no time for this!" Mysterium said, his voice booming. "While we exchange pleasantries the very fabric of reality unravels. We must unite, band together to fix this before we and all we know are wiped from existence!"

"An' jus' how d'you plan on doin' that little bit a' prestidigitation, son?"

Chaos came rainin' down in our reality already. The people are rememberin' the red skies, n' they're scared shitless," Constantine said.

"Truly," the one called Doctor Occult added. "One of our own- Doctor Fate added to the trouble. He's been defeated, but he ripped the 'hole' bigger in the process."

"It was Nabu, actually," the Stranger interrupted, "one of the old Lords of Order who turned to Chaos in the end. The result however is the same."

"The negative energies threaten to burst through the Wall, like a dam ready to crumble," Strange added.

"We all know all of this," Miss Jones said. She looked old and tired suddenly, her voice full of tears as she hugged herself. "What do we do about it?"

"The actual battle is out of our hands, I think," Occult said, watching as the little disk in his hand spiraled. "The heroes will deal with the villains- as they always do. It'll be up to us to try and mend the damage to the Wall I think--"

"An' jus' how are we supposed t' do that, mate?" Constantine said, chaining a new cigarette and flicking the spent butt into the void. "The Wall's leakin' like a sieve all over creation. We'd need a shitload a' Dutch boy's t' plug this dike."

"Be that as it may, John Constantine, we must try." The Phantom Stranger looked at each of the assembled mystics, waiting for support, or at least response. Finally Occult nodded, and Strange gave his blessing. Mysterium frowned but agreed, the woman at his side simply shrugging and looking away with a fresh round of tears swelling in her eyes. All but her then turned to Constantine and Arcane.

The man, John Constantine eyed Arcane with a conceited smirk, raising his eyebrows again as he blew a cloud of smoke into space. He shrugged-

"Fuck it, lads," he said. "You only live twice, right?"

"Most of us, John Constantine," the Stranger said with a grim smile, turning finally to Eric. "And you, Doctor Arcane? Do you stand with us in what might well be our final hour?"

Arcane was petrified- scared shitless. This was way beyond anything he had ever encountered. For some reason however, Strange had brought him into the mix. He had faith in a simple Hedge Mage and Arcane wondered why for a heartbeat. Then he simply shrugged-

"What the hell," he said, his head finally clear since he had entered the Astral Plane. He flicked his spent cigarette away, watching as it spiraled up and up, disappearing into the pink, crackling energy. He turned towards the others-

"I got nothin' left to live for anyway..."

"Welcome to the club, Arcane..." the Jones woman said, her face stony cold as she stared at him. Eric Arcane shivered wondering just what he had gotten himself into this time...

Titan- Somewhere in the Negative Zone...

Genis-Vell stood at the grave of his father, lost in thought. He had not been back to the world of his birth in some time, too long, and he regretted that. With the recent upheaval in the ranks of the Avengers however it seemed a better time than not to take a short sabbatical and return.

The grave was undisturbed. The flame still burned. The monument was well tended as the people of Titan, those that remained that had not melded with their fellow Eternals or gone off to explore this realm, honored their saviors well. He was glad of that. Glad that someone cared, and remembered-

The feeling came over him suddenly, in a wave. His vision clouded even as his face darkened, becoming one with the cosmos. He staggered as the images pored in, his hands reaching out, settling on the tombstone for support...

There was a Wall composed of giants, gargantuan beings long dead and calcified, blinding light pouring from their wide eyes and gaping mouths. There were cracks in the Wall as it flaked away, dark, crackling energy seeping through. Energy he recognized and knew too well. One of the giants shifted, a stony faced god breaking free-

Marv?

The creatures scurried forth, consuming all in their path. They were horde, countless in number, their black skin-like armor glistening as they scrambled across the galaxy, world to world just ahead of the storm. They devoured all in their path; slaying, ravaging, and multiplying like locusts. A swarm coming ever closer. A wave, unstoppable in their sheer mass. Creatures of Chaos...

Yo, Genis...

He saw Doom, his armor rent and smoldering, the demons of Hell striving forth...

He saw a silver ship with a crystalline skull-like head riding the crest of the storm, tentacles groping beneath...

He saw a boy with an owl running scared as the world swam with pink at his heels...

Marvel!

He saw Galactus amidst the Chaos, laughing in the heart of the storm...

He saw Thanos...

Captain Marvel turned, energy flaring from the Nega-Bands on his wrists as the grim-faced mad Titan smiled down at him. Genis-Vell knew the face well, so similar to the face he had seen on the giant, yet different as well.

Behind Thanos were others that he knew. Pip, the ugly and obnoxious little Troll that was usually fodder for the mad Titan. Gamora the green-skinned assassin, debatably the most dangerous woman alive. Finally, Adam Warlock, the being created by the Hive years before to be Mankind's future, one step below God. Together, they were the Infinity Watch, each possessing the powers of one of the Infinity Gems, those stones that when combined could alter...anything. Just how they had retrieved the Gems or Thanos for that matter was a mystery, even to one with Cosmic Awareness, apparently. The last he had heard, the Mad Titan had been rotting in a cell in another dimension, the prisoner of yet another mad god.

"Greetings, boy," Thanos said, his voice gravelly and cold as a grave. He was still smiling, condescending.

"What do you want, Thanos," Genis snapped, ready to fight, "here of all places? I thought you respected-"

Easy Marv...

Genis heard the familiar voice in his head even as Thanos raised a warning hand, Adam Warlock stepping forward in a swirl of gold and black-

"We are not here to battle, Genis-Vell," the gold-skinned man said, his long cloak swirling about his tall, muscular frame. The Soul Gem affixed to his brow seemed to sparkle and glow as his eyes turned dark and distant just for a moment. "Rather, we are here to warn-"

Don't trust him, Marv. He stabbed your dad in the back. He'll do the same to you to get what he wants-

"Quiet, Rick," Captain Marvel said, the others ignoring his outburst, knowing that Genis-Vell spoke to Rick Jones- his other half trapped in the Zone but with the Eternals elsewhere on Titan. Marvel was not welcome there, with that group, but still he felt the need to visit the grave of his father on the world of his birth. It just seemed right, and he had the ability to do so undetected- at least by the Eternals, apparently.

"Jones speaks wisely, boy," Thanos mocked. "You should listen to him when he does. It happens so rarely-"

"Call me 'boy' again and I'll-"

Adam Warlock stepped between Thanos and Captain Marvel, his hands raised to ward or defend, attack if necessary. "We are not here to battle you, Marvel. We are here to help. A crisis stirs even now, its horrors spreading whilst we bicker. The progeny of Chaos draw ever closer and will

soon be upon us. Titan I fear will be the first front of the war, though the true battle lay `pon the Earth."

"I saw this `progeny'. Ugly critters devouring everything in their path, but if the battle's on Earth, shouldn't we be there?"

"The Avengers are at the forefront of that conflict," Warlock interjected. "I fear their natural distrust of us would simply distract. Better we make our stand here. We may turn the tide-"

"I doubt that, Warlock," Thanos said. "But it's out of our hands. Our war is here in the midst of Chaos, in the Negative Zone. Perhaps the Infinity Gems can turn the tide in our favor-"

"Why do I doubt that?" Gammora said, staring daggers at the dark-faced Titan.

Thanos chuckled, "A little faith, child. Have I ever let you down?"

"Hoo boy," Pip the Troll laughed, setting flame to the tip of a good, thick Cuban. "This is gonna be a blast, I can see that."

"More than you know, Pip," Adam Warlock said, his gaze meeting Marvel's for just a moment before turning away towards the distant sound of rolling thunder-

"More than any of us might ever know..."

The Florida Everglades...

The creature stopped, pausing in his aimless wanderings. Huge red eyes stared uncomprehending at the strange pink energies that bubbled from the murky waters, boiling light and smoke.

He heard the screams but did not understand.

Somewhere back in the dim recesses of his mind, Ted Sallis shouted, memories of another time raging. He recalled fire and flame, the bitter stench of burning flesh and chemicals. He remembered endings.

He remembered beginnings as well...

Finally, almost shrugging, uncomprehending, the Man-Thing moved on...

War World...

The terraforming was almost complete. Soon life would sprout from the cold hard surface of the mechanical world that had been created with the sole purpose of destruction in mind. Life from death- it was only fitting.

Ganthet walked the plains, examining the soil, fingering the dirt he had created from the Flame. The Green permeated the earth, rich with life in its basest form and potential. The air was thin he noted with a deep breath, but rich with content on the cusp. All that it would take was a spark. Soon...

"It is remarkable what you've accomplished here. A new beginning, a pity it will come to an end so soon."

Ganthet- last of the Guardians, or the first depending on your point of view- turned and stared at the other old man that stood beside him. The Highfather was looking to the sky again, as he had so often of late, his face grim with melancholy. Shazam the Wizard of course had wandered away.

"Not if I can help it," Ganthet said tossing a handful of soil back to the dirt at his feet. "I've worked too hard to see it all fail now." Highfather, late of New Genesis shrugged-

"We've all worked hard old friend. All for naught it seems at times. The prophecies still come true-"

"Bah!" Ganthet spat, walking on. Overhead the thin atmosphere sparked and crackled. A chill wind smelling of ammonia wafted past, ruffling his skirts. "We hold too much with the stale old prophecies, visions of long dead fanatics always spouting doom and gloom. I have faith in my warriors."

"As do I," Highfather agreed. "But evil stirs and the old threats rise. The Hounds of Chaos are scratching at the door. Your brave new world will be the first line of defense- here at least."

"We shall endure, my friend. Just as we always have."

"You have more faith than I, I fear."

"And therein lies our main difference..."

"Faith."

Renria in the Shiar Empire...

He had found a dead and lifeless world when he arrived. There was destruction, devastation everywhere. The cities were afire; buildings collapsed and in ruin, the outlying communities devoid of life. It was as though war had instantaneously swept the planet, destroying it in the space of a solar day, a few short hours.

He had heard the cries, the call, his Cosmic Awareness almost overwhelming as though a billion souls were crying out for help at once. He had sped away, Quantum leaping through dimensions as quickly as possible, but it had still taken the better part of a day to reach Renria.

He had been too late.

Bodies littered the streets, clogged the buildings and tunnels, the fields and streams. Half devoured, ravaged and lifeless he found no one spared, not a soul to remember the glory that had been Renria on the fringes of the Shiar Empire. The stench of death and offal clogged his senses, that final act of the body to defend against predators. It had not seemed to matter.

Quasar leaned against a building, vomiting before the carnage turning his stomach. He had never seen such wonton destruction, senseless death with no apparent purpose. It sickened him.

He saw the first creature as his stomach calmed. He simply looked up and it was there, staring, considering him. It was huge and gangly, with black plated skin and long claw-like fingers, a barbed, twitching tail. It had an elongated head with a set of jaws that looked able to bite through adamantium. Its huge dark eyes stared at him quizzically, almost comically.

"Who-" he rasped, his voice cutting short as he saw the others, all but identical. They were few at first, doubling, trebling as they scrambled into view. Soon they were dozens, then scores, a horde, a swarm clacking and scrabbling, inching closer.

Quasar swallowed, backing away, taking to the air as they surged forward in mass. Snapping and howling they leaped at him, forcing him higher and still they came, hundreds. Hundreds leaping and clawing, snapping at his heels. He had never seen the like.

HE was there, suddenly. Quasar had been distracted, but still- how could one so huge move so silently. HE stared at the creatures as they swarmed at his feet, his strange dark eyes sparkling, turning towards Quasar. He was almost smiling.

Strange...

Stranger still was that Galactus had even appeared at all. It was well known fact that Galactus had been defeated by various entities, Infinity and Lord Odin of Asgard not the least. He had been turned and delivered to the Skrulls for 'trial', though there were few that did not know that that meant execution really. Galactus had devoured the Skrull Home World years before, and only he knew how many lesser planets in their empire over the centuries. The Skrulls had demanded retribution, and through a strange twist of fate and divine intervention, were expecting it soon. How Galactus had gained his freedom would remain a mystery however, in the light of crisis.

Quasar stared in awe as Galactus ignored the creatures swarming at his feet, scrambling up his legs. The great force of nature raised his arms, his fingers twitching ever-so slightly as machinery appeared, swirling and forming from the very molecules of the air. A strange apparatus appeared about him, a harness of sorts as an even more magnificent machine began to take shape before him. Quasar licked his lips and soared higher. He had seen this before...

Renria was dead, and Galactus was about to feed on the carcass.

Quasar had no idea what the creatures were that had overrun the planet, nor did he care really. They were scavengers and killers, and now they faced the Devourer of Worlds. Galactus would deal with them by sucking the energies of life from the planet itself. Right or wrong, in the end Renria would be avenged.

But what were those creatures? Where had they come from, and more, where were they going? Were there more?

Quasar paused at the edge of the planet's atmosphere, concentrating, looking outward with all his essence. He called on his Cosmic Awareness...

He saw nothing...

Not that he did not get an image- just that it was an image of emptiness, a void where nothing remained. Anti-Life... negative space... void...

Quasar shuddered. He needed help. This was far too big for him alone, and since Eon was his usual silent self, he was on his own. It was not a hard decision, of course.

Quasar watched as the planet started to quake, its volcanic line the first to suffer the ill-effects of Galactus. Fires spouted across the globe, the clouds darkening quickly as ash and soot filled the air carried on the wind. It would not take long before Renria was just another memory, lost but for the few that recalled, a notation in some Shiar log.

The Avenger called Quasar watched a moment longer, then called upon the power of the Starbrand engraved in his skin. He felt the surge of Quantum energy, so similar to his own as space folded at his whim. It would take time, but he would be home soon.

Back on Earth, amongst friends...

New Genesis...

Orion stared at the words emblazoned on the slick white wall. Pulsing in flame they had appeared almost a full day before, the great hand remaining motionless since though not disappearing as was normal. Occasionally it tapped, waiting...

"What do you suppose it means?" Lightray asked again for the umpteenth time. Orion sighed-

"I don't know."

"Perhaps it's a joke," Barda offered, shifting her stance, her hands in the pockets of her shining Dockers.

"The Source does not joke," Orion grumbled, wishing that it did. He glanced at Scott Free, but the Master of Escapes and ruler of New Genesis simply shrugged-

"Don't look at me. I haven't a clue."

Orion sighed again, returning his attention to the slab where the Source made contact with the children of New Genesis. Usually the great hand only appeared to give warning of dire events, some shattering, imminent catastrophe or prophecy. It spoke in riddles too, but nothing that the High Father Izaya could not decipher, or Metron at least. High Father was dead however- moved on, and Metron had not been seen in days. It was up to Orion, get of Darkseid and ruler of Apokolips to interpret and guide.

He sighed again...

"Prepare the ranks for war," he said turning to the others; Lightray, Mister Miracle and Big Barda, Fastback and the Bug. They stared in anticipation, Barda turning her shock rod in her hands with a slim smile, Lightray frowning at the news-

"You're certain?"

"No," Orion said, glancing at the Source Wall once again hoping that it had changed. "No, but better prepared than not. Go! Spread the word."

They filtered out, one by one, his friends- such as he had. Lightray was the last, turning back-

"It can't be your father. He's done. Dead-"

"Is he? Prophecy says otherwise. Whatever, New Genesis will meet this threat with passion and pride. New Genesis will not fall..."

Lightray shrugged. "I hope not..." and he was gone...

Orion turned back to the Source again. The finger twitched but wrote no more, seemingly pointing at the last words inscribed...

FOR YOU...

What in the name of the Fire Pits did that mean?

Manhattan ...

Peter Parker woke, his head pounding, buzzing...

His Spider-Sense was going wild! Danger was imminent! But what- where?

He leaped out of his bed, springing to the ceiling and concentrating, trying to focus. The buzz was devastating, overwhelming. Something huge was

coming, but what?

Peter

Head pounding he winced, gritting his teeth as he turned towards the bed . It was empty of course, but he had thought... He had heard...

"Arrgh! "

Peter Parker dropped to the floor of his apartment, fell to his knees in agony as his head threatened to explode. There had been a faint buzzing from his Spider Sense for days now, ever since the storms and the rats that had swarmed through the streets. He had never really learned what had happened that day, but he had felt the unease ever since, and now ...

Now he was apparently going crazy. He would have sworn that he had heard her, Mary Jane calling to him. She was dead though. He knew that. Dead and gone for some time ...

And he was going insane with the loss and the constant nagging in the back of his brain, like a toothache causing just enough pain to distract and occasionally overwhelm. There was no dentist to help him though.

Richards had his own worries and problems and was apparently dealing with some Avengers situation at the old Baxter Building site. Parker had gone to see Strange, but his manservant , Wong, had simply said that 'the doctor is unavailable'. That could mean anything from meditation to off in some dark dimension battling some butt ugly thing that no one else even knew existed. And it was the same all over. There was nowhere to turn. There was no one to help.

But of course, that's the way it usually went in the life of 'your friendly neighborhood Spider-Man'.

Parker sighed as the buzzing and pounding slowly began to recede again. He knew that it would not last long, but hopefully it would be long enough this time. Long enough for him to find out what was happening.

He got up off of the floor, slowly, standing on shaking legs and taking a long look at the empty bed before finally pulling on his costume. He had to get out. He had to get away, and there was only one real way for him to do that, he knew.

Within moments a thin strand of webbing shot through the open window of Parker's apartment, followed by a familiar form. A lithe figure clad in red and blue swung up and away, swiftly disappearing into the stone canyons of Manhattan ...

Manhattan ...

Raven gasped, feeling the shift of emotion. People were dying by the thousands somewhere, by the hundreds of thousands. She could hear their

screams of agony in her mind. She could feel the death and devastation. She could sense the hopelessness...

It was not Trigon...

"Wallace..."

"Raven?"

Raven turned, blinking to see Koriand'r standing before her, a look of concern and compassion on her face, twisting her brow with worry. "What's wrong?" Starfire asked, stepping closer, sitting too close. Raven licked her lips-

"I- I don't..." She took a breath, long and deep, exhaling slowly. "I sensed Wallace- Flash- in pain, confused, reaching out-"

"But why, after all this time?" Starfire crossed her arms over her breasts, shivering as she looked to the ceiling, seeing beyond? "He's with the League now. He's left us behind, again. Why would he contact you?"

"I don't know," Raven said, her gaze following Koriand'r's, staring at the tiled ceiling. There was nothing there. "I don't know..."

Kori placed her arm about Raven's shoulders, the other woman tensing even after all the years. She was still tentative, aloof. She had to be.

"Wallace..."

A chill wind blew through Titan's Tower...

San Francisco

"Look, no offense, but Cap isn't my boss. Hawkeye is my chairman, so what did *he* say?"

"And Cap isn't *my* boss, either, but both Hawkeye and T'Challa agreed with him. They were pretty clear in their instructions."

Priscilla Lyons, Vagabond, furrowed her brow at the statement made by Everett K. Ross, the liaison between the Avengers and the United States Government. Dust swirled around them as they watched the sun slowly fall down to the horizon, and it was in the basking red light that Ross finally recognized the destruction the two were standing amidst. The area had been burned to the ground; buildings had been reduced to ashen tombs which still held the bodies of the dead and the injured that had yet to be rescued. "Wow," he said as he wiped the sweat from his brow with the cuff of his white button-down, "somebody sure had a hot time in the old town, huh?"

"It gets worse the farther we go into the city," Vagabond answered,

crouching down to touch her gloved fingers against a melted doll that had once belonged to a child, "all because of a maniac named Equinox. Look, I know why Cap told us to stay here, because these people *do* need our help. But, that doesn't mean he shouldn't call every available Avenger to New York if this crisis is as big as people think. We're members of this team same as him, doesn't matter that we're not the big guns."

Ross squinted his eyes after removing his sunglasses, watching as a young woman was pulled from the wreckage by Darkhawk, one of the western Avengers he'd yet to meet. "Hawkeye told me you'd argue this," he said, "which is why I'm here. If you don't continue with the disaster relief, I'll toss your toned little ass in the nearest federal prison I can find. Same goes for all of you."

"No prison could hold me for very long," a voice said from directly behind the diminutive liaison, causing him to yelp and jump in surprise. Ross turned sheepishly to see the vigilante named Moon Knight, his white cloak hanging loosely around his body. "I am no Avenger," Marc Spector continued, "and you would do well to remember that."

"Then what's keeping you here, jackass?" Everett asked, an accusatory finger jabbing at the Knight's chest.

The Moon Knight's eyes shifted very slightly to glance at Vagabond, who was waving at a group of approaching heroes in the sky. "I have my reasons."

Frustrated at Spector's obtuseness, Ross turned his head in time to catch sight of the Quinjet landing a few yards away. After the plane had powered down, a small group of fellow Avengers disembarked, their costumes blackened and torn after their hours of relief aid in the ruined city. The Two-Gun Kid was the first to depart, his scowling face hid beneath the shadows of his wide-rimmed Stetson. The Atlantean woman, Andromeda, and the Inhuman, Karnak, followed a few steps behind him, their own faces stern reflections of the devastation they had witnessed.

"Another fire broke out a few miles yonder," Two-Gun informed as he accepted a hug from Priscilla, "so we had a helluva mess to clean up."

"This," Andromeda said as she made her way to Ross' side, "rivals the destruction I saw during the fall of Atlantis many years ago. The madness of evil men knows no bounds."

Suddenly, a violent force gripped the assembled heroes, the mental assault causing even the most powerful among them to fall to their knees in agony. A voice screamed in the minds of the Avengers, but the words were too loud and too strong to be understood. The attack lasted several long minutes before stopping as suddenly as it had began. Slowly, Vagabond reached for her communicard, trying to regain her balance as she opened the hailing frequency. "Did everybody else get hit by that?" she asked, hoping for at least one of their absent members to respond.

"Jack of Hearts here," the voice of Jack Hart answered across the frequency, "and yeah, we got hit by it, too. Sunfire got nailed by it, but I weathered through alright. You guys okay?"

"That was a psionic attack," Karnak said as he braced himself on one knee next to the disoriented Vagabond, "tell him to find Moondragon."

A mile or so away, the Jack of Hearts received his order and gave an affirmative, the recovering Shiro Yashida sitting on the ground next to him. "You cool to fly, Sunfire?"

"A warrior of the empire shall never be found wanting, Jack Hart," Sunfire replied as the nuclear fire that composed his body flared brightly. The two men propelled themselves into the air, the Avengers identity card in Jack's hand homing in on the specific frequency that each card owned by a team member emitted. After a few moments of flight, the two reached their destination and landed.

"I don't see her," Sunfire said impatiently as Jack walked away from him, the card still gripped in his hand.

"Oh man," Hart whispered as he walked over the hill. Heather Douglas, the telepathic priestess better known as Moondragon, was on the ground, curled into the fetal position, arms wrapped around her legs to control her shaking. Jack scrambled down the hill until he reached his teammate, placing his hands on her shoulders to let her know he was there. "Moondragon, what happened? Did you cause that psi-attack?"

"If I did," Douglas answered, her face streaked with tears, "I humbly apologize. Please do not tell a soul that you have seen me in such a state...my pride could not endure it."

"Forget about it, babe," Jack said as he helped the shaking woman to her feet, "but what happened to you?"

"I felt him," she whispered, "when he tore through the dimensional walls. He's in New York, where our teammates are, and I don't think they can stop him."

Jack swallowed hard. "Who?"

"Annihilus..."

To be continued...

Next Issue: The battle resumes as the JLA Avengers take on Annihilus as you've never seen him before. And just what does Doctor Midas have to say about all this. Be back soon at JLU: 2001 for the next chapter...

Story © Curt F and Chris Munn
Plot © Chris Munn and Curt F
Editing © Curt F and Chris Munn



Avengers # 40

THE AVENGERS



**Captain
America**



Iron Man



Beast



Hawkeye

MARVEL 2000 & JLU 2001 PROUDLY PRESENT...

Titan- Somewhere in the Negative Zone...

"They're leaving..."

Mentor raised his arm, shielding his eyes from the harsh white glare that was swiftly receding through the Rift. The strange cascading energies that had been spewing from the tear had slowly vanished as well, sucked through the hole in a spiraling vortex, like filthy water down the drain. And thankfully, with the storms and lightning, the red skies and the white bubble, so too went the creatures of Chaos.

They had been trapped in the Negative Zone for months now, the Eternals of Earth and Titan, trapped on the latter when the very moon had been shifted to the anti-matter realm to save them all. It had been a hard existence. The Zone was a cruel and thankless mistress, yet it had never been so harsh as in this, what they all had thought to be the final battle. When the dark skies had turned red and the very fabric of space had ripped asunder, when the creatures of the Wall born of Chaos had come streaming through the Rift there had been many that foresaw their doom; the end.

But now the skies had reverted, returning to the strange and swirling brilliance that they had once been before. Truth, Mentor had never seen the space of the Zone so stark in all their months of exile. So barren and...clean...

"It would appear that we have won."

Mentor turned to look at Thena as she stepped to his side. The beautiful ruler of Earth's Eternals was wounded, her golden armor ripped and showing skin and blood. Her right arm hung limply at her side, yet she stood tall and uncomplaining, proud.

"I do not know," Mentor replied, casting his gaze upon the devastation. The great city that they had been constructing lay savaged and in ruins about them. Many of the mighty spires lay toppled or burning. The Great Hall was shattered, smoke rising from the broken, ivory dome. All about them too lay the dead. There were so many.

"Rather, I believe the battle has moved on, passing us by. We have done all that we could, but-"

"We have done all that was expected, Mentor of Titan."



Black Panther



The Wasp



Warbird



Thor



Scarlet Witch

Both Mentor and Thena turned to the sound of the all-too familiar voice and saw Adam Warlock descending into their midst, his Infinity Watch at his side- and one other- Rick Jones, partner and link to the hated Genis-Vell, the son of the Captain Marvel. They appeared as battered and bruised as the rest of Titan, scarred and bloodied. In truth, Pip the Troll was unconscious, held by Gamora the Assassin. Even Thanos the Mad Titan and son of Mentor himself seemed shaken, recently freed from his own imprisonment at the hands of a dark god. Only Warlock seemed unperturbed as he landed in a swirl of ragged cloak, planting his staff to earth for support. The green Soul Gem on his golden brow glistened in the queer light.

"We have given our all. We can do no more."

"As always, you speak in riddles Warlock. Have we won, or--"

"We are safe, at least for now. As you suppose, Mentor, the battle rages on without us."

"Marv says that the storms have moved beyond Shiar space as well," Rick said, stepping within the select group. "Worlds vanished from the quadrant, but the 'fabric' survives, whatever that means."

"And what of his vaunted 'Awareness', Jones," Thena said with a sneer. There was no love lost between the Eternals trapped on Titan in the Negative Zone, and the so-called Protector of the Universe. "What, pray tell does that tell you."

Rick frowned, gazing up at the Rift in the Zone and raking his fingers back through his hair. Not so far away he could see the fluctuating energies of the Exploding Atmosphere, that gateway to Earth that defied their passing. "He says 'the energies yet burn, but elsewhere'. He can feel them swelling and spreading, but somehow being contained like..."

"He says he senses Norrin Radd."

"The Silver Surfer?" Starfox said, limping up to the crowd. Eros, the other son of Mentor stared at his brother with a flicker of hate- an oddity for the one-time God of Love- before returning his attention to Jones. "How is the former Herald of Galactus involved in all of this?"

"He says he can't pierce that veil, Eros. He simply 'hears his agony'."

"That particular veil was never meant for even Genis' father to pierce, Jones."

There was a collective gasp as all eyes turned skyward again, staring at a strange rippling in the fabric of space. All save one feared that a new tear



Quicksilver

THE JLA



Superman



Wonder Woman



Batman



The Flash

was forming, that the disaster was renewing, yet as they watched something seemed to form. It was large and oddly chair-shaped, and sitting in it, a man. He was grim-faced and dressed in blue, his costume flickering with unearthly streaks of light and energy-

"I am Metron," he said simply and with certainty, as though that explained all. Starfox and Gamora leaped to the front, ready to attack but both Mentor and Warlock stayed their rage.

"Stop! This is no foe."

"Nor is he truly friend, Mentor," Warlock said and the being simply nodded.

"You are indeed wise, Adam Warlock, but hark. I have much to say, but my time here is limited. It has taken all the energies and power of my Mobius Chair to cross the threshold, and it is only by the very disaster we all seek to avert that I was able this time."

"Speak then, stranger," Mentor said taking charge to silence uneasy murmurings of the gathering crowd. "What have you to tell us?"

"Little that your wisdom has not already gleaned. Know however that steps are being taken to repair the damage that has been done. Even now a conclave of Mages struggles at the very edge of reality to repair the Wall, trying to ultimately hold back the floodtide of Chaos itself. Too, beings struggle at the dimensional crossings; the Avatars of Earth in all dimensions seek to control the surge of anti-matter, to keep it at bay. The very Gods of all worlds strive against the creatures of Chaos; the Asgardians and Olympians, the Titans of Old, the Gods of New Genesis that are a mirror of your own Eternals. The war has come to my home reality however, and it is there that the ultimate battle will be fought."

"Then we have to get there, Metron," Starfox said. "Show us the way!"

Metron shook his head as a scream of agony cut through the air. All eyes turned to the source and saw Pip the Troll staring wide-eyed into space, his chest falling as his final breath fled his body.

"Pip!" Gamora shouted, running back to the creature that had inadvertently become her friend over time. She was an assassin by trade, created by Thanos for his own dark schemes. She had seen Death in all her glory and knew even as she crouched at the Troll's still form that he was gone. She looked up and about, wiping away a single tear, almost surprised to find it there.

"His Gem is gone- stolen!" then, "Where's Thanos?"



**Green
Lantern**



**Martian
Manhunter**



Firestorm



Zatanna



**Black
Canary**

Everyone turned, all searching for any sign of the Mad Titan, nowhere to be seen. All save Adam Warlock who stared at Metron, watching as the strange visitor began to fade-

"There are other worlds..." Metron said as he vanished, his image fading on the wind.

"Other worlds to conquer..." Warlock added, finally turning away...

THE AVENGERS

VS

JUSTICE LEAGUE OF AMERICA



Chapter Eight:

Last Stand!

Written by Curt Fernlund
Story by Chris Munn and Curt Fernlund

The Aerie



Plastic Man

Mt. Annapurna Nepal:

Ra's al Ghul squinted into the brilliance of victory.

Even from miles distant the Babel Tower gleamed, crackling with power as it drew in the strange negative energies of the storms that had spread across the planet. Ra's al Ghul watched with barely contained excitement as the power pulsed and throbbed, the Tower itself wavering, barely able to contain the devastating anti-matter that would soon be released across the globe in a cleansing wave that would cull all of those not worthy to reside in his Utopia to come.

He could hear the agonized screams of the silver man, that being that had fallen from the stars and had brought his dreams to the cusp of realization. The cosmic Powers contained within that one creature, that alien were vast, and all that Ra's al Ghul needed to capture the crisis and turn it to his favor and goals. Truth, the silver creature was barely visible in the pulsing flare of energy erupting within the Control Room, the machines of the demon's Head stripping away his abilities and powers, using both to his own ends. Soon...

"Ahhh!"

Ra's al Ghul turned to the new cry, his eyes scanning the shielded room beyond to find Lund struggling at his controls. The scientist was expendable of course- they all were- but he MUST finish his duty before he succumbed.

"Lund , you fool!" Ra's al Ghul snapped as he depressed the button on his own console. Immediately he heard the roar of uncontained power beyond, the screams of his chosen scientists as they burned for the glory of the Demon's Head. "If you cannot control-"

"Not my fault!" Lund shrieked, his hands a flurry of motion as he adjusted the controls. The actual mechanics of the machinery were lost on al Ghul, though it had been his brilliance that had conceived the final glory. His ' Babel Towers ' had been positioned about the world, his original goal to throw humanity into chaos by taking away their ability to communicate. Only the strong would have survived that, only those worthy. With the advent of the red skies however, and the silver man, his plans had been changed, and the Towers converted or shut down to further his new scheme. Here in Nepal , his Babel Tower drew in the chaos of the storms, the unbridled energies held in check by the powers of the silver being. When the time was right, Ra's al Ghul would unleash the Negative Energy upon the world in devastating effect, wiping away those that deserved a quick death and would not fit into his ideals of the world. He would control those that remained, guiding them into a new, golden age...

"The energies are spiking, coming in too fast. The Tower can't contain... there's something... Nooo!"

Ra's al Ghul grimaced, actually flinching, staggering back in momentary worry as the room beyond flared white. He heard Lund's scream- the terrified screams of all of his scientists as a wave of anti-matter washed through the fortified Control Room, wiping away the unworthy; Lund and

his minions. They all simply faded away, the negative images of their skeletons lingering momentarily in his mind's eye.

"Father?"

Talia was at his side, but he paid her no heed as he stared into the room. The silver man had survived, but the scientists were gone. In their place however were three others, lying on the floor and connected by charred bands of steel and leather, smoldering and hurt- though alive!

"Ho... Holy... Holy shit..."

Hawkeye raised his head, immediately regretting it as the world swam and spun about him. He lowered his head quickly, but too late as his stomach churned and lurched and whatever was left in his stomach spewed out across the floor.

He lay there a moment, gagging and hacking as he tried to get a grip, tried to focus. He was in a lab- he had seen that much before the world went screwy. It looked like one of Doom's labs- or Reed Richards' with a thousand whirring and clicking machines just to make a cup of coffee. Somehow though he imagined that whatever the lab's purpose with all its gleaming machines and gear lining every free space of wall, it was a bit more complicated than that.

He looked up again, struggling to get up off the dirty tiled floor, his bow a familiar piece of reality in his hand. He had seen something else before his last lunch had come rushing back- something that he recognized-

"The Silver Surfer?"

Clint Barton stared at the former Herald of Galactus. The man was trapped, secured inside some kind of tube and writhing about like someone was sticking pins in his brain. Why, Hawkeye did not have a clue, but he knew that he had to get the man out. No way he was there for any good purpose.

Against all odds Hawkeye struggled to his hands and knees, trying to rise, trying to get to his feet. To his credit, he almost made it before leather coiled about his throat and a jolt of electricity shot through his brain.

Oubliette stood on shaky legs and high heels as she looked down at the archer spasming at her feet, dangling the coils of her whip wrapped about Hawkeye's throat. She smiled, then frowned quickly as she looked to her father just a few feet away, trying to rise. The Exterminatrix stepped over Hawkeye's prone form, her heels clacking as she ran to her father-

"Daddy?" she said, kneeling beside her father, Doctor Midas. He seemed weak as well, confused as he struggled to his knees. He still held the Negative Rod in his hands, and Oubliette gasped as she stared at the small metallic cylinder that they had received from Annihilus- in a round about way. It was still crackling with energy, pulsing even more vibrantly if

possible, as it seemed to be drawing in the energies that danced about the lab. She had no idea what was happening, but she could see the glory reflected in her father as he hugged the rod to the golden chestplate of his armor. He was ecstatic.

Midas stood and held the Rod out, laughing as the energies flared and coruscated about the nozzle of the cylinder. Oubliette could see the very air shimmering as the Nega Rod sucked up the energy in the room, lines of power arcing out and away to the machinery and the writhing body of the Silver Surfer. She shivered, licking her lips-

"Daddy?"

"It's here, daughter- finally!" Midas cackled as his hand started to glow, caught up in the energies of the Rod. "Power! Right here..."

Oubliette stared at the machinery, at the Surfer squirming in agony. Where were they? She had no idea as she slowly turned, trying to take it all in. Finally she saw the people beyond- the old man and the woman both wearing the dark goggles, watching them from beyond the thick safety glass in another room. She heard the crackle of an intercom-

"Who are you?"

Midas turned, staring at the man beyond the thick glass that was staring back with equal intensity. Doctor Midas laughed-

"I?" Midas said, raising the Cosmic Control Rod high overhead and Oubliette felt the sudden surge of power, making her hair stand on end with a crackle of electricity, and more...

"I AM..."

And the Control Room exploded...

**Manhattan,
Avenger's Mansion-
Sub-basement Level 2
Storage Vault:**

"It should be here somewhere..."

The Black Panther crouched, his keen eyes swiftly reading the labels on the many boxes that lined the shelves and corners, every bit of free space of the storage area. There were years of memories here; machines and tokens, mementos from past adventures all stacked and stored away for future use or future generations. There were weapons here as well, devices taken from defeated villains and locked away for study. Weapons they had created. Too, there were monuments-

"Here," Captain America said drawing everyone's attention. "I think this is it."

The Panther moved closer, inspecting the small crate that his friend had found, reading the label as the Batman stepped near as well.

"It's smaller than I would have imagined," he said, eyeing the crate as Captain America pried it open at T'Challa's nod.

"Power is not often measured in size, my friend. At least not on this world." Batman smirked, nodding.

"Touché."

The three men turned then as Captain America cradled the machine, heading for the door. Thor and Superman waited patiently, both knowing that they were out of their depths in Avenger's knowledge and sciences. There were many similarities of course, but then too there were multitudes of differences. Thor stared at the small machine however, his eyes sparking with a glint of recognition as the Panther once again secured the vault door.

"I do recall yon device now," he said, following as the small group made their way back up the stairs and out of the sub-basements of the mansion far beneath the streets. "'Twas when our allies- Goliath, the Scarlet Witch and Quicksilver and... the Vision were lost to us for a time--"

"On the Squadron Supreme's world," the Panther said remembering the adventure well. He had been called in by Stark to help create the very device they now carried. "It was the first time we learned the truth behind the Squadron Sinister's origins. Not our first journey to other dimensions, but an enlightening one."

T'Challa, Son of T'Chaka and King of all the Wakandas listened only partially as Thor recounted the tale of the Black Knight's quest as they walked. The quest to cleanse the Ebony Blade of its Blood Curse, of their battles upon Arkon's world against the Enchantress and the resulting separation of the team upon attempting to return home. When the four afore-mentioned members were lost- tossed to the strangely similar world of the Squadron Supreme for the first time.

There had been other battles between the two teams of course, since, and many monumental. It almost seemed second nature now traversing the gap of dimensional space for the two teams to meet. Were that that was the case now, but it was never simple it seemed.

They passed up the flights of stairs, and T'Challa watched their new, erstwhile companions. Superman seemed almost intrigued, actually smiling on occasion to Thor's recounting. Yet there was some deeper mystery troubling the 'Man of Steel'. Something bothered his heart. The Justice League had recounted their most recent tales of being cast into the Negative Zone and their own encounter with the Squadron Supreme. Their battle with the being they called the Time Trapper before that, and more importantly the alleged 'murder' of the child of Arcanna. To hear their side it had been an accident, and in truth- to the Black Panther at least- that seemed the way of it. Whatever the circumstance had fueled the rage they all had felt over that had passed it seemed. Grudges remained of course, and memories, but that however was not what held Superman's true attention. There was something more.

The loss of their comrades in the Negative Zone perhaps? The League had said as much, though not in great detail. Six were lost, presumed dead from their initial travels. Was there one there special to the Man of Steel? Or was it simply the dire threat that they all still faced? The recently missing Martian Manhunter and Wonder Woman- along with Hawkeye and Iron Man- two of the Avengers' own? Perhaps the very fate of their own home world lost to them for so long?

And what of the Batman- what was he thinking?

His grim façade barely ever broke. The Panther had yet to see the man sleep, let alone eat or simply rest. And his eyes never stopped moving, taking in everything. Even now he scanned the grand hallways of the Mansion, taking note of furniture, noting the many pictures and portraits, marking the windows and doors to memory. What drove a man to such extremes? His peers often considered the Panther grim and stoic, but he was nothing compared to this man from another world.

"Jarvis..."

The Panther looked ahead, drawn from his pondering to see Captain America speaking with the Avenger's butler. Jarvis had been with the Avengers from the very beginning, and nothing ever seemed to disturb his sense of dignity and duty. Not even the sudden intrusion of eight unknown heroes from another dimension. The aging butler stood proudly in his own version of attention, nodding slightly to each man in turn, returning his attention then to Captain America-

"I have presented Brunch for your pleasures, sirs," Jarvis stated matter-of-factly. "Though beyond coffee and light breads, most seem content to simply rest and exchange pleasantries. Master Beast is still in the Medical Labs tending to Masters Flash and Green Lantern?" Jarvis looked to Superman for reassurance as to the names and the Man of Steel grinned, nodding. Jarvis smiled in return, "and I believe Miss Wanda and Miss Van Dyne are giving Miss Zatanna an impromptu tour of the upper living areas and recreational facilities."

"Thank you, Jarvis," Cap said, and with a nod of his head the man smartly stepped about his serving cart and headed back towards the kitchen. Cap turned and saw the Batman watching the receding retainer with some interest, but whatever he was thinking remained a mystery behind the white slits of his cowl.

"We should get set up as soon as possible, Cap," the Panther said before the group could enter the parlor. "I'll have to give the machine a diagnostics. It has been years since we last used it, after all. I wish Iron Man was here," the Panther said with a sigh as he took the dimensional gate device from Captain America. "It is his creation, more than mine."

"I have some experience with electronics, Panther," the Batman spoke up. "If I can be of any help..."

"Any assistance would be appreciated, Batman. And best you come as well, Thor. As you will recall, we will need the power of M'Jolnir soon enough."

"Aye, my friend," Thor said with a nod. "I stand e'er ready to thine aid."

"Call us when you're ready, T'Challa," Cap said as the three men were departing for the Science Labs. "We'll be here working on morale."

**Manhattan,
Avenger's Mansion-
Third Floor
Living Quarters:**

"It's very impressive," Zatanna said as she walked alongside the Scarlet Witch and the Winsome Wasp. All three women had taken the time to shower and freshen up, now awaiting Jarvis' announcement that their uniforms were cleaned and repaired as well- except for the Wasp of course. Zatanna had been truly dazzled by the woman's wardrobe, which took up one of the smaller rooms in itself. A pity she was shorter than the other two women were, as Zatanna would have loved to swap clothes, if just for awhile.

Still, she was glad for the downtime as the three strolled the wide, lush halls of the mansion's upper floors. Wanda had said that it had once been the residence of Anthony Stark's parents- the Iron Man. She could easily see that the man had to be in the league of Bruce Wayne and Lex Luthor when it came to money, if those artifacts and relics littering the halls were at all close in equal value to their duplicates on her own world. She marveled at the décor; the furnishings rich but in excellent taste, the extravagant pottery and paintings, statues and simpler busts by masters both old and new. There were many statuettes by a woman named Masters that were truly extraordinary, and all the more so as Janet said that the woman was blind.

She stared at the many portraits as well. Members past and present of the organization she supposed, recognizing those that she had only just met. She paused, sipping at her mug of coffee as she eyed a collage of reproduced newspaper and magazine articles touting a 'new' assemblage from years before. Captain America stood in the center of Wanda, her brother and a brooding Hawkeye. All had been villains apparently, at least at one point, and the media seemed to doubt the team's legitimacy. It was so unlike home...

"Those were hard times," Wanda said as though reading the other magician's mind. Zatanna glanced at the Scarlet Witch, hearing the almost longing in her voice, but saw the smile as well. "The best of times as well. We were all so young and arrogant and so eager to prove ourselves, both to the world as well as those that came before." Wanda grinned, feeling Janet Van Dyne's hand on her arm.

"We always had faith in you," the Wasp said, her own memories coming to fore. "We never would have accepted you if we didn't see the goodness within, and it was that very arrogance and eagerness that helped you all prove yourselves... eventually."

"It seems your past was as hectic as the League's," Zatanna added in

understanding, "and as uncertain at times. I didn't join the League until much later, but I remember my father sharing many of their adventures with me, reading from the paper in the morning. There were too many times when it seemed the public had doubts, but we- the League always prevailed in the end."

Both Wanda and Janet smiled, knowing exactly what the other woman meant. "We always do," the Wasp added after a moment. "But hopefully not in our house coats," she said with a grin. "Let's go see if Jarvis needs some help with the laundry."

**Manhattan,
Avenger's Mansion-
Sub-basement Level 1
Medical Labs:**

"We hardly ever use this device," the Beast said as he swiveled the telescoping extensor arm out over the table, aiming the lens over the Flash's leg. "Though why I can only imagine. It's not a catch-all per se, no miraculous healing mechanism, yet it does speed the process remarkably."

"Seemed to work for me," the Green Lantern said as he massaged his shoulder. "At least to a point." Kyle Rayner winced as he felt a popping of bones in his neck and shoulder. The Avengers' Ultra-Rejuvenator had done a seemingly miraculous job of healing some of his minor injuries that had swelled and colored after the beating Thor had given him. Luckily there had been no internal injuries- or if there had the Ring had taken care of them. What the Ring could not heal though, the Beast's machine had for the most part. At least now he could move again without moaning.

"Goggles up," the Beast said as he stepped behind the protective screen to operate the machine. Kyle held the dark goggles over his eyes, watching as Wally West forced a smile before doing the same. The Beast was not certain if the machine would help the Flash as his own aches and exhaustion was speculated as a result of being cut off from the Speed Force coupled with his own efforts to compensate. Wally had simply pushed himself too hard. As Kyle watched, squinting into the intense violet light he could see his friend's face relax just a bit. It did seem to help, and as the Beast shut down the machine's power the Flash actually collapsed back in a sprawl.

"Whoa... baby," Flash said with a contented smile. "Give me one of these things and I might swear off sex for life." Kyle and McCoy both laughed, stepping back up beside the examination table and the young speedster.

"It is refreshing," Beast said as he slid a stethoscope pad along the Flash's chest, listening intently. "Your heart rate's still fast, though I assume that's normal? How's the legs?"

"Good," Flash said as he swung his feet to the floor and tried to stand. He wavered a bit, his legs quivering, but the other two men were both at his side to support him. "Or better at any rate. The pain's gone but I still feel shaky."

"Maybe some food," Kyle suggested. "Like the old days?"

"Not a bad idea--"

Both men felt the quick breeze as a scarlet streak vanished through the suddenly open door. The Beast grinned, glancing at the Lantern.

"That certainly brings back memories from my youth. Quicksilver and I used to be at odds quite often, and too many times--" But before the Beast could finish his statement the Flash had returned and piled plates of food up on the exam table. He faded into view with an empty plate in hand-- then suddenly it was full again.

"Better dig in guys," he said around a mouthful of eggs almost too fast to understand. "This is great, and thirds are definitely on the menu..."

And he was gone again...

"Oh, definitely," the Beast chuckled, moving off to restore the Medical Lab to a ready condition. Rayner grinned, not really knowing why, but understanding none the less.

**Manhattan,
Avenger's Mansion-
Main Floor
Parlor:**

"Coffee, Cap?"

Steve Rogers turned from the window; his own thoughts and reminiscing interrupted by the soft voice at his side. Outside on Fifth Avenue the streets were abustle again, already. There was damage of course, but repair crews were already well at work, Damage Control and SHIELD overseeing the worst. Traffic rolled along what was once known as Museum Mile, and beyond in Central Park he could see the usual crowds of people out enjoying the relatively good weather; the calm 'between' the storms as it was generally called. It seemed that it took more than the potential devastation of the cosmos to put Manhattanites off their stride for more than a New York Minute.

Cap smiled down at the Black Canary, accepting the steaming mug that she offered him. "I usually don't. I've had trouble with addictive narcotics in the past, but I'll admit that today I can use the caffeine." He took a sip, immediately feeling the very slight rush, then frowned as he saw the blonde strike a match to a cigarette. "You smoke?"

"When I'm anxious," Dinah Laurel Lance said, waving the match out and dropping it into the ashtray situated on the windowsill. She sat in the window seat, Cap still standing over her as she blew smoke out the open window. "I started young for awhile, mainly to annoy my mother. I start and stop," she said with a shrug. "I was surprised to find a humidior on the table, and a cigarette case. I'm surprised your butler allows it."

"Jarvis does his job well, and there have been a few smokers in our ranks. Stark himself," Cap smirked, "and even me for a time, back in the war before we knew better."

"It's weird," the Canary said changing the subject, watching the smoke spiral out the window and drift away on the breeze. "Not so long ago- on my Earth- I was right here, exactly. This building is a Justice League International embassy on my world. Mostly just a place to crash now, but it's an odd sense of déjà vu."

"It's a mansion on the Squadron's world as well," Cap added, sipping at his coffee. "At least it was. I suppose there are some constants in all dimensions."

"I guess," Dinah agreed as she crushed out her cigarette. Cap noted that it was barely half smoked. "I wish we could get moving. I hate this waiting."

"I know what you mean." Cap nodded, glancing about the room. He saw the Plastic Man simply content apparently to relax and eat. Cap wondered if the man's strange metabolism required extra nourishment- or any at all for that matter. He seemed a truly unique individual. Not so far away the boy- Ronnie Raymond sat watching the television, absorbed in the news of the strange world he was on apparently. He had yet to change back into his other persona- Firestorm- and Cap wondered if he had been trying, or if he could not. On the far side of the room he saw Warbird rubbing down Pietro's legs with liniment. It was an odd sight to see Carol Danvers involved in such a mundane task as she had recently been volatile to say the least. He remembered though that like he, she was ex-military and knew full well the benefits of downtime. Quicksilver for his part had declined to join the other speedster in the Med-Labs. He knew that as beneficial as the Ultra-Rejuvenator was, it could potentially be as addictive as any drug and as a rule of thumb it was only used for emergencies. A simple massage and ample rest and Pietro was usually fine.

Cap saw a shimmer of red as the Flash appeared again, but before he could even move the speedster was gone again with more food. Apparently the healing was going well.

Captain America downed the last of his coffee, setting down his mug. He had eaten lightly and felt fit and rested again, ready to go. Like the Canary however, the waiting was getting on his nerves. He glanced at the beautiful woman sitting before where he stood and found her looking up at him. She reminded him of Sharon Carter in a way; skilled and dedicated, determined and independent. Just as attractive, the same smile, huge blue eyes-

"Cap, I-"

The intercom buzzed and Cap heard the Panther's voice in the proverbial nick of time-

"We're ready..."

War World...

Ganthet staggered and collapsed, breathing heavily as he swayed on his hands and knees. His power was waning, he could feel it. The Flame still burned brightly he knew, but the negative energies, which threatened the very existence of the universe itself were cutting him from the source. It would not be long before his own reserves were totally depleted.

And still the creatures came.

He heard the roar of power, the blinding flash of light and saw Izaya not so far away still engaged in battle. He could tell that the Highfather was weakening as well, and so was Shazam. The magic like the Flame was in flux, surging at times and then barely a spark. If the creatures should mount an attack at their ebb, they would all be done.

Luckily however the monstrosities born of Chaos on the Great Wall were, for the most part, unthinking, unorganized killing machines. They swooped in like locusts, but a devastating swarm without guidance, their only purpose seemingly to devastate any and all in their path. Luckily too, individually they seemed to fall before the powers of the three.

There were just so many...

"Ganthet!" Highfather said, stepping closer. Light flared from his shepherd's staff and another of the creatures fell. Another took its place however, scrabbling closer. "Are you injured?"

Ganthet shook his head, struggling to rise. "No, old friend. Tiring, but I fight-"

Both men turned at Shazam's scream, watching as the old Wizard fell beneath a writhing mass of slick black.

"Shazam!" Lightning flashed at Ganthet's panicked shout but fizzled with nowhere to strike. The Guardian of the Universe saw Izaya's powers flare, blasting into the sea of creatures swarming over the Wizard and quickly steeled his will, adding to that power with the Green Flames of Oa. The creations of Chaos screamed and writhed, burning under the onslaught, yet still they could not see the Wizard-

There was a shimmering, a rippling as though the very fabric of space had suddenly been stirred, and just as suddenly the creatures were gone. The nearest swarm at least. Both Highfather and Ganthet stared at the still for of the old Wizard, bloodied and battered yet heaving for breath. They glanced at one another, both puzzled by the strange effect, but as they started for the old man-

"Darkseid..." Izaya gasped.

"Mongul!" Ganthet shouted, yet both knew that they were wrong even before their startled echoes died away.

The man kneeling at Shazam's side resembled both, and neither. The same size and monstrous shape, the same stony visage, yet there was something different about the blue-clad figure that neither would-be conqueror could match. There was an air of Death about him.

The stony-faced savior stood as the two older beings approached. Both were wary, and too both watched the skies for the next swarm of Chaos unleashed. The being however simply smiled, raising his hands-

"Peace, gentle beings," the man said, his voice gravelly, as etched in stone as his face. "I bring good tidings," he continued, the Wizard at his feet slowly beginning to stir. "I bring victory..."

The man gestured skyward, and Ganthet's eyes boggled at the sight. He wondered how he had not seen it before; it was so huge. It was a star ship the size of War World itself on which they all stood. It appeared spherical and white; smooth with distance save the one huge aperture on one hemisphere from which what appeared a gigantic lens protruded. Ganthet knew the wonders of the universe, yet there were few man-made structures that could compare with the might and majesty of War World. Yet this...

"I bring Galactus!"

Metropolis, The Daily Planet Building :

Iron Man soared higher, swooping up to blast at the creature climbing the side of the building. He could hear the strained whine of his over-taxed Repulsor Rays, adjusted the gain just a bit from the boot jets to compensate as he let gravity do the armor's work for a few seconds. He had the solar receptors wide, letting the power cells feed what energy they might collect though sunlight was scarce with the roiling clouds churning overhead. The electrical pins were doing a better job but the computer was having a hard time sifting energy from the anti-matter.

He watched as the monster screamed, dropping from its perch and flailing as it fell to the streets below. Hopefully that was one more down, though he doubted it. It took a head on shot of the Repulsors to actually hurt one of the creatures, and from what he had seen they could survive a simple fall.

Kicking in his boot jets once more he sailed higher again, turning in a wide arc as he scanned the building. This one seemed secure enough for the moment, at least on the outside, but the rest of the city was still under siege by the creatures. The streets were crowded with the panicked and injured- and the dead. Smoke was rising from fires raging everywhere, whether sparked by the storms or the monsters he had no idea. Not that it mattered. The once pristine city was overrun and in shambles. Its huge towers were charred and crumbling, though surprisingly none had collapsed yet. Iron Man could see that it had been a beautiful city once; huge and stretching into suburbs dwindling in the distance. Even the slums seemed... clean, but for the war raging in the streets. He wondered just where he was.

He had simply appeared, spit from a tear in the sky so like those that had appeared on his own world. It had taken a moment simply to recover, a frantic few moments as his onboard computers rebooted to at least the

point that he could control the armor again. He had brought up his Nav-software, but the system could not place his position, and simply looking around he could see that he was in no city that should exist on his own world. He saw the gigantic glass tower in the shape of an 'L' almost in the city's center, and the other building, older and smaller with the huge golden Saturn-shaped globe on top. No, not his world at all...

The Justice League's Earth then. Had to be.

He had been scanning the city, searching for some sign of the others when the creature's started appearing. They were the same monstrosities that had come swarming from the Negative Zone on his own world. Slick black and armor plated, with nothing but destruction on mind they came tumbling into the city, ravaging everything in their path. There was little to do but try and help.

He saw others doing the same. There was a man dressed in blue and gold racing through the cityscape firing blasts of energy. There was another with the same color scheme carrying a shield and struggling through the streets. There was a machine shaped like a gigantic insect floating overhead...

He needed answers, but knew enough not to approach the city's heroes in a moment of crisis like this. Here he was the unknown, and past experience led him to believe that sudden appearances usually led to obligatory fights. Too, approaching the local authorities would probably have the same result. No doubt the city's emergency units were stretched and stressed to their limits and did not need a man in armor flying in to distract them. That left the newspapers. If anyone knew the state of the world- back home at any rate- it would be J. Jonah Jameson and his Daily Bugle. Here in this city, Iron Man hoped that this 'Daily Planet' was the closest equivalent.

"Well," he said to himself, checking his battery readings a final time before sealing his armor and shooting towards what appeared to be the 'City Room', "nothing ventured- nothing gained."

He heard the obligatory screams as he sailed in slowly through the window. He cut the power to the jets, landing lightly to the floor as his scanners had read the structure as remarkably reinforced. Still, the dying winds roared scattering papers in a flurry, the heat of his over-worked jets making the worn tiles under his feet smolder.

He saw people ducking out of sight with little panic after his initial, dramatic appearance. Oddly, as a whole the newsroom staff seemed to have their 'duck and cover' routine down to a tee, as though armored men flew through their windows on a regular basis. There was one man however that did not run, though he did put a desk between them. He was older, overweight with thin and graying hair and chomping down hard on the butt of a cigar-

"Great Caesar's Ghost..." he exclaimed as he tried to split his attention between the intruder and his people. The armor was reading too a sudden surge in cell phone activity, along with a strange ultrasonic signal that seemed to be coming from a red-haired boy snapping pictures. No present danger that Iron Man could see as it raised his hands, hoping to appear

friendly-

"I... I come in peace." Tony Stark grimaced beneath his mask, glad that his armor was all encompassing. He could feel his skin flush red, burning with embarrassment. "I'm... My name is Iron Man. I mean you no harm-"

"Then what in the name of thunder are you doing here, man?" the older man said. He was obviously Jameson's counterpart on this world, or at least in this city. "Don't you know where you are?" Tony Stark shrugged-

"Actually, sir, no. I'm from... out of town, but that's not important. I'm looking for the Justice League."

"Well, you came to the right place then, son," the old man said with a grin. He pointed to the window behind Iron Man, and the Golden Avenger turned, half expecting the worst.

He saw Wonder Woman there, perched in the window frame, one shapely leg stepping down to the floor. Iron Man sighed with relief to see a friendly face at last, then grimaced to see her right hand wrapped tightly in some kind of metal brace. He looked up to her face then and saw her smile-

"Hello, Iron Man," she said, even though they had yet to actually meet.

"Welcome to Metropolis..."

Earth's Moon, The JLA Watchtower:

As a scientist, Anthony Stark always marveled at the art of teleportation. It was a science that he had never managed to get a grasp of despite his best efforts and the accomplishments of his peers. Doom had managed it, as had Sunturion, but even studying the workings of the latter's armor- though he could copy the process he could never quite find the breakthrough to patent a version all his own. It was annoying to say the least.

But as he appeared on the platform that Wonder Woman had quickly described his scientific frustrations were swiftly forgotten. He had little to do in those first seconds as his computers rebooted yet again, recalibrating from the sudden flux of spatial transition. Little to do but stare in awe at his new surroundings...

He wished that he had more time as he ignored the rattling and 'pinging' of his internal workings. He wished that the world- the very universe was not about to come crashing down around them all so that he could simply walk through the grand, sweeping halls and savor every inch of the headquarters of the Justice League. The Wonder Woman had a remarkable gift for understatement, having called their Moon base simply that, but as he craned his neck and stared trying to take it all in he knew that he was in Wonderland- or Olympus .

The walls were stark, sparkling in metallic cleanliness yet bristling with machinery that appeared baffling even to his genius at a glance. The floors were pristine tiles of white stretching out and dulling the sound of the

station that seemed almost to vibrate in its glory. He could see the Earth, a great sweep of red flowing over Asia in waxing glow of earthshine, storms crackling with pinpoints of flashing light. There was a tower rising in the distance; some communications array no doubt, perhaps a beacon for ships and the transporter mechanisms. His audio sensors were filtering a babble of newsfeeds broadcasting somewhere within, and his sensors- as they popped to life one by one- quickly gave readings on the atmosphere and power output swirling about him-

"Iron Man?"

Tony Stark blinked to see Wonder Woman standing just ahead and waiting for him. He felt foolish, like a kid in a candy store and oddly started to blush again. Twice in so short a time, it was embarrassing.

"Sorry," he said as he stepped fully from the transporter pad, still looking about but trying not to ignore his beautiful hostess. "It's... impressive. I've built my own space station, and worked on one for SHIELD and NASA, but this is truly remarkable. The technology is extraterrestrial?"

"In part," Diana smiled, amazed that the man in the armor was learned enough to recognize that at a quick glance. "It's a combination of Martian and Thanagarian technologies mainly, though everyone who could contribute did. No little effort was provided from Earth itself; funding and technology, including certain things from my own people."

"You're not from Earth?"

"Yes," Wonder Woman corrected. "I'm what is called an Amazon."

"We have Amazons," Stark said. "I've encountered a few."

"As foes it sounds," she said, walking on, her soft footfalls almost inaudible on the strange acoustical tiles.

"More often than not," Stark said as he raised his hands to the collar of his helmet. "Mind if I take this off for a bit? I could enjoy the opportunity to refurbish my supply and breathe some fresh air."

"Please." Wonder Woman watched as the man in the armor depressed hidden studs and opened locks. Soon, with a hiss of compressed air he tilted the golden faceplate and pulled the skullcap off and back while the neck bracing receded into the main torso. His hair was matted to his head, his face covered in sweat and some sort of gel, but she was pleasantly surprised to see how handsome he was under the armor. His smile was truly dazzling, and might have melted her heart in another time and circumstance. He held out his hand, still wrapped in heavy metal-

"Anthony Stark," he said with a grin, almost embarrassed. She started to take his hand, then held it up, showing him the shattered remains in the metal brace. He blushed again. "Sorry,"

"No apologies," she said, reaching out to embrace his wavering hand with her left. "I am Diana, Princess of Thymscira." There was that smile again.

"Charmed..."

"Diana?"

And the moment passed.

Wonder Woman turned and saw the familiar form of one of her oldest friends. He was dressed in his old red and black costume, his red hair in disarray as his neck stretched forward to an ungodly length, his nose vibrating madly. She saw his wife and her dear friend standing in relative safety just a bit behind.

"All's well, Ralph," she said, signaling the all-clear sign to stand down, a simple wave of her fingers in position. "This is a friend." She turned back to Stark and saw his face alight with curiosity, making her smile. "Anthony Stark, meet Ralph Dibny- the Elongated Man, and his wife Sue. Ralph, Sue, this is Anthony Stark- the Iron Man. "

Pleasantries were quickly exchanged as Diana stepped to the wall and the closest communicator. She was glad to have found Ralph, and more especially Sue here at the Watchtower when she and J'onn J'onzz had arrived back on their own world, miraculously more or less unscathed after their travails. They had appeared in Gotham, remarkably, and luckily had quickly found one of the Batman's teleport pads secreted on top of the Wayne Foundation Building . It was a simple matter from there to get back to the Moon.

They had found Ralph and Sue there, holding down the fort so to speak. Both were old friends, Ralph a long-standing member of the League so it was only mildly surprising. As they rushed her to the Medical Wing, Sue Dibny explained what had been happening in the relatively short time that they had been absent. It felt like months to the princess, but in actuality it had not even been a week in full. The strange oddities of the Time Stream had wrecked havoc with her senses apparently. Sue explained what had happened; the betrayal of Nabu and the Chaos war when the red skies had reappeared. The Justice Society had beat back Fate with the help of the Spectre and the combined efforts of the heroes of the world. No sooner had one earth-shattering catastrophe ended however, that the next had begun.

The red skies had remained, along with the strange rifts. The storms had spread, and now it seemed that strange creatures had invaded, coming through the Negative Zone. If that was truly where the tears in space led. The creatures themselves seemed oddly familiar as well, though she could not quite understand why. She had never encountered their like before this. Something from the files then?

While Ralph and Sue worked to mend her shattered fist –crushed on the other Earth by the monster Annihilus- the Martian Manhunter flew to the Monitor Womb to view the world's state, and hopefully find some sign of their still-missing friends. Not only those that they had left behind on the Avengers' Earth, but those lost to the Time Stream in the beginning; Aquaman, the Atom and Red Tornado along with Superman's parents and wife, Lois Lane. It was there that he first reported the ultrasonic alarm of Jimmy Olsen's Signal Watch. It was there that he saw the Iron Man...

"J'onn," she said over the intercom, knowing that his mental abilities were probably straining to their limits at that moment. She hated to interrupt. He had been injured himself in the battle with the Avengers, and his time in the Womb was probably his first best chance to rest. Still...

"We're back. It was only the Iron Man alone."

"Pity," she heard J'onzz say, his voice sounding heavy and tired. "I had hoped this might be simple, but it never is."

"J'onn, you should rest. I can take over--"

"You need to rest as well, Diana. More so perhaps, and the Iron Man as well. I can go longer without sleep. I shall be fine."

"But, J'onnn--" he cut the signal.

Diana turned to find the other three watching, waiting. Finally she sighed.

"J'onn is doing all he can to search for any sign of our friends that may have come across. There is little we can do at the moment, so we should rest." She directed the last to Stark, then turned to the Elongated Man. "You take the duty, Ralph. Keep abreast of the situation down below. I have every faith that the world's heroes can hold the tide, but stay alert in case things change. Anthony, I can show you to a guest room where you can rest."

"Actually," Stark said smiling at Sue. "Ralph's wife offered to give me the nickel tour, and believe it or not that would be more beneficial to my state of health than sleep. If there's someplace I could plug my armor in though, maybe freshen up a bit?"

"Of course," Diana said, considering. "Steel's workshop I believe. Sue?"

"I'd be happy to, Mister Stark," she said, crooking her elbow, which Stark automatically took.

"Anthony, Sue. Please..."

Ralph Dibny's head stretched forward, hovering just beside Diana's as the two watched the pair stroll away towards the elevators. The Princess could not help but smirk to see the Stretchable Sleuth's nose vibrating madly.

"Why do we always meet the smoothies, Diana? I really hate guys like that."

Diana smiled, knowing full well that Ralph and Sue Dibny were perhaps the most happily married couple she had ever met. If Sue seemed flirtatious, it was simply out of good humor for her husband's sake, having left her alone at home for far too many nights whilst he was playing the hero and detective.

"I don't know, Ralph," she said with a smile as she turned to her friend. "He is quite attractive however, I must admit."

"Arrgh..."

Diana afforded a laugh as her friend receded, and finally she too walked away...

**The Aerie,
Mt. Annapurna
Nepal:**

"Lund ! Lund !"

Ra's al Ghul shouted into the intercom knowing full well that he would receive no answer. There was nothing left beyond the thick, cracked safety glass separating him from what was once the main control room of Project: Babel . The vast array of machinery was simply gone. The walls, floor and ceiling had been blasted clean down to the reinforced neutronium shielding. The very plexiglas through which he stared was now warped and twisted from the heat of the negative energy that it had barely contained. Of his technical staff- and Lund- nothing remained but charred shadows etched on the walls and floor, a twisted visage of shock etched into the glass.

The room beyond was not empty however, nor still. Energy still crackled and sparked, the flickering illumination the only thing lighting the surrounding nearby labs. The entire section had shut down with the sudden surge and was dark and swiftly starting to chill. Al Ghul wondered if the entire facility had been affected, but swiftly dismissed his concern, knowing that his many followers would see to any catastrophe beyond. Smoke drifted in aftermath of the blinding blast of anti-matter that had scoured the room as well. Yet there was movement.

The silver man remained, though no longer constrained by the special machinery and devices that had encumbered his form before. The machines were gone, and he lay unconscious, smoldering on the barren floor. Too, there were the strange new comers-

The odd man garbed in purple and blue lay still on the ground, one hand yet clutching the strand of leather wrapped about his throat, the other cradling his bow. An archer then- probably a hero though not of Green Arrow's progeny nor the assassin, Merlin. Some unknown then, perhaps hoping to make a name for himself in light of the worldwide calamity.

The red-haired woman dressed tightly in leather was on her knees retching but remarkably conscious. Ra's al Ghul stared, squinting into the flickering light trying to fathom her special powers- her Meta, but she seemed no more outstanding than the unconscious archer. How had they survived?

But then he knew. He saw it. The woman had reached the last, the man in the golden armor and had been in contact when the surge had ripped through the room destroying months of work and preparation. The golden man stood close to the woman yet, and she in turn was linked to the bowman by the whip. Somehow the man had protected them all. He still held that small cylinder that he had been clutching before, and it was still

leaking energy, but there was something different as well. Ra's al Ghul had seen the like before.

He was glowing. His eyes were red and wild with a sudden madness. He shivered and hunkered, clutching the rod whilst the energies washed over him. They almost seemed a part of him now, somehow and he was almost giddy with the power...

"Father?"

Talia had come up behind him and he was so distracted that he had not noticed. He needed to focus, and quickly, or this would all run away from him.

"Status, daughter?"

"I-"

"Status!"

"The Aerie is running on emergency power- eighty-seven percent in the upper levels, less here. Thirty-eight dead when the batteries overloaded and erupted. Another fifty-two injured directly, and over two hundred exposed to the radiation before the reactor was contained. Breach in Sections thirty-one through forty-two and flooding in eight through twelve-"

"The Tower?"

"Shut down. Without the control machinery the energies are blazing skywards like a shaft of light. They are being channeled into the Rift, though why or how is unknown."

Ra's al Ghul leaned forward resting his fists on the control panel on his side of the glass. The woman was struggling to rise now, but the man in the golden armor seemed unconcerned, or perhaps simply unaware. His thoughts were elsewhere, his gaze lost to something beyond-

"At last..." his voice boomed, echoing through the room, crackling over the intercom.

"Daddy?" the woman said. Ra's al Ghul could hear the terror lacing her voice.

The golden man looked down at the young woman, his face lost behind his helmet's mask. His eyes crackled with an internal fire. "I've done it, Oubliette..."

He held up his hands and Ra's al Ghul saw anti-matter dancing between his fingers like lightning. He dropped the rod, forgotten.

"Power..." he whispered watching the dancing lights, making them flare and grow. "POWER!"

"Initiate Project: Nullify," Ra's al Ghul said, squinting into the light. "Start with Template: Steel. It probably won't work, but try none the less. Then shift to Firestorm. If that proves ineffective I shall have to reconsider. And find out just where that energy is funneling to."

Ra's al Ghul heard his daughter on her communicator, static crackling through the outer chamber. She would initiate the contingency plans, he had no doubt. He only hoped that the Detective's countermeasures meant to incapacitate his teammates would work against the man in the golden armor.

Seeing the power, the raw energies rippling off of the man, the Demon's Head had his doubts. He would have to take measures of his own...

**Manhattan,
Avenger's Mansion-
Sub-basement Level 1
Science Labs:**

"Thor?" Captain America asked seeing the sudden strain wash over the Asgardian's face. The Thunder God grimaced, but his arms remained steady and the flow of energy uninterrupted.

"I sense..." Thor said through clenched teeth. He was sweating, his arms shaking as he held his hammer out, a coursing stream of mystical energy funneling into the Trans-dimensional machine that they had taken from storage. "There was a surge of strange energies, and it has taken mine entire mettle to hold M'Jolnir fast and true."

"A surge?" the Panther asked as he stared at the machine's displays. The energy readings were all topped into the red and off the scale.

"Aye. 'Twas the foul stench of Annihilus."

"Annihilus?" Superman asked, some worry in his voice.

"Thor speaks in prose," the Scarlet Witch said with a grim smile. "It takes some getting used to. He means that the energy reminds him of Annihilus."

"Anti-matter then?" Batman suggested, and the Panther nodded.

"Most likely. My monitors are off the scale. Something is definitely influencing your dimension. Whatever was here is there now, but multiplied by astronomical proportions."

"So we can't get back?" Plastic Man asked. "That sucks BIG time."

"I did not say that. The journey will be hard, but--"

"The Son of Odin stands ready to do his part. Fear not, thy assemblage shall traverse the dimensional gap and return to thy home in safe passage."

I shall stand fast to guarantee thy safe journey. The portal shall remain open." Thor settled in, standing fast as he rolled M'Jolnir in his sweating palms.

"That might not be necessary..."

All eyes turned to Kyle Rayner as he spoke up somewhat nervously. Thor himself eyed the Green Lantern with some suspicion, the word of the Nth Man lingering in the back of his very being. The Flash stepped up, suddenly at Rayner's side, his hand on his friend's shoulder.

"What do you mean, Kyle? What-"

"I can funnel the magic, the energy coming from... his hammer. I can see it through the Ring. It's...It's just another form of light."

"Are you absolutely certain, Rayner?" Batman asked. The science was almost beyond him, and the strange magicks pouring from the seemingly simple stone hammer were baffling and confounding to say the least.

"It's easy," Kyle Rayner said, his eyes sparkling in the glow. "I can make a construct that'll redirect his energies in a cycle. He can come too that way," Kyle said with a shrug, looking at the rest of the assemblage- some of the greatest heroes he had ever seen or known. "Figure we'll need him. Long as I'm conscious- and the Ring doesn't run out of power..." Kyle shrugged again.

Thor stared at the boy that held one of the greatest weapons in the universe at his command. Kyle Rayner, Earth's last Green Lantern tried to smile, but it was forced and hollow.

"So be it. Do what you must, boy. Thor stands ready!"

Kyle Rayner looked; first to his ring, then casting his gaze to the assembled heroes. Thor stood at the rear of the small machine, his hammer channeling energy to create a portal before them all. He peered into the shimmering light but saw nothing beyond. The Thunder God seemed certain however, and the others trusted him; Batman and Superman, and the Avengers' Black Panther and Captain America . They had seen it all. They were the best. If they did not have faith...

He looked to each. Wally, probably his best friend- at least in the Meta World nodded quickly. Plastic Man grinned widely, nodding just the same. Zatanna- Zee smiled warmly, and Dinah gave him the thumbs up.

The Avengers seemed just a bit less certain. He saw the blonde- Warbird whispering to the Beast. The Scarlet Witch seemed aloof, and Quicksilver nervous, shaking at breakneck speeds. The Wasp lighted on Captain America 's shoulder and waved.

They trusted him- all of them. Even Thor- Even the man that had beat him to a pulp and left him for dead. He would have been but for the Ring- he knew that. He accepted that, accepted it -at least from the other side. Accident or no, he had killed a little kid. He had killed- at least inadvertently. He had killed, but the Ring had saved him again-

"Work thy Magic's, boy," Thor snarled as the energy spurred again, lighting the room. "E'en the Odinson is not without limits."

Kyle Rayner nodded, licking his lips. He concentrated, extending his arm—the one with the Ring, his other hand gripping the off wrist to hold it steady, keep it from shaking in terror. He held sixteen lives in his hands—him and the man... the God that had tried to kill him...

He had to get this right...

**Earth's Moon,
The JLA Watchtower:**

I HAVE THEM...

Wonder Woman staggered, slamming into the wall as the telepathic message of J'onn J'onzz almost bowled her over. Her hand went to her head and she winced again as she put pressure on her injured hand.

"J'onn..."

THEY'RE COMING...

"J'onn... I can't..."

HAWKEYE! I SENSE HIM, BUT...

"J'onn!" The princess pinched her eyes at the bridge of her nose as she hugged the wall, the world spinning...

THERE'S MORE! SPIKE! THERE'S...

"J'onn..." Diana dropped to her knees with the psychic assault. She heard Sue Dibny's screams...

NEFARIA...

To be continued...

Next Issue: At last, the conclusion. Be here to find out why and what, where and who. All answers will be revealed as the greatest battle of two universes comes to a dramatic conclusion as the Avengers and JLA play...

ENDGAME!

Be there...

Story © Curt F
Plot © Chris Munn and Curt F
Editing: Chris Munn



Avengers # 41

THE AVENGERS



**Captain
America**



Iron Man



Beast



Hawkeye

MARVEL 2000 & JLU 2001 PROUDLY PRESENT...

War World

Ganthet screamed and dropped to his knees, gasping for breath, clutching at his heart. Izaya and Shazam were at his side immediately, having nothing better to do but wait-

"What?" Izaya said, his hand on Ganthet's shoulder.

"What's happened?" Shazam asked, stroking his long, gray beard in worry.

"Kyle Rayner is dead," Ganthet wheezed, trying to catch his breath.

Ganthet looked up, his ancient eyes brimming with tears as he looked to his comrades.

"I'm sorry," the old Wizard said.

"We have lost a great warrior," Highfather said as well and Ganthet stared, breathing hard and on his knees. He shook his head in despair.

Thanos smiled as little by little...

Bit by bit...

Everything fell into place.

He glanced at Galactus, watching as the energy swirled.

He looked to the Rift...

He looked to Galactus...

The energy swirled, swelling as it flowed to the Devourer. It was working. He was consuming the excess negative energies, fueling his appetite and the Rifts were starting to heal- to close. He would need more energy- forthcoming all too soon so long as the 'heroes' did their part.

Thanos pulled the cube from thin air, teleporting it through the Gem of Space stolen from the annoying and aggravating Troll. He held it high, watching it sparkle...



**Black
Panther**



The Wasp



Warbird



Thor



**Scarlet
Witch**

Soon...

THE AVENGERS

VS

JUSTICE LEAGUE OF AMERICA

JLA

Chapter Ten:

Godhood's End!

Written by Curt Fernlund
Story by Chris Munn and Curt Fernlund

**The Aerie
Mt. Annapurna
Nepal:**

Firestorm flew higher, watching as Superman hammered on the threat of Nefaria. The Man of steel was crying, screaming, battering with all his strength-



Quicksilver

THE JLA



Superman



Wonder Woman



Batman



The Flash

Kyle was dead...

Warbird was blasting Nefaria with her energies- star powers Ronnie could see clearly now, the radiations of the sun. Nefaria ignored her best, and Superman's too. He was beyond their abilities- even the hammer. He was so strong...

Kyle was dead. Dead and gone...

"Bastard..."

Firestorm raised his arms, pointing his fists at the crackling form of Nefaria. The man was laughing as he slapped Wonder Woman aside without a care. Ronnie saw her head twist abruptly before she tumbled away, slamming into the mountainside. There was a flicker of silver at her side-

Ronald...

Firestorm returned his attention to Nefaria. He could see the strange energies dancing about the man now, and knew them for what they were. He knew how to shut him down.

Do it!

He could understand. He knew what he had to do.

He did it...

They moved through the complex swiftly and silently, each to their own thoughts. There was nothing to say really. Nothing that each of them had not heard before.

Bucky, Oliver, Jason...

The list was endless it seemed. Ever growing, and now the name of Kyle Rayner had been added to it. Possibly the names of Aquaman, the Atom, Red Tornado, Lois Lane, the Kents as well. They just did not know. There was no time. They would mourn later, and bury their dead when- if they could.

The Batman tried to ignore his feelings, pushing them aside for the time being. There was still a job to do, and worrying about Rayner was simply a distraction at the moment that he could not afford. He had the point, Ra's Al Ghul cuffed and in front of him as he led the group up through the maze



**Green
Lantern**



**Martian
Manhunter**



Firestorm



Zatanna



**Black
Canary**

of corridors again, back towards the surface.

J'onzz had relayed the plan to all of them, as the Captain had in turn relayed their success inside the Aerie. There had been some debate as to what to do next, and in the end the general consensus was to gather, and Iron Man had suggested that both the Rod and the Surfer be brought to the tower. Whether either man or machine would prove integral remained to be seen, but it seemed the logical choice.

There had been the unconscious Midas and his daughter to consider as well. Wake them and move them along, or drag them behind? Leaving them was obviously not a decision. Captain America had the strength to lift Midas in his armored bulk, but to carry it the entire way- even with the help of the others would be a Herculean task. It was the Wasp actually that solved that particular problem.

Using something that she called 'Pym Particles' she simply shrunk Midas and his daughter to an easily manageable size. She then scooped up the still unconscious villains and dropped them into an empty compartment in Hawkeye's bandoleer, safe and sound at least for the time being. They would not simply regrow at their own discretion should they wake prematurely, but were at the Wasp's mercy to return to their true size. Probably not the most humane solution, but there was no time for niceties.

"There!"

Batman glanced up from his thoughts at the first hint of natural light streaming down the corridor from around the far bend. The Wasp zipped back to the group, scouting ahead with no sign of fear.

"The entrance is just like we found it," she said, "open and not a guard in sight."

"Good," Captain America said as the group gathered closer, heading for the exit. The Panther took the rear, keeping Talia ahead of him and moving with the Black Canary and Hawkeye taking turns flanking. Captain America took the point alongside Batman, both men watching as the Wasp dwindled in the distance ahead, scouting advance. "Don't get too far ahead Jan, just in case. Stay alert everyone, and brace for the shift in light. Shield your eyes against the glare."

One by one they finally emerged, each in turn stopping dead in their tracks and staring at the scene that met their eyes. The tower of Ra's Al Ghul dominated the mountainside, the strange apparatus at the top glowing hot with a blinding light as energy poured forth shooting back into the Rift cutting into the sky. The dark, pinkish clouds still roiled and churned, black lightning arching across the sky and spiraling up into the massive tear. Thunder rolled on and on.

They saw Nefaria then, still flying; the center of attention as the others still



Plastic Man

battled him. Even from the distance they could see that the combined might of the Avengers and the Justice League was doing little more than occupying the villain. Superman held Thor's hammer- the Thunderer nowhere to be seen as the Man of Steel battered away at the Count. Energy flared with every mighty blow, and they could see Nefaria stagger only to swiftly recover for the next. Warbird continued to unleash her own star bursts, blasting at the man to no effect as Wonder Woman flew strafing assault, hitting in fly by before circling wide for another pass. Firestorm was near, but beyond the battle. His fists were aglow as he trained his nuclear energies on Nefaria, though to little or no result apparently.

On the ground near the base of the tower they saw the others. The Scarlet Witch and Zatanna were manipulating their magic, though to what effect the Batman could not guess. He could see the blurring images of the two speedsters, Flash and Quicksilver running in unison and creating a gale-force wind, a funnel that twisted upwards towards the main combatants and to the Rift beyond. Iron Man, the Beast and Plastic Man were at the tower as well, the Golden Avenger's armor stripped to the bare minimum, the pieces cobbled into the tower itself, connecting the man directly to the mechanism. There was no sign of the Martian Manhunter- or of Kyle of course...

"Fools."

The Batman eyed Ra's Al Ghul, watching as the Demon's Head stared skyward, his face a grim mask. Perhaps sensing the Batman's own gaze upon him, Ra's turned.

"You will destroy us all in your attempts to stop that madman. The tower is overloading. It was not built to withstand such a flow of power."

"Just what was it built for, Ra's?" Batman asked, scrutinizing his old foe. Ra's Al Ghul was one of the most dangerous men alive in his opinion, and he knew whatever the true purpose of the tower it would only benefit the Demon's Head in the end. Still, if Ra's was concerned, perhaps there was a chance. Ra's Al Ghul returned to silence however, unwilling to offer more-

"It was dubbed the 'Babel Tower', beloved," Talia answered. Batman saw her father snap his head about, staring daggers at his daughter. Talia frowned, looking away but continued.

"One of several scattered about the globe. They were designed originally to assault the human mind, those parts of the brain in particular that effect the ability to comprehend speech, to read and articulate thought. The plan was to shut down those areas and throw the world into disarray, the resulting chaos culling a large portion of Humanity, the rest surviving to be manipulated by my father in the Utopia that would follow."

"Incredible," the Black Panther said as he lowered the still unconscious form of the Silver Surfer to the ground. The Batman saw behind him that the Wasp was restoring Midas and his daughter to normal as well, Hawkeye and the Canary on guard just in case.

"The sheer scope of such a scheme," the Panther continued, "the magnitude... The death toll simply from accidents would be staggering. The

loss of life from unreadable signs and directions, labels on medication, hazardous materials..." the Panther's gaze narrowed, focusing on Ra's Al Ghul.

"And you call Nefaria a madman-"

"We can debate that later, T'Challa," Cap said as he stepped up to the young woman, Talia. "How do we shut it down?" Talia stared at the Avenger for a moment as though judging the man's worth before she turned to the Batman.

"I fear you cannot-" she said even as another voice cut her off in turn-

"Nor do we wish to," J'onnn J'onzz said as his form faded into view in their midst. Batman heard Hawkeye and the Wasp gasp, but glancing their way it did not seem a startled reaction, rather one of recognition, or memory. Why-

"Iron Man and the Beast directed Plastic Man in reconfiguring the tower's signaling mechanics to broadcast once again, rather than receive. The various energies, which it gathered, are being sent back into Qward. Apparently that is doing something to heal the fabric of space as I received word from the Elongated Man that the Rifts scattered about the globe are sealing, the resultant storms starting to disperse. Unfortunately Nefaria is situated by the largest Rift remaining and easily accessing even greater power now that it is focusing. He becomes stronger with each passing moment. Our initial plan to alter Firestorm's abilities through the Scarlet Witch's Probability Hexes and magic worked to a point, however Nefaria is far and away beyond Ronald's power in his present form. Nefaria is gathering energy faster than Firestorm can drain it away, and I fear that what he has siphoned off is simply returning in a cycle."

"Fools, as I said." Ra's Al Ghul sneered at the gathered heroes, then focused his gaze once again on his daughter. A look passed between them, something like shame crossing over Talia's face as Ra's glared-

"Watch-"

Too late, the Batman cursed, distracted by the events. Ra's Al Ghul kicked out even as Talia spun, lashing out. Batman blocked the kick, but the Demon's Head dashed quickly out of reach as Talia's elbow slammed into the Panther's neck, staggering him. She shoved the Panther aside as she continued her fluid movement, dropping to the ground to sweep her leg at Captain America. The Avenger jumped clear however, already in motion, responding as he hurled his shield at Ra's Al Ghul's legs, knocking him to the ground.

As planned, apparently, as Ra's tumbled, rolling with the blow and over the edge of the cliff..

The Wasp and the Martian Manhunter were over the edge immediately in pursuit, but Batman did not bother. He knew what they would find. Ra's Al Ghul left nothing to chance.

Batman turned back to Talia, locked in Captain America's embrace as the

two heroes returned. Empty handed as expected.

"He just vanished," the Wasp said, J'onzz confirming.

"Teleported perhaps, or some secret entrance back into his base where his mind is shielded from my probes. Given time--"

"He's no longer important, J'onn," Batman said, staring at Talia. "His plans are ruined. He'll turn up again, eventually, if he has the opportunity. If we can stop that..."

All eyes turned skyward again, just as the world seemed to explode...

War World...

Galactus screamed!

Thanos watched intently as the gigantic body spasmed, glowing brighter as it swelled with energy. It shifted back and forth, positive and negative as the Devourer consumed the fluctuating energies that swirled about him. Or tried to. Thanos was starting to doubt that even the mighty Galactus could contain the unbridled power of a galaxy.

Not that that was ever the true plan, of course.

The Mad Titan afforded a quick glance back to War World and his erstwhile companions still gathered there below. Trusting fools that they were, they all three stared up in awe, uncomprehending as to what was happening before their very eyes. All the better that they remain mute and dumbfounded. He did not need their interference now.

Thanos held forth the cube, watching as Galactus writhed with a fresh wave of anti-matter washing over him. The strange energies dissipated as the Devourer fed, taking in the negative. Thanos saw the Rift shrink minutely every time and knew that the other breaches about the galaxy and especially on this dimension's Earth were closing as the power was redirected here. To the old men below the plan seemed to be working. And it was in a way.

Thanos chuckled, licking his lips in anticipation. He was saving the universe... again...

Mentor would be so proud. So would Izaya.

Now, it was just a matter of time.

Waiting...

Mt. Annapurna

Nepal:

"It's not working!"

Firestorm screamed to no one in particular as he kept going, pouring on the power. He could 'see' Nefaria's make up, his cellular composition and he was doing his best to alter it even though it was messing up his head to do so. It was weird! His powers just should not work that way, not against something living- and Nefaria was that no matter what the others said.

But it was not working.

His nuclear powers were rearranging Nefaria's base composition. He was converting the ionic energy into other things, less harmful elements but as fast as he converted the man's body seemed to shift and change, sucking in more and more power. Where was it all coming from? And how was the Count containing it all? It was ridiculous!

And he was getting tired. Ronnie Raymond wondered just how long he could keep up the pace. Nefaria did not seem tired in the least, or weakened. If anything he seemed stronger. It was like trying to stop the tide, or a hurricane.

Hell, he could do that. This was worse.

He could hear Nefaria's laughter as he hammered away, pounding on Superman. The Man of Steel was out on his feet so to speak, moving on instinct as he continued to fight back. Firestorm could see the bruises on the man's face, the blood-

God, Superman was bleeding...

He could barely stay aloft it seemed, barely hold the hammer of Thor, but somehow he did. They all did. Warbird, Wonder Woman, all the others on the ground, doing whatever they were doing. They all kept fighting, and Firestorm would do no less.

Firestorm winced to see Nefaria's fist slam down onto Superman, sending the Kryptonian falling. He heard the boom of the impact as he watched Wonder Woman and Warbird streak skyward to take up the direct battle again. Ronnie gasped as Superman hit the snowy slopes far below a moment later, he himself inching skyward to join the fray head on. Maybe he could make a difference up close and personal somehow. Maybe-

No!

Firestorm yelled to hear the Martian Manhunter's cry in his head. He paused, glancing down.

"J'onn?"

Hold position, Ronald. Employ your powers as planned. Help is on the way.

Firestorm looked about, licking his lips as he did as instructed. Where the necessary help was coming from he had no idea, but he had faith in J'onn. He would do what he had to do.

No matter how useless it seemed...

Captain America grimaced, watching as Superman slammed to earth. The mountain seemed to rumble with the impact, or it could have been the thunder it was hard to tell.

"T'Challa?"

The Black Panther crouching at his side scanned the far away spot, watching as plumes of snow billowed, steam drifting on the winds stirred by the speedsters. The Panther was silent for a time, but Steve Rogers knew that T'Challa's sight was far better than his, perhaps better than any of them for a normal view and the Martian had enough to concentrate on-

"He's moving." Finally the Panther stood. "He's hurt, but alive." Cap nodded.

"Pietro," he said, his thoughts relayed by the Martian Manhunter instantly. "Get to him. Get him here. We need to regroup." Cap glanced skyward.

"Wonder Woman," he said again. "Join us. Carol," Directing his thoughts to Warbird, "it's up to you for the moment. Keep him busy. You and Firestorm. Flash keep up your cyclone. Keep the funnel redirecting the energy towards the Rift as best you can. Just a little longer, people--"

Quicksilver appeared within the perimeter, the Man of Steel at his side, the Mutant Speedster supporting the other's weight. Pietro seemed only a bit out of breath, winded from his non-stop movement, but the mere fact that he was still on his feet after so long was astounding. Superman on the other hand looked as though he had been through a ringer. The alien's left eye was swollen shut and his face seemed more bruised than not. He still held Thor's hammer, remarkably, though it dangled at his side, the strap looped about his wrist. Cap recalled that one brief time when he had wielded M'Jolnir. It was an honor afforded to a very select few. Cap watched as the Panther took the Man of Steel, then turned to Quicksilver-

"Any sign of Thor?"

"He's there," Pietro said, pointing at a mountain in the distance. "Unconscious and far too heavy for me to lift, let alone carry back. He's in a bad way."

"Go back. Try to wake him," Cap ordered and Pietro vanished even before he could finish. "We need him," he said to the empty space where Quicksilver had been standing. He saw Wonder Woman land softly, if not gracefully no so far away. She looked only a little better than the Man of Steel. Oddly it was the Batman that stepped to her side to offer support. Cap saw the woman Talia frown at that, held in check still by the Black

Canary.

"Tony?"

'Beast here, Cap,' Captain America 'heard' in his head. 'Shell head's a little busy at the moment trying to keep his armor from going 'BOOM'. You would not believe the power generating in this tower. It's astronomical. I don't know where it's coming from.'

"I do," Cap said as he glanced at the unconscious form of the Silver Surfer. It was the only logical explanation, having gathered all the bits and pieces, all the fragments together. "Stand ready, McCoy. Be ready to free Iron Man from his connections."

'Will do, chief.'

A flare of light from above and he saw Warbird flailing, struggling to stay aloft. She had done something- Nefaria was shaking his head and rubbing his eyes, but she had hurt herself in the process. Firestorm kept up his assault, but the boy would not last much longer. They had to hurry now.

"Superman?" Cap said not daring to look at the Man of Steel. He knew whatever he asked the man would do or die trying. He was a hero, ready to give his all, and that was what Cap was about to ask of him, of them all-

And himself of course. He could do no less...

Carol Danvers screamed as Nefaria squeezed, crushing her hands.

Her starbursts were done, depleted and useless so she had taken the fight to him again. She had to buy the others time. Cap had needed her to hold the fort, keep Nefaria occupied and she had. She had gotten in a few solid blows before count Nefaria had simply blurred and grabbed her fists in mid-swing. He was just too damn fast.

Tears swelled in her eyes with the pain. Nefaria simply laughed and squeezed all the harder. Her vision started to gray, to dim-

"Let her go!"

She barely heard the boy, Firestorm. He was shouting, his powers exploding over them both and the pain eased just a bit as Nefaria winced. Warbird saw him look up and away, his eyes glowing.

"You annoy me freak," Nefaria said as his eyes blazed, beams of fire shooting forth and sweeping the sky in Firestorm's wake. "Dieeee!"

She was free suddenly, tumbling through the air. She forced herself to concentrate, to think past the pain and right herself, to fly. A new wave of pain washed over her as blood rushed back into her shattered hands, remarkably pulling her from her daze. She screamed again, but cut her cries short, gritting her teeth as she focused on the pain. She looked

skyward, for Nefaria, tears running down her face.

The Superman was back, pounding relentlessly on Nefaria with Thor's mystic hammer in hand. He was actually driving Nefaria back, not giving the villain time to breathe, to think. Hammering mercilessly. She saw Nefaria's eyes blaze again-

And Wonder Woman was there, wielding Captain America's shield. She swooped right in, blocking Nefaria's eye beams with the shield, bouncing them right back at him and it was Nefaria's turn to scream as he was bathed in the heat and radiation of his own assault.

She saw Firestorm again, floating in the background. He was still blasting away with his powers, and more. There was the Martian, his eyes aglow in the dark shadows of his brow. He was doing something, and Carol realized that the telepathic link was gone. This was it-

Nefaria shook his head, swinging wildly as the Man of Steel kept hitting him with the hammer. The Wonder Woman was right there too, at his side deflecting blows, striking with the unbreakable shield. The Martian was fucking with his head while Firestorm continued to leech his power-

Thunder slammed down over them all as freezing rain fell like a sheet from the suddenly dark sky. Warbird strained to hold position as the winds trebled. She strained simply to see, blinking the after image of lightning away, blotting her vision.

She saw him then, hovering there. He was naked, his armor stripped away, his hair burned and his body charred and blistered from Nefaria's assaults. He was flying without the hammer, but she quickly understood. He didn't need a hammer. He was a god.

"Nefaria!" Thor shouted, and Carol Danvers cringed at the anger lacing his voice. "Villain, thy time hast come! Though grim Hela claim my soul this day, that dark mistress shall take thine hand as well and lead thee to the lowest depths of her domain!"

Thor raised his hands and the very air seemed to tremble. Static washed over her, making her hair stand on end. She saw Superman and Wonder Woman squinting into the growing storm, struggling to hold position. Firestorm was gone, and even Nefaria finally seemed put out. He almost looked afraid.

Thor lowered his arms and lightning sprang forth, dropping from the heavens like a jagged wall of light. Thunder slammed into them all like a tidal wave. She thought that she heard Nefaria scream.

But maybe that was herself...

Cap stared up into the storm, squinting against the glare, the sudden rain that chilled to the bone. He saw the occasional glimpse, a shadow in the sky but who or what he could not tell. That battle was beyond him.

He hefted the Nega Rod in his hand, splitting his attention between the rod itself and the Silver Surfer on the ground at his feet. He hoped that he had judged it all correctly. He hoped that he would at the very least revive the Surfer, adding another soldier to the ranks. Even better that the act would drain away at Nefaria's seemingly inexhaustible power source.

Of course he was quite possibly about to kill a man as well, one way or another. But then, if they did not succeed odds were that they would all be dead before too long. Nefaria would not be merciful, should he win.

Cap knelt beside the Surfer. He licked his lips, a final consideration, thinking-

Praying...

"I'm sorry," he said as he plunged the nozzle of the Nega Rod into Norrin Radd's chest...

War World...

Now!

Thanos saw the surge. He felt the shift as a wash of power came suddenly flooding through the Rift and enveloping Galactus. The giant screamed again as his body writhed. Light bent about him, his form taking on black shadow of anti-matter for a moment and Thanos knew that his opportunity had arrived.

Using the Infinity Gem of Space he willed the cube into the very negativity, that, which had been the Devourer of Worlds and was now his opposite. He winced, watching as the power flared with impact, his construct lost within the elder being. The null that was once the end, now too the beginning.

Alpha and Omega clashed. Darkness and light, chaos and order, whatever it was or would be, there was the spark. It was that thing, which Kronus had sought. It was that sight lost on the blind man, the paradox that confused the World Mage.

It was HER desire he knew now after so long.

It would be his gift to HER...

Mt. Annapurna Nepal:

Nefaria screamed to feel his soul ripping away.

He felt the winds. He felt the storm, the never-ending rain of blows as they assaulted him over and over, wearing him down. The alien with Thor's

hammer. The woman with Captain America's shield. The God of Thunder himself! He could not think, could not respond. Damn, he knew now what the boy was doing.

The power was fading, siphoning away and back into the Negative Zone. Whatever had held it in check was gone, fluttering skyward towards the Rift, caught on the wind churned up by the speedsters. Damn them! Damn them all!

He should have killed them when he had the chance instead of toying with them.

Now. Now it might be too late.

Or he could run. He could run back into the Zone. True, Annihilus was there, but he had enough power remaining to deal with that freak of nature. And somehow he knew that if he could reach the Zone again, he would be safe. They would not dare to follow him there, being only human as they were.

Nefaria screamed again, shooting skyward and lashing out as he flew for the Rift. He felt his arm slam home, brushing aside soft flesh in passing. The Wonder Woman? He did not care, did not stop as he rocketed to safety, oblivious. His eyes blazed clearing his path-

And something slammed against his chest.

Count Nefaria glanced down and saw the Cosmic Control Rod planted squarely in his chest, but that was not what captured his attention. Rather it was the tiny man dressed in shreds of red and blue. He was barely a few inches tall, his arms looped about the rod as he struggled to twist the nozzle. He glanced up with a smile and Nefaria blinked-

"What-"

And one more time the world exploded...

The Negative Zone...

Aquaman winced as he raised his arm trying to shield his eyes from the sudden, dazzling display of light. He hissed, sucking air through gritted teeth as he felt the burn, shifting to shield Lois from the brunt of the explosion. He still heard her cry out from behind.

It had been a desperate, fantastic shot; a throw that few might have made. Maybe Ollie, Bruce of course, any number of villains naturally. Well, perhaps it had been the Atom that had guided his throw more so than his own unerring aim. Palmer would have used his powers to help guide the cylinder on target, adjusting his mass as needed to make certain that the Rod flew true.

Still, the job had been done. The strange energy rod had struck the

apparent villain squarely and the Atom had managed to activate it. That they had even come upon the scene, that they had found the proper hole in the number of Rifts that still littered Qward was astounding in itself. Arthur wondered if perhaps some god might be on their side after all.

They had lost all track of time within Qward, and in truth it really seemed as though there were something wrong with the very fabric of reality. Red Tornado had felt the effects first, not so long after they had escaped that first world where they had fought the strange creature called Annihilus alongside the equally bizarre heroes they had encountered there. They had decided to try their 'luck' and accept their collective fate back within the anti-matter universe, and not so long after that the Tornado had simply shut down.

Even Ray had no explanation for it, save perhaps his extended absence from his true realm. They were none of them sure exactly just what the Red Tornado had become over the years; an android, an Elemental, some queer combination of both? Whatever, he had collapsed after a time and with him had gone their only means of propulsion through Qward.

How long they had drifted they had no idea. They had passed rifts and holes, tears leading somewhere though no place that seemed familiar by the brief, bare glimpses they received...

There had been a world that seemed composed of mechanical doppelgangers of the League. Another that depicted them all as knights and wizards, damsels and kings.

They had witnessed a world where Batman ruled as a vampire. Another where he was old and battling Superman while wearing a massive suit of armor. Ollie was in that one, one-armed and bald.

There was a reality where the seas had overtaken the land, but Arthur was surprised to find his brother ruling there, lording over all like a dictator.

There were many that were simply scenes of devastation; melted buildings or barren deserts, a world of ice and darkness...

Finally they had found 'this' Rift, drifting closer. They saw a world in the not too distant distance that seemed on the verge of perpetual explosion, but the rock on which they rode avoided that explosive atmosphere and sailed lazily towards the hole and potential survival. They drifted close, straining to see...

There was Superman, but wielding a hammer.

There was Diana but carrying a strange shield resembling the one that Captain America had held in that first reality.

There were others that they did not recognize, all battling some glowing paragon of a man that seemed akin to a god himself the way he was batting his foes about-

"This can't be it," Arthur had said, shaking his head glumly. "Too many there that I don't recognize."

"Clark..."

They had looked at Lois then, he and Ray Palmer. She looked tired and weak, still wrapped in the remnants of Wonder Woman's broken lasso. Her eyes were wide and staring as she licked her lips, watching as the Superman beyond attacked the paragon.

"It's Clark... Superman!" She looked up and about, her gaze shifting between Atom and Aquaman. Her voice had been near frantic.

"Lois," Aquaman had said calmly, sighing as he looked to her, obviously lost after their drifting through Qward. "Look again. There's so many there that we don't recognize. This can't be-"

She was up and on her feet, her fist pounding Arthur Curry's chest. "It's Clark, damn it!" she shouted, tears in her eyes. "You think I don't know my husband?"

Aquaman looked to the Atom, and Ray Palmer in turn looked through the Rift. "If it was Jean..." he said, his lips twisting. He looked to Arthur. "You'd know Mera."

Aquaman glanced back through the tear again, then looked back to Lois, nodding.

"You're right. But what do we do?"

"We have to help them!" Lois shouted, and Arthur found his hand on her shoulder, holding her back before she simply leapt into the void.

"Agreed," he said, pulling her back from the edge of the small asteroid that had been their home for so long. "But we cannot just jump blindly into that. Whoever that man is he's easily holding his own against several obviously powerful Metas; Superman and Wonder Woman among them. Much as I am loathe to admit it, I am not in their league power wise, and neither is Ray."

"But we have to do something. We have to help!" Lois was near hysterical by then. Arthur Curry blamed it on their time of seclusion, their aimless wanderings away from their loved ones. He blamed it on the desolation of their surroundings. He blamed it on her worry over the Kents, still unconscious and hopefully secure within the inert form of the Red Tornado. He looked to Ray hoping for some support and saw the Atom considering the strange metallic cylinder, rolling it in his hand-

"It's this," Atom said holding the rod up. "I'm sure of it. The Hulk said this was some kind of containment vessel, and it seemed to empower Annihilus somehow. This is the key to that," he said, gesturing at the scene beyond, on the other side of the Rift. They all looked as if on cue and saw lightning flashing, ripping through the sky and striking the glowing man. He seemed only slightly perturbed.

"We need to affix this to him somehow," Palmer continued. "Somehow I think this will either drain him of that power he seems to be brimming with, or divert it some way- back into Qward maybe, maybe even back to

Annihilus." The Atom shrugged. "I dunno. I'm just guessing, mind, but it 'feels' right."

Aquaman nodded. "I've come to trust the feelings of my teammates, Ray," he said glancing at Lois Lane-Kent. "All of them. What do you suggest?"

It had been a desperate plan. Aquaman would hurl the rod, the Atom guiding the throw through his mass manipulation, riding the momentum. It would strike the glowing man and Ray would activate the rod, sucking the power away. The glowing man would lose his power and they would win. They would go home.

It had seemed simple enough at the time...

Nefaria cursed, spitting as he felt the power wane.

He stared at the Cosmic Control Rod jutting from his chest, his eyes wide as he watched the ionic energies dancing from the ass end of the nozzle. He tried to reach up, to grasp the metal cylinder and yank it from his chest, but his arms were suddenly all too leaden and solid, his very body weighing him down as weakness washed over his form. He stared...

His eyes sparked and the world faded to red as he focused on the rod. He saw the blaze as he willed the energies from his eyes, the concentrated blast of ionic energy coalescing on the weapon. He screamed in agony even as smoke and steam billowed skyward, the metal of the rod wavering, bending in the intense heat that his eyes were generating, redirecting.

His head spun about, snapping as the alien drove the hammer home. Some form of plasma spat from his lips-

Thor waved his hand, made a fist and lightning swelled, striking, ripping through his body. He staggered-

The woman slammed Captain America's shield, edge against his throat.

They were trying to kill him.

Count Nefaria looked up, shaking his head. He swept his gaze about, burning them all, weak as it was. Still they screamed, writhed at his whim. But he was tiring, his strength was eking away, siphoning into the rod, and beyond. The little man was gone- if he had ever been there at all- but the damage was done.

He felt the wind then, the cyclone flowing up from the ground trying to force him back. More, there was another, the force of a hurricane coming from above. He glanced skyward and saw a man cast in red commanding the winds of the storm. Who was that?

It did not matter. He was too close. He would not be defeated now. Not by the likes of these...

"Help!"

The Superman looked up at the sound of the voice. It was all too familiar. He had heard it so many times over the years. His eyes flashed, his amazing sight scanning the heavens, his X-Ray Vision delving into the Rift-

"Lois..."

He saw her then. His wife, the woman he loved more than life itself as Nefaria cast his burning gaze into the rip in the fabric of space. She was there with Aquaman and the Red Tornado, and Nefaria's own Heat Vision destroyed the asteroid that they were standing on. Arthur and Lois fell back into the real world, the Red Tornado simply hovering there in the void between.

"Lois!"

He caught her. Simply, no fanfare, no outstanding feat, he just caught her and held her close, tight...

"Lois..." he whispered. He ignored the golden cord wrapped about her upper torso. He ignored the fact that she seemed twenty pounds lighter and smelled of sulfur, her skin parched and dry. He simply held her, pulling her close as she in turn wrapped her arms about his neck. Her lips were soft, cracked. Her breath was hot as she buried her face into his neck-

"Clark..."

He did not care. It did not matter.

"Lois..."

Thor reached out as M'Jolnir fell within reach. He grasped the hammer, the mystic Uru metal vibrating at his touch, the power instilled by Odin himself rolling through his form once again.

He smiled briefly. He had been surprised- just a bit- that the Superman had proven worthy, one of those select few worthy to wield the might of M'Jolnir. A true warrior then, a brave and bold soul. One of the world's finest-

'Thor?'

"I stand ready, Captain. Nefaria falters. What needs be done?"

Carol Danvers tried to focus past the pain. Her hands were shattered, crushed, but she would be damned if that would stay her hand if she was

to deliver the final blow.

She called on the star power, the forces from beyond that she had wielded so freely when she had been Binary. It was hard now, the energies often escaped her, but she had enough for one more assault today. She could feel them swelling now, a song in her mind as she tried to focus, to draw the power of the stars to her beck and-

'Carol...'

"I'm ready, Cap..."

The shield was fantastic. It was light, and so strong. Easily as indestructible as her own lasso. More so apparently.

Diana still grimaced however as she adjusted the straps, angling the disc between her and the form of Nefaria, trying to stay the effects of his energy discharge. She watched, trying to judge, trying to decide when best to strike, and knowing full well that when she did it might be the last-

'Wonder Woman...'

Diana gasped, hearing the voice in her head.

"I understand..."

It was time...

'Tony!'

Iron Man glanced up at the strange sensation. He 'heard' Cap's voice in his head and knew that his leader was sending the final word. They finally had the opportunity, the means to take Nefaria down.

"You heard?" the Beast asked, craning his neck and peering up at him. The open panel in the tower sparked and crackled with the Beast's renovations. Plastic Man's head came snaking out as well, his goggles wide with wonder.

"I heard," Iron Man answered as he adjusted the circuitry in his gauntlets, watching the read outs scroll past once again. They would probably never be ready, but they were as ready as they were going to be.

"Let's do this," he said as he sent a surge of power coursing into the tower. He had maybe thirty seconds of energy left, once he purged his power cells- if he was lucky. The back up battery array would burn out quickly, and he would be dead weight soon. Hopefully it would be enough.

"Once more into the breach," McCoy said as he stuck his head back into the circuitry, racing to adjust the tower's output.

"Here come the Judge..." Plas echoed, his body shriveling and snaking, worming its way back into the tower as well without a care to his own safety.

Stark just had to smile...

Ronald Raymond poured on the power.

He did not know what he was doing- not anymore- but he kept doing it. He could see the power, the ionic energy fluttering skyward, converting at his whim. How... Why... He had no idea.

He felt the surge. Ionic energy converting to something less, something simple and beneficial...

Helium...

Oxygen...

Lead...

It was incredible. Whatever the Scarlet Witch had done had pushed him over the edge. He could effect sentience. He could effect god-

Hell, he WAS God!

'Firestorm...'

Ronnie Raymond blinked, looking about. It was Captain America, but where?

"Wha-"

'Listen, Firestorm. Listen to J'onnn...'

Ronnie licked his lips, concentrating as a wave of energy seemed to wash over him- over the whole range of mountains. He forced the power forward. He saw Nefaria shift...

"Faster!"

Wally West shouted over the whine of the wind, the continuous rumble of sonic boom as he raced the path he was swiftly burning into the eons old rock of the Himalayas. His course was afire, steam rising and swirling in his path, frozen in the heartbeat that it took to make the circuit once more. Only slightly changed the next, and the next.

He was hot, sweating and tired. His lungs felt ready to burst as he raced

ever faster. The Speed Force was stabilizing somehow, he could feel it, feel the song. But it was not quite right yet, still fractured and out of sync. Just a bit.

"Faster!"

He saw the streak of silver blur past, lightning flickering as Quicksilver drew near for less than a microsecond. He was good. Keeping pace. Not as fast of course, but then Wally had been the slower in HIS world. Tit for tat. Yin and yang. It was only right. Only expected.

"Faster!" he shouted again, not knowing if the Mutant Speedster could even hear him in the roar and rumble. He could feel the shift though; the blast as the vortex they created writhed skyward to encompass the power mad maniac that had killed Kyle.

"Kyle..." he whispered. His eyes were watering, from the burn of course, from the pain of the push, the race. His throat hurt.

The wind shifted again and he chanced a glance skyward. The Rift was rippling, and there was something within, a shadowy form casting crimson in the flashes of lightning. The Red Tornado, had to be.

The others were back and Reddy was adding his awesome cyclonic powers to their own, taking their vortex and directing it through Nefaria and then into the Rift. He could hear the whine of conflicting elements, the sizzle of pure power unchecked as Reddy's vortex moved counter to the one they were creating, ripping at the killer, the murderer.

Kyle was dead...

"Faster!"

"He's adapting."

J'onnn J'onzz, the Martian Manhunter looked away, rubbing at his eyes and pinching the bridge of his nose, trying to drive the lingering images from his vision.

"Mutating, I don't know. Whatever the Atom did, he was starting to weaken, but he seems to be drawing power again, changing."

"He's growing as well," Cap added, passing the borrowed bat-noculars back to the Batman. "And his skin seems to be burning away. He's become a being of pure energy, like our Wonder Man. If he completes his metamorphosis we may not be able to beat him."

"You're idiots."

The gathered heroes turned to see Midas, still lying on the ground, his huge metallic head resting in the lap of his daughter.

"You tell 'em, daddy," Oubliette said with a smirk, flipping Captain America the finger. He ignored her, directing his attention to Doctor Midas.

"Why are we idiots, Midas?" Cap asked, his slightest movement a signal to Hawkeye to keep the armored villain covered. "Do you have something to contribute?"

Midas shifted slightly as his daughter placed a cigarette into the mouth slit of his helmet, lit it. Midas exhaled with a long sigh, blue smoke drifting on the trailing wind.

"The Nega Rod," he said, glancing up and at Nefaria again. "It'll redirect his energies- the negative energies. Whatever the little man did with HIS Nega Rod, that's what's fucking his positive energies, throwing him in a state of flux. I can see it through the helmet. The conflict between the two will send half his power back into the Zone, wherever the source of Annihilus' powers originate."

"There is what appears to be a 'Nega Rod' imbedded in Nefaria's chest," J'onn confirmed. Midas nodded.

"Plug your Rod into him too, blow that tower and you'll overload him. While he's still partially human, he's vulnerable. Wait too long and we can all kiss our asses goodbye."

Cap stared long and hard at Midas, trying his best to read the man, but his golden armor hid much. He turned to the Batman, but the detective simply shrugged.

"Your call, Captain," Batman said, looking to Talia, but she had nothing to offer. The Panther too was little help.

"It sounds feasible. Midas has nothing to gain."

Captain America glanced skyward again. He held the fates of so many in his hands. He quite possibly might kill Nefaria if he gave approval. But how many more would die if he did not?

"Tony..."

"Arrgh!"

Nefaria screamed as he felt the burn. His body seemed to boil and swell as he was bathed in a wash of solar radiation. Still, he steeled himself, trying to focus. He saw the alien, the Superman-

Stellar energy ripped through his form, sending him tumbling. Before he could right himself he felt his body shift again, the boy with the flaming hair. He was changing him somehow, altering him, and his energies were flowing towards the rift, caught in the vortex.

He needed to focus. He needed to-

"Gahhh!"

His brain seemed to explode. Sizzling tears swelled from his eyes as his head threatened to burst from the pain. Psychic, he knew the feeling.

Shift again- the boy.

Something slammed into him. Power! He felt power and something solid. His ears were ringing, hard to think, to concentrate.

The Silver Surfer shot past. Where had he come from? And there was a woman riding the back of his board, the blonde. She was screaming-

"Ahhh!"

Lightning ripped through him again, piercing, frying his core. Thor, damn him. Damn him!

They were hitting him en masse, as one. Coordinated somehow, blasting him with a myriad of energies at once. Fools, they could not stop him now. Not now. They were only making him stronger-

A flash of silver as the Surfer passed and Count Nefaria stared down at the sudden pain. There was another rod jutting from his chest. Another! Where...

What...

Now Tony!

LIGHT!

Bright and pure, white as the driven snow. The tower seemed to glare as a beam of white energy raged forth, rushing in a wave that enveloped Nefaria, washed over him and pulled him away. He could feel the sudden pain, as though his body were being stretched to its limits, torn apart and pulled towards infinity.

"No..."

They were watching. All of them just watching as the light cascaded skyward, caught on the winds of the sucking vortex, directed back into the Zone. He could feel his body starting to fade and disperse, to slip away as the power retreated-

"No!"

He was too close. He had come too far. He would not let the power, the divinity slip through his grasp now. Not now! Nefaria concentrated, gritting his teeth, tensing his muscles as he fought to draw the power back. They would not win.

They would not-

NOT...

WHITE

**The WatchTower
Earth's Moon
Later...**

There was pain. Pain and darkness, though in truth the darkness was paling. Swirling. There were sounds as well, muffled and distant, but if he focused he could make out things that he understood. Things that he recalled.

"Captain?"

Captain America opened his eyes and immediately tensed. The surroundings were vaguely familiar, though he could not recognize them at first. Sterile, metallic walls, the smell of antiseptic and lemon, a bright light glaring overhead.

"Welcome back."

There was a woman above him. Probably one of the most beautiful women he had ever seen in his long and tired life. She had kinky red hair pulled back into a loose bun and a pleasant smile, sparkling blue eyes contrasting her dusky skin behind wire-rimmed glasses. She flashed a thin beam of light in his eyes.

"How do you feel?"

"I-" his voice croaked and he had to clear his throat before he could answer. "I'm sore. Burning. Who..."

"My name is Paula," the woman said returning her slender pen light to the breast pocket of her long white coat. "I'm a friend of Princess Diana. She brought me here to help." The woman extended a finger and held it before Cap's face. "Follow," she said as she directed her index finger back and forth in front of his eyes. A doctor then. Cap obeyed.

"Where am I?" he asked as the woman stopped the finger movement and adjusted something overhead. He heard a metallic 'click' and was suddenly washed in a soft violet light.

"You're on the JLA's WatchTower, in the Sick Bay to be precise." She reached up after a minute and turned off the light.

"You're fine, Captain," she said with a smile as she jotted notes onto a paper on a metallic clipboard. "You'll be feeling a sunburn for a few days, but otherwise you're probably the best specimen of manhood that I've had the pleasure to inspect. Thank you."

"You're welcome," Cap said as he sat slowly up. His head was spinning a

bit, as though he were suffering from too much heat and sun. He glanced about the room as he waited for the lab to stop spinning. The doctor, Paula, had shifted to the adjoining table.

He saw the Batman. The man's skin was red, but otherwise he seemed fine at least as far as Cap could tell. His cape and shirt were missing, though he still wore his cowl, not that it mattered he supposed. But he had thought that they were all among friends. He remembered the early days of the Avengers though, and the secrets they all kept for a time.

When the doctor moved on again, towards the Black Canary and the Panther beyond, Cap smiled at the detective, noting that the man seemed as dizzy as he had moments ago. "You all right?"

"I'll live." Batman sat up, looking about, feeling his bright red face. "Yourself?"

"I've suffered worse. What happened?"

The man who was Batman smiled grimly. "We won." His slight smile quickly faded however. "We suffered our losses though. J'onn was here before you woke up. Green Lantern of course. And the Atom is missing."

"The tiny man." Batman nodded.

"He gave his all, apparently. Showed us the way. He has the habit of showing up, however. If he's alive, I imagine he shrunk into a microscopic world to escape damage. We'll find him, when he's ready to be found."

"The others?" Cap asked. He found his shield beside the Med-Lab bed, slipped it onto his back and wincing at the pain from the burn. Batman slipped his shirt over his head, starting to dress.

"No other casualties. We were lucky. Most of us, those at our power level suffered burns, heat stroke or its equivalent from the excessive radiation. Aquaman suffered the worst because of his unique physiology. He'll be in the 'tank' for a few days at least as he and his group suffered even more. They were apparently stranded in Qward- your Negative Zone- for some time. Longer than we were hopping dimensions. The Time Stream I expect. At any rate, Diana, Wonder Woman called in her experts from her homeland to help us out, help us heal. The damage was more mental I think."

"We'll heal," Cap said as he eased off the gurney. He was tired and aching, feeling as though he had gone through a ringer. He hurt, but he would survive.

The Batman stood as well, hissing through clenched teeth at the pain. He looked to Cap, forcing a smile. "You did good. You took an army and directed them- us, in the worst situation. You gained our trust, and trusted us in dire circumstances. I'm impressed, Captain."

"Steve," Captain America smiled, extending his hand. "Call me Steve."

The Batman took the hand without hesitation, shook it, almost whispering, "Bruce..."

Epilogue One:

The Edge of Infinity...

Eric Arcane looked up to the WALL, watching as the Spectre began slowly to fade away. He was the last of the 'special' people, the extra-special entities that had appeared to help in their direst need. The In-Betweeners, Lord Chaos and Master Order, the Nth Man, Aquarius, all of them had left without a word or thank you. Assholes all.

Arcane reached into his coat and produced a pseudo cigarette, lighting it with a slight flare of magic. He drew in the smoke, letting it fill his astral lungs as he stared at the great gaping holes still etched in the Wall. Nothing spewed forth, as they had been sealed somehow, but they were a reminder.

"Well, it's been a thin slice a' heaven, lad."

Arcane turned, looking at the Constantine. He looked none the worse for wear, his hair more or less in place, his long coat just scorched a bit about the fringes. He had a Silk Cut dangling from his lips, his hand hanging out waiting to be grasped. Arcane sniffed.

"That's it then?" he asked, breathing deep of his cigarette. He had healed a bit, but he was still older than he should have been. His dreads were flecked with gray and his skin was lined and sagging, pale. He was only just a little happy to note that Strange looked worse; weak and feeble, his gray temples just a bit more streaked. His eyes were dark and rimmed with red.

Mysterium had departed, taking Arcanna- what was left of her at any rate- with him, back to whatever reality they had originated from. Occult still lay there steaming, staring into the void.

"Don't be like that, son," Constantine said, flicking ash from the butt of his cigarette. "We done good here t'day. You ought'a be proud. 'Appy at least."

Arcane stared at the WALL, floating there in space at the edge of reality. It had been healed to a point, but there were places where beings had been, now sealed but vacant. Arcane knew that there were five, FIVE creatures out there that someone would have to deal with eventually. "We failed..."

"Not 'ardly, son," Constantine said, flicking his butt into the void. "The Wall's still there. Sure a couple bad asses got loose, but that's why God made 'eroes. The BIG guns'll take care a' that. We're done."

"Are we, Constantine?"

Strange stepped forward, staring up at the Wall as well. He seemed almost

lost as he stared on, longingly. "I can only imagine that we will be called upon again to right this."

"Yeah, well that's why we get paid the BIG Bucks, Stevie. Suck it up."

Strange frowned, then looked to Arcane. "Will yourself back..."

Strange vanished, his form fading back into the Astral Plane.

"Bloody ponce," Constantine spat, lighting another cigarette. He looked to Arcane, grinning that 'eat shit' grin he had down so well. "Steer clear a' that one, son. You got potential. You don't need 'im-"

"We all need friends, Constantine."

John Constantine moaned, shaking his head. "Bloody 'ell, mate. This is where I came in." He glanced at the dark man that had stepped up to their fading group and shook his head. He smiled at Arcane.

"Keep yer nose clean, son."

Eric Arcane watched as the astral form of the man, John Constantine slowly faded away. With his passing he felt the rock that had been their base start to crumble away as well as it headed towards the Wall. It would disintegrate in proximity, eventually, and that would be it. He turned to the dark man who was staring off into space.

"So we won?" he asked, and the man almost smiled.

"In a sense. We have helped stem the tide, Eric Arcane. We suffered true, but life goes on."

"And the Giants, those that escaped? What can we expect from them?"

"They will do what they need to do." The man turned, his eyes sweeping the Hedge Mage. "There shall be contest Arcane, ever. This is how we grow. The Maker has his plan."

"And that's it then?" Arcane spat, flicking his spent butt into the void. He noted that the form of Occult had finally vanished. "So long and thanks for the fish?" The dark man chuckled.

"What do you want, mage? A medal? You live. You will see another day. You have made friends, allies. Would that I might say the same..."

Eric Arcane groaned, trying to will himself away. Constantine was right.

He started to fade but too slow. He still heard it.

"Despite our efforts. Despite the victory we have achieved, I remain alone. As it was and shall always be, forever I shall remain..."

A stranger..."

Epilogue Two:

War World...

Thanos smiled.

He stared up at the form of Galactus trapped there floating between dimensions, his eons old body shifting back and forth, positive to negative, black to white. The energy flowed freely about him, the anti-matter of the Negative Zone clashing with the positive reality of this fractured mirror universe. It had worked.

The Devourer of Worlds had been so engrossed with gorging himself, sating his never-ending appetite with the never-ending energy that he had not even realized what was happening. As Thanos had expected, the heroes of the two worlds had done their part at the proper time. They had defeated whatever villain had sprung from the turbulence in the Time Stream and the Speed Force. They had beaten back the Spawn of the Wall. They had dispersed the swelling energies and stemmed the tide of the cosmic storms, which had threatened to wipe out and wash away all of existence. They had averted the Crisis and had managed to seal the rifts.

All but one.

It was that one, which Thanos had coddled, molded and swayed to his favor. That one tear in the fabric of space that he had chosen to make his play, bringing the mighty Galactus into the very heart of the storm and into the midst of the very energy that would be his salvation as well as his downfall. He had watched with a smile, almost giddy as the rift had closed on Galactus, sealing him in a non-existence, hopefully for eternity. Forever feeding yet never filled. He had fooled the doddering ancients of this universe into letting him 'help' them. He had fooled the Devourer. He had won.

All for HER.

Thanos raised the Cube he had created with the Reality Gem, staring curiously at the strange flickering trapped within the crystalline structure. Just a spark of the Primal Force made whole. A dash of Speed, a stitch of Time, a little bit of Chaos and the clashing power of Is and Is Not. All locked away, in hand, at his beck and call.

It was Life, the beginning, that elusive thing that Kronus had searched for and that Galen had survived. In the palm of his hand, he held the future of reality, not death, not genocide. That was not what SHE wanted.

SHE did not want tribute, countless deaths in HER name, for HER love. They all belonged to HER already. That had been his mistake before. That was what he had never quite grasped. The Anti-Life Equation...

Thanos stared up at Galactus, watching as the giant shivered in ecstasy. He would never hunger again. He glanced back and away, gazing at War

World there in the distance and the three old men standing there watching him in turn. Ganthet, Izaya, Shazam; did they know or even suspect? Probably not as they had their own problems to worry about, the mundane and maudlin diversions of their own limited vision.

"Let them enjoy their struggles while they can, my love," the Mad Deity said to the void. He returned his attention back to the cube in his hands, watching the rage and sparkle of Creation, feeling the warmth burning therein. Thanos smiled as his form shifted, altering. Death held the key. Thanos had been right, Darkseid knew. It had been an effort to wrench the secret from the Titan, but in the end he had been true.

"Genesis. For you..."

Epilogue Three:

The Aerie Mt. Annapurna Nepal...

"Two Hundred and thirty six all told. That includes those killed when Nefaria first appeared, as well as Midas as best as we can estimate. There are still several unaccounted for. The injured are remarkably less, oddly."

"Midas was not merciful, reveling in his newfound power. We were lucky, much as I am loathe to admit to chance."

Talia shrugged, but did not disagree. The death toll could have been far worse, if not for her beloved, and the League of course, and those others. "There are also the long term effects to consider. There were many simply exposed to the strange radiations being expelled by Midas and Nefaria, not to mention the anti-matter-"

Ra's Al Ghul waved his daughter to silence as he strolled on. Repair crews had long since began repairing and cleansing the Aerie. It would take some time before the station was up and running to full potential, but for the most part his plans were on hold, so he had time. Time to plot and plan, and to consider.

"Should I reestablish Project: Babel?" Talia asked, though she was certain that she already knew the answer. She watched as her father stopped and bent to pluck something from the floor, though she could not see what. It sparkled as though metallic in the dim repair lights strung along the corridor.

"The League will no doubt disable the other towers as soon as they remember. And they will, or at least the Batman or the Martian will. No, Babel is scrapped. I wish to reopen research into the Protocols however. I was not pleased with the final result. We shall find a way to counter all Metas now, for the future, stymie all powers. I do not wish to rely on haphazard chance again. Call up Team 'Dhal' and establish them here."

"It will take time, father," Talia said, not liking the direction that her father now seemed to be thinking. "The labs--"

"We have time, daughter," Ra's Al Ghul said as he stopped before the shattered windows of one of the many Science Labs within his complex, his home. He stared at the shadowy image etched into the far wall, the silhouette of a man with arms raised in terror. "Remember our recent efforts in Gotham. And perhaps I shall finally afford myself time to look into the Ruby of Revival." He held up the bit of metal and considered it, and Talia saw it then for what it was; an arrowhead, sleek and indestructible, ever sharp. Hawkeye's Armor Piercer, it had stopped Midas-Adamantium...

"We have nothing but time."

Talia nodded as her father favored her with a smile and walked on. She knew when she was being dismissed. She knew too that she did not like it.

Epilogue Four:

The WatchTower Earth's Moon Later...

"It's truly impressive, I have to admit. We have a Monitor Room of course, but this is beyond anything I could ever envision." Anthony Stark stared up the long metallic shaft, watching as the myriad of two and three-dimensional displays flickered and blurred, ever changing as they spanned the world. "It's alien holographics of a sort I assume, fed by that multi array antennae you showed me earlier?"

"Yes," J'onnn J'onzz smiled, the anti-grav suspensor chair spinning slightly as he scanned the changing images. The world apparently was moving on, picking up the pieces after yet another Crisis. He wondered just how many had died as the waves of anti-matter washed over the face of the Earth. How many had died as the Spawn creatures had appeared and ravaged all in their path? How many had died in the panics and the riots, the devastation both here and on other worlds. They would probably never know. There were so many areas on the planet now that had simply been wiped clean by the storms; in Africa and Brazil, Siberia, Mexico, so many more. "It's Thanagarian mainly, with a few Martian innovations. The Thanagarians are immersed in anti-grav technology. The same Nth-Metal incorporated into your peripherals was created there, brought to Earth by a Hawkman years ago."

Stark raised his hands and flexed, watching his rebuilt gauntlets as they flowed about his hands. The armor was light, as J'onzz had added technology from his Mars and Thanagar, someplace called Rann and Tamaran. Strange, unfamiliar names, worlds that did not exist in his own universe as far as he knew- except for Mars of course, a dead world. There was a good chance that the cobbled adaptations would not even work back home. They had seen that the physics of the two worlds were just different enough. Still, if they did, if he could reproduce the Nth-Metal...

"Thank you."

"The very least," J'onn J'onzz said, his gaze sifting through the images before him. The world seemed at relative peace, at least for the moment, which was just as well. It was almost time.

The Martian Manhunter shifted the view of one of the images to the Medical Wing, internally. He generally had no reason to review the internal scanners, and he loathed simply scanning mentally, the invasion of privacy, but he was curious as to the state of his fellows, and his guests. It had been over a day since the Crisis had ended, and most had been healed for the most part. Too, friendships had formed.

"Perhaps you might tell me of that man you mentioned before. We appear to have a bit of time left. Doom?"

Tony Stark laughed. "That'll take more than a 'bit of time' to give Doom credit, but sure..."

J'onn J'onzz listened in wonder as the Iron Man started his recitation. He mused briefly if Stark imagined how similar he sounded to the other as he continued to scan the world's monitors as well as the internal scanners, flexing his mind.

He focused on Thor...

"How is thine arm, Princess?" the Thunderer said as he approached.

"Better," Diana said, unconsciously flexing her fist. When she had contacted Paula, the Amazon surgeon had first insisted on helping her, then the woman called Warbird who had similar injuries. Crushed hands. Paula had used the Purple Ray to add to both their recoveries, though here on the Moon for some reason the healing factor was not as effective. It eased the pain, and allowed the bones to be reset without a major cast, but there was stiffness yet, a little pain. Diana smiled, looking up at the Thunder God.

His skin was still pink, but his hair had started to regrow already. His body was covered in scars, dressed in a cut away jumpsuit with the JLA Insignia emblazoned over the heart, the sleeves ripped away to allow his movement. Nefaria had burned away the Thunderer's armor, and a good layer of skin, and though Thor was not embarrassed to be walking the station in the nude, the others were a bit intimidated.

"I am gladdened by this. Warbird too seems almost fit. Thine Healing Ray seems miraculous."

"Not that you needed it," Wonder Woman said with a smile.

"Did I hear my name?" Carol Danvers said as she approached. Her hands, despite the Healing Ray were swathed in cloth bandage and plastic bracers.

"Only in the best reference," Diana said, smiling at the blonde haired woman. They were both warriors, and she had seen Warbird give her all to

the call of duty. She would have been a proud Amazon.

"I wanted to ask," Carol said, gesturing at the frayed rope hanging on Wonder Woman's hip. "I saw you use that golden rope, but-"

"It was broken in the Time Stream, the strange forces there apparently too much for it somehow. I'll need to get it repaired, but that task may be involved. It was a gift from a Goddess," Diana said, looking to Thor's Uru hammer, "not unlike your hammer I assume?"

"A gift from my father, Lord Odin of Asgard," Thor said as he hefted the hammer. "'Tis enchanted, and a very select few might wield it."

"So I heard," Diana said, eyeing the hammer, M'Jolnir. "Superman said it's a truly powerful weapon. And I have to admit too, that Captain America's shield was fantastic."

"Aye," Thor smiled, rolling the haft of his hammer in his hands. "There be similar weapons to M'Jolnir made, but in all the Nine Worlds there be nothing to compare to the shield of Captain America."

"Ain't that the truth," Warbird said as she gave Diana a curious glance. "You want to hold it don't you?"

Diana actually blushed. "Well, I was hoping..."

Thor knelt and placed the hammer at the feet of Wonder Woman without pause. He looked up as he stood, smiling at Carol. "Please."

"Good luck," Warbird said, smirking.

Wonder Woman licked her lips, glancing from one to the other Avenger as they watched her. She looked down at the hammer, wondering why it seemed so hard to just bend down and pick it up. She was sweating.

Finally the Princess Diana of Thymescira crouched and extended her still good left hand. She licked her lips again as she felt the tingle of static wash over her as her fingertips brushed the cold stone. She reached down and gripped the haft, making a fist as she stood- or tried to.

"Unngh!"

She heaved with all of her might, but try as she would, she could lift the haft but the head would not rise off of the floor. She heaved and grunted for a time, then finally surrendered. She heard Thor's bellowing laughter-

"A worthy attempt, Princess," Thor said, grinning widely. Diana heard Warbird laugh as well, felt her hand on her shoulder.

"Don't let it get you down, Diana," Carol Danvers chuckled. "We've all tried. Cap's the only other one, and Superman."

"Methinks it be thine divinity," Thor said as he scooped up M'Jolnir once again. "Our Pantheons, let alone our origins be too different. Mine followers

art Vikings; ravagers and pillagers. Thine be scholars.”

“Well, that's not exactly true. You see...”

Carol Danvers turned away as the two Gods started to discuss theology. Her hands were aching and she wanted to get home. JLA Earth was nice- at least their Moon Base Alpha was, but it was BOR-ing. Time to go, definitely.

She scanned the Hall of Justice, Thor and Wonder Woman starting to drone in the background. She saw Wanda, talking to Zatanna...

“Your gesticulation is fine,” Zatanna said as she held Wanda's hands out lightly, adjusting her outstretched fingers marginally. “I think it has to do with the way the magic operates in your world. It appeared so- thick to me while I was there, blunt maybe, I don't know how to explain it.”

“I understand what you're saying, Zee,” Wanda replied, practicing the gestures, which Zatanna had taught her. “Everything here seems so crystal clear and exact, and not just the magic. The air, the sunlight, the sounds, everything seems so pure. You started to explain it before, an age of Order?”

“Yes. Our universe is full of- well, deities for lack of a better word. Among those are the Lords of Order and Chaos who've been vying for dominance of our reality since Time began. Chaos has ruled many times, in the beginning of course, more recently in the last Ice Age and the Dark Ages. Order has been ascendant since then. Everything, even the Chaos Magic, which you draw power from is very structured, thus clear as crystal-ordered.”

“I see,” the Scarlet Witch said, nodding. “It's so hard to manipulate on my world at times. Not complaining mind, but I've been through hell in my learning process, and it conflicts with my Mutant Hex Powers often enough that it's annoying. My teacher in witchcraft- Agatha Harkness told me once-”

“Uh...”

Both women turned at the hushed, embarrassed voice and saw Firestorm standing nearby. He seemed nervous as he split his gaze between the two women, licking his lips as he edged closer.

“What's up, Ronald?” Zatanna asked, noting his awkwardness and wondering why. Maybe he was just shy around them, maybe not wishing to interrupt their discussion. She smiled, trying to put him at ease but making him blush instead.

“I'm,” he said, hesitating, almost stuttering, “what you did to me. I've lost it. I can't see the... organic structure anymore.”

“It was never meant to be permanent, Firestorm. My Hex Powers effect probability, and my Chaos Magic plays off of that, but it does not last usually. I can for instance alter the numerous outcomes of an incident. Say a building, it's old and in disrepair. There is a chance that it will remain

standing. There is also a chance it will collapse. I use my powers to push probability in the direction that I desire. In your case, there was a slight chance that your abilities might affect organic, sentient life. With Zatanna's help and guidance, and the Chaos Magic I was able to shift you in the proper direction. For a time at least, because the physics of your universe righted with our victory; the Time Stream and Speed Force, and apparently the elemental powers that you wield."

"Yeah, well," Ronald Raymond said as he rubbed the back of his neck in confusion. "It's just that it's like trying to remember something that you know you know. It's like it's on the tip of my tongue but it just won't come."

"This too shall pass," Wanda said with a smile. "Don't worry, Firestorm. You'll be fine."

Firestorm forced a smile, hoping she was right. Zee smiled too, and oddly that was all the confirmation that he needed. If she was good, he was good. He just wished that he would either remember or forget altogether.

He turned with a thank you, leaving the two mystics to swap spells or whatever they were doing, wishing this was over with. He liked the Avengers, they had turned out to be good people, but he had a life to get back to.

He saw Plas speaking with the Beast and the Dibny's, both Ralph and Eel stretched to a certain extent as they were in the midst of explaining something to Sue and the Beast...

"Plas is obviously the more versatile," Ralph Dibny said as he stretched about his wife, eliciting a giggle from Sue Dibny as she pushed him away. "The Gingold formula makes me stretchable, but Eel is like liquid almost-or 'Silly Putty' though we both hate that term. He's much more malleable and can actually change his form to a degree that I can't."

"That's okay, Sweetie," Sue Dibny said as she brushed Ralph's cheek, blowing him a kiss. "You stretch in all the right places."

"Sue!" Ralph said, blushing even as he grinned.

"Well, you are both quite incredible," The Beast said with a grin. "The resident expert on elasticity in my realm is a happy medium between the two of you I should think. I've seen him pull some amazing stunts, yet his powers seem only limited by his intellect, which is vast."

"Yeah, well," Plas interjected, his body shifting to mimic the Beast's with a decidedly red hue. "My power's only limited by my imagination." Shifting swiftly to a good facsimile of Han Solo in Storm Trooper armor, "and I can imagine quite a bit..."

Henry McCoy laughed, always enjoying a good movie quote. "I wonder though," he continued, "the strange chemicals that altered Plastic Man. Have you ever investigated the base? Is there a connection to your Gingold, Ralph?"

Ralph Dibny's nose suddenly started to vibrate, to twitch quickly. "Y'know, we never have. I wonder..."

"Well, thank you Henry," Sue Dibny said, her voice only marginally acidic, dripping with sarcasm. "I've lost him for the foreseeable future. Thank you very much."

Henry McCoy smiled as the three started comparing notes. He saw Superman and the reporter walking with the Wasp and the Panther...

"I can't begin to thank you, Janet," Superman said as they all four reentered the Hall of Justice where they were all starting to gather. It felt so good to have Lois back, at his side, on his arm. And his parents-

"I couldn't have done it if not for the Red Tornado," Janet Van Dyne said with a shrug. "And you and T'Challa of course. My husband- my ex-husband is the scientist, and he invented the Pym Particles. I just used them, after you found the Kents, with Reddy and T'Challa's help. I'm surprised it worked. I know Hank's never tried to enlarge something so small and not originally reduced by his particles."

"It seemed logical," the Black Panther added. "There seemed no reason that it should not work, after initially finding the targets. Luckily your Red Tornado knew exactly where they were and directed us."

"Along with Superman's Microscopic Vision," Lois Lane added. She was dressed in a station jumpsuit like Thor's, her own clothes soiled and reeking from her time spent in the Negative Zone and that other Earth that she had visited with the others. "I just wish we could find the Atom as easily."

"Ray tends to escape into the Microcosm when the world gets intense. He's done it before. I have every faith that he's fine, and we'll find him when he wants to be found." Superman smiled, squeezing Lois' hand and she nodded in understanding. She was so close to this Meta World, living on the fringe but never truly a part of it. It was annoying at times, her reporter's instincts wanting to take over, to batter them all with questions, but she had her husband back and for the moment she could live with that.

"Well, Doctor Paula's given them a clean bill of health. Apparently they were out of the loop from the beginning. I can't imagine they'll even remember what happened when they wake up." The Wasp strolled on, glancing about the huge room as they finally paused. Almost everyone was there, except the Flash and Quicksilver, Iron Man and the Martian.

"They appear unharmed throughout," the Black Panther said. "I cannot imagine what you all went through, or why they should have been taken initially, but they will recover well."

"I agree," Superman said, scanning the room. It was almost time, time to say goodbye. "I'll take them home after you all leave. Hopefully there'll be no problems."

"I doubt it--"

Janet Van Dyne looked to Lois Lane and smiled as the two men started talking shop. Hank was the scientist, not her. She knew what to do, but not the how's and why's of why it worked. Lois returned her smile, but shrugged. She was simply happy to be back with her husband. Janet envied that.

She wondered where the others were and finally spied Cap and Hawkeye talking with the Black Canary...

"A Boxing Glove Arrow?"

Hawkeye smirked, slipping the arrow back into the wide green quiver, handing it back to the Canary. She shrugged, setting it aside. She would return it to the trophy room later.

"I don't feel so bad about my Parachute Arrow now. He actually used that?"

"A lot," Dinah Laurel Lance chuckled, smiling as she remembered happier, simpler times. "Towards the end he started to use simpler arrows, just regular ones. I..."

Captain America put his hand on the Black Canary's shoulder. He understood. He knew loss, but then too so did Hawkeye. Dinah smiled up at him.

"I want to go back with you."

"What?" Hawkeye sputtered, and Cap was speechless. Where had that come from? He had almost sensed a connection before, but this...

"Dinah... Canary... I don't think-"

"There's nothing for me here," Dinah Laurel Lance said as she looked between the two men. "The man I loved is dead. I don't really have a life here. Sure, I have a few ideas, but, well, the League's just too big for me. I feel second rate in the shadow of Superman and J'onn, Batman, hell even Plas. I'm a fifth wheel here, but your Avengers seem more open, more diverse."

"Well," Cap began, glancing at Hawkeye. "We'd be honored of course, but-"

"Hell, Di, the WCA would love to have you, but believe me, you don't want to chuck your life away." Clint Barton stepped up and held Dinah at the arms. "You're a helluva fighter, and you'd fit in no doubt about it, but our world ain't for you. There's people here that love you. Believe me, I know. I lost my wife a few years ago, and you're a lot like her. You have friends here that'll see you through that. Let `em. Quit the League for awhile if ya have to. Take some time off and get your head together. You'll see. You're more important, an' better than you give yourself credit for. Hell you gave me a run for my money."

"You beat me in the end," Dinah said, smiling.

"Yeah, well, I'm Hawkeye."

Cap watched as Clint talked to Dinah. He seemed to understand what she was about, and he was glad of that. His own personal life had been a joke of late- a dream. The last thing that he needed was another fan, and he was seriously thinking that there was something closer to the Black Canary to that than a simple peer. He let Hawkeye talk her down, glancing about the room. He saw the Batman stepping towards the View Annex...

"Are you all right?" Pietro Maximoff-Magnus asked as he stood beside the Flash. The younger man seemed somber, his cowl down as he stared into space, watching as the Earth spun in the distance. When he spoke, his voice was hoarse, almost a whisper.

"I need to tell Connor."

Pietro looked at his new friend. He did not know who 'Connor' was, but he understood. He had lost many friends over the years.

"He'll want to know. Kyle's dead. Gotta tell him."

"He will appreciate that," Quicksilver said, not quite knowing what to say to ease his new friend's pain.

"They don't care," Wally West said as he stared off into space. "No one, they're not even concerned. He wasn't Hal. They don't care-"

"We care, West."

Pietro jumped at the cold voice that cut the queer silence. It was like crushed glass, or stone rolling through a rock grinder. He turned instantly and saw the Dark Knight standing there in the doorway. He seemed hunched almost, his cloak about him, lost in the shadows.

"We simply mourn in our own way," the Batman said as he strode up to the View Port alongside the Flash. "We will mourn as a group later. For now, we have to heal and get the Avengers home. For now we all deal with it, as best we can. Kyle was a good man, a hero. He was a good replacement for Jordan. I liked him, and I'm sorry that he's gone."

"I didn't know him," Quicksilver said, not quite knowing what to say. "But..."

Wally West smiled.

"I know. He was my friend. Like Barry and Hal, maybe. Me and Kyle," Flash said with a shrug. "I have to tell Connor, and Donna too-"

"Soon enough, Wally West."

They all turned as the Martian Manhunter spoke, passing through the ceiling, then phasing just as swiftly through the floor.

"Thor is ready..."

They gathered then, there in the Hall of Justice, the meeting room of the Gods there on High Olympus where they watched over us all. There had been times when other gatherings were more numerous. Times it seemed when the entire Meta Community had banded together to avert an Invasion, or a Crisis, some ultimate calamity or war destined to doom the world. It was debatable whether there had ever been a greater assemblage of heroes, however. They were the best of two worlds- the very best. It was all in the point of view, of course.

They had put Ralph and Sue Dibny on Monitor Duty. The Kents were still asleep in the Medical Wing some floors away, and of the heroes officially part of the current JLA present in the WatchTower only Aquaman was absent there at the last. All were patients still and under the tender care of Doctor Paula, the Amazon brought in by Wonder Woman, Princess of Thymescira to help us all heal. She had been miraculous, easing our pains and injuries with her extraordinary skills and machines. The Kents had been blissfully asleep since the very beginning- months it seems at times- since they had been kidnapped by the Time Trapper.

I missed most of that as well, remembering only garbled bits and pieces blurring together and out of sequence. In a way I hope to remember it all some time, as I hate not knowing. It's the reporter thing, something in my blood I suppose. However, a part of me never wants to know the horrors there at the End of Everything, the End of Time. Clark says that he will tell me whenever I'm ready. An edited version of course, and one that he got from J'onn J'onzz as Superman was out of the first half of the fight even longer than I was. It was his being replaced with a doppelganger from yet another dimension that set this whole thing off, just a little over a week ago according to the calendar. The 'Sand Superman' he was dubbed, a being from Quarrm J'onn had said. He saved us all there in the end, at the End of Time.

I missed most of the latter half as well, being separated from the rest of the League with Aquaman, Atom and the Red Tornado along with the unconscious Kents. We had adventures of our own while the JLA and the Avengers struggled to save the universe. It's all connected somehow, in some strange way. It was there in the anti-matter realm that Aquaman had started to suffer, being burned and dehydrating in the queer environment, then back on Earth just in time for that final, searing explosion. Doctor Paula sentenced him to a few days in the WatchTower's water tank in the depths of the base in a healing solution. He would be watching on monitor, and most of the Avengers had said their good byes and thank yous in person earlier, as did I.

I was standing in the background, along with the Red Tornado. He was as silent and stoic as ever, despite the time we had recently spent together. He had been acting strange since he had reawakened there in Qward, at the edge of the Rift when he had started his mighty winds to create a vortex, adding to the efforts of Flash and Quicksilver. He seemed different somehow, though I never really knew him well enough to say exactly what was different. I stood near, but away, more interested on the upcoming departure.

They gathered and spoke, some smiling, laughing, shaking hands a final

time. Some showed their faces there, just before the end. Captain America was handsome and apparently old we had learned, having been 'created' in World War Two on his Earth by his America. A pity that Alan Scott and Jay Garrick, the rest of the JSA weren't here for this as they probably would have enjoyed some of his war stories. Iron Man was handsome too, removing his golden faceplate to give his share of good bye smiles and kisses, which were truly dazzling I might add. The Black Panther was African I learned, a king of a country on his world. Warbird was beautiful, named Carol, ex-military so we shared a bit. Actually only the Batman stayed in character, or in costume rather though he seemed friendlier than I had ever seen him- or imagined he could be.

No one seemed concerned about the Atom's disappearance. All were confident that he would turn up eventually, though they would look for him I knew. It was the death of the Green Lantern that seemed to hang over what should have been a celebration. No one said anything beyond expressing their sorrow, but I knew that they were all hit hard by it. They had all lost loved ones over the years in one way or another. Death was a reality ever present in the lives they led as Heroes, but of course there was the other thing as well. They did not speak of that either, but I knew too that it was eating away at the back of all their minds.

The Green Lantern had killed a little girl on an alien world. It had been in the heat of battle, and Clark said it had been an accident, that the girl had simply appeared at the wrong time in the middle of a tense situation, but still I knew. It was the one line that they all hoped never to cross. They were heroes, trying to uphold law and order, trying to set an example really, and they did not kill.

But they did. Barry Allen, perhaps the most beloved of the second generation of heroes had killed the man that had killed his wife. There was more to it of course, but the result was the same. Hal Jordan, Earth's second Green Lantern had killed. There was Hawk, the ex Teen Titan. Even Clark...

He had executed three criminals of extraordinary power that had decimated their version of the Earth. That was another piece of the Time Trapper's intricate plot that seemed to span centuries. It's all connected somehow. Another world, destroyed by criminals apparently from some alternate Krypton. They were vile, evil creatures according to Clark, threatening to bring their terror to our Earth. Clark believed them, and in the end crossed that final line. Matrix had been there- Supergirl, and she had told him everything, gotten him involved initially, changed his life inevitably. He never speaks of it, not since he told me that first time, and I never ask even when he wakes screaming at my side in the middle of the night. Or crying...

He did what he had to do. I told him, and I'm sure that whomever he shared the tale with told him the same, but still it eats away at him. I know. I know the man I love.

I did not know the boy- the man that had become Green Lantern, but he had been chosen to take the place of many others before him. He had been a hero, and I did know that whatever the circumstance of the little girl's death, he would have taken it to heart, and to the grave. They all knew that as well, even though they said nothing of it. They would mourn I'm

certain, each in their own way, in time.

I watched as they started to separate, the League shifting to the near side of the vast hall to give the Norse Thunder God room. The Avengers gathered around him, not too close as well, probably knowing better than we what was to come. The beautiful shining man- the Silver Surfer stood with them, his powers restored. He was holding the man in the golden armor- Doctor Midas and his daughter in some form of stasis so they could not disrupt the return home.

Energy sparkled and crackled from his awesome hammer- named M'Jolnir I had learned, that reporter thing again- as he swung it round ever faster in an ever-widening arc. The hammer started to glow eventually, and he finally simply stopped the swing of momentum and grabbed the haft, holding it aloft before him. I saw a wavering in the air, like heat rippling on a desert highway in the distance. We all felt a gush of cool wind and saw flickering images of another room fading in and out of sight.

"The construct created by thine fallen comrade hast faded with his passing, or perhaps the destruction of his mighty weapon, the emerald ring. I know not which, yet this I do know; where 'ere Thor has tread, he doth know the path to return. I sense that thy Time Stream and Speed Force, the very dimensional barriers, which we all fought so valiantly to repair dost try to bar the way, yet they reckon not with the Will of Almighty Odin, and the determination of his chosen son."

"He's stubborn," the Beast interjected with a grin, and Thor smiled, nodding.

"Aye. Regardless, 'tis taxing holding yon portal wide. Time slips away, as must the Avengers. Justice League, it hast been an honor to fight at thine side."

"The honor was ours, Thor," Clark said stepping closer. I saw his restored cape fluttering in the wind of the storm that the Thunderer had whipped up. His eye was still swollen shut, but a faded, ugly purple now. Zatanna had used her magic to fix his teeth, thank God. He had been starting to lisp. "I only hope that we can meet again one day, only under less dire circumstance."

"Something tells me we will." Captain America looked to the JLA and saluted, a corny gesture to be sure, but somehow when he did it, it just seemed right, fitting.

And that was it. There was a final group smile and wave, a few parting comments as the storm simply swept over them all, enveloping them, obscuring them, and they were gone. We watched as the light and energy faded away, the winds dying to the slight breeze of the air conditioning within the Tower. Silence...

I watched, staying quiet as I was still just a guest there in their most intimate moments as one by one they all just drifted away. The Red Tornado was gone when I looked back. I don't know if he had remained throughout or not. Flash was next, vanishing in a flicker of scarlet. The death of the Green Lantern had hit him hardest of all I thought. They had been friends.

Plastic Man, Zatanna and Firestorm left together, next. Zatanna and Firestorm seemed to be discussing something while Plas walked behind, his eyes focusing on Zatanna's legs, if not a bit higher. I heard J'onn call the Black Canary's name, glancing at the BIG three before they too left and suddenly it was just Clark and I, and Batman and Diana.

There was a moment of silence, oddly awkward between them as I knew they were friends. Diana smiled at me warmly, and I realized that they were hesitant to speak in my presence. Clark put his arm around my shoulder, kissed me lightly on the cheek.

"No more secrets," he said, looking at Batman. "Lois almost died because of me. She fought in our name according to Aquaman, helped us win."

"And what?" Batman asked, and I could hear the sarcasm in his voice. "You want to make her a member? Maybe we should call Snapper Carr."

"I'm serious, Batman. Things have changed dramatically. Life is too short."

Batman looked to Wonder Woman. Her skin was burned like the rest of us, her arm in a plastic brace to protect her crushed hand, her golden lasso in tatters. She nodded in agreement and with that the Batman finally sighed.

"You're right, Clark," he said, turning his back to us. He seemed hesitant, and I was about to say that it was not necessary, suspecting what he was about to do, but too quickly he reached up and pulled back his cowl.

I gasped when he turned around. I recognized his face of course, and I had suspected for some time- that reporter thing again. It did make sense.

"Things have changed. I think we all realize that, just as we realize that this is probably the end of the League as we know it." I gasped again at Bruce Wayne's cryptic statement. The end of the League?

"J'onn may stay on, and probably Firestorm, but I know that Dinah will be leaving, probably permanently. Zatanna will be going with her, though she wasn't officially a part of the latest group. Flash and Plastic Man will be taking extended leave I'm certain. Atom's missing. Kyle's dead. Aquaman has affairs of state that we snatched him from, and who knows the turmoil in Atlantis after his being gone for two weeks after healing. The Red Tornado?" Batman shrugged.

"That leaves us."

"I'll need to leave for a time," Diana said, holding up her injured arm. "Too, I need to return to Thymescira, to see to this." She patted her hip and her frayed lasso hanging from her golden belt. "I may be gone some time."

I felt Clark stiffen just a bit. "I'll probably do the same." He looked at me, smiled. "You all know what we were going through before all of this started. There are things in Metropolis that need to be dealt with, that require more of my attention."

"As in Gotham." That was all that Bruce offered, but we all knew what we

meant. I looked from one to the other, licking my lips, wondering if I should say anything. I was actually sweating.

"But what about the League? The world needs you."

"Not us," Batman said as he pulled his cowl on again. Oddly, his body seemed to shift, his stance and bearing, even his voice as though he had just become someone else. In a sense I suppose he had.

"There are other heroes, Lois; the JSA, the Titans, even that new group of Outsiders. And just because we're leaving does not mean there are no others to take our place."

"You don't mean..." I gasped again and Batman scowled.

"No. Not THEM."

"J'onn will gather a group if he remains," Clark assured. "And if not then we will before we leave. The JLA will go on."

There was another awkward silence, at least until Diana finally hugged Clark and I, long and hard. She kissed Batman, the first time I actually saw him flustered. She tried to speak, but in the end simply smiled before turning and walking away.

I saw Clark's smirk as Batman watched her. Then the frown returned.

"If you need me, Bruce--"

"I won't." Batman smirked, then he too was gone.

We stayed at the WatchTower for a time as the others drifted away, leaving, one by one. As expected, J'onn was the last, except for us. The Dibnys would return, rejoining, the first to fill the sudden vacuum in the membership. Who else would return was still up in the air. Clark would not, at least for a time. We would take his parents home, and then return to Metropolis and it would all, finally be over.

Still, as I write this knowing that no one will ever read it, probably not in my lifetime at least, I can't help thinking that I was witness to the end of an era. Really, it had not been so long since the JLA had reformed, and now it was over again, at least in another incarnation.

I wondered if the Avengers were going through the same type of thing back on their world. If they actually got home. We assume that they did, but would we ever really know? Would we ever see them again?

Captain America thought so, and oddly I did too. It just felt right.

I suppose ultimately however that as this began, only Time would tell in...

THE END

And now a word from our sponsors...

Finally...

You cannot imagine my relief that this is finally done. Don't get me wrong, it's been a blast! The Avengers has always been my favorite comic since I was in grade school. Hell, the first comic book I remember owning was Avengers #20 or so (I forget without looking) where the Swordsman is pushing Cap off the construction site. To finally get a chance to write the Avengers, and to write the story that pits them against the JLA to boot- a story I waited over 20 years to see in the comics... It doesn't get better than that.

Working with Chris has been great as well. He's a genius and technically the best writer I've seen from an Editor's view. And hopefully soon enough we'll get the chance to work together again. Maybe a sequel? Don't hold your breath, though the set up is there for anyone to pick up the baton.

I want to thank everyone that had a hand in this as well, or even just a finger... Dino Pollard for his input and Headshots. Mike Raz for his advice on the story and Web work. Dave Ingram for input. David Wheatley for posting assistance and the use of M2K. Brent Lambert for allowing us to shunt his own Avengers run back a bit. Gary for running the side issue at his own site. Steve Crosby for continually reminding me that he was excited to read it. And all those folk who got a sneak peak here and there like Derrick Ferguson, Matt Hrubey, Matt Pierce, Mick Edwards... This was indeed a communal effort. Thanks to all!

All that said, I hope you enjoyed reading as much as I enjoyed writing this monster. It's been fun...

Curt F: July 29, 2005

First off, I want to say that this story would not have happened if it wasn't for Curt. He took my meager plot ideas and transformed them into one of the best (no hyperbole!) comic – not just fanfiction – stories I've ever read. If I'd had it my way, the credits would involve his name in full capital letters and mine in tiny unreadable print. That's how essential he was to this story.

I think it's safe to say that everyone knows just how big of a fan I am of the mighty Avengers. To me, they are the epitome of super-hero icons, and I relished the opportunity to work on such an epic story involving my favorite heroes. As for the JLA, I admit that I didn't know as much about them when we started, but I quickly learned to like them pretty well as well.

There are a few people who deserve thanks on my end. Mike Rasbury and Matt Pierce, for helping me out during my time of crisis while scripting the battle issue between the two teams. Had it not been for them, those fights wouldn't have been hardly as cool as I hope they turned out. I, too, want to extend thanks to David Wheatley and Brent Lambert for allowing us pretty much full reign with the AVENGERS title at Marvel 2000.

While my editorship role at M2K has been over for a while, this project first began during my term as EIC. It was my last wish that the project still see the light of day after I stepped down from the position, and it feels so damn good to finally see it out there for all to see. It was a lot of hard work (Curt, maybe we should do a DVD-extra style interview for a future cyberback, going over all the crazy ideas that popped into our head during the plotting...Lex Luthor and the Cosmic Cube, baby!), but it was totally worth it.

In closing, I think the following statement sums up this experience fairly well: if I'm to be remembered for anything when it comes to fanfiction, I hope it's this.

Chris Munn – 07/30/05

Story © Curt F
Plot © Chris Munn and Curt F
Editing: Chris Munn
