



**Avengers**  
# 42



**Black Panther**



**Captain America**



**Quicksilver**



**Andromeda**

**MARVEL 2000 PRESENTS...**

**"REVENGE ALL AROUND"  
Part I: "Style Clash"**

by *Brent Lambert*

T'Challa looked up into the night sky and then stared down at his watch. Tonight, was suppose to have been a night of relaxation for the team. No suits. No distress calls. Just enjoying each other's company. Too much had happened recently and they all could just simply use a break. Even the Avengers could burn out. Unfortunately, he wasn't doing too much relaxing at the moment. He was standing outside the entrance of Avengers Mansion with Steve Rogers, Jack Hart, and X-51 for company. They had received an urgent call from one of their allies and so now they had to wait.

"How long do you think she'll be?" Jack asked.

**::Considering where her signal was coming from. I would say that Designate: Sersi is about 10 minutes away from us::**

Jack sighed, "Great ten minutes. I really hate missing Lost."

"Good show," Steve said.

"Damn good show," Jack agreed.

"A friend in need is worth missing a show over."

**::T'Challa is right. Sersi would not have called us unless the emergency was great::**

"Then why aren't we out there meeting her? I know you and I could at least get up there," Jack said.

T'Challa cut his eyes at Jack, "She didn't say anything about being under attack. She just said she had someone who needed medical attention. You flying out there won't make things go any faster. We wait and we wait without complaint."

Jack was beginning to miss Thor more and more with every day that passed. T'Challa's regal arrogance was driving him up the wall and he was always talking down to people. As if the rest of the



Sunfire



Karnak



Moondragon



Thor



Scarlet Witch



Avengers weren't good enough to him. The only ones he avoided talking to like that be Cap and Moondragon. Of course no one smarted off to Cap. Jack felt that if anybody should be leader that it should be Cap. What gave T'Challa the right to lead the Avengers? He had his own country to run. Why did he feel the need to be here? Despite his criticism of Thor it was undeniable that he had saved the entire planet. The attention of the Avengers couldn't be everywhere at once. It simply wasn't possible.

"I think we have an incoming," Steve said pointing up at a bright point in the sky that only seemed to be glowing brighter.

"X-51. Can you do something to soften their descent? I don't think Jarvis would be happy having to call someone else to fix the lawn again after the Tyrant incident."

The android, now gifted with Celestial technology, looked to Black Panther and nodded, **::Yes I can do something. All of you wait here::**

X-51's purple metal "skin" began to change into a dark black and he launched himself into the air like a bottle rocket. He was out of sight within a matter of moments. Jack laughed, "Damn he moves fast."

"Too bad Pietro wasn't out here," Cap said returning the laughter.

"He's already been outraced once this year. I don't think he could stand a second time," Jack smiled having heard from Beast how the guy who called himself The Flash ultimately bested Pietro. Quicksilver hasn't stopped being red in the face since.

T'Challa remembered how he had been bested in the battle with the Justice League. Batman had simply outdone in every sense of the word. He had never met a man of such flawless skill. That day the King of Wakanda had been humbled severely. He would admit it to none, but his pride was still wounded from the encounter. Defeat wasn't a foreign face to T'Challa, but something about that defeat stung particularly hard.

"Jack go inside and retrieve Heather. We'll need her telepathy to keep the people who see this blazing ship calm. We don't need them thinking its yet another alien invasion," Panther ordered.

Jack's smile ceased at that point and turned to walk into the abode of Earth's Mightiest Heroes. When he was gone it was then that Cap asked the question he had needed to ask Panther for some time, "Did Batman really pull that big of a number on you?"

Panther's eyes snapped open, "That has nothing to do with this!"

**Crystal**



**Quasar**



**Photon**



**Jack of  
Hearts**



**Machine  
Man**



**Binary**

"Look T'Challa I've always known you to be a guy on the edge, but ever since Batman got the better of you, you've been intense. We all lose some T'Challa, but if you're going to lead this team you're going to have to move past that," Steve advised.

Turning his attention to the sky, Panther said, "We'll discuss this later. Our guests have arrived."

X-51 was holding the nose of the egg shaped spaceship and he was bringing it down gently to the Avengers Mansion lawn. Heather and Jack were outside by the time Sersi had made her way out of the ship with her guest in tow. He was wrapped in tattered brown rags and he seemed to be mumbling inaudibly.

Jack was the first to move to Sersi and he pulled back the cloak of her passenger to see-

"Quoi? Is that you?" Jack asked hardly recognizing the once innocent face of the Celestial Messiah. His hair now stretched down to his shoulders and shifty eyes couldn't keep a solid lock on Jack.

"Pain and oppression. Oppression and pain. Oh what is there to gain?" Quoi mumbled under his breath.

"What it was wrong with him?" T'Challa asked harshly as he stepped in front of Jack. It was obvious to him now that Quoi needed medical attention, but not of the physical kind. He didn't like being deceived and Sersi had done just that.

Jack stepped back from T'Challa and turned to Moondragon, "Could he be any more of a jerk?"

"He is royalty. He believes his rights extend far beyond yours."

*I like how you said yours and not ours,* Jack thought.

"The war has wrought this upon Sequoia. When he went off to face War Dancer alone something awful happened. None of us even know if Dancer was defeated. All we know is that his forces pulled back and there is a tentative peace amongst the many races. One can only hope Quoi succeeded so his current condition would not have been in vain," Sersi said as she held tightly to the arm of Quoi. He walked a bit slumped over and drool dripped slightly from his mouth.

"So why bring him here?" T'Challa asked frankly.

Quoi grinned, "Here are friends. Here are enemies. Here comes safety."

"If there was any one place with the collection of minds capable of giving Sequoia his sanity I knew it would be on Earth," Sersi explained.

"Were my people involved in this war?" Jack asked fearful of the answer for some reason he couldn't explain. Lately, he had been having nightmares. Fire and screams filled the horrible illusions that plagued his sleep.

Sersi's lips trembled as she looked up to Jack and back at Quoi. Her eyes were downcast as she answered Jack, "Yes. Yes, they were. They fought alongside the War Dancer. Why we don't know, but they did suffer one of the greatest losses. Their home system was destroyed."

It took a minute for Sersi's words to sink in, but when they did Jack turned his back to his teammates and hurled up all the Lo Mein he had eaten.

"Sorry Jack. I had to make them go boom. Boom bad, but boom good," Quoi giggled.

The words of the Celestial Messiah sunk in slowly like quicksand. Jack couldn't believe what he heard. A man he called friend had ripped away part of his heart. Jack was half-human and half-Contraxian. Admittedly, he hadn't learned as much about the Contraxians as he should have, but that made losing them all the more painful. Their homeworld was gone. All the culture, history, and artifacts that could have helped Jack understand half of himself were now gone.

"You did what?!!" Jack yelled as he ran forward towards the still giggling Sequoia. Hart wasn't able to get very far because X-51 quickly moved in front of him and restrained the Avenger with a strong grip on both shoulders.

**::Violence is not the answer here. Designate: Sequoia is obviously disturbed my friend::**

"The Contraxians genetic capabilities were far too dangerous. The Celestial Messiah did what he had to do. I'm deeply sorry for your loss, but the Contraxians do survive. Their home system's destruction is hardly the worst that came from this war," Sersi said turning to Heather, "Thanos has returned and he's more powerful than ever before."

Heather laughed scoffing, "Thanos' return means nothing to me."

Suddenly an image flashed through her mind and it was Thanos choking the life out of her. Then she heard the Titan's voice, "But it should mean so much to you my dear. You have escaped my

lover's embrace too many times. I will be coming to reunite the both of you."

"Lets go inside. We can discuss all this further, but right now we need to attend to Quoi," Cap ordered.

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Red Skull walked up the red carpet and took his seat at the top of the giant skull shaped table. He ran his black glove across the red table and smiled, "Today my friends we begin the zerstörung of the schändlich Japan. Germany suffered too long because of the Japs betrayal. We shall all make them pay."

Seated next to Red Skull was a villain that had played his fair share of revenge driven games. Professor Anthony Power was a man that had plagued the lives of the X-Men, Defenders, Avengers, SHIELD, and an assortment of other heroes. His plans were to unite the world under one power. Now, he just wasn't quite as picky about where the power came from.

Across from Power was someone who had once been a pathetic shell of a man. His students had called him Mr. Rasputin and the old man had lost them when he began to teach of Tavi's return. Telling your students an ancient god would come down to step on them wasn't exactly a way to keep parents happy. Rasputin had considered himself a High Priest of Tavi and paid worship to the god. Eventually, he constructed the Tavistick, which was a weapon for his god. It provided him with limited mystical ability and he was soundly defeated. He had all but given up on the chance to attain true mystical might until Red Skull approached him. The Skull had provided him with a means to increase his abilities and become worthy of sitting at this table.

The Man without a Soul was next to Rasputin and it sickened him to be seated to such an oaf. Centurious considered himself to be in a far different arena than those present in this floating fortress that Red Skull had constructed. Unfortunately, Centurious owed his loyalty to Red Skull if he ever wanted to be truly alive again. Skull had resurrected Centurious with the combined power of the Cosmic Cube and some mystical means. For now that life could be easily taken away. If Centurious wanted his true life then he had to perform three tasks for Skull. This was among the first of them.

Damocles was across from Centurious and he was very much in the same predicament. Red Skull had bought him back to the land of the living. Eric Barlow was a confused man who was always searching for something in life. His younger brother, Bennet, cut that life short when Damocles had the life of Thor and others hanging in the balance. Eric had always hated his brother and cursed his name even with his last dying breath. Now he would

have the chance to repay Bennet in kind, but he had to work for Red Skull first.

The last person seated at the table was Dr. Animal and he was at the far end directly across from Red Skull. Animal had been a creation of Zeneo Technologies and had worked under Diablo. One of his fellow creations had been Binary, Nicole Ridely, of the Avengers. Eventually, Animal left the employ of Zeneo Tech. Skull saw opportunity in his abilities and snatched him up.

A few feet away from the table there stood a large metallic monstrosity. Thermal Man had been a weapon created by the Chinese to be the destroyer of democracy. Times had changed a great deal since then and Thermal Man's purpose was now an obsolete one. Skull had not changed with the times though and Thermal Man's purpose was one that the Nazi took a great deal of interest in. The atomically powered robot had gone toe-to-toe with Thor and shrugged off blows from Mjolnir. He was not something to be trifled with.

"The Coalition will make the streets of Japan run red with their beschmutzen Sie und ordnen Sie Blut!" Red Skull exclaimed with a wicked smile.

Power fidgeted some in his seat. His large cybernetic frame made it a bit difficult to fit into the seat that Skull had placed for him. Large wires took the place of hair and tiny yellow wires stretched from his chin and covered where his neck would have been. Cybernetic hands gripped the handles of the chair and they were starting to give way under Power's tight grip.

"How are we going about conducting this plan of attack?" Power asked anxious to see exactly what it was that Red Skull had in mind. Anthony considered himself to be Skull's intellectual superior, but his many defeats over the years had left Power with little resources. Skull had the resources and sticking with him ensured Anthony an opportunity to rebuild his power.

Skull folded his arms across his chest and put a fist to his chin, "We'll be splitting up and each handling different tasks. Power I will leave Tokyo to you. Centurious will make the US Naval Base into rubble. Rasputin will take Thermal Man to Okinawa. The Tavistick shall make them scream. Kyoto belongs to Damocles and Dr. Animal will serve as back-up where necessary."

Old man Rasputin quivered under the task that had been assigned to him, "What of the heroes? I don't think I'm prepared to handle a team of them dropping on my head."

"The feeble one makes a point. As much as I have faith in my own power and your gifts Skull, I can't imagine having to fight off the

likes of the Avengers," Centurious added.

Red Skull slammed his fists on the table and spit began to fly from his mouth as he screamed, "You fools! I have gifted all of you with incredible power. You will not betray me with your cowardice! I have worked too hard to assemble all of you. If I didn't have faith in your abilities I would have let the lot of you wherever you were. Do not disappoint me! And do not come to me with your weak fear!"

Rasputin had to fight the urge to piss himself. This wasn't what he was use to. He had accepted Skull and his gifts of power, but he wasn't ready for this. As much as he loved Tavi and doing his will this seemed like too much. Bearing the burden of High Priest was a difficult one, but having to bear that burden and work for Red Skull was overwhelming. Still he had faith that Tavi would guide him through all difficulties.

"Fear? That wasn't programmed into me," Dr. Animal smiled from across the raging Red Skull.

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## **BEGIN INTERLUDE**

"Are you sure that this machine will work?" Mieko Ko asked as she walked alongside Thanatos.

Thanatos ignored Ko and continued walking. Belladona kept pace with Mieko and whispered, "I think your question went unheard."

"Don't play games with me Belladona. It's not too late for me to back out of all of this."

"Be patient Ko. Thanatos will fulfill his bargain to us," Belladona replied.

The two women finally caught up to Thanatos who was standing in front of a large pillar of purple energy that seemed to shoot right out of the space ship and into the blackness of space. There was no way energy moving that fast could be contained in one vessel. The time traveler wasn't in the least daunted by the energy. He was quite use to it. Chronal energy could be very dangerous if dealt with by unknowing hands, but Thanatos knew time.

"Will he honestly help us?" Mieko Ko asked from afar.

Thanatos looked back, "He will once he hears my-URRKKK!"

A large green hand had reached out from the energy and wrapped

itself around Thanatos' throat with two fingers. The green behemoth stepped out from the energy and looked around. His eyes full of emerald rage made their way to Belladonna and Mieko Ko.

"Who as bought me here?"

Thanatos could barely offer up an answer, "I did old friend."

"Old friend? I don't know you."

"Oh but you do Maestro," Thanatos said as he slipped off his helmet, "I'm Rick Jones."

### **END INTERLUDE**

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Black Panther paced back and forth across the tan carpet. He had been repeating this action for the past three minutes. The King's face could not have been any more trapped in thought. Steve was watching T'Challa with a hint of curiosity. Cap had an idea what was bothering his friend, but it was useless to try and pull anything out of him. He was an aristocrat and they only spoke their mind when they were ready to. So Steve would continue to sit in his chair and watch T'Challa pace.

Finally, Black Panther came to a stop, "I don't want him here. He's too much of a liability."

"I can't wait to hear the explanation on this one," Captain America said folding his arms across his chest and stretching out his legs. Steve was seated up against the wall and above him was a picture of Hank Pym.

"You heard Sersi. Sequoia has destroyed worlds and was at the forefront of an intergalactic war. The last thing we need is a vengeful army coming to Earth for his head. Keeping him here endangers us all," Black Panther said in a surprisingly cool and collected tone. His gaze didn't waver from Steve. The two of them were giants in their own right so it was only inevitable they would bump heads.

"Sometimes I wonder why I let you talk me back into all of this, but now I know. It was because you were my friend. Friends don't abandon friends. Avengers don't abandon Avengers."

Panther huffed, "Steve be reasonable. He is a threat to the entire planet. Not just us. Keeping him here puts us all in harm's way. If he is to stay on Earth then it won't be here."

"That's where you're wrong Mr. Royalty. The government has deemed it entirely necessary and in their best interest to keep Sequoia here at Avengers Mansion," Everett Ross said as he rudely interrupted the conversation. He had a cell phone to his ear and with his other hand he was holding a Coke. The smug smile on the youthful man's face could turn even the ebony King of Wakanda a bright shade of red.

Steve rose out of his seat and put his hands behind his back to prevent himself from punching the most annoying government liaison since Henry Peter Gyrich. The long time Avenger would be lying if he said that Gyrich's current status didn't make him smile. He'd be a blessed man if the same fate could befall Ross.

"I've got one good guess who ratted Quoi out," Steve said to Panther. Ross closed his cell phone shut and sat down his Coke on the table. Steve wanted to string up Ross from the nearest ceiling fan. How Panther managed to hook up with this fool was a story best left untold.

"Neither one of you see Sequoia for what he is. He's an opportunity. It's my job to see what the rest of you can't. Any other person not wearing a skin-tight costume would know that someone who can blow up solar systems is a weapon damn worth keeping!"

Smacking the punk would have been Steve's preferred course of action, but he was a man of control. Captain America knew what it was like to be thought of as only a weapon. Everyone saw you as immaterial and not even a person. The syndrome would be far worse in the case of Sequoia who was possessed of truly god-like power.

Ross took a swig of his Coke, "Besides Panther, keeping him would be in your best interests. The government might think you don't want him here so you can't take him for yourself. With Magneto around the corner I'm sure you'd want a new weapon or two."

T'Challa's eyes narrowed, "You would accuse me of that!"

Ross laughed, "I didn't accuse anyone of anything. Just throwing out possibilities my friend."

"Leave. Now."

"Yea I'll go, but we'll talk more later. Bet on it," Ross said as he walked out of the room and breathed a sigh of relief. He had lied through his teeth about the government wanting to keep Quoi, but Steve wouldn't look into it because he wanted Quoi to stay. Panther wouldn't look into it because he was already walking on eggshells with the government. One wrong move and his leadership of the

Avengers were gone. Ross knew that and he had taken it to his advantage. The government might not yet believe in the power of Quoi, but they would once they got to see him in action.

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*(Today the Genoshan Government issued a statement detailing their plans to help alleviate poor countries burden of disposing waste materials. Ships have already left the docks of Genosha and are heading for countries as far away as Indonesia. Magneto says it is all part of creating a greater harmony between Genosha and the rest of the world.)*

"I'm glad to see that my father seems to be calming down. Perhaps age is beginning to get to him," Quicksilver said as he watched the middle-aged Asian reporter continue to tell of Genosha's humanitarian efforts. Pietro thought he would never see the day when his father reached out his hand to help humans. It was an idea that damn near floored him, but it was a welcome change in his father. Maybe he could really make Genosha a respectable place after all.

"Yes, it seems he has," Sunfire said pensively, "I had only hoped that Exodus would have strayed away from your father. No offense intended, but he has never been the best of influences on Bennet."

"Exodus has long outgrown the need for my father to baby him. If anything I think Exodus might be the reason why my father has taken this kinder stance."

Sunfire nodded, "Perhaps. Exodus has a bit of a temper himself. So do you really think that Hammer is Zemo?"

Quicksilver sighed, "They say Zemo's body has been found, but I believe my father. As much bad blood as we've had between us throughout the years I believe him. This is too much for him to make up."

"Agreed and I think just about every Avenger in this mansion feels the same way, but the burden of proof is against us."

"Trust me. If there's any man that can handle his own problems it's my father. No worries there."

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Jack knocked on the door and walked into the medical room where Quoi was strapped down and Sersi was watching over him.

"He did what he did for a reason, Jack. He did it because to destroy

lives he was saving lives. Sequoia is no monster. What he has done haunts him. What more proof do you need?" Sersi asked directing her arm to the writhing Quoi.

Jack shook his head and clenched his fists as he stared down at the ground, "It's not enough Sersi. He should suffer for all eternity. You defend him, but if he had annihilated your Eternals for the so-called greater good then you wouldn't be his biggest fan either."

Jack's words were slow and cold. Each one took its time in Sersi's head and dragged into the recesses of her memory. She knew Jack's anger and his hate were entirely justified, but she would not see harm come to Sequoia. By any hands...

"You don't know what we were facing out there," Sersi whispered.

"Who? Please tell me who? How can you justify what he did?"

Sersi looked up to Jack nearly in tears, "Proctor was out there Jack. He didn't find me. I was lucky for that, but Proctor destroyed an entire empire. If he did it once do you really think he would hesitate to do it again? It was killed or be killed Jack. I don't expect that to quell your anger, but if Quoi hadn't of stopped War Dancer then that tyrant would be on Earth's doorstep right now."

"I can't forgive it Sersi. I just can't."

Peeking his head into the room Ross looked around and said, "Remember Jacky boy. Don't even think about laying a finger to Quoi. He's government property!"

Before Jack had a chance to respond a blaring noise roared through the medical room and the rest of the Avengers Mansion. It was their call to assemble.

"Guess you guys have someone's ass to kick," Ross said.

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Panther was at the forefront of the conference room. He was wearing his full uniform and had his arms folded across his chest as he began the briefing, "We have ourselves a very serious problem ladies and gentleman. It seems that Red Skull has assembled himself a team and he's struck out at Japan. Hard. He claims to be avenging the betrayal of Germany at the hands of Japan. We're going to go in and we're going to take his team out."

"I'm assuming some of us will be handling some of Red Skull's team solo then considering our numbers are about even?" Andromeda asked. She was anxious for the chance to prove herself

worthy as an Avenger. Taking down one of Red Skull's flunkies by herself could easily do that.

"I got the answer to that question," Ross said making this his third interruption of the day, "That would be not no, but hell no. I've already been ordered to call in back-up and they'll be here very soon."

"We can handle this problem on our own!" Panther roared his patience getting as thin as a violin string at the moment.

"The government has evaluated the Red Skull situation and to preserve their interests in Japan they've decided that the Avengers will come in packing basically. So if you got a problem with this I suggest you take it up with President Kelly," Ross snapped.

"Kelly's too busy trying to rack up mutants to hear a spoiled king whine," Binary said as she entered the room with a stare of death for T'Challa. He returned the favor.

"Who else is coming?" Captain America asked seeing the apparent anger that was begging to be freed from Black Panther.

"Already here Cap," Photon said as she strutted into the room in full uniform, "I could honestly use a break from New Orleans at the moment."

"Understood. Just glad to see you're okay Monica," Cap replied.

"Tigra, Scarlet Witch, Crystal, She-Hulk, and Quasar should be coming anytime now," Ross butted in.

Panther sat down to calm himself and began his briefing all over, "Fine. With increased numbers we can split up into groups. I'll be going with Sunfire, Tigra, and Binary to Tokyo. Moondragon, Andromeda, and Wanda will go to the naval base. Jack, X-51, Karnak, and Sersi will handle the pest control problem on the outskirts of Tokyo."

"Great I get to be pest control," Jack-of-Hearts grumbled.

"Quicksilver, She-Hulk and Photon will go to Okinawa. Crystal and Quasar will head to Kyoto," Black Panther finished.

Moondragon noticed someone was notably missing from the assignment list, "Where is Captain America going off to?"

"I'm taking the fight to Red Skull...by myself. We have unfinished business with each other and I think it's about time I finish it."

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**NEXT ISSUE:** Avengers vs. The Coalition. Be there!

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**Author's Notes**

Man this issue came out a whole ton better than I had thought it would. Coming back to Avengers after the amazing Avengers/JLA crossover was tough enough, but having to pick that first villain for the team to face post-crossover was even harder. Luckily, during an M2K chat Steve Crosby (great guy!) told me I should have Red Skull pop up in Avengers and it really got my wheels turning so much thanks to him for giving me that spark of juice I needed.

Also much thanks to Chris Munn who helped inform me of some continuity issues (yea that sounds crazy right? Mr. M2K Continuity needing to be reminded of something, but it does happen from time to time). Chris will continue to be a big help in the issues to come and I'm grateful to have him as a guide.

I've got about a good four arcs in my head at the moment and they'll all put the Avengers through the ringer. So keep reading and thanks.

**-Brent Lambert**

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**Avengers**  
#43



**Black Panther**



**Captain America**



**Quicksilver**



**Andromeda**

**MARVEL 2000 PRESENTS...**

**"REVENGE ALL AROUND"  
Part II: "Style Clash"**

by *Brent Lambert*

**2 Weeks Ago**

"So do you think this little ruse of yours is going to work?" Everett asked as he sat down at the table across from T'Challa with his TV dinner. Processed ham with some clumpy macaroni was on the menu tonight. Not exactly Ross' favorite, but the government was paying for his clothing, transportation, and food. He didn't have too much room to complain.

"It'll work as long as you keep playing your part in it well," T'Challa replied as he looked with disgust upon Ross's meal. Such food never found itself on his royal table.

Everett sighed, "Playing the biggest jerk on the planet wouldn't be so hard if it wasn't the freakin Avengers. Getting on Cap's bad side isn't exactly good for anyone's health."

T'Challa laughed, "I know I'm asking a lot of you Everett and I'm sorry, but to keep our plans secret we have to make the Avengers think your new position has gone to your head. If our friendship appears on the rocks we can work in secret better."

Taking a bite out of the ham Everett didn't speak again until he had swallowed, "Do you really think it's a good idea to work behind your own team's back?"

"I don't know Everett, but I do know what has to be done. My people deserve no less."

**Present Day**

Black Panther grabbed the young Japanese girl and flung her into the nearest alleyway. He had just prevented her tiny body from being crushed by the gigantic foot of a robotic monstrosity. The



Sunfire



Karnak



Moondragon



Thor



Scarlet Witch



machine had two large feet and four arms that each ended in drills. T'Challa didn't flinch in the sight of the ten foot tall robot.

"Simpleton," Black Panther whispered under his breath as he leapt into the air and landed atop the robot head. With a few quick slashes of his anti-metal claws T'Challa was able to rip the CPU from the mechanical shell.

"Panther watch out!" Binary warned from above.

T'Challa looked behind him and saw four missiles headed his way. The King of Wakanda jumped into the air and was swooped up by Binary. The missiles hit the robot that Panther had just dismantled and created an explosion that knocked Binary out of the air.

"Looks like the king has fallen."

Panther looked to the voice's source and saw a smug smile coming from Professor Anthony Power. T'Challa quickly rose to his feet and helped Binary to hers.

"You shouldn't have come here Avengers. Already you're beginning to fall," Power laughed as he pointed a cybernetic finger to Tigra who was struggling to protect a group of people from Power's machines.

"Go and help her Binary. I shall take care of Power," Panther commanded.

"I would say it should be the other way around, but I'm not going to argue," Binary said as she flew away from Panther and moved with lightning speed towards Tigra.

Before she could help her feline teammate a tentacle wrapped itself around her waist and flung her through a window. Glass that would have cut through any normal person's flesh simply melted on contact with Nicole's. She didn't have blood underneath her skin. Only searing heat.

Binary was only disoriented by the attack, but quickly found her attacker was a robot composed of hundreds of tentacles. The golden robot had earned Ms. Ridley's attention and she would respond in kind. She only hoped she could do it in enough time to come to Greer's aid.

"Guess you haven't heard about me before. I'm damn good at whuppin ass," Binary smiled as she flew dead on into the robot.

"Shit," Tigra said seeing that her help was now distracted. She was

**Crystal**



**Quasar**



**Photon**



**Jack of  
Hearts**



**Machine  
Man**



**Binary**

trying to protect the civilians from the drills, saws, and lasers of Power's robots. Her abilities could only go so far though and she would need help soon.

"Where the hell is Sunfire?" Tigra asked aloud as she pushed a 20 something man out of the way of a large chainsaw. In the act though the weapon grazed her back and she let out a pained scream. Greer fell to the ground hard and was kicked in the stomach by the robot.

Tigra went flying through the air and slammed into a nearby wall. The brick was already unstable and Greer's impact had sent all the material crumbling atop her.

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Sunfire had been in another part of the city and working towards where Panther and the others were. Tokyo was a large place and robots were swarming across the entire city. Seeing him soaring through the air gave the citizens some hope, but Shiro wasn't one for being idolized. He was here to do a job and he would make everyone involved in this attack paid dearly.

That was when he spotted him. Power and Panther were in conflict. T'Challa was having to fight Power and his automaton creations. Shiro would relieve his leader of one threat. Turning his body towards the ground Shiro divebombed towards Power. Ever since his time with the Exiles, Shiro had been enhanced a great deal. He would pour all that unbridled energy into Power.

Sunfire thought he had surprise on his side as he approached Power, but when he was only feet from Power he simply vanished and reappeared right smack in front of a wall. The Japanese national hero slammed into the concrete head on and was knocked unconscious by it.

Power laughed, "You need to teach your Avengers not to underestimate their enemy!"

"You should not celebrate so quickly," T'Challa snapped.

---

"Oh it has been so long since I've heard the taunt of a so-called 'hero'," Power smiled as he launched a laser from the center of his chest and sent Panther flying back a few feet.

Panther's armor hadn't been harmed in the slightest by the attack, "Is that the best you have to offer Professor?"

"I have so much more in store for the likes of you," Power replied.

---

Moondragon stepped over a pile of bodies that were US Air Force soldiers. All of their eyes were green and their expressions blank. Heather bent down and touched the forehead of an Asian woman, "Their minds are gone. It's as if their souls have been stolen from their bodies."

Andromeda knew what it was like to undergo soul replacement. To an extent anyway, "Then we find this soul thief and make him scream for his deeds!"

"Easy Drom. We need to keep our heads in the game here," Wanda reminded. She knew what it was like to get lost in emotions and become overwhelmed by them. That was a dark path that she was still struggling not to walk down.

A dreadful music began to fill the air and the ground seemingly started to spurt up black ice. The loud crunching of feet could be heard from afar and it wasn't long before the three women saw the Soulless Man. Centurious had his hands crossed behind him as the tortured souls of the Air Force soldiers floated around him and through him.

"They only send three after me. I'm insulted," Centurious said as he shook his head in pity for those who had come to oppose him. Could the Avengers have made this any easier for him?

"Whelp! You dare look down at me!" Moondragon cried out as she reached out to Centurious' mind. She sent out a telepathic strike that could have fell a platoon of men, but it was all for nothing. Her attack was rejected and Heather felt her mind awash in psychic flames.

Taking a few steps back Heather gripped her bald head and screamed loud enough to make the birds in nearby trees fly away. Andromeda rushed to her aid, but it was too late. Heather had fallen into an unconscious state and her skin had turned pale gray.

"What will it take for monsters like you to stop harming innocents?" Wanda asked infuriated.

Centurious smiled, "I would say your first born, but your children are known for being mockeries."

"Bastard," Wanda growled under her breath, "You're in for a world of hurt now!"

"From me!" Andromeda yelled as she charged forward at Centurious. He simply lifted up his purple glove and sent Andromeda flying backwards. The Atlantean felt as if an 18-wheeler had hit her head on.

Scarlet Witch didn't have time to worry about Andromeda. She was a tough number and would recover from Centurious' attack. Right now she had to prepare herself for whatever the Soulless Man might try and do to her.

"Such delicious women. If only you would side with me and not fight against me, but alas you let your talents go to waste," Centurious sighed as the souls surrounding him shot up into the air and threw off a powerful green light. Now there was a swirling portal of black and blue hanging in the sky.

Demons began to pour out from the portal and each of them landed to the ground with cat-like grace and flesh hanging from their teeth. The smaller demons looked like little children with a row of metal spikes coming down their backs. The larger ones resembled giant two-headed bats with leopard's skin. There were fiery coals where their eyes should have been, but none of them made their way to Wanda. Instead they all flew towards the still recovering Andromeda.

"Andromeda!" Wanda exclaimed as she held out her hand and healed the Atlantean fully.

"Pay attention witch!" Centurious yelled as he fired off a ball of flame at Maximoff. She didn't have time to dodge it and the attack struck her full on in the chest. Wanda fell to the dirt and was forced to fling the earth onto herself to put out the flames.

"I sent my demons to your friend because I wanted to focus all my attention on you, Child of Chthon," Centurious grinned, "So I suggest you accept that attention for all it's worth."

Wanda stood to her feet and shook off the dirt she had thrown on herself, "For someone who knows so much about me are you truly ready to face me?"

"When you're in Hell you learn you can face just about anything."

With that the entire scenery changed around the two. The sky was black and the ground slick like marble. The air seemed hotter and flames could be seen off in the distance in every direction.

"So is this your arena?" Wanda asked.

Centurious nodded, "For now. I figured two giants of mysticism such as ourselves deserved plenty of space."

"Don't lie. You want the advantage. I'll give it you because you're going to need all the help you can get!" Scarlet Witch exclaimed as she sent a pile of magma crashing atop Centurious head. Playing with the odds was Wanda's forte. She'd do things that the Soulless Man would never see coming.

"Ahh!" Centurious screamed as the hot rock melted away his flesh, "Impudent witch!"

Just as quickly as the magma burned him it became part of him and he was soon a living mound of magma. With a sinister laugh he pointed his hand at Wanda and fired off a stream of magma.

"Damn it!" Wanda exclaimed as she teleported behind Centurious and hit him in the back with a hex bolt. The bolt returned Centurious to his human form and had him naked on top of that.

"You would dare strip me! Then I shall show you the same disrespect," Centurious growled, but before he had the opportunity to attack he was struck in the chest by another hex bolt from Wanda. The Soulless Man fell to the ground and grabbed at his chest as a mysterious pain moved through him.

Wanda looked at Centurious and saw him in a new light. Four crystal shards were glowing in the center of his chest. Scarlet Witch deduced that his newfound power was coming from those jewels. She would rip those items from his body before this battle was over.

"Get up Centurious and show me some disrespect already," Wanda taunted.

Centurious stood up and his clothing returned to him, "Gladly."

---

"Foul beast! Get back!" Sersi yelled as she blasted another grizzly bear in the head with cosmically powered energy. It had to be the 50<sup>th</sup> bear she had killed and the beasts just kept coming.

"Are you alright Lady Sersi?" Karnak asked as he leaped up and easily broke the jaw off another grizzly. If it wasn't a jaw then he had cracked in the skull and if it wasn't that then he had ripped out the heart. The Inhumans' blows were precise and deadly. He moved flawlessly and there was never an unnecessary step. Karnak was perfection in motion.

"I'm fine Karnak. Behind you!" Sersi warned.

Karnak didn't even look back. He simply threw an upward punch

and knocked the approaching grizzly out cold, "Thank you for making me aware of that threat."

"Something tells me you didn't need my help," Sersi smiled.

"I fail to see what the hell is so damn funny!" Jack roared as he came zooming by the two Avengers with a horde of hawks and falcons on his tail.

Sersi sighed, "Do you think he needs us?"

"Help him. I can handle these bears fine," Karnak replied.

Sersi nodded and looked up to the sky. Green energy lapped at the edges of her eyes and without warning a powerful stream of cosmic energy flooded forth from them. Then she raised her arms to the sky and energy ripped outwards from her hands. Many of the birds were caught in the tidal wave of energy. The ones that weren't were now easy target practice for Jack.

Jack was heading back towards the Earth at break neck speed and Sersi smiled, "You don't have to be in that much of a rush to thank me."

Before she knew it she was in Jack's arms and headed back up into the sky, "Only you would smile when a flying rhino is headed your way."

"Huh?" Sersi said confused.

Jack pointed down to the ground and where Sersi was standing there was indeed a bleeding rhino. The Eternal let out a gasp and squeezed Jack even tighter, "How stupid could I have been?"

"Considering you're friends with Quoi I should have left you down there," Jack said and earned a hateful scowl from Sersi, "Just kidding woman. Sheesh!"

"Looks like Machine Man is handling the rhino stampede just fine," Sersi said as she observed her teammate looking like a fat man flicking around dirty napkins. Except the napkins in this case were the rhinos.

Jack laughed, "The guy is packin Celestial technology. I doubt a stampede is going to slow him down."

---

Okinawa can be found along the same latitude lines of places such as Hawaii, Florida, and the Bahamas. As such it is considered an

international resort location. Unfortunately, that played right into the hands of Red Skull. The numerous people in the prefecture were forced to flee in whatever manner they could to escape Thermal Man's wrath.

Quicksilver and Photon had been shuttling people off the island as much as they could while She-Hulk held off Thermal Man. The three heroes knew that Rasputin was somewhere, but they couldn't be worried about him at the moment. Civilians came first.

It was because of that mantra that She-Hulk took the beating that Thermal Man was giving her. Every punch from the automaton felt like getting slammed in the face with a tank. She wished her punches were having the same effect on Thermal Man, but from the pain in her wrist she was sure they weren't.

"C'mon guys! Hurry up already!" She-Hulk yelled to herself as she ducked a blow from Thermal Man. Rolling to the side she flung the front bumper of a car into Thermal Man's eye.

The bumper seemed to go clear into Thermal Man's optical orifice. The robot paused for a moment and then suddenly spit out melted metal slag from his mouth. It was still white hot as it made impact with the concrete.

"I have something else you can chew on!" Quicksilver yelled as he rushed forward and shoved a metal pole in Thermal Man's open mouth at the speed of sound. The impact was enough to send Thermal Man stumbling backwards and opening him up to an energy attack from Photon.

"Hungry? Good!" Photon exclaimed as she poured her energy down his still open mouth.

Thermal Man continued to stumble backwards and crashed into a Honda. Metal gave way and glass was sent flying outward.

"I was beginning to think you guys had gotten lost or something," She-Hulk said relieved at seeing her teammates. Pointing to the robotic beast she said, "That sucka right there is tough."

"Yes that's why I agreed to tag along with him," an elderly man said as he approached with the three heroes with a decrypted looking stick in his right hand.

"You must be Rasputin," Photon said folding her arms across her chest, "I'm not impressed."

"Shouldn't you be in a nursing home?" Pietro mocked as he moved forward with lightning speed to end the battle in one punch.

"Pietro! No!" Photon warned, but it was too late.

"Foolish child!" Rasputin cackled as he whacked the approaching Pietro in the head with the Tavistick. Quicksilver fell backwards and hit the cement hard. His body began to merge with the cement until only his face was visible.

"You lil prick! When I get out!"

"Shush," Rasputin commanded as Quicksilver's lips disappeared.

"So you know a few magic tricks. Big deal. I can still-URRK!" She-Hulk cried out as she was lifted into the air by a metallic hand. Thermal Man had recovered quickly from Quicksilver and Photon's attack.

"Let her go!" Photon yelled as she sent a full powered blast at Thermal Man's face.

"No my child. You need to let go," Rasputin said as he shook the Tavistick and a strange ringing began to emanate from it.

Monica found it hard to resist the ringing. It was putting her to sleep. The world was beginning to go in circles. She-Hulk looked like a Picasso painting and Thermal Man like a bad anime robot. As much as she tried to fight Rasputin's seduction she couldn't. So she fell to the ground asleep and left She-Hulk alone to face the villains.

Rasputin smiled as he walked up to She-Hulk and pinched her cheek, "I'm going to let Thermal Man have his fun with you."

---

"Watch out!" Crystal yelled as she was within the arms of Wendell Vaughn. Flying through Kyoto had become a dangerous task as Damocles had filled the skies with his large, cannon-equipped golden airplanes. Quasar had been doing a good job of playing cat and mouse with the aircraft thus far, but he knew he was going to have to drop Crystal off somewhere. Otherwise, he couldn't bring his A game to the table.

"I'm going to have to set you down somewhere," Quasar said as he bobbed and weaved through the buildings.

"Fine just make it quick. Someone has to take care of those Frankenstein looking things."

Quasar sighed, "This guy sure has a flair for the theatrical."

"Tell me about it," Crystal replied as she pointed out a good alleyway for her to be set down in.

Wendell gently put her on the ground and was off into the air again. Crystal braced herself for the hordes of robots she was about to face as she walked out of the alley. All of the metal brutes were at least ten feet tall and all of them resembled Frankenstein. Once they locked eyes with her she knew the battle was on.

Crystal lifted her hands up and lightning began to rain down from all directions on the robots and on the planes that Quasar was struggling against. Magma began to erupt from the earth and attack the robots. Streams of fire flew forth from her fingertips and sent many of the robots rocketing into the air.

"So much for a challenge," Crystal laughed.

"It's a challenge you want? Believe me I can provide it," a large voice echoed.

Crystal looked up into the air and saw a large blimp with a picture of Damocles on it. Suddenly, that blimp blew apart and a black swarm of robots moved through the sky towards her.

The Inhuman royal took a big, dry gulp as she braced herself for the coming wave of robots.

---

The history between Steve Rogers and Red Skull was thick enough to fill up a volume of Encyclopedias with. The two had been back and forth with each other for years and today would be just another chapter in that rivalry. The last time the two had met each other it had been a brutal battle. Captain America had disposed of Crossbones, but Red Skull ripped out Steve's heart by telling him his beloved Maria was nothing more but a creation of the Cosmic Cube. Maria had been the one normal thing for Cap for so long and to have her taken away hurt him deeply. To make matters worse it had been Red Skull to provide the revelation.

It didn't take much for Cap to infiltrate Red Skull's flying fortress and that worried Steve a bit. Skull was probably expecting company and maybe even desired it. Nonetheless, he would do to Skull what he had done to Crossbones, but this time he would enjoy it. Skull had done too much to him over the years and taking away Maria was the final straw. He had it with Skull and that was precisely why he asked to tackle this solo. He didn't want the others to see what he was about to do.

The Avengers needed the squeaky clean image of Captain America. It kept them on the right course when they were in dark times. He wouldn't take that image away from them. That would just give Red Skull one more victory and Steve had gotten tired of handing those out. Steve's anger knew no bounds and it was easy to do regrettable things when struggling with an ungodly amount of anger.

As he crept down the hallway he noticed two things. One, the Skull had too much of a fascination with the color red and that crumbled up pieces of paper were hanging on the walls. Cap moved closer to the wall and picked off one of the pieces of paper. Pulling out a tiny flashlight Steve illuminated the paper and what he saw made him red with rage.

It was a picture of him pushing Maria on a swing. He walked a little further down the hall and picked off another picture. It was of him eating ice cream with Maria. She always did have a weird liking for mint chocolate chip. A little further down the hall and there was a picture of him taking Maria to her first day of school. With every picture Cap grew more and more angry. Red Skull had been watching him and his daughter for quite some time. The bastard had always known Maria's true nature and probably reveled in the fact that Steve was growing to love the little girl.

"So nice of you to join this little party Captain America," Red Skull said as Cap stared at the final picture. It was of Maria hugging Red Skull.

"You bastard! I swear I'll make you pay for all that you have done here today."

Red Skull yawned, "Your threats are tiresome Captain."

Cap snarled and leaped into the air hoping to latch his hands around Skull's neck, but he was stopped short of his goal as an energy blast struck him from the side. He went flying into the nearest wall and slumped to the ground unconscious.

A little girl walked through the opposite wall with a gun in her hand. Looking up to Red Skull she smiled, "Did I do good father?"

"You did splendid my Maria."

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**NEXT ISSUE: The Avengers have to pull together and beat Red Skull's Coalition back and just what lies in Captain America's future. Be back for the conclusion to "Revenge All Around!"**

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### **Author's Notes**

This issue was actually kinda scary for me to do considering I've had a pretty positive response to issue 42 thus far and I really wanted to keep that momentum going. Fortunately, I have a pretty good gang of people around me giving me feedback and all that good stuff. So hopefully that ends up giving you, the reader, a better issue overall.

And if you really want to see the roots of this story arc I suggest you check out Steve Crosby's Captain America #25. He deals with the whole Maria deal and makes Skull an even more powerful foe for Cap because of it.

Thanks all and stick around. Things are just getting started.

-Brent Lambert

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**Avengers #44**  
**April 2006**



**Black  
Panther**



**Captain  
America**



**Quicksilver**



**Andromeda**

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## MARVEL 2000 PRESENTS...

### "REVENGE ALL AROUND" Part III

by *Brent Lambert*

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Crystal braced herself as the swarm of robots came towards her. As they grew closer they looked less and less like a black cloud of death. The individual robots began to stand out. They all looked like bats with no mouths and blue eyes that were too big. Their various nuts and bolts were clearly visible and they hardly looked so intimidating. That was until the tiny machine guns appeared from the robots' bellies.

It was then that Crystal turned her body into diamond and braced herself for a hail of bullets. She knew that the bullets would probably chip away portions of her body and Crystal wasn't quite sure if she could cope with that. These new aspects of her powers were untested. She wasn't quite sure what they could stand. Would she be able to handle it?

The bullets seemed to move in slow motion as they made their way towards Crystal. She put her hands in front of her face to spare as much of her facial features as possible. Waiting for the coming attack was nerve wracking and it seemed to take forever, but then she realized that it really was taking too long. Moving back her arms Crystal saw her savior in the form of X-51.

He had created a force field around the two of them and the bullets were evaporating on contact.

**::Are you all right, Designate: Crystal?::**

"Better than ever," Crystal gushed, "Aren't you supposed to be taking care of an animal problem?"

**::Problem solved, Designate: Crystal. All is well::**

"Well, you're a fast worker. Maybe you could give Quasar a hand. I think those canon planes are beginning to annoy him," Crystal suggested.



Sunfire



Karnak



Moondragon



Thor



Scarlet Witch



**::I think we have other problems::**

Damocles was running at full sprint towards the two Avengers. Sweat was dripping off his black goatee and his purple armor was glowing. He was moving so fast that X-51 didn't have time to put down his shield before Damocles slammed into it. The force field broke like glass and electricity surged through X-51, who crumpled to the ground.

"Found the frequency for your force field and simply turned it against you. I knew I had to move fast or your lil' computer brain would have figured it out," Damocles said as he stepped on X-51's head and looked to Crystal, "Now to finish you off!"

"Go bite yourself!" Quasar exclaimed as he flung two of Damocles' cannon planes at him. Damocles shielded himself from the attack, but the distraction was enough to allow X-51 to recover.

**::You should have thought of a better approach::**

A transparent wire came out of Machine Man's palm and stuck itself to Damocles' armor. Damocles found his armor immobile and he was unable to move, but he could still speak, "Bastard! You're a computer! A human mind is always superior to a computer!"

"Guess that theory got proven wrong," Wendell joked as he landed on the ground.

"Do you guys hear that?" Crystal asked as a dull buzzing sound rang through her ears.

**::Yes. A large swarm of bees and wasps are headed our way::**

"Great! What about him?" Quasar asked.

"Don't worry about him. He's coming with me," a wolf said as it came from around an alley corner. It quickly transformed into a bald headed 20 something year old white male wearing big square red sunglasses and a black jumpsuit.

"And why would we let you do that?"

"Oh, because you're about to be very busy," Dr. Animal smiled as the three heroes were suddenly covered in black widows, "Don't let any of them bite you!"

Animal stuck a tiny red dot on Damocles' shoulder and they were both gone.

**Crystal**



**Quasar**



**Photon**



**Jack of  
Hearts**



**Machine  
Man**



**Binary**

"Shit!" Quasar yelled as he created a shield underneath the bugs and expanded it outwards.

"Uggh this is gross," Crystal groaned as she turned her body into magma and melted all of the little suckers.

**::I find it fascinating that he can generate so many biological entities with just a mere thought::**

"Only you would find a swarm of bugs interesting," Quasar sighed, "And it looks like we gotta take out these bees too or they might hurt civilians."

"Agreed."

**::It is the wisest course of action.::**

"Well then what are we waiting for? Time to be exterminators."

---

Black spirals swirled across the purple sky of the realm that Wanda had been transported to. Centurious and herself were locked in a mystical battle that seemingly had no limitations. Wanda's powers allowed her to wield probability and the results could be anything. Centurious seemed to be tapping into a power stemming from wherever they were.

The two supernatural combatants had been back and forth thus far with neither gaining any clear advantage over the other. Centurious had the landscape beckoning to him like a dog to his master, but Wanda had been able to endure the wrath of the land so far.

"You going to give up anytime soon?" Wanda asked as the ground around her suddenly shot up into a miniature mesa and giant black crows made their way towards Wanda, "Guess I got my answer."

Centurious laughed as Wanda struggled to avoid the beaks of the crows, "Where is your power Wanda? Where is the woman who stood against Tyrant?"

Wanda ducked and dodged the brown beaks of the crows with great disgust as she saw bloody limbs hanging from the bird's eating appendages. Centurious certainly made sure to add detail to his vile creations. Taking a dive off of the mesa Scarlet Witch launched a hex bolt into the ground creating a large bed for her to land safely in. Quickly rolling off of the blue mattress Wanda sent another hex bolt into Centurious' chest. The Soulless Man flew backwards, but instead of hitting the ground he took to the air.

"Your hex bolts are beginning to bore me, little witch. Surely you have something better to offer me?" Centurious chuckled.

Wanda's eyes suddenly turned black as she held out her hands and pink neon energy began to leak out of her fingertips, "You want a display of power? Be careful what you ask for!"

The entire realm began to shake and rumble violently. The swirling black spirals in the sky disappeared, and Centurious gripped his stomach in immense pain, "What are you doing?"

Wanda responded with a voice that was far too sinister and dark to be her own, "I'm ending this little game of yours, Centurious. The real world calls to us."

With that proclamation the realm that Centurious had constructed shattered away like glass and Wanda fell to the ground exhausted. Realizing that his stomach was no longer in pain Centurious rose to his feet and walked over to the unconscious Wanda.

"You were holding back. Your true power was on the cusp of being freed. Why did you not let it loose?"

---

She-Hulk was thrown into the concrete for the third time, but this time Thermal Man planted his foot on Jennifer's chest. The robot might have smiled if he could have, "Tiny green woman is about to get smooshed!"

"Not a chance in hell, tin can!" Jack yelled as he came down from the sky and slammed into Thermal Man.

She-Hulk looked at the approaching Karnak and Sersi with relief, "About time you folks showed up. I was getting my ass kicked."

"Nevermind that. Where are Quicksilver and Photon?" Karnak asked.

"That Rasputin guy merged Quick into the ground and has Monica trapped in some kind of trance," She-Hulk answered painfully as she was sure that Thermal Man had broken more than a few of her bones.

"I will handle him. You help Jack with that infernal robot," Karnak ordered as he backed away from the two women and ran up the street to where Rasputin was still working his magic on Photon.

"Maybe one good blast will finish this thing off," Sersi smiled as she

looked down at She-Hulk to see a horrified look on her face. Looking back up the Eternal saw a large fiery ball headed her way.

"Move!" She-Hulk screamed as she knocked Sersi to the side and took the blast head on. A flaming body skidded along the ground and moaned softly. Sersi was terrified at the thought of She-Hulk being harmed.

"She-Hulk! I'm coming," Sersi yelled as she ran towards her teammate.

"Sersi, she'll be all right. Help me!" Jack exclaimed as he was dodging the blows of the large robot. His Zero Energy was proving effective against Thermal Man, but he didn't seem to be piercing his armor.

"Hold his mouth open then!" Sersi snapped.

"Easier said than done!" Jack replied as he surrounded himself in a Zero Energy field and put a hand at the top and bottom of Thermal Man's mouth.

Holding out her hands Sersi sent a stream of green cosmic energy into Thermal Man's mouth. Jack was holding the robot in place and keeping the energy pouring in. The robot began to shake violently as Sersi's power was starting to tear down the interior structure of the automaton.

Meanwhile Karnak was keeping low to the ground and dodging the blasts of Rasputin.

"No Avenger is your plaything!" Karnak exclaimed as he got up close to Rasputin and kicked the old man's staff. The kick broke off the top of the staff and a tiny red jewel shard flew out of it. The shard fell to the ground and Rasputin's power was broken.

Quicksilver was above ground and wiping concrete dust off of his costume at super speed while Photon was awaking from her trance and looking very angry.

Rasputin began to back away from the Avengers and smiled, "Until we meet again."

"Guys, look!" Jack yelled as he stood atop Thermal Man's body pointing out a large cloud of locusts moving towards the Avengers.

"Dr. Animal," Karnak forewarned, "I suggest we all split up and help the others. Our job is done here."

"What about those two?" She-Hulk asked, her skin just beginning to heal from the flames.

"We let them go. Pietro take She-Hulk to safety. The other Avengers are our priority," Karnak ordered.

---

Power's right hand transformed into a large machine gun and rained down a hail of bullets on Black Panther. The King of Wakanda moved with gymnastic level agility as he dodged each and every bullet. He returned Power's attack in kind by leaping through the air and planting both of his feet in Power's chest. Spikes protruded from the bottom of his boots and sent oil flying from Power's cybernetic chest.

T'Challa flipped off of Power's chest and scratched his claws across Power's face. Landing on his feet Panther moved forward and tackled Power head on. The two went tumbling across the backdrop of a wasted Tokyo. Professor Power reached behind Black Panther and gripped the back of his head tightly. With cybernetically enhanced strength he flung the African king off of him and quickly rose to his feet.

Panther skidded along the ground, but used the spikes under his boots to bring himself to a halt. Before he could get back on his feet Power was already close enough to him to send a large foot headed towards his face. T'Challa rolled out of the way and Power's foot tore through the concrete like it was wet tissue paper. Panther rose to his feet, but Power's right hand had transformed into a machine gun again and was raining down bullets. Panther sidestepped the bullets easier this time and smiled, "Your aim is off, Power."

The Professor returned the smile in kind, "No. It's precisely where I need it to be."

Panther quickly turned his head and saw that the bullets were headed towards a group of civilians. He wouldn't be able to block the bullets, but he would have to do something. Pulling out a small tablet from behind his belt buckle T'challa flung it at the civilians and they were covered in a protective white slime that quickly hardened. It was more than enough to deflect the bullets that had not already struck the crowd.

As soon as Panther turned his attention back to Power, he was slammed in the chest by a giant red beam. The blast didn't knock him to his feet, but staggered him. A great pain surged through his chest, and he fell to the ground unconscious. Power walked over to the fallen body and laughed, "A King? Ha! You're hardly fit to rule a landfill let alone Wakanda."

Binary saw Panther fall, but she couldn't take the fight to Power just yet. She was pulling Tigra out of the rubble because Greer was too injured to help herself. Nicole looked down on Tigra in pity for her condition and anger for the man responsible. Too much destruction had happened in this city today and she would be the one to see Power pay.

Ridley was about to spring forward on her opponent when a voice stopped her, "Hold up, Binary. We gotta do this together."

Turning around the young black woman saw Jack-of-Hearts, Photon, and Karnak all arriving to aid her.

"Take it easy, my friend. We have to work together if we're going to bring this clown down," Photon said.

Binary nodded, "Yeah, you're right. He's already tagged black and arrogant over there."

"Okay, this is how we're doing it. Jack and I will get in his face. That should allow you and Karnak enough time to position yourselves in a way beneficial to us. But don't make a move until Jack and I are already on him," Photon ordered. Everyone around her nodded.

"Ready?" Jack asked.

Photon smirked. "Always."

The two heroes blazed a trail towards Power who seemed eager for their coming. Jet packs popped out of Power's back and he was soon flying towards the two heroes. Photon moved at the speed of light and was quickly behind Power. She bombarded him with her energy and was hoping to fry his circuits. Professor Power crashed into the concrete as he was consumed by Photon's energy. Jack quickly added his Zero Energy to the mix and it seemed victory was at hand.

Binary was watching the two at work and saw something that neither of them did. A blue circle moved against the stream of Jack's Zero Energy and a tiny prism moved against the stream of Monica's power. Nicole yelled out to her fellow Avengers, "Look out!"

Jack and Monica both turned their heads to Nicole, but it was too late. The blue sphere had crashed into Jack and he was entrapped in a large bubble. The prism had smashed into Photon and she was suddenly in a much larger version of the same item. Her body had been refracted across the prism and caused her agonizing pain.

A smoking Professor Power rose up from the crater and knocked

dust off of his shoulders.

"Oh, I have had it with this," Binary exclaimed as she flew forward and slammed her body into Power's. She delivered blow after furious blow across his metallic body. Metal plates and wires gave way, but Power still kept a smile on his face.

"All that anger, and no brains," Power laughed as he grabbed the back of Binary's neck and sent a teleportation beam through her. She was going somewhere far away from the battlefield.

Karnak was the last Avenger left to stand up to Power and he was determined to finish off the cyborg. Getting a good running start Karnak scooped up a large piece of concrete and while running he flung it at a dented part of Power's body. The rock hit with enough force to penetrate Power's body and slam out through his back. The battles with the various Avengers had weakened the Professor a good deal.

"You're going to pay for that!" Power yelled as he leaped into the air and landed right in front of Karnak. The running of the Royal Inhuman ceased and with one precise kick he broke off one of Power's hands.

"Impudent wretch!" Power screamed as he smacked Karnak across the face. His hand remained stuck to Karnak's face and impulses were sent into the Inhuman's body that overloaded his nervous system.

Power let go of Karnak and let his body drop into the rubble that was Tokyo. Looking around at his success Power felt a great swell of pride, but he wasn't quite through. Great minds like his always knew how to make their achievements memorable. With his good hand he tapped a button on his ear and timers went off in almost all of Tokyo's skyscrapers. He had implanted bombs that would destroy all of those buildings within a matter of minutes. By that time he would be gone.

Jack-of-Hearts beat violently on the bubble he was entrapped in. There was very little oxygen left and his Zero Energy had no effect on his prison. Power walked over and tapped the bubble like a child looking into an aquarium for the first time.

"You should hope your friends come for you before you run out of air, my friend," Power advised as he unleashed his jet packs and took to the air abandoning the Avengers to their fate.

---

Andromeda stabbed one of the smaller demons in the head with

her trident and flung his body into the face of one of the larger demons. Black blood splattered across her uniform, but it was only a minor addition to a uniform already caked with demon blood. The Atlantean had been vigorously working to keep the body of Moondragon safe from the ravenous demons that would feast upon her.

She had been in conflict with three kinds of demons thus far. There had been the tiny ones equipped with sharp white teeth and tiny serrated claws. They almost reminded Andromeda of young children in the way they moved about. Then there were the ten-foot tall brutes that were all shoulders and no neck. Trying to pierce them with her trident had proven to be quite the undertaking. Lastly, there were the demons that looked like Lockjaw's ugly cousin, and they had proven the most difficult for Andromeda to kill. Having to do downward strokes with her trident exposed too much of her side to the other demons. She had to take quick jabs at the dog demons and move out of the way before they could snap off her leg.

Needless to say, she was very happy when her four fellow Avengers came to aid her. Sersi, Crystal, X-51, and Quasar were a welcome sight even as she was still battling demons.

"Get to Wanda!" Quasar commanded Sersi, "The rest of us will dispose of these demons!"

"Oh, you can have the witch. I've already seen everything I needed to," Centurion said as he levitated Wanda's body off of the ground and flung it at the Eternal. Sersi caught Wanda's body, but landed flat on her back. That garnered a laugh from Centurion as he wrapped himself in his purple cloak and vanished.

"We got to do something about that vortex!" Crystal pointed to the portal in the sky that was allowing the demons to get through.

"Leave that to me," Wendell replied as he flew into the sky and entrapped the gateway in a cube that he was steadily decreasing in size. The colliding energies whipped across the sky and they almost struck Quasar, but he somehow managed to avoid the sparks with nimble movements. Sweat poured down Wendell's face and his muscles twitched wildly.

Upon seeing their gateway closing the demons took off in a sprint away from the Avengers. Andromeda and the others took out as many as they could, but there were too many. Some would escape. The Atlantean cursed and praised Quasar for that.

---

Stirring himself to consciousness Captain America found himself

strapped down to a table with his beloved shield only inches away from him. Despite his struggling, the Avenger was unable to free himself. Once again the Red Skull had gotten the better of him.

"Glad to see you've awoken friend," the Red Skull said with a smile as he hovered above Captain America.

Steve spat in the man's face and Skull wiped it away casually, "Oh, so much anger towards me. I thought we were closer than that."

"Unca Stevey is just a bit mad is all," Maria said as she walked up to the Red Skull and took his hand.

"Yes, perhaps he is daughter. I hate it when my friends are angry with me," the Red Skull replied.

"Let Maria go, you slime! Let her go!"

"Maria is mine now and forever. She and my sons will help rebuild this world in the image of my forefathers. A world of purity and grace. Today was just the beginning of that," the Red Skull proclaimed.

"You've really lost it, Skull. You don't have any sons, and you most certainly don't have a daughter."

Skull clapped his hands together, and a figure moved from out of the shadows behind him, "I'm sure you remember your fights with a so-called alternate version of myself. The imposter made claims of my death, but I made sure to silence those claims. I captured him and erased his mind. Then I filled it with a love for myself, and with some genetic alterations my first "son" was born."

"You're sick," Cap sneered.

"My nature is left up to interpretation by history, Captain, but I think neither of us can deny I have gained my vengeance against the traitorous Japanese. So with that goal accomplished, I see no more reason to keep you here," the Red Skull said as he turned to his son.

The alternate Red Skull stepped into the light where Steve could finally see him. Skull's "son" looked like a 17-year-old boy with blonde hair, blue eyes, and crimson skin. The changed Red Skull placed a tiny red dot on Captain America's chest and placed his shield atop Steve's torso.

"You'll be teleported back to Tokyo where you can tell everyone of your anguished tale of capture. Until then keep your eyes open. My children and I will be watching you," the Red Skull

warned.

"Wait!"

The Red Skull's eyes perked up, "A question, Mr. Rogers?"

"Where's your last child?" Captain America asked, wondering what other poor being had been enslaved by the madman.

With a slight chuckle the Red Skull replied, "Oh, him? I think you know him quite well. Come and say hello, son."

Morbid curiosity filled Steve as he watched the Red Skull's third "child" step into the light. His heart sank as he saw Bucky step into line with Maria. His mouth opened in shocked awe. It was Bucky, but where his uniform once had blue there was now black. How the Red Skull managed to pull this off was beyond Cap, but then it hit him.

"That's the Bucky from the other world!" Steve yelled.

"Of course it is. Do you really think I would go through all the trouble of trying to bring back this world's Bucky? I can only spend so much time out of my precious day torturing you."

Captain America struggled at his restraints even more like a dog wild with rabies, "Let them go, Skull. Let them go!"

The Red Skull yawned, "You bore me with your childish screaming. We shall play later. Until then make sure the Avengers know that the true Red Skull has returned!"

With that the teleportation device on Captain America's chest activated and he was gone.

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### **Avengers Mansion (Two Days Later)**

"The Red Skull definitely got whatever revenge he was looking for," Everett said as he looked through the window to see Captain America at the bedside of the injured T'Challa.

"My sister, T'Challa, Heather, Greer-

"And Karnak were all harmed by the Red Skull's group," Crystal said as she walked up behind the two men.

"To say this was a loss is putting it lightly," Pietro sighed.

"And it seems that Steve is taking it the hardest. Though that's expected," Crystal replied.

Ross felt uncomfortable around the Avengers with Black Panther no longer around to keep him confident, "I just wonder what the roster is going to look like when this is all said and done. Black Panther obviously can't lead anymore. For the time being we're having one of his decoys take charge of Wakanda until he's healed up. Power's device really did a number on him."

"Well, I just came to tell you two that I'm leaving with Sunfire to start helping with recovery efforts in Japan," Crystal said.

Ross sighed, "That's two more out the door."

Crystal laughed, "Actually it's a bit more than that. Photon has already left. Quasar and Sersi are about to head back into space. Jack's leaving for a couple of days, but he says he'll be back."

"So that leaves us with Binary, Andromeda, X-51, She-Hulk, Cap, and you," Ross said to Quicksilver.

"Not exactly a classic team, but I think it'll do for now," Pietro said as he leaned over and kissed Crystal on the cheek, "Take care for now. I'll be sure to visit Luna soon and give you an update."

"Sounds like a plan. I'll keep you all posted on things in Japan," Crystal replied as she backed away from the two men and headed out the door.

"Get Captain America out of the infirmary. We have a press conference in Central Park at 6:00. That gives us an hour of prep time. We've got to show the world that we've still got our shit together," Ross explained.

Pietro nodded grimly, "Yes, we do. Not just the public, but our foes as well."

"Glad we're on the same page here," Ross replied as he walked out of the same door Crystal had.

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### **Press Conference time...**

Cap approached the podium and tapped the microphone a few times before he began to speak, "Ladies and gentlemen, I first want to make a promise to the people of Japan, and to you. I will personally see to it that the Red Skull and all of his thugs are

bought to justice and made to pay for the unforgivable havoc they have wrought. It will be my sworn duty as Avengers leader to make sure that the world's last prominent Nazi war criminal is finally taken down."

"But I wouldn't stand a chance without the Avengers, and you all have been called here today because I wish to present the new team to you. I will be heading up the team as chairman. Quicksilver, She-Hulk, the lovely Andromeda, X-51, Jack-of-Hearts, and the lively Binary will all make up the team. So it is without further ado that we cheer to you-

"AVENGERS ASSEMBLE!"

After the applause for the new team died down one reporter quickly raised his hand. Captain America acknowledged him and the short Latino man asked, "So what do you make of the new Avengers Africa team that King T'Challa presented today in Wakanda?"

Captain America was taken aback by the question, "I am not quite sure what you're talking about, sir. There is no team of Avengers in Africa."

"With all due respect, Captain America, there is one. Black Panther showed them to the world only a few minutes before this conference started."

Steve flashed angry eyes at Ross and turned back to the crowd, "That'll be all for today, ladies and gentlemen. Have a wonderful night."

Captain America stepped away from the podium, walked over to Ross, and firmly gripped his shoulder as he whispered, "Son you and I need to talk. And I expect the complete truth."

Ross gulped at the thought of having to deal with a pissed Captain America, as any man with half a brain would.

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### **The Red Skull's Fortress**

The Red Skull looked at the large blank white screen in front of him and sighed as he waited for his correspondence to patch through. He was still high off of his humiliation and taunting of Captain America. The fool really believed Maria to be alive. His "daughter" was really just a mechanical construct of the Red Skull's design.

Just as he was about to yawn in boredom the screen flashed on

with the image of the person who had afforded him so many opportunities. The voice echoed through the room. "How did your plans work out?"

The Red Skull narrowed his eyes. "Perfectly. Japan and the Avengers both are reeling from my attack. Your assistance in the matter was greatly appreciated, Regent."

"No need for formalities. So I assume that the mystic jewel shards I dispensed to you were of good use to Centurious and Rasputin?"

The Red Skull nodded. "Indeed they were. I must again thank you for helping me to bring Centurious and the others back to life."

"It was a pleasure to bring you such powerful foot soldiers. Now if you can only continue to keep the heroes focused on Earth, then I can carry about my plans without interruption."

"Of course, Regent. Having the Kree Empire as a friend is not an alliance I'll quickly forget."

"Good," Onset replied. "Make sure that the eyes of the heroes are kept away from the stars."

With that last proclamation the visage of Onset disappeared and left the Red Skull to his thoughts. How could he be sure that Onset didn't intend on backstabbing him? The woman just came out of the blue to help him when he was thought dead to the world. He owed her a great deal for the position he was in now, but she had her own stake in things. Who was to say she could be trusted.

*No need to worry about that quite yet. Just enjoy your victory over the Avengers for now,* The Red Skull thought as he continued to wrap himself in thoughts of triumph.

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Captain America turned on the television and watched the previous recording of "Black Panther" presenting Avengers Africa. The decoy King of Wakanda was at a large podium decorated with extravagant flowers and behind him were seven individuals that made up Avengers Africa.

"I am glad to introduce to all of you today the Avengers Africa. This will be a team born of the great Avengers tradition and their main focus will be the continent of Africa. Such a team has been needed for some time and I'm glad to have it be under my own hand."

One by one the various members introduced themselves...

The leader of the team was Doc Diamond. He was wearing a black jumpsuit and dark leather boots. Along with that he had on square pink sunglasses and two diamond tattoos. One was on his neck and the other was on his forehead. The tattoo on his forehead stuck out more so because Diamond was completely bald.

"It is my hope that together this team can help create a safer Africa."

That was a very different hairstyle from his teammate Twister who had long white hair and completely white eyes. He was wearing a sleeveless sky blue shirt that accentuated his large chest and matching jeans. Twister was the only male teammate that was barefooted.

"Avengers Africa will be the best thing to happen to this continent in a very long time."

Both female teammates were without shoes. Sister Anansi wore what might have looked like traditional Nigerian dress, but the outfit was much more tight-fitting and hugged her curves completely. She was holding a wooden staff with a golden spider on the end of it. The other female teammate was Crab Spider and she had the body of a model. Tall, skinny, and her glowing skin were her best qualities. Her hair was short and her lips full. In her arms she was carrying a painting canvas.

"In a place of struggle, strife and grief our team shall stand for justice and hope," Sister Anansi proudly proclaimed.

"My sister is correct. Let everyone remember this day for it shall be the planting of a seed that will bear much fruit for my brothers and sisters."

Seraph looked like a beautifully sculpted mahogany angel and he even came with a pair of gray wings to help make the metaphor even more poignant. Black bands were wrapped around his wrists and he wore loosely fitting black pants. A black flaming sword was holstered at his side.

Fervor and Portal were obviously twins. Both stood at nearly 6'4 and they were well on their way to developing a nice set of dreadlocks. Fervor was muscular while Portal was leaner. The two had narrow eyes that looked like they could cut through a forest.

It was at that point that Captain America flipped off the television and turned to the squirming Everett Ross, "How long did you know about this?"

Ross gulped, "T'Challa has had it in the works ever since he became leader of the Avengers."

"Did he plan on telling any of us?" Pietro asked as he leaned against a nearby wall and tapped his foot at 150 mph.

"Look, I know you guys are mad, but-

"Mad? No, I would have been mad a week ago. I've just got back from a very bad mission. Right now, I'm furious," Captain America replied.

"To not only go behind our backs, but to try and fool us on top of that. Even you've got to admit that's low Ross," She-Hulk chastised.

Before Ross could even reply, Captain America threw out another comment, "Save it, Ross. Let's just make something clear. You're skating on thin ice with all of us, and I'm personally going to talk to President Kelly about this situation. Whenever T'Challa wakes up, I suggest he help you find a new job."

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**NEXT ISSUE: Cyclops and Jean Grey of the X-Men stop by for a visit.**

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#### **Author's Notes**

This is the end of my first arc on Avengers and I have to say that I'm surprised I got it done this quickly. I guess I was just on an Avengers high for this first arc. Part of that is to be blamed on the obviously fantastic JLA/Avengers crossover. One can't read that masterpiece and not feel the need to write. So I can guess I can blame Chris and Curt for that. But, look for The Red Skull in future issues as he finds other allies in powerful positions. Things are just starting to heat up for the Avengers as we make the march towards the historic 50<sup>th</sup> issue of the series.

-Brent Lambert

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**Avengers #45**  
**August 2006**



**Black  
Panther**



**Captain  
America**



**Quicksilver**



**Andromeda**

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## MARVEL 2000 PRESENTS...

### "GUESTS and PATIENTS"

by *Brent Lambert*

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Nicole Ridley stepped to the podium and looked out across the stadium to observe the 500 odd African-American teenagers she was about to speak to. Ridley had never been to Chicago, but she had received a warmer welcome here than she had anywhere else in her life. The NAACP had asked her to be the premiere guest-speaker at an event for hopeful young African-Americans. Nicole felt honored to have been asked to the event considering her past and gladly accepted the invitation. Now it was time for her to speak...

"Hello everyone. I am very honored to be here today. I have come to find that the hospitality in this city is unparalleled. I have been welcomed here with arms wide open. Chicago truly is one of Earth's greatest cities!"

With that an uproar of applause and hoots went up from the teenagers. Binary leaned back from the microphone and smiled. She saw such passion and hope in these young people. There was a fire in them. A fire to change the world. She hoped maybe with her words of wisdom she could guide that flame in the right direction.

After the clamor died down Binary spoke again, "I was asked here today to speak to you and maybe impart some wisdom upon you. Well, the smartest advice I can give you is to not take the way I've taken. My road has been far too hard and I made it hard for myself. Don't do the same thing to yourselves.

I started off in the streets of Metro City trying to make a quick buck by selling drugs. The money was good, but in the end it wasn't good enough. I became a junkie myself and allowed myself to be lured into a project for another quick buck. I fought against the Fantastic Four, but eventually found my way to the Avengers. An upstanding man of thunderous proportions gave me a real opportunity and I finally took advantage of it. I got lucky



**Sunfire**



**Karnak**



**Moondragon**



**Thor**



**Scarlet Witch**



ladies and gentlemen. Real lucky. I don't expect you all to get by on luck though. I expect you to get by on your God-given talents because I know you have them. You wouldn't be here if you didn't."

---

"Why do you think they chose to show up in a taxi?" Quicksilver asked Jarvis as they held the door open for their soon approaching guests. Pietro was by nature an anxious man and having to wait for an abundantly slow taxi was driving him up the wall. He wanted to know what the status of his sister was as soon as possible.

"Flying in the Blackbird would have been a bit extravagant don't you think Master Pietro?"

Maximoff huffed, "It would have been quicker...and cheaper."

Captain America laughed as he approached the two men, "Considering the price of gas I think taking a taxi might have actually been the cheaper option for the two."

"You laugh, but my sister lies in a hospital bed in need of the type of examination only Jean can offer," Quicksilver snapped, breaking the almost joyful mood.

It was then that the taxi pulled up and stopped in front of the gates of Avengers Mansion. A tall, slim man made his way out of the taxi from the back door facing the mansion. He was wearing a white, collared, button up shirt. Every button was done except for the top one and he had his sleeves neatly rolled up. Along with the shirt he had tan khakis with what looked like a new pair of Stacy Adams. The most distinguishing trait though was his bright red sunglasses.

Before he walked to the gates he helped a red headed beauty out of the taxi. She was dressed in a sleeveless neon orange blouse and a knee high black skirt. Her high heels nearly made her the height of her partner. As they began to walk to the gate Captain America was already there to greet them.

"You two have no idea how grateful I am for you agreeing to pay us a visit," Captain America said as she pressed a button to open up the gates to the abode of the Earth's Mightiest Heroes, but even Earth's Mightiest needed help sometimes.

**Crystal**



**Quasar**



**Photon**



**Jack of Hearts**



**Machine Man**



**Binary**

“When Captain America comes knocking, who can say no?” Cyclops smiled, “Besides you just really needed my wife, but there was no way she was going to get any of Jarvis’ green tea without me being around.”

Steve laughed, “So I take it Hank’s given you the full scoop on Jarvis’ skills in the kitchen.”

“This is Hank we’re talking about here. When does he ever stop talking?” Jean said as all three began to laugh.

“Well, I do think that Jarvis already has some food for you two in the house if you like.”

“You and Scott eat. I think I’ll take Pietro with me and get right to work,” Jean said, not letting the two know she could sense Pietro’s overwhelming anxiety.

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Jean walked down the hallway to the infirmary with a quickened pace, but it was still a maddeningly slow one for Pietro. He knew Jean couldn’t help it, but the woman was driving him crazy. The least she could do was run and soothe his impatience some.

“If you don’t pipe down Pietro I’ll have to ask you to leave,” Jean said with intense sternness.

Pietro’s eyes widened and for the first time in seven minutes he stopped moving, “You read my mind?!!”

“I am not the exact replica of my teacher. Do not mistake me for Xavier,” Jean snapped coldly. It wasn’t the type of person that she normally was, but with Pietro you had to be that way. His leadership of the Omega team had calmed him down some, but he was still the hard head.

“Believe me I would never confuse the two,” Quicksilver replied with a tone just as icy. He didn’t like being talked down to, especially by one of Xavier’s golden children. His team of X-Men had fought hard and did plenty of proactive work, yet they were considered the renegade bastards.

Jean smiled coolly at Pietro’s comeback, “Good. At least it’s been

established you can tell the difference between male and female. But we can sit here and argue all day or we can go and see if I can help your sister.”

With that Pietro loosened up, “Fine. I’m just worried about her. This was a mystically induced coma. Her mind could be in Hell for all I know.”

That detail hadn’t been given to Phoenix and she swallowed a lump in her throat at the thought of Wanda being trapped on some hellish world. Taking a breath she said wearily, “Maybe you should have called Dr. Strange.”

“He was busy. You were our next best bet. Betsy is obviously injured and Exodus...well I flat out didn’t want to call him,” Pietro confessed without shame. The second in command of Genosha being in Avengers Mansion would not blow over well with the American public. Of course Quicksilver quite frankly didn’t like the man no matter how much he had professed to change.

“I had heard about Betsy. I need to remind Ororo to send some flowers to the hospital room now that I think about it,” Jean replied as she quickly touched a slender finger to her temple and sent Ororo the reminder.

“It was my intention to visit her, but I’m not exactly on good terms with Warren,” Pietro explained as he felt himself getting a little less impatient with this whole affair. He could easily blame it on Jean’s abilities, but something about the woman’s aura was naturally soothing and calm. He was beginning to understand how Cyclops and Phoenix were such a complementary couple.

Finally, the two turned the corner and they were in the infirmary. Jean visually examined the injured Avengers members and said, “We’ll save your sister for the end. I don’t want to rush her examination.”

Quicksilver nodded, “If we’re going to work from better to worse I suggest you start off with Moondragon.”

Jean walked to the bedside of Heather and saw that the completely bald woman was in a serene state. She could almost swear that the woman was fighting back a smile. Taking a deep breath she reached down with a gentle hand and entered into Moondragon’s mind.

Pietro watched the world-class telepath with great interest. Her body seemed completely frozen as she became one with his comatose teammate. In many ways the nature of a telepath's abilities was completely opposite from his own abilities. A telepath had to be slow and methodical in their work. They required concentration and poise. Pietro's training had been all sound and fury. He always had to be in motion and he could never slow down. It wasn't in his nature to take his time.

Jean saw none of Pietro's observation as she was immersed in a world of white. She was crying out for Heather and only heard the faintest of replies. Nonetheless, a reply was still there and that was all Jean needed to hear.

Pulling herself out of Heather's mind Jean looked to a curious Pietro and smiled, "Heather will be just fine. Give it a couple of days and she'll wake up. Now who is our next patient?"

"He was brought here only a few hours before the Japan incident kicked off. From all that we can tell he's completely insane, but we know it was a created insanity," Pietro said his gaze turning to the far corner of the infirmary where the large isolation room was. It had originally been built for the express purpose of quarantining off Avengers members that were infected with biological agents. It had now become a holding area for an insane Messiah.

"I sense a great deal of hesitation Pietro. What's wrong?" Jean asked.

Pietro sighed and looked to the floor as he said, "I'm not sure if I should tell you this or not, but this man has destroyed an entire solar system. I don't know if he's the kind of person you'll really want to help."

Phoenix had to keep her jaw from falling at that point. It wasn't highly publicized information, but she herself had been responsible for the destruction of a solar system. It had been with entirely good cause, but at the same time those deaths would never be erased from her mind. No wonder this man was insane. To have to carry such a burden would surely push the sanity of anyone.

"Take me to him. It sounds like he needs my help the most of all."

"Follow me then. I just hope you're sure about this."

---

Cyclops took a chunk out of the apple and continued to say nothing. Neither man had uttered a single word to each other since Jean left with Pietro. Scott wasn't exactly sure how to approach Captain America and the feeling was reciprocated for Steve. Both men were leaders, not conversationalists. Saying no to a suggestion from Jean Grey was hard for any man to do though, but honestly Cyclops would have preferred to not be alone with Captain America. It had nothing to do with the man, but with how uncomfortable that man made Scott feel.

Steve had no idea where to begin with Scott. He knew the basics of the man and he was sure that Scott knew the basics of him, but this wasn't a military situation. Besides, the WWII vet was far more comfortable with the art of the fist than the art of the idle chatter. Yet, there was still a burning question that Steve needed to ask Scott. However, he knew that once the inquiry was made the floodgates would be opened. Then Steve would be in uncharted territory and he wasn't sure if he really wanted to see how far the rabbit hole would go.

"That Jarvis knows how to put together a meal. Maybe we can snag him over to do a few meals at Xavier's," Cyclops, said as he wiped his mouth with a napkin.

Despite his deep thought processes Steve managed a smile, "I don't think Stark would be too keen on that one. He's already trying to snag Jarvis for the West Coast team. Let him hear the X-Men have had a meal from the man and he'll flip."

"Just remind him we let you guys have Beast," Cyclops joked.

Steve didn't even hear the joke as he blurted out what he had to ask, "How did you deal with losing a child?"

Scott answered Steve frankly, "In an extremely complicated way. I've had two children and not one of them did I ever really get to raise. I guess that's not really answering your question though. I didn't deal really. I just threw myself back into the X-Men."

Steve looked behind him at the picture of Luna and Maria playing in Central Park and said, "That's my little girl. I found her on the

streets and adopted her. Thought I'd be able to live a normal life. Be a good dad. I wanted to play the strict dad on Prom night. I wanted to see her get a diploma. I never really got that chance. She's in the hands of Red Skull and I'll be damned if I let him corrupt her any further."

"Then you haven't lost her yet Steve. She can be saved and if you need help doing the X-Men are always there."

Cap shook his head and let a single tear fall to the table. His emotions were ripping him apart. He didn't want Cyclops to see him lose it, but this was his child. His little girl and that damn bastard had her. He was holding her above his head like some kind of trophy. No child deserved to be a pawn in his games.

"That is what's killing me Scott. I don't know if that's really my Maria. A friend told me that Maria is nothing more than a construct created by AIM. I don't want to believe that. I can't believe that and I have to wonder, did I ever really have a daughter to begin with?"

"She's your daughter, no matter how she came into existence. Save her and don't ever let her go after you do," Cyclops said and then he gave a weak laugh, "Guess I could do with following some of my own advice. I always looked at my own children with a bit of disappointment. I wasn't really around for either one of them and one of them is twice my age. But, I guess I should have been happy just to have them around."

Then a silence fell between the two men and each realized they had said more to the other in a short while than they had said to any of those close to them in months. There existed a natural kinship between the two men. Both had come from ordinary lives and were thrust into difficult roles early on. America had chosen Steve Rogers to be its leader and Xavier had chosen Scott Summers to be his.

Cyclops was finally the one to break the silence, "Why didn't you call us when The Red Skull attacked Japan?"

"No offense Scott, but we had plenty of Avengers there to handle the problem. If anyone is to blame for the failure there it's me. I rushed off stupidly against Skull on my own. I let it get too personal. I almost wanted to kill that man," Captain America admitted.

“If there’s one thing I always respected about you Captain America it’s that you always find another way.”

“Finding another way isn’t always easy, but while we’re on the subject of calling for help why weren’t the Avengers given a call when the race riots happened?” Captain America asked with the tone that an officer would take with a troublesome enlisted soldier.

Cyclops eyed Captain America darkly, “Look I know that America is your home turf, but what happened in D.C. was just a personal for me as Japan was for you. My wife and a friend both lost children as a result of those riots. Besides, it’s not like I had you on speed dial. Storm and myself had just been freed from months of imprisonment.”

At that point Steve looked very confused, “Weren’t you around for the Sons of Set incident and the Shadow King attacks?”

Cyclops shook his head strongly, “Wish I could have been, but no. The guy you saw wasn’t me.”

“Well, something has to be done to ensure that riots of that kind never occur again,” Captain America said.

“Then why doesn’t your group and others like it speak out for mutant rights? A shout of support from someone like you definitely wouldn’t hurt the cause.”

Steve knew this would be one of the tough questions he would have to answer if he started any kind of conversation with Scott. It was a question with a simple answer, but Steve had to be delicate about how he worded it. Just as Steve was passionate about his country, Scott was feverishly passionate about his people.

“My job as Captain America isn’t to support one group or another. I’m to be a beacon for all Americans and by taking a stance on something as controversial as mutants I risk alienating a large portion of the citizens who look to me as a symbol.”

Cyclops was visibly angry with the answer he was given and he only replied a minute later, “It’s people like you who make me the maddest Steve. I can deal with the out and out racists. They’re a stupid lot anyway, but the intelligent folks who say nothing, now that burns me up! People like you are the reason I had to kill Mark Rogers and people like you allowed the race riots to happen!”

Captain America rose up from his chair and pointed a finger at Scott as he said angrily, "That's uncalled for! I'm not an ordinary person. I am a symbol, son. A symbol for a country in turmoil. I don't agree with mutant discrimination, never have, but I will not go parading around every press conference discussing the issue. It'd be no better if I discussed abortion, stem cells, or immigration. And since you're so bold son I'd suggest you'd find a way to get on the TV every now and then, rather than blowing up another building."

"Shame on both of you!"

Scott and Steve looked to entrance to find a very angry Jarvis standing there. He looked back and forth at both men and finally said, "The two of you are suppose to be leaders, yet you're arguing about who needs to do what! Get off your own rumps and do it! Help each other instead of rambling on at one another. This world is far from perfect, but it won't get any better with the two of you acting far beneath the class I know you're capable of."

Jarvis having finished what he had to say walked out of the room and left the two men to simply stare at each other not really sure what to say.

"Feisty guy," Cyclops muttered.

Cap laughed loudly then, "I haven't seen him rip into anyone like that in months!"

Cyclops sighed, "I guess we did have it coming to us. I apologize for what I said. I shouldn't hold the responsibility for speaking good for mutantkind on your shoulders alone."

"I'm sorry as well. The X-Men do plenty of good work and I know all of you to be good people. Charles Xavier was never a bad judge of character. He saw in people what they could never see in themselves and I'm sorry that he's gone."

Cyclops replied solemnly, "You and me both."

"One can only hope that your wife and Pietro are faring better than the two of us."

Scott smirked, "Knowing Jean she has the situation under control."

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Jean touched the glass that contained Sequoia and looked to Pietro. She felt a great deal of sympathy for the man so she asked, "Has anyone been in to see him since he's arrived here?"

Pietro shook his head, "People are either mad at him or afraid of him. Jarvis would probably go in there, but Captain America has strictly forbidden it. He's pretty much been all alone."

"And that's not going to help the man's condition one bit. I need to go in there."

Quicksilver zoomed in front of the door and outstretched his arms, "Sorry Jean, but I'm under strict orders. Nobody goes in there."

Phoenix sighed heavily, "Fine. We'll do this long distance then. Pull up a chair for me to sit in. I'd be lying if I pretended to know how this one will turn out."

Her escort nodded and within seconds had found the comfiest chair in the house and bought it to Jean. With a smile he said, "I didn't want you to sit in one of these cold steel infirmary chairs."

As Jean sat back in the chair she asked, "So who usually sits in this thing?"

"Black Panther. The thing was built with royalty in mind so I'm sure you'll find it suitable."

Jean eased back in the seat and said, "You need to tell Black Panther when he gets better that I so need one of these!"

Pietro smiled, "I'll make sure to put a sticky note on his head."

Phoenix laughed and then gave Pietro a reminder; "Don't make any physical contact with me once I go into this trance. If you do you could risk killing me and Quoi."

The Avenger nodded in understanding and Phoenix slipped into the mind of Quoi. Once again, Pietro watched Jean with caution and interest. A few minutes of observation had passed and Quicksilver began to assume that all was well with Jean. So he was almost about to zip off to the kitchen to grab a Sprite when he saw Jean slightly twitch.

That twitching quickly turned to violent convulsions and pink telekinetic energy surrounded Jean's body. The room began to shake and medical instruments were falling off their cabinets. Pietro remembered Jean's warning and had to fight the urge to reach out to her. All he could do was watch helplessly as Jean raged against whatever was going on in Quoi's mind.

Then just as suddenly as the maelstrom began it ended. Jean awoke and leaned forward, putting her head in both of her hands. Sweat coated her face as she looked up to Pietro and said, "I have never in all my experience made contact with a mind like your friends."

"Were you able to help him?"

"Unfortunately, no. I can say without any doubt that no telepath can ever hurt nor help Sequoia. Whatever madness is plaguing him, he'll have to fight it on his own," Jean replied.

"Why? What's wrong with him?" Pietro asked.

"His mind is infinite. Imagine the normal mind as a house with a certain amount of rooms and for me to access your mind I have to open the doors to all those rooms. With Sequoia that's impossible. For every one door I opened his mind made 100 more," Jean explained.

Hurriedly Pietro replied, "Then I shall suggest to Captain America that he be sent back out to space."

"What?!! You can't do that! If he stands any chance of recovery he needs to be around people he recognizes and knows," Jean implored.

Pietro folded his arms across his chest and wrinkled up his nose, "He is a danger to everyone here! I don't want him around causing anyone harm."

Rising out of her chair, Phoenix met Quicksilver's gaze head on, "He needs your aid. Not your scorn Pietro. Have some decency and if I'm right it wasn't all that long ago that you were in the same predicament as him."

Being reminded of his own bout of insanity stung Pietro, so he said with all the more resolve, "He has destroyed billions of lives. A murderer like him isn't worth keeping in this mansion."

“No wonder all the women in your life leave you. You’re as cold hearted as your father,” Jean insulted as she turned from Magneto’s son and she was about to walk out of the room angry until she remembered that she had one last person left to look into.

With a complete tone of disgust Jean said, “Take me to your sister.”

Pietro wasn’t quite sure what about his logic had set Phoenix off, but he honestly didn’t care. Quoi needed to be sent away and he would tell Captain America so ASAP. Until then though, he wouldn’t waste his breath on Grey. So he quickly zipped over to his sister’s bed and waited for Jean to arrive.

Arriving a minute or so later Jean looked down to Wanda and said, “Remember what I told you. No interfering of any kind. I know you’re impulsive and this is your sister, but I’m already at the point where I want to send you across the Atlantic. Don’t make me have to actually do it.”

The Avenger remained silent as Jean touched Wanda’s forehead and was once again locked into her telepathic trance.

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She-Hulk ducked Andromeda’s punch and tackled her at the mid-section. The two women tumbled to the ground. Jennifer kept her tight grip on the Atlantean and lifted her up into the air. Andromeda wiggled in her teammate’s grasp, but quickly delivered two hammering blows to Jennifer’s shoulders. She had fortunately hit with enough force to cause She-Hulk to loosen her grip. Andromeda planted her feet in Jennifer’s stomach and pushed backward. As she flew from She-Hulk’s arms, she did a back flip and landed on her feet gracefully.

“So don’t we have guests today?” Andromeda asked as she ran towards She-Hulk, leaping into the air, and releasing out a kick that was meant to hit Jennifer’s jaw. The green woman caught Andromeda’s foot and flung her across the training room.

“Yea, Jean Grey. World’s best telepath at the moment,” She-Hulk answered as Andromeda bounced off the metal wall she was meant to make a nasty impact with. Unfortunately, that didn’t work out and the woman had landed easily on her feet.

“Telepaths are dangerous people,” Andromeda said as she charged forward and smacked Jennifer across the face with her trident and then spun her weapon around to take She-Hulk’s feet out from under her. Walters smacked into the ground and Andromeda was on top of her with her trident pressed up against She-Hulk’s throat.

Since She-Hulk was unable to speak Andromeda made another comment. “I would say that the whole lot of them should be depowered, but only because Atlantis lacks in telepaths.”

She-Hulk sent her knee into the woman’s back as hard as she could and sent Andromeda flying into the nearest wall without her trident. Jennifer quickly rose to her feet and discarded the trident to another end of the training arena. Grasping at her throat Jennifer said, “Oh c’mon telepaths aren’t the evil of the world. We all have powers and they can be abused. No one group should be held more accountable than another.”

Andromeda rose to her feet, “So you say, but how many times must a telepath possess a world leader or enslave a team of heroes before the point finally is driven home. Telepathy is quite simply one of the most dangerous abilities on this planet.”

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Jack Hart looked across the wreckage of Tokyo and felt he was getting an infinitesimal sampling of the suffering his people were experiencing. He had heard the details from Sersi and knew that his people had been the transgressors. All the same, Ultron, Kang, and Red Skull all fell under the same category. Did they deserve no less a cruel fate than the Contraxians?

The Contraxian/human hybrid was walking alongside Shiro Yashida, Japan’s national hero. Jack felt like he had to come here to Japan and be with Shiro. If there was anybody who could understand Jack’s frustration at the moment, it was Sunfire.

Walking in the most devastated areas of the city had become a routine for Yashida, following the days after the attack. He preferred to make his walks alone, but Jack could be quite the persistent fellow. In truth, Shiro appreciated Jack more than he ever had for staying in Japan. He was grateful to Crystal’s efforts as well, but she wasn’t far from home. It was easier for her to be

here. Jack was far from one home and the other was in ruins. If anyone had an excuse for not being here it was him. Yet, he was one of the few that was.

As they walked through the streets the two Avengers spotted two little girls playing with broken dolls in a burnt out car. Their hair was matted down and their faces coated with soot. They seemed completely oblivious to the world as they entrapped themselves in a game of "house". Shiro walked towards the car, but as soon as the girls noticed him they screamed and ran as fast as they could down the nearest alley. They left behind their dolls.

"Maybe you should have worn your containment suit," Jack-of-Hearts said.

Shiro shook his head fiercely, "No. There is no telling what kind of booby traps Red Skull and Professor Power have left behind. I need to be on guard at all times."

Jack smiled and compliments Shiro by saying, "Well, you are this country's Captain America after all, so I can understand that."

"Please don't say that," Shiro replied sternly.

The Avenger looked at his teammate with an expression that was half-confusion and half-shock. Jack just couldn't fathom why Shiro was so taken aback and asked, "What's with the snappiness?"

"Captain America is not so greatly loved here as he might be in other parts of the world. He is a great hero to be sure, but he was once one of my country's greatest opponents. The scars of war and defeat never entirely heal," Sunfire explained as he began to walk down the alley in search of the two young girls. He hated that he had frightened them and wanted to let them know he meant them no harm.

Jack nodded in understanding and followed Shiro. He asked Sunfire another question, "So how do you feel about Cap personally?"

The question made Shiro shiver. He looked back at Jack with troubled eyes and said, "He is an honorable hero to be sure. Yet, every time I look at him I am painfully reminded of my people's shame."

At that moment the two found themselves in more emotional sync than they had been since they both found themselves on The Avengers. They were heroes amongst their respective people, but their people had not always been seen in such a positive light.

“My people are not villains. They made a mistake by allying themselves with the wrong person, but they should not be condemned as a whole. I feel the same way you do every time I look at Quoi.”

Sunfire looked up into the sky and then back down to the ground as he thought of something to say. When it finally came to him he said, “Then let us not worry about our people’s pasts and make sure that better futures are forged for them.”

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Jean Grey found herself smack dab in the middle of a very devastated New York City. Cars were strewn about and most of them were on fire. The ones that weren’t were flattened. Looking up into the sky there were cars balancing delicately from the windows of broken skyscrapers. The air was bogged down with the smell of smoke, gasoline, and burnt flesh.

With each step that she took Jean heard a crying off in the distance. Something was very wrong in the mind of Wanda Maximoff and Phoenix intended to track down Scarlet Witch to ascertain the problem. Wanda’s mind was clearly here. Jean could feel that much, so Pietro’s worries about any sort of mystical entrapment were without merit.

Lifting herself into the air Jean looked across the city to see of any apparent signs of Wanda. It was then that she heard the cry again and turned her attention to the Brooklyn Bridge. Bursts of blue, green, and red energies were seen by the telepath and she quickly zipped her way over there. The firebird surrounded her body as she flew.

Jean floated above the bridge and watched the two forces march towards each other. She was floating only a few feet above the opposing forces, yet they seemed completely oblivious to her. Leading both forces were different versions of Scarlet Witch.

The Wanda to the left of Phoenix’s bird’s eye of view was the

Wanda she was familiar with. Behind her were Captain America, Iron Man, Thor, and Quicksilver. The Wanda to the right of Jean was garbed entirely in black. Her hair was straight and hung to her lower back. Behind her was Magneto, an elderly woman, Quicksilver in his green outfit, and Vision. Each version of Wanda looked fiercely determined as they marched towards each other. A battle was about to be joined and Jean wasn't quite sure what she could do. Interfering in the fight was not a sound idea, but she needed to know just what was going on.

At that point, Phoenix heard a violent screech above her. Looking upward, Jean saw large dragons of black and red entrapped in conflict. As they hacked and slashed at each other their scales and blood rained down. Calling upon the power of the Phoenix, Jean deflected any stray items that might have been looking to hit her.

“Why are you here?”

Jean quickly turned around and saw the High Evolutionary floating in front of her. Preparing herself for a fight she replied, “I am trying to help here. Just what is going on here?”

High Evolutionary shrugged. “A war. A merging. Something in-between. I haven't quite figured it out yet, but we must observe. The crystal will grow angry if we interfere.”

“What crystal?” Jean asked and the psychic manifestation pointed upward. Following the direction of the finger Jean saw a very familiar item in all its glory.

*The M'Kraan Crystal! Why the hell is it manifested here? Something is not right,* Jean thought as she urgently flew towards the item. As she grew closer to it, the glow of the universally powered jewel began to blind her.

Stopping within feet of the jewel she asked, “Why are you here? What do you want with Wanda?”

“I AM HERE TO ANSWER WISHES AND RESTORE CONFIDENCE.”

Jean continued to press on with her questions. “What wishes?”

“YOU ARE AN INTERLOPER. YOU MUST BE EXPELLED!” the crystal roared as it began to vibrate violently. Light lashed out from the jewel and stuck Jean in the chest like heavy brick.

Phoenix let out a cry of pain and was sent spiraling into the air. She wasn't the world's most powerful telepath for nothing though and she was able to steady herself. Jean's instinct was to respond with an attack in kind, but she held back.

"You do her harm by remaining here!" Jean exclaimed. "Her body is weak!"

"YOU KNOW LITTLE WOMAN! LEAVE HERE!"

Another wave of psychic energy tore through the air and struck Jean head on. The blast threw her out of Wanda's mind and into the arms of Pietro.

"What did you see?" Quicksilver asked anxiously as he caught Jean.

Jean grabbed her head, "A lot. Need time to think."

It was then that an emergency alarm began to blare throughout the room. Pietro helped Jean to her feet and said, "Guess we've got a situation to deal with."

"It would seem that way," Jean said using her telekinesis as earmuffs to cut off the sound.

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This was Alberto Ruiz's first Friends of humanity rally. For the past few years he had admired the group and their goals, but was too young to participate. His father was a stinkin mutie lover, even after the Brotherhood of Evil Mutants had attacked his high school. Now that he graduated and was away from home he could do as he pleased.

What he was doing at the moment was listening to Dr. Easley Withersby. He was a senior member of the Friends of Humanity and well respected college professor. He was no afraid to stand up to the filthy mutants and their diseased powers.

The white-haired professor was shaking an elderly fist in the air as he proclaimed, "Mutants are desecrating this entire planet! They're a worse plague than any that has ever come to this planet!"

A resounding cheer went up from the crowd of about seven hundred. Alberto had found his cause. Helping to combat the threat of mutants was what he was called to do. The filthy animals deserved every ounce of hate that the young man could muster.

The professor continued his chorus of hate by saying, "I would rather die before I share my beloved planet with these utterly irresponsible creatures!"

A resounding cheer of agreement went up from the anti-mutant crowd. After the roar died down everyone began to notice the abundance of tiny blue bubbles that was interspersed among them. The bubbles had a slight glow to them and one was about to touch a bubble. Then disaster struck. One by one the bubbles began to explode and unleashed concussive energy. People were flung and tossed in every direction.

Alberto avoided the chaos by immediately throwing himself on the ground. He felt like he was back at his high school all over again. People were screaming and he was terrified. The friend of humanity had been his last hope to rid himself of that terror. They had already failed him and he wasn't even an official member of the organization.

"You should have let me put acid in those."

Alberto looked up and to his left to see a bubble gum chewing female who looked like she could have walked right out of Beverly Hills. She was wearing blue-tinted sunglasses, a baby blue, tight-fitting sleeveless fleece jacket and shorts that barely touched her upper thigh. The woman had a tan to die for and in any other situation Alberto would be trying to get her phone number.

"Bubbles, you always insist on taking the fun out of these events."

The source of that comment was a tall man cloaked in black. His pale, thin face and piercing green eyes were barely visible under the thick hood. Alberto could only imagine how the Florida heat was bearing down on that man. Yet, there wasn't a single hint of sweat or perspiration anywhere on the man's body. He walked like a man who greatly believed in his own self-importance and dared anyone to call him a lesser man. The young man was sure that he was the leader of these murderous freaks.

Another woman walked up beside the haughty man. She was wearing a V-cut, sleeveless blue shirt that clung to her voluptuous

form like a scared child to his parent. In the space between her breasts there was a glowing white jewel. White wristbands with blue diamonds in the center helped to accentuate her outfit. Unlike the other woman this one seemed to be more muscular and had wild raven hair. She resembled a modern day Amazon.

“I have to agree with her. These slabs of meat don’t deserve our mercy. The stench of them sickens me.”

The man in black, even as people ran around screaming and terrified, smiled. “Any other day I would agree with the two of you, but we don’t want to piss off our guests before they arrive.”

“Too late for that!”

With a wicked smile born of deception the devilish leader looked behind him and saw whom he had been waiting for. Captain America and his Avengers. The esteemed heroes his team would destroy. Then the man caught hold of a sight that made his smile vanish. Two X-Men were mingled in with the Avengers.

Quicksilver was at the fore of the group and pointed at the black-cloaked man. Angrily he said, “My sister told me about you! You’re Ramses Xavier!”

Jean and Scott both tightened up at that name. Ramses Xavier was the cause of Longshot’s insanity and by default the reason Psylocke was gravely injured. The couple was fiercely protective of their friends and Ramses had been the cause of multiple injuries, physical and mental, to many of their friends. Neither had any idea that this day would lead them to this man, but they wouldn’t pass up the opportunity for justice.

Ramses bowed deeply before the battle ready team. As he rose he said, “I am indeed Ramses Xavier. A pleasure to meet all of you at last. I had hoped to see some familiar faces, but new company is never something I am against having.”

She-Hulk stepped forward and pounded a fist into an open palm. Her face was a snarl of anger as she said, “Just three of them. We can beat these clowns easy and get home in time for dinner.”

**<Don’t underestimate them! Ramses is a high level telepath and has telekinetic abilities to rival my own. Not to mention he’s hiding something. He’s just too smug.>**

Alberto Ruiz saw what that something was before any of the Avengers did. Off in the distance he could see a swarm of people who to his utmost horror looked like they had crawled out of a George Romero film. There had to be at least a hundred of them all walking with disfigured bodies and oozing mouths. The young man would have screamed, but it died in his throat before he had a chance to voice. At the lead of the horrific crowd was an emaciated man with ashen skin, sunken black eyes, and cracks all along his flesh as if he was a dried mummy. A dusty brown toga was wrapped around his body as he led the masses like some undead messiah.

Ramses laughed as expression of shock spread across the Avenger's faces. "Where are my manners? I should have introduced to you my fellow Lords of Humanity. Behind me are the two lovely ladies Bubbles and Gemstone. At the fore of that terrifying collection of middle class America is Tombmaker. And of course I can't forget the last two of my pack..."

A bolt of lightning struck down in front of Ramses and out of the smoke of the blast came forth a tiny, blonde-haired preteen holding the hand of a middle-aged Mexican man wearing a dusty suede trench coat and smoking on a cigar.

"Arcadia and Timeline."

Andromeda snickered at the group that Ramses had presented. "You call yourselves Lords of Humanity? You are barely fit to be lords over plankton!"

Xavier smiled at the feistiness of the Atlantean royal. "Let our actions speak for us Andromeda!"

Captain America gripped his shield tightly and proudly proclaimed, "If it's action you want...AVENGERS ASSEMBLE!!!"

That wasn't a battle cry that Phoenix and Cyclops usually responded to, but they felt Cap's energy flow through them as he said it. The patriot had a way with words that felt inspiring over commanding. If faith could move mountains then Captain America's voice could part seas. Cyclops admired that talent and hoped to one day imitate it

X-51 registered the spike in heart rate and adrenaline from all of his allies. Captain America's simple words had proven to be

effective. While X-51 was now capable of feeling emotion, he still didn't understand how to exactly interpret it. Tyrant had neglected to instruct him in the use of his Celestial technology. Yet, having to learn about himself was the most human thing X-51 had done in all of his brief existence.

Energy flared around Phoenix's body and she began to rise into the air. Pink telekinetic power flickered around her body like flames and there was no doubt who her opponent would be. Ramses' body began to emanate dark violet energy to match Jean's. As he began to rise into the air he said, "Spare me the trouble and surrender now. I don't want to harm you in front of your hubby dear."

Jean smiled. "I would have too many friends giving me hell for not beating you into submission."

The two psis could feel each other's power and though both were loath to admit it, they knew their coming struggle would not be an easily won one. Ramses had trampled many versions of this woman across the Multiverse, but he had always had an army behind him for support. It had been quite some time since had had to depend on his powers alone. His only advantage in this fight was his ruthlessness. That could very well be his only saving grace in this conflict.

Truthfully, Jean had no idea just how powerful she was in comparison to Ramses. This entire battle would have to be played by ear, but Jean had encountered her fair share of psis. That experience would be put to the test here today. She was trying to read even the slightest thought from him, but they psi-barriers wouldn't budge. Ramses was blocking her out totally.

One side of Xavier's face twisted into a grin. "Do you want to give up yet or do you feel the need to continue this pointless exercise?"

"Getting to humiliate an overbearing ass is never pointless."

Ramses' stare narrowed. "Be careful with your words girl. My hand just might not be so merciful to you."

It was Jean's turn to smile. "My power has been feared for millennia. Planets and civilizations have trembled in fear of it. Your mercy is the last thing on my mind."

“Then it shall not be on mine,” Ramses said as he created a telekinetic field around Phoenix and began to implode it. Sweat was dripping down his face as he struggled against Jean’s telekinesis.

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Cyclops didn’t have to time to worry about his wife as he was battling away blasts from the jewels of Gemstone’s body. She was aiming at civilians and Scott was doing everything he could to take care of her blasts. Unfortunately, she could fire off four shots while he was only limited to one. And that disadvantage was going to eventually get someone hurt.

Alberto Ruiz quickly found himself in the line of sight of a green blast of energy. He covered himself with his arms and blocked his face. Death was coming for him and just like his brother it would be at the hands of a freak. The blast never came and when Alberto finally unshielded his face he found himself in the arms of Quicksilver.

“Saving a bigot is so unbecoming of me,” Pietro said as he placed Alberto a mile away from the battlefield.

The young man wasn’t even able to utter a single syllable of a rebuttal before Pietro was long gone.

“Thanks for the assist,” Cyclops said as Pietro peeled around a street corner and stood beside the X-Men leader.

“Let’s just remind this woman why the Avengers are not to be reckoned with.”

Gemstone laughed. “You Avengers do no one any justice. Where were you when my brother was killed for simply being a mutant?”

That memory was clearer than any other in the young woman’s mind. It was only weeks after the Pale Riders had wrecked Seattle. She had been living there with her younger brother for about a year. The two of them were at a bookstore when her brother’s powers manifested in the form of a mini sonic boom. The store was wrecked and a few people had some minor scrapes and bruises. Yet, whatever rage those people had still been feeling over the Pale Riders was unleashed upon her 15-year-old

brother.

They surrounded him and a demon born anger was in all of their eyes. She had tried to get through the mob to save him, but all she received for her efforts was a swift kick to the gut and a subsequent beating. By the time the police had arrived her brother had been bludgeoned to death.

“Death with death isn’t the answer! Killing these people won’t bring your brother back!” Cyclops exclaimed.

“Killing these people were never the intention! At least not yet! Ramses only wanted to draw you out.”

The two were then battered with an array of energy blasts that came from her wrists and chest. Cyclops, well-trained in the martial arts, was able to dodge the blasts. Pietro’s natural abilities gave him more than enough chance to miss the blasts. Finally, getting tired with the whole affair, Pietro ran forward and punched the young woman in the face. She went flying back from the attack and slammed into a nearby car.

Cyclops ran forward, grabbed Pietro’s shoulder roughly, and turned him around. “Was that really necessary? She wasn’t a threat needing that kind of force.”

Pietro scowled at Summers. “You may feel the need to play nice with these terrorists, but I won’t Summers. I’ve fought too many of them and they don’t need our mercy!”

Scott moved himself only inches away from Pietro’s face. “Believe me I’ve heard all about your time as Omega’s leader and how you managed to let so many die on your watch!”

“Both of you pricks are annoying as hell!” Gemstone shouted as she knocked both men off their feet with blasts to the chest. She was favoring a leg and a very sore jaw as she moved towards the two men. When she got close enough to Pietro she kicked him in the side. “That’s for punching me bastard!”

Cyclops looked up and shot a thin optic blast into Gemstone’s neck. The woman’s head craned back and she fell to the floor unconscious. Picking himself up he groaned from the attack and helped an aching Pietro to his feet. With a smile he said, “Maybe I underestimated her.”

Quicksilver eyed Scott with disbelief. "Maybe?"

---

"We don't have to do this," Captain America said as he stood before Timeline.

The Mexican man eyed Rogers suspiciously and said, "And just why is that?"

"Because you were looking to only injure these people. Not kill. I could see that plain as day."

Timeline threw his head back in laughter. "Don't think it's because I didn't want to, Captain America. People like those bastards killed my lil boy. They killed him because his Daddy was a freak! Believe me I want to kill every last one of them."

Steven sighed. "And just what will that resolve? Do you think your son is going to be proud watching his father slaughter people?"

Timeline snarled and yelled, "What do you know about me or my son?!! You don't know anything!"

Suddenly, a shadow was cast upon Cap and he looked up for its source. A car was above Rogers and he narrowly dodged it. The vehicle crashed into the ground and glass went flying in every direction. Timeline saw Captain America rolling away from the impact and said, "That was only a test. I can drop a thousand cars on you if I want."

Captain America quickly rolled to his feet and said, "A guy who can drop cars from the sky. Just my luck."

"Not exactly. I can duplicate anything from my own personal timeline. Any car, person, animal, or item I've ever seen with my own eyes I can duplicate. Like a burning brush," Timeline said as he created a ring of fiery brushes all around Captain America.

Smoke began to fill Steve's nostrils and he began to wheeze from the toxic air. Putting his shield over his face he ran through the flames relatively unscathed. As soon as he put his shield at his

side a cougar pounced on him and wrestled him to the ground. With one hand he struggled to keep the deadly jaws of the animal away from him and with the other he was reaching for his shield.

Timeline snickered and said, "I made sure to make plenty of visits to the zoo."

"You're going to need more back up than that to keep Captain America down," Cyclops said as he blasted Timeline in the back of the head. The mutant slammed into the ground unconscious.

Cap finally got a hold of his shield and slammed into the side of the cougar's face. The animal's jaw was broken and Captain America quickly jumped to his feet, "I'm just glad he didn't decide to call up an elephant."

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Bubbles had learned one thing from the media. If somebody was green and strong, do anything you could to avoid him or her. Unfortunately, she was being targeted by She-Hulk so she was just going to have to keep out of arm's length. The task wouldn't be hard for her to accomplish considering her abilities.

"As much as humans have persecuted your kin I would think you would hate them as much as me," Bubbles said as a flurry of her trademarks surrounded the feet of She-Hulk.

The attorney had to wade through the bubbles. She was moving ever closer to the Malibu diva when she said, "Foolish hate never solves anything. Now a good ass beating can work wonders."

Bubbles' face twisted into a snarl and she snapped her fingers. The hundreds of heavy bubbles around Jennifer's feet began to glow. She-Hulk knew what was about to happen as soon as she saw Bubbles waving at her. The spheres exploded and the concussive force was enough to send Jennifer hundreds of feet into the air. Bubbles watched with delight as the Avenger slammed into the ground headfirst.

Now it's time to seal the deal, Bubbles thought as she outstretched her arms and bubbles began to pop up and grow into full size from her pores. The objects came at She-Hulk with break neck speed. She-Hulk was blanketed by bubbles till the point that her body was no longer visible. Bubbles turned her head as her

weapons exploded and covered She-Hulk in acid. Jennifer was quickly awoken as searing pain surged through her body. The large amount of acid quickly ate away at her body and she let loose a blood curdling scream.

“Monster!” Quicksilver said as he ran forward and punched Bubbles square in her nose. Bubbles went flying backwards and skidded along the sidewalk. Her vision was blurred and her entire body ached, but she was conscious.

Slowly, she rose to her feet and took off her broken glasses. With a scowl that could scare Death, she said, “Oh you are so paying for my next facial!”

“There won’t be much of a face left after I’m done!”

With the speed of a runaway train Pietro ran forward with the intention of caving the woman’s face in. Instead, he slammed into a wall of bubbles and was cocooned by it. He began to punch and kick wildly at the wall fearing the same fate as She-Hulk. As the bubbles began to glow the Avengers faced his impending doom with just one emotion...rage! This skanky little girl had bested him when he had faced the likes of Onslaught, Bastion, and the Crimson Pirates. The idea of it made him sick.

Then a heavenly red light cut through the bubbles and Pietro was free of his prison. Cyclops was smiling smugly at the speedster. Pietro ignored it and looked for Bubbles, but found she had already met Captain America’s shield.

“You shouldn’t have been so careless Quicksilver. You could have gotten yourself hurt!” Captain America said as he picked up his shield.

Quicksilver protested. “She attacked She-Hulk ruthlessly! She needed to be put down immediately.”

“Jennifer will heal from her wounds. Don’t forget whose blood is in her veins. You, on the other hand, don’t possess such traits,” Captain America replied.

Pietro huffed. “Fine. But this battle is far from over.”

---

Andromeda is surrounded on all sides by the suddenly zombified people of the tourist town. She sees elderly, women, and children mixed into the bunch, but they've all been transformed by Tombmaker's touch into monstrosities. Nonetheless, she could not bring herself to do them any grievous harm. Especially, if there was a way to reverse what had been done to them. So with the blunt end of her trident she began to knock back the monsters until she had created enough of a gap for her to charge Tombmaker directly.

"Come child and feel the embrace of Tombmaker," the ashen man said as he spread his arms open like Andromeda was a loved one. The Atlantean would teach him the error of that.

When she was within feet of Tombmaker she flipped her trident and was prepared to send three metal prongs into his chest. Before that action could happen a zombie dog came from around a corner and snatched Andromeda's trident from her. The sudden appearance of the canine threw off her balance and sent her into the arms of Tombmaker.

He quickly wrapped his arms around her and whispered. "Welcome to my family."

She began to lose all feeling and her vision faded away. Her throat felt like it hadn't seen water in weeks and her insides were crunching and twisting. Yet, she felt absolutely no pain and then she felt nothing at all.

---

"Stay still you big toy!" Arcadia yelled as she created fire arrows to reign down on X-51 from the sky. He was moving with speed greater than she had anticipated and was causing her a good amount of aggravation.

With the failure of her arrows she created an explosion at X-51's feet and to her surprise he was still standing. She huffed and clapped her hands creating a sound wave that knocked the robot to his feet. He quickly jumped up and shot a tiny dart at the young girl. Arcadia ducked and changed the dart into a black bat. Pointing at X-51 she said, "Get it!"

The bat charged at X-51, but a simple laser beam from his index finger was enough to incinerate the creature. At this point,

Arcadia's face was flushed red. A flash of realization made her understand what the crux of her problem was.

"You're just like Pinocchio. Time to make you a real boy," Arcadia said and with a blink of her eye the transformation had been completed.

Looking down in wonderment X-51 saw that his hands were flesh. He saw with inadequate human eyes, felt blood flowing through his veins. Breathed in oxygen. Then all too suddenly that brief moment of humanity was gone. Looking with eyes that were once again forged from Celestial technology, he saw that Cyclops had taken down the girl with a non-lethal optic blast.

"Guess her hold on you wasn't permanent," Cyclops said as he hefted the girl onto his shoulders.

X-51 nodded. **::Yes it would seem that way::**

"I suggest we see what we can do about this zombie situation," Cyclops said as he turned away from X-51 and made his way to the swarm of zombies making their way towards a still healing She-Hulk.

Never once did he think to look back and see if X-51 was following him.

---

Jean Grey bit back exhaustion and yelled. "Yield!"

"Never!"

Telekinetic energy raged around the two combatants, but neither was gaining an inch over the other amidst the swarm of power. Both of them were pushing themselves to the limit, but unfortunately for Ramses his opponent had one last reserve of power.

Living fire began to emanate itself from Phoenix and her voice took on a seemingly different form. "You have forced me to take this route Ramses. Now suffer!"

The flames flared outward from Grey and consumed Ramses. His mind and soul were lit afire by the power and he let out one last scream as he began to tumble through the air. Before he could

reach the ground he was caught by X-51, but before the android could return the ground Ramses had disappeared from his arms.

Looking across the battlefield Jean saw that all of the other members of The Lords of Humanity were fading away as well and those people who had been zombified were returned to normal. When she landed on the ground she said, "I'm guessing Ramses was prepared in case he was defeated."

Captain America nodded. "I'm glad you and your husband were here today. I have a feeling things might have been much worse with you."

Jean smiled. "Ramses was cocky. Guess he wasn't expecting to fight a psi of his caliber. We were glad to help."

---

"It has been my pleasure to speak with you here today. Remember that the future is what you make it and I have faith you all will make it one worth living in," Nicole said as she stepped away from the podium and moved off to the side of the stage where an elderly black man with ghost white hair was waiting with a grin.

"That was spectacular Ms. Ridley! I think you really did get through to them," the old man said shaking Binary's hand fiercely.

"I was glad to help. I would love to be apart of some other activities down the line to assist kids like those out there."

The old man nodded solemnly and said, "Well, actually I've been asked to give you a proposal which will allow you to do that and more."

Binary laughed with excitement. "Come on then! I want to hear it!"

"How would you feel about being the NAACP's sponsored superhero?"

---

### **Later on that night...**

Jean sipped at her tea and looked out the window to see which constellation she could spot. Scott came up behind her and

wrapped his arms around her and said, “What’s wrong? You’ve been quiet ever since we got back from Florida.”

“There is something very wrong going on with Wanda Maximoff.”

“Well, why didn’t you mention that to Captain America? I think he would have appreciated knowing that.”

Jean shook her head. “No, that would just make the situation worse. I don’t even know what’s wrong honestly. I’m just running off a feeling Scott and then there’s Quoi. That poor being is suffering Scott.”

Scott hugged Jean a little tighter. “There’s something else isn’t there? You wouldn’t get this worked up for nothing.”

Sighing she said, “I feel some connection to Quoi. He was forced to make a terrible choice like I’ve had to do so many times in my life.”

Cyclops could see that Jean didn’t want to give any specifics so he wasn’t going to make an issue out of it. They were home and that’s all that mattered. So tenderly he said, “Everything’s going to be alright Jean. It always works out in the end.”

Jean laid the back of her head on her husband’s chest and said, “For all our sakes I hope you’re right Scott.”

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### Author’s Notes

**Yes, this took an immensely long time and I’m sorry for that. The issue just kept growing and growing so I had to nip it in the bud eventually to save myself from writing a 30 page story. Though I was only five pages away from that, but hey I still stopped myself. Anyway next issue won’t take near as long to come out. At least I hope so. Now just let me go find some wood to knock on.**

**-Brent Lambert**

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**MARVEL 2000 PRESENTS...**

**"I STRUCK OIL!"**  
**Part One**

*Written by Brent Lambert*

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**#46**  
**October 2006**

**Captain  
America**

**Quicksilver**

**Andromeda**

**Scarlet Witch**

The night was young and Nicole wasn't doing a damn thing with it. She was sitting at the doorstep of Avengers Mansion and looking up at the stars. That was where she drew her power yet; she had always felt uncomfortable up there. She could take drugs, thugs, guns and other Earth centered criminals. Fighting clones and alien wars made her just feel like she was playing some big video game.

*Okay not exactly the best explanation. Too many have died for it to be compared to that,* Binary thought grimly as she remembered how Proctor so ruthlessly decimated the Shi'ar Empire. He killed their Empress without a care and her limply hanging body still haunted Nicole's nightmares. Thor had thrown her head first into the world of super heroes and she loved him for it. The man had given her a chance when she didn't even deserve one. He trusted in her and by doing so allowed her to turn her life around.

Now, she was seeing the fruits of her labor and could only guess at whether she should eat of them. Part of her screamed to take the offer, but she didn't want to throw her teammates into politics. She may not have been fond of all of them, but they were the closest thing she had to real friends. All her life people pretended to befriend her for sex, money, or some other personal gain. The Avengers wanted none of that. They treated her with respect and dignity. It would be utterly wrong of her if she did not do the same.

"Why stare at them when you can meet them up close and personal?" Jack asked as he walked up behind Binary. The Avenger tried to stay out of the Mansion as much as possible. Quoi being in there just made him sick to his stomach. That murder's protection was a vile injustice.

"Surprised you're up this late," Binary replied.

Jack sat down next to Binary and suddenly the night seemed

Jack Of Hearts

calmer for both of them. "You shouldn't be. I flew for days at a time up there. I can control my sleeping habits."

Nicole laughed. "Whatever happened to good ol' insomnia?"

"So last year. Don't you know we Avengers have to develop a new personal problem every season?"

"As long as you avoid trying to get a Nicole Richie look I can deal with the other issues," Binary smiled.

There was a bit of silence between the two until Jack asked, "So do you think it's crazy how we got replaced by X-Men?"

Binary sighed. "I knew you were going to bring it up eventually. Butters you that much huh?"

Jack shrugged. "Not really. I just think it's a bit crazy. Doesn't seem like something Cap would do."

"Name one person on this team who's been acting normal?"

"You," Jack quickly answered.

"Like hell! If I had been, I would have cussed a few folks out by now," Binary joked.

"Yea..."

"Red Skull screwed us over good didn't he?" Binary sighed.

"Wish I could answer no. He beat the hell out of us. The fact he's out there laughing somewhere pisses me off."

Binary nodded. "Same here. Just imagine how Cap feels? That man is the definition of being your own worst critic."

Once again, Jack shifted the area of conversation. "So just why are you out here by yourself anyway?"

"Contemplating."

"Ahh, contemplating is always good."

Binary smiled and shook her head. "You were supposed to ask what I was contemplating about, smart ass!"

"What a woman thinks is territory I rather not tread."

Nicole play punched him in the shoulder. Jack grabbed his arm in mock pain and said, "That could get you a counseling you

Machine Man

Binary

know? Injuring teammates is strictly forbidden."

"Looks like I'm not the only one trying to break that rule," Binary said.

"Can we please not talk about him?"

"Fine. How was the Japan stay?"

"Humbling."

"That's it? No Godzilla? No Mothra?"

"Red Skull and his men were thorough in what they wanted to do. Sunfire blames himself for our defeat. He feels his quick temper took him out of the battle too early when he could have made a difference," Jack-of-Hearts said.

"You know he's probably right."

"Oh c'mon! We all share the blame for that battle. Cap shouldn't have went off alone for one!"

Binary could see she was going to have to explain herself better. "All I'm saying is some self reflection isn't a bad thing. Shiro, if the stories are true, has to be one of the most stubborn men on the planet. He'll cope with this."

Jack decided to let it go. "Yea, guess you're right. So what were you contemplating?"

"The NAACP wants me to be their "super" spokesman," Binary said.

If Jack had any opinion at all he didn't let it show. "So what are you going to do? Sounds like quite the opportunity."

"I don't have the slightest clue what I want to do. If I say yes I'm throwing the Avengers into a hot bed of politics. If I say no I might be given another opportunity to make real, positive change. Then again I've never been good at playing nice and I'm sure some of the members will bump heads with me. I get enough of that with Panther."

"I'm sure he loves you too," Jack grinned.

Binary rolled her eyes. "Don't even play. That ass is the last person on Earth I would EVER be a fan of."

Jack understood and even shared some of Binary's resentment towards T'Challa. The man had essentially told a group of Avengers that they weren't getting the job done. He had

pointed to Milwaukee as an example, but Wakanda had never lifted a finger against Doom.

Standing up Jack looked at the stars and said, "You'll make the right decision Nicole. I have faith in you."

"Thanks," Binary replied with deep sincerity.

---

X-51 had been standing at the edge of the balcony for almost two hours without moving. Andromeda had passed by him three times and was beginning to wonder if the robotic unit was experiencing some sort of malfunction. She finally walked out onto the balcony and tapped X-51 on the shoulder. It was surprisingly cold.

"Are you alright?"

**::Yes. I am merely processing thoughts::**

"Then I'm a fool," Andromeda laughed. "I thought you were looking at the stars."

**::I was. My mind allows me to process over a thousand activities at once. I am also reading all of George Martin's books simultaneously::**

Andromeda was always baffled at the nature of X-51. Machines were hardly uncommon in Atlantis, but she wasn't sure how to look at her teammate. He was no mere machine. At times he almost seemed human, but when you got right to the core of it he was merely metal and wires. Didn't that constitute a mere machine?

"In Florida you were made into a flesh and blood human. What was it like?" Andromeda asked.

X-51 turned to her with eyes that were cold and haunting. **::It was frightening and beautiful all at once. I honestly have no words::**

"I'm sorry she did that to you. It wasn't right."

**::She blessed me and cursed me. I can neither praise her nor blame her. Like I said. No words::**

---

"No words can explain how mad Captain America is about the existence of this team," Everett Ross said in front of an assembled Avengers Africa.

The team was seated around a circular, brown table. Seated

directly from Ross was Doc Diamond, the leader of Avengers Africa. He took off his square pink glasses and set them on the table. Doc wanted Ross to be able to see his eyes and see how serious he was when he said, "To be frank, I really don't give a damn what Captain America thinks about this team."

Twister slapped the table and exclaimed, "That's what I'm talking about! The Avengers over in America have never paid any attention to the strife of Africa. We're getting more help from Genosha than we have ever received from them. Why the hell should we be concerned with how they might feel about us?"

"Because they might try and shut us down. Isn't that right Ross?" Seraph explained. He folded his large, muscular arms across his chest and awaited Everett's answer.

The young man nodded. "I have a feeling if T'Challa doesn't wake up soon they'll make a move. Cap is pissed and he's going through a lot of personal shit. He might not be making exactly sound decisions."

Doc Diamond put on his glasses and stood up from his table. "Well, then it's your job to make one thing very clear to them Ross. If they even attempt such a move I'll be knocking right on Magneto's door. Best believe he's dying for an opportunity to help solidify his positive position in Africa. Fighting off Americans trying to shut down an African team would do just that."

"I'll do my best to convey the message," Ross replied nervously.

---

The Iranian men nervously pointed their guns at the three approaching men. It was obvious they were superhumans from their flashy uniforms, but none of the men were familiar with any of them. At the head of the group was an officer of the Republican Guard who cried out, "Stop where you are and prepare for arrest!"

At the head of the group was a man wearing a metallic red helmet and long red gloves that came up past his elbows. A bit of red armor descended down from his helmet and reached over his pectorals. Two red straps wrapped around his back from that point and connected to his crimson pants.

Eric the Red sighed and said, "Oh I can't stand these simpletons! Sundown."

The man standing next to Eric nodded and rose into the air. He was a handsome blonde with black glasses and white bodysuit

that had a large red ring in the middle of it. Sundown had black gloves and boots to match. When he rose high enough into the air orange solar power poured out of those hands and slammed into the Iranian men. Only burning husks were left after the assault.

"Thank you," Eric said as Sundown touched the ground.

Turning to his other companion Eric smirked. "Now it's your turn Phat. I desire some information from this particular oil refinery."

Phat nodded from underneath his gray sweat suit and said, "Weapons tech?"

"Something like that. Now go and use your talents to get us into this facility before the authorities arrive."

The three walked over the burnt bodies and walked up three flights of stairs until they were at an entranceway of the refinery. Phat walked up the keyhole and stuck out his finger. The finger stretched outward and shaped itself into the specific key needed to access the door. With a quick turn the door was open and Eric patted the wayward mutant on the back for a job well done.

Cracking his knuckles and popping his chest Eric the Red said, "Now it's time to go to work."

---

"It's the Americans! It's the Americans!" a Venezuelan man cried out as a large mass struck into the oil refinery he had worked at for nearly 10 years. The sound of bristling fire and exploding metal filled his ears. He instinctively dove to the ground and narrowly missed a large chunk of shrapnel slamming into his head.

In truth, that large mass was really an alien by the name of Ry'Lor. He was an ancient warrior who had made it his mission to make the world better for all. This decision was one he came to after an encounter with Moonstar and the mutant team known as X-Force. Now he was putting this decision into action by the side of Eric the Red.

His mission here was simple. Bring this refinery to the ground.

---

Things were simple for Jack. Quoi didn't belong here.

He didn't deserve to be here. Billions had died by his hand.

Jack's people. Innocent people.

He was going to betray them. Cap should have seen it.

Jack could kill him now. They would thank him for it.

The Contraxians deserved justice. How could he do it?

What made him think it was okay? The bastard.

Jack watched the bastard. Playing crazy.

Ha! The murderer knew what he was doing.

Hart sighed. "You're going to get yours. Just not tonight."

Jack left the room. Sequoia's eye glittered just a bit as he did.

---

### **The Next Day**

As always Captain America was the first to step into one of Ross's briefings because despite how mad he was with Ross, Steve Rogers was still a punctual man. And secretly, Steve was hoping that Ross had some new information on The Red Skull. Every single time he thought about Japan he was filled with renewed fury. That monster would pay for what he did to his little girl.

The last Avenger to make it into the briefing room was Quicksilver. He had been spending time with his sister and would not cut it short for anything, except a dire emergency. One of Ross' briefings was definitely not one of those situations.

Ross smiled smugly at Pietro. "Glad to see you could make it."

"Just hurry and get this over with you twit," Pietro said.

"I'll do my best," Ross laughed as he walked around the table and handed everyone a manila folder. "If you'll look at those you'll see some nasty little things have been going on in the past few hours."

Captain America flipped through the pictures. "Venzeula. Iran. The Gulf Coast."

"All places where oil is located. So who did the deeds? Do we think they're connected?" She-Hulk asked.

X-51 looked up. **::If you turn on your television I think**

**you'll find out the answer to that question::**

Ross turned around and reached up to press a button that turned on a large plasma screen. Plastered on the center of the television was Eric the Red. Behind him was a scenery of flames and black smoke.

"If you look behind me I'm sure you'll see that something just blew up. An oil refinery my friends and I intend to destroy every last one unless every nation on this planet decides to hand over all nuclear weapons and military intelligence to Factor Three. Don't mistake this as a game because it's not. I have no illusions of world domination. Just world unity and as I'm sure the United States understands, no peace can be achieved without great sacrifice. I'll give the nations of Earth two days to deliver on my demands. Otherwise your energy sources will be crippled and anarchy will ensue."

Captain America balled up his fists in anger. Another megalomaniac with delusions of power. He was no better than The Red Skull. At least Skull had the decency to admit he was a monster. This man pretended to have actually want peace. The Avengers were going to take him down and take him down very hard.

"Oh and just so I don't have a complete message I would like to end with something a bit positive. Stay in school kids. Maybe you can learn to listen to sense."

With the end of the transmission Everett turned to the Avengers. "Guess that's just about all the briefing you guys need."

"Now we just need to find this bastard's location," Binary said wondering just what they were about to be up against.

---

The infirmary room was still. Nothing moved. Only the beeps and twerps of machinery were audible. Then there came forth a scream

Moondragon jumped up from her bed and yelled, "I know where he is!"

---

**Begin Interlude**

I lost to the Avengers. Many can probably lay claim to that title, but I felt like I was the biggest loser of all. I watched as

Red Skull and his forces made fools of the Avengers. I still curse the fact that couldn't be me. To see the looks of utter defeat and humility on the faces of the Avengers must have been priceless. Victory had been so close for me, but it slipped away in those last precious moments.

Who is to blame for that defeat? I don't like to lay blame. It is not the way of a Roman legionnaire to act so individualistically. Admittedly, I blame myself despite that philosophy. The Avengers humbled me just as Black Panther and the Fantastic Four before them. Roman blood still flows through me. I can't help but to feel rage. Can I be blamed for that? If only Mars had given me the strength I needed at that pivotal moment. The Earth would have been made over in mine and Calizuma's image. I would have been Emperor of a Rome more massive than any ever known.

But, there is one important lesson to be found in Red Skull's victory. Persistence is rewarded and for those strong enough it is rewarded handsomely. For Red Skull had suffered many a defeat by the hand of Earth's shortsighted "heroes". Yet, he found opportunity and pounced on it. I shall do the same. An opportunity is fast approaching. I can feel it.

### **End Interlude**

---

The Avengers surrounded the hospital bed of Moondragon and each was trying to assess the situation in their own way. A previously comatose teammate had suddenly and quite excitedly woke up. Heather was claiming to know where Eric the Red was. Only hours ago the leader of Factor 3 declared no source of oil would be safe unless all the world's military secrets were handed over to him within three days. It was hardly a veiled threat. Factor 3 had already struck refineries in Iran, the Gulf Coast, and Venezuela. All the Avengers had seen the pictures and the attacks were thorough. The refineries had been burnt to the ground. Nothing was left.

"How were you able to find Eric the Red?" Pietro asked a bit skeptical of Heather's claim. Everyone was just so happy to have Heather back that they didn't take the time to ask the tough questions. How did she know Eric the Red? Why in her comatose state did she reach out to him?

Heather scowled at Pietro. She felt his scrutiny and took offense to it. "I did not reach out to him. Someone reached out to me. Obviously, this is a trap, but they claim to have my cousin, Sundragon, captured."

Captain America put a hand to his chin and said, "Sundragon

and you share similar abilities?"

"Yes. I can't be sure, but I think Pamela may have stumbled across this fiend's plot."

"We're assuming, when we need to know. This opponent is well organized and has a plan. All of this could be a big ruse. If we plan to do combat with him we must be the same way," Andromeda said.

"She's right. Tell us what you know Heather and we'll plan accordingly from there. We need to hurry though. Time is working against us here," Captain America ordered.

As the Avengers filed out of the room no one noticed Quoi's facial expression. It started off as a slight facial twitch, but finally grew into a smile.

---

"Do you think they will come?" Ry'lor asked

Eric the Red swiveled in his chair and rose from it. He walked down four steps that were the entrance to the platform he was seated on and said, "Oh they were going to come regardless. We could potentially be dealing with any number of supers considering the scope of my threat."

Sundown was standing next to the massive Ry'lor and looked like a string in comparison. Adjusting his sunglasses he said, "The Saudis have The Janissaries and Genosha has its own oil trade going. Those could be two significant enemies outside of the normal ones."

Eric the Red nodded. "Yes, Magneto would be the farther things from pleased if I struck. I've already invited the Avengers into my den. It wouldn't be wise to send Magneto an invitation as well."

A robust, young black woman was standing in a corner of the complex with her arms folded across her chest. She had curly, short black hair and full lips. Human-sized fly wings protruded from her back and the incandescent lights of the room made their translucent nature all the more apparent. When she heard mention of Genosha she said, "The Fallen Angels would get their asses kicked! Bring them and the punk Avengers on!"

"Angel, your enthusiasm is appreciated, but save it for the fight ahead. We have a long road in front of us, but with strength like yours I have faith it will work out for the best," Eric replied. His cause was a righteous one and it had to succeed. He had already suffered defeat twice before by the hands of Danielle Moonstar and her Force Works. Unfortunately, luck would not be playing on Eric's side. The Avengers were a world class team and Factor 3 would have to be at the top of their game to compete with Earth's Mightiest.

"Just let me fight Binary and we're all good," Angel replied.

"You're kidding right? No way could you ever handle Binary."

That comment had come from Vivisector who, along with the rest of Factor 3, had entered into the communications room. He didn't mean for his comment to come across as harsh, but the truth was what the truth was. Binary was a cosmically powerful weapon. Angel on the other possessed flight capabilities and some acid regurgitation. She was more than out of her league.

"Ahh shut up already! We can handle whoever we wanna handle. Long as we have Eric on our side," Mondo said as he waved a hand to their leader.

What might have been a look of disappointment from Eric quickly turned into a smile, "Mondo is right. Together we can achieve anything. But we must make preparations. Our foes will be here before long."

"I have concocted finely detailed dossiers on all of the illustrious members of the current Avengers roster. It would be best if you all studied them as soon as possible. If any of you have difficulty reading," Vivisector turned to look at Mondo, "then Ry'lor can easily telepathically implant the information into you."

The slight drunk Gin Genie smiled goofily, "Then juice me up already Ry'lor. If I'm going to pulverize these creeps I need to get a couple of more bottles of vodka in."

Ry'lor looked concerned to Eric the Red, who simply nodded and said, "Once the fight starts Gin Genie will be under your full mental control, but I need her power. I have a very definite use in mind for her abilities."

The massive former alien warlord took Gin Genie's hand and said gently, "Follow me then."

"Is the captive ready?" Eric the Red asked.

Shoc replied quickly, "Yes sir she's ready. Do you think she'll cooperate?"

Laughter came forth from Eric the Red. "My boy, she doesn't have a choice."

"And she doesn't deserve one," Vivisector added.

Angel glared at Vivisector viciously. "And just who the hell decided you could determine that honey?!"

Shoc was forced to agree. "Yea, Eric it just doesn't feel right forcing her to do this. Isn't there a better way?"

Eric sighed as he could begin to see the doubt form into a murky black cloud. He knew he was taking a risk with the capture of Sundragon and her subsequent use, but it was one he wasn't turning back from. Walking forward he put a hand on Shoc's shoulder and said, "If there was you know I would have taken it. You remember when I asked you to join this team?"

Fields nodded. He remembered well. Eric continued. "I was told not to let you in. That you were a risk and too wishy washy, but I took that risk anyway. I trusted in you and you turned out beautifully. All of you did. Now trust me in. That's all I ask."

Shoc really couldn't find himself arguing with Eric. If not for him, Fields would have exploded into a blast of negative energy already. As it was, Eric had found a way to stop his imminent death and gave him a purpose in life beyond revenge. He owed the man too much to start doubting him now.

"Alright Eric, I'll do this your way, but as soon as we're done I want to make it up to her somehow."

The leader of Factor 3 nodded. Fields had a gentle soul and a warrior's spirit. The two sometimes clashed, but Eric was happy for the contrast. He kept them human. "I promise we'll do something for her. She is no animal after all."

Angel waited until it was just her and Shoc before she spoke again. "Boy you should have stood your ground! What Eric is doing to that woman is wrong!"

"And causing disasters to happen all over the world wasn't? C'mon Angel if we're in this we gotta be in it all the way. Bad things happen to good people all the time in this world. We're trying to stop that, but sometimes to do good you gotta do bad."

The young woman pushed a finger into Shoc's chest. "Maybe so, but you can't tell me this doesn't make your stomach turn. Eric respects you just as much as he does Ry'lor and Vivisector. You should have tried to change his mind. And to think I thought you had a backbone!"

"Ha! And what were you doing to make it better? Crossing your arms and pouting like you always do? Hard choices have to be made Angel and I made one today."

Angel shook her head and began to fly away from Shoc. She left with one shot. "I hope it's a choice you can live with man."

---

"Why couldn't they have tried to kidnap me and wake up Wanda?" Pietro asked with all seriousness. He hated seeing her sister in such a weakened state and what Phoenix had told him was frightening. He needed his sister with him to save her from what could be a terrible fate.

"Maybe it has something to do with you being too fast to catch," Everett joked.

"You may think I'm being cruel, but I only want my sister back," Pietro said as he painstakingly kept pace with Jennifer and the others. It was internally agonizing not to just speed ahead of them. He had struggled with his immense impatience with the world for years. Becoming the leader of a group of X-Men made him grow a lot as a person, but being back with the Avengers was causing old frustrations to rise once more. His sister's injury agitated the situation more.

"I would love to have Wanda healthy again. We all would, Pietro. But don't you think it a bit rude to wish ill will on Heather?" She-Hulk asked.

Pietro sighed. "You're right. I honestly was hoping that screaming was Wanda. Seeing Heather instead broke my heart. Despite that, she is an Avengers and we're going to need her."

"Especially with that alien on Red's team. Imagine the Hulk with telepathy and you should get the picture," Everett said.

"And you know all this how?" Andromeda asked ever suspicious of Ross since the Avengers Africa incident.

"I was finally able to get in contact with someone at the Work Tower. They gave me the lowdown on Factor 3."

She-Hulk rolled her eyes. "Great...now those kinds think we're

bumming them for information. As if their heads aren't big enough already!"

"I like the one called Moonstar. She seems to have a true warrior's spirit," Andromeda commented.

"Wiz Kid seems more like my kind of guy," Ross said.

"You would say that," Quicksilver groaned. "That man is an ass."

"You had Pyro on your team. Not to mention Warren Worthington so-

"I'm fully qualified on what constitutes an asshole," Pietro snapped.

She-Hulk laughed. "I think he has you there Ross."

"Let's just get this briefing over with already," Everett said.

*T'Challa you need to go ahead and wake up already! Before I lay one of these asses out!*

---

"You think we stand a chance against these guys?" Mondo asked as he stepped into the makeshift computer room that Vivisector had set up. It was full of loose wires and blinking screens. The wolfish looking mutant was sitting at one computer screen typing away. He turned back to Mondo and gave a scowl.

"Of course we stand a chance against them. Why would you even ask that?" the former professor growled.

Mondo shrugged. "We lost to Force Works."

"We lost to Force Works and Factor X," Vivisector corrected. "Besides, Eric has made sure that we have some insurance in this fight. And with the information I've compiled we shouldn't have a problem taking them on."

Before Mondo had a chance to respond a large boom resounded throughout the entire building. Vivisector smiled at the Samoan youth and said, "It's showtime!"

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**TO BE CONTINUED...**

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**MARVEL 2000 PRESENTS...**

**"I STRUCK OIL!"  
Part Two**

*Written by Brent Lambert*

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**#47  
January 2007**

**Captain  
America**

"So you were actually foolish enough to come here and challenge us," Eric the Red said as the fully assembled Factor Three stared down the invading Avengers.

Two opposing forces were on opposite ends of the building. Factor Three had gently assembled outside a door and the Avengers had forcibly ripped through the facility's roof. You couldn't tell from appearances that the Avengers were the less ruthless of the two teams. Captain America stared down Eric the Red and angrily said, "You didn't give us much choice Red. America and oil are pretty much inseparable."

**Quicksilver**

"You would admit to the eco-waste you create. How very...un-American," Eric shot back.

"Can we just whack this creep already?" Jack-of-Hearts asked from behind Captain America.

**Andromeda**

Normally Steve would have told him something about not sinking to the villain's level, but his mind had been clouded as of late. Eric the Red. Red Skull. All of it was the same thing to him.

With a nasty snarl he exclaimed, "Take them down!"

**Scarlet Witch**

That proclamation was the beginning of the battle as the two teams ran and flew into each other. Steve found himself in the sights of Mondo while Sundown met Jack-of-Hearts mid-air. Eric the Red slammed his body into X-51 and the two tumbled into the ground.

"You would be doing the President so proud defending his precious oil!" Eric the Red said as he was about to punch X-51.

::He's not my President. I cannot even vote!::

Jack Of Hearts

Machine Man

Binary

The android grabbed Eric's wrist and flung him into the air like a rag doll.

---

The ground erupted beneath Steve and he quickly leaped into the air to avoid the jagged spikes the geo-manipulator had generated. Rogers landed on the ground with knees bent and arms spread wide as he flung his shield at the Samoan mutant. Mondo erected a rock spire in front of him to block the blow. The uniquely made shield shattered the spire, but Mondo sent up rock to catch the shield in mid-flight. Captain America's weapon was cocooned by rock and promptly absorbed into the ground. The young man smiled at the Avengers leader. He was, fighting against one of Earth's greatest heroes and he was actually holding his own. Maybe Vivisector was right after all.

Captain America tugged at both of his gloves to make sure they were tight and said, "Son, I have no idea why you're smiling, but I am about to knock it off for your face."

Mondo was loathe to admit it, but that proclamation had momentarily scared the piss out of him. Eric the Red trusted him though and he couldn't fail him. If the Avengers were taken down the way to world peace was wide open. That was an opportunity that simply couldn't be passed up. He knew the Avengers to be heroes. Mondo would never dispute that, but they were blind heroes. They didn't see the big picture and they didn't want to. What Eric wanted to do was simply remove from the picture long enough so that his plan could go to work. Then they would see the genius behind it all.

Charging forward with full force Captain America did a forward flip and was about to send his feet straight into Mondo's face when a large burst of purple energy slammed into his chest and sent him careening into the concrete. He was dazed just long enough for Mondo to entrap him a rocky prison. The Samoan walked over to Rogers and said, "If you so much as move a muscle a hundred rocky daggers will rip through you."

Steve wanted to struggle, but he knew the kid meant it on his threat. And why shouldn't he? Cap could see it in the boy's eyes. He was scared and being scared made people trigger-happy. He wouldn't risk doing something crazy just yet. Looking up Captain America was able to see the source of the attack that threw him off. He couldn't believe his eyes, but floating gracefully behind Mondo was the person they had come to save...Sundragon!

"Well, I guess you know our secret weapon now. Ahh shucks! We were kinda hoping to save her for later," Mondo gloated.

"And you're supposed to be an ambassador for world peace?"

Mondo scowled darkly at Captain America. "Don't presume to judge me Mister Great All-American. If you were even concerned about protecting the world you would have joined up with us a long time ago."

"I'm not particularly fond of doomsday devices."

"Maybe if you had one Japan wouldn't be such a wreck right now."

Captain America grinded his teeth at that comment and had to fight back the urge to burst through Mondo's prison and teach the boy a few things about respecting your elders. Now wasn't the time for that though. He needed to keep probing the boy and find out how the hell Sundragon ended up standing with Factor 3.

"And how would that have made me any better than Red Skull? Or are you just not getting that?"

Mondo stepped back from Captain America and looked back to Sundragon. He had things to do and conversation wasn't one of them. "Pamela, take him out please."

Before Pamela could make her move there was blinding white light above her and another familiar face appeared from it. Captain America wasn't quite sure what to make of it, but he was glad for the momentary distraction at least. Maybe with Mondo's mind elsewhere he could break free.

The Celestial Messiah looked down upon Sundragon and said, "I think we are due for some quality time."

---

Hart hated having to do aerial combat in close quarters, but he wasn't being left with much of a choice. His opponent on the other hand looked completely comfortable in the environment. Hopefully, Hart could use that bit of overconfidence to his advantage. Having anything to work with at the moment would be a blessing.

"Captain America says he knew you," Jack said as he rose above Sundown and looked down upon him. "Said you were a complete loser and totally batshit crazy. With a costume like yours I'm inclined to agree."

"This coming from the Alice in Wonderland reject," Sundown said as he cut under Hart and sent out a concussive wave of energy from below him. Jack was sent tumbling through the air like a wayward newspaper and he didn't have time to prepare

himself for Sundown's continued offensive. Jack-of-Heart's chest heaved as Sundown's solar powered fist slammed into it. Pain shot through his back as Sundown flew around him and kicked him in the kidneys. Sundown then wrapped his arm across Jack's torso and flung him over his shoulder.

Once again, Jack went spiraling into the air and his body bounced off the telekinetic field Moondragon had erected to protect herself from Ry'Lor. Before he could catch a second wind a double-fisted blow to the face hammered him. Spit flew from the Contraxian hybrid's mouth at the force of the blow. The world became a spinning haze and Jack struggled to regain his footing. Sundown flew right over the same telekinetic field and shot a line of energy from one hand straight into Hart's pelvis. A loud slam was heard as Hart collided with the ground.

Not wasting any time the solar-powered man quickly positioned himself above Jack-of-Hearts and unleashed an onslaught of violent orange energy. It was mere seconds before impact that Hart thrust his arms out and returned the attack with malicious energy of his own. Sweaty, grim determination was locked on both men's faces as the colliding energies waged war against each other. Both had decided to be unyielding in their attacks.

The orange and magneto energies crashed, crackled, and sizzled with amazing fury. Jack-of-Hearts wasn't afraid of power. He had faced it in the likes of Thanos, Tyrant, and Darkseid. Sundown would be no different. Jack would overcome and he would win. There was no other option.

Sundown saw the grit in Jack and knew he would have to beat it tenfold. His team was depending on him to win the fight because it could decide the entire battle. If he won here, then he could help Ry'Lor beat off Moondragon and the battle was essentially over at that point. Sundown regretted not having finished off Jack sooner because now he actually had to work for his victory.

"Just go ahead and give it up! I don't want to have to kick the shit out of you anymore!" Sundown exclaimed as he poured out even more power.

"Fat chance of that! What? You're getting tired already?" Jack asked with a cocky laugh to accompany it. Truthfully, he could feel the power of Sundown beginning to overcome his own. Hart was going to have to kick it up a notch.

Then he saw it out of the corner of his eye. Sequoia was here. Right here. Why?

"Pay attention loser!" Sundown yelled as he energy overcame

Jack's and covered his body entirely.

It was only minutes later when Sundown had landed next to Jack's smoking body. He looked out across the battlefield to see which of his teammates may need him.

---

The triton of Andromeda glistened despite the dim lighting of the facility. Angel and her teammate, Gin Genie, knew that was the weapon they were about to face. Both women were confident that together they could dispose of Attuma's daughter. Neither realized they were about to embark on a battle against a truly skilled Atlantean warrior. Honestly, neither would have probably cared. It was two-on-one and the odds were logically in their favor. Unfortunately, in a world of hidden cities, mutants, and demons the course of logic wasn't always a feasible option.

Throwing back another beet Gin Genie wiped her mouth with the back of her glove and said, "Let's get this done quick."

Angel's wings began to flap rapidly and she floated upward. Crossing her arms across her chest the young woman said, "As long as you don't act completely drunk we shouldn't have a problem."

"Shucks didn't think you had any confidence in me!" Gin exclaimed as she struggled to stay standing.

Andromeda shamefully shook her head at the two women's bickering. In the midst of battle these allies were hurling insults at each other! This battle was already won if this was their best team effort. Sundragon's rescue and Factor 3's defeat were assured. Such reckless confidence allowed her to charge full force against Gin Genie.

The blonde rolled her eyes and said, 'Yea...real smart. Just like you big time heroes. You honestly think I'm going to let you get near me with that thing?'

Gin immediately stopped her foot on the ground and sent a vibration through the earth powerful enough to create a miniature wave of dirt and concrete that moved towards Andromeda with surprising speed. The Atlantean woman continued her charge as she stabbed her triton into the wave and flipped over it like a pole vault champion. She landed only feet away from Gin Genie, but another vibrational wave had already been put into motion. The force knocked Andromeda flat on her back.

The doughy-shaped Angel quickly positioned herself above Andromeda and lobbed a ball of digestive, green acid from her mouth at the Atlantean. Andromeda rolled out of the way of the slimy guck and missed having her head burned off. She continued having to roll because Angel continued hacking up the acid like she was a machine gun. Eventually, after a few dozen holes had been burned into the ground, Andromeda jumped to her feet.

"You're a terrible ass shot," Gin Genie snapped as she finished downing another beer and slammed her foot on the ground. Instantly, a sinkhole formed underneath Andromeda's feet and she was swallowed by it. Andromeda stabbed her triton into the side of the sinkhole to break her fall. She kept her feet pressed on one side of the hole and held on to her triton, which was embedded in the other side.

Genie walked up to the hole and looked back at Angel. "That's how you take care of these bastards!"

Their gloating didn't last long as a warning was shouted out to them. "LOOK OUT!"

Genie turned back and wasn't able to dodge a flying Vivisector. His body slammed into both Angel and Genie knocking all three into the same hole that they had just used to entrap Andromeda in. The Atlantean woman quickly let go of her triton and kicked herself off of Angel's falling body. She landed back on solid ground and saw who had given her the opportunity for freedom. She-Hulk had a large smile across her face.

"You did that?" Andromeda asked.

"You know it," She-Hulk replied.

"Of course I would."

---

Eric the Red dipped to the side and dodged a punch from X-51. With an open palm he slammed his hand into X-51's stomach and sent the android scuttling across the ground. Taking no time for pause he jumped atop the robot and began to pummel him with punches. Eric's uniform offered him an energy shield and he was able to add a little extra power to his punches because of it. Even that didn't seem to be doing anything to the machine.

An elbow cracked Eric the Red across his chin and he went flying sideways off of X-51. The Celestial-enhanced android rose to his feet. **::Designate: Eric the Red, you should stop this**

**madness. None can achieve peace through violence::**

"You must have never heard of Pax Romana," Eric the Red said as he charged forward and rammed into X-51. The two bodies fell to the ground and were interlocked with each other.

**::I have seen hundreds of civilizations and none of them have ever achieved anything through the means you suggest::**

"There's a first time for everything."

Eric the Red placed his hands on X-51's temples and a surge of yellow energy flowed through his arms and into the android's head. X-51 began to shake wildly and continued shaking as Eric the Red stepped away from him. It was a one-time trick that had thankfully worked for the Factor 3 leader. Vivisector had enhanced his suit with a powerful blast that would overload X-51's systems with a massive virus. The professor wasn't sure how long it would affect the robot, but it didn't matter. The Avengers would already have fallen by then.

Sundown landed next to Eric and asked, "Is everything alright?"

"Yes. Now we need to help Sundragon. She's about to take on the so-called Celestial Messiah. If he is as powerful as Vivisector suspects we need to remove him from the equation and fast," Eric commanded.

---

Shoc's body twisted unnaturally to avoid a shot of stellar energy from Binary. The Avenger's first shot missed, but she moved in with enough speed to land a few well-placed punches to the head, gut, and lower back. Each blow seemed like it was cushioned somehow and wasn't having the desired effect. It was like hitting Jell-O. Still, she didn't let up the attack. She kept battering Shoc in the hopes that her blows were doing some damage.

"Keep this up much longer and I may actually have to hurt you," Shoc warned as he dodged some of the blows, but others found their spot. Fields knew his containment suit ran the risk of taking on damage from hits on the level of someone like Binary. Vivisector had made adjustments to Shoc's containment suit to make it more durable. He was thanking the man for that at the moment.

"Hurt me? Boi stop!" Binary laughed as she grabbed Shoc by the arm and flung him over her shoulder. Fields slammed into the ground and she planted a heel into his chest. "I think it's obvious who's in danger of getting hurt here."

"The two of us fighting doesn't make sense. We're both working for the same goal," Shoc said.

"I've taken shortcuts in my life, but they've never gotten me anywhere. You can't shove peace down people's throats," Binary replied.

Black energy shot forth from Shoc's feet and he sent his shoulder flying into Binary's midsection. While the wind was being knocked out of her he elongated one of his arms and wrapped it around her neck like a snake. He flew upwards into the air with Binary struggling to break free. With all the strength he could muster he flung her body into the direction of the roof.

Before she even hit it a blast of orange energy tore itself loose from her body and not only incinerated a large portion of the roof, but also knocked Shoc unconscious. Nicole quickly flew downward and caught Fields in her arms. She really didn't want to unleash that kind of power, but she needed to help Moondragon against that big alien freak. He had her playing a game of tag because he was obviously superior in strength to her.

"Time to level the playing field," Binary said. With a brief glance she Pietro in combat with a kid in a hoodie. He looked like he was in control of the situation, but Quicksilver had a knack for making something more difficult than it needed to be.

---

Quicksilver had Phat by the neck as he continued to run faster and faster in a circle. The mutant had tried to smother Pietro with his extra skin and the experience was nothing short of absolutely disgusting. Pietro didn't take well to being put through disgusting experiences. It violated all of his strong sensibilities.

"You have some nerve to think you could ever lay a finger on my presence!" Pietro roared as he let go of the young man and his body went flying off wildly. It was like watching a big tennis ball smack into a concrete net.

Phat's body exploded but in no way that was fatal to the mutant. His skin spread outward and wrapped itself around the concrete pole. Slowly, he sunk to the ground and reformed himself. He was a short, stocky young man who was not at all happy about being flung around like some rag doll. Luckily, he was packing a surprise for Pietro courtesy of Vivisector.

"You gotta do better than that if you want to hurt me slow poke!" Phat yelled as he taunted Pietro with the shaking of his

ass.

The former X-Men leader's face flushed red and he charged forward. Instead of running into Phat he ran right smack into an invisible energy field that surrounded the mutant's body. Quicksilver was knocked flat on his back and slipped into unconsciousness. Phat laughed and put his sneaker on Pietro's chest. "Hook, line and sinker. Man, Vivi was right about you. Just fire you up and you can be played into doing anything."

Suddenly, a tap came on the young man's shoulder and he turned around just in time to see a white fist collide with his face. Phat was thrown backwards and slammed into the ground unconscious. Binary stepped over to the mutant just to confirm that she had taken care of him and said, "Could you have been any easier?"

Captain America was stuck in Mondo's trap and his shield wasn't anywhere near him. He could easily break through the rock, but not before Mondo sent a bunch of rocky spikes straight through him. Still, Rogers had been in far worse situations than this one. He just kept telling himself that as he tried to strategize some way out of this trap.

Mondo had that smug ass look on his face that Cap would have no problem removing, but it seemed like he wouldn't have to. As a smile crept up on Steve's face the suspicious Mondo turned around just in time to receive a left hook from She-Hulk. The young man flew to the other side of the building and hit the metal wall with a smack.

Steve pushed his arms outward and shattered the rock trap he had been in. Rising to his feet he looked around and asked, "Jen, have you seen my shield."

"Right here," Andromeda said as she tossed the shield to Captain America. "And you owe me for having to pound through so much earth to get it."

Steve winked at her. "I'll let you skip a few training sessions after this."

Andromeda huffed at the comment. "You insult me Captain America. I am a warrior and denying myself the chance to become a better one is not a favor."

"Shaddup already and let's wrap this up!" She-Hulk exclaimed as she pointed to the clash that was happening between the Celestial Messiah and Sundragon.

Captain America wasn't really sure if he even wanted to

interfere in that fight. The Celestial Messiah was a being of terrible power and trying to help might just end up hindering him. From what Steve knew of Sundragon she wasn't a slouch in the power department either. It was probably best to let them duke it out and wrap up the remaining members of Factor 3.

That decision was made for the Avenger's leader when an energy grenade was thrown in the midst of the three heroes. Steve lifted his shield up to his face before it blew and the force of the blast knocked him right atop Mondo's body. Dazed and confused he wasn't able to tell where She-Hulk and Andromeda had been flung. Nor was he able to see Eric the Red standing over him.

"You should have laid down your arms and joined me. We would have made such powerful partners, but your idealism is misdirected. It's a shame really-

Cap swung his shield at Eric's head and slammed his shoulder into his torso. The mutant was flung to the ground and Steve elbowed him in the nose. Ignoring the pain, Eric grabbed the attacking arm's wrist and sent an electrical shock through Steve that was powerful enough to down whales. Writhing in pain, Steve still managed to crash his shield into Eric's throat. An agonized wheezing came from Eric as the electrical shock stopped and he crawled away from Rogers, gripping his throat.

Still smoking, Captain America stood to his feet and said, "You are a pathetic man and I have every intention of turning you in."

Vivisector tackled Captain America from the side and yelled, "Get away Eric! Go help Sundragon!"

---

A violent collage of rainbow energies swirled around Sequoia's body along with the intense red glow coming from his eyes. He looked quite frightening, but Sundragon was under mind control. She wasn't able to feel any fear against this cosmic powerhouse. So it was that she continued to attack him with telekinetic and telepathic energies.

"Don't you understand? I absorb any and all energies. You are only making me more powerful so I would suggest you stop now."

Quoi suddenly sensed another presence behind him and looked back to see the large alien Ry'lor with Moondragon over his shoulder. "She doesn't know how to stop. And who's to say what she's doing is not exactly what we wanted to happen?"

"Huh?" Quoi asked clearly confused at what Ry'lor was trying to get at. Instead of waiting for him to answer the question, the alien hybrid struck out with a powerful psi-blast that covered Ry'lor's entire body and he let loose another blast that covered Sundragon. His opponents squirmed uncontrollably as their minds were wracked with pure psychic pain. Every memory, every reflex was now a weapon of pain.

From this attack Sequoia was also able to discern Ry'lor's intentions. He laughed once the thoughts had been made known to him. They had lined the building with devices that would disrupt his particular energy signal and make his powers supposedly inaccessible. With a wave of his hand Quoi made Moondragon disappear from Ry'lor's shoulder and held the alien tightly in the air.

"You really have no comprehension of my powers. You were right on one thing. I do require energy but I can take that energy from anywhere and in any form. There was no way you could disrupt that," Sequoia said as he laid a hand flat on Ry'lor's chest and he began to shake wildly as his muscles were broken down. "See, I started a chemical reaction in your body and now simply absorb the energy created by that reaction."

Eric the Red saw what was happening to his follower and knew it was time for things to end. Looking up at Quoi he said, "You monster! I'll have your head another day!"

Then he tapped a button on his wrist that teleported not only him, but also all of Factor 3, away in a blaze of golden light. After they were gone Sundragon began to tumble to the ground, but was caught gracefully by the arms of Sequoia.

"You're okay now. Just sleep," Quoi said as he sent a cooling wave of energy throughout Pamela's body that put her into a state of relaxation.

Binary flew up beside the Messiah and asked, "How were you able to hurt that big gray ass like that?"

"My powers are finally a bit more under my control. Energy is just what starts me off. What I can do with that energy is limitless. It's like money I guess. It's a basic unit that you can use to buy just about anything. The energy I absorb allows me to have any ability I desire. The more powerful the ability the more it costs me."

"Celestial Messiah for Dummies," Binary laughed as she flew off to check on Jack-of-Hearts and Quicksilver.

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### **Above Avengers Mansion (An Hour Later)**

"Jarvis can you prep the infirmary room for us? We have a couple of injured we need to have taken care of," Captain America said over his communicator as he guided the Quinjet to the hangar.

The trusty butler's voice buzzed in and replied, "I would sir, but someone else insists on doing it themselves."

"Huh? What are you talking about Jarvis?"

"Master T'Challa and Miss Maximoff have awoken from their comas and eagerly await your arrival."

Captain America looked back to Andromeda and She-Hulk with an angry scowl that they both shared with him. Finally, he replied, "We'll be pulling in shortly. I know there's a lot of explaining to do."

Rogers' anger could fill volumes in a library, but fortunately he made sure to store it all in a library closed for business. He was the Avengers' leader and despite his anger with Black Panther he had to act like the leader everyone thought he was. Captain America had set a standard to follow in terms of Avengers leadership and he would not fall short of his own example.

"What are you going to do Cap?" She-Hulk asked hoping that the answer involved some sort of physical mistreatment.

"I'm going to let him talk and if I don't like what I hear he might want to call the Justice League to see if they'll give him membership."

---

### **Location Unknown**

"We should have kept at it! We could have beaten them!" an angered Mondo pleaded to Eric the Red, who was sitting in a chair giving the young man a sideward glance.

"Let's be honest here. They mopped the floor with us and that wasn't even exactly the most powerful group of Avengers ever," Gin Genie said as she downed a bottle of beer.

"I'm inclined to agree with Gin. Besides, this was never meant to be anything of substance. I just wanted to test our mettle as a team and going up against the Avengers has shown me one thing."

Shoc's eyes narrowed at Eric's statement. "And just what would that be?"

"We have a lot of work to do."

---

### **Outer Space**

The two massive beings stood on the edge of the starship overlooking the blue ball that was Earth. One looked over to his ashen skin companion and said, "There is much work to be done before we can snatch up the woman you seek."

Thanos smiled at the comment and replied, "Not hardly as much as you think Imperix. Things are already in motion that will help us in our task."

"Is there something you're not telling me Thanos?" Imperix asked with venom in his voice. He didn't like being played and he was extra paranoid being in a universe that was not his own.

"Yes there is something I haven't told you Imperix. Let us go somewhere so I can tell you of The Destiny Force."

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**NEXT ISSUE: The march to issue 50 begins here with the first part of "FORCES OF DESTINY". Be here as Captain America has it out with Black Panther and just what the hell is up with Wanda now?**

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**TO BE CONTINUED...**

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MARVEL 2000 PRESENTS...

"FORCES OF DESTINY"  
Part One

#48  
May 2007

Written by *Brent Lambert*

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**Where: Avengers Mansion**

Captain  
America

"I would have thought you would be happier to see me up and around," Black Panther said as he stood next to Wanda Maximoff in the Avengers' living room. The two formerly comatose heroes had awoken and found themselves observing a very angry group of Avengers making their way into the living room with the exception of Quicksilver. Pietro's impatience forced him to push ahead of his teammates. There was nothing that he could keep him from his sister, but upon embracing her he felt something different about her. Power resonated from her now and even her posture was full of a new confidence he had never seen in Wanda. It was odd for Quicksilver to see his sister like that, but Jean had warned him that his sister might be different.

Quicksilver

So he sat down on the nearest couch to Wanda and waited for the arrival of his fellow Avengers. Captain America walked in with an accusatory finger and said, "Panther we have some stuff to talk about!"

Andromeda

T'Challa's stare narrowed as he replied, "Yes we do, but I would strongly suggest you lower your voice. I am not one of your insubordinates."

Scarlet Witch

She-Hulk rolled her eyes from behind Cap and said, "Let's cut the royal BS here T'Challa. You went behind all of our backs and created a team of Avengers without so much as giving us a second thought. What would inspire you to do such a thing?"

Binary snickered. "Royalty. They think we should all just follow their lead."

"Watch yourself woman. I am also not some piece of gutter trash you can refer to however you please."

Jack Of Hearts

Binary's fist balled up and if Jen and Cap weren't in front of her she would have barreled the Wakandan king straight through the fireplace and out of the Mansion. That pompous prick had the nerve to throw out his thinly veiled insults like she was too stupid to pick up on them. More and more she was hoping that things would get out of control and she would have the opportunity to manhandle T'Challa. Still, part of her was curious to hear Panther's explanation for his actions. Sure, she knew that the two of them didn't along, but Nicole had been under the impression that Captain America and Black Panther were good friends. Why would the "All-Mighty King" feel the need to go behind Captain America's back?

Machine Man

**::Designate: Black Panther. Were we not trustworthy enough to know of your plans?::**

Binary

Black Panther folded his arms across his chest. "That's not it at all X-51. I simply knew it had to be this way and no other way. There was no way the United States government was going to allow a branch of the Avengers to form in Africa. To be frank, I knew Captain America wouldn't either. Unfortunately, that reluctance was not my concern. Africa has long been crying out for the same presence that the Avengers and Fantastic Four offer to North America. I can no longer sit by and watch the genocide plaguing the continent."

"So basically you want your own little gang of policemen for the continent?" Binary snapped.

Ignoring her comment Black Panther turned to Rogers. "I apologize for deceiving you, but I had to. America's not willing to let a team of Avengers rise up in Africa. By me deceiving you it also absolves you from involvement with the formation of the team."

"Don't try to turn this around! You weren't thinking about protecting me at all. This is your own ego at work T'Challa! Nothing more!" Captain America bitterly exclaimed. He knew just how intelligent of a man T'Challa was and just how skilled he was orally. While he may be able to make himself look like the victim, there was no way Captain America was going to let that cloud the facts. Black Panther had created an entire team behind all of their backs. The fact he was Chairman at the time didn't matter a lick. Major decisions like that needed to be brought before the entire organization.

"Unlike you, I refuse to wear blinders to the world around me. We've improved many things, but just as many things are getting worse everyday. Can you honestly tell me that you don't see it? Have you become that wholly blind?"

Pietro finally threw in a comment. "I understand where you're coming from. I lead the X-Men for a long time and I've seen the worse of this world's oppression first hand. That doesn't mean going behind the backs of those you call friends to alleviate the problem."

"Fine condemn me, but my team knew nothing of the deception. They will not be disbanded!" Black Panther declared firmly.

Captain America moved a little closer and said with gritted teeth. "That's not for you to decide."

"Come and try to disband them then. Bring whoever you want because I will blow every last one of you out of the sky without hesitation. Dare violate my country's sovereignty and you will see a war the likes of which," Panther stopped himself and took a deep breath. "In my absence my lawyers have been drawing a treaty with Genosha in the event that you or any other superpowered team enters Wakanda in an attempt to shut down Avengers Africa."

"You WHAT?!!" Pietro exclaimed. The reaction was similar to everyone else in the room, except for Wanda. She was still standing next to Panther with a cool smile.

Black Panther did not let the reaction of his friend affect him. He was cold as the Arctic. "I do mean to keep this team alive and I will do so by any means necessary. This is the last I will say on the subject."

"This isn't over-"

"Yes it is," Scarlet Witch interjected. "I need to talk to all of you. There's so much stuff going on right now my head is spinning."

"Take it easy then sis. No need to rush into things," Pietro said laughing at the fact he just told someone not to rush.

Quoi looked at Wanda and his mouth gaped open. "You've learned!"

"Yes I did learn. I think it'd be better if I went ahead and explained the situation to everyone."

The Celestial Messiah nodded his head. "Yes, that would probably be best."

It was only a moment ago that the mood of the room had been

intense anger, but now that had turned to a strong curiosity. Wanda had been acting strangely for months, especially in terms of her powers. Finally, getting an explanation for it all was something that Pietro especially had been waiting for. Everyone formed a half circle around Wanda as she began her tale.

"As you all know my powers began to grow in strength after the Scarlet Centurion unlocked them. I was never quite sure how exactly how he had done it until the examination of my mind by Jean Grey. That was when the floodgates opened."

"Who told you about that?" Quicksilver exclaimed.

"No one Pietro," Wanda said tenderly. "I just remember her being in my mind and it really resolved a great deal"

Pietro couldn't explain, but he now somehow felt guilty for allowing Grey into his sister's psyche. Paying no attention to her brother's guilt, she continued with her explanation. "The Scarlet Centurion was able to free my powers because of the M'Kraan Crystal. When I was with The Twelve there was a time when we were all in sync with the crystal. During that brief time the M'Kraan tapped into my subconscious and plated the seed for my greatest desire. It was a billion to one chance, but I deal in breaking probabilities."

"So Centurion made that seed blossom essentially?" Cap asked.

Wanda nodded. "Even though the seed was blossomed I still couldn't control it as some of you saw through my various outbursts. Then came my encounter with Centurion, which put me into a comatose state. During that time my mind warred to make sense of my abilities. Jean Grey helped to make my conscious mind aware of my subconscious war. So I was able to finally get full control of my abilities. Believe me; I see things in ways I never have before."

"As the Celestial Messiah, I am glad to see you've come into your powers quite nicely."

The Scarlet Witch warmly smiled. "Thank you Sequoia. It pleases me a great deal to have a handle on my powers."

"So do we all. I know you have been working to get control of your powers for years. You deserve some stability," Captain America said as he moved across the room and gave Wanda a hug. Stepping back he grabbed a strand of her black hair. "Thought I must admit it'll take some time getting use to your new hair."

She-Hulk smirked. "I have a curling iron upstairs if you feel like adding some bounce back to the locks."

"I appreciate the suggestion, but I think I'll go ahead and try this out for a while," Wanda replied.

Abruptly, Sequoia collapsed to his knees and started clutching at his chest. Captain America went to his side and lifted him to his feet. "Son, are you alright? What happened?"

Quoi shook his head as if fighting off a migraine. "A very powerful precognition flash. I have a great deal of energy built up in me right now. Sometimes that can result in random bursts of power. Fortunately, we should all be grateful for this burst."

"What do you mean fortunate?" Binary asked.

Sequoia looked grimly at his teammates. "We have a problem which may very well require calling on everyone who has bore the name Avenger."

Binary sighed. "And damn was that hot tub calling my name."

"Well, looks like the two of us found some action quick," Wanda said nudging Black Panther with a wink.

"Just how are we going to get that many guys together?" Binary asked.

The Celestial Messiah straightened into a firm posture. "Leave that to me."

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### **Where: Wakandan Air Space**

The green goliath sped towards the ground at terminal velocity. He wasn't in the slightest bit worried about the impact. He had survived a nuclear war and came out on top of the world. Crushing a puny African country that had illusions of grandeur would be nothing for him. This world would break under his heel as easily as his own time had. Thor? Nothing. Silver Surfer? A pest. Magneto? A mere toy. All of them would be his to crush and fold like paper. Then once he was done with them he would turn on Thanatos and his allies. All would fall to him and The Destiny Force would be his to wield.

This gleeful thought filled him as he came closer and closer to Wakanda's capital. The air rushed through Maestro's gray hair

and as the Wakandan city became clear a grin spread across his face. He could only imagine the fearful reactions of the feeble people as they paid witness to his arrival. Thanatos had promised him a good time and he must admit that so far Jones had lived up to his word. Being shot from an orbital cannon had started the enjoyment and crushing this city would finish it. He would grant Thanatos the favor of a quick death. A swift snap of the neck would be enough.

With only a hundred and fifty yards till impact, Maestro was blasted in his side by flat beam of blue energy. The blast registered like a fly landing on a bun to Maestro. With angry eyes, he flicked his head in the direction of the annoyance. The beam had come from a tubular jet-black plane and had long wings armed to the teeth. As the vehicle approached Maestro, a field of electricity surrounded it. Four other plans were following Maestro's attacker.

Still falling, Maestro twisted his body around and roared at the plane squadron. "Pathetic humans! You all shall fear me before this day comes to its end!"

All of the planes began to fire on the green behemoth, but their attacks were in vain. Maestro would not so easily be destroyed. So the Wakanda pilots could only watch as the monster slammed into the capital city like a meteor. The impact was enough to send their flight patters into disarray.

Smoke plumed from the impact site and the leader of the squadron feared the worse. Picking up a radio transmitter he said, "Evacuate the capital city immediately. Hostile has arrived. Evacuate immediately. Assistance of Avengers Africa required. Code Red! Begin to evacuate city."

Evil had entered Wakanda and the pilot could only hope his country was ready to face it down.

### **Where: Some Remote Facility**

Zeneo Technologies had hid Kamee for nearly a year, ever since his encounter with the Fantastic Four. He often times wished he could be like his one time ally, Binary, and fight alongside The Avengers. So far fate had not been so kind to him. The peaceful meditation master looked more akin to a starving protestor than a dangerous warrior, but he was guarded by at least 50 men a day. His grayish skin and emaciated body wasn't what earned him his entourage. Kamee was possessed of the ability to push anything to the epitome of itself. He could focus on a particular area for improvement and make it as strong as it possibly could be.

Zeneo Tech. Had put his abilities to use in many experiments. He had pushed metals to the limits of their molecular malleability making it so that you could bend titanium as easy as cardboard. Animal immune systems had been boosted to fight off all disease. Viruses were pushed to their limits and sicked on the said animals in an attempt to find a flaw with Kamee's power. No flaw was found. The virus just became locked in constant struggle with the immune system.

Then there was the matter of Kamee having absolutely no say in his fate. He was a genetically engineered creature and no one in the world gave a damn. The people he saw as teammates began to break away and he suddenly found himself very alone. Alone and exploited. He had no idea what Zeneo Tech's ultimate plan for him was.

All he knew was that he was trapped in a four by four cell and fed slop three times a day. Meditation was the only thing that kept Kamee from teetering over into insanity. So he was often in a meditative state anywhere from ten to twelve hours a day. Today he was in his seventh hour when a large explosion ripped him from it.

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### **Where: Avengers Mansion**

"I'm of the right mind to walk up there and slap whoever that Quoi guy is right in the face," Monica Rambeau, also known as Photon, said to an eager audience in Black Knight.

"Agreed. I do not appreciate being ripped from my home and brought here. In full uniform to boot," Dane replied.

"Cap and T'Challa are up there with him. I'm sure there's a good reason for all of this," Pym said trying to be the voice of reason among the chatty group of summoned Avengers. He didn't exactly like being pulled from restoration efforts in San Francisco, but he'd wait this out.

"PEOPLE! Let's calm down and get together here. The situation is very serious and we don't have a whole lot of time," Captain America said from the podium where he was between Sequoia and Black Panther.

"Care to tell us why we've all been plucked here and just who's responsible for it?" Iron Man asked.

Quoi looked in Iron Man's direction. "That would be me. I summoned you all here because of the threat I sensed in my mind. Believe me, I understand that this is short notice, but we

haven't the time to be polite. This world's fate may depend on it."

"So give us some idea of what we're up against here," Wasp said.

Quoi nodded. "Of course. 30 minutes ago the nation of Wakanda was attacked by what we believe to be an alternate version of The Hulk who calls himself The Maestro."

"You called all of us here for a Hulk?! No disrespect to the guy, but I don't think you needed every yahoo who's ever been an Avenger to handle it," US Agent exclaimed.

"There's more," Quoi interjected. "Much more. This attack is one in a three-prong assault that we must conduct. The Maestro is just one of many in an alliance that stands poised to kill all humanity. He is joined by Thanatos, Red Skull, Abyss, Mieko Ko, Belladonna, Emperor, Thanos, and all of their various allies. They intend on making themselves gods and will stop at nothing to achieve this goal."

"My stars and garters!"

"Okay you've got my attention now," Iron Man admitted. "With a grouping like that there must be more behind than a simple attack on Wakanda."

"There is," Black Panther said not liking the implication his country was unimportant. "A superhuman was also kidnapped from a Zeneo Technologies facility. His name was Kamee and-

"Shit!" Binary exclaimed. "If they have him then they can boost all of their powers up to the max level and then they'd practically be gods anyway!"

"Except he's being used for a different purpose in this case. Thanatos and his allies have built a tower in Greenland upon which they're going to strap Kamee and use his "epitomizing" abilities to push every human to access the Destiny Force within themselves. Then that same machine will suck back all that power and divide amongst Thanatos and his allies," Quoi explained.

"And what's the third part of this attack?" Falcon asked.

"They're launching an attack against this Mansion. They think to catch us by surprise," Quoi replied.

"Fortunately, we've got Quoi here. And we know their plan. So

here's the plan. We've already divided everyone into three teams that will tackle these various problems. Pull up the screen if you would please, T'Challa," Captain America said.

The ruler of Wakanda nodded and pressed a few buttons on a monitor behind him. A screen slide down from the roof and displayed who would be going where.

#### **WAKANDA**

*Captain America, Iron Man, Black Panther, Wasp, Hank Pym, Scarlet Witch, Binary,*

*Sundragon, Beast, Wonder Man, Karnak, Andromeda and Warbird.*

#### **GREENLAND**

*Darkhawk, Justice, Firestar, Rage, Photon, Quicksilver, Warbird, Namor, Sunfire, Stingray, Starfox, Black Widow, US Agent and Tigra*

#### **THE MANSION**

*Hawkeye, She-Hulk, Crystal, Callisto, Gilgamesh, Quoi, Sersi, Moondragon, Quasar, Mantis, X-51, Firebird, Black Knight and Living Lightning*

Wonder Man gave Beast a high-five and said "Looks like we get to wrestle with the big green."

Captain America looked out amongst the group. "You have your assignments. AVENGERS ASSEMBLE!"

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#### **Where: Above Earth**

Abyss stepped back from the large black circle that was painted on the floor. In the center of it were random battling stick figures to give the appearance of war waging within it. On the other side of the painting was Belladona and Mieko Ko, current leader of HYDRA.

"You sure this will work?" Belladona asked.

"Of course it will. I have prepared heavily for this spell. Everything is in order," Abyss replied.

Mieko Ko huffed. "It had better be. Summoning that volatile a creature is dangerous business Abyss."

Pupiless white eyes burned holes into Mieko Ko. "The Fallen

One is a brutal, cosmic butcher with an unlimited supply of power. I am fully aware of what I am bringing here, but we need a weapon against Maestro."

"Who's 99% likely to turn traitor once we accomplish our goals," Thanatos said as he entered into the room.

"Fine," Belladonna said crossing her arms across her chest. "We finish this and head to Earth. Thanos is bound to be arriving at Avengers Mansion soon."

"No telling what kind of welcoming committee he's getting there," Mieko Ko added.

Abyss nodded. "Nothing he can't handle. Now let the ceremony begin."

And the circle began to glow white.

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### Where: Avengers Mansion

Hawkeye had assembled the team outside and had the flyers form a perimeter around the mansion. Black Knight was standing next to him and said, "So any clue why we got stuck here to fight against Thanos? I have a sword and you have arrows. I'd much prefer to be cutting down some HYDRA than taking on a evil-grinning Hulk."

"We're both good leaders regardless of our powers and we're going to need coordination against a threat like Thanos. Last time he was down this way we had to have The Shi'ar bail us out. I don't think we're going to get that this time."

Black Knight shook his head. "Craziness. Well, I guess we better brace ourselves. How do you want to position the ground people?"

"We got mostly flyers so I don't think our positions are going to make a huge difference. I just have Crystal ready to throw off some flight paths with her wind abilities."

Dane nodded. "Understood."

Suddenly a telepathic intrusion came into all minds on the battlefield. << **This is Sequoia. Thanos and his allies aren't going to fly in. They're teleporting on the ground now!** >>

Black Knight and Hawkeye looked at each other with surprise and were knocked to the ground by a large boom. They both rolled with the impact and were able to maintain their footing. Looking straight ahead they saw a large orange vortex, Thanos stepped out of with his allies in tow. A massive green and purple robot and a white-skinned woman wearing black and gray armor with a helmet akin to what an ancient Egyptian royal would wear flanked him.

Thanos stepped through the portal and took a deep breath. "I assume you Avengers must have been warned. It's hardly important. Big Barda, finish off those two would you. Imperix, find the Celestial Messiah and destroy him."

Big Barda appeared absolutely emotionless as she marched toward the two Avengers. She pointed her rod at them and fired. A green field of energy blocked the blast. The source of it was a very angry Eternal. "Wench, you will not lay a finger on them!"

Black Knight looked up at his ex and said, "Thank you."

Thanos smiled at the thankful Avenger and looked at the carnage ensuing around the mansion. Barda's mate, Mr. Miracle, was locked in aerial combat with X-51. Imperix had his massive hands around Quoi's throat and Metron was beating back the powers of Moondragon.

"Smile on this," Hawkeye said as he fired an arrow at the Mad Titan. Thanos saw the weapon coming his way and couldn't help but to laugh. He reached out and snatched the arrow from the air inches before it hit his face. Light exploded from the arrow and blinded Thanos. He yelled out. "Fool!"

Before he could regain his sight, Crystal used her abilities to lock Thanos in a cocoon of fire. The grass sizzled around the bubble, but the Inhuman only increased the heat. Hawkeye called out to her, "Be careful. We still want our house in one piece."

Firebird flew above Hawkeye and said, "Do you want him out of the picture or not?"

With that question she began to pour her own power into the sphere of flame that Crystal had concocted. Black Knight observed a glowing green presence in the sphere and immediately yelled to Crystal, "Back up! Get away!"

His warning came too late as the green energy exploded outward. Crystal was sent flying through the air and landed on the ground with a smack. Her body was smoking. Firebird had

been flung like a toy into the nearest lamppost and she was rendered unconscious. Hawkeye had landed head first after he was thrown back and he too was knocked out cold. Black Knight was the only one to maintain consciousness even though his body was not responding to him.

A smoldering, completely naked Thanos walked over to Black Knight and lifted him up by the throat. "I should rip your puny head off right now and spare my soldiers the trouble of dispatching you."

"Your concern needs to be with me, Titan!"

Thanos looked up to see who had shouted the warning and smiled at the sudden arrival of an old foe. "Adam Warlock. How lovely for you to show up."

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**TO BE CONTINUED...**

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MARVEL 2000 PRESENTS...

**"FORCES OF DESTINY"**  
Part Two

Written by *Brent Lambert*

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Captain  
America

Doc Diamond stalked behind the rampaging Maestro and leaped atop his shoulders. The leader of Avengers Africa slammed down his diamond claws, which protruded from his knuckles, atop Maestro's head. His weapons were completely ineffective and he was plucked off of Maestro with a flick of the monster's finger. Diamond went flying through the air and if not for his invulnerability would have been crushed by the building he smacked into.

Quicksilver

Seraph floated above the carnage and turned his flaming sword into a deep black. His weapon took on just two colors. When it was white it healed and when black it killed. Staring down at Maestro made his intentions clear. The young man divebombed his way towards Maestro, but was stopped by a warning.

Seraph stopped himself in mid-flight and looked upwards. A soaring Quinijet was visible and his hopes were restored. Help had arrived for them.

Andromeda

In the aircraft, Captain America placed a hand on Sundragon's shoulder. "Thank you for stopping him. If he is going to bear the Avengers name he has to learn killing is not the answer."

That statement was said with Rogers eyes locked directly on Panther. Wanda, sensing the tension, said, "Besides, I can make him a little bit less of a threat before we land."

Scarlet Witch

"Then do it," Black Panther snapped. "My country suffers!"

Wanda nodded and put her hands to her temples. Scarlet energy began to leak from her eyes and her hair began to levitate. A monstrous roar came from the ground as Maestro suddenly crumpled to his knees. "It is done. He should not be a problem."

"Unfortunate you couldn't do the same for Thanos," Iron Man

Jack Of Hearts

said. "I don't think it was the best idea to leave Clint at The Mansion."

Captain America sighed and turned back to the look at Tony from the pilot's seat. "You've said that a thousand times. Trust Clint's ability to lead. Besides, he has Sequoia with him and I've seen and heard of the amazing things that boy has done.

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Machine Man

Imperiex had his arms under Sequoia's and had him locked in a full nelson. The Celestial Messiah struggled under the grip. "Release me fiend!" It was not a command his attack would obey.

The robotic monstrosity laughed coldly at Quoi. "Pathetic creature. You are as meaningless to me as the wind is to an angel's wing!"

Binary

Seeing the creature squirm at the taunt filled the Imperiex drone with pleasure. His true body was elsewhere in the universe, but that information wouldn't be disclosed to his allies. Not until he had got what he needed from them. While this was not his universe, he had every intention to mold it in his image. This abundance of Destiny Force would facilitate the cosmic giant in that endeavor.

It would have taken Quoi nothing to teleport from Imperiex's grip, but he was trying to let his energy build up again. Going from the battle with Factor 3 to having to teleport in so many Avengers had taken its toll on his energy supply. That and a few other unknown activities. There was no telling when he would have to do another big feat. He couldn't afford to be low on energy. So for at least the next few minutes he would rely on his natural super strength and wits.

Imperiex's grip grew tighter and Sequoia cried out in pain. "A messiah is what I've heard you called. Who can you possibly save when you can't save yourself?!" That angry question was followed by a powerful blast to the back of Sequoia's neck that sent him tumbling through the air wildly.

Regaining his bearings, Quoi turned to his attacker and grinned. "Was hoping you would do that. Needed the charge."

Imperiex realized his mistake only after Sequoia began to punch him at supersonic speeds. The blows were actually hurting him! Perhaps this Messiah would live up to his name after all. Each of his blows came down like hammers, but eventually he found an opening and delivered a wide smack. His nearly door sized hand sent Quoi into a tailspin, but when

he stopped he was grinning again.

A blast of lightning shot downward and stuck Imperiex on top of his bulky head. The bolt shot through his entire body, but he hadn't budged. "Lightning? If you are a messiah, then you are a stupid one. The power of Imperiex is beyond nature."

Quoi smiled again as chunks of Imperiex's armor began to rust and break off. Sequoia's lightning had not been electricity at all, but rather tachyon particles that had aged Imperiex's armor by thousands of years. "Beyond nature. Not beyond me."

The drone let loose a guttural roar as it charged at Quoi. Air rippled around its fractured body as it barreled towards the Celestial messiah. This fool dared mock Imperiex, who had brought worlds to their knees. It was a trait that the two didn't know they had in common. Both had been harbingers of destruction to their respective universes. Both believed that destruction had been wrought from noble purposes. The line between hero and villain was thin indeed.

Before Imperiex could collide with him, Quoi formed a force bubble around his body. The cosmic machine rammed into the plant/human hybrid and the two went tumbling through the air. Imperiex punched Quoi, but his force bubble had absorbed the blow. As both bodies were tumbling towards the ground Sequoia slammed an open palm into Imperiex's chest and sent him flying backwards. The force from his blow would have been enough to snap a truck in half.

In mid-flight Imperiex readjusted himself. "You are quite the insolent whelp! I will crush you before this day is over!"

Two towers of green energy ripped forth from Imperiex's eyes even as bits of armor rusted off. The blasts tore through Quoi's force bubble and struck him dead in the chest. He felt the air leave his chest as he was forced backwards. Imperiex took advantage of the opportunity and charged forward.

Before he reached his opponent, the Celestial Messiah vanished and disoriented Imperiex. "Behind you."

The machine quickly turned around and saw a smiling Quoi. "You really weren't paying attention when you were told about me. I absorb energy and convert it to whatever use I want. Any and all kinds of energy."

"That will not stop me from crushing you!"

Sequoia shook his head. "Arrogance. Not a good trait. This is battle is over. Even as we speak the liquid methane oceans of

Neptune pour into you.”

The Messiah had created a tiny portal in Imperiex’s inner body that led straight to the oceans of Neptune. Now that incredible cold drained into Imperiex’s body. The drone could no longer move, but managed to shout out one last thing as he exploded. “I WILL KILL YOU!!”

As he exploded blue green liquid fell from the sky and made its way to the ground. Quoi reached out and made it disappear before it would have hit a battling Sersi and Big Barda. Before he could make any effort to help Sersi, he sensed the peril Black Knight was in and headed his way.

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“You have made a mistake coming here!” Sersi said as she deflected a blast from Big Barda. The Eternal then delivered a blast of her own that slammed into Barda’s chest. “Emperor Gladiator spoke of you. One of the new lapdogs of Thanos. Know that service with him will only end in a cruel fate for you.”

Barda silently rose to her feet and stared at Sersi with soulless red eyes. The warrior woman quickly lobbed off a few black shots from her rod. Sersi deflected two of them, but the third struck her in the shoulder. The force of the blast sent her spinning into the air and she crashed hard into the Mansion’s lawn. Her body stopped moving and Barda moved towards here. When she stood over The Eternal’s body, she bent down and grabbed her opponent by the hair. A blast in the face would end this fight and allow Barda to move on to her next opponent.

Suddenly, Sersi moved and slammed her elbow into Barda’s throat. As she went clutching for her throat, Sersi blasted Barda in the face. The blast carried the woman clear to the door of Avengers Mansion. Rising to her feet Sersi mumbled, “Time to break that damn rod.”

Even though Barda was stunned, Sersi had no intention of taking any chances. Green telekinetic energy came forth from her hand and lifted Barda into the air. Sersi quickly flung her through the air and outside the Mansion grounds. Barda’s body slammed into a parked minivan. Glass exploded and a car alarm began to blare. People scattered as they saw Sersi regally descend from the air. She looked at an unmoving Big Barda and waved a disapproving finger. “Really think I would fall for my own trick?”

Using her main ability, Sersi morphed the metal around Barda into hot tar. Her enemy never once cried out as the substance

consumed her body. The Eternal was impressed if nothing else. Despite what was probably intense pain, Barda lifted up her rod and aimed it at Sersi.

"That isn't happening," Sersi said as a beam of green energy shot forth from her forehead and hit the rod. The blast was supposed to dissolve the weapon. Anger filled Sersi at the failure of her attack. It was extremely rare for her molecular attacks to fail. Barda's weapon was either mystic in nature or was just dense enough to require more concentration to manipulate. Sersi didn't have time to try again though as Barda launched a blast into The Eternal's chest. She was sent careening straight through the gates of Avengers Mansion and went rolling across the ground. A normal mortal would have been ripped asunder by the assault, but the physiology of Eternals was resilient.

Still, Sersi's attempts to rise to her feet were in vain. She would push herself up trembling, only to crumple back down into the grass. As she continued to regain her footing the tar covered Barda marched towards Sersi ignoring all the pain. The Mad Titan would not stand for failure. Sersi's back was to Big Barda so she could not see her from any angle.

Before she could fire another shot, a yellow energy bubble surrounded Barda. She looked upward and saw that Quasar was the source of her imprisonment. Her dark scowl prompted a response from Quasar, "Don't be too mad. I probably just saved you from a severe beating."

The scowl continued and Barda pointed her rod upwards. She unleashed a stream of energy at the roof of her bubble. Sweat began to trickle at Quasar's brow as the attack pressed onward. "You really aren't making this easy."

Her attackers' relentlessness and skill reminded Barda of a world she had known long ago. Still, she would not lose. Her fear of Thanos far surpassed her respect for these warriors. So it was that she continued her assault. Quasar's muscles were beginning to shake and quiver under the pressure Barda was applying to his field.

Having recovered enough, Sersi slowly rose to her feet and looked upward at a struggling Wendell. Gritting her teeth, The Eternal struggled forward and said, "Drop the shield Wendell!"

Quasar nodded and as soon as the field was dropped Barda's blasts went flying skyward. She was taken aback by the dropping of the field and hit directly in the back by a blast from Sersi. The hot tar that was beginning to dry on Barda's body became hard metal and the woman struggled to move.

Normally, she would have broke from it easily, but she was battle weary.

"Time for this to end!" Sersi exclaimed as she re-shaped the air molecules around Big Barda into a metallic sphere prison. Looking up to Quasar, she said, "Make her useful."

Wendell noted the brutality in The Eternal's voice, but chose to ignore it. She was tired and had suffered a good amount of harm at Barda's hands. Pushing any negative thoughts from his mind, he wrapped Barda in a field and flung her in the direction of her master, Thanos.

"That should give Quoi and Warlock a bit of hand," Wendell smiled.

"And now we need to assist Moondragon."

"If Cap was here we'd have mopped the floor with these guys already," Quasar sighed.

---

Iron Man flew over the monstrosity and unleashed a full repulsor blast in Maestro's face. The future Hulk roared in anger and leaped into the air after his attacker. His anger blinded him to the giant Pym who had knocked him out of the sky with a smack. Maestro crashed into the ground and as soon as he was on his feet, the shield of Captain America met him. Rogers slammed the shield into Maestro's face and as his head snapped back Cap crashed it into his neck. Maestro stumbled back and reached out with one hand that grabbed Cap's shoulder and most of his throwing arm.

"Take your shield to orbit!" Maestro yelled as he flung Captain America over his shoulder and right into the hands of Pym. He looked at Cap and smiled as he slung his teammate at Maestro like a baseball. Captain America straightened his body like a bullet and lifted his shield in front of his face. He slammed into Maestro's back and landed in front of him. "How about that orbit?"

Angry eyes flashed upward and as Maestro was about to stand to his feet a full-sized Wasp blasted the bearded Hulk in the back. Maestro felt the attack, but refused to show it. None of these punks should be hurting him! What the hell had Wanda done to him? He didn't have time to ponder that question because in addition to Wasp's blasts he now had Iron Man's Uni-beam atop his head.

"Keep it up! We got him on the ropes!" Captain America

commanded. After all this was over he was going to give Wanda a big hug. No way the four of them could handle a Hulk under any normal circumstances. This new Wanda was indeed a force to be reckoned with.

Finally growing frustrated with the combined attacks Maestro yelled, "ENOUGH!" He leaped into the air and collided with a stunned Iron Man. Maestro wrapped his hands around Tony's mid-section and began to squeeze. Alarms began to blare in Stark's ear. His armor was holding up under the pressure thus far. Pym reached out and punched Maestro, loosening his grip enough for Stark to escape. He quickly turned around and fired his repulsors into Maestro's chest.

The future despot crashed into the ground and sent up a plume of smoke upon impact. Maestro leaped up from the plume and landed only a few feet from Wasp. He reached out to smack her, but Wasp nimbly avoided the potentially damaging attack. Janet blasted maestro in the face and said, "Didn't your mother teach you manners?"

Maestro couldn't help but to cry out from the attack. He was getting weaker with every second. Damn Wanda to Hell! If not for her all of Wakanda would be in ashes by now. He would make her pay for this no matter what it took. Right now he had to find a way to survive this fight, which was becoming less and less of a possibility.

Pym noticing how much Maestro had decreased in muscle mass said, "You look a little famished. Need a protein shake? Maybe a steak?"

Growling under his breath, Maestro leaped into the air again, but was caught easily by Pym, who began to squeeze. "You really shouldn't make this so easy. Our Hulk would be smarter."

"Your Hulk is weak and pathetic!" Maestro exclaimed as he struggled in Pym's grip. "He is nothing to me!"

Iron Man hovered in front of Maestro. "Looks like the complete opposite to me at the moment. Wouldn't you say Hank?"

"I think you're right Iron Man. He's even losing his lovely green hue," Pym said with a smirk.

Pym sat a raging Maestro on the ground, but the once powerful monster had transformed into an elderly Bruce Banner. Cap walked up to the man and shook his head, "You may have had your way in your time, but we're The Avengers. You weren't going to get past us."

"That arrogance old partner is so unbecoming of you," an all too familiar voice said to Captain America.

Looking up Steve saw Bucky, an alternate version of his old friend who had been twisted by Red Skull into his dark servant. Captain America knew that this conflict was coming, but he still couldn't shake images from the war out of his mind. He didn't want to do this. Bucky was someone he could have never hurt, but things were different. Red Skull had made sure to that.

"We can finish this quickly," Iron Man said as he landed behind Captain America.

"No," Captain America said. "This is for me to handle."

---

"Jarvis, how the hell am I supposed to handle sitting on the sidelines?" an injured Jack-of-Hearts asked as he sat on the medical bed.

The loyal butler of the team wringed his hands as he watched visual feeds from Wakanda and outside The Mansion. "Do as I do Master Hart. Simply keep yourself busy."

Jack laughed. "You've been watching those feeds since this all started."

Jarvis looked back and smiled. "Only because you simply refuse to be a good conversationalist."

Jack hung his head and sighed. "Sorry Jarvis. I've been fussing so much about my own condition...I know watching all of this has to be getting to you."

"You'd think after how many battles I have seen them go through that this would be an easy affair, but I cannot help it. Their safety is paramount to me," Jarvis said with his voice trembling only so slightly. "That is why I take your care upon me as a matter of honor. They save the world. The least I can do is to nurse to their needs."

"You're a good man Jarvis," Jack said. "Better than most. So if you wanna help me just keep me distracted."

"That is a plan I find most agreeable," Jarvis replied.

Suddenly there conversation was interrupted by one of the video feeds being replaced by the image of Falcon with Hercules, the first Human Torch, Swordsman, and Magdalene

behind him. "Jarvis, have the Avengers already left?"

Jarvis nodded. "Yes, Master Wilson. They have already divided themselves up."

"Ok then. Who's gonna need our help the most?"

Jack-of-Hearts answered for Jarvis. "The Avengers in Greenland. We got all the cosmic folks here and Captain America is in Wakanda."

"Then that's where we're headed. We'll be using SHIELD'S Hermes system to get there fast. Take good care of him Jarvis," Falcon said as the screen switched back to the battle outside the mansion.

Jarvis sighed and could only wonder what perils awaited Falcon and the others.

---

Romanoff walked across the hard, frozen ground and stared at Belladonna spinning her purple staff. She was the leader of a splinter group of assassins who had allied themselves with Thanatos. Boudreaux was a smaller cog in the alliance, but she intended to fight tooth and nail for her impending godhood.

"Take your people and go home. Save yourself the trouble."

Romanoff snickered. "Did you really just say that?"

Belladonna picked up on the accent and laughed. "I guess a Ruskie would be use to this weather anyway."

"Can't quite say the same for a swamp rat," Widow replied.

"Well played," Belladonna said as she ran full speed at Romanoff. She swung her stick at Black Widow, but the former Russian spy ducked it with ease and swept Belladonna's feet from under her. Belladonna collided with the tundra, but she quickly rolled out of the way of Widow's stomp.

The Cajun woman kicked her leg out and struck Widow in the shin. She then swung her staff like a bat and struck Black Widow across the head. Natasha was flung to the ground with a throbbing headache. As she fell, Belladonna rose to her feet. The assassin ran towards Black Widow and stabbed her staff at the ground. Its destination was Widow's face. Romanoff rolled out of the way, but the weapon managed to nick her hair. Black Widow cried out as some of her hair was ripped from the scalp.

To add insult to injury, Belladona kicked Romanoff in the kidney closest to the dirt.

"Should have taken your Communist ass home," Belladona said, as she was about to deliver another kick. Black Widow swung her arm backwards and fired a stinger blast into Belladona's throat.

Fighting back pain, Black Widow rose to her feet and tenderly rubbed the kicked kidney. Belladona had been knocked flat on her back by Black Widow's blast. She was barely breathing and from all appearances she was unconscious.

Natasha let out a sigh of relief and in the same breath yelled out in pain. A knife had been lodged in her shoulder, but instead of pulling it out Romanoff turned to see who had thrown it and if they had anything else they felt like chucking.

"If my aim was better it'd be your neck!" Mieko Ko exclaimed. The Asian beauty was the current leader of HYDRA. She had waited patiently for Viper's alliance with Shadow King to crumble and had taken her rightful place as leader of the terrorist organization. Rightful in her mind at least.

Laser fire quickly began to rain down on Natasha from a gun Mieko Ko was carrying. Widow was forced to perform her usual acrobatics with only one arm being available. Mieko was frustrated at not landing a shot. "Run all day if you want you roach! I'll kill you and all your friends!"

The dry, barren terrain of Greenland didn't offer Black Widow much in the way of cover so she was forced into having to rely on one arm. It was inevitable that one of Ko's shots would find its mark and the first had been on her right knee. As Black Widow fell two more shots stuck on her already injured arm and in the center of her abdomen. Natasha landed on her back and drove the knife even deeper into her shoulder. She bit back a cry of pain as soon as she noticed Belladona standing over her.

With a raspy voice Belladona said, "It helps to have friends who show up at just the right moment."

"You damn skippy!" Falcon yelled as he slammed into Belladona with both his fists and sent her careening over Natasha. Sam then helped Black Widow to her feet and supported her with his shoulder. "I got the memo a little late, but I'm here to help."

---

Anthony Power stood atop the wreckage of a bus and looked on at the two Avengers who intended to oppose him. The

Beast and Wonder Man side-by-side was hardly a sight that brought fear in the man who had single-handedly combated The Defenders, Avengers, and X-Men in the past. "You are who they send to do oppose with me? Has Japan been forgotten so quickly?"

Beast gave a toothy grin and said, "Opposition seems like such an inappropriate way to term what we're doing. Simon, you have always had such an eloquent way of wording these situations. How about you having a go at it?"

Simon folded his arms across his chest. "I think what Hank means to say is that we're going to kick your sorry metal ass."

"Bravo!" Beast clapped. "Such power in such simplicity."

Power clenched his fists. "Then come and make full on that promise. Or do you have more useless banter to spill?"

"Useless banter? From us? Surely he jests!" Beast said.

Simon shrugged his shoulders and flew forward slamming a fist square in the Professor's face. Power soared off the wreckage of the bus and landed inside of a cart carrying plantains. Wonder Man turned back to Beast and said, "So about how pissed do you think he is?"

"I would have to gander about Thor on an empty stomach pissed."

Simon's eyes widened. "That bad?"

"You obviously have no earthly comprehension of how hard you punch."

Simon grinned. "Flattery will get you anywhere."

Beast put his hands to his ears and laughed. "Eww! Icky Hollywood voice!"

He leap-frogged over Wonder Man and slammed into Power just as he was rising from the cart. As Power was flung backwards, Beast flipped off his chest and with his feet delivered an uppercut. He was sent right back into the plantain cart.

Beast moved out of Simon's way as he slammed the very same bus Power had been standing on right on top of him. Wonder Man dusted off his hands as he landed next to Beast. "I think my voice could do wonders for the team. I'm going to propose that they let me do a Got Milk ad for the team."

"Does milk react appropriately with ionic energy?"

"Sure hope so. No need to go boom over some moo."

The bus that Wonder Man had crumpled atop Professor Power began to shake wildly and there was a cacophonous crack as the vehicle ripped in half and professor Power flew forth from it. Glass from the bust shot off in every direction and the smell of gasoline filled the air. Power floated over the broken transport with green energy surrounding him. It flickered and popped like fire.

Simon turned to Beast and asked, "So do you think the pissed off factor has been kicked up?"

"Exponentially."

"Figured as much," Simon replied as he flew upward and was parallel from Power. "Sorry about the bus. Just standard big ass fight regulations."

With practically a canine snarl, Power said, "These regulations will soon be the very least of your worries."

The green energy quickly coalesced in Power's hands into a sphere. He hurled the ball of energy at Simon, who flew to the side to narrowly avoid the ball of energy. Wonder Man then turned his eyes back to Power.

"Simon! Watch out!" Beast called out, but it was too late for Wonder Man to react. The ball had turned back and was heading for Simon like a heat seeking missile.

"Shit!" Simon cried out, as the sphere was only feet away from impact. He raised his hands up to cover his face and waited for Power's attack, but it never came.

"Damnable woman!" Power yelled.

Simon looked down and saw Andromeda moving to retrieve her trident, which was glowing a bright green. A relieved Wonder Man turned back to Professor Power, cracked his knuckles and said, "I guess your green crap wasn't as fancy as you thought."

"Perhaps not," Professor Power admitted as long knives popped out the top of his hands and shoulder plates slid back to reveal two cannons. "But I'm always prepared for such eventualities Avenger."

Beast grabbed a steel bar that was lying next to a broken

lamppost. Hank threw the bar upward and yelled, "Catch!"

Simon caught the makeshift weapon and flew forward into Power. He crashed the bar against one of Power's knives and snapped it off. Then he smacked the bar across Power's head before a blast from one of the shoulder cannons caught Simon in the face. He dropped the bar and went spinning through the air.

Having retrieved her trident, Andromeda ran to Beast and asked, "Do you think you can toss me up there?"

"Could Theseus find his way through the labyrinth?"

Andromeda narrowed her eyes and Hank sighed. "My humor is lost on yet another. Scott would rejoice."

"Do you talk to yourself all the time? Simon needs our help!" the Atlantean woman exclaimed.

"He is a far tougher ox than given credit for," Beast said, bending down and cupping his large hands together. "All aboard the McCoy Airlines. Fasten your seats and prepare for liftoff."

---

Abyss rose up from a shadow cast by the sunlight. His blank eyes surveyed the battlefield and spied the former New Warrior, Justice, depriving a group of HYDRA soldier of their weapons through the use of his telekinesis. The rifles were being suspended in the air and their feet held to the ground. Raising a bandage-covered hand, Abyss began to chant inaudibly. A square white portal opened in Abyss' palm and tiny winged snakes came forth from it.

"Go and devour what you have been summoned for," Abyss commanded as the snakes hissed in compliance. They quickly latched on to Justice's telekinetic fields. All of them turned yellow as they absorbed Vance's energy. The Avenger looked at Abyss and hit him with enough telekinetic force to remove him from the large island.

As Abyss was soaring through air he whispered, "Come to me and bring what you have consumed."

Trickles of light formed across his body as the snakes appeared and filled him with the telekinetic energy they had taken from Justice. Before they finish filling their master, eh was slammed into the ground by a blast of light. Abyss hit the ground hard enough to form a crater. Despite no harm being done, Abyss was none too pleased as he arose from the crater. Turning his

whit eyes to the sky, he saw that his attacker had been Photon and next to her was Vance Astrovik. Snapping his fingers, the snakes unlatched themselves from Abyss and then he said, "Give me a sword."

The snakes hissed in obedience as they began to glow pink and turned to blobs of telekinetic energy. They gathered together in Abyss' hand and formed a broadsword. "Long ago I use to have one of these on a regular basis. Cutting you both down with it will be quite nostalgic."

The shining metal gave Justice an eerie feeling so he quickly erected a telekinetic field around himself. Photon shifted into her light form and said, "I'd like to see your cut someone moving at the speed of light."

"Whoever said you would be moving, " Abyss replied as eh held up his hand and the two Avengers were locked in place. Justice was doing is best to escape from the grip, but his telekinesis didn't seem to be working. Dark, malicious laughter erupted from Abyss as he floated upwards towards the two Avengers. "Your telekinesis is useless! Trying to escape your impending doom would be futile."

Abyss was first in the face of Justice. He lifted his sword into the air above his head and was about to cleave Vance in two when Abyss' hand was stuck by a blast from Warbird. "If you can't play nice then don't play at all!"

Carol punched Abyss in the face and was taken aback at just how cold it was. Punching him had felt like hitting a slab of wet rock. Abyss was only knocked back a few feet by the blow, so he reached out and grabbed Carol's hair. With cold brutality he head-butted Warbird and would have delivered a punch to the gut, but his fist was caught by Warbird's open palm.

The broadsword fell to the ground an shattered into a million pieces. This freed Justice and Photon from their imprisonment. Vance, angry at his powers being made useless, latched Abyss in a telekinetic grip and separated him from Warbird. The two Avengers flew beside Danvers and Photon said, "Thanks for the help."

"But I think you should let us take it from here," Justice cut in. "Abyss decided to go and make it personal."

Carol looked at Monica, who nodded. "The kid's right. Abyss made toys out of us. I think throwing some strings on him would be appropriate."

Warbird laughed at Abyss. "I'd hate to be you right about now."

---

Kamee was trapped at the tip of the golden tower that looked like a twisted stick spurting forth from the earth. The pitiful gray being was the key to Thanatos' plot and he was in Shiro Yashida's sights. He barreled through the air at breakneck speed because he was going to need momentum in combination to his abilities. It was the only thing that would help him free Kamee. Atomic flame bristled off of Shiro's body, as he grew closer.

A spear cut through the intense heat Shiro's body was emanating and scraped the hero across the back. Sunfire let loose a cry of annoyance and turned to the source of what had struck him. There he found a man clad in the golden armor of a Roman centurion. Sunfire stared down his opponent and asked, "Who are you to strike me?"

"I am Thanatos you arrogant whelp! You are fortunate I only decided to injure you," the battle clad man replied as the Spear of Destiny reappeared in his hand.

Sunfire laughed. "Are you sure you could even call that an injury with your incredibly bad aim?"

"Brave words for a dead man," Thanatos replied as he lifted up his spear for another throw. "You and your allies will not stop me."

Shiro knew he could deal his enemies a great blow by disposing of the architect of this battle. He had failed to save his country against the threat of Red Skull. He refused to fail the world. "You will be stopped!"

Atomic flame shot out from Sunfire's body and rushed at Thanatos. The alternate Rick Jones shot forth a stream of Destiny Force energy from his hand and it cut through Shiro's fire. The beam then struck Shiro directly in the chest and sent the mutant tumbling backwards in the air.

The strong arms of Warbird caught him. She scowled at Thanatos, but knew that she couldn't fight him with Shiro in her arms. He smiled and began to fly towards her. Carol knew what was coming and took off like one of the planes she use to pilot. Thanatos hurled his power at her like missiles, which she was forced to nimbly dodge. It had become a cat and mouse chase with Sunfire being a huge liability for Warbird.

*Shit! This is not good!*

Carol flew above a blast and immediately below one. Thanatos

was hurling multiple blasts, which were forcing her into a mood of ducking and weaving that would slow down her speed. Warbird knew something needed to change about the dynamic of this battle and fast.

That something came in the form of a pillar of fire that struck the pursuing Thanatos in the gut. The Destiny Force wielder was flung through the air and his entire body engulfed in flames.

"Looks like you needed a bit of a hand," the Human Torch said as Thanatos screamed from the attack unleashed upon him.

"Johnny?" Carol asked wondering if the rest of the Fantastic Four were on the battlefield.

"No. I'm the first model."

---

"You shouldn't have come here old foe!" Thanos said as he backhanded Warlock into the air. "Death is coming to this planet today and it will be glorious!"

The Mad Titan was still choking with Black Knight with one hand as Sequoia slammed into his back and tackled him to the ground. Angrily the Messiah said, "Do you have any idea how many times I've heard people say that?"

Thanos released his grip on Black Knight and plucked Sequoia off of his back like a fly and flung him into the arms of Adam Warlock. Standing up, Thanos gave his opponents a glare of hate and began to march towards the entangled Warlock and Quoi. That was when a stone Big Barda blindsided him and knocked Thanos hard enough into the ground to create a crater. The rumble was felt throughout the city despite the crater only being big enough to house Thanos' body.

By the time Thanos pushed back Barda and had risen from the crater, his opponents had repositioned themselves. Sequoia smiled at the Mad Titan and said, "Looks like a lil bit of teamwork is more than enough to kick your ass."

Thanos snarled and let loose a blast of cosmic energy from his hand that was headed directly towards an unconscious Black Knight. Sequoia quickly flew to intercept the blast and caught it directly in the chest. He managed to absorb most of the energy, but he was still flung away from the battlefield. The Mad Titan took the opportunity to pounce Warlock and began pummeling him with blows.

"Like I said. You should never have come here," Thanos repeated as he punched Warlock again and again. The blows that allowed Thanos to hold his own against Odin were causing Warlock more injury than he would ever admit.

"I am the master of souls!" Warlock yelled as a stream of green light struck Thanos in the forehead. "I know that you fear me being here more than you would ever admit to yourself."

Thanos yelled out as Warlock bared loose all his inner demons with a single strike. Both of his hands went to his head as he struggled to regain control of himself. He didn't have much time though as Sequoia was flying back towards the Titan at breakneck speeds.

Sequoia smashed into Thanos and said, "I really hate to hit a naked guy...on so many levels."

Thanos swatted back Quoi and rose to his feet with a groan. "No matter how many times you knock me down I'll get back up."

"I haven't been hitting you to hurt you. At least not much," Quoi smiled. "I just used up too much energy on your little friend."

Glowing pink tendrils rose up from the ground and wrapped themselves around Thanos' wrists and ankles. The Mad Titan struggled at the constraints but found himself unable to move. Quoi floated in front of him, still smiling, and said, "Now that I got enough to hold you in place I'm gonna let Warlock go to work on you."

Thanos spat in the Celestial Messiah's face and said through gritted teeth, "Do your worst you pathetic backwater creature!"

Wiping the spit from his cheek, Sequoia stopped grinning and venomously said, "You better believe I will."

---

Falcon had come to the rescue of Black Widow and succeeded in knocking out Belladonna. Ko had every intention of shooting the two Avengers dead in retribution. Just as she raised her gun to fire, a feral roar came from her side and the gun was kicked from her hand. Mieko's fiery eyes locked onto her new opponent; the cat woman known to the Avengers and hero community as Tigra.

"You will not touch them!" Tigra hissed angrily.

Mieko kept a tight gaze and replied, "No, I won't. Not until I have taken care of you."

Tigra leaped forward and attempted to rake her claws across the HYDRA's leader chest. Mieko dodged the attack and grabbed one of Greer's wrists. Using Tigra's own momentum, Mieko slammed her face fist into the tundra. As Greer skidded across the dirt, Mieko pulled out a tiny rod from the inside of her one of boots. The pencil length green rod extended into a spike-tipped staff.

Greer cursed as she rose to her feet. Mieko had moved faster than she expected. It was pretty safe to assume that she couldn't afford to underestimate Ko a second time. Crouching low, Tigra began to circle her prey. Mieko laughed at the display.

"I've seen more threatening puppies."

The Avenger rolled forward like a Civil War cannonball and Mieko Ko barely side stepped the attack. Tigra fluidly brought herself to a stop and back flipped. Her feet caught Ko in the chest and sent her to the ground. The HYDRA leader's staff went flying through the air like a spear. Its intended target had been Tigra's belly, but it instead struck her thigh.

"Stupid wench," Mieko groaned as she struggled to catch her breath. The blood flowing freely from Tigra's wound was pleasing to Ko. It showed her superiority over the woman. "You thought to bring harm to me? Such foolishness."

Tigra removed the spear from her thigh with a cry of pain as Mieko stood to her feet. Greer stood as well, despite the pain, and said, "You are quite the woman, but unlike you my help isn't down for the count."

Mieko's eyes widened at Tigra's subtle threat and she quickly dropped to her knees narrowly missing the blunt edge of Swordsman's primary weapon. She quickly swept her leg backward, but Jarvert was able to dodge the attack with a leap. Before hitting the ground he stuck out his leg and kicked Mieko in the forehead. Ko snapped back and her body slid to the feet of Tigra.

Amazingly, Ko immediately kicked up her legs upward and wrapped them around Tigra's neck. She flung the wounded heroine into the arms of Swordsman and jumped to her feet. "I may not be possessed of powers, but I have will in abundance and I refuse to lose this day."

Pink lightning struck between the battling sides and all looked

upward to see a man garbed in the armor of a Roman soldier accessorized by a long flowing red cape. Pink energy bristled at the corners of his eyes and surrounded his hands. "Your strength is to be admired Mieko Ko. Let me vanquish these infidels for you."

Mieko laughed. "My help is far from gone wench. Meet Emperor. He will be your doom."

---

Bucky Barnes meant many things to Captain America. He was a friend, comrade, and fellow soldier. Most of all, Bucky was the first person that Captain America ever felt like he had truly failed. Now he had failed another Bucky all over again. This time thought he had the chance to make it right and save a friend.

"We don't have to do this. I know you're in there. Fight him," Captain America said to the alternate reality Bucky. This version of his old friend had come from a world where Captain America had died instead of Bucky. It was a world Rogers had wished for many nights.

"There is no fighting him. I am Red Skull's son and to see you dead would please my father greatly," Bucky said.

"If you really wanted to fight me you would have done it already," Cap rebutted as he slipped his shield onto his back. "I won't need this to beat you because you can do it by yourself. You're strong. I know it!"

A twitch occurred in Bucky's cheek that let Steve know that what he said was getting through. Somewhere deep down, Bucky was struggling to regain control of himself. This Bucky had grown up strong. In him Captain America saw what his Bucky could have been. That angered Cap more than anything. Red Skull had stolen the young man's potential for good.

Eventually the twitch stopped and Bucky smiled. "It is good you know my strength. I shall kill you with it."

"I failed one Buchanan. I refuse to fail another," Captain America defiantly proclaimed.

Bucky charged forward and threw a punch headed for Cap's chin. The Avenger caught the attack with his palm and kept a firm grip on Bucky's fist. He pulled his arm back and brought Bucky's body forward. Cap moved to thrust his knee into Bucky's chest, but the young man used Cap's tug to flip forward and over Cap. Now free of Captain America's grip, he sent a

kick in the direction of the Avenger's lower back that never connected. Rogers spun out the way of the kick. He immediately leaped through the air and kicked him in the head. Bucky's head snapped back, but he grabbed Captain America's ankle and flung him towards the ground. Cap's hands touched the ground before any other part of his body and used the energy from Bucky's throw into a back flip. Just as he was completing the flip he was punched in the face and then in the stomach. Before he could recover, Bucky twisted his body and cracked his elbow across Cap's chin.

Ignoring the pain, Captain America thrust his knee into Bucky's ribs and slapped him across the back of his head. Bucky pushed himself away from Cap and re-positioned himself. He was crouched down while Cap had taken on a boxer's stance. The two's battle had taken them into the middle of a narrow street littered with burning cars and twisted lampposts. Bucky began to edge closer to Captain America, keeping his eyes locked on the target ahead. Like a boulder in the plains, Captain America refused to move. Cap was going to let Bucky bring the fight to him, but he had every intention of shutting the battle out once that occurred.

Finally growing impatient, Bucky ran forward like crouching samurai of old. He ran up over a burning car with near blinding speed and propped his body, head first, towards Captain America. The two bodies collided with a deafening smack and they began to roll across the cracked asphalt. Bucky had his black gloves wrapped around the throat of Captain America.

"You expect me to give up!" Bucky growled. "I won't. The will of the Red Skull will triumph and before long he will be a god that you will have to kneel before."

Captain America grabbed Bucky's wrist and thrust his body upwards like he was doing a strenuous sit-up. He made sure his head connected with Bucky's nose. The same attack was repeated three times in rapid succession. Blood spewed from Bucky's nose and Cap released Bucky's hands. He shoved a knee into Bucky's stomach and tossed him across the street. Rising from the ground, Captain America pulled off his shield and said, "Playtime is over Bucky. If you can't break free of The Red Skull on your own, I'll help you."

"I'm already as free as I can ever be. What don't you understand about that?" Bucky exclaimed as he struggled to rise to his feet. He looked to his left and saw a broken fire hydrant. Vibranium was this country's meal ticket so it was safe to assume that least traces of the metal were in everything.

Walking over to the weakened Bucky, Cap said, "You're my

friend and I refuse to watch you suffer under Red Skull."

Grabbing the piece of hydrant, Bucky flung his arm back and struck Captain America in his shield. Roger knocked the wreckage from Bucky's hand and pounced on the young man's back. He slammed his shield into Bucky's head and twisted his arms behind his back. Now that he was pinned down, Captain America wasn't quite sure what to do with him. Bucky managed to mumble something underneath the squeeze of the shield, "Sorry furk-er!"

"I'll just take that as Red Skull talking," Cap said, flagging down Iron Man to his position.

---

Iron Man hovered in the air alongside Wasp with Hank Pym, still holding on to a weakened Maestro, below them. The three had been watching Captain America duke it out with Bucky and had been waiting for the opportunity that they could help in the fight.

"You think Cap has this under control?" Janet asked Tony.

"Positive, but the four of us together could have neutralized it a lot faster."

"Iron Man you know that Cap is a man of honor. He has to handle things on his own sometimes," Pym replied when all four of them suddenly saw Captain America motioning for them to move his way.

"That's our cue," Iron Man said.

"Guess I'll need to temporarily dispose of our little friend here," Pym said as he tossed Maestro into a nearby pile of rubble. "We'll be back for you later wrinkles."

As the three heroes moved towards Cap's position, Maestro felt the life returning to him. Looking down at his hands he saw that they were once again green and his body was growing at a massive rate. He smiled to himself. Wanda's powers were still unpredictable as ever.

Maestro gave a devil's grin and said, "Think it's time for me to wish on a few bones."

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**TO BE CONTINUED...**

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**NEXT ISSUE:** *The monster you've all been waiting for! Issue 50 has arrived!*

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**Avengers #50  
September 2007**



**Captain  
America**



**Black  
Panther**



**Quicksilver**



**Andromeda**

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## MARVEL 2000 PRESENTS...

### "FORCES OF DESTINY" Conclusion

Written by *Brent Lambert, Barry Reese, Steve Crosby, and Jeff Melton*

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Vortigen Walker was a man who had never felt his age and with good reason. The life of an Arthurian druid, especially a Proudwalker's, was by its very nature a regenerative one. He had lived quite healthily for well over five hundred years and he didn't intend to stop that streak now, but two very angry Avengers did. Abyss, as Walker now called himself, had made fools of Justice and Photon. It wasn't an insult the two intended to take lying down.

"Tell us how to shutdown this plan of yours and we might spare you a beating," Justice said as he surrounded himself in a telekinetic field.

"Then again," Photon cracked her knuckles, "maybe not."

Abyss laughed in a way that would easily frighten children. He pointed his mystical broadsword at Justice and said, "Threats are pointless. Fight me or don't!"

Photon rose into the air and transformed her body into light. "You don't have to ask twice."

Monica zoomed towards Abyss and began to circle him at speeds twice that of sound. Not only was she creating an air-sucking vortex, but also she was blasting Abyss again and again. Justice was keeping their opponent grounded with telekinesis.

Suddenly, a cold black hand gripped Vance's throat and lifted him high into the air. With a voice resonant as an organ and black as death, his attacker said, "Today, this battle is not yours."

Justice immediately focused all of his telekinetic power on releasing the grip of his attacker, but the man's fingers didn't even budge. Photon saw Vance under attack and left Abyss to crumble to the ground, unconscious. Moving at near light speed, Monica slammed into Justice's attacker and both went flying upward.

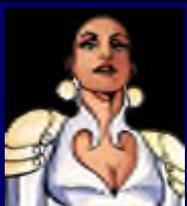
"I am impressed. That almost actually hurt," the man said, his black eyes suddenly glowing blue. His entire body was black as coal and his long hair littered with tiny sparks that gave him the appearance of a living galaxy. As the two bodies continued their upward climb, he wrapped his hand around Photon's throat and shot forth from



**Sunfire**



**Karnak**



**Moondragon**



**Thor**



**Scarlet Witch**



it the same energy that was in his eyes.

Photon screamed and immediately broke away from the man. Somehow, he had managed to hurt her in her light form. How? The being smiled from above and said, "That was a taste of black matter. It's the material that binds the universe together, but I have learned long ago how to use it to destroy. Even light."

Monica fired a steady stream of photonic energy into The Fallen One's chest as he began to approach her. The attack didn't seem to be doing much of anything to the smiling, cosmic maniac. Photon knew that she was in trouble, but she was too proud to call for help. She knew that this was a big battle and trying to pull people away to help her would have been selfish. This guy was powerful, but he had to have a weakness. She'd just have to work to find it.

A recovered Justice flew around The Fallen One's back and entrapped his head in a telekinetic bubble. With extreme concentration, Vance closed the bubble around his opponent's head with the intention of crushing it like a melon meeting a swing hammer. Justice's attempt was an utter failure and only caused The Fallen One an annoyance. He turned his head in Justice's direction and said, "Your attempts at harming me will forever prove unsuccessful."

The Fallen One moved to attack Justice but he was given a hard punch in the face by Warbird and tackled from behind by Starfox. Before he had a chance to recover, Photon zipped above his head and launched a full-blown salvo of photonic energy. Despite not being hurt, the attack did catch the cosmic madman off guard. The three-prong attack threw The Fallen One into a mid-air whirlwind.

Finally coming to stop, The Fallen One smiled wickedly. "You four make a good team. I am eager to see just how far the limits of your teamwork can be pushed."

Starfox gulped. "I get the feeling all we did was piss him off."

Photon moved next to Eros and sarcastically commanded, "You're the pleasure guy. Make him happy."

"That would be a good idea if he already wasn't happy as could be," Starfox replied.

Frowning, Warbird said, "Seems he's waiting for us to come to him."

"And Abyss is starting to come out of it," Monica added.

Energy flared up around Justice. "I'll take care of that."

"No you won't," Monica said hardly. "The four of us must stick together if we're to have a chance against our new opponent."

Vance didn't like getting his legs cut out from under him, but he knew as long as he was with The Avengers he'd have to get use to it. Monica happened to take her former leadership of The Avengers to the head. "Let's be honest. The four of us have don't squat so far."

Warbird put a hand to her chin and said, "We just haven't been brutal enough yet. This guy is obviously confident in his abilities. I suggest we use that to our advantage. Justice, give him a good heart squeeze."

**Crystal**



**Quasar**



**Photon**



**Jack of  
Hearts**



**Machine  
Man**



**Binary**

“Already tried,” Vance sighed. “The guy has no internal organs to speak of. At least none my TK felt.”

Carol was surprised. She hadn’t expected the usually gentle Vance to cut loose of his own accord. Maybe it was getting smacked around by Abyss and now this new guy or maybe Vance always had this in him. Whatever the source, Carol was just glad he had his head in the game.

The Fallen One kept a morbid gaze on The Avengers, prompting Carol to say; “We need to knock that smug little smile right off his face.”

“Agreed,” Photon said, “We hit him hard, fast and keep it going long enough until we can get some help.”

“Just don’t put me out front,” Starfox half-smiled.

Carol rolled her eyes. “Of course not. We wouldn’t want to mess up that pretty face.”

“It is loved by millions after all,” Starfox replied with a bunch of sarcasm and a hint of honesty.

“Can we just get to it already? That smile is starting to creep me out,” Justice said.

---

“I cannot believe your arrogance,” Metron said as a blast from Thanos’ twisted version of the Mobius Chair struck Moondragon in the chest. “To truly believe you could match me.”

Heather was flung backwards through the air, but quickly regained her composure. It was expected of a woman with her level of discipline and training. Whoever Thanos’ new lackey was, Moondragon intended to put him in his place. Quite firmly.

A stream of green telekinetic energy came from Heather’s forehead and struck Metron’s golden forcefield that surrounded him. She had been attempting to break through his defenses since the start of their conflict. Failing was not an option for her.

Quasar flew above Moondragon and quickly added his power to hers and Sersi did so as well from another angle. Heather scowled, but did not pull away from the joint attack. “I can handle this on my own! I need no assistance.”

Wendell knew just how to humor her. “We see that, but we need your help with other fights. The quicker you can move on the quicker we can win.”

If there was any satisfaction from Moondragon, she refused to show it. “So be it.”

“Okay then let’s take this guy’s chair straight to the dump,” Wendell exclaimed as energy continued to pour out from his Quantum Bands.

Metron was offended by the three-person assault. He had intended to humble the haughty Moondragon and the appearance of her teammates had put a dampener in that. Still, the idea of defeat hadn’t entered his mind. His force bubble would be more than capable of handling the combined attack. If they thought sheer numbers

would make him yield, then they were sorely mistaken.

“I thought you fancied yourself to godhood woman! Only a pathetic mortal would so readily accept aid,” Metron shouted to a red in the face Moondragon. He knew that the road to victory was through the pride of Moondragon.

Fighting back her anger, Moondragon gave a mock laugh. “No god stands alone! Have you not heard of worshippers?”

The idea of being referred to as a worshipper didn't sit too well with Wendell. Especially a worshipper of Moondragon, who was as much a religious icon as a politician was honest. Still, if Heather demeaning him kept her calm and out of trouble, he wouldn't complain.

Unfortunately, Sersi wasn't inclined to feel the same way. “Woman, watch your tongue! I've traversed this world long before any of your ancestors were conceived.”

Metron laughed. “Seems your status as a god is in dispute.”

Moondragon scowled resentfully at Sersi and angrily charged towards Metron. It was exactly what Quasar didn't want to happen, because Sersi and him were forced to impede their blasts lest they strike down Heather along with Thanos' minion.

With a telekinetic field surrounding her, Moondragon crashed into Metron's force bubble. “You will not insult me again!”

“Why can't I, when you make it so easy?” Metron asked as his force bubble dissipated and a beam shot forth from between his legs. Heather's telekinetic field shattered from the attack and she was sent plummeting towards the ground

Sersi saw the falling body and shouted, “Wendell!”

Responding to the cry, Quasar shot off at tremendous speed and caught the tumbling Moondragon in his arms. Metron's blast had left her unconscious and Wendell distracted from the main battle at hand. Sersi had been left to face Metron alone.

The Mobius Chair rotated to face Sersi and Metron said, “It seems that is just you and me. I wonder what results that may yield.”

“One in which I vanquish you!” Sersi shouted. From her fingertips, green energy erupted that hit the Mobius Chair and changed its molecular structure to sand. Metron wasn't able to erect his shield in enough time and now found himself without his prized vehicle. Instead of falling prey to gravity, the minion of Thanos now floated enraged in front of The Eternal.

“There would have been a time when the loss of The Mobius Chair would have crippled me greatly. Thanos has assured me that is no longer the case.”

Sersi didn't make a move because frankly she wasn't sure just how much damage he could take or give. Being an Eternal afforded her a great deal of abilities, but there was no telling how many of these Metron could counter. She now regretted letting her own pride get the better of her.

Metron's eyes flashed red and his face went pale gray. “Shall we begin this brief exercise?”

Sersi lifted up her arms as if she was about to cast a spell and replied, "The arrogance of your master flows all through you. I think you won't find me such easy prey, spawn of Thanos."

Spawn. The word was inherently inferior to Metron. It implied that he was birthed from some foul cesspool of utter filth. The idea repulsed and insulted him. He had been a god before coming into Thanos and was only sculpted into perfection by bending to the dark lord's will. Sersi would be made to pay for her insolence.

Before The Eternal woman had a chance to react, Metron moved at inhuman speed and wrapped his hand around Sersi's throat. She was surprised at how tight the man's grip actually was. With her arms still raised in the air, Sersi shot Metron in the face with steady stream of green cosmic energy. It hit with the force of speeding 18-wheeler and sent Metron careening through the air.

Pouncing on the opportunity before her, Sersi flew after the dazed Metron and lobbed blast after blast at him. It was as if an armada of fireworks was raining down on Metron. Each blast hit its mark and sent Metron into even more of a wild tumble. Sersi could taste victory on her breath.

It was a taste that would be short lived as a searing pain tore into her mind. A recovered Metron tapped the side of his head and said, "A brave attempt, but the mind is my realm."

Surprise filled Metron as Sersi began to resist him. "We Eternals are blessed with many talents, Metron of the New Gods."

---

Gilgamesh threw a knife and rolled out of X-51's way. Their opponent, Mister Miracle, blocked the attack with his black staff, but dodging that attack allowed X-51 to rocket into the servant of The Mad Titan. The two bodies launched across the Mansion lawn and nearly right into Quasar, who was holding the unconscious form of Moonragon. Being in some control of the struggle, X-51 directed himself and Mr. Miracle into the ground. The two's impact dug up a ditch that would give Jarvis an aneurysm.

Mr. Miracle used his knees to push X-51 off of him and rolled backwards to get back on his feet. Thanos had truly taken him to the next level. An attack like that would have gravely injured him back in his home universe. Pointing his staff at X-51 he said, "You are quite the powerful machine. A true testament to the ambition of your universe."

Sneaking up behind Thanos' servant, Callisto slung her staff across his neck and pulled back tightly. Mr. Miracle gagged under the strength of The Morlock. Leaning forward, she whispered in his ear, "All that praise and you didn't think to pass any my way?"

"Perhaps he didn't think you were worthy of any," Gilgamesh joked as he charged forward and flung another of his knives to knock Mr. Miracle's staff out of his hand. He stopped behind X-51 and asked, "Do you have some way to finish this quickly?"

X-51 turned his head towards the monster hunter ever so slightly. **::Designate:**

**Gilgamesh I am surprised you would even ask such an elementary question::**

Gilgamesh shrugged. "Never hurts to check. I know how touchy feely some of you Avengers can be."

**::I don't deal in this touchy feely::** X-51 said as he approached mister Miracle, who was still struggling against the grip of Callisto. With one outstretched finger, X-51 shot a blue laser into Mr. Miracle's chest that knocked him out.

Releasing her grip, Callisto let Mr. Miracle drop to the ground with a thud. "What'd you do to him X?"

**::The beam I emitted paralyzed his nervous system entirely. I would estimate the effects to last three Earth hours::**

"And you couldn't do this at the beginning of the fight, because?"

**::I think you know the term well Designate: Callisto. It wasn't as much fun::**

The Morlock leader raised an eyebrow and looked to Gilgamesh. "Fun coming out of his mouth. Never thought I'd see the day."

A searing noise cut through any response Gilgamesh could have given. A falling Metron crashed with a deafening smack between the two Avengers. From above an enraged Sersi screamed, "Stay out of my head!"

Callisto immediately slammed her staff into Metron's neck and Gilgamesh pointed a sword at his heart. A stern warning issued from Callisto. "I strongly suggest you don't flinch."

It was then that the visage of Metron faded away to reveal Sersi and the two heroes knew they had been duped. The real Metron dropped from the sky and knocked the two Avengers away with optic blasts. As Callisto went flying backwards all she could think was why X-51 didn't warn them?

Seeing his teammates tossed aside angered X-51, but he was unable to move. Metron was able to access some unknown function of Mister Miracle's staff and had used it to lock up all of his systems. He had to watch helplessly as his teammates were tricked and then attacked. X-51 was just as helpless as Metron traced the outline of his face like he was some statue on display.

"Miracle spent too much time admiring you to take care of you effectively. Still, you are quite the beauty."

Then there was a sickening crack that echoed from behind The New God. With a swift turn of his head, Metron saw that fully powered Quasar had snapped Mister Miracle's staff in half. Realization of the

ramifications of that filled Metron with dread, but X-51's cold first had clocked him before he could even act on it. The New god went careening through the air and was caught in a Quasar created force field. Wendell pulled the yellow globe back towards him and dropped Metron's unconscious form in front of X-51.

"That was a helluva punch! Geeze we know who got their Wheaties," Quasar laughed.

**::He violated me. I returned the favor::**

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The chances of Maestro losing his powers in the middle of a conflict and reverting to an old man would have been a billion to one. Such odds didn't matter to the whore Maximoff and Maestro had discovered that the hard way. He would make her pay for what she had done. And quite harshly at that. But first his attention required the disposal of four Avengers who had enjoyed his disadvantage far too much.

Wasp, Iron Man, and Hank Pym were on their way to help Captain America wrestle down a mind-controlled Bucky. Their backs were turned to the now recovering Maestro. Somehow the power of the Scarlet Witch was not as effective as she and her friends might have hoped. Before he rose to his feet, an explosion knocked him back down. Perhaps he was not as recovered as he thought.

Janet looked to the direction of the blast and said, "Dammit! I could have sworn I saw a packed bus that way not but five minutes ago."

"You and Hank go take care of it," Iron Man ordered. "I'm more than enough to help Cap out."

Hank nodded. "Be careful Tony."

Stark returned the nod of camaraderie. "You too Hank."

Maestro watched as the two Avengers left to take care of civilians and the future Hulk smiled. He'd crack open a can of sardines first and worrying about plucking a couple of wings later.

Iron Man continued to move towards Cap, never seeing the bulk that was beginning to add itself to Maestro's body.

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Once recovered, the first thing Maestro did was clap his hands. All the city felt this, buckling under the shockwave of power. Of everybody close to Maestro at the time, only Iron Man was able to remain on his feet. Still, the blow staggered him, and when he saw

Maestro rushing forward Iron Man almost wasn't able to raise his hands fast enough.

"Unh, that's what I get for trusting magic," Stark muttered. Repulsor beams shot out the palms of both hands. Even at full charge, the Maestro remained standing. What was worse, the futuristic Hulk was still moving forward.

"I always regretted not doing this the last time I killed you," said the Maestro calmly. There was no rage in his voice, nor in his movements as the Maestro reached both his hands towards Iron Man's. That seemed more frightening to Stark than anything else, that this Hulk wasn't fueled by rage. He genuinely enjoyed hurting others.

"No!" Firing up his boot jets, Iron Man rocketed into the air, narrowly avoiding the Maestro's grasp. The repulsors had ceased. Too much power had been wasted on something that wasn't effective. Perhaps it was from all the radiation he absorbed in that apocalyptic future, but the Maestro was far more powerful than the present-day Hulk.

Wait, that was it! The thought flashed through Iron Man's head like lightning. There was a way to stop the Maestro, if only Iron Man could-

Being lost in thought was not a smart thing to do at any time, much less in the middle of a fight. Maestro had the Hulk's leaps, and was much more adept at those as well. With Iron Man's attention inward, the Maestro had jumped up and grabbed him. Again, the Maestro squeezed, and along with the blaring alarms Iron Man could feel pain throughout his whole body as the armor began to give.

"Arrogant to the last, eh Stark?" Maestro laughed. That sickening voice still rang in Iron Man's ears as he was hurled at a nearby building.

Flailing desperately but unable to control his descent, Iron Man crashed through the Wakandan skyscraper. Through the eighth floor wall, then down to seventh, sixth, then finally out through the fifth floor wall. From the brief glimpse Iron Man got as he spun into the ground, the building was falling sideways, demolishing nearby buildings in its collapse.

"No," said Iron Man softly, thinking of those that may not have evacuated. Then he crashed hard against the ground, and inside he felt something break. Against the highway asphalt Iron Man skidded, smashing into cars that flipped away at impact. More than a few would have broken gas tanks, and at the slightest spark-

BOOM! Flames consumed Iron Man as he finally slowed to a stop.

His armor's internal systems seemed to still be functioning, as the semi-conscious Iron Man was not being roasted alive. However, he could feel the heat, and he knew that soon his armor would fail completely. He had to stop the flames, get out of there before the Maestro reached him.

With everything he had, Iron Man pushed himself up onto his hands and knees, and promptly collapses. Pieces of the armor's systems were already failing. Stark felt every pound of its weight.

Suddenly, the heat was starting to lessen. With tremendous effort, Iron Man raised his head. Bursts of energy were crashing into the ground all around him, and seemed to be smothering the flames. Just ahead of Iron Man, a figure too small to be the Maestro was walking towards him through the smoke. Iron Man wasn't sure when the man walked out from the smoke, because the Black Panther's raiment was much the same color.

Grabbing Iron Man by one arm, King T'Challa helped his old friend to his feet. "Where is he, Iron Man? Where is the monster that dares to hurt my nation?"

Iron Man turned his head, and raised his other arm to point. Maestro could now be seen in the sky, falling towards them. "Right there. What the Hulk might one day become."

"Yes," remarked Black Panther. "I will need to update my Hulk contingencies." Reaching into the sheath on his boot, Black Panther removed what appeared to be a knife and threw it with unerring accuracy at the plummeting Maestro. Much to Iron Man's surprise, the knife sunk to deep into the Maestro's chest it actually disappeared!

"Yeeaarghh!" The Maestro bellowed in pain as his twisted body crashed into the ground, more than twenty feet away from the two well-equipped humans.

"We should be running," Black Panther urged to Iron Man.

They turned and hurried away, but even with Black Panther's support Iron Man wasn't able to move very fast in his crippled armor. As they were moving, Iron Man noticed that a knife was once again in the sheath Black Panther's boot. Of course, Iron Man realized. They were energy daggers, probably neural based. Still, one wouldn't be able to stun the Maestro for long, and in fact Iron Man did hear a great bellow behind him.

"Panther!" roared Maestro. His arms were raised high. "Your skin will be my new rug!" Maestro smashed both his arms to the ground with tremendous force. The shockwave was focused, running down the length of the highway towards the two fleeing Avengers. Asphalt split and vehicles were hurled to either side. Once it

reached Iron Man and Black Panther, they would stand no chance.

"We're clear enough from the smoke," remarked Black Panther. The arm that wasn't holding Iron Man had not been raised, was reaching toward the sky. "She should be able to see us now."

"Who-?" Iron Man had started to ask, but then he quickly realized whom had extinguished the fires. "You mean...?"

"Yes, hold on tight."

As though on cue, right before the shockwave could reach Iron Man and Black Panther, Binary reached them first. Swooping in low, the powerful Avenger grabbed Black Panther's wrist and carried him up into the sky, Iron Man and all. Turning in the air, Binary veered off the highway, and once over safe land slowed and released Black Panther.

Iron Man had fallen less than a second earlier, released by Black Panther. If they had fallen together, Iron Man's weight could very well have crushed the other man. Fortunately this fall was not so painful as the last, and Iron Man was already standing when Black Panther and Binary and reached either side of him.

"Will you be able to continue?" Black Panther asked.

"Yes," responded Iron Man. "My armor took in a lot of that heat, converted it into energy. Already my systems have rebooted, and I'm almost back up to full power."

Iron Man turned suddenly and raised a gauntly, shocking Binary with a repulsor blast. It sent a hurled car careening away from them. Maestro could be seen nearly a hundred yards away, picking up another car to throw. "Unfortunately I don't think my armor can sustain another hit. Binary, I won't be able to help you trade blows with him."

"How fortunate then that I am more than willing!" yelled Black Panther and he leapt towards the Maestro. In each hand was an energy dagger, and Black Panther hurled these as he ran. One struck Maestro in the arm, causing him to drop the vehicle. The monstrous villain crouched down, apparently in pain. Black Panther approached rapidly, fists clenched and ready to strike.

"Panther wait!" cried out Iron Man. "That's not the Hulk! He's smarter and might be playing-"

The upper-backhand blow struck Black Panther squarely in the chest. Wakanda's ruler was sent hurtling through the air, nearly as fast as Iron Man had been thrown earlier. Immediately Binary, who had returned to the air with the intent of joining Panther in the attack, was now rocketing to save him. Leaving Iron Man, once

again, facing the Maestro alone.

"Not again you won't," promised Iron Man. Maestro had tensed his legs, obviously with the intent of leaping after Black Panther and Binary. But Iron Man struck first, with a weapon quite different from his repulsors. From his armor's chest shot out the Uni-Beam, an emission of light and force that struck the Maestro square in the face. Iron Man had adjusted the effect, so that it was mostly light that struck Maestro, for the purpose of disorienting him.

"Iron Man!" Binary yelled from overhead. "Catch!" She tossed a semi-conscious Black Panther down towards Iron Man as she rocketed at the Maestro. Iron Man reached out and safely caught his friend, knowing that the vibranium weave of Black Panther's raiment would absorb the impact of falling against metal. Gently, Iron Man lowered Black Panther to the ground, hoping that the vibranium had afforded enough protection against Maestro's blow.

"Thanks Binary," Iron Man called out. "Go keep him busy while we figure out how to stop this!"

Binary gave a salute as she arced through the sky toward Maestro. "Oh, I'll just go ahead and beat him for you."

Extending both arms straight out, Binary rocketed at Maestro, who had picked up another car with one hand. A swing of that car smashed into Binary as she was mere feet away, the awesome heat of her fiery, cosmic-powered body igniting the gas tank. Flames engulfed the pair of titans, though both appeared unfazed.

"Are you all right, Panther?" Iron Man inquired. "Because without your help, I think Maestro just might kill her. Then us, followed by every living thing in Wakanda. That monster won't stop until we're all dead, and it's got the power to do it."

"Yes, I've read Banner's report on his future counterpart," Black Panther stated. "And aside from bruised ribs, I'm ready to assist with whatever you have in mind."

Iron Man's sensors could tell that T'Challa actually had broken ribs. That one of his lungs was even punctured, but Iron Man knew that Wakanda's monarch would live up to his word. "Most of the components we can salvage from my armor. But there are other things we'll need to find."

Iron Man relayed what would be required, and Black Panther pointed towards a nearby building that appeared to be residential. "Every Wakandan home has a computer and government interface network. Everything we'll require should be inside."

A short distance away, Binary was toe-to-toe with the hulking Maestro. Her blasts of cosmic power had singed away most of the

creature's hair, but Maestro seemed otherwise unfazed. One enormous hand wrapped full around Binary's head and smashed her hard into the pavement. For many seconds Binary struggled, most of her body buried, but soon her flailing arms began to slow.

"Binary!" Iron Man cried out as he and Black Panther were entering the building. "You don't have to breath!"

The flailing stopped entirely, not from Binary's lack of life but rather the surge of realization. "Oh, right." She gurgled from beneath Maestro's palm. Power flared from her entire body, barely harming Maestro but actually liquefying the ground around her. Freed, Binary slammed both cosmically charged fists full into Maestro's face, actually staggering the future tyrant.

Inside the building and away from the action, Iron Man and Black Panther put their minds to work. Ripping apart walls and floorboards, they unearthed wires and circuitry required for what Iron Man intended. Removing his helmet and other pieces of the armor, Stark set about building.

"The energy output required for this will be enormous," Stark told T'Challa.

"From here we can draw on the entire Wakandan power grid."

"Even more than that, I'm afraid." Stark then added quickly, before T'Challa could respond. "And yes, I'm well aware of the kind of power your country can generate, Panther. Binary however draws on the power of a star. We'll need to get her away from Maestro."

The wall in front of the two Avengers crashed in, shattered by the tremendous impact of a bruised Binary. Moving faster than most men possibly could, Black Panther grabbed the device, which closely resembled the Ultimate Nullifier, and carried it clear from the debris. Binary fell next to Tony Stark, battered and clearly pained, with cosmic energy "bleeding" from cracks throughout her body.

"Ooohh, god he hits hard." Thick blood dripped from Binary's mouth. Beside her, Tony Stark rose tall and raised his arm, at the end of which remained an armored gauntlet. The Maestro approached, massive and terrifying, bearing down on the little armored man and broken star.

A thick cable led from Iron Man's gauntlet into the building's wiring. At Iron Man's command his palm flared with power. "Meet the Wakandan power grid." Electric blue in intensity, the thick repulsor stream hit Maestro full in the face. Unprepared for such a magnitude of power, Maestro was hurled back, providing a brief respite.

"I'll see to Binary," Stark told Panther. "Leave me the device and buy us time."

"Be quick about it." Black Panther leaped through the hole that Binary made, a dagger of energy in one hand and claws extending from each fingertip of the other. Maestro had just stopped skidding along the pavement when Black Panther jumped off a large chunk of stone. The dagger was thrown, pierced Maestro's left eye.

Suddenly half of Maestro's body had gone numb. For a being of his strength, half mobility was enough, as Maestro dug his left hand into the pavement and hurled a large fragment at the rushing Black Panther. Not only did the Wakandan King successfully dodge the projectile, he jumped into the air over the pavement and rebounded off it to further propel towards Maestro.

"For the brave soldiers you have killed," intoned Black Panther. He landed fast before the Maestro, slashing his claws across the murderer's chest. The vibranium tore deep gashes in the muscular flesh, further painning the Maestro.

The punch Black Panther saw coming. He by no means took the brunt, but rather a glancing blow that he rolled with. That, along with the vibranium weave of his raiment, lessened the blow considerably. Blood spattered and bones splintered, Black Panther's jaw disintegrating and teeth smashing up against his skull, but it could have been much worse. The fallen king collapsed, unmoving as Maestro raised a foot.

"Put your hand here Binary," Tony Stark told the barely coherent Avenger. Her hand guided by Stark, Binary touched the device. It charged with a notable whir, and Iron Man addressed Maestro as it activated. "Give my regards to you."

Maestro could only widen his eyes as the temporal pulse engulfed him, and the future Hulk disappeared. Black Panther rolled over on reflex, in shock from the pain and barely moving. Limping from his own injuries, Tony Stark emerged from the damaged building approached T'Challa. Binary had also reached her feet, and followed.

"Oh my god. We have to...I can fly him..."

"Moving him would just make it worse." Stark pointed towards the city's outskirts. Specks that were vehicles could be seen. "Emergency crews are on the way. They'll treat us, at least enough so we can return to the fight."

"Okay." Binary couldn't look away from the spot where Maestro had vanished. "Did you...kill him?"

Iron Man had started to shake his head, but stopped himself. "I

suppose, in a way. That device was a sort of time machine, sending Maestro back to his native time. Our Hulk will make his way there, or he already has, and he'll break that son of a bitch's neck."

---

Thanos broke free of the pink tendrils that Quoi had locked him in and wrapped his hand around the Celestial Messiah's throat. Adam Warlock began to pummel him across the head and back with blows, but Thanos would not loosen his grip. This pathetic alien thought himself so much better than the Mad Titan that he could contain him! It was beyond foolish and Thanos would not suffer such a fool.

"Let him go!" Warlock yelled as struck Thanos with a karmic blast that brought him to his knees.

Still, his grip on Sequoia would not weaken. He would see the pest crushed underneath the weight of his fist. The Mad Titan was so blinded with rage that he never saw the projectile coming towards his right side.

In an instant, the arrow had shot clear through the side of Thanos' eye and right behind the bridge of his nose. He screamed out in agony and immediately let go of Quoi. That damnable human had attacked him! But how could his tiny arm have mustered the strength to penetrate his skin? It wasn't possible.

Bloodied and intense pain, he turned to see his attacker with his one good eye and was surprised to find Sersi holding the bow with another arrow poised for attack. Hawkeye was limping on the shoulder of Quasar and his face was plastered with a wide grin.

"Betcha didn't see that one coming," Quasar said.

Shooting a finger at Thanos, Hawkeye pulled it back and blew. "Bullseye."

"I walked among The Greeks. What made you ever think I would be incapable of shooting an arrow?" Sersi asked, addressing the mix of shock and pain that was on Thanos' face.

"Oh by the way," Hawkeye added, "That's an electric arrow."

Activating by voice command, the arrow unleashed the full power of a lighting bolt into Thanos. His jaw locked from the intensity of the attack and a gasping Quoi reached out to touch Thanos' ankle. Using his powers, Sequoia intensified the blast a hundred fold. The still naked Thanos' skin began to sizzle as he screamed and fell to the ground unconscious and smoking.

Sersi lowered the bow. "Too bad I didn't get to use the second

arrow.”

Hawkeye laughed. “Kinda glad you didn’t. I had been hoping to save that TNT arrow for something else. Ya ain’t a bad shot tho. Almost as good as Dani.”

“And besides, the last thing I want on my costume is Thanos chunks,” Quasar added.

Looking down at the body, Hawkeye looked up and asked, “So who’s going to set up the eye appointment for this guy?”

---

The ground cracked and grass decayed under Centurious’ feet as he walked towards Scarlet Witch. His face was emotionless and his white locks billowed from an unnatural wind born of death and dark magic. The Soulless man grew ever closer to Wanda and he could feel her nearly realized power. Still, he was confident because he had defeated her once before. All he had to do was call upon his superior magical skill to do it again. Of course he was not so foolish to underestimate the forces at her command.

“It would seem that we’ve come into combat with each other again,” Centurious said across a burning street to an unflinching Scarlet Witch, whose eyes had begun to flash crimson. He knew she was mustering whatever strength she could because he was doing exactly the same.

Wanda kept her gaze locked intently on The Soulless Man, feeling the foul nature of his magicks polluting the very air around her. In the back of her mind, she almost wished that she could have disposed of him back in Japan. There was no telling how many souls he had ravaged since that time. It took everything not to hear the screams of those he had already taken in through his dark magic.

Fleeing Wakandans ran between the two rivals, carrying what little they could and shouting obscenities the entire way. Even in the dust they kicked up, Centurious was still able to see the eyes of Maximoff. Something about her was different from their last encounter. The lay lines of magic were bristling around her. Centurious could both see and feel it, but he wasn’t quite so sure about his opponent. He could only hope she didn’t.

Wanda could feel Centurious examining her with those icy cold eyes, but she felt no fear from him. She had never felt more in tune with her powers. Maybe it was her confidence that he saw? She only hoped that was indeed the case and Centurious might choke himself on the revelation. Honestly, she knew it was a pipe dream at best. The man she had faced in Japan was too ruthless to be intimidated by simply a confident woman. Still, it

never hurt to dream

Finally, the stream of feeling men, women, and children had ceased. The two were alone once more. Even though their allies waged war all around them, the two were stuck in a moment. It was in that moment the two would do battle with each other. If either one had their way only one would be alive at the end of it. Centurious saw Wanda's potential and she saw The Soulless Man's cruelty. Both feared what they saw and felt it had to be eradicated for selfish and selfless reasons.

Centurious charged forward with green eldritch energy overflowing from his hands, creating tiny streams of it running away from his body. He stopped only a few feet from Wanda and thrust his arms forward, sending a pillar of energy on a collision course with Scarlet Witch. Quickly lifting up her arms to shield her face, Wanda created a crimson net of power that not only deflected Centurious' blast, but sent it back at The Soulless Man.

Returned energy blanketed Centurious and sent him rocketing across the street and straight into the railing of a highway. Green smoke emanated from his body. With a pained expression, he rose to his feet with aid from the railing he had only moments ago slammed into. Getting to his feet only took a few seconds, but felt like forever, as muscles cramped and bones cried foul. His first move had been countered and he was spaying for it in spades. It was only the first play of many. The game had just begun.

Before he would get his bearings, a crimson spear careened through the air and stabbed Centurious right below his heart. The force of the impact sent Centurious right over the railing and crashing into another highway only fifty feet below. The Soulless Man slammed into the concrete and both his hips were dislocated from the impact along with a broken arm. Pain ran up and down his body, not only from cracked bones, but from the searing energy Wanda's spear poured into his body. Uttering a spell in an archaic tongue gave Centurious the ability to rise to his feet as his body knitted itself back together. One of his many captured souls had to be sacrificed to perform the spell necessary for healing.

As he was healing, Wanda descended down from the air with bolts of crimson lightning firing randomly from her body. Pointing a hand at Centurious, Wanda unleashed a tidal wave of blood red power that knocked the still healing Centurious into a highway concrete pillar. Centurious fell to his feet and coughed up blood.

"I see that you've decided to not play cat and mouse this time around," Centurious said as he gasped for breath and gripped the dirt with his hands.

Wanda landed on the ground and began to approach Centurious. Everything from her hair follicles to her smallest

toenail was trembling with power. Centurious felt it and knew the h would have to match it. The souls within him whimpered and rejoiced that thought of being sacrificed for Centurious' gain. The sight of the fallen Centurious was almost pitiable as the souls trapped within him, but the Scarlet Witch reprimanded herself for such thoughts. The Soulless Man was not deserving of her pity.

"I cannot afford to be gentle here," Wanda said as she fired a hex bolt at the ground in front of Centurious' hands. Dirt began to shift and quake underneath the necromancer as hundreds of spiders burst forth from the ground. They commenced to crawl all over Centurious, sinking their teeth in along the way. Poison was being rushed through his immortal blood, but despite the numerous painful bites, he did not cry out.

In fact to Wanda's surprise, he was mumbling an incantation.. Before she could do anything to stop him, the spiders took on a green hue and melted off of Centurious' body. It was a disgusting sight, but the green slime coalesced uniformly at Centurious' feet.

"I'm beginning to understand. Improbabilities and magic work hand in hand. If there was ever a mutant that could be called a gift to magic, it's you."

"You speak nonsense!" Scarlet Witch exclaimed as she waved her hand outward and knocked Centurious on his back with a hex bolt. To be completely honest, she had no idea why she lashed out the way she did. It wasn't as if Centurious had insulted her.

Rising to his feet, Centurious threw his head back and laughed. "It is as I thought. You know the truth, but refuse to admit it."

Spreading his feet at an equal angle from his shoulders, Centurious clasped his arms across his chest and looked skyward. His eyes began to glow green and a thousand screams erupted from his mouth. The slightest of glowing slits opened in his back and it quickly grew to allow the one thing his magical captives wanted-freedom.

The angry souls rose from the necromancer and began to circle him wildly, while Wanda watched in horror. The green ethereal beings were mere skeletons whose facial bones had been contorted permanently into expressions of terror. Centurious had damned them in much the same way he had been cursed centuries upon centuries ago.

With a smug snarl, Centurious gave the unleashed creatures a single command, "Kill her."

---

Mieko saw the shocked expression on the faces of Swordsman, Falcon, and Tigra. The three Avengers thought they had her dead to rights, but Ko didn't become the leader of HYDRA by acting stupidly. She had plenty of back up in Greenland and one of those people just happened to be someone who had held his own against the Fantastic Four and Black Panther without too much trouble.

His name was Emperor and like a true royal of his time he properly respected women in power. "Your strength is to be admired Mieko Ko. Let me vanquish these infidels for you."

Mieko laughed at Tigra who had mocked her allies only moments ago. "My help is far from gone wench. Meet Emperor. He will be your doom."

Swordsman looked to Falcon and said, "Take Greer out of here. I'll hold off this guy as long as I can."

"You gotta be crazy!" Tigra exclaimed. "I have a feeling this guy is more than you can handle."

Jarvert shot a sharp eye at Tigra. "I'll be able to handle him a lot better with a wounded teammate out of my way."

A blue blur passed in front of the Avengers and Quicksilver stopped only feet in front of the three Avengers. With the stern voice of a battle tested leader, he said, "Swordsman's right. Falcon get her out of here now!"

Tigra resisted Falcon's attempts to get a good grip on her. "You gotta be out of your mind if you think I'm going to leave you two alone."

A pink telekinetic wave flew forth from Emperor's body and knocked all of the Avengers on their backs. Quicksilver rose to his feet and moving at speeds well over that of sound, he battered Emperor with blows that dented his golden armor. Swordsman knew a distraction when he saw one and said, "Greer you have to get out of here. You're only hurting us by staying."

"Besides I'm involved now," US Agent said coming into view with Darkhawk and Rage behind him.

Tigra rolled her eyes and said to Falcon, "Get me out of here before I die of an overdose of ego."

Sam grinned and looked to his friends. "Be careful"

Agent saluted Falcon and gave his typical cocky smirk. "Don't worry. This guy doesn't have anything on Russell Crowe."

None of them watched as Tigra left in the arms of Falcon because

Emperor had Quicksilver lifted off the ground with a metal hand clasped around Pietro's throat. Swordsman charged forward and stabbed his sword through Emperor's forearm, causing him to drop Quicksilver. With an angry eye, he telekinetically lifted Swordsman in the air and flung him backwards into a swarm of HYDRA soldiers nearly a hundred yards away.

Pulling Jarvert's sword from his arm, Emperor used his telekinesis to fling the weapon in Darkhawk's chest. Powell took the blow and skidded across the ground. He pulled the sword from his chest and jumped to his feet. His alien armor had protected him from what should have been certain death.

"You don't get rid of me that easy Julius," Darkhawk said as ran forward and swung the sword at Emperor's other arm.

Emperor erected another telekinetic field and blocked the blow of Darkhawk, but that attack was only meant as a diversion. A powerful darkforce blast exploded from Powell's chest and sent Emperor careening through the air. Unfortunately, Chris wasn't able to keep up the assault as he had to temporarily switch back to human to allow his armor to repair itself.

Coming to Powell's side, US Agent said, "You could have let me at least get one lick in."

Suddenly a telepathic voice roared in their heads, **<I have tired of these games!>**

Both men saw an angered Emperor flying full speed to where they were. Rage walked up behind the two and cracked his knuckles, "Guess we'll be getting those licks in after all."

"We have to have a strategy," Quicksilver said zooming in front of the three heroes. His attack against Emperor had been reckless, but he needed for Tigra to get away safely. He wouldn't have any dead Avengers on his head.

"How about some help for starters?"

Looking upwards the four saw Sersi, Quoi, Adam Warlock, and the other Avengers that had been defending the Avengers Mansion. Quicksilver noticed one of them was missing and asked, "Where's Quasar?"

Sequoia pointed above Emperor. "About to drop a little surprise on your friend."

Everyone looked to where the Celestial Messiah had pointed and saw what looked like a blazing meteor slam into Emperor. The impact sent out a blinding wave of light that forced everyone looking to shield their eyes. US Agent groaned and said, "I almost

forgot how flashy you Avengers could be.”

“Comes with the territory,” Darkhawk replied.

Landing on the ground, Hawkeye put an arm on Pietro’s shoulder and said, “I think it’s pretty much a safe bet that your friend is out of the game.”

Quicksilver looked at the unscathed Clint. “I would have figured you all would have taken more of a beating.”

“We did,” Hawkeye answered. “But we just so happen to have this Celestial Messiah guy on our team. Able to do anything his pee brain can think of, including patching us all up.”

“He overstates my abilities. If I could do anything, I would have ceased his mouth a long time ago,” Sequoia joked as he approached the two men. “Seriously, I have used up more energy than I intended to in this conflict.”

Quasar was suddenly above the three with Emperor over his shoulder. “Don’t worry. I think the rest of us can take it from here.”

---

A group of angry komodo dragons had surrounded Beast, but Sundragon telekinetically flung them in every direction. Landing beside McCoy, she said, “The assistance is appreciated, but I do believe I can take it from here.”

“I respect your abilities to the utmost Pamela, but that,” Beast pointed to a coming stampede of lions, “is not something I think anyone should handle alone.”

Pamela surrounded the two of them in a purple telekinetic bubble and said, “Agreed. But we can’t keep fighting these creatures like this.”

Hank nodded. “We have to find where Dr. Animal is. I wonder from where that name derived? Somewhere Dr. Monreau weeps at the rip-off.”

“I know nothing of this Monreau. Is he a friend of yours?” Pamela asked as the two flew high above the stampede of animals that was waging through Wakanda’s capital.

Beast laughed. “Let’s just say that he would find me an inspiration.”

---

The spirits twisted around Centurious with devilish power. They were intensely green and at his command, began to barrel their way towards Wanda. She erected a crimson force field to keep the creatures at bay. Harming the souls was out of the question for Wanda because they were innocents in this affair.

Against her will, her powers reached out and felt whom these screaming souls once were. A mother. A soldier. Someone who had the gall to cheat The Red Skull in a business deal. No matter their sins, none of them deserved the torture of being Centurious' immortal slave. She could feel their pleas for mercy and hopes for death in her very soul. What a torturous existence they had to endure! Once again, her powers felt the need to act out of turn.

Crimson cocoons enwrapped each of the souls like caterpillars preparing for metamorphosis. They fell to the ground around Wanda and thinking them dead, she screeched, "What have I done!"

"Something magnificent I'm sure," Centurious observed. Now he knew that the advantage was his. Wanda's powers were acting on their own. The power that the Scarlet Witch had just exhibited was sending shockwaves through the lay lines of magic. Seeing the movements gave him a better understanding of Maximoff's powers. It was an understanding he would keep to himself.

Before he had a chance to summon more of his minions, a purple lance of telekinetic energy knocked him to the ground. Centurious' face met gravel and he wasn't even allowed a chance to stand as two big blue feet gripped his shoulders. He was lifted off the earth and flung into the nearest concrete pillar, for the second time today.

Sundragon landed next to Scarlet witch and asked, "Are you alright? We heard you yell."

"I'm fine," Wanda answered weakly. She was sweating profusely. Something in her gut felt wrong. It was far beyond aches or butterflies. Whatever was affecting her, she was sure Centurious was the source of it.

Beast landed in front of the two women and dusted his hands; "I surmise that our menacing adversary won't be getting on his feet anytime soon. Concrete smackings and all that."

A gravelly, death-laced voice ruined that hope. "Do not think me vanquished so quickly."

The three watched as a soul floated upward from Centurious' body and dissipated into nothing. Another sacrifice for a spell of healing. Though he wouldn't admit it, The Soulless Man was not at all thrilled at the prospect of fighting three Avengers. Wanda had

already weakened him. He needed a way out of this situation.

It was as if his prayers (if a soulless man could do such a thing) had been answered. Thermal Man came crashing down like a heavenly fireball in-between Centurious and his would be opponents. As dust and rock blasted towards the sky, Centurious knelt down to draw a circle in the dirt.

Stepping into it, he said, "Travel afar. Miles ahead. Take me from this place before I find myself dead."

The circle of dirt began to glow and Centurious vanished without a sound.

Wanda felt his departure and cried out, "No! He got away! Damn him."

Beast knelt down and curiously examined the fallen Thermal Man. He cautiously tapped the robot as Wonder Man, Andromeda, Wasp, and Pym approached from where Centurious had just stood.

Wonder Man saw his friend touch the robot and asked, "Is he down Hank?"

"Considering I still have all of my appendages attached to me, I'd have to say yes."

Scarlet Witch seemed to hear none of the exchange. "We need to go after Centurious! He's a threat-

"That we'll worry about later," Wasp interrupted. "He's obviously abandoned this battle. We need to help stabilize things here."

The roar of a thousand lions and tigers blared out any response Wanda may have given. Wonder Man cracked his neck and rolled back his shoulders at the sight of the animal army approaching them. "I knew there was a reason Mom wouldn't get me a cat."

---

Red Skull had his back against the wall and quickly closing in on him were the seven members of Avengers Africa. At the front of the group was Doc Diamond. Slightly behind him and to the right was Twister and to the left was Crab Spider. Seraph was in the air above Red Skull and the other Avengers were a few feet behind Diamond.

The members of Avengers Africa had pushed The Red skull into a corner. His back was to a crumbling brick wall that had been only hours ago an apartment complex. Fiery cars were on both sides of him and staring him down were seven pissed off Africans. None of that kept the Nazi from maintaining his stern cool. He was going to

show his attackers just how vicious he could be.

Doc Diamond, leader of the group, kept a tight gaze on The Red Skull. He knew better than to underestimate him.

"Seraph stay airborne! Sister Anansi give us some cover!" Doc Diamond commanded, when a cold hand suddenly wrapped around his throat. The fingertips were cold as ice and dug into the young man's flesh.

Electricity rushed from The Red Skull's glove and into Doc Diamond's body. Violent convulsions resulted as the powers rushed through him. His body was still twitching and shaking as The Red Skull tossed him aside. Seraph saw the attack on his leader from above and rage coursed through him. The sword in his hand became deathly black as he began to dive-bomb for the World War II veteran.

He was so blinded by his rage that he didn't see the energy spear streaking right towards him. The neon green object splattered across Seraph's side and sent him into a wild tailspin. Numbness flooded Seraph's entire body and he wasn't even able to open up his eyes to see who had attacked him.

Professor Power descended from the sky and landed behind The Red Skull. "Are these pests bothering you?"

"Only slightly," the Nazi answered without turning his head.

"Then let me slight you some more," Crab Spider said as she rapidly flipped through her sketch book and ripped out one of the pages from it. She held the picture away from her as it began to shake and glow blue. Like film going through a projector, the images in the picture came off the page, but unlike the film these images became amazingly real.

Standing before The Red Skull and Professor Power were an assortment of elven archers, mace wielding centaurs, and lions twice their normal size. Power rubbed his chin thoughtfully at the sight and said, "Perhaps we should twist this one to our side."

Red Skull snorted. "I only deal with inferiors when all other options have been exhausted."

It was at that moment when dozens of wooden arrows barreled towards the two men. With ease, Power activated an energy shield that deflected all of the arrows. Red Skull laughed. "You blacks continue to be as pathetic as you were when the Italians crushed you."

Sister Anansi heard the comment and her cybernetic half of her brain ran through hundreds of mystical spells until it found the

appropriate one. Pointing her elegantly decorated staff at The Red Skull, she said, "Cast away the light of falsehood and expose those who would hide behind it."

A stream of pink fire exploded from the carefully carved staff. Upon impact, it dissipated Power's shield and left them exposed to Crab Spider's summoned creations. Before the enlarged lions could pounce on them, Power grabbed Skull and took to the sky with the jet boosters underneath his feet.

"This battle is pointless. I think we should leave," Power said.

"We were supposed to keep The Avengers distracted until Thanatos' machine activated. I will not abandon godhood."

"Unfortunately, those chances for godhood grow slimmer and slimmer. Thanos and his allies were defeated at The Mansion and the Avengers there are now in Greenland, where the battle is a lost one. Kamee will not do as Thanatos' machines command him in time, I'm afraid," Professor Power reported. His cybernetic body allowed him communications abilities while in combat. He had been talking to Mieko Ko the entire time he was defending Skull from Avengers Africa.

Pausing for only a moment, The Red Skull said, "Let us leave then. I am more than capable of crushing The Avengers on my own. I need not Thanatos and his devices."

---

Walter Newell would have greatly preferred to use his armor exploring the migration habits of dolphins instead of having to use it against HYDRA agents, but such was his lot in life. Being involved with The Avengers meant taking on the high flying adventures and the worldly dangers. Newell was proud to be considered one of their number, but his heart was in the ocean. He almost wished this tower he was about to destroy had been in the ocean.

"Stop daydreaming Stingray!" Madgalene, companion to Swordsman, said as she cut through a swath of approaching HYDRA agents with a bright orange blast from her staff.

Hercules landed in front of the two heroes with a great thud that shook the ground around them. Looking back, the Olympian winked at the two heroes and said, "I do believe there is a tower most foul that desires to be removed."

The tower in front of the three heroes was the one that was holding Kamee captive. He was the key to all of Thanatos' plans and if they could make short work of that tower then they could obtain victory. Only one problem was facing the three Avengers and it

was the horde of HYDRA agents that were guarding the structure.

Still, even that problem was much of one to Hercules who tossed the soldiers aside like they were rag dolls while Magdalene and Newell shot them out of the sky like birds in hunting season. They followed close as they could to the raging Olympian to serve as back up.

"You think he even really needs us?" Stingray asked.

Magdalene's pride would not allow her to answer that question. "Just keep fighting! We're almost there!"

At only a few yards away from the tower, Hercules leaped into the air and slammed his shoulder into the structure at thirty feet in the air. There was a loud smack and a deep crack began to run up and down the golden building. Landing gracefully on his feet, Hercules began to pummel the base of the tower with blow after furious blow. No longer were the HYDRA soldiers trying to fight The Avengers, they were running away from what they knew was going to be impending destruction.

Madgalene swept the legs out from one passing HYDRA soldier and knocked the other to the ground with her staff. Looking to Newell she said, "I think that's your cue."

Stingray nodded and took to the air. His job was to rescue Kamee, but like everything else with The Avengers he knew it wasn't going to be easy.

---

Captain America takes measure of his foe—the one foe he never intended to face, especially under these circumstances. He knew that the Red Skull had somehow brainwashed this alternate version of his old partner, and was using him as a tool, a weapon of utmost destruction against Captain America. It was very much like the Skull, who enjoyed using psychological assaults intended to cause distress to his foes—and he would always save his most devious assaults for Cap. Cap knew Bucky. It was a well-established fact that, even at his age during the war, Bucky had the potential to be the deadliest fighter on Earth. This Bucky, under the control of the Red Skull, could well be just that. But he had seen small twitches in Bucky that made it clear that he **was** Bucky Barnes. And it was through that knowledge that he had faith that Bucky could overcome this sinister programming. He **knew** he could.

Looking over at Bucky, he took measure of his foe. It was in his nature to do so, to prepare for battle. What he saw—he couldn't help but be proud. Bucky had grown into a warrior in his own right. Standing a little over six feet tall, he was no longer the young hellion that stood with Cap through the darkest days of World War

II. In addition, he had been training for a number of years, the alternate Bucky. He clearly worked out with the same intensity that Cap brought to the gym, and it showed in his build. Bucky was, on this Earth, not just an older counterpart of himself, but also a counterpart of Cap himself.

Bucky leaped at Cap, leading with his right leg, which quickly struck Cap in the side of the face, jerking his head violently to one side, and reminding him that this was a battle, and that it had been joined in earnest. Cap took a few involuntary steps back, but maintained his balance, even as Bucky landed gracefully on his feet to Cap's side. Bucky quickly pressed his advantage, kicking Cap in the side. Cap grimaced with pain.

"You know you have to go down," Bucky says matter-of-factly. "The die has been cast."

Cap quickly moves his shield upward, blocking Bucky's next intended kick, and pushing him back slightly. "No, it hasn't," Cap returns, stepping forward, even as Bucky re-gains his balance, and faces off against the counterpart of his former mentor, his fists raised defensively. "You can overcome the brainwashing...**fight** it!"

Bucky feints with his left, causing Cap to move to defend that side. However, he delivers a punishing blow with his right fist that slams into Cap's left chin, jerking his head to the opposite side with great force. "I know all about fighting, Cap!" Bucky returns, anger burning in his eyes—the anger of the one behind all of this. "You should know that as well as anyone alive!"

*"I taught him that move,"* Cap thinks to himself, *"but he's modified it somewhat. I should expect that, though. He's been fighting for years...on his own."* Cap deflects the next blow with his forearm, drawing Bucky's fist upward, leaving his mid-section unprotected for a split second. It's all Cap needs to deliver a blow to Bucky's stomach, causing him to double over slightly. *"I could end this now, and try to break his conditioning."* Cap thinks to himself, as he brings his fist down towards the back of Bucky's head.

Bucky, however, surprises Cap with a sudden movement back, even as he brings his hands up again, breaking Cap's downward movement and causing him to stagger back, as his hands are brushed away.

"Come on, Cap!" Bucky remarks, a hint of that familiar smile crossing his face. "You can't take me down **that** easily!"

As Iron Man neared their position, Bucky leaped over Cap. On the way down, however, he bent backward, stretching his legs in a scissors move around Cap's back and sides. As he went down, he landed on his hands, his momentum picking Cap up from the ground and flipping him forward. With Cap landing hard against the

side of a building, Bucky flipped back up onto his feet.

Bucky rushed forward, preparing to push his advantage, even as Cap got up slowly amid the rubble of bricks along the wall he was flung into. Cap, knowing he needed a couple of moments to recover, flung the shield at the charging Bucky. Bucky, however, ducked under the shield, which completed its arc, and return to Cap's waiting hand. By now, however, Cap had regained his footing and was prepared to meet Bucky's charge.

Cap knows that if he is to help Bucky, and to end this fight against their enemies, he has to keep Bucky on the defensive. Bucky is far too disciplined an opponent to give any advantage in a fight. As Bucky charged forward, Cap feinted to the left. Bucky moved to the left, but Cap went under his foe, slamming his shield upward, even as Bucky leaped overhead. He slammed the shield into Bucky's mid-section, taking the wind out of Bucky, who fell back away from Cap with great force.

A normal foe would have been too stunned to react, but Bucky did not land on his back. Instead, he rolled over at the last possible moment, and rolled with the fall, preventing himself from being instantly knocked unconscious by a combination of Cap's blow and the fall. Cap shook his head, amazed that Bucky's reflexes were still intact, despite the Red Skull's brainwashing.

"I was hoping to help you see the light, Bucky!" Cap comments, as he rushes forward, kicking the still-stunned Bucky (leaning forward on one arm, as he was trying to get to his feet) in the jaw, jerking his head backward from the force of the blow. Just then, Cap's face lights up with a thought. "Iron Man!" he calls out.

"I'm right above you!" Iron Man returns, keeping his eyes on the scenes of battle around them, and firing off his repulsor beams at foes encroaching on his allies as the need arises.

*"This might work,"* Cap muses, as he kicks Bucky in the chest, driving him back, trying to keep him off-balance for a little while longer. *"The Skull and Zola have both used different brainwashing methods in the past, but the Skull seems to prefer light hypnosis more than the other methods. Hopefully, he did this time as well."*

However, Cap's distraction costs him. Bucky sweeps out his right foot, striking Cap in the back of his legs, behind the knees, causing him to stumble forward. Bucky does not waste an opportunity like this, and quickly gets to his feet, slamming his right fist into Cap's face, even as the Star Spangled Avenger is still off-balance!

Cap tries to regain his footing, and rises his shield defensively, timing it perfectly, even as Bucky slammed his fist into the shield (where Cap's face had been a mere split-second earlier). This surprised Bucky, who took a step back. Cap was quick to react, kicking Bucky in the mid-section and driving him back!

Cap moves forward, pressing his advantage. He swings forward towards Bucky's mid-section. However, Bucky displays amazing speed, grabbing Cap's arm, and using his own momentum against him, flipping him forward, away from Bucky, causing him to land on the ground a short distance away.

Bucky rushes forward, preparing to press his own advantage. He leaps at Cap, who is lying on his back. Cap lifts his legs forward, slamming his feet into Bucky's mid-section, doubling him over, even as he tilts back, causing Bucky to flip over his head, and land back away from him, on the small patch of grass surrounding the sidewalks where they are fighting.

Cap and Bucky both get to their feet quickly, each marveling at their opponent's speed and resourcefulness. "I knew you'd be a tough foe to put down, Cap," Bucky comments, nodding at Cap, who is resuming a defensive stance. "I guess that's why Red Skull gave me this job."

"No," Cap retorts. "The real reason Red Skull gave you this job is because of our history. He knew I wouldn't want to fight you...and, quite frankly, he also knew that you'd have trouble fighting me."

Bucky hesitates. "That doesn't seem to be working," Bucky responds, but Cap notes the defensiveness in his voice, as if he is trying to convince himself as much as Cap.

"You know the Skull as well as I do—at least, deep down you do!" Cap responds indignantly. "If you beat me, he's won. If I beat you, he's won a psychological victory over me. He doesn't care about you, or even how you do in this fight. As long as the fight is joined, and you play your part in his little game of vengeance...that's all the Skull cares about! That's all he's **ever** cared about!"

Cap can see the hesitation in Bucky's eyes. This is more than the twitch he noticed earlier.\* He thinks he might be getting through, but not completely. Red Skull's brainwashing techniques have improved over time. He can tell that by Bucky's reflexes, and his movements. They're not stilted, as the Skull's brainwashed victims have been in the past.

"I know you hate the Skull!" Bucky returns angrily. He strikes out at Cap, but his movements are influenced by his own anger. He telegraphs his blow, and Cap sidesteps it, slamming his elbow into Bucky's side as he passes by. "You'll say anything to defame him...especially to me!"

"You know the Skull too, Bucky!" Cap responds. "That's why you're not certain right now. You've lost the confidence you had earlier, when you were sure you were doing the right thing. Are you starting to remember the Red Skull we both knew?!"

"I..." Bucky starts, looking over at Cap, who is raising his shield.

"Ironman!" Cap calls out. "Attack plan Beta-9...now!"

"What?!" Iron Man asks, flying overhead. "Why would you...?!" He shakes his head under the helmet. He's known for far too long that it's folly to question Cap. He's proven himself over and over again in battle.

Iron Man directs a light beam from his gauntlets down towards Cap. Cap quickly flips his shield around to where the inside faces out. It captures the light beam, and then he turns it, to where it faces Bucky! As Iron Man continues the light beam, it

hits Bucky directly in the face, causing him to stagger, even as he throws his hands over his eyes. Then, he lowers his head, his hands grabbing the top of each side of his head, even as he drops to his knees.

Cap walks over to Bucky, who looks down for another moment, before turning up to face Cap. He rubs his eyes, as he lifts up his head towards Cap. As he looks up, the picture before him is still flashing, but is slowly coming into focus.

“Bucky?” Cap asks, tentatively, even as Iron Man lands behind him.

“Cap?” Bucky asks, shaking his head, as Cap’s face comes into focus. “I hope I just woke up from a dream.”

“I’m afraid not,” Cap responds, allowing a slight smile to cross his lips, as he reaches his hand down, offering it to Bucky.

“All right then,” Bucky replies, taking Cap’s hand and making his way to his feet, even as his familiar smile returns to his face. “Then, let’s turn it into Red Skull’s nightmare!”

“Nightmares are where I play my games Captain!” Red Skull yelled from above the Avengers with Professor Power holding firmly onto him. “You would do well to remember that fact.”

“You’ve lost Skull! Give it up!” Bucky yelled. “You don’t have control over me anymore!”

The Red Skull sinisterly smiled. “Don’t be fooled child. The Red Skull never loses control. I’ve lost nothing. While the ultimate goal may not have been achieved, look around you. Another enemy of my agenda has suffered greatly. I see no defeat here.”

With that last proclamation, Professor Power and Red Skull took to the sky. Captain America looked to a damaged Iron Man and asked, “Can you go after them?”

“I wouldn’t mind to, but we got bigger problems.”

Cap almost wanted to sigh. This just wasn’t letting up. “What is it?”

“Seems the Avengers in Greenland are in dire need of some back-up.”

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“Pathetic!” The Fallen One yelled as he had one hand clasped around Warbird’s throat and the other around Sersi’s. The two women felt tremendous black cold quake through their bodies. Warbird struggled to break free of the monster’s grip while Sersi tried her hardest to invade the creature’s mind since all other attacks had proven useless. The Eternal woman could only wonder what had spawned such a creature.

Justice and Sunfire came from behind The Fallen One and began to douse his back with telekinetic and solar energy. Not in the least bit disturbed by the attack, he threw Warbird and Sersi to the ground. Turning around to his two attackers, The Fallen One backhanded them and sent each on a downward tumble to the ground.

As he adjusted himself in mid-air, Sunfire grabbed Justice's wrist and said, "Calm yourself! We need to press our attack again!"

Relinquishing himself of Shiro's grip, Vance erected a telekinetic field around himself and said, "We just got imp slapped and you want to go back?"

"Are you not an Avenger?"

Justice's brow furrowed at Sunfire's insinuation. "I'm as much an Avenger as you, but that doesn't require being stupid and reckless last I checked."

While the two continued to argue, Quasar flew above them with Adam Warlock and Quoi by his side. Shiro looked up to them and said, "Follow them. They are attacking."

"As least they might have a plan," Justice groaned as he followed behind Sunfire.

When the two made contact with Quasar and the others, Justice asked, "So what's the plan here?"

Wendell answered "We need to know what we're up against here so we're going to distract him long enough for Sequoia to do some kind of analysis on him."

"My Soul Gem should assist us in that task," Warlock added, hoping that indeed this creature had a soul.

Coming into The Fallen One's line of sight, Quasar sent down a yellow battering ram of cosmic energy atop the creature's head. Unsurprisingly, The Fallen One didn't flinch under the attack. Wendell cursed under his breath as Justice and Sunfire swooped in. Sunfire blasted their opponent in the face while Vance telekinetically locked his legs together. It was assumed by Justice that the combo attack would only hold off The Fallen One for a few minutes but suddenly the attack was given an extra boost as Namor rammed into the cosmic powerhouse from behind. The Fallen One barely budged under the full strength of Atlantis' ruler, but it gave Warlock enough of an opening to unleash his Infinity Gem.

"Bare your soul, foul one!" Warlock yelled as the stream of green

energy ripped forth from his forehead. The power of the gem struck The Fallen One in chest and a blood-curdling scream issued forth.

Justice thought that victory was upon them until he realized that it was Warlock that was screaming and not The Fallen One. That maniacal creature looked at the squirming Warlock and said, "What you tried to reach into is far too old and complex for you to comprehend. Infinity Gem or not."

In barely a mumble, Warlock echoed the sentient. "Too much. Too much to bear."

Justice grabbed Warlock to steady him, but the golden-skinned alien knocked him away. If it had not been for Vance's telekinetic field, his skull would surely have been smashed to pieces. The Fallen One laughed at the spectacle of hero attacking hero so he didn't notice Sequoia as he snuck up from behind him. The Celestial Messiah wrapped his hands around The Fallen One's face and they began to glow green.

"Let's do a head examination," Quoi said as he became one with The Fallen One's being. Fearfully, Sequoia immediately pulled his hand back from the being and like Adam Warlock issued forth a painful scream.

As he began to fall from the sky like a heavy rock, the arms of The Golden Avenger caught him and Justice exclaimed, "Iron Man! You're here."

Rocketing up beside Justice, he replied, "A little worse for wear though. So what's our situation?"

"A cosmic maniac is beating the hell out of us."

Shiro narrowed his eyes at Justice. "He exaggerates quite a bit."

Adam Warlock finally ceased gripping his head and shouted, "No! Not a cosmic maniac. A billion billion maniacs!"

"What are you talking about Warlock?" Iron Man asked.

Before the question could be answered a wave of sparkling black energy rushed across the heroes and sent each of them tumbling through the sky unconscious. Iron Man's armor was beeping loud enough to be heard from two city blocks and Justice's telekinetic field had finally failed him. As the five bodies descended to the earth a crimson energy blanketed all their bodies and in an instant they had vanished.

They were teleported to the feet of Scarlet Witch who had Captain America and Darkhawk by her side. Looking to them she said,

"Okay. That's done, but I got to warn you. I may be able to control the conscious affect of my powers, but subconscious is another thing altogether."

"Meaning?" Darkhawk asked.

"That other stuff could be happening as a side effect of you using your powers," Captain America answered.

Wanda nodded. "Precisely. So the bigger the feat you ask of me the more potential backlash. Think of it as water building behind a dam. Eventually, my powers are going to go off on their own."

"Understood," Cap replied. "We'll use you as sparsely as possible."

"Let me move in! I can help Quasar take that guy," Darkhawk implored.

"That won't be necessary," a voice weakly said from behind The Avengers. All three turned around to see a barely standing Abyss. A green aura hung around his body that stank of road kill.

Wanda could feel the magic from it and gave her teammates a stern warning, "Stay away from him. He's emitting a decaying aura."

"Precisely," Abyss said as he began to float upward. As he did so he shouted one last parting shot. "You have seen what my weapon can do Avengers. Join me or die!"

With that Abyss' body shot upwards like a bullet with The Fallen One following closely behind. They looked like two streaking stars in the night a sky. A sky that had seen too many Avengers fall from it today. Keeping his eyes to it, Captain America said, "I have a feeling our quarrel with him has just begun."

Darkhawk shrugged. "Hey. Nobody died. That's gotta count for something."

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### **Two Days Later (Avengers Mansion)**

The forces of Thanos had thoroughly ruined the front lawn of The Mansion, again. Stark had seen to it that The Mad Titan and his allies were placed in gigantic metal prisons that were filled with enough sedative gas to keep a herd of elephants down.

Quasar and Black Knight were standing in front of the prisons keeping watch for anything strange. The last thing they needed was a villain outbreak on The Mansion lawn, especially if that outbreak involves Thanos. As they kept watch, Black Knight asked,

"So what are you going to do with these guys?"

"Sersi, Sequoia, X-51, and I are going to deliver them to New Chandilar where he is going to stand trial for his crimes. It's about time that scumbag be given some formal justice," Wendell said as he clenched his fists together.

"Agreed."

Wanting to change the subject, Quasar said, "I see that you haven't left yet. Do you plan on sticking around? I know about The Champions falling through-

"There's too much drama around these parts for me to stick around. I think going it solo for a little bit would be my best bet," Black Knight answered.

Pushing his lips to one side of his face, Quasar gave a quick and weary nod. "Good luck with that."

Dane smiled. "And good luck with hauling Thanos' heavy ass through space!"

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### **The Mansion Sub-Basement**

Captain America stood silently behind the chair typically reserved for the Avengers' current leader, his eyes fixed on the image of Nick Fury that flickered on the team's plasma screen communicator. The SHIELD leader looked tired and somewhat angry, which wasn't unusual. Cap had known Fury since the second World War and he knew him to be a good, if oft-times pragmatic, individual.

Cap glanced at the two companions who had joined him in this conference. The Black Panther (really one of his many decoys) was leaning forward, eyes riveted to the screen, but the Scarlet Witch looked sullen and withdrawn. *She's thinking about Centurious*, Cap reasoned. *Wanda's too strong to let his warnings take root... she can handle those powers of hers. I just hope she has as much faith in her as I do.*

"What can we do for you, Nick?" Cap asked, hoping that Fury wasn't about to pile more bad news upon the already beleaguered team.

"It has to do with HYDRA," Fury replied. "They were involved in Thanatos' plot and my son Mikhel is working undercover with them as Ko's husband. I was wonderin' how things went down with you guys."

"Ko escaped," Cap answered with a weary shake of his head. "But we did get quite a few HYDRA agents that we're prepared to turn over to SHIELD."

Fury nodded. "Good. So no sign of my son at all then?"

Cap shook his head. "None of that any of my Avengers could see."

"If I may," the Panther said, interrupting the discussion. "I would like to request that SHIELD remain outside the borders of my country. Wakanda is more than capable of handling the situation on its own."

Captain America frowned, wondering what his old friend was up to. And yes, it had to be T'Challa behind this because any and all decoys acted on his explicit order. Steve was the only Avenger to know of a dummy replacing T'Challa and if he was a less honorable man he would reveal that secret now. Before he could speak up, Fury said "T'Challa... we could do a lot of good there."

"You could do a lot of spying," T'Challa responded. "Our secrets are not yours, Fury. I would like to remind you of that."

"T'Challa!" Cap exclaimed. "Nick's right. Your people need the kind of assistance that SHIELD could provide. And I think we can trust him not to play spy games with human lives."

"Nevertheless, it is my right as ruler of Wakanda to make decisions about what aid we shall accept. If SHIELD chooses to ignore my request, our military will have to take steps to ensure our sovereignty."

"Is that a threat?" Fury pressed, eyes narrowing.

"That's enough!" Wanda shouted, a red glow suddenly surrounding her body. The lights in the room flickered and momentarily went dim as a powerful electromagnetic pulse disrupted the electronics in the room. Fury's visage wavered and nearly disappeared before returning. "Nick," the Witch said, speaking in a deliberately calm voice, but one laced with fury. "You heard the Panther. SHIELD knows all it needs to know. End of discussion." She then round on T'Challa, pointing a shaking finger at him. "Pack your bags and get out."

"But," the Panther began.

"Now!" The Scarlet Witch repeated. She then rose from her seat and strode from the room, seeming to radiate a dark and deadly malevolence.

Captain America stared after her, something cold settling in the pit of his stomach. "This isn't good," he whispered to himself.

With eyes still narrowed, Fury said, "Keep a leash on her Cap. Or I will. Fury out."

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### **Africa**

Centurion felt the heat all around him, but his sweat and exhaustion mattered nothing to him. He remembered that treacherous woman now and he intended to fulfill the bargain he made with her so many years ago. Somehow or another, Wanda's beating had awakened things in him that he had forgotten. She had loosed the chains of a magical spell previously cast onto him. Now, he would have his revenge.

While he could not finish off that damnable sorceress in a manner pleasing to him, he would hunt down her descendants and rain havoc upon them. They would plead for his mercy before the end came. She stole a piece of him and he intended to destroy all that was left of her.

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### **New York (A Few Hours Later)**

The restaurant was a nice one and the mood amongst the five Avengers attending it was surprisingly happy. Considering the most recent events they had been put through one would assume it to be a gloom and doom dinner.

Instead Beast roared with laughter as he said, "Remember how Simon looked after that!"

Wasp smiled. "He didn't want to take a shower in there for a week."

Stark just shook his head. "He can fight Nefaria, tussle with Kang, and throw around Ultron, but a lizard in the shower does him in."

Cap took a sip of his drink and settled back into his seat. "He said he was going to go back to LA right?"

"With all the people leaving left and right I don't see how you're going to have much of a team around Steve," Hank said as he sliced into his steak.

"Maybe you might want to add Bucky to your team?" Wasp suggested.

"No, he wants to go back to his home. I can't blame him. I want to say we've been catching up, but it's not exactly the right word."

Stark could understand his frustration given his recent and continued experiences with a son from the future. "I know what you mean Steve. Just keep talking to him though. The eeriness of it goes away after a while."

Raising a glass in the air, Wasp said, "I propose a toast. To the continued health and life of the Avengers!"

Raising up his glass with his foot, Hank exclaimed, "I can agree to that fair dame!"

"Avengers forever!" Stark shouted.

"Avengers forever!"

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### **Location Unknown**

The Red Skull walked down the long hallway with Professor Power and Rasputin behind him. It was a dark and musty underground tunnel which the Skull used on occasion when he felt like he needed to get away from the world. Today though was different. He was meeting someone. Someone he held very dear to his heart.

As he neared the end of the tunnel and saw his prize, he wrapped his arms around the young man and exclaimed, "Son! I am so glad you made the right choice."

Bucky smiled at his self-proclaimed father. "Of course. There was no other choice to be made."

Stepping back, The Red Skull inwardly screamed with joy at his own genius. It seemed that Bucky's conditioning was more potent and powerful than even he could have assumed. Not even the inspirational words of Captain America could fully free the young man. It had been a temporary joy for the Captain and it was now a wound that The Red Skull would now enjoy pouring salt into.

"Welcome home son. Welcome home."

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### **Avengers Mansion**

Wanda walked to Vision's grave and knelt down in front of it. She hadn't paid a visit to the man she once loved in quite some time. Things had just been too hectic and chaotic. It was always one threat after another. She regretted not making more time to see him.

"I'm sorry it's been so long. I have just been so busy with The Avengers, but I can't be a part of them right now. I need a break. Ever since you died, I threw myself into the work of this team. Hoping maybe by doing so that some small portion of you would always reside in me."

Fighting back tears, Wanda continued. "I know now that is not the case. I know you're with me regardless of any of that. I just wish I had you here now. I understand my powers for the first time in my life and now that I do, I wish I never had. I have control, but that control lays so much on my shoulders."

Centurious had shaken Wanda. The entire time she was fighting him, she had kept in tune with his thoughts. At first, it was only meant to be a minor thing to gain her any combative advantage she could muster. That was until she knew what he saw. The fabric of the very universe bent to Wanda's will, but like anything when you make a bend you alter the entire structure.

"For every time I use my powers to do something unlikely, another thing just as unlikely occurs somewhere to unfold the bend I created. I use my powers never knowing exactly what harm I may be doing. My powers are why Maestro nearly killed Binary and the others. I should have put him down for good."

Standing up on her feet, Wanda finished her visit. "I have to go. I'm going to Agatha. At least with her I can learn to control this thing better and keep an eye on Luna. I may not see you again for a long time, but part of me feels that you're out there somewhere watching me. I just wish I could see it. Don't think of me as gone though. I'm around. I always will be."

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## NEVER THE END...

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### Author's Notes

**Man it's been a great run. I wanted to come in and do better the second time around. I can confidently say that I think that I did. I know this issue was monster, but there was just so much to cover. So my apologies there, but you can't say that this isn't a true issue 50! I worked really hard on it and much thanks to those who offered their assistance with the issue (Steve, Jeff, and Barry you guys are the truth!). I'll let you guys tell the reading world which scenes were yours. I want to leave them in suspense.**

**Steve Crosby is up next and hope he's going to have as**

**much fun with M2K's Avengers as I have. I've heard some of his ideas and they are simply stellar. So I expect great things. Oh and just to hype something that the tiniest hints of were thrown in this issue.**

**THE ULTRON/KANG WAR IS COMING!!!**

**Peace out everybody. It's been fun. Support Crosby.**

**-Brent**

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