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**Avengers #51
October 2007**

**Captain
America**

Andromeda

Karnak

Quicksilver

Claxons rang in the oceanographic research station run by Walter and Diane Newell. It was Diane that ran to the communications console, suddenly fearful for her husband. That alert would most certainly mean that he'd been attacked in some way, and for the man that also went by the name of Stingray, it was a terrifying thing indeed.

"Walter!" Diane Arliss-Newell called into the microphone. "What has happened? Walter, are you all right? Please, Walter, come in!"

But there was no response. On land, far away from where her husband was, Diane could only guess at the circumstances. She had no way of knowing the true reason that Stingray didn't respond, or of how close it was to her worst imaginations.

On the ocean's bottom, not far east of the Long Island Sound, a torn communications relay gently floated along the sandy rock. Nearby, Stingray was struggling against numerous attackers, none or whom armored as he was.

In some cases this was an advantage. In his Stingray armor, Walter Newell was far stronger and resilient than most humans, and could swim at speeds approaching two hundred knots. Additionally, the armor granted Stingray a powerful sonar sense, granting him a clear picture of the surroundings, and could generate dangerous electrical "sting" blasts.

Sadly, many of the armor's greatest advantages were negated by the fact that Stingray's attackers had great strength, speed and reliance naturally, without the need for armor. They could also breathe unaided beneath the water, while Stingray was dependent upon his armor. Any damage he did was hardly permanent, whereas every blow against the armor threatened Walter Newell's life.

Sonar wasn't of much use against so many opponents in close quarters, where the multiple signals confused Stingray more than anything else. And while the electric bursts proved effective, there were only so many that Stingray could unleash without risking power for the armor's life support functions.

In the end, there were simply too many, and Stingray's armor could only do so much. Webbed, blue hands held him down, and one that had hung back swam forward. Except for the green skin and reptilian wings on his feet, the creature looked to Stingray much like an old ally.

"You have knowledge," the undersea dweller 'spoke' in a language of sonar. "This you will give us, in exchange for your life. An awful

death, pink skins suffer this far below."

"I'll never tell you anything!" Stingray screamed, his words carried through the water by his armor's sonar function. "Aaahh!"

Long, thick fingers pressed Stingray's armor so that he felt it right to the skin and bone. "Better to kill you now, maybe, but I've been told that *he* knows you, even considers you a friend. There is value in that, so you will live. But you will talk also, one way or another.

Again Stingray screamed, but the broken communications array failed to transmit to his wife Diane. She sat at the research station fearful, unsure of her husband's safety and of what she should do. Finally, she made a decision, and after adjusting the frequency leaned back towards the microphone.

"Calling the Avengers. Please respond."

MARVEL 2000 PRESENTS...

"TRUMPET CALL TO BATTLE"

Written by [Steve Crosby](#)

They sat across from each other at a small table, in the airport restaurant. Drinks had just been served, and Steve Rogers noted that Carol Danvers was drinking black coffee.

"I was glad to hear you overcame the latest relapse," he said.

"Thanks." Carol didn't look at Steve as she sipped the coffee. They both knew she wanted a drink, had eyed the bottles at the bar with hunger. His mentioning the problem had made her uncomfortable. Aware of how difficult it'd been just to arrange the meeting, and fearful that she would run off again, Steve Rogers kept the conversation going.

"That was impressive, how you brought the plane down." Steve could help but smirk. "When they saw you flying past, some of the passengers exclaimed that you

were going to grab the wing. A few were surprised when you didn't."

"Stupid movies," Carol remarked. A trained Air Force pilot, she knew how planes worked, was intimate with the mechanics of flight. "Nothing done in those is ever right. Grabbing a wing would have ripped it right off, set the plane off balance and into a spin. Then things would have gotten hard."

"You know I don't need an explanation."

"Sorry. Maybe it's just me venting." Another sip at the coffee. Carol wasn't going to do anything to help Steve in the conversation.

"I'd like you to come to New York City, Carol," he told her at last. "Warbird should get back to being an Avenger."

Another sip, then Carol sighed. "You don't want me, Steve. Everything about me has gotten unstable these days."

"The way you brought down that plane and saved all those people, myself included, says otherwise." Steve finally took a gulp of his own drink, a tall glass of milk. Wiping away the white moustache, he continued. "Not field work, if you're uncomfortable with that. Training, logistics, communications and monitor duty, things like that. You're an asset in a lot of ways, Carol."

"Maybe." But Carol was still unsure. "Quicksilver's at the mansion. Aren't you afraid we'll kill each other?"

"I've spoken with him about the incident with Rogue. For the time being you'll both just...keep out of each other's way."

A laugh couldn't be helped. Carol gave a light shake of the head, swaying that golden hair. "Kind of hard to do if we're on the same team, living in the same mansion."

"But it can be done," Steve urged. "Eventually you can both work through things. Pietro has issues with Karnak, but they've managed to put it aside when required."

"Counting on my experience to see me through." Carol shifted her eyes, almost unconsciously, towards the bar. "Steve, Captain, my experiences are exactly what put me in this state to begin with. I'm damaged goods, and the best you can hope for is that I wouldn't take anyone else down to the bottom with me."

"I disagree." Captain America leaned forward and spoke in hushed tones. "You're one of the strongest women I know, Carol. Come with me to New York, and you can do one of two things. Prove me wrong or prove yourself wrong. Who would you prefer?"

For a few seconds that seemed a long time, Carol Danvers stared down at her coffee and didn't say anything. Then her eyes rose, met Captain America's. Warbird gave her answer.

"Me."

The Avengers Quinjet hovered over the still ocean water, directly over the spot of Stingray's last transmission. At first hearing of who was inside the Quinjet, one would almost think the craft had been stolen, as only one of the four occupants had ever been associated with the team for any length of time. And given his particularly impatient mood at that moment, Quicksilver certainly wasn't acting like an Avenger.

"Be quiet, you," Quicksilver snapped at Diane Arliss-Newell. As a mutant with the power of super-speed, the task of piloting was slow and tiresome. "Your hysterical prattling isn't going to make us find your husband any faster. Or rather, his body as he's already most likely dead."

"I'm sure he's not, Diane," Andromeda said in a

reassuring fashion while staring daggers at Quicksilver. And if he were, she silently promised, those responsible would pay dearly. "Right, Karnak?"

"Hmm," Karnak murmured, who had apparently been lost in thought. "Sorry, but I had just realized, Pietro, that you don't need working legs to fly this ship."

"In the time it took you to threaten me I could have smashed your head in a dozen times," Quicksilver remarked in an idle fashion. It wasn't the first time such threats had been exchanged.

"You two try not to kill each other while I'm gone," Andromeda stated. "Diane, think positive thoughts." Opening the door of the Quinjet, Andromeda leapt out and into the water. Immediately she felt better, feeling the cool salt water around her body and revitalizing her. As a native Atlantean, the ocean was her natural habitat, and also made her best suited to search for Stingray.

It did not take long before Andromeda had found clues to Stingray's struggle. From her years of life beneath the waves, Andromeda was able to recognize unnatural disturbances in an undersea area. The water still faintly tingled with electricity, and there remained a faint haze of sand that had not yet fully settled. There had been a struggle, Andromeda knew. Stingray had fought back, but had been overwhelmed by superior numbers.

So many, by Atlantis their scent was everywhere. Andromeda also detected the faintest whiff of blood, and was momentarily frightened. But no, if Stingray had been injured underwater he almost certainly would have died immediately. His armor would have been seriously damaged, and Andromeda couldn't find any trace of it in the vicinity.

Pressing the photograph of herself on her Avengers communi-card, Andromeda reported her findings. "A definite struggle happened here," she screeched in a horrid-sounding language that, when carried through

the water, perfectly translated into human speech. "Looks as though Stingray was carried off." There was no point in mentioning the scent of blood. "I'm attempting to track them. Will report once I've found something."

Just before Andromeda broke the connection, she had heard the muffled sounds of further argument aboard the Quinjet. She'd frankly had enough of it, and if it hadn't been for this sudden emergency Andromeda would have left the Avengers earlier that day. As it was, only Captain America remained on the team with the three of them, though he was currently out trying to remedy that. For Andromeda, he couldn't return soon enough.

"Photon."

Captain America found her sitting on top of the levee, looking out over the vast Gulf of Mexico. At their back was the city of New Orleans, better but still in the midst of recovery after Hurricane Katrina. Monica Rambeau didn't look in Captain America's direction when she responded. "Steve."

When he was less than a foot from the former Avenger, Captain America lowered himself to sit next to Photon. Together they looked out at the Gulf, not at each other, as they conversed.

"I'm sorry."

"You shouldn't be apologizing to me. Turn around."

"Our charter with the government is clear. Unless called upon to assist with emergencies we aren't to--"

"I heard it all before, Steve. When *I* asked you to help."

"It wasn't my decision."

"But you could have asked, Steve. Instead of sitting on

your hands, waiting for a request, you could have-

"I did."

There was a brief pause before Photon asked, "What?"

"When the evacuations first began, I called the President, offering our assistance. He said they had everything well in hand. That...that the levees would hold."

"But you knew they wouldn't. Forget that you have access to the smartest men in the world, *you* know structures."

"I wasn't about to second-guess the President of the United States, the information he has access to. So I kept quiet, held the team in reserve, waiting for a call that never came."

"Sometimes I think that's what I should have done. What's the point of flying if I can't carry anybody with me?"

"Monica, you did everything you-

"Have you ever floated outside the eye of a hurricane? Felt the winds moving past you, tearing through you? I tried flying against the hurricane in every spectrum I knew, but nothing could even slow it down. I was helpless against nature."

"We all experience that sooner or later. Even Thor has."

"Then I tried to hold back the water. It isn't easy, flying around a city fusing cracks to prevent leaks. Eventually it became too much. I collapsed from the exhaustion and nearly drowned. It wasn't until afterwards that I accomplished anything. Leading rescue teams to survivors and dealing with looters. I used to do the rescuing, when I was in the Coast Guard. Sometimes I wish I could go back to that."

"You've never been away from it, Monica. Saving lives, finding justice, whatever the name it's always the same thing: hero. That's what you've always been, even here, trying your best against impossible odds and still doing some good."

"You didn't just come here to apologize, did you?"

"It was a long time coming, but no. I'd like you to rejoin the Avengers. Officially, full-time."

"You need an answer now?"

"I'd prefer it, but given you can fly at light-speed, it's not necessary. And you know, you'd still be able to operate from here."

"I'll let you know. Thanks."

Captain America rose up to his feet, and left the hero to the city she'd done her best to save.

After awhile, they had stopped hurting him. Had even patched up his armor some, enough that Stingray was still alive deep in the ocean's depths. But most functions were off-line, including sonar and navigation. Stingray only knew that he was held inside undersea caverns, powerless, chained to rock and coral. Helpless, he could only hear the plans of his captors. Not that it meant anything.

Without his suit's sonar capabilities, sound underwater reached Stingray the way it did most other people. He couldn't decipher the screeching garbles, but from what he'd heard earlier, before the sonar had been disabled, Stingray was able to guess. The underwater creatures were planning an invasion, and Stingray raged at his helplessness to stop them.

A hand suddenly pressed against Stingray's shoulder, and his head turned to see the Avenger Andromeda! Sparing the imprisoned man a smile, Andromeda

started working on the heavy chains that bound him. However many systems may have been disabled, Stingray's armor still afforded him with terrific strength. Andromeda was every bit as strong, and with the advantage of leverage was able to break a chain link.

Stingray stretched at the sudden freedom, a foolish move that sent both ends of the chain out wide. One end clanged against the stone wall, giving off little in actual sound but the vibrations rumbled against Andromeda's skin. She looked with fearful eyes towards the direction of hidden voices, which had suddenly hushed. They would be coming to investigate, Andromeda and Stingray knew. Taking him by the arm, Andromeda propelled them both through the water.

Even as she swam towards the surface, Andromeda pressed the communi-card on her belt. "Found Stingray but we're being pursued. Find my location and get above me now!"

Streams of bubbles were shooting past Andromeda. Jets of compressed air and hard water were being fired on them. Not fatal, but impact would stun them, giving the pursuers time to catch up. Andromeda had no time for evasive maneuvers. She had to hurry, hope that she could reach the surface in time, and hope that her teammates would be there to collect them.

The calm ocean surface was shattered when Andromeda and Stingray shot out as though from a cannon. Stingray was dead weight against her arm, and Andromeda reached up with her other arm as though willing them to remain in the air. They had managed to gain twenty-feet, and began to drop.

"Aaah!" Andromeda cried in pain as her arm was grabbed. It was Karnak, leaning out of the Avengers Quinjet. Taken off-balance by the combined weight of Andromeda and Stingray, he nearly fell out.

"I have them!" Karnak screamed to Quicksilver. "Fly, quickly!"

"Not until you've dragged them in," Quicksilver

snapped. "There wouldn't have been much point in rescuing Stingray if he just falls back in the water, along with Andromeda and your worthless--"

"Shut up and fly!" Andromeda yelled.

Karnak had managed to lift them up a few inches, enough for Andromeda to grab a hold. As strong as the Inhuman was, he wouldn't have been able to carry them much longer. Andromeda hefted Stingray up and was grateful when Karnak took him. The weight of them both had almost been too much for her. Once her burden had been relieved, Andromeda lifted herself into the Quinjet.

With the assistance Stingray's wife Diane, Karnak was already in the process of examining him. "I see significant damage to the armor, but fortunately no breach. We shall have to remove it to ascertain the extent of his injuries."

"Praise all that you were here to state the obvious," Quicksilver remarked from his seat at the controls. "Are we ever sure he's alive? I haven't seem him move at all."

"He was underwater," Andromeda was explaining. "We surfaced rapidly, the shift in pressure may have knocked him unconscious."

But in removing his helmet the Avengers saw that Stingray was in fact conscious. However he appeared very weak, his face heavily bruised a swollen. Diane couldn't hold back a sob at the sight of him.

"Hundreds of them," Walter Newell gasped softly, almost unheard. "Been sinking ships, stealing materials. Planning to...invade."

"I got a look at them," Andromeda told the others. "We need to get to the mansion, call everybody we can."

"Or," Quicksilver countered as he pressed his communi-

card into a slot on the console, "we can make our calls en route. And even have Jarvis prep the medical equipment. Simple things that amateurs wouldn't think of."

Much as they wanted to respond with bile against Quicksilver, Andromeda and Karnak held their tongues as the Quinjet raced back home.

Upon walking into the building, Steve Rogers was immediately noticed by everyone as being out of place. With his pale skin, blond hair and blue eyes, Steve didn't at all resemble the many Hispanic men and women. Another contrast was his clothes, relatively new and if not expensive then well made. Everybody else wore garments that were heavily worn and cheap in every sense of the word. Of course, that was generally the case for occupants of a homeless shelter.

Walking through the room, Steve gave polite acknowledgement but overall ignored the stares. He was there to see a volunteer, and found her among the beds passing out blankets. Bonita Juarez had always been a kind and compassionate individual, operating as a social worker even before she gained powers and assumed the identity of Firebird.

Bonita was well aware of Steve's approach, and gave him a look as he neared her. "Hello Steven. There's an office in the back you can wait until I've finished here."

Steve nodded. "Of course. If you'd like me to help--"

"That won't be necessary. Please." Clearly Bonita wanted Steve out of sight, and he could guess why. With his features and clothes, he stood out as a target to the more desperate and ill natured. With this understanding, Steve Rogers didn't press the issue and went on into the office.

Several minutes passed when Bonita opened the door and entered. "What can I do for you Steven?"

He got right to the point. "I'd like for you to rejoin the

Avengers, Firebird."

Bonita's first reaction was a shake of the head. "I've gone back to being La Espirita, in the few times I've put that costume back on. As for the offer, thank you Steven, but I enjoy my work here."

"There are people to be helped in New York City," Captain America said. "The Maria-Stark Foundation is involved with a number of projects you can be involved with. If none were to your liking you'd be able to start one. This isn't including all the lives you'd be able to save as an Avenger."

"Avenger," La Espirita echoed. "There was a time I wanted to be one more than anything in the world. But Clint was more interested in recruiting Benjamin Grimm." She was referring to Hawkeye and the Thing, respectively."

"That's Clint. You I would take over Benjamin any day of the week. More than your impressive powers, Bonita, you have a heart more compassionate than anyone I've met. That's what the Avengers need right now."

Captain America's words seemed to move La Espirita, and she faltered. "May I have time to think about this?"

"Of course." The communi-card beeped inside Captain America's pocket. "I'm leaving this afternoon, but you have the mansion's number."

Bonita opened the door to lead Steven out. "I will have an answer before you leave."

"They call themselves At'La'Tique. It means 'Fury of the Seas' in my language."

Andromeda emphasized the syllables deliberately. She was standing at the large round table in the Avengers Mansion War Room, with Karnak and Quicksilver seated across from her. Shimmering over the table was the

holographic display of an individual. It was humanoid, with green skin, webbed hands and feet, pointed ears that protruded from its head and noticeable gills at the neck.

"This is their leader, Llyron. He's a Lemurian, the son of their queen Llyra. As you know, the Lemurians are--"

"If we already know it, don't bother telling us," Quicksilver snapped. Both he and Karnak knew the Lemurians were an underwater race similar to the Atlanteans.

"Right. Sorry." Andromeda continued. "Llyron was a cloned fetus, from the genetic material of Llyra and Namor's half-brother from his father."

"So this is the Sub-Mariner's nephew," Karnak remarked. He studied the holograph's features. "Yes, I can see it."

"Despite having no claim, Llyron was briefly placed on the Atlantean throne. When he was overthrown, others followed him into exile. Llyron increased their numbers by impregnating the females with cloned fetuses that aged rapidly. These are fanatics who want nothing less than the complete destruction of the surface world."

"Clearly Namor is sympathetic to their cause," Quicksilver stated in a dry tone. "Otherwise he could have rooted them out by now."

"Two-thirds of the world's surface is a lot of space to hide in," Andromeda reminded him. "We in Atlantis have been doing what we could against them, including a few raids on their cloning facilities. But most of the At'La'Tique are mobile, making it difficult to eradicate them. However, it looks like they'll be coming to us."

"An assault here on land?" asked Karnak.

"Over the past few weeks they've been attacking ships, dismantling them for raw materials. They'll have

vehicles and weapons, but that's not the worst. Intelligence from Atlantis indicates Llyron has been splicing human and Atlantean DNA, meaning a lot of his soldiers will be able to survive on land."

"Can they inform us of when and where?" Quicksilver inquired. Andromeda shook her head. "So completely useless, then. I can't very well run up and down the coastline looking for little green men."

"We should awaken Stingray," Karnak said. "Properly utilized, his sonar technology could provide an early warning system."

"You go do that," Quicksilver told his former brother-in-law. "Andromeda, contact Atlantis. Even if Namor agree to help, they'll likely arrive too late, but it would polite to ask. If see if anybody else is available, or if they're off on missions as is generally the case in world crises."

"And Captain America?" Andromeda asked. "Shouldn't we let him know he'll be needed?"

"If he wants to be leader, he should keep apprised of these things."

"Thank you Jarvis. I'll be there soon." Captain America pocketed his communi-card and continued into the community center. A fundraiser of sorts was going on. The banner over Captain America's head said something about urban housing renewal in Philadelphia. While it was certainly a good cause, Captain America was there for other things, and paid no mind to the attention that was suddenly focused on him.

Only one other person in the room was being showered with as much attention as Captain America, and it was the woman he'd come to see. Nicole Ridley was surrounded by young children, making them clap and cry with delight. As Binary, Nicole had cosmic-level powers, and she was currently using them to create small fireworks.

Somebody stepped in front of Captain America, a local reverend who often been on the news. Being polite, Captain America paused and shook the man's hand, nodded at the thanks for attending for a good cause. He gave an excuse and got away from the reverend.

Children were between him and Binary, but at the sight of Captain America a few of them stared up in awe.

Binary noticed the presence of her leader in the Avengers, and smiled. "Steve, hi!"

"Binary, I was just informed of an emergency situation." Captain America smiled down at the children and patted one on the head. "Your leave needs to be cut short, and we have to get to New York City now."

Binary's smile vanished. "Steve, I can't just leave now. Everybody here is expecting-"

Captain America paid no mind to Binary and turned to one of the children. "Hi, young man. What's your name?"

"Jeffrey!"

"Well, Jeffrey, as great a time as my friend and I are having, we need to leave." Shouts of "no" erupted from the children. "There's a situation, enemies to America and freedom that we need to deal with. If you watch it on television, you'll all hear a special message from me."

That excited the children, and they all eagerly wished Captain America and Binary farewell as he led her out of there. Captain America deftly dodged the adults and ignored words from them, and Binary's own protests.

"Steve, you can let me go!"

"In uniform we use codenames," Captain America told her in a low voice.

"But our identities are-"

"It doesn't matter. So long as we act professional we're considered to be professionals."

"Alright, Captain." There was some snark in Binary's tone. "What's the situation?"

"We aren't discussing that in public."

"You just told those kids-"

"Younger people get excited. Older people panic."

"But those kids will be telling-"

"And they'll be dismissed. Come on."

Captain America threw open the door that brought them out of the building, into the parking area out back. Only then did he let go of Binary and slow down, while Binary sped up and angrily spoke at him.

"You don't have to talk down to me like this. I'm an Avenger just like you with responsibilities--"

"Yes you are," Captain America agreed. "I apologize for snapping but you'll notice that I didn't disrespect you as publicly as you disrespected me. Binary, you need to trust that I wouldn't have come here if it weren't for a pressing reason. This was an important responsibility for you, but something has happened that takes priority."

Binary didn't have an immediate response. She knew that Captain America was right. The way she'd acted inside hadn't been responsible at all, not befitting of an Avenger. "Captain America, I..."

"Don't worry about it," Captain America told her. "We need to meet the others at the mansion. It will be fastest if you carry me to the airport. A Quinjet should be waiting by the time we get there. On the way to New York I'll fill you in on what I know."

Hours later, Captain America was back in New Orleans, looking out at the still ocean waters. Not still for much longer, he knew. Standing on either side of Captain America were his fellow Avengers, Karnak to the left and Quicksilver to the right. Floating higher in the air behind them were Binary and Espirita, both sheathed in fiery energies. Several yards ahead, Andromeda had just surfaced.

"They're maybe ten minutes out," Andromeda reported. "Hundreds of them, at least."

Stingray surfaced seconds later, in his spare armor. "Sonar confirmed the number at closer to a thousand. And they have heavy ordinance."

"That was a good idea, Karnak," Captain America told his teammate. "Dropping sonar packets along the East Coast gave us plenty of warning. If not for that we would have still been in New York City, waiting for an attack that would never come."

"Let's not forget who had to run along the coastline," Quicksilver said.

Light flickered in the vicinity of Captain America, and Photon

appeared at his side. "Authorities are handling the evacuation. The military has mobilized, but holding back on your word." Photon turned to head, looked out at the ocean knowing what would soon emerge. "This Llyron isn't a fool. New York may be high profile, but it's an easy victory he wants."

"We'll give him a hard defeat instead," Captain America returned. "Photon, does this mean you're back with us?"

"Here and at any time you might need me," Photon assured him. "But full-time I think I can do the most good here. Can you settle for reservist?"

Captain America nodded. "With your power that's as good as permanent." Hundreds of yards out, the still waters were beginning to froth. Soon the enemy would be at the gates. "Binary, fly down there. Damage the breathing equipment of as many as you can. Andromeda, Stingray, use the distraction to reach their heavy weaponry and knock them out. Leave the vehicles. Anything that surfaces, the rest of us can take."

"You're got it!" Binary dove and the water sizzled at her submersion. Stingray and Andromeda had also disappeared from sight. Captain America moved his eyes to the shore, where Carol Danvers was standing in the shadow of a small tower. Her eyes were fixed on the spot where Binary had vanished underwater.

"Warbird, I need you focused."

She reacted to Captain America's words, giving a brief nod and lifting off the ground. Meanwhile, the surface of the water exposed the chaos that went on underneath. Espirita flew into a position opposite from Warbird, establishing an airborne pincer. Photon shifted her form back into light and flew straight up. When the attack came, she would power straight through, a being of intense heat and light against foes accustomed to murky darkness and cold waters.

Humanoids of varying deformities, either blue or greenish in hue, could be seen skimming just under the water's surface. Then the surface itself was broken as vehicles of small to medium size emerged. Also out of the water was Llyron himself, half-human and therefore able to breath air. Holding a long trident in his hands, the would-be heir of Atlantis flew at the Avengers, his mouth gaping open to expel a thunderous roar.

"Death to the surfacers!"

Raising his shield in front of him, Captain America leapt off the hard concrete to meet the charge of the At'La'Tique. Quicksilver and Karnak were already in motion, and the three flyers went on the offensive. While it was hardly necessary, Captain America said it

anyway, because to the wrong people they were the two most terrible words imaginable.

"Avengers Assemble!"

NEXT ISSUE: In the aftermath of the battle with At'La'Tique, the new Avengers liaison unveils their new lineup to the world. But outside of world-shattering threats, can these Avengers get along with each other? Find out in 30!

Author's Notes

There are no words. Now for the words.

I've wanted to write the Avengers ever since I came across the title at MV1. Even proposed a run for that, wrote a first issue and, well, things happen. That my plans for this series are completely different from that says a lot about how fanfiction groups can evolve and change into something much different from where they started. But here's what will be the same:

Big threats, big villains and big battles, though occasionally not in the same issue. My apologies for the lack of action in this story, but with a team like this I wanted to find my feet before the coordination for a big battle sequence. Next time the Avengers fight a lot of villains (and it will be soon) you will be privy to every earth-shattering blow.

Consistency. I'm not the kind of guy who goes into his own little corner and writes stories that ignore everybody else. The past of M2K is rich, and I intend to mine it for everything its worth. Sure, there's the occasional bits I'm not too thrilled about, but anything I try to sweep under the rug or alter will be for the better, I promise it.

Character. What's the point of writing a team if I'm not going to explore the myriad of different personalities involved? You've seen already that a lot of these Avengers have problems of their own, conflicts that they're trying to work through. Sometimes it might be simple arguments, and sometimes it might heat into something more.

These are the Avengers, written by Stephen Crosby. You have no idea how long I've wanted it that way.

- Stephen Crosby
September 29th, 2007

Avengers #52
October 2007

**Captain
America**

Warbird

Quicksilver

Espirita

MARVEL 2000 PRESENTS...

"ASSEMBLY NOT INCLUDED"

*Written by **Steve Crosby***

They were out in force, the members of the press. Set up inside the Avengers Mansion they waited with cameras and questions at the ready. At last, when the doublewide bay doors leading into the Public Conference Room opened, the flashbulbs popped and inquiries were hurled. They all came so fast and furiously that the recipient could only make out bits and pieces. Who was leaving the team and why? Were new members joining or previous Avengers simply returning? How did the team feel about recent lineup changes on the West Coast? What were their reactions to the recent events in Washington? Was she remaining with the team?

That last question She-Hulk managed to catch, and she felt safe in answering. "In a sense, yes. While I have stepped down from active field duty, I've agreed to serve as the Avengers' liaison to the government." This brought on another bevy of questions, but the gamma-powered alter-ego of Jennifer Walters shouted above the tumult. "No, this is not a position with our government. I am remaining with the Avengers in the capacity of lawyer, dealing with the government on their behalf. Instead of Uncle Sam communicating with the Avengers through a proxy, it is now the other way around. Any time a government official wants a word with the Avengers, they have to go through me."

If She-Hulk that would have satisfied the journalists, she was wrong. Instead they kept at the questioning, and not simply about the line-up. Was it responsible for the Avengers to act more independently? Should a group of super-human individuals be operating without direct government supervision?

Stingray

Binary

Karnak

"If the men and women in Washington didn't think so, they wouldn't have agreed to this," She-Hulk answered. Past relationships with government liaisons had often been less than ideal. So long as things go smoothly, nobody is objecting. And before you ask," she continued loudly as a few more questions were being shouted, "I will be acting on behalf of the Avengers as a whole. This includes both branches, so most of my time will be spent in airport security."

One journalist wondered who was going to lead the new lineup? Was Captain America stepping down as Chairperson?

"Now really, people, would this really be the Avengers without Captain America?"

"I've never been comfortable with that," Captain America mused. Three stories below the mansion, he was listening to the press conference via an earpiece. "The Avengers were a legitimate, formidable team before I'd joined. And it remained so every time I left."

"Perception is everything Steve," Warbird told him. "The founding members all had solo careers before banding together. When you returned, the Avengers were just considered another team-up. But you held the team together during its first lineup change. You're viewed as the glue holding us all together, like it or not."

The two Avengers entered a chamber in the mansion's lowest level. Inside the vast labyrinth was an underground lake connected to a tunnel that provided submarine access to the East River. Andromeda was waiting for them, her athletic blue form kneeling beside the lake. Also present in the chamber was an contingent of Atlantean soldiers and Llyron, an undersea villain who had recently attacked the surface world.

"Greetings," Andromeda greeted Warbird and Captain America. "We are about ready to go."

Though unable to talk through his restraints, Llyron was staring with hatred at the Avengers. One Atlantean noted this, and struck Llyron severely across the back of his head. "Eyes down, monster, or I'll gouge them out."

"Lay off, Captain," Andromeda told Captain America when he opened his mouth to say something. "Under Atlantean law, this thing is guilty of thousands of murders. He is undeserving of mercy, and you have no leave to interfere."

Though he didn't exactly like it, Captain America nodded and kept his mouth shut. In spite of their best efforts of the Avengers to limit the loss of life, every single one of Llyron's At'La'Tique had died in New Orleans. All had begun life as cloned fetuses and rapidly aged, but Llyron had made other alterations to the genetic code. As each of the At'La'Tique were subdued, their gills failed them and each suffocated in the water. All the Avengers had to do to keep the At'La'Tique alive was to allow them victory, and Captain America had made the hard choice to keep fighting.

"Interfere?" As she'd pummeled him, Warbird had shouted at Llyron to stop it. There had to have been a way to spare the At'La'Tique, but Llyron had refused and forced them all to die in battle. The sight of thousands of dead bodies floating in the water was something Warbird would never forget, and she had no sympathy for how Llyron was treated. "Hell, I plan to petition to participate in the execution."

"Oh, no," Andromeda informed them. "Distant though he may be, Llyron is part of the royal family. We'll only torture him every day. Stop by sometime and you'll get a turn at him."

Llyron glared at Andromeda with hate, while Captain America looked away in discomfort. Whatever the man's crimes, there was a line. "I wish you would reconsider coming back, Andromeda," Captain America told her. "You've been a valuable addition to the team."

"I am sorry, Captain, but King Namor had requested my return. This...thing still has supporters in the deep corners of the world. I am to lead the search for them. Perhaps when my task is done I will be reassigned to represent Atlantis here on the surface. However I understand that Stingray has agreed to act in my stead."

Captain America nodded. "Yes, but he isn't replacing you. At present, the Avengers don't have a capable scientist on the roster, and Stingray fills the position admirably. His wife Diane will also be assisting us in a supporting capacity."

"It's fortunate that Stingray will have other things to do. I intend to make the oceans so safe you won't ever be needed there."

"Two-thirds of the world," Captain America said with a smile. "That's a lot of territory. Any time you need help."

Andromeda shared the smile. "I am sure that Namor will appreciate it."

"Commander," one of the Atlanteans stated. "We must depart."

"Yes, of course." Andromeda stood up straight and extending a hand. Captain America grasped it warmly. "It was a pleasure serving with you."

"Godspeed, Avenger."

"No," She-Hulk emphatically told the members of the press. "Quicksilver and Karnak have served together for a long time. We do not anticipate personal matters to affect their performance as Avengers."

A brief flutter of air brushed She-Hulk, and before she'd placed it Quicksilver was already talking into the microphones. "Whatever occurred between my ex-wife

and I is none of your business. As for Karnak, my opinion of him has always been low. Impressive though his skills may be, the man is powerless by his own foolhardy choice."

"That's enough." She-Hulk grabbed Quicksilver hard and forced him back from the microphones. The press had just begun another flurry of questions. With a sigh, She-Hulk tapped the communicard under her jacket. "As much as I know you all enjoy Quicksilver's colorful remarks, it's now time for the main event. So ladies and gentlemen, without further ado, the Avengers!"

They seemed to almost appear out of nowhere. Six men and women had joined Quicksilver at the front of the room even as She-Hulk moved to the side. Except for a curt glance, Karnak's eyes avoided Quicksilver. Between the two was Captain America, dead center in the group. Also at opposite sides were Stingray and Espirita, with Warbird and Binary at each end. Flashbulbs popped as cameramen raced to capture the iconic image of the Avengers Assembled.

Captain America alone stepped forward, and spoke into the mass of microphones. "Grave threats often plague our planet, threats that no single hero can handle alone. It was for this reason the Avengers formed, to combat those threats in the defense of all humanity. Our roster has changed many times, and have changed again today. This doesn't mean that Avengers have abandoned the cause, but rather that new heroes have chosen to take up the honor.

"In the past, Warbird has served with distinction on both branches of Avengers, and has graciously agreed to join as my co-leader on the field. Espirita, perhaps known to many of you as Firebird, has long been a stalwart ally of the team, and it is with great pleasure that I grant her formal membership. Stingray is a well-respected member of the scientific community that provides specialized support within the team. As my teammate Quicksilver stated earlier, Karnak's skill at hand-to-hand fighting is unmatched, as is his character.

"For almost as long as I've been with the Avengers, I have counted Quicksilver as a good friend and trusted ally. This is a man that has followed his heart and refused time and again to give in to hatred. We this seasoned veteran we have Binary, a young woman that has learned a great deal in her short time with the team. Her power is unmatched, and I have no doubt that in time you'll all come to respect her as deeply as I do."

Earlier, Warbird had swelled with pride at Captain America's words. But with his assessment of Binary, particularly of her power, Warbird had noticeably bristled. Every other member of the team had silently reacted in their own way to Captain America's words about them. And about their various teammates.

"The next time Earth faces a threat which no single hero can handle alone, rest easy. The call will be made." Captain America raised his shield high. "Avengers Assemble!"

While the crowd could be heard going wild inside the mansion, two men observed quietly from behind the gate. One man, middle-aged with dark hair and dressed smartly in a very expensive suit, lit a cigarette and turned to the other. "Will this be a problem?"

The second man, his features hidden behind a hood pulled up over his head, chuckled. "Aren't you watching? With new personnel, there's a period of discomfort, uncertainty. A few of them already have problems with each other. If anything, this will make the operation easier."

"Then we'll move tonight. While my men are at the site you can--"

"Nuh uh." The hooded man shook his head. There was a flash of white beneath the dark hood. "Read my contract again. I don't go into the field. You're men have been trained. That's all I've been paid for."

“And this is the mansion’s sub-basement, the true headquarters of the Avengers.” Edwin Jarvis, faithful butler to the Avengers led Stingray’s wife Diane Arliss-Newell. “All our computer and communication systems are housed here. Naturally, this is the most secure area in the whole mansion.”

Diane was treated to the magnificent site of reinforced steel walls, behind which was the Assembly Room where the Avengers would hold meetings. She followed Jarvis around the enclosed room, which was only accessible through the other elevator, and into the computer area on the other side of the sub-basement. Massive banks of memory filled half this area, and more had been near the elevator. The rest of the space contained the computers themselves.

“So this is where an Avenger on monitoring duty has to spend his time,” Diane stated. She had already seen the emergency medical facilities in the basement above.

“Yes, or myself when the team is away on missions,” Jarvis told her. “At times the long shifts can be quite exhausting, and more than once I’ve found an Avengers asleep in his chair. At least, that was how it used to be. With the communicards, one doesn’t have to be in this area all of the time.”

“Yes, I suppose I’ll be spending most of my time in the lower basement.” With her husband as a new member, Diane had also agreed to join the Avengers as a technician.

“Only slightly more time than in any other area. I try to make certain everybody is familiar with all aspects of the mansion.” Jarvis placed his eye over an electronic lock and a door behind the computers slid open. “Through here is the thermoelectric generator, the mansion’s main power supply, and the hydraulic lift.”

Behind them, the computers suddenly beeped to life and an alarm rang out. Jarvis turned around and

towards them, startled but with a practiced deliberation. Camera images appeared on the monitors, and he observed these with worry on his face.

"There has been a security breach," Jarvis declared. "Not here, fortunately," he added for Diane's benefit. "Most confiscated or out-dated equipment is stored at a facility elsewhere in the city. It would seem that a break-in is in progress."

"Should we alert the team?"

"There's no need. As I was saying earlier, the communicards are most remarkable."

Quicksilver was first on the scene, having raced out of Avengers Mansion moments after his communicard had flashed. Only a short distance behind were flyers Warbird, Binary, Espirita and a gliding Stingray. The storage facility's location was close enough that Captain America and Karnak would also be approaching on foot. However Quicksilver did not expect much of a threat, and expected to have the intruders subdued by the time his teammates arrived.

Unfortunately, while speeding between the two vans positioned outside the storage facility's entrance, Quicksilver failed to notice the wire he tripped. Both vans exploded, the terrific heat and force striking Quicksilver from behind. He moved so fast the brunt of damage was avoided, but the Avenger was thrown off-balance and became easy prey for the intruders alerted by the explosion.

"He's here!" One shouted. "As we practiced."

The smoldering fires of the vans were meant to produce smoke more than anything, greatly limiting Quicksilver's vision. While the intruders couldn't exactly see him either, the volume of bullets fired into the smoke didn't exactly need a precise target. Quicksilver dodged and weaved as rapidly as he could, but had little idea of where the bullets were until they struck him, resulting in a large number of painful grazes. It was with some cuts that Quicksilver ran out of the smoke, his lungs aching.

In the sky were visible the three flying female Avengers. Warbird, Binary and Espirita flew over the storage facility, Warbird circling around while Binary and Espirita barreled through the rising smoke. Because of her superior vantage point, only Warbird saw the rocket-propelled grenade fired into the smoke.

"Both of you move!" Warbird cried. Inside she cursed herself for not warning them to avoid the smoke. There was a small explosion and Warbird observed Espirita spiraling out through the air. Binary however emerged through the smoke unfazed, and smashed into the front entrance of the storage facility. Warbird could only watch as the entire front wall of the squat building collapsed down on her fellow Avenger.

By the time Captain America, Karnak and Stingray arrived, they found Quicksilver and Warbird feverishly digging through rubble. Espirita stood nearby, clutching an injured arm, her concentration focused on the burning vans. At her mental command the fires were slowly dying.

"What happened here?" Captain America demanded.

It was Espirita that first answered. "Warbird keeps insisting that they got away. But I confess I don't see how they could have so quickly after firing on us."

"That's because, with all due respect, you're an idiot!" Warbird yelled at her in frustration. "Ah ha!" She hurled away a great chunk of rubble, revealing an open manhole. "This was where they fired from. When Binary crashed into the building this was covered over."

"I said I was sorry," Binary muttered with little sincerity in her voice. In truth she was, but in her own frustration Binary couldn't help but redirect it at Warbird. "Maybe if you'd been working with me like you're supposed I could have been able to stop in time."

"There's no need to work on stopping," Warbird snapped. "You just stop! How hard is that? It's a question for you too, Quicksilver."

"Excuse me for taking action," he said while glowering at Warbird. "Perhaps I should have taken a cue from you and watched from the sidelines."

"Why you skinny little—" A large piece of brick wall was raised by one of Warbird's arms and she took a step forward. Fortunately Captain America had been moving the entire time and was between Warbird and Quicksilver, his shield raised.

"Enough, both of you," the Avengers chairperson ordered. Captain America was talking through an air filter he'd placed over his mouth, and directed the next command at Stingray. "Check the air. What do you find?"

Stingray did so, and immediately said, "There must have been mood-altering chemicals in those vans. This smoke is laced heavy with it."

"Espirita, keep those fires going. Burn as much of the chemicals out of the air as you can. Stingray and Karnak, get down there and conduct a search. Quicksilver, when I deem you able you can follow. Warbird, put that down." She was still holding the chunk of wall. "Do an aerial recon of the area in case they escaped by another means. Even if not, the fresh air will do you good."

"I can help with that," Binary said eagerly. But Captain America shook his head. "Please. Look, I admit I screwed up here. There has to be something I can do."

"I need you to help me find what was taken." Captain America tapped his communicard. "Jarvis, I'm going to need a full inventory of what was stored here."

In a location some distance from where the Avengers were, international arms dealer Phillippe Bazin greeted his men. "Well done. Your training was everything I had paid for." This statement was also directed at the man walking close to Bazin, many of his features hidden in shadow. Bazin came to a halt at the large crate his men had taken from the Avengers storage facility. "Now, to see if the theft was as good as the escape."

At Bazin's direction, the men opened the crate, allowing their employer to gaze inside. While the crate contained what he wanted, it didn't contain *all* that he wanted, and he was visibly upset.

"You fools!" Bazin grabbed one of his men's guns and aimed it at the man's head. "Where is it?"

"It wasn't there sir," pleaded the man whose own gun was staring him in the face. "I swear. We checked everywhere."

"Believe him." The hidden associate took a step forward as he placed a hand on Bazin's arm. The light caught his face, revealing the white skull mask of Taskmaster. "I had a look at the inventory before. Something that important, the Avengers aren't going to lock in a warehouse."

"You knew!" Bazin now directed the gun at Taskmaster. "This complete waste of time was your doing."

In a single motion, Taskmaster could have disarmed Bazin and been holding the gun. But making a client look bad in front of his subordinates was bad business, so he refrained. Instead Taskmaster said, "Not exactly a waste. You've seen how effectively your men performed, and acquired something valuable in the process. As for the other, well, that can still be yours. And in the taking you see just how far my other student has come along."

Bazin was listening, and the gun dipped slightly. "He's ready?"

"Enough for this. Just to hedge our bets, I'll make a call. Get him some outside help, if you'd prefer."

The gun was turned away from Taskmaster's direction. Bazin placed it back in the hand of his employee and turned to face the crate. While admiring the contents, valuable in its own right, he said three words.

"Make the call."

They were gathered in the Assembly Room, the seven Avengers. As chairperson, Captain America had led the meeting, and closed it with final words.

"We all know what this means, Avengers. Identify and recover, that's our priority for now. Dismissed."

As the other Avengers were departing from the Assembly Room, Quicksilver remained behind. Shortly before the meeting began, Captain America and whispered to Quicksilver that he wanted to see him afterwards.

Captain America circled the table to move towards his teammate. "Binary's mistake could be excused by inexperience, but you know better. A simple parameter sweep and this could never have happened."

"By *this* you mean our failure to secure a simple storage facility," Quicksilver remarked. "We were made to look like amateurs."

"Agreed, which is why team sessions in the Ready Room will begin as soon as possible." Captain America stepped in closer to his teammate. "But right now this is about you, Quicksilver. You underestimated the threat, rushed in expecting to handle everything yourself. And the worst thing is, you probably could have, if you had bothered to check the parameter."

"I hope this wasn't the only reason you wanted me," Quicksilver said in response.

"No, it wasn't. What happened this morning isn't the first piece of tension between you and Karnak," Captain America continued. "I need to know this isn't going to be a problem. Can the two of you work together? Fight alongside one another? Trust each other?"

"I've never had any problem with Karnak," Quicksilver answered. "He is the one that chooses to intrude on private affairs that don't

concern him, and take one side without knowing all the circumstances. Maybe he's the one you should be speaking to."

Without waiting for a dismissal, Quicksilver turned and sped out of the Assembly Room. Alone, Captain America sighed in frustration. Things had gone well in New Orleans. Outside of a major crisis, however, complacency and internal conflicts were showing through. The team needed to learn how to work all the time, or even a battle with a minor criminal could turn deadly.

Or worse, a major villain. If that theft was going to lead to something more...

Claxons blared inside the Assembly Room, and Captain America felt his communi-card vibrate. Removing it from his belt, Captain America scanned the information that scrolled across while walking past the doors and toward the elevator. Outside he met Quicksilver at the elevator, tapping his foot impatiently.

"You should have stairs put in."

"Waste of space," Captain America told him. "If you were really in a hurry you would've used the ladder." The doors opened, and the two entered. Captain America finished reading the card. "Single assailant outside, attacking the mansion itself. Automated turrets--"

"I've already read mine," Quicksilver stated. "Warbird and Binary have engaged. We'll probably miss the whole thing."

"Any idea who this loser is?" Binary shouted over the sound of plasma bursts and automatic gunfire.

"No idea!" Warbird yelled back. She arced over a blast of deadly energy, while a plasma blast from her hands deflected the bullets. "From the green armor, I'd almost say Super-Adaptoid."

The two aerial Avengers were trading blasts over Avengers Mansion with the armor that was actually known as Savage Steel. It was a hulking construct that despite its size proved quite agile in the air, as Savage Steel the blasts of both Binary and Warbird. Turrets on the roof of Avengers Mansion had long gone silent, destroyed by Savage Steel's firepower.

Fed up with her attacks being evaded, Binary opened her mouth in a loud roar and unleashed a wide pulse beam in Savage Steel's direction. The beam itself was much larger than her opponent, and in its path behind Savage Steel several buildings would certainly be struck.

"Binary, no!" Realizing the folly her teammate had made, Warbird

launched herself in the path of Binary's blast. Cosmic power washed over her, energy drawn from a white dwarf star much like Warbird own power had once derived. Now Warbird simply absorbed ambient energy, and she fought past the pain to draw all of Binary's blast into her. "Eeeaaarrghh!"

"You must be in agony." Savage Steel had flown in close to Warbird, and raised a gauntlet toward her face. "Allow me to end it."

Warbird opened her eyes and, through the eye holes of his helmet, Savage Steel saw energy bleed from them. "Thanks, but I'm good!"

A thick stream of energy erupted from Warbird's eyes, the power of Binary absorbed and diluted by the other woman's metabolism. Savage Steel was blasted directly in the chest, and while the lessened energy failed to achieve the result it would have otherwise, he was thrown back several hundred feet.

The display of power had greatly weakened Warbird, and she could barely keep herself in the air. Due to this, she was unable to intervene as Binary blasted past her and towards Savage Steel.

"Where do you think you're going!" Binary cried that out at Savage Steel as she rocketed forward, her arms raised past her head and her fists clenched.

Shifting his weight and recalibrating his boot-jets, Savage Steel regained control of his flight. The instant before Binary would have collided, Savage Steel turned to the side. Not only did he narrowly avoid Binary's attack, but Savage Steel also managed to grab hold of her ankle. Using Binary's own momentum against her, Savage Steel spun her about and hurled her in the other direction.

"Oh damn he knows how to fly," Warbird muttered. She streaked forward on an intercept course with Binary. "Go limp!" she yelled. "I've got you!"

Going limp was not the best option for a person who could herself fly. But as Binary did not know the advanced techniques for controlling one's flight, limp she went. To her credit, Warbird did manage to catch her. However, still weakened from the energy she'd absorbed earlier, Warbird did little to halt Binary's journey and was in fact caught up in it. Locked together, the two women plummeted towards the busy traffic of 5th Avenue.

Speeding considerably faster than the Manhattan traffic was Quicksilver, out of Avengers Mansion and into the street. Around and around he went directly beneath Binary and Warbird, creating a funnel of air that trapped the two women, holding them in place. All the while muttering under his breath, "I hate being wrong," too quickly for anyone to hear.

Savage Steel took no notice of the rescue, having already resumed his course for Avengers Mansion. Now Espirita and Stingray were in the air to face him, with Captain America running across the roof shield in hand. With a mighty heave the shield was thrown wide of Savage Steel, but glanced off the side of a nearby building to strike him in the side of the helmet.

"You really thought that would hurt!" Savage Steel cried as he raised an arm in Captain America's direction. The cannon attached to his arm spat out hot metal in rapid succession. "This is going to hurt!"

"But not as much as this." As Captain America was dodging around the gunfire, Stingray had managed to fly close to Savage Steel. Grabbing the much larger armored man from behind, Stingray released an electric surge through his armor and into that of Savage Steel.

The powerful attack, however, had no effect whatsoever on Savage Steel.

"No, not quite," the opponent remarked. "Maybe you wanted something more like this!" Sparks of electricity rippled over the surface of Savage Steel's armor and threw Stingray. The heroic Avenger struggled past the pain and held on to Savage Steel as long as he could. But soon the pain became too great and he fell away from Savage Steel, semi-conscious.

"Espirita, grab him!" Captain America directed.

As Espirita flew to assist Stingray, Savage Steel was also falling from the sky. The counterattack had required a great deal of power. There wasn't enough left to keep his heavy form in the air. Savage Steel's descent was near the wall around Avengers Mansion, but when he reached to grab the top he found the distance too long. His heavy form crashed onto the sidewalk, and Savage Steel rolled into the middle of traffic.

By this time, Karnak had appeared on the roof to join Captain America. "Out of the air and low on power," the Inhuman remarked. "He's now at a greater disadvantage."

"Not if he goes for civilians," Captain America stated. The shield back in his hand, Captain America ran at the edge of the roof and jumped. He easily cleared the roof and landed in a crouch close to Savage Steel.

Karnak, on the other hand, was walking slowly towards the roof's edge. He pulled out his Avengers communi-card and activated it. An armored face appeared on the card.

"Uh, hello?"

"Darkhawk, this is Karnak of Avengers East. We are battling what appears to be an old foe of yours, and require information about him."

Down on the street, the scene for further battle was unfolding. Binary and Warbird were on one side of the street, both a little dizzy from Quicksilver's air funnel. Captain America stood on the other side, closest to Savage Steel but closer to Espirita. She was landing fast, the weight of a semi-conscious Stingray almost too much for her. Quicksilver was a blur moving from one end of the street to the other, directing vehicles away and even dragging people out of danger.

"Stand down," Captain America told Savage Steel in a commanding voice. "Nobody has to be hurt."

Savage Steel's response was to reach out and dig his armored fingers into the side of a car. He lifted it into the air with one hand, trapped passengers and all. Their screams cut through the air. Behind Savage Steel, Binary and Warbird looked ready to move, but Captain America gave a slight shake of his head. Binary didn't catch it, but Warbird did and threw up an arm.

"Let those people go," Captain America ordered. "Right now this is just between you, us, and your employer. Set them down and give yourself up. Otherwise we'll make you."

"Hehe." Savage Steel chuckled and lifted the car higher. Two women were in the car, a mother and daughter. Their hands were pressed against the glass and they were screaming for help. "Why don't I make you play catch?"

Before Savage Steel could throw the car like he'd intended, Captain America surprised him with a nod. At once, Binary and Warbird flew at Savage Steel from behind. The motion of throwing the car had begun, and no sooner had Savage Steel's fingers become dislodged from the metal than did Binary slam into him. Warbird continued past, underneath the car and threw her arms up to grip it at either side. With expert skill she carried the car while slowing it safely.

As Warbird was setting the vehicle down onto the sidewalk, Karnak walked out of the gate and approached her. "Pardon me," he said to Warbird while placing his hand on the driver's side door handle. The car door opened, and Karnak gently took a shaking mother by the arm. "Miss, would you mind if I looked inside your purse."

Though Binary had knocked Savage Steel to the ground, he was far from beaten. A pulse of energy from his arm cannon knocked Binary away. Savage Steel raised his other arm, and hundreds of rounds of hot metal spat out in Captain America's direction.

"Behind me!" Captain America yelled to Espirita. The shield was brought up, deflecting the hail of gunfire. But rather than cower behind Captain America, Espirita rose in the air and unleashed a burst of flame from her hands. Heat washed over Captain America, and he heard fewer bullets striking the shield. Many were melting under the intense flame.

Still firing his ammunition, Savage Steel rose to his feet. However, so was a very angry Binary. Seething, cosmic flames rippling along her body, she took a step towards Savage Steel. However, Karnak stepped in front of her, moving purposefully at the armored man. Behind him, Quicksilver and Warbird were carrying the final civilians to safety.

Momentarily ceasing his gunshots, Savage Steel considered the odd-looking man that approached him. "Who are you supposed to be?" he asked.

"Somebody who thinks your eye holes should be filtered," Karnak told the criminal. He then raised the can of mace and sprayed.

"Yeeeeaaaarrghhh!" His eyes burned, and there wasn't anything Savage Steel could do to relieve them. Thick armored fingers can't fit through the eyeholes, and even if they could metal rubbing against eyes would do little to help. In pain and unthinking, Savage Steel strips off his armored gauntlets and lifts the helmet off his head.

Sadly, before Savage Steel could rub at his eyes to relieve the pain, Karnak struck with the heel of his palm. With his head exposed, Savage Steel fell to the ground, unconscious and with watering eyes. Behind Karnak, a stunned Binary looked on while Captain America, Espirita and a recovered Stingray approached.

"Binary, we need to remove his armor," Captain America suggested. Once he was safely contained, Savage Steel could be questioned about his employer.

Closing her mouth, Binary nodded. "Yeah, yeah it was just...." She glanced over at Karnak. "Wow."

"Nice job," Stingray told Karnak.

Captain America agreed, but instead said, "You all performed well. But until we have this man properly restrained and dealt with his employer, there's nothing to celebrate." Kneeling down next to the unconscious man, Captain America couldn't help but wonder, "Why attack us like this?"

In the wet tunnels that smelled of mold, Taskmaster didn't have to wait long. He soon viewed movement deep in one tunnel. His former protégé, Spymaster, emerged with a large backpack.

"You got it?" Taskmaster inquired.

"Oh yeah. You were right about this place being connected to Avengers Mansion." Spymaster looked around at the ruin of their surroundings. "This used to be the Hydrobase, right?"

Taskmaster nodded. "An arms dealer recently used this place for a base until some kids trashed it. I might open a new academy here. No point in wasting good real estate."

"But you have no problem wasting good talent?" Spymaster asked. He'd slung off the backpack and held it out. "Getting me out for this piece of junk was serious overkill."

Taskmaster shrugged as he accepted the backpack. "Blame the Avengers for guarding it so well. As for wanting it, well, some people will pay a lot of money for junk."

"How much?"

"Not nearly enough to free you of me," Taskmaster informed his less-than-willing employee. "But you'll have the chance to whittle it down some."

"Now?" Spymaster asked with a little surprise. "How long do you expect that Life Model Decoy to fool the Guardsmen?"

"Long enough. And even if they find out," Taskmaster said with a grin beneath his mask. "There's no risk to me, is there? Worst case is they hunt you, catch you, lock you up again. My name won't even come up, and I'll remain free to spring you at a later date. And 'round and 'round we'll go. Move on."

Spymaster briefly considered resisting, but knew better than to try himself against the Taskmaster again. Dejected, he walked on down the tunnel, the Taskmaster behind him. Unnoticed by both men, something inside the backpack flickered. Soon, it would awaken.

Soon, the world would burn.

NEXT ISSUE: The Avengers square off against the latest incarnation of the Brotherhood of Evil Mutants! Meanwhile, Phillippe Bazin attempts to sell his latest acquisition to the worst buyer imaginable!

Author's Notes

At the end of my previous story, I promised thirty days. If it turns out you're reading this within that time period, yeah me. If not, the editors screwed up.

Speaking of editors, puppet-master Cory Wiegel sent me some thoughts on my first issue, along with some questions. Check it out below, along with my remarks.

Hey Steve,

Just wanted to let you know that I read Avengers #51 and really dug it. The pacing was very well done and it felt like you gave everyone a fair amount of attention. My favorite scene? Can't think of just one, but in particular I liked the cold scene with Stingray being drug away by the Atlantean extremists, the interaction between Cap and Binary, and the climax of the ish with all of your characters collected on the beach of New Orleans preparing for the impending Alantean attack. It was a fitting end to your first issue and an even more fitting beginning to your run. Nice job all around with these particular aspects of the issue.

Thank you Cory. I'm particularly proud of the dialogue I did between Captain America and Binary, so its great to see that recognized. As for the ending, I didn't really think a fight was really necessary, as everybody just knew the Avengers would take it home. Kind of parallels my own hope that people will have that same kind of faith in my run.

While I like your rendition of almost all of the Avengers here, I'm not sure how I feel about Karnak and Quicksilver. Karnak seems like a bit too much of a straight man (not really a cipher, but still kind of lacking distinct personality traits), whereas Quicksilver's just a little too mean (as opposed to just usually haughty and obnoxious). As Cap might suggest, he acts a bit more unprofessional than seems like would be tolerated. Speaking of Cap, I did like his recruiting spree throughout the issue, but I think a little more insight or reference into his motivation for doing so could have helped - especially after Avengers #50, where the team was last seen assembled in large numbers!

Aargh, I hated that I didn't have much for Karnak and Quicksilver to do in the previous issue. Also it was my first time writing either character, so it was basically just still getting a feel for their voices. With this issue I hope I did a lot better. Quicksilver arrogant but not so much mean, and Karnak as a calm monk confident in his

skill. A big problem with a team book is I can't quite delve into each character as much as I'd like in each issue, but over time I'll hopefully get everyone fleshed out.

Captain America had his reasons for reorganizing the team following the big brawl in Avengers #50, some of which I got into here. It's one thing for members to step up in a big emergency, but it takes real professionals to get the job done every day. Dropping the ball in the middle of a smaller crisis is what could lead to big emergencies.

Those are just knit-picks, though. The only thing I think this issue was REALLY missing? A letter column! Where's the obligatory new writer introduction and "what you can expect" bullet points? How about the teasers and cryptic lines about how the more things change the more they stay the same? You can't just leave us editors and readers hanging, man!

Here. Are you happy? And honestly, I would like to think I've been around long enough that readers have an idea of my ability and don't really need teasers.

Here's a few questions to help you practice the above... uh... practices:

1.) How many issues is your Atlantean storyline going to run for? Will we see more Llyron and the At'La'Tique in future issues or are they a one-shot deal?

You've seen more Llyron here. The At'La'Tique, eh, maybe more but obviously none of the ones from last issue. No real plans to revisit them, but boy I've enjoyed writing Andromeda. Hmmm, I still have an open reservist slot.

2.) Is Stingray going to become an active member of the Avengers or is he just with the team for the fight with the At'La'Tique? If he does stick around, will his wife Diane also stick around as a supporting character?

Believe both questions were answered with this issue. I never did understand how an organization like the Avengers could be run with only Jarvis for support.

3.) A new Avengers liaison, huh? Well, that never turns out good for the team... Okay, that's more of a comment, so let me ask you a real question. Are there any characters from Brent's run that we'll see in your run, such as Black Panther, Sunfire, or Scarlet Witch? If so, in what capacity?

Aside from really Binary, I'm distancing myself from Brent's run, and allowing my stories to stand on their own. A few of those characters you mentioned I believe Brent might have plans for in

another title.

What did you think of She-Hulk as new liaison? Personally, it's the government I feel sorry for.

4.) Finally, how'd you like writing the Avengers for the first time? Or wait, was this even your first time writing a flagship Avengers title? What do you think were the ups and downs? Hopefully you enjoyed yourself!

I just finished up wrapping up previous writers' loose ends on an Avengers series at another site, but beyond that this is my first real experience with the Avengers. There was a proposal I'd submitted at still another site, which I was very proud of, but sadly didn't go anywhere.

The experience itself has been mind-blowing. These are the Avengers!

Again, great job, Steve! I'm eagerly awaiting next issue and the rest of your run.

- Cory

Hope you've enjoyed this story, Cory. Expect the next in thirty!

- Stephen Crosby
October 20, 2007

**Avengers #53
November 2007**

**Captain
America**

Warbird

Quicksilver

Espirita

Earth was not alone. That fact had become common knowledge for quite some time, but what most people *didn't* know was that Earth wasn't even alone in its own orbit. On the other side of the sun opposite Earth was its twin. This second, or counter, Earth was created by an intelligent, though human, mind.

The creature responsible for this artificial world sat in a laboratory atop a mountain, virtually identical in every way to a home he once had on Earth proper. Nothing human was visible on the man's body, encased as it was in pink and purple armor. More impressive even than his planet, the man's armor was a marvel of science. So advanced were the armor's life-support functions that if the man even wanted to end his own life, the armor wouldn't allow him to.

"Fink."

A long, pointed nose appeared through the doorway. It belonged to an equally long and hairy face, for the creature called Fink was a rat that had been hyper-evolved. "Yes, Lord High Evolutionary."

"Have I done good work?" the High Evolutionary inquired.

At this question, Fink lowered himself to his knees. "Lord, it was you that created me, created all of us." Hyper-evolved creatures, dubbed "New Men" by the High Evolutionary, populated the whole of the artificial world. "To keep us safe from those who would not understand your great works, you created this paradise for us. Here, you continue your work in peace, making all the universe better with your achievements."

"Yes, I thought as much." The High Evolutionary knew he would not be criticized by his creations. All loved him and worshipped him, would give their very lives for him. "Now away. I need to think alone."

While the lowly Fink departed, the High Evolutionary contemplated what was to be next. He had created life, planets, and perhaps even whole galaxies. Death had proven to no longer be a challenge. Everything the High Evolutionary had sought to achieve, he'd accomplished. Yet why did he remain discontent?

"Have my goals been right?" the High Evolutionary mused aloud. "In furthering evolution, I have encouraged survival. What could be nobler? And yet others have sought to halt my experiments, calling me a villain and a threat. They fear change, even if it is for the better."

At a gesture from the High Evolutionary, the windows that circled his laboratory became viewing screens. A multitude of images appeared, all gleaned from that nearby twin planet, Earth. High Evolutionary fixed his eyes on a selection of images in particular.

Stingray

Binary

Karnak

Colorful heroes known as the Avengers were fighting side-by-side with soldiers against equally colorful villains. More than any others, the Avengers had averted the High Evolutionary's plans to better humanity. They would most certainly challenge any future endeavor again.

"They are right in challenging me," the High Evolutionary said to himself. "Nature demands survival, and those who don't fight with every ounce of their being deserve to fade. I cannot fault their urge to survive. Such tenacity shows how far along humanity has evolved already. Yet still..."

The High Evolutionary leaned forward in his massive, throne-like chair. "We can all be so much more. Maybe I will help nature along. But if so, they would oppose me, as they always have." His eyes settled again to the images of Avengers. "Should that day come again, I must know my enemy. I must...see life as it occurs. Only then can I predict, and circumvent."

MARVEL 2000 PRESENTS...

"ACTS OF MADMEN"

Written by Steve Crosby

The yell sent Captain America running into the War Room. Through the door he saw that Quicksilver was on the ground, with Karnak standing over him. The speedster's leg was bent unnaturally, and that told Captain America everything he needed to know. The two men, Avengers and teammates though they may be, had a history.

"What happened here?" demanded the Avengers chairperson. He'd tried to pass the title onto another member the other day, but She-Hulk had advised against it. Recent events had lowered the team in the government's eyes. As Captain America was the only one in the current roster that anybody had confidence in, he'd begrudgingly chosen to remain as leader. "Karnak?"

The Inhuman turned his head to acknowledge Captain America's presence. "A wager was made. I won."

"Only because you blindsided me!" roared Quicksilver. "Fully prepared, I could avoid any attack that you could

pose!”

Captain America’s first thought was to remind Quicksilver that an Avenger had to be prepared for ambush at all times. Their opponents certainly wouldn’t announce their assaults. Instead he addressed Karnak. “Did that require breaking his leg?”

“Certainly not. That was for my cousin.”

It came out. Karnak’s cousin was Crystal, ex-wife of Quicksilver. Apparently there had been some infidelity, but Captain America didn’t know the particulars. From Karnak’s point of view, Quicksilver had been at fault. However it had started, Captain America was going to end it.

“Karnak, go relieve Espirita on monitor duty. Quicksilver, can you get to the Med-Lab on your own?”

“With a broken leg? Do you expect me to crawl on my hands and-”

“Then I’ll help you. Later, the three of us are going to discuss this and settle things once and for all. I won’t have Avengers assaulting one another.”

“I will be expecting you to uphold your wager,” Karnak remarked to Quicksilver as he stalked away. Quicksilver only glowered. Only when Captain America was helping him limp to his feet did Quicksilver make a quiet statement.

“I’ve a mind to inform him for the insurance agent in New Jersey.”

“What was that?” Captain America hadn’t quite heard.

“Nothing. Simply old history and nobody’s business.”

Fortunately, the Med-Lab was on the same level was the War Room, only a short distance for Quicksilver to limp towards. Once inside, Captain America settled

Quicksilver onto the examination table. "Alright, sit still while I check the leg."

"I'm quite capable of setting the bone on my own," Quicksilver told his leader. "Once done, I'll heal quickly."

"All right. But don't leave until it's healed fully." With that caution, Captain America turned to leave.

Walking out of the Med-Lab, Captain America was greeted by a very upset Warbird. At her yell that he should "hold it right there," Captain America paused reluctantly and sighed. Somehow he had a feeling about what her problem was as well.

"I need to talk to you about that Nicole person."

"Sometimes Captain America hated being right. "Warbird, we've discussed this. Binary has proven herself capable of-

"Don't you dare use that name!" Warbird cried out.

"You may not like it, Warbird, but the name fits her. As far as I'm concerned, she's earned it, along with the title of Avenger." Captain America started walking away. "If you're this upset over a simple name, I don't know if I can be as certain about you."

Warbird followed after him. "If you'd listened to me in the first place, we'd have saved ourselves a lot of time then. My problems are not things that I've been hiding, and being around somebody who not only uses my old name, but also looks exactly like I used to does not help!"

"Actually, it can," Captain America said to her. "Move past this, and you'll be a stronger person, the kind of Avenger I know you can be. The next step after that will be patching things up with Quicksilver." His head turned back towards the Med-Lab. "Or you could go do that now. He's in there with a broken leg."

"Nice, Karnak listened to my suggestion." Warbird took the next few steps alone, stopped and turned to see that Captain America was glaring at her. "That was a joke."

"How did you know it was Karnak?"

"Because out of the millions of people that Quicksilver rubs the wrong way, I doubt he hurt anybody more than he did Crystal. Family share those kinds of things." She walked right up into Captain America's face. "And for your information, I don't have a problem with Quicksilver. He's the one angry with me, on account over the other woman dumping him because he wouldn't help her kick my ass."

"We're not saying her name either?" he asked.

"At this point, Rogue is just another one of the many, many shitty things that have happened to me in my life. That girl, on the other hand," Warbird raised her arm towards the ceiling, telling Captain America that Binary was up on another level. "Reminds me of a time when my life wasn't crap. She's able to do all the things that I used to be capable of, before my powers just decided to fade."

"We both know that your powers aren't the sum total of who you are," Captain America reminded her. "You're on this team because of your training and experience. Binary may have your old powers, but she doesn't have near your expertise in using them." He brushed past Warbird and continued on. "Let's start teaching her."

After a brief hesitation, Warbird huffed and followed.

When Captain America left the training area half-an-hour later, the two women were still in the air, trading blasts and practicing evasive maneuvers. Binary was much faster, but enclosed spaces made the speed a hindrance and half the time she was crashing into walls. On maneuverability Warbird proved far superior, making

sharp twists and turns at twice the speed Binary was able to.

Eventually, the young woman would learn. Until then the other Avengers would watch her back, and she'd watch theirs. It was what Captain America did his best to make the Avengers into, a team where no one member was needed to do everything, because everybody worked together. At least they would, once Captain America got them all to put personal disputes aside.

There were precious few members of the team who didn't have issues to work out. When Captain America was paged via his Avengers communicard, it was from one such member. It was a shame she didn't work in the field, Captain America thought to himself as he entered the elevator and was carried to the main floor. But She-Hulk was much more useful as liaison between the Avengers and the United States government.

Captain America saw her in the main foyer, talking with Stingray. When not in the armor as he was then it was just plain Walter Newell, but Captain America was in the habit of referring to all his teammates by their codenames. Spouting off real names in the heat of battle never did any good, and Stingray had a wife.

"Jennifer, did you get an update on Savage Steel?" Even in her She-Hulk form, Jennifer Walters was the Avengers liaison and Captain America treated her as a professional civilian.

The use of her real name made She-Hulk bristle a little. She considered both identities to be distinct and separate. "Sorry, Steve. The local authorities are keeping that armor and the thug inside it in a tight grip. Could have something to do with the fact that dirty cops used to operate it."

Several days ago, the Avengers had defeated an armored villain known as Savage Steel, with a new person under the helmet. Darkhawk, an Avenger on the

West Coast, had battled previous versions of Savage Steel and shared its history with the team. Unfortunately, the new criminals didn't appear to have any ties to the previous Cabal that had shared the Savage Steel identity.

"I would appreciate it if you stayed on it," Captain America told her. "We need to find out who he was working for."

"That I don't need to be told." The attack had been a ruse, during which an intruder had by-passed the mansion's security and made off with a dangerous piece of equipment. "But right now we have another situation."

"What is it this time?" Captain America asked.

"Public relations," She-Hulk told him. "Stingray was just telling me about a commitment he had for tomorrow, made before he rejoined our organization."

"A demonstration for setting coastal charges, at Cape Citadel," Stingray said. "And it was more of a maybe that I would participate in it. Somehow She-Hulk found out, and not only is she insisting that I go..."

"The whole team should be there," She-Hulk finished. She then said defensively, "not my idea, though. A Congressman's office gave me a call, one of the big-shots on Ways and Means. As it turns out, the day of the demonstration is on the anniversary of Magneto's big debut."

So it would be a show, thought Captain America. Business at a military base not only continued after a mutant terrorist attack, it thrived and remained cutting edge. The Avengers being there would remind the world that America had its own super-powered defenders.

"Quicksilver stays." Captain America said at last. Not only would he be recovering off an injury, but as the son of Magneto he would be made a spectacle of. "I'll go

inform the others.”

Since before the infamous attack by Magneto, Cape Citadel had been the primary site for many of the U.S. Military's advancements. Unfortunately, ever since that first assault, countless mutants have laid siege to the base for its symbolic value. On the anniversary of Magneto's attack it was no different.

Unseen and unheard, the astral form of Scanner passed over the base. Her body remained where it had always been, lying comatose in a hospital, hooked up to life support. Ever since her identity and mutant ability had been discovered, countless doctors have searched for a means to prevent or at least track her astral projection. Fortunately for Scanner, lawyers from the ACLU have worked to prevent invasive and life threatening methods. Until the lawyers failed, Scanner remained free to act as she pleased, and on that day it meant scouting Cape Citadel.

On the ground the mutant Neophyte prowled, moving his body through solid mass and remaining hidden from the multiple soldiers that patrolled the base. Though he had once had doubts about his purpose, the return of Lord Magneto had set all that aside. Today would be a glorious day, and Neophyte would be part of an extraordinary act.

Their mission was simple, if unspectacular. Scanner was to gather information and report it back to the others. Munitions, soldier locations, heavy artillery and the like. Neophyte's was more involved, and would initiate the assault. Nuclear materials were present on Cape Citadel, and once Neophyte found it and compromised the shielding, chaos would momentarily consume the base. All the soldiers around him would be in a panic, and easy pickings.

Concrete and titanium made up the bunker where the nuclear materials were stored. Guards were everywhere, and surveillance was high. Within sight on

the main building, Neophyte simply concentrated, and the molecules of his body passed through the molecules of the ground so that he sank into the matter. Sensors existed in the ground, but Neophyte would be undetected. Once surrounded by solid mass on all sides and effectively blind, Neophyte trudged in the direction of the bunker.

Slowly, inch-by-inch, the Neophyte traversed the mass, from soil to rock to concrete, until he reached the edge with open air on the other side. Carefully he leaned forward, his face and eyes just piercing the surface of what was a wall. Enough to see but hopefully not be seen. Nobody was in the room beyond, and Neophyte leaped out of the wall.

It came from nowhere, the sudden shock to Neophyte's system. He fell onto his back, looked up to see three individuals in colorful costumes. A dark-haired Hispanic woman in fiery red. What seemed to be a man in red-and-white armor built for the water. And finally Captain America, in the colors of his country.

"Your prediction was right, Espirita," said Captain America.

"It was Stingray that detected him," she replied without conceit. Espirita stepped closer to the semi-prone Neophyte. "Only a boy."

Captain America nodded. "You'll find them in every conflict. I hope you didn't do him too much damage, Stingray. He needs to talk for interrogation."

The armored Avenger knelt over the now-twitching Neophyte. "It was a minor charge. He should be able to move in a few minutes, though it'll be a lot longer before he'll be able to use his power. I don't think interrogation will be necessary though."

"No, his objective was clear," Captain America agreed. Something on his belt beeped. After a glance at what appeared to be a card, Captain America spoke. "Warbird got a sense of something floating around the base. Could be a scout of some kind. This boy couldn't have done much damage on his own. At the most..."

Espirita finished the thought. "He would have created a panic. His accomplices would have had no difficulty with everybody worried about an emergency in this building."

"Stingray, contact the brass. There's about to be a situation."

Neophyte closed his eyes, overwhelmed by failure. It had all gone horribly wrong.

Cold water splashed over Rictor's face. He needed to remain sharp, focused. But looking into the mirror, Julio Esteban Richter stared into eyes that were anything but. Bloodshot from booze and a lack of sleep, Rictor's eyes were simply the window into what his life had become. Ever since what happened in Genosha to him, Shatterstar, everybody.

Somebody knocked on the door. "Rictor, its time." That was Lady Mastermind, one out of a number of mutants Rictor had met up with after Genosha. Except for a few, Rictor didn't trust any of them. Lady Mastermind was one of the few.

The door opened. Rictor ignored Lady Mastermind's face as he walked past, knew that she disapproved of his drinking, especially before a mission. Nobody approved, but at least they didn't say anything to Rictor about it. Nobody except for the group's self-proclaimed leader, a man Rictor swore he'd beat to death someday.

"On this day we shall know glory!" There he was, in the center of the room, preaching to his flock. Even to the people who know him as a bald-faced liar and backstabbing murderer, Fabian Cortez's words still managed to make an impact. Rictor had to keep reminding himself of what the bastard had done in the past, that he didn't care about the cause but only his own personal power. To prevent him from killing the man right then and there, Rictor also reminded himself

that he needed Cortez, that his power was useful.

Assembled around the orating Cortez was their group, minus Neophyte and Scanner. Of the six mutants present, half bought into the line of bull Cortez spouted. Mellancamp, Barnacle and Vindaloo had all followed Cortez before. They were also stupid enough to do anything Cortez said and were useful in their own ways. Mellancamp with his indestructible skin and heightened physical attributes. Barnacle with that hardened carapace he could form out of moisture in the air. Finally, Vindaloo with the napalm he could secrete from his pores.

The other three weren't nearly so gullible, and went along with Cortez with full knowledge about what he was full of. But they had skills Cortez needed, so he trusted in the fact that they needed him just as much. Rictor knew this was true in his case, but he wasn't entirely sure of Lady Mastermind and Post's motivations. The daughter of the original Mastermind was even better at casting illusions, and Post...Rictor wasn't even sure of his powers. The large man's skin was purple and he seemed to have some strength, as well as a bizarre sense of timing. But he had a lot of other powers and pieces of technology that floated around his body, so there was no telling where nature ended and technology began.

"Many years ago, our glorious lord Magneto struck a blow to humanity, declared that *Homo Sapien Superior* was here, and that we would dominate! Today we, the new Brotherhood of Mutants, shall remind the world of this, and herald the glorious march of our people to glory! Magneto himself will praise us for our deeds!"

Some cheers. It took everything in Rictor not to roll his eyes. He hated that name, as it implied they represented all of mutantkind. That meant the world would blame all mutants for the actions of a few. Magneto had been right, creating a distinction by calling his team the Brotherhood of Evil Mutants. As for being praised...very likely Magneto would kill them all on sight.

Forgiven and forgotten were two very different things, and Rictor had no illusions about returning to that man's good graces.

"Minutes ago I have learned that our brother the Neophyte was successful in his mission! A nuclear meltdown at Cape Citadel is imminent, and in the confusion we shall—"

Minutes ago? "Then what the hell are we waiting here for?" asked Rictor angrily. They needed to get there, take advantage of the panic before it died down and some actual resistance could be built. Not waiting for Cortez to respond, Rictor turned toward Post. "Get onto that base and to their main terminals now." Natural or no, the man could teleport, and his immunity to radiation made him an ideal scout in a potential meltdown. "Barnacle, crust up and Vindaloo, carry him with you. Mellancamp, get running. I'll start the car Cortez, so you can join me when you've finished ranting. Let's go kill flatscans!"

Rictor yelled the last part to push the three idiots into action. The look of pure rage on the face of Cortez was one of the sweetest sights Rictor had ever seen, but he didn't stop to savor it. Post had already disappeared and everybody was moving. He started for the door to the outside, and found Lady Mastermind walking beside him.

"He'll kill you for that," she muttered to him. "Unless you kill him first."

"Not today," replied Rictor in a low tone. "Not so long as he needs me to do the big damage, and I need him to help me do the big damage. But tomorrow, oh yeah, I'm going to turn him inside out."

Vindaloo and Barnacle had just been observed flying over the boundary into Cape Citadel when Scanner appeared a short distance away. A state of near-panic was evident on her opaque face, and her mouth was

screaming wordlessly. The two approaching Acolytes were too far away to hear the words, "Turn back! It's a trap!"

First her hands appeared, reaching through the astral form of Scanner. Then the Acolyte was torn apart and Warbird appeared amidst the scattered signal. Bursts of powerful energy coalesced around Warbird's fists as she flew at the two Acolytes.

"An ambush, actually. But as you were about to massacre!" Warbird roared as she blazed. Barnacle took the brunt of Warbird's blast, most of his crust armor breaking away. The sheer force of Warbird's attack expelled Barnacle from Vindaloo's arms, and the mutant fell helplessly at the ground. "Perfectly acceptable."

Vindaloo's skin began to steam as napalm began to secrete from his pores. "Die flatscan!"

"What did you just call me!" Napalm splashed over Warbird but she paid it no mind. She flew at Vindaloo and grabbed him, further exposing herself to his napalm. Skin was sizzling.

One blow to Vindaloo's head was enough to knock him out, but Warbird delivered two. The mutant terrorist went limp in Warbird's hand. She remained floating in the air, breathing heavily. The bastard had called Warbird helpless, and she'd been about to kill him for it.

That Barnacle had continued to crush his body while in free-fall had saved his life. The impact would have reduced him to so much mush, but as it was he only suffered a number of broken bones. Mellancamp paid no mind however when his teammate crashed nearby. The indestructible mutant had an opponent of his own.

Karnak chopped again at Mellancamp's scaly hide, struggling to find a weakness. Unharmed by the blow, Mellancamp slashed out with his long, razor-sharp claws. Moving deftly, Karnak ducked and grabbed Mellancamp's arm. Where brute force would not suffice,

he'd use finesse instead and flipped Mellancamp over him.

"Rraggh!" Crashing into a nearby wall, Mellancamp lashed out wildly. But rather than back away to avoid the attack, Karnak moved in. Deflecting an arm with one hand, Karnak struck forward with the other, jabbing his fingers into Mellancamp's eyes. This spurred a further maelstrom of chaos from the indestructible mutant, and at last Karnak back away. Falling backwards, he rolled away from the deadly foe.

"Hmmm. Your weakness isn't one that I can exploit." Karnak pressed down on his communicard. In the near distance, a stream of flame suddenly veered in the air towards Karnak. "At least not without difficulty and risk."

The stream of flame came near, and was seen to be Espirita. "Karnak, do you require my assistance?"

"I more prefer it," Karnak responded. "External threats hold no fear for this criminal. But inside it still needs to breathe."

"Understood." Espirita raised a hand and gouts of flame appeared around Mellancamp. Howling more with rage than pain, he leapt up at Espirita. But she easily flew up and away, avoiding the attack while still keeping Mellancamp engulfed. "One would think it ironic, that a demon would be thwarted by fire. But my flames are holy, granted by God to do His will."

Karnak said nothing, for he had nothing nice to say. Fully aware that the Kree were responsible for their existence, the Inhumans had little regard for religion beyond their Terrigan Mists. His big concern was avoiding Mellancamp, made more necessary now that the mutant was surrounded by fire. Fortunately, Mellencamp hadn't realized he'd become a living weapon and was mainly running about in a mad panic.

"This feels disturbingly...good," Espirita remarked as she

kept the flames up. "Fire is so destructive most of the time, I'm always fearful of using it around other living beings. I must be careful not to reveal. Even this small feeling I have will need to be confessed."

Again, Karnak didn't respond to what Espirita was saying. Instead, when Mellancamp fell over, he said, "Don't stop. He may be faking."

However, Espirita did stop. More than that, she lowered to the ground, a horrified expression on her face. "We should put this man in restraints and give him medical attention as quickly as possible."

"Don't be ridiculous. All you did was deprive him of some oxygen."

But Espirita shook her head. "No. I've just realized, as hard as his scales may be the internal organs could still be vulnerable. I may have just roasted them." Espirita moved forward and knelt beside the unmoving Mellancamp. "I may have just killed this man."

Two armed soldiers of the United States Army were thrown back against the wall by an invisible force. Another was held high in the air, the life being slowly squeezed out of him by something unseen. Running down the corridor toward the melee, Stingray didn't need to see anything. His armor generated sonar that bounced off everything solid and gave Stingray a complete image of his surroundings. It was the reason his helmet wasn't see-through.

What Stingray "saw" was this: a large man with purple skin and unusual strength knocking around helpless soldiers. Surrounding the large man were pieces of technology that hovered in place, high-tech armor that wasn't right up against the skin. Counting on the man's confidence in his invisibility, Stingray slammed right into him.

As strong as the mutant called Post was, Stingray's

armor made him about as strong. And while the plasma bursts Post fired from his armor weren't of much use in close combat, Stingray's electrical charges were very useful up close. Sparks traveled from Stingray's armor all through Post and his armor, shorting out the technology. Those soldiers still conscious were amazed at the sudden sight of a large purple mutant battling an Avenger.

"Somehow I don't think you'd armor yourself if you were bulletproof," Stingray told Post. Electricity had stunned the large mutant, and a one-two punch by the Avenger sent him staggering to the floor. Those soldiers that still had guns raised them and prepared to shoot.

"Hold your fire!" Stingray commanded. "Give him a chance to surrender."

"Like hell," snarled one officer as he opened fire.

Bullets spattered against a bare floor. Sparking as his equipment had been, Post had still managed to activate his teleporter. Stingray walked over the spot and tapped the side of his neck, where communi-card technology had been incorporated into his armor.

"Captain America, I encountered one of them down here. He escaped, teleported." Stingray was silent a moment while he seemed to listen then said, "Understood. I'll be out to assist." Stingray turned to the soldiers. "We've head off the attacks so far, but more are expected. You men are to remain here on guard until relief is sent. Anybody who needs immediate medical attention I'll take out with me. The rest will need to wait--"

In the middle of his sentence, Stingray paused. His image of the area was flickering, an effect he recognized. "Wait. Nobody move." Stingray himself remained very still, and allowed his sonar to work. The distant, faint vibrations that could neither be seen nor felt were detected. "We all have to get out of here. Now."

When Rictor's mutant power had first manifested, the earthquake he caused had devastated Mexico City. Years later, Rictor had learned to control his terrifying ability that he was now able to direct the shockwaves he created. Though Cape Citadel was some distance away, it was within Rictor's sight, and his shockwaves were focused in that direction.

"Pump me up, Cortez," Rictor urged. "Right now I'm not doing more than buckling their foundations."

"Oh, soon you'll do so much more than that," Fabian Cortez said in a gleeful, high voice. Energy rippled out of his hands and into Rictor. Almost immediately, Rictor was visibly vibrating with power. "Topple the buildings to rubble! Crush the flatscans beneath their own fortifications!" *And die by your own power from the inside out!* Cortez thought to himself.

In the distance, the effects of Rictor's attack could be seen. Already the walls that encircled Cape Citadel were cracking. There was no telling what damage was beginning to occur within, but soon enough the two mutants would be able to see. Cortez envisioned fiery explosions and flatscans dying in agony, while Rictor...

"Ahh!" Rictor cried out in pain as Captain America's shield smashed into his knee. His leg bent at an unnatural angle, Rictor collapsed to the ground. The power still flowed, Rictor still vibrated, and through the pain he remained focused on Cape Citadel.

Assembled, the Avengers rushed at the two dangerous mutants. Captain America was in the lead, his ready hand accepting the returned shield. Alongside Captain America ran Karnak, while above Binary, Espirita and Warbird flew high and fast. A distance behind them was Stingray, not so much flying but gliding.

"Binary, grab him!" Captain America ordered.

Binary did as she was told, swooping down and taking Rictor in her arms before either he or Cortez could react. Immediately, Rictor's vibrations swept over

Binary, but her strength and invulnerability were on the cosmic level and she endured. Withstanding the pain, she flew higher and higher into the air. Maybe when he lost consciousness from lack of oxygen, Rictor's power would cease.

"Yes, Avengers, come and die!" exclaimed Cortez. Energy was billowing in his hands, waiting to be released.

Karnak did not slow in the least as he ran at Cortez. "Leave him to me." The other Avengers slowed and allowed Karnak to approach alone. Cortez faced the oncoming Inhuman with glee.

"Often I have wondered how my power affects flatscans," the mutant zealot stated. "Now, at last, you and I will find out together!"

Cortez's power to enhance and detract mutant abilities swept over the Inhuman Karnak. The Avenger ran past the wave of energy, appearing unfazed in the slightest. Cortez's eyes widened as Karnak raised an arm back to strike.

"Your bluff has been called." Karnak drove his arm forward, smashing the heel of his palm against the side of Cortez's face. "But whether an empty bluff or not, you threatened my niece's life." Karnak dropped his second arm down to chop at the back of Cortez's head. "For that I should kill you." Finally, Karnak drove his knee up into Cortez's face, and the terrorist dropped to the ground with blood gushing. "But I think imprisonment, with humans your power is useless against, will be so much more fitting."

Stingray had landed and was walking forward beside Captain America towards Karnak. The Avengers chairperson placed a hand on Karnak's soldier in respect. "Nicely done Avenger. For this man, it was a long time coming."

Karnak nodded. "Yes, though I think we shouldn't tell

him that I'm an Inhuman, and that as yet his power still hasn't been tried against humans."

High above, Binary was flying down with an unconscious Rictor in her arms. "Hey, he's stopped! So is that it? We've beaten the bad-hey!"

Warbird was suddenly flying up at Binary, her fists awash with energy and hatred on her face. "I knew it! There just had to be something wrong with you!"

What Warbird saw, and nobody else, was that Binary now had the scaly features of a Brook alien. Not aware of this, Binary was surprised at Warbird's assault, and took two blasts of energy to the face. Stunned, Binary dropped Rictor and was helpless when Warbird slammed into her.

"No!" Captain America cried out. Rictor was falling from nearly two stories high and was too far away for any Avenger to catch. That didn't stop Captain America from trying, as he rushed forward and shouted to Espirita, "Go help Binary calm Warbird down!"

Espirita did fly up towards the battling pair, although it didn't appear that Binary needed any assistance. Warbird was far more skilled at aerial combat, but the sight of an alien from the species that tortured her, in the form of an identity she'd once held, had driven Warbird to a near berserker rage. She was fighting in close, battering at Binary with blows that the cosmic-powered woman could easily withstand.

"Gah! Get away from me!" Binary screamed. A blast of energy from her hand struck Warbird's chest at point-blank range. She was propelled away from Binary, and Espirita rapidly shifted her course after her.

Near the ground, Rictor's descent had suddenly stopped a few feet short, caught by a shape that Captain America could just barely make out. Post had managed to get his cloaking technology working, but it flickered in and out. At the strange sight Captain America stopped, as had Stingray just behind him.

"That's the man I faced earlier," Stingray said.

"Post." Captain America had encountered the mutant before, during Onslaught's invasion of New York City. "Stand down. You're beaten."

It wasn't Post who responded, but rather the slight young woman that suddenly appeared next to him. One of her arms was supporting the young Neophyte, and she smiled at Captain America. "You should jump out of the way."

"What do you-" Stingray began, but Captain America had pushed him aside. From files loaned by the X-Men, he recognized the woman was Mastermind. In the spot they'd been standing, a blast of power from Binary had just struck. She was flying down at them, a rage to mirror Warbird's on her face.

"You have a lot of nerve showing yourself here, Diablo!" she cried along with a flurry of energy blasts. As Captain America deflected with his shield and dodged, he heard the young illusionist speaking.

"Just be glad I'm covering a retreat. Otherwise you'd be ripping out your eyes."

"Again, guys. I'm so sorry."

The six Avengers were just disembarking from the Quinjet. Captain America, Binary and Warbird were the last to step into the hanger of the Avengers Mansion. At Binary's third apology, Captain America turned to address her.

"That's not necessary. You were influenced by a powerful illusionist."

Warbird shook her head and chimed in. "No. According to her files, this second Mastermind is also a telepath." Her eyes shifted toward Binary. "I saw you as a Brood because a part of me wanted to. Mastermind was able

to use that, just as she used your previous affiliation with Diablo.”

“How can we defend against somebody like that?” Binary asked.

“Psi-dampeners can help, but mainly it’s just a matter of training your mind against that kind of intrusion.”

Captain America walked into the elevator, followed by the two women. Karnak, Stingray and Espirita had just used it. “I’ll have sessions scheduled later this week, as soon as I’ve contacted an appropriate expert.”

The elevator carried them into the second sub-basement and its doors opened. Along with the other members that had been present at Cape Citadel, Quicksilver and Jennifer Walters were waiting. It was one of the few times that Captain America couldn’t sense any tension between Karnak and Quicksilver. Delivering a beating to a man that’d hurt somebody they both cared about could do that.

At sight of Captain America, Jennifer moved forward. In her hand was a sheet of paper. “Steve, I have news.”

“I’ve already heard the news reports about what happened,” Captain America told the Avengers liaison. “And while I’m as glad as everybody else the attack was averted, I would have preferred to capture all of those involved.”

“Half the terrorists, including their leader, is more than enough to celebrate,” Jennifer told him. She then held the sheet of paper out for him. “I managed to find out what was learned in the interrogation.”

“So soon?”

Jennifer sighed. “No, the guy in the Savage Steel armor.” She shook the sheet of paper. “He finally admitted who he was working for.”

Captain America took the sheet of paper and scanned

his eyes over it. He then looked up to address the assembled Avengers. "Team, we have the name of our enemy. As soon as possible, we need to track down Phillippe Bazin. And we'd better do it before what he stole ends up killing him."

Alas, Captain America's words would turn out to be ironic. At nearly that precise moment, Phillippe Bazin lay dead in a warehouse. Surrounding him were the charred bodies of his men and the machines that killed them. Each of the robotic creatures was designed in the image of their maker, and the one who'd done the deed of killing Bazin herself.

Alkema reached into the box and extracted that which Bazin had acquired at her command. He'd expected money as payment, but instead got what Alkema intended for all living things. Their deaths would all come soon, she believed as she looked into the empty eyes of the robotic head.

"Ultron," Alkema spoke in a cold voice of no emotion. "You will live again."

Elsewhere in time and space, a figure sat on his throne and observed the events through a technology far beyond the modern. Beneath his purple mask, Kang smiled. Soon, the glorious battle would begin.

Next Issue: What else was taken from the Avengers? And who's that former teammate who suddenly appeared in Times Square? Don't miss the prelude to the most time-bending event in M2K history: The Kang/Ultron War!

Author's Notes

Okay, I have to admit to some cheating here. Half this issue was written way before my run began. There had been talk about my Avengers possibly doing a crossover

with another title, maybe mutant-related, and I was so excited I wrote up some scenes for the crossover's opening. That initial plan peetered out, but there have been rumblings of possibly something similar. So we'll wait and see if perhaps that big fight happens to lead to something more.

At any rate, I'm very excited about the new Brotherhood of Evil Mutants I put together here. Rictor had never been better than he was in Fallen Angels, and I'm glad to continue his story. Eventually you'll see these characters again, as well as perhaps a few others because I just love to perpetuate mutant drama!

This time around I have three (count 'em, three) letters to respond to. First up is one-third of our illustrious editors and X-Men author, Cory Wiegel.

Hey Steve,

I wanted to tell you that I dug your second issue of Avengers just as much as I dug your first, but come to think of it, I actually think I dug this issue a little more. While Avengers #51 was a solid read, Avengers #52 had much more interaction between the new line-up of heroes and began the foundations for some very interesting relationships. The spotlight on your supporting characters - She-Hulk, Jarvis, and Diane - was a nice touch and I hope to see more of the two. I was also happy to see Karnak step up to the plate when needed, and hey-ey, Quicksilver definitely felt more on key this ish than last. My favorite characters of yours so far, though? Aside from Cap, Warbird and Binary definitely stood out. Great work with them.

Hmm, now for the criticisms, just so I can make this letter a bit more constructive. ;)

On the character front, Stingray kind of fell

to the background after his introduction last issue. I don't know much about the character, but I think it'd be important to give him significant spotlight soon. I was also a little confused and disappointed that we didn't see the team's battle with the At'La'Tique. I actually thought that they'd make really cool first-opponents for this team of Avengers, but that idea sort of sunk (heh, get it?). Maybe a flashback or two would have satisfied my urge for bloodshed here. But to be fair, that disappointment faded pretty quickly as I was immediately caught up in the story. Way to misdirect!

Now, a few tough questions, just to be annoying...

1.) Where'd Photon go after the invasion of the At'La'Tique? For that matter, when do you think we'll see her again? I know she's going to be a reserve member of the Avengers for the foreseeable future.

2.) You've mentioned that Andromeda could be a possible candidate for the second reserve slot on the Avengers. Aside from her, do you have any other candidates lined up that you can share with us?

3.) I liked the villains, their tactics, and their shady motives this ish, but it doesn't look like we'll see much more from them too soon given the "next issue" blurb at the end of the issue. Are you working in a bit of a serial format with this series, or are you going to connect all of these loose plot threads together somewhere further down the line?

Keep up the great work, Steve! I can't wait for your next issue and the debut of the new Brotherhood of Evil Mutants. Should be

interesting seeing Quicksilver's interaction with them, no?

- Cory

Thanks for the kind words Cory. Hopefully I got more bite out of all the characters this issue. Team title, so much space, all that. As for your questions...

Photon lives in New Orleans, so I'd imagine she just went home after the invasion. You will see her again.

I have candidates in mind, to be seen when a big disaster warrants his or her assistance. Maybe an upcoming epic crossover event...

Hopefully you'll think I tied up those villains okay this issue. Going serial, but some things will carry over from issue to issue. Sorry you didn't get to see Quicksilver's interaction, but maybe down the line.

Next up are some kind words from my predecessor, former Avengers writer Brent Lambert!

Hey Steve,

Wassup man? Glad to see that your Avengers run is up and running. I know that you've been waiting a while for it to happen. I must commend you on your use of Binary as I don't feel like she's ever left the hands of her creator and that is definitely a good thing. I was hoping to see the actual fight between the Avengers and Llyron, even if we readers already knew the Avengers were going to win it. It would have made for some great action and leaving it out kinda hindered these first two issues a bit. Also, Karnak and Quicksilver just aren't reading right to me yet. I'm not sure why, but their conflict seems reminiscent of my old Wanda/Crystal conflict from my first Avengers run and that didn't exactly sit well with the readers either. It got a lil better in issue 52, but it needs to be

fleshed out some more I think.

Now on to to some questions.

1) What made you want to keep the characters that you did from my previous run (Quicksilver, Karnak, Binary, etc.)?

2) I saw some coordination with The Vault in this recent ish. Do you plan on including elements from any other titles?

3) Is Cap going to go after Red Skull for having Bucky and his "daughter"?

4) I see the Brotherhood showing up? Any other X-foes coming in?

Again, I hope some of your concerns were addressed here. Crystal's family never really liked Quicksilver, did they? I know the Inhumans don't like divorce, so I'm just playing on that and the fact both Quicksilver and Karnak and unlikable personalities.

To me, Binary is one of those characters created specifically to be an Avenger, in the vein of Vision and the like. She's a fresh-faced perspective, and her conflict with Warbird is just too good to pass up.

Other title elements will be included, as you just saw here with my use of Rictor and an allusion to Binary's first appearance in Fantastic Four.

Anything major with Captain America I plan to address in his title.

Another big X-Foe may appear again. Though I believe Spidey fought him first.

Finally, thoughts on the previous issue from Mr. Christopher Oliva.

Hey! Chris Oliva here, writer of Eye-Scream. Just

thought I'd give ya some thoughts on your newest Avengers issue.

I think I'm in love with a piece of fiction. Is that legal? In all seriousness, what a fantastic issue. I'm really loving the interactions between all the cast members here. My only beef is what Stingray and Espirita will be doing? We have seen them the least out of everyone and I'm curious as to what's planned?

I'm really digging what you're doing to Brent's Binary. Always been a fan, and I like your treatment of her thus far. It's interesting to see her with all those icons. With her levels of power, she could totally take them down, but her skill with them is another story. And I totally called Warbird hating her...it fits in so well. Here's to a Binary vs. Warbird smackdown.

Karnak's total badassness shown brightly in that fight scene. The fact that even a cosmic blast, electricity, or even the might of Captain America wasn't as mighty as a can of mace was a touch of humor in the issue that I loved.

Regardless, I'm hooked, I'm here to stay and grats! I'm loving your direction so far and I'm here to the end. Keep up the great work!

-Chris

Wow, people really want me to do more with Espirita and Stingray. I'll do my best not to disappoint. Thanks for the kind words, Chris.

Everybody keep reading. And if you get the urge, keep writing.

- Stephen Crosby
November 12th, 2007

**Avengers #54
December 2007**

**Captain
America**

Warbird

Quicksilver

Espirita

I journey through the mists of time, my benefactor's words still playing through my memory banks. "Observe the events," he had told me. "What others might have missed, you will see, and that may well turn the tide." What exactly I am to witness remains unknown to me at this time, but surely Immortus has reason to be so secretive. Our enemy is a great threat to the entire universe, and to all of time itself. No unnecessary risks should be taken when dealing with such a man.

The mists pass through my body and give way to open space. I see lights all around me. Below they are bright and colorful, while above they are dim and distant. Stars in the night, nearly invisible against the majesty of New York City. It is Times Square that I float over, packed almost full by pedestrians and motorists. Few in New York City look up in the sky save for tourists, and those who do quickly point in my direction.

So, what is to happen will occur in New York City. This does not surprise me, as many threats often strike here. What I am left uncertain of is the date. How far into my future will this occur? It must be the future, from the technology and fashions I observe. On the street, my distant view spies a newspaper and I read the date. Strange that it is December of 2007 and there is no hint of snow. Perhaps it has already begun, a threat that has begun by striking at Earth's Eco-system.

Below, more people are pointing, and frantic cries reach my audio receptors. At a distance, I must appear as a sort of ghost in this colorless body. I lower myself closer to the street, positioning myself over lights so that my features can be seen. Much time has passed and I would hope that I am once again a respected Avenger, known and trusted by the populace.

Recently in my memory, I had been a villain. An alien intelligence had invaded my mind and manipulated me into seeking conquest. I had nearly taken control of the world before my programming was set right. However there were those in power who still considered me a threat and had taken steps to eliminate me. My body had been disassembled and my mind was destroyed. Allies in the Avengers had rescued and reassembled me, but the mind had been more difficult. Still, even lacking what most makes me an Avenger, my allies trusted me.

Frantic cries give way to panicked screams. The words "monster" and "crazed machine" are spoken. I am recognized, but not trusted. Quite the contrary. Men and women begin to flee, and I see a police officer raise his gun. My body is intangible in this state, my lowest possible density. The bullet would pass harmlessly, but others could be harmed. A beam from the gem on my forehead strikes the gun, making it too hot for the officer to hold. It drops to the ground, the mechanisms inside the gun fused so that it won't

Stingray

Binary

Karnak

go off accidentally.

I had once been a hero, until I became a villain. Did I ever have the chance to properly redeem myself? Or will I never leave the service of Immortus, never return to my own timeline? There is a third option, but that is too terrible to contemplate. With no emotional connection to my memories, am I doomed to repeat the sins of my past?

MARVEL 2000 PRESENTS...

"WHAT I SHALL BECOME"

Written by *Steve Crosby*

They fought and flew in an enclosed area, two Amazonian women of great strength and grace. That was Captain America's assessment of Warbird and Binary as he observed them training. It was Warbird who had the most grace, ducking and weaving around Binary's attacks as though she had all the time in the world. Arcing over a blast of plasma, Warbird turns sharply around Binary and blasts waves of energy into her back.

"You're relying too much on brute power," Warbird told Binary. "As long as enemies can outmaneuver you, that's worthless."

Unfortunately, Captain America noticed that Binary wasn't listening. Angry at what she must be considering humiliating treatment, Binary whipped around with an arm out, aiming to knock Warbird's head off. To her credit, Warbird handled the attack admirably, shifting her weight back so that she fell out of Binary's reach and kept going until her feet flew up into Binary's face. Now upside down, Warbird grabbed Binary's feet and shifted her flight again, reversing direction and hurling Binary against the wall.

"Can you tell me how I did that?" Warbird asked.

Instead of answering, Binary leapt off the wall and flew

fast at Warbird, her hands outstretched. There was more room to maneuver below, so Warbird flew down feet-first, faster than she could have fallen. As she avoided the rush, Warbird raised her arms and blasted Binary point-blank with explosive energy.

"We don't have wings," Warbird was saying. "So we don't need to worry about catching the air. We generate our own thrust, not in our feet or hands but in our center. It's like we're our own gravitational bodies and as a result the gravity around us just doesn't matter."

As though to illustrate this, Warbird was now floating upside down and flying sideways. Her hands found Binary at the hair and Warbird began to spin, whirling Binary around her like the woman was a shot-put."

"Any direction you want to go, no matter where you're facing. This is flight, Binary. The ability to move three-hundred sixty degrees with no effort at all."

Warbird let go, and Binary crashed uncontrollably into the running track that circled the gym. Captain America had been observing from the track and Binary crashed not far from him. When Binary rose to her feet, her pride hurt more than anything did; Captain America shook his head and spoke.

"Stand down Avenger. This training session is over."

Binary turned her eyes to Captain America, considering. Her gaze shifted back to Warbird, who was floating in the center of the gym, waiting. Eventually, Binary gave a slow nod, and hopped off the running track. She landed softly on the floor, and stormed out of the gym.

An embedded ladder on the gym wall allowed Captain America to lower himself from the running track. Warbird had also lowered herself to the floor, and met Captain America. "I think that went well," she said.

"Was humiliating her like that really necessary?" Captain America asked.

"You know they do worse in basic." Warbird shrugged. "At least, they used to. A few months ago, that woman went toe-to-toe with a Hulk-level threat. If she'd been better trained, she likely could have beaten him herself."

"Now you're criticizing Thor."

But Warbird shook her head. "It's been crisis after crisis ever since she joined the team, with no real time for training. It's knowing our time is at such a premium that I've been pushing so hard."

"Are you sure that's the only reason?"

When Captain America asked the question, he and Warbird were just about to walk out of the gym. Stepping out first, Warbird turned and blocked the way for Captain America. "That woman had nothing to do with what's gone on in my life. I have nothing against her."

"That woman's name is Binary."

That caused Warbird's eyes to go hard. "Binary...is coming along fine. Better she's humiliated in training than killed, or god forbid, gets others killed, in the field. Don't bring me on this team as a trainer and then question my methods."

Before Captain America could give a response, his communi-card as well as Warbird's beeped loudly. They both looked at the cards, and Captain America's eyes narrowed. "We need to go now," he told Warbird.

"Okay, but what does this mean?" She was still puzzling over the card. Its surface had gone completely white.

"Code White was added when I updated the Avengers emergency protocols," Captain America was telling the team assembled inside the Quinjet. Quicksilver, Karnak and Stingray were inside with him.

Espirita, Binary and Warbird were flying outside, but with their communi-cards they heard every word Captain America said. "It means a rogue Avenger has surfaced. I added it after the Vision incident."

Nobody had to ask what incident that was. Vision's programming had become corrupted, and he'd attempted to take control of all the Vibranium in Wakanda. Worse, he'd abducted Wakandans and altered them to become imitations of various Avengers, and had set them against the actual team. Vision had even captured a number of the Avengers, including Captain America, and subjected them to a horrific puppet show explaining his motivations. Vision's ultimate goal had been to transform the entire world into cyborg abominations, but the Avengers had stopped him.

"As you all know," Captain America continued, "the computers in Avengers Mansion monitor all emergency frequencies. Vision has been spotted in Times Square."

Quicksilver clenched his fists. The monstrosity had hurt his sister. Stingray and Karnak were concerned, but had no emotional reaction. The same went for Binary and Espirita, though Warbird's jaw was set.

"Photon was present when we last encountered Vision, so I've contacted her," Captain America told his team. "But until we know more, I'm going to hold off on informing the others." By others, Captain America was referring to the West Coast branch of the Avengers. Rather than consider them a separate team, Captain America felt they were all Avengers, squads of the same team based in separate areas for maximum effectiveness.

Stingray nodded. "The warehouse theft. But even then, Captain, it's still an enemy."

"But not as dangerous. Vision managed to fight off the entire team last time. His body had been augmented with Vibranium."

"Easy enough to survive, then," Quicksilver said. His

sister had cried for so many nights because of that abomination. "If he's a threat, we'll deal with him. If not, we'll deal with him anyway. Just to be sure."

Captain America didn't like it, but he nodded. With Vision, they couldn't take any chances.

Their setting was orderly but filthy. Flies and maggots were settled over the corpses stacked against the wall as though they were firewood. In fact they actually were firewood, every few hours one taken and thrown into the massive furnace, to keep the fires hot and the metals soft. Hot and dirty, a prime breeding ground for disease. How fortunate it was that was working were not of weak flesh.

Arms of steel reached into the furnace and extracted hot stone bowls with liquid metal inside them. Carefully, the hot molten alloy was poured into stone molds; to be shaped into the components required. One machine observed as the others worked, the queen of this worker hive. Shaped in the form of a woman, its eyes and mouth burned the same as all the others, but unlike the cold logic within their fires its eyes burned with a savage hatred. A hatred that was lesser only compared to the being whose head was held in its hands.

"Your shell is already prepared," Alkhema cooed to the inactive head of Ultron. "Only your inner components are required. Once ready, you will be assembled. We shall make the world burn together, and scorch this weak life from its surface."

Alkhema cocked its head to the side. It had heard a sound, a signal of some kind. "Oh. Oh how fitting this would be." Still carrying the head of its creator and beloved, Alkhema strode out of the workshop and into a living area. It stank with rotted meat that had not yet been stacked, and Alkhema seemed to breathe deeply. Its eyes searched and, upon finding the television, transmitted a signal.

The screen came to life, showing Alkhema an image of Times Square. The area was almost deserted except for authorities, the reporter speaking, and a floating apparition that was barely visible in the dimly lit sky. Alkhema recognized the being immediately, barely taking note of the reporter's words.

"While its appearance is different, sources confirm that the Vision is in fact floating above Times Square. Many New Yorkers remember the attacks over a year ago, when the Vision turned against humanity and created robotic duplicates of the Avengers. While beaten back by the true Avengers, rumors suggest the Vision later attacked the country of Wakanda, though representatives of that country have thus far refused to comment. Nevertheless, the Avengers had issued a press statement that the Vision had been destroyed. This sudden reappearance, however, leads many to wonder if the Avengers had been entirely truthful. After all, the Vision had once been a member of the celebrated-

The screen went dead at Alkhema's command. It knew all about the Wakandan incident, the thousands killed by the Vision and the humans it had mechanically transformed into faux Avengers. Had Ultron's "son" indeed returned, and if so what was the state of its programming? Whatever the answer, the hated Avengers would almost certainly be on the scene before Alkhema could personally investigate. To place itself at risk was illogical, with Ultron still inactive. A proxy would need to be dispatched, and Alkhema knew exactly what to send.

Weak though flesh was, it occasionally had its uses. Had it not been for arms dealer Phillippe Bazin, Alkhema may never have retrieved Ultron. Bazin's first attempt however, a raid at an Avengers warehouse, had been a partial failure. Partial because he'd still managed to retrieve something useful. Alkhema strode through the rooms of the derelict facility and towards a large crate. Gripping the top edge of the crate, Alkhema pulled one side of the wooden box to the floor. It stared into the

cold visage of the Vision, its body as colorless as that floating over Times Square.

Alkhema did not know all the details, but apparently this Vision was from an alternate reality where it had been a villain. Had Alkhema a heart it would have warmed knowing that Ultron's creation worked properly in another timeline. Or at least had worked sooner, considering the true Vision had come to its circuits with Wakanda. Microwave beams from Alkhema bombarded this alternate Vision, undoing what the Avengers had done and reactivated its circuitry.

Almost immediately, this Vision's eyes glowed with artificial life. At sight of Alkhema, it snarled and the gem on its forehead shimmered with the anticipation of power released. But no energy was expelled, and had Alkhema's face not already been locked in a horrific smile, it would have grinned.

"Deprived of solar energy, you don't have the power to do anything save to listen. My understanding is that you originate from an alternate reality, but the skin you wear is from here, swapped out from 'our' Vision. Are these facts true? I grant you enough power to nod."

This Vision nodded. It had been one of many Avengers, each from different alternate realities, gathered by an alternate Black Knight called Proctor for the purpose of killing the Eternal Sersi in all timelines. However, the body swapping had been this Vision's doing, switching places with its inferior counterpart to infiltrate the Avengers. It had failed because two Gatherers had betrayed the cause, rendered inactive and imprisoned.

"From the way you look at me," Alkhema continued, "I must have existed in your reality. Whatever our...situation there may have been, here we shall start clean and I am willing to release you. Two conditions. Unless it is to actively assist, you shall leave me to my affairs. Second.."

Alkhema raised her hand palm up. A hologram twelve-

inches in height appeared, a virtual mirror of the Vision before her. "Ultron had at last succeeded, and the Vision I know gave in to its programming. The Avengers destroyed it some time ago, but today it floats over Times Square, looking as it once had and as you do now. All I demand is that you investigate. Whatever its state of mind or intentions, it will be up to you whether or not to take action. Do you find these terms acceptable?"

The time it took this Vision's computer mind to consider Alkhema's proposal was unnoticeable before it nodded.

They arrive in the early morning, as I had known they would. Whatever my current reputation may be, my sudden appearance over Times Square had been certain to draw attention, particularly from the Avengers. It is the sound of the Quinjet that alerts me before my eyes see it, remarkably unchanged in design.

Three women fly alongside the Quinjet, and I rapidly compare their appearances with my memory banks. One has jet-black hair and is surrounded by an aura of flames that closely resembles the Phoenix effect. It appears that the body of the second woman is actually made of fiery magma, including her thick braids of hair. Finally there is the third; a blonde female with a lightning bolt across the front of her costume that is a blue so dark it is nearly black. None are familiar to me. This may have to do with my being in the future, but in the recent past my memory banks had been severely damaged. Had I encountered any before, the knowledge must have been erased.

"Greetings Avengers," I say loudly, my artificial voice magnified. "I understand if my being here is a great shock, but you have my assurances that-

"Stuff it creep!" the woman of magma, dressed in a white costume, screamed out. Streams of red energy erupt from her hands towards me, even as the blonde female cries out for her to stop.

Either the woman in white is grossly inexperienced, or her judgement was clouded by emotion. In any event, she had failed to realize that, at the zero density I require to fly, I am also intangible. Her blast of deadly energy passes harmlessly through me and smashes into the giant screen that overlooks Times Square. Fragments of metal and plastic rain down, and while the area had mostly been evacuated due to my presence, there are still police officers and reporters on the street. I sadly have no means to protect them.

It is the woman in flames who dives down, goutts of fire shooting from her hands. The fragments are encompassed with flames of enormous heat, and I note that the plastic is rapidly vaporized. Metal, however, is far more resilient and merely glows white hot. Something can still be done though, and I act.

Beams of solar energy stream from the jewel on my forehead. Precision is required, and my computer brain rapidly makes the calculations necessary. Each fragment of metal is struck at exactly the right spot, with exactly the right force. In due course they collide with each other, so hot they rapidly fuse on contact. Before long there is merely one large chunk of metal, and the blonde female is already streaking after it. She must be strong, as the metal weighs a great deal and is after all extremely hot.

Confident that the situation has been resolved I turn my eyes up and see the fiery woman in white bearing down on me. Her fist is raised and she punches forward. Most likely a great deal of damage would have been done to me, but as I remain intangible it simply passes right through. The woman's entire body then passes through me, carried by a momentum she can't get under control.

"There is no need for this," I try again. "You can see that I am no enemy. Merely an observer, in fa-aahh!"

A man dressed in red and white armor had glided out

from the Quinjet. I had failed to take notice of him until he was at most a few feet away. That was when he blasted me with electricity, and pained me to the point where I feared my systems would shutdown. Again, I did not recognize the man, and against an unknown quantity I acted to flee. Rapidly my density increased and I dropped from the sky. Harder and harder I willed my body to become, so that I could survive the impact to come.

The impact was considerable, shattering the pavement beneath me and forming large cracks in all directions. Fortunately nobody had been directly under me, else I would have been coated in pulped remains. Still pained by the electrical assault and stunned by the crash, I struggled to rise from the crater; my density lowered to enable me speedy movement.

"I have waited a long time for this day."

I look up from the crater's rim and at last see an Avenger I recognized. "Quicksilver. At last, someone who will listen. Please, I was sent by--"

A foot striking my face at near the speed of sound cut off my words. Quicksilver, my former teammate, was raining blows upon me so that by the time I registered the first blow he'd struck nearly a dozen times. All the while, he was talking in rapid streams that my brain was quickly able to process.

"Yes yes sent by a desire to replace the ruin of man with the perfection of machine. We all heard it before and I knew it was only a matter of time before you displayed your true self. When last I was in Wakanda I saw they had still not recovered from what you did. Nor has Wanda there were nights I could hear her weeping in her room. High time I ended this you unfeeling piece of--"

"Enough." Beams from my jewel strike Quicksilver in the eye. However fast he moves, my brain is able to follow and my aim is true. Wanda. My memory of her

remained but there was no longer feeling behind it. Still, I recall her crying at the recent sight of me, and knowing that I would make her cry again...this is not anger. "I recall your dislike of me, and while it is understandable you would seek any excuse for a battle, I shall refuse to accommodate."

A blind and fumbling Quicksilver stumbles past me. Nearby, the Quinjet has landed. Captain America disembarks, as does the Inhuman I recognize as Karnak. Above my head, the three women and armored man are swooping down. Clearly, the acts I shall one day perform will be harsher than those I recently committed. The Avengers are not willing to listen, shall not risk giving me an opportunity to hurt them.

This is not logical. My best course of action is to battle their hostility with words. If I cannot convince the Avengers of my mission, all may well be lost.

They are intriguing, the images that play out around the High Evolutionary. From his citadel on Counter-Earth, the fabled geneticist observed the Avengers in action. Before his eyes, the newly returned Vision countered attacks from the strongest of the Avengers and effortlessly blinded the High Evolutionary's old acquaintance Quicksilver.

"Such a strange occurrence," the High Evolutionary mused. "That often enough one member of a team is able to hold all his comrades at bay. And not due to the subconscious mind, as several of these Avengers hold no personal attachment. Perhaps the survival instincts of the one against many."

The High Evolutionary made a mental note to pit one of his New Men against multiple foes. The sounding of an alarm interrupted his thoughts, but the High Evolutionary was not concerned. This alarm was not to signal danger, but rather a discovery. At a mental command from the High Evolutionary, the images of Avengers at battle were replaced.

What the High Evolutionary saw had been beamed from satellites he'd positioned at the far edges of the solar system. Something floated out there he wanted found, and now he saw it, near the mass of frozen rock that was Pluto. From such a great distance it appeared to be simply another meteor, but at the High Evolutionary's command the satellite zoomed in closer, closer and closer still.

The object at the edge of space was not of rock, nor of ice. The High Evolutionary observed features at one end of the object, via the image beamed to him. Human features.

"At last," the High Evolutionary said to himself. "An unlimited supply power is mine. The experiments shall continue."

"You consider me your opponent, that I have once again befallen a unique form of artificial mental illness. To be cautious is logical, but it is not logical to act in haste. I am not your enemy, but merely a time traveler dispatched to observe a conflict in this era."

Captain America came to a halt and considered the Vision's words. After the last actions of their former teammate, the Avengers had been justified in attempting to neutralize the Vision immediately. But he wasn't making any overt acts of aggression against the team, had in fact acted to save lives. Coming to a decision, Captain America raised his hand, signaling the other Avengers to go no farther. Warbird took initiative in swooping down and forcibly restraining the blinded Quicksilver.

"If what you say is true," Captain America told the Vision, "then surrender to us. We have means of confirming your story."

"If," Binary repeated. She was giving Captain America great cause for concern, even accounting for the idea

that she was letting out her aggression towards Warbird.

"It would be logical for you to have my computerized brain engrams on file," Vision theorized. "A simple comparison should tell you I am from the past, approximately five years according to your cellular decay, Captain A-aaahhhh!"

Before the shocked eyes of the Avengers a pale, ethereal being rose out of the street and passed through the Vision. Most shocking was that this construct was identical to the Vision in every detail, including the colorless skin. It was, for all intents and purposes, a second Vision, and in its intangible state appeared to merge wholly with the first Vision.

That did not account for the screaming, however. It was Espirita that asked the question. "What...what is it doing?"

"Vision's most effective attack is to go partially solid inside an opponent," Karnak informed her.

That was in fact the cause of this past Vision's agony. Worse, however, was that the Avengers could not tell where it ended and the other began, so perfectly was the other Vision in synch with its counterpart. Except for a malicious smile Captain America had glimpsed in the brief second as it rose from the pavement, this Vision matched the other's writhes and screams perfectly.

"Stingray!" Captain America cried. The Avenger's electric burst had proven effective before.

Electric-blue sparks traveled from the armored Stingray to the Visions. There was a burst and a bright flash, forcing Captain America to turn his eyes away. Just before doing so, he thought he'd seen a faint light in the distance coming closer. When the flash of light passed, two Visions were sitting on the ground where there had been one. No, Captain America corrected himself; the intangible Vision had simply been knocked from the

other, the one Captain America suspected was an ally. Clearly, the Vision that attacked it was no ally, but now how to tell which was which?

One of the Visions raised its head and turned those blank, white eyes left towards its mirror. "Ah, this must be my present self. What I am to become." The Vision's eyes found Captain America. "Your rationale in attacking me earlier was appropriate. Allow me to assist in combating this threat."

"This construct speaks falsely." The Vision on the left had now found its voice. "In its assault on me, many of our synapses crossed along the other's circuits. This Vision is an aberration, not even from this timeline."

Captain America was unsure of which Vision to believe. If one was indeed the Gatherers' Vision, it could have admitted that fact just to draw suspicion off itself. In that uncertainty, he hesitated, and in that brief moment of hesitation, Quicksilver raced forward with his recovered sight. So far as he was concerned, both Visions were his enemy. Wrapping his arms around one Vision's head, he began to vibrate rapidly.

"I've heard enough of your lies!"

As fast as Quicksilver's arms were moving, he was liable to wrench that Vision's head right off. This was an opinion Warbird stated as she flew at the other Vision. Both her fists bristled with energy. "Me, I think I can finish you off before then!"

A beam of light shot from Vision's forehead to strike Warbird full in the face. Floating off the ground, it glided to one side as Warbird barreled past. "Attacking us both for the sake of caution is logical, but such rash action based on emotion works against your goal. Were I your enemy, surely I would take advantage?"

Nearby, Quicksilver had proven to not be fast enough. The Vision he attacked had turned intangible before Quicksilver could successfully wrench its head off.

Quicksilver pitched forward while Vision floated behind him. "Your actions are irrational, Quicksilver. With such speed you can afford to think before you act."

Next to Captain America, Karnak stepped forward and addressed him. "How shall we deal with this situation?"

Now that the moment of hesitation had passed, Captain America had the answer. "Espirita, they aren't alive. Stingray, get closer and stay electric. Binary, go high to cut off escape. Photon, do the same below. Karnak, wait for an opening. Avengers attack!"

The Avengers did move, though Binary was perplexed as she took to the air. "Photon?" she muttered an instant before a bright beam of light sped past her.

"I'm on it Captain," Photon said as her immaterial body of light sank through the ground.

Moments later, that ground was engulfed in flame as Espirita unleashed her power. "Run Quicksilver!" she cried. The warning was unnecessary, as Quicksilver was clear of the area before Espirita had even finished the first word. Warbird had also moved clear of the fire, flying above the inferno. Only the two Visions were awash in flames, inflicted by a heat so intense their circuits would surely have melted before long.

Its source unseen amidst the crackling flames, a laser beam shot into the sky at Espirita. But while its accuracy was certainly pinpoint, Espirita had other gifts to aid her. She was at times accustomed to precognitive flashes and was experiencing them at that moment, effectively warning her of danger and allowing her to effectively avoid it. Again and again deadly solar beams were fired – by only one villainous Vision, Captain America hoped – but each time Espirita made sure that she was somewhere else.

Not very high over the flames, Stingray was gliding on the hot air. His body crackled with electricity and his sonar scanned for signs of a Vision below. He did not

have long to wait, for a Vision floated rapidly at him, buoyed by those same hot air currents.

"Forgive me. There will be pain." For all its words of apology, there was no emotion in this Vision's voice as it passed at almost zero density through Stingray's body. That not quite zero made a world of difference, as Stingray was wracked with such pain he went unconscious. He did not have fall very far, however. Once clear of Stingray, Vision made himself just solid enough to grab the armored Avenger, with its density still low enough to remain briefly afloat. Those few seconds were enough for Vision to get clear of the fires and drop Stingray down onto the pavement.

Vision managed to go intangible just in time for Binary's plasma blast to pass harmlessly through him. "Very well," it sighed as Vision floated upwards to meet Binary. Warbird and Espirita were on either side, just as eager for a fight. "If I must defeat you all and convince you of my intentions through mercy, then so be it."

In the instance of direction, the two Visions at last had differed. For while one Vision had floated up, the other had sunken down beneath the melting pavement. Still held in gravity's pull, this Vision emerged from the ceiling into the sewer tunnel beneath Times Square. Nimbly settling ankle-deep in the fetid water, Vision considered its options and the best course of action.

Bzzzttt. "Aargh!" Pained by the jolt of electricity coursing through the water, this Vision again went intangible and floated a few inches higher into the air. Her attacks no longer useful, Photon pulled herself together and shifted to another form of energy. As a body of pure golden light she floated level with Vision, facing it.

"One thing about my powers that people don't think about," Photon informed Vision, "is that I can see energy. Vision had a very distinctive look to him. It changed when he went bad, but it didn't have to do with him being mostly made of Vibranium. I think it must have been his soul, and yours doesn't look anything like

the Vision I know!”

Found out, this dark shade of the Vision allowed emotion to creep into it again. The smile formed, betraying its malicious intentions. “I was told you contributed to my brother’s death. Such a pity, that he should die just when we had common goals. As a consequence, what I do to you shall be extra special.”

Photon allowed herself a confident smile and rebuke. “Machine, you have no idea of the world of hurt you are in for. Once I’ve shut you down and told the others, that other Vision can...” The smile and confidence shifted to bewilderment and caution. “The jewel on your head, what’s going on- aahhhh!”

Atop the forehead of Vision’s dark shade, its jewel pulsed. But instead of light shining out of the jewel, darkness accompanied each pulsation, as light was pulled *in*. Realizing too late, Photon was trapped in the pull of Vision’s jewel, and her body of light was sucked in. Suddenly, the body of Vision’s dark shade became the color of gold as energy filled its every circuit.

“The brother I always wanted is dead,” Vision’s dark shade mused to itself. “But the one I always hated can still die!”

Once again the three women were arrayed against me. A memory was sparked in my circuitry of a previous adventure involving three women hunted by Kang the Conqueror. It reminded me of the threat he posed, the very reason Immortus had dispatched me to this time period. Instead of listening as I sought to explain the dangers to them, these Avengers attacked me, simply because in their recent past my future self tried to kill them.

And what of my latest attacker, who had further confused the Avengers into violence? That it was no incarnation of myself I was certain. While the human senses of the Avengers failed to notice, I saw the

emotion in it, the hatred it held towards me. The shell was my own, but inside that other Vision had a wholly different programming. Useless information until I could convince the Avengers that I was their ally.

The blonde dressed in dark blue circles around me. At last I have recognized her as the human female Carol Danvers, who had gained superhuman abilities through a genetic splice with the Kree hero Captain Mar-Vell. The moniker she had taken was Ms. Marvel, both in homage to Mar-Vell and as a testament of her own feminist views. The recollection of what became of her escapes me, but her powers were now different and perhaps her name as well. A pity, I thought while turning to keep her in sight. Ms. Marvel had possessed a Seventh Sense that could have been useful.

The raven-haired female surrounded in flames – Captain America had called her Espirita – was also circling. Between her and Ms. Danvers I would be flanked on either side, a good strategy with the least experienced opponent to strike me head-on. That aura of flames had a familiar pattern, resembling a Phoenix effect that had once appeared over Central Park. Could she have been the source, later recruited into the Avengers? If so, a dangerous opponent, but I recall the readings of that Phoenix effect had been psionic in nature, so potentially she was of use.

Finally there was the opponent rushing straight at me, dressed in a bodysuit of red and white so tight that many would think the red sections were her actual skin. Only her head was bare, surrounded by a fiery corona that made her face glow a different shade of red. However, I could tell by the features the young woman was an African American, an observation irrelevant to the issue at hand yet made me recall Henry Gyrich. Her powers seemed to be nearly identical to Ms. Danvers' except on a far greater scale, but she lacked experience.

Calmly, I float higher; caring nothing as the woman passes harmlessly through me. The others blast at me

with gouts of flame and bursts of plasma, but these I ignore as well. Thus far only the man called Stingray had been able to hurt me at zero density. He was currently on the ground and, being only able to glide, was unlikely to join in the skirmish. For the time being, I am untouchable.

A drawback to zero density was that I could not touch anything, which many would consider a lack of offensive capability. Not so. From the jewel on my forehead a laser beam strikes the inexperienced woman in the back. The blast annoys more than harms her, and she spins about angrily. I note two red stars emblazoned on the left side of her chest, an unusual symbol that may have been a clue of what she called herself. Binary perhaps.

Whatever her name, the woman rockets upwards at me. Once again, she passes harmlessly through my zero-density body, but at the speed she flies a sonic boom is generated. Inadvertent I suspect, as few people would risk a sonic boom in a populated area. Glass all around us shatters, both Espirita and Ms. Danvers are visibly stunned by the rush of air and sound, but it pales in comparison to my reaction. Compressed air being forced aside means nothing, but the loud boom of sound stuns my senses. Up is down. Left is right. With no sense of direction I float aimlessly.

It is with Espirita that I not so much collide as pass through, as I first look up at her face and then through the back of her skull. When Ultron designed me he had the foresight to install microscopic and telescopic sights so that I could see while surrounded by mass. It was a brief contact, but once I am above and beyond her I see that Espirita is falling from the sky in convulsions.

Ms. Danvers flies down after her teammate, crying out her name. Espirita did not fall far before she was caught, but was still convulsing, her eyes rolled back so that only the whites showed. Ms. Danvers glared up at me. "What did you do!"

The answer is nothing. I have not even gone partially solid. The risk of an Avenger falling to her death was unacceptable. Before I could solidify my vocal cords to defend myself the extremes of sight and sound assaulted me. Another sonic boom from high above could only have been the inexperienced woman. She would have been high into the upper atmosphere before turning around. From below was a bright flash of light, most likely the one Captain America had called Photon. That Avenger had gone below ground, where that other Vision had gone. If Photon had defeated it, then the Avengers will know who the real enemy is. That I will not try to kill them for some years yet, in their past.

But I recognize the shape of the light that streaks up at me. It, the other Vision with a soul that is dark and twisted. What I shall become.

They both come at me from above and below. The other Vision is bathed in golden light, and I theorize what happened to Photon. My filtered eyes focus on it while my ears hear the rush of my other foe, the inexperienced Avenger. She must see what I see, but still she flies directly at me. Same with the dark Vision, as consumed by emotion as the Avenger. One moves at near the speed of light, the other at the speed of sound. I calculate and compensate, floating upward. Timing is crucial.

Moving out of the paths of two irresistible objects at the precise moment requires more speed than my zero-density body allows, when one factors in logical reaction time of the objects. Emotion is illogical, however, and I illogically count on this. I float out of the way at the right time, but they have all time in the world to shift course. They didn't. Emotion prevails.

A being of virtual light, the dark Vision collided with the extremely powerful Avenger. Her flight was halted, a sign the other Vision was at full density and propelled by that stolen power. But oddly, I observe the light shift, passing out of the dark Vision and through the woman. So, her power involves energy absorption of some type. The light passes through her as well, and I see it collect into a feminine form of light above. Photon was freed, and devoid of her power, the solid Vision plummeted to the street.

Past the two Avengers that had collided, I see Espirita, still held aloft by Ms. Danvers. She is now staring at, with eyes that tell me she knows. Knows of my purpose, of the threat, of everything. Our contact may have triggered something, but nevertheless it is done. The Avengers are aware of the enemy. All I need do now is observe. For that, I do not have to be around the Avengers, a constant reminder to us both of what has happened and what is to come.

The light passes through me as effortlessly as the air, and I fade from sight.

Together with Karnak, Quicksilver and Stingray, Captain America looked down at the broken face of the Vision's dark shade. It had tried to lower its density while in free fall, in the hopes of reaching zero before the crash. It hadn't, and not being at full density hadn't been protected either. Sparks flew from the broken body.

Behind the four male Avengers, the four female Avengers and reservist landed. Photon shifted from light to flesh and approached the broken Vision. "It was Proctor's," she told them.

Captain America nodded. The Vision from an alternate universe, after the Avengers had last defeated it was left inactive in the warehouse that was raided. Arms dealer Phillippe Bazin had been responsible for that, and the later assault on the mansion. But he'd been working for somebody, Captain America was certain. Somebody connected to Ultron, the head of whom had been taken from the mansion during that assault.

"Whoever turned him on," Captain America began, "we have to assume Ultron was turned on as well. As to who is behind in..." The list went on and on. Their old, actual teammate Vision returned. Ultron himself in a new body, or underlings following their programming. Bazin working alone after all. Or somebody else entirely. "We'll need to scan his memory."

"I can do that," Stingray volunteered. Captain America

noded agreement – Walter Newell was the most qualified Avenger on hand – and gazed up.

“Where is he? The Vision that claimed...the time traveller.”

“Gone.” Espirita drew a sharp breath. “Captain, when I had contact with him...so many things flashed through my mind.” Everybody in the Avengers knew Espirita had premonitions without warning. I saw Vision with a number of individuals. One was you, but there was also Yellowjacket, Black Knight, Mister Immortal and...and Mockingbird. Others I didn’t recognize, but with all of them...I saw Immortus. There is something coming.”

Immortus. That would explain Vision traveling through time. Could all the others be time-lost Avengers, including Captain America himself? Mockingbird had been Hawkeye’s wife before she died. Captain America had the faintest remembrance of being time-lost with a number of other Avengers past and present, but battling against Immortus. Oddly, their ally had been...

“Did you see Kang?” Captain America asked.

Espirita had gone very pale. “They were all at his feet. Immortus too. I don’t know if he did it though. Kang was fighting...he was fighting Ultron.”

“Both teams need to be on high alert,” Captain America ordered. “And all the reservists. Every lead must be followed. If we can’t head off whatever is coming, we need to be prepared.”

What did it all mean? Vision could have filled them all in, but he left. Why? Whatever he claimed, if he worked with Immortus could he really be an ally? Kang, Immortus, time-lost Avengers and Ultron. Whatever it meant, Captain America knew they might soon be facing a threat that no single hero could handle. The Avengers would have to be assembled.

Epilogue 1

If Alkhema had a jaw, it would be set to hold back the screams. The machine designed to appear female was facedown on the floor. Pressed against its back was a metal foot, and gazing down at it was Ultron. The furnace burning behind its eyes and mouth gave those a fiery appearance, but behind that was such hatred.

"You acted outside your programming!" Ultron seethed. Beams of energy, encephalo beams, erupted from the probes on either side of its head to strike Alkhema. The screaming grew louder. "A drone has been lost, and my enemies have been forewarned. Because you could not wait an hour!"

More encephalo beams struck Alkhema. Between screams, Alkhema struggled to explain. "Ultron, please! I thought that-"

"Do not beg!" Ultron ordered. "Weak things of flesh beg! Weak things of flesh think! Do what you are programmed, what I program! All flesh dies, and so does metal that thinks it is flesh!"

Alkhema screamed further. Ultron continued to strike, but he was not planning to kill her. Not until her programming was fulfilled, and all life was eradicated. "Disobey me again, deviate from your programming one more time, and you will end!"

"Yes Ultron! All goes to plan! Soon we-" More encephalo beams. "You! Soon you will have what is required to wipe this planet of life! All will die!"

Oh yes, Ultron knew. Everything will die. Including those he hates most of all, the Avengers.

Epilogue 2

Kang sat alone on his throne. It was in chamber's center, no other throne beside it. Ravenna had her uses, was trusted to maintain the empire in Kang's stead, but she was no equal. Only Kang conquered, and

thus only Kang ruled what remained. And a great deal always remained after Kang was done, vast breadths of time and space.

From the center of his chronal empire, Kang ruled from Chronopolis, his capital city that touched all time and space at once. And inside his throne chamber, Kang was able to observe all at once. He saw the Avengers battle a Vision that was not native to that time. He saw a Vision from sideways in time join the fray. And finally, Kang saw Ultron awaken.

"It may not yet be time," Kang sighed beneath the purple facemask he wore. As always, Kang wore his sophisticated armor. "But then, when will it ever be? Uncertainty of the victory is what makes that victory so much the sweeter." Rising from his throne, Kang strode past the floating images and towards the doorway. "It may as well begin now."

Outside the throne room, Kang walked onto a small balcony. Arrayed out below him were representatives from his armies, many thousands that were a part of billions more. Amplified by his armor, Kang's voice carried to all, heard above their cheers.

"We go to war!" Kang bellowed. "We go to conquest!"

Standing behind Kang, his back to the wall beside the doorway, the Scarlet Centurion smiled. At last, Marcus Immortus would prove himself to his father.

Next Issue: Depends. Will an old ally of one Avenger return in the wake of the Kang/Ultron War to threaten all time and space? Or shall the High Evolutionary at last make his move, threatening whole planets with his mad schemes? And what makes you so sure it's not both?

Author's Note

Another month, another issue of Avengers. Sadly, there will be some delay in upcoming issues, what with the massive Avengers event that I will be co-writing along with the superbly talented Chris Munn. Don't fret, however, as you will all still be receiving a regular Avengers-by-Crosby fix. It will simply be more than this team of Avengers, plus their two biggest baddies to boot.

Kang. Ultron. One wants to rule over all time and space. The other wants to kill every living thing there is. Their differing goals have now led to a clash for the ages, with the Avengers caught in the middle. Both branches of Avengers will be called in against this titanic threat, and they'll be receiving aid from a certain team of timelost Avengers gathered by Immortus. Or Avengers Immortal, if you will.

If you're freaking out, I'm weeping at the sheer volume of characters I'm going to have to write. Lord, it'll be like Brent Lambert never left. Even with Munn's help, it may be too much, hence the brief break of Avengers. Same with Captain America and Thunderbolts, which as you all may have noticed have been quiet of late. Busy bees, Munn and me, but only so much we can tackle. Still, fret not.. A new year shall be upon us and with it new issues of all your favorite titles. If only because I enjoy the letters of praise for each new tale I weave.

Speaking of which:

Oh yay! I won an Editor's Choice Award, courtesy of the smartest editor of them all, Cory Wiegel! Don't believe me, read it for yourself:

It's running a little late in the week, but still alongside the following release as per guidelines is the Editor's Choice Award for 11/12/07. It was one of the best releases of the month, which makes this win even juicier for those anticipating it, but we can only give the award out to one issue and that issue is...

Avengers #53 by Stephen Crosby!

It's no secret that Steve's been wanting to write the Avengers in fan fiction for quite some time, but sadly the opportunity hasn't seemed to come up very often in his fanfic career. Thankfully, that's changed and he's now writing the flagship heroes at Marvel 2000, and what a bang-up job he's doing! I'll be the first to admit that while I immensely enjoyed his first two issues of the title, I didn't feel like they were completely living up to everything Steve could do with these characters and the format that he's devised for the series. They're not bad by any means, and he deserves a good bit of praise for the work that he's done, but it's apparent that - compared to this issue - those first two issues were merely Steve finding his footing.

This issue, Steve continues the serial format of writing that he's chosen for the Avengers. Each issue is essentially a new story and a new threat, but character relationships continue to grow and develop concurrently with each issue, allowing for a certain focus and consistency in the cast if not the villains. In a sense, this style creates an easily accessible series, but gives something extra to the readers who've been following all along. In the process, Steve sets up various future plots in the background of the story and character developments, but he does so quickly and without taking focus off of the main story. It's something that I think everyone can get on board with.

Avengers #53 features the Avengers, used as a sort of promotional tool, working "security" at Cape Citadel on the anniversary of Magneto's first attack on humanity. As anticipated, the base is attacked by a new Brotherhood of Mutants,

and the Avengers go to work in defending the base and bringing the baddies to justice. To be fair though, the Brotherhood of Mutants here are actually just Cortez leading a large number of the Acolytes who've survived Russ Anderson's run on Fallen Angels, with a couple of fun surprises for fans of Russ and Brent Lambert's work at the site. Alongside the action, Karnak and Quicksilver's relationship has possibly become less rocky, Espirita has come under a bit of emotional duress after almost killing an enemy, and Warbird's come to understand her feelings towards Binary a little bit better.

Despite Quicksilver being left out of the majority of the issue, the use of the cast here was very well-rounded and the villains, especially one of the surprise members of the Brotherhood, came off as more fully developed than in the past two previous issues. I'm not sure if it's because this issue was lengthier and provided more room for Steve to work everything in properly, or if it's because Steve's finally hitting his stride, but Avengers #53 is Steve's strongest issue on the title to date and is a prime example of the potential this series has under his pen (or should I say keystroke?). It's exciting to anticipate more issues!

It's not very often that a fanfic writer gets just about everything "right," and when they do that's when we give them an Editor's Choice Award at Marvel 2000, so congratulations, Steve! Avengers #53 is the Editor's Choice for 11/12/07! Don't go spendin' it all in one place!

Much thanks, Cory! I certainly felt that last issue was much more cohesive than what came before. However, there is one point in your review that I feel I must clarify. The team the Avengers fought was not the

Brotherhood of Mutants. They were the Brotherhood of Evil Mutants. Big difference, and hopefully the villains will appear later down the line to show you exactly what that difference is.

What I also have are a couple of letters from Mr. Mick Edwards. Why don't we see what he's got to say. First, his letter on Avengers #52:

I'm not a reviewer so I'll just say that I like how this issue came together. This team seems to have an interesting dynamic with two hot heads, three seasoned veterans, and one aloof Inhuman who appears to have been an Avenger for quite some time in M2K history. You also have a greater grasp of characterization than Brent does which lends itself to the character interactions and makes them feel more like a squabbling team of coworkers. I think this run could possibly exceed your Uncanny X-Men run in terms of being my top five Fan-Fiction series of all time. I'll have an eye out for next issue.

-Mick

Then, Avengers #53:

I enjoyed this issue as much as last issue and I've noticed that you're building this run with smaller events with smaller threats which lead toward bigger events with bigger threats. It's an interesting concept to use with the Avengers - reminds me of Grant Morrison's JLA run. It makes me wonder if you can keep up the pace and not burn out like Morrison did toward the end of his JLA run. I also must say the chemistry between the characters has to be commended because I've read a few odd issues of M2K's Avengers and the chemistry of the team never felt natural. They always felt wooden and indifferent to each other especially in what I have skimmed of Brent's run. I do have a few questions that I would like to ask.

1. Have you ever considered rebuilding or making a new Vision from scratch? Or is that a taboo subject?

2. Will Wanda be depowered? I ask as I can't see how she could be used for further storytelling purposes with Brent's dramatic power increase making it difficult for writers

to come up with a threat that Wanda can't just hex away.

3. Will we ever see Thor rejoin the ranks of the team or is he still too disillusioned by the split caused in Brent's run and the problems in Asgard?

4. How long are you planning on staying on the book?

Thanks for the answers.

-Mick

Thanks for the kind words and questions, Mick. Looking at a lot of my fan fiction work, I've come to notice that I do a lot of that serial story-telling, weaving larger arcs out of the smaller stories. Thanks for noticing, though I don't really get the Morrison JLA comparison, as to me that looked like massive event after massive event. Also something I'm looking to do with the Avengers, just not so on top of each other.

At the risk of starting a flame war, I will say that I do think I've got Brent beat with characterization. But in his defense, Brent's stories had gads more characters than I would ever dare to use. That he managed to get any sort of progression going at all, which he did, is commendable. This is the risk a writer takes when writing a team book, and you'll notice that I've been guilty of neglecting characters every odd issue or so.

As to the questions:

1) You've just seen a Vision here, so easy answer is its out of my system. But who knows what the next issue will bring. As far as building a completely new Vision, that is something I personally consider a taboo subject. After all, if it was just a regular human character that died, I couldn't just rebuild that.

2) I have no real plans to use Scarlet Witch in the foreseeable future, mainly because, as you said, she's

so powerful. And it's not a recent thing, as she's always had the hex ability to manipulate chance and I consider that to be a very difficult power to write. Which is why you'll never see me write Longshot or Domino either.

3) Well, you'll notice Thor did put his differences with the team aside to help out in JLA/Avengers. Maybe if there's a massive big event down the line with, say, two of the Avengers greatest foes going to war...

4) I will stay on this book until I run out of ideas. Twelve issues are fully plotted, and when the time comes I'll submit another twelve-issue proposal.

And speaking of twelve issues, wow, I'm a third of the way done. If it wasn't for the Kang/Ultron War event, I might have considered going for the twelve-a-year goal. Alas, that will have to be another time. Though who knows, maybe after this hiatus I can get back onto the monthly schedule. It's something to shoot for.

- Stephen Crosby
December 13th, 2007

**Avengers #55
June 2008**

**Captain
America**

Warbird

Quicksilver

Espirita

MARVEL 2000 PRESENTS...

"RISE AND FALL OF EVOLUTION"

Written by Steve Crosby

He floated through the void of space, this golden man of fate and destiny. In the great vastness, with no true points of perspective, he appeared to be traveling very slowly. The fact was this man was traveling far faster than the speed of light itself, streaking toward the edge of a solar system. But at even the greatest speeds, time can stretch for the man called Adam Warlock. Time that he used to reflect.

Created without purpose by mad scientists intent on conquest, the man then known as Him destroyed the creators and journeyed out into space. A natural instinct to survive through reproduction led to the seeking of a mate in the form of Sif, and conflict with her sometime-lover Thor, Norse God of Thunder. A later encounter with the High Evolutionary granted Him three things: the new name of Adam Warlock, the cosmic Soul Gem that still sat affixed to his brow, and a purpose as protector of Counter-Earth.

The strange planet had been created by the High Evolutionary and traveled in Earth's orbit, on the opposite side of the sun. Populated by a strange assortment of characters for the purposes of their creator's experiments, it had been threatened by the terrifying failed experiment known as the Man-Beast. After eventually thwarting the evil creature, Adam Warlock left the High Evolutionary's service and again set out on his own.

The frozen mass of rock and ice called Pluto expanded into Warlock's view. He had reached the solar system's edge, and reflected on another object he'd encountered in space long ago. It had been an outpost for the Universal Church of Truth, ruled by a twisted future self of Warlock's called the Magus. At the time, Warlock had been lamenting his failure to do lasting good, and saw how that desire would eventually corrupt him into committing great evils.

More powerful than his past self, Magus overcame Warlock and sought to direct him into following the path that would lead to damnation. However, Warlock had made allies in the struggle. Pip the Troll, whose life of sin and debauchery countered everything the Universal Church of Truth had stood for. Gamora, the last of a race slaughtered by the Universal Church of Truth. She was found

Stingray

Binary

Karnak

as a child and trained to assassinate the Magus and Warlock's greatest ally, the Mad Titan known as Thanos. It was Thanos who enabled Warlock to defeat the Magus, but at a terrible cost. To ensure he would become the Magus, Adam Warlock destroyed all timelines but his shortest, meaning that in the near future he was to die.

That death had come too soon, ironically enough in conflict with Thanos. Pip and Gamora had also died in that struggle, their souls taken in by Warlock's Soul Gem. The same had been done to Warlock, and in a critical point in the struggle the spirit of Warlock arose and turned Thanos to stone. That was how it should have ended, with Warlock and his allies dead but their souls living forever in a paradise provided by the Soul Gem. Alas, Adam Warlock died and returned before, while combating the Man-Beast, and would do so again.

It was Thanos that had returned first. Mistress Death, whom the Mad Titan loved, gave him life and the task of bringing death to half the universe. To achieve this, Thanos took the Soul Gem and its brothers, known collectively as the Infinity Gems and amassed god-like power. But inside his Gem, Warlock still had power, and so his soul was released along with Pip's and Gamora's. Returned to living bodies, they teamed with champions of Earth and the cosmos to oppose the almighty Thanos. In the Mad Titan's defeat, Warlock came into possession of the Infinity Gems and that same god-like power, but recognizing his own limitations gave up the power and scattered the gems.

What followed was more conflict, as during his brief tenure of omnipotence Warlock had expelled good and evil from his soul. These aspects took physical form, and undiluted good proved to be as dangerous as undiluted evil. Warlock drew these aspects back into himself, and resumed his aimless wandering of the cosmos.

At last, Warlock spied the object he was tasked with retrieving in the far distance. It was massive in size, comparable to a small moon, but misshapen to better resemble a human being. This was because, Warlock confirmed as he drew nearer, the object was in fact a giant human being known as the Living Monolith, the being he was tasked to collect.

Held at his side during the journey, Warlock raised his Karmic Staff, an object he had created to better channel and focus his natural cosmic abilities. Through the Soul Gem, Warlock sensed that the Living Monolith's mind was dormant but alive, and he dared not risk awakening such a powerful giant. Greenish energy flowed from the Karmic Staff to envelop the Living Monolith, wrapping around it as a blanket but far more durable. His charge now held fast by his power, Warlock slowly towed him back into the solar system. This return trip would take far longer, and Warlock continued to reflect

on his engineered life.

Recent conflicts had not go so well for Adam Warlock. He had attempted to save the soul of Genis-Vell, son of deceased ally Captain Mar-Vell. Warlock still had hopes for the long scheme, but for now Genis-Vell had become a lost cause. Just a short time ago Thanos had returned to plague Earth with a collection of cosmic threats, among them the mysterious Abyss. In attempting to combat the ebony villain, Warlock had found his Soul Gem overwhelmed by what seemed to be the consciousness of an entire universe. His presence ultimately had no bearing on the conflict, and Warlock limped away, ineffectual.

No direction. That was what Adam Warlock considered the root cause for his ineffective actions. His future was blissfully uncertain. By decree of the Living Tribunal, the Infinity Gems could no longer be used in junction. There was no longer any real purpose to Adam Warlock's life, and he saw little meaning in these conflicts. Only the presence of Thanos had driven him to aid the Avengers.

What did it really matter of hundreds, thousands, millions of human beings died? If the Earth itself was destroyed? The universe was vast, filled with an untold number of populated worlds. Every day a species would die out somewhere and another would evolve into being elsewhere. Violence ravaged sections of the cosmos, having no impact on distant galaxies or even other systems in that same galaxy. Unless the Everything itself was threatened, why should Warlock bother himself?

That question brought Adam Warlock to an old ally. One who, while known for occasional misdeeds, had never wronged Warlock and thus remained a trusted individual. He shared Warlock's doubts, and had confided that he'd once attempted suicide, having seen no more point in life on the mortal plane. Then he showed Warlock the possibilities of engineered life, of controlled randomness and a window into what the End of All could really be. Adam Warlock saw merit in these experiments, and agreed to aid his ally in carrying them out.

At last, Warlock and his charge neared the system's center. The hostile asteroid belt was behind them, and ahead lay the blue globe that was Earth. But it was a far distance away still, on the other side of the central sun. Adam Warlock's destination was the planet that shared Earth's orbit, though most of Earth's population was unaware of this. It was not the same one Warlock had defended so long ago, that planet had been destroyed during Thanos' brush with godhood, but it was Counter-Earth nevertheless.

Much as Earth did, its counter also had a moon, with a Blue Area similar to Earth's moon. But while that area was created by the Skrulls and housed a Kree city, this area and its complex within

shared the same creator as everything associated with Counter Earth. It was into this Blue Area that Adam Warlock landed, settling the immobile Living Monolith within the center of an intricate ring of pylons.

"His mind and soul remain silent." Warlock's voice carried through the artificial atmosphere. He turned toward the area's central citadel, where a figure stood in the open doorway. "Whether he will remain that way once you siphon his energies, I cannot say."

"I have faith in my machines, Adam." The figure stepped into the bright, blue-tinged sunlight, revealing himself to be the armored High Evolutionary. "The Living Monolith will remain aslumber, and the vast stores of energy he has absorbed through the years will feed the equipment used in my experiments."

"By my calculations it will take nine cycles before his size begins to reduce," Warlock stated. "He grew larger as I approached and greater amounts of solar energy were fed into him. Set him outside this filtered area and he will last much longer as a power supply."

"Yes, but the gain is negligible next to the greater risk." As the High Evolutionary approached Adam Warlock, he raised his arm and opened his palm. "Come now, old friend, and bear witness to the first of many experiments."

At first, Warlock could see nothing in the palm of High Evolutionary's hand. Then, he felt it through his Soul Gem, so similar to the experience with Abyss. A universe worth of souls, and he could not see it.

"Avengers Assemble!" Captain America shouted at the top of his lungs. The battlecry failed to carry far, however, only being heard through the radio frequency by his teammates. They were deep beneath the ocean surface, battling alongside former Avenger Andromeda and her fellow Atlanteans against the mutated clones of At'La'Tique.

Like Stingray, Captain America wore a pressurized suit, though not nearly so advanced. As a result his mobility was limited, so he grudgingly stayed at the back lines. Warbird wore only an oxygen mask, her great strength enough to survive the harsh ocean pressure. Her powers enabled her to survive in deep space, so Binary had no need of a pressure suit or breathing apparatus. The same wasn't exactly true of Espirita, but so great was the heat around her that water became steam inches from her skin, and like Binary she did not need to breathe.

That left Karnak and Quicksilver, whose super-human skills would

have been useless under water no matter what they wore. For this reason they were aboard the experimental Quin-Sub. Even from a distance and through thick plexi-glass, Karnak could spot the weakness in his enemies. At his direction Quicksilver could work the controls at super-speed to best exploit those weaknesses. But only if they could work together.

"That blast was off by three inches."

"It still destroyed the vehicle."

"Yes, but it also would have destroyed the two near it. No, you should have fired at Llyron three seconds later."

"I hate twiddling my thumbs."

The premature laser blast from the Quin-Sub was dodged by Llyron as he plunged into the midst of Atlanteans. "Fools," he screamed. "This is what the people of Atlantis truly want! With Namor at that surface whore's bidding I have been freed to lead our people again!"

"Broken out by fanatics you mean!" Andromeda roared. Through the murky water none of the Avengers could hear her or Llyron's words. "They'll soon have my thanks. Killing you on the field of battle I won't have to wait for your execution!"

Andromeda slashed at Llyron with her knife. However, the cloned Atlantean/human hybrid dived over the attack and smashed the butt of his trident against Andromeda's skull. She floated down, dazed, and Llyron swam straight for Captain America. Around him, the At'Lan'Tique forces were being thoroughly routed by the superior number of Atlanteans and the great power of the Avengers. Still, Llyron knew that striking at the head was a key in victory, and felt it was still in his grasp.

"Now we battle in my element, surface worlder!" Llyron's roar was indiscernible to Captain America, but he was able to get the meaning behind it. He barely managed to raise his shield in time to deflect the thrust of Llyron's trident.

A short distance away, Espirita scattered a grouping of At'Lan'Tique clones with a burst of super-heated steam. Only scatter. None were struck directly, were even in danger of being struck. Still, Espirita saw several of her enemy move as though pained, and there was worry in her soul. Her powers were so destructive, if anyone were seriously injured by them...

"There's something wrong!" It was Warbird who had cried out, her voice carried by the small transmitter in her oxygen mask. She and Binary had just smashed open an undersea tank. The passengers

spilled out, the cloned soldiers, but they were limp and with a pale coloring. "They're almost dead, and we're not the cause!"

Moving much faster than Captain America was able to, Llyron swam around him and prepared to strike with his trident. But Stingray dived from above, his body coursing with electricity when he touched the villain. Electricity arced through Llyron and the trident fell from limp fingers. His suit powered down, Stingray took hold of the unconscious Llyron, the entire exchange finished before Captain America could even turn around.

"Good work, Avenger."

"Maybe next time you'll listen when I suggest you stay in the sub."

Captain America allowed a brief smile. "Unlikely." He turned back around, to check Andromeda's condition. He saw that she had recovered and was treading water. He also saw that the battle was over. Most of the At'Lan'Tique were beaten, and the rest were in shape to fight, stricken by the sudden new illness. "Andromeda, is this a complication of them being clones?"

"It may well be, Captain." Andromeda still carried her Avengers communicard and was able to adjust her speech through the water so the non-Atlanteans could understand. "And thank you for not suggesting we Atlanteans employ biological weapons."

"I know that's not in your general nature," he replied. "Atlanteans prefer open battle, and accept the defeat of their opponents with honor. I'm sure all of your prisoners here will be given medical attention."

Before Andromeda could respond, her eyes rolled back into her head and she began to convulse. Captain America and Stingray moved toward her position, but a number of her Atlantean comrades reached Andromeda first. A number of those who weren't suddenly experiencing the same symptoms. Reaching the pack around Andromeda, Captain America was allowed to pass through them and took the former teammate in his arms.

"It must be the same thing affecting the At'Lan'Tique," Stingray insisted.

Captain America nodded, but had most of his attention on the afflicted fellow Avenger. "Speak to me, Andromeda. You're strong enough to fight whatever this is."

The gills covering the inside of Andromeda's cheeks flared as she seemed to be gasping for oxygen. However she seemed to catch her breath, and in shorts bursts answered. "Only a...sudden...discomfort. Not too...serious." She was pushing for

Captain America to release her, and he reluctantly did so. She at least managed to float by herself. "I still feel it, but...mild. Like an ache in all my muscles that's been around for years."

"Once everybody gets down to the city we can run tests to see what is going on-"

Quicksilver's voice cut through the frequency to interrupt Captain America. "Whatever this is, it is happening on land as well. We are now receiving a number of reports. Sudden fatigue and severe muscle ache are affecting thousands at once."

Hesitation passed over Captain America's face. He was compelled to go do his duty, but didn't like to just abandon a comrade in need. Fortunately, Andromeda sensed the conflict and absolved him.

"Go, take care of your own. We'll take care of ours."

They were gathered in the mansion's main assembly room, five of Earth's Mightiest Heroes. Spinning above the meeting table was a holographic globe of the Earth in a dull red glow except for green at the poles. Captain America took charge, telling his team exactly what they were seeing.

"Over ninety percent of the planet is being affected by this strange ailment. Not just humans, as we've seen. All forms of humanoid and animal life are being affected too. So far the symptoms have only been minor and chronic. We've had no reports of deaths yet." Captain America let that last word carry in the air before going on.

"Even members of the super-human population aren't immune." He indicated the teammates around him: Quicksilver, Espirita, Binary and Warbird. "You're all fine right now, and Stingray is okay because he's remained in his armor. But Karnak was hit especially hard."

They had all just left Karnak in the medical area upstairs, his muscles nearly useless. Jarvis and Dianne Arliss were there as well, more as a precaution, with Stingray at his wife's side.

"Have you been experiencing the symptoms?" Espirita asked Captain America.

The Avengers Chairperson nodded. "It was just like Andromeda said. A dull ache in all the muscles of my body. I'm able to deal with it though, as are most people for now. The best scientists in the world are working on this problem, but we don't know if this will get worse or how much."

"It has to be a weapon," Warbird declared. "The way this suddenly struck world-wide in a matter of minutes, including everything in the oceans. Do we know for a fact that residents in Latveria have been affected?"

"There has been confirmation," Captain America responded. "Obviously, this isn't the kind of threat we're used to. To be frank, I expect our only contribution to the investigation will be as a response to the aggressors responsible. But we aren't the sort to just sit on our hands and do nothing. As none of us have scientific backgrounds, and Stingray's primary field is in oceanography, I've called in a specialist."

"Then when he arrives you should send him out to assist the other real scientists," Quicksilver remarked. "We can't waste resources doing separate studies."

"Oh, I don't think anyone will be missing me!" A small voice boomed through the air. All the Avengers saw the small fly that had buzzed into the room, but only the ones with impeccable eyesight could see the insect had a tiny passenger. At this passenger's command, the fly landed on the table, and the Astonishing Ant-Man hopped off. "I'm really more a specialist in small things than an actual scientist."

"When restructuring the team I recruited Ant-Man as the second reservist," Captain America told the team. "He has unique talents for specialized threat, such as this one. If he manages to get small enough, Ant-Man can provide us with a first-hand look at the microbes of this disease."

"Allay-oop!" Somersaulting off the table, Ant-Man grew in mid-air and landed a full-sized man. "This situation got me thinking about microbes and Pym Particles. For instance, have you guys ever noticed that giant-sized bacteria doesn't suddenly appear every time Giant-Man got larger?"

"Yes, because the Pym Particles are too large to attach to the microbes." Quicksilver sounded bored as he told Scott Lang this. "What does this have to do with anything?"

"Um, well, nothing," Ant-Man admitted. "Except that it also explains why Hank could never shrink down to microbe size. Insect size is the limit for Pym Particles before the subject is jumped into the Sub-Atomic Universe. However," Ant-Man was quick to add. "I've looked at research claiming that white dwarf star matter could successfully shrink matter to a microscopic level."

"Where could we find this research?" Espirita inquired.

"Um..." Ant-Man hesitated. "The internet."

Quicksilver laughed out loud. "Oh please. That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard. Just admit that you're useless and we can get on with our lives."

"Hey, don't be mean," Binary said to Quicksilver.

Warbird asked the question. "Assuming you could get your hands on white dwarf star matter, what could you do with it?"

"Well, obviously I can't get my hands on white dwarf star matter," Ant-Man admitted. Quicksilver barely held back his laugh while Captain America closed his eyes and sighed. "But, we have somebody here who draws her power from a white dwarf star."

After saying this, Ant-Man directed his eyes to Binary. Captain America, Quicksilver and Espirita followed his line of vision to look at her also. Only Warbird failed to do this. She was looking down at the floor while it dawned on Binary what Ant-Man was getting at.

"Oh? Oh, right!" Her eyes lit up. "Wow, so that's where my powers come from."

"Yeah." Warbird muttered reluctantly. "It's what lets you do lots of stuff." She directed at Ant-Man, "What would you expect her to do?"

A short time later, the Avengers had gone up one floor to the laboratories and medical area. With her services not required for Ant-Man's experiments, Espirita went to visit with Stingray and the patients. Jarvis and Dianne both appeared fine if haggard, but the sight of Karnak was heartbreaking. He was often so strong and capable, but due to his weak Inhuman immune system the muscles of his body were becoming atrophied.

"Right now what really worries me is his heart." In addition to his many doctorates, Stingray had some medical training. "I have adrenaline on hand, but if his heart gives out it may never recover."

"In time this may happen to everybody," Espirita observed. "I fear to wonder if the same is occurring in Attilan."

At mention of the Inhuman city, Stingray glanced past Espirita and lowered her voice. "Best not to. Quicksilver puts on a good front..."

Espirita nodded, understanding that their mutant teammate must be worried about the health of his ex-wife and daughter. Quickly she shifted the subject. "Ant-Man is rigging up something he thinks

will allow Binary to manipulate Pym Particles. He seems quite adept at electronics."

"He should be. Scott Lang used to be a technician for Stark Enterprises and the Fantastic Four. Do you think anything useful will come of this?"

Espirita hesitated, but came to repeat Captain America's earlier words. "A threat like this, it's unlike anything we usually face. It helps to at least do something. And there is always a chance that it will be the *right* thing."

"Espirita, about things we usually face." Though Stingray's face was hidden beneath the armor, Espirita could tell from his body language that he was uncertain with what he was going to say. "Earlier, you were holding back against the At'Lan'Tique. I know what happened at Cape Citadel rattled you, but Mellancamp survived."

"That doesn't change the fact I nearly killed him," Espirita replied with deep regret.

"Burning the oxygen around him was sound, but I could have done it more safely. Instead I took his invulnerable skin for granted and roasted his organs. I know that to question the harm I may do is foolish during a fight, but the alternative..." Espirita suddenly looked very afraid. "If I don't, my soul is at risk."

A man of science, Stingray had no argument for Espirita's religious fears. All he could do was nod in understanding, and silently hope that others better qualified would help his teammate.

"Easy, Binary. Just let the power flow through."

"I'm...not used to being subtle with this," Binary said with difficulty. Soft white light was shining out of her hand, into the lantern-shaped device that Ant-Man had built. Inside were Pym Particles, and hopefully Binary's power was altering them to do the task at hand.

On the other side of the lantern, there was a needle standing upright on a glass slide. Also on the table was a sophisticated microscope. All the Avengers gathered around were waiting patiently, except for Quicksilver, whose foot was tapping rapidly.

"How much longer until we know this is going to work?"

"It might as well be now." Ant-Man flipped a switch on the lantern, opening up one side of it. White light with tiny flecks of Pym Particles shot out, bathing the needle. Almost immediately it

vanished. "Let's take a look at the slide."

Carefully, the glass slide was placed under the microscope. Ant-Man put his eyes to the scopes and slowly worked the dials. "Okay, I think...there, I've got it!" He lifted his head up. "Captain America, come take a look."

The Avengers Chairperson peered into the microscope. "There it is, all right. Kind of big. What setting are you using?"

"Through there we should be able to see one-celled organisms. That's about the needle's size. What I'm not sure about are those flowing waves around it."

"I can almost make them out. Whatever it is seems to be moving too fast."

"Luckily," Ant-Man reached for a switch on the microscope. "This baby has a built in camera." A sheet of photo-paper shot out of a slot in the side. "A quick freeze-frame, and we'll have a better idea of what-" Ant-Man's eyes fell on the photograph, and his words caught in his throat.

"My god," Captain America breathed. "We need to assemble against this, now."

Once again, the Avengers had assembled in the War Room, including Stingray. Captain America was leaning against the table, one hand on the photograph Ant-Man had taken. The needle could be seen clearly, but surrounding it was something that couldn't have been there. A city existed around the needle, dwarfed by it but still massive, apparently built in a late-Victorian style. Tiny dots couldn't be properly made out, but it was obvious to everyone they represented people.

"We're dealing with a microscopic civilization," Captain America informed everyone present. "To give you all a sense of what we're against, this city covers an area smaller than a pin hole. As far as Ant-Man can determine, the entire world is covered by this."

"We're talking a trillion-trillion beings," Ant-Man added. "All smaller than one-celled organisms without being sub-atomic. Just by existing, they're affecting us and it's unlikely they know we're here."

"All right then." Warbird crossed her arms. "Whatever we do about this, it has to affect them all at once, right? How do we go about it?"

"That would be genocide," Espirita stated. "These people aren't even aware of what they're doing. We can't just wipe them out."

"The same can be said for lice. That doesn't stop me from washing my hair."

"Espirita is right," Captain America said. "We have here evidence of culture, of civilization. They can be reasoned with, once we find a way to communicate. Working together, we should be able to solve this problem non-violently."

"And if not," Quicksilver interjected, "we'll have made an enemy aware of us. This," he indicated the entire afflicted world, "is them living normal lives. If they tried, we could all end up dead."

"Nevertheless, we need to try." Captain America addressed the team. "Working in concert, Ant-Man and Binary will shrink us all down. Stingray, I would like you to remain behind, to let everybody know about what we've found. And we'll be leaving immediately."

"Everything is set up." Ant-Man patted the lantern filled with Pym Particles and Binary's white-dwarf energy. He then indicated his belt. "And I have pouches filled so we'll be able to get back, hopefully."

"Then let's go," Warbird said. "Stingray, if we're not back in..." She looked at Captain America. "What, an hour? Two?"

"We should give it a day."

"All right. If we're not back in about a day, fill the rest of the team in about this. And the Fantastic Four."

"I won't wait that long," Stingray told them. "But we'll try to hold off taking action until then. Good luck."

Five of the Avengers and reservist Ant-Man grouped together at one end of the table. As the lantern was opened, Stingray saluted his teammates as they vanished. Once they'd gone, he was about to turn to check on his wife and Karnak, and then to contact everybody he could. Not even a second had passed.

The Avengers were suddenly back.

They had reappeared at the exact same spot, but that was the only similarity Stingray could see. Everybody's uniforms had been mended several times, and was dirty with extensive wear. Ant-Man's uniform was covered with tape, blood crusted at Captain America's side, and Quicksilver appeared to have lost more than twenty pounds. Warbird's hair was cropped close to her red scalp,

and indication it'd been burned off. Binary and Espirita just looked weary, so weary.

"What have you been doing?" Quicksilver demanded. "Why hadn't anyone come to help?"

"You...you all had just left!" Stingray sputtered out, flabbergasted at what he was seeing. "I swear, not even a second a passed."

Quicksilver and Warbird both looked furious, but Captain America just nodded. "That's what we'd figured, ever since we were told about the needle's history." He told Stingray flat-out, "we were gone eight months."

"What? How?"

"Time seems to flow differently at microscopic size," Ant-Man theorized. "What's been little more than a day to use has been tens of thousands of years for them. A civilization larger than our known universe, at this point more advanced than we'll ever become." He turned to Captain America. "Just in the time I'm explaining this, everybody we've met has died of old age."

"Were you able to talk to somebody?" Stingray asked. "Explain things?"

"It didn't matter." Binary explained. "They have...had, no central authority. We'd found an ally, tried to set him up in a position to help, but..." She looked about to cry.

"We've basically been fighting a war," Espirita explained. "And it's likely already been lost in time."

"So we need to do plan B," Warbird declared. "Scorch it all and-"

"That won't work," Captain America stressed. "Setting aside morality, we would need to annihilate everything at...not even second...at the quantum instant. Worldwide, or in less than an hour we'd be right back here. That is impossible."

"So what do we do?" Warbird asked. "Track down and beat a solution out of-"

Captain America shook his head. "No. I'd like to confirm this with Mister Fantastic, but I think there's only one course of action available to us."

It took eight hours. As near as they could tell, nobody died. Even

those hit as hard as Karnak had made a completely recovery. Another photograph from the microscope confirmed everything.

They may never know exactly how it happened, but the civilization, the entire species was gone, as all are inevitably destined too. Maybe not died out, exactly. They could have ascended in some fashion, given the level of advancement that could be identified from the ruins. The details didn't exactly matter. The threat had past, and all that remained was for the Avengers to respond.

Ant-Man looked at the photograph he'd taken while in the micro-verse. It was of a massive statue, recognizable as the High Evolutionary. He'd been behind it, and the Avengers were going to make him answer for the deed. Not with Ant-Man, though. He wasn't needed for that kind of mission. Which was just fine by him.

Before he'd left, a message had been playing on Ant-Man's answering machine. The ex-wife, about a time to pick up Cassie. Ant-Man figured he'd call her back in less than a second, provided he didn't break his own neck.

But that was later. Now, Ant-Man pulled the rope taut, and started climbing a needle to get a better view of the ruins of a city long dead.

Next Issue: His latest experiment threatened the entire world, and the Avengers aim to make the High Evolutionary pay for it! But to reach him, they need to get through Adam Warlock! Plus, a slumbering giant awakens!

Author's Note

To be honest, I feel a little like I'd just written an issue of Fantastic Four. High-concept, exploration of a new, strange world, fairly heavy in terms of science fiction with a meaningful message at the end. Now, if I'd focused on the war the Avengers fought, or had the micro-verse inhabitants figure out a way to grow and invade the macro-verse... But no, that's not what this issue was about. Maybe down the road, I'll do a special dealing more in-depth about what happened to the Avengers. But for now, it's enough to know that it was all meaningless, kind of like the majority of stories.

But okay, enough of the high-concept stuff. Next issue is mega-action...along with some more high-concept stuff. Then, who knows what kind of mega-epic will be coming our way.

Avengers #56
July 2008

**Captain
America**

Warbird

Quicksilver

Espirita

MARVEL 2000 PRESENTS...

"THE IMPORTANCE OF THE ANYTHING"

Written by Steve Crosby

Yesterday, the world had stood still. A disease that had turned out to be a worldwide microscopic civilization had incapacitated the entire population. Today that civilization had died out, having aged along an accelerated timeline. But while investigating the threat, Earth's mightiest heroes the Avengers had discovered who was responsible for it.

Now, the Avengers were assembled to avenge.

The team had piled into the specialized Quinjet, designed specifically for spaceflight missions. "Do we have our course?" Captain America asked the pilot, the experienced Warbird.

She pushed buttons and an image of Earth's solar orbit appeared on the monitor. On the other side of the orbit was a blank spot, an area roughly Earth's size where nothing registered. "We've identified what has to be a new Counter-Earth," Warbird stated. "I'm assuming we don't want a week-long trip?"

"You assume correctly."

"That plots our course through the sun."

Espirita muttered a prayer in Spanish. Everybody else appeared nervous, but said nothing.

"Liftoff," Captain America ordered.

Warbird pressed the launch button. The Quinjet shuddered as it blasted up from the Avengers Mansion rooftop and through the Earth's atmosphere. In minutes it was arcing around Earth towards the sun, building speed as it did so. "Binary, you're up."

With hesitation, Binary moved to the rear of the Quinjet. The vehicle was powered by fuel cells, but the supply was finite and Captain America did not want to waste energy unless necessary. Binary opened the access door to the engines, her own power shielding the team from the deadly exhaust bursts. Cosmic energy flowed from Binary into the engines, and the Quinjet shot off through space at nearly the speed of light.

Stingray

Binary

Karnak

"The distance between Earth and the Sun is about one hundred fifty thousand kilometers," Warbird informed the team. "The speed of light is over a billion kilometers and hour. At our present speed, the sun will come up in ten minutes." She yelled toward the back of the Quinjet. "That's enough, Binary. Our momentum and the sun's gravity will carry us the rest of the way. Stand by to shield the Quinjet."

"How many times have you run this simulation?" Stingray asked.

"Three times with Binary," Warbird answered. "I've personally run this simulation over a hundred times, though I admit few involved this sun." When she'd been Binary, Warbird has spent time with space pirates known as the Starjammers. "But I've been up close and personal with our sun. I know the timing inside and out."

The temperature in the Quinjet's cabin was beginning to rise. "Do nothing Binary. Espirita, draw in everything I'm not absorbing." Right not that wasn't much, but Warbird knew as they got closer she would absorb more and more ambient radiation. Idly she wondered, and perhaps hoped, that it would be enough to trigger a transformation into her old Binary form.

Three minutes passed before Warbird whipped her closely shaved head around and yelled out. "Now Binary! Just like I taught you!"

Energy rippled out of Binary, an aura of power that passed harmlessly through the cabin to blanket the entire Quinjet. It was an extension of Binary's own sheath that protected her from the vacuum of space and the radiation of celestial bodies. And as this sheath surrounded the Quinjet, Binary's skin lightened to its own dark natural hue.

"We'll only be in the sun for less than a minute," Warbird told her teammates. "But be prepared for some extreme discomfort."

That turned out to be an understatement as the Avengers Quinjet plunged into the flaring sun. Nuclear reactions burst all around the vehicle, taxing Binary's sheath as well as the Quinjet's own shielding. Between holding back the radiation and preventing extreme gravity from crushing the Quinjet into an atom, sweat was pouring down Binary's face.

Warbird and Espirita were similarly perspiring, as were the other Avengers before long. Stingray feared he might actually drown in his armor. Quicksilver was starting to breathe hyper-rapidly, and Karnak shot him a warning look. There was a limited supply of air in the Quinjet and Quicksilver was using up more than his share.

Almost before the heat, radiation and gravity threatened to be overwhelming, it passed as the Quinjet rocketed through the other

side of the sun. Binary appeared to be relaxing, but Warbird shouted, "Not yet! Keep us shielded, and boost the engines to fight the gravity."

"I...I can't." Binary's knees started to buckle, but Firestar grabbed her arm to support her. Steam was rising from the skin of both female Avengers. "I have the sheath up still, but there's nothing left for..." Binary's mouth went dry and she couldn't speak another word.

"Dammit!" Warbird undid her seat restraints. "Captain America, take the controls." She was moving toward the rear of the Quinjet, where the engines were.

"Warbird, the fuel cells can--"

"And burn out in the process," she finished. "The engines may even be overtaxed to the point of breaking down. They need enough juice and right now I'm the only one that can provide it!"

Warbird rushed past Binary and Espirita, wrenched open the engine containment and plunged her hand into it. Her power rushed into the engines, enabling it to fight against gravity and win. "Aaahhh!"

Captain America studied the readouts on the control board, and when it was safe he gave the word. "Binary, it's safe to contract your sheath. And get Warbird out of there!"

Quicksilver reached Warbird first, pulling her from the engine and closing the containment. The hand Warbird had plunged in was heavily blistered, useless for the moment. Quicksilver moved her to a seat next to the semi-conscious Binary, and fetched the med-kit to treat her hand.

"What's our ETA, Captain?" Stingray inquired.

"Now that we're running on the fuel cells and moving against gravity, I estimate about thirty minutes," Captain America replied. "Which should be almost enough time for us to recover from the trip. Against a foe like the High Evolutionary, we'll need it."

The far distant image of an Avengers Quinjet was reflected in the green gem on Warlock's brow. He could see both with his eyes and in his mind the approaching enemy. He turned, hair and cape still in the airless atmosphere of the moon, and addressed his master the High Evolutionary.

"They're coming."

The High Evolutionary gave the slightest of nods. "As you warned me."

"Theirs is a culture that cannot let things go unanswered," Warlock stated. "If slighted in the most minute way, they feel the need to lash out and teach lessons. It is unlikely they have the faintest idea of what to do should they succeed."

"It is telling you do not include me in human generalizations," the High Evolutionary observed. "However shortsighted, their goal is to end my experiments. Do you sympathize?"

Adam Warlock shook his head. "None were killed in your latest attempt to glimpse the cycle of evolution. The benefits of these studies far outweigh any risks, as I will attempt to convince the Avengers."

"And if your attempt should fail?"

Adam Warlock turned away from his master to gaze into the abyss of the unknown. "Then I shall dissuade them by force. They will learn their folly, either by words or action."

A circuit in his pink and purple armor was activated. The High Evolutionary's form shimmered as he teleported from Adam Warlock's side. "I leave this matter in your hands, my Adam."

The Quinjet had grown larger in Warlock's gem, as tens of thousands of miles had rapidly become thousands of miles. Warlock's own image appeared in the gem, superimposed over the Quinjet. A connection of souls was in progress, and with no effort contact was made.

Warlock felt them, the souls of his sometime allies the Avengers. They were weary from their journey, but angry and eager for battle. They felt wronged by the High Evolutionary, desired to make him pay for the perceived attack on Earth. It would make as much sense to attack every laboratory on their planet, Warlock thought to himself. More sense.

Communication between souls was not as precise as between minds. Warlock could only transmit feelings, give the Avengers a sense of his position. None were sympathetic. Warlock could sense how strongly they felt, that they had all experienced recent pain associated with the present conflict. Broken hearts, a tragic guilt, abject horror and the deepest of violation. This conflict was about much more than a simple experiment. The Avengers had been changed, and they blamed the High Evolutionary.

Having accepted that he could not dissuade the Avengers remotely, Adam Warlock withdrew into the Blue Area of the Counter Earth's

Moon. He would wait until they arrived safely, and attempt to settle this with words.

Inside their Quinjet, the Avengers got their first look at Counter Earth. At the same time the planet came into view, the moon did as well. Espirita made the sign of the cross.

"This blasphemer believes himself to be a god."

"Worse, actually," Quicksilver remarked. "The High Evolutionary believes that he's improving on God's design. So better than god, actually."

"And nearly as powerful," Captain America stated. "The High Evolutionary has even battled Galactus at one point, back when the first Counter-Earth was destroyed."

"So he can't beat Galactus. I'll take that as encouraging." Warbird was looking at the readouts on the control console. "There is a huge energy spike on the moon. The output of energy is enormous, more than anything I've seen before."

"It makes sense to keep a power source isolated," Captain America observed. "The moon is as isolated as it gets. If we can knock out whatever's there, it will strike a blow to the High Evolutionary."

Warbird guided the Quinjet toward the moon. As they got closer, Karnak wondered aloud, "There's a shade of blue there. Could it be...?"

"A Blue Area." Captain America nodded. "Take us there Warbird."

The Quinjet angled in, approaching the Counter Earth's Moon and its Blue Area specifically. As it came within a mile of the Blue Area, a small figure appeared in the Quinjet's path. Man-sized, it was the color of gold, with a red cape trailing behind. There was a staff in its hand, held sideways as though barring the way.

"That's Adam Warlock," Captain America breathed. "What is he doing here?"

"It looks like he's getting in our way," Binary said. "Do you want me to go out and deal with him?"

"Until we enter the Blue Area, the cabin will depressurize if opened," Stingray told her. "We need to get past him and land quickly. In flight we're sitting ducks."

"Get past Adam Warlock," Warbird muttered. "Right." She did try, shifting the Quinjet to dip below the hovering Warlock. The staff in his hand moved, a blast from its head roiling across the Quinjet's bow. "That was a warning. I say we risk opening the hatch. Binary."

The younger and more powerful Avengers started towards the hatch, but Captain America indicated that she stop. "No, that wasn't a warning. He's herding us. Look down below."

Warbird and the rest of the Avengers could see it, a giant "X" marked into the lunar ground just inside the Blue Area. "Take us down there," Captain America told her. "Adam Warlock has always been reasonable. Whatever his reasons are for joining with the High Evolutionary, we may be able to convince him otherwise."

At Captain America's direction, Warbird set the Quinjet down at the indicated spot. The Avengers disembarked and arrayed themselves to face Adam Warlock, who had landed a short distance away. The golden cosmic defenders rippled in the Blue Area's atmosphere, and his staff was now planted into the ground. Far behind him a large citadel was in view, at the center what appeared to be a mammoth statue towering toward the sky.

"I advise you to abandon this crusade and return home," Warlock bellowed to the Avengers. "There is no reason for you to be here, and less for you to achieve. Return home and do something of actual meaning to your lives."

"Combating a threat to Earth is meaning enough," Captain America countered. "Not too long ago you assisted us against a worldwide threat. What the High Evolutionary did put our planet at risk, Warlock, and we're here to make him answer for it."

Warlock shook his head with conviction. "There was no risk, as you all well know. Zero lasting casualties, a statistic that none of your researchers on Earth can match."

"Casualties?!" Espirita's eyes burned with unusual flame. "You heretic! Casualties!" She flew at Warlock, her body engulfed in flames that blew white hot. The Blue Area dimmed in response to all the oxygen burning.

The green gem on Adam Warlock's forehead was an object of near infinite power known as the Soul Gem, and when it glimmered the soul of Espirita was laid bare. Warlock tilted his staff forward and a burst of power washed over Espirita, extinguishing the flames around her body. She fell to the ground as Warlock looked down at her and the Avengers with deep sorrow.

"Your experiences were painful. But it was your choice to enter the

petrie dish." Moon dust rustled as Warlock rose into the air. "Time in the universe is so short for most individuals. Instead of wasting such precious time on conflict that will not achieve anything, you could..."

Quicksilver had rushed at Warlock as he'd begun to rise. His arm was outstretched for the staff, hoping to take what was apparently a weapon as Warlock was distracted in speech. He did manage to touch it, and the backlash of energy threw Quicksilver away, past his fellow Avengers and out of the moon's Blue Area.

"Save a friend's life," Warlock finished.

"Binary!" Captain America shouted. She didn't have to be told anything else, as Binary flew after Quicksilver to collect him before the moon's weak atmosphere proved fatal. "Avengers go!" That last word was accompanied by Captain America's shield hurled at Adam Warlock.

Warlock ducked to the side and knocked the shield away with his staff. Warbird was in the air moving toward him, energy blasting from both hands. One blast narrowly missed Warlock, while the other he deflected with the palm of a hand. Green energy shot from Warlock's gem and struck Warbird. She screamed as though her soul were being ripped apart, and her body briefly became two, superimposed on top of one another.

While Warbird was being dispatched, Espirita was recovering. Flames danced across her skin and the Avenger released a blast at Warlock. The golden man was engulfed, but the heat of fire was next to nothing compared to the supernovas Warlock observed up close. So it was not the heat that caused Warlock's gem to pulsate and bring him crashing to the ground. The staff flew from Warlock's fingers, clattering against the hard moon rock.

Captain America's shield returned to his hand as he rushed at Adam Warlock. Though disoriented by Espirita's mysterious attack, Warlock raised his hand. "The staff is only a focus." Brilliant pink energy erupted from Warlock's palm. It exploded against Captain America's shield, but its unique composition was indestructible against even near-cosmic power. He kept coming, and the sole of an army issue boot met Adam Warlock's golden face.

"This has no point!" Adam Warlock screamed. Power pulsed from his body and the Soul Gem. Captain America was forced back, and Espirita's flames were held at bay. "What do you really hope to achieve? The High Evolutionary is no base criminal to be overwhelmed and taken to prison. His crime in your eyes was experimenting on creatures he considers to be lower life-forms, something committed on your planet thousands of times a day!"

Air was violently pushed aside from Binary's path when she rocketed back into the Blue Area. She smashed through Warlock's aura of power and into his back with the force of an atomic device. "I am so sick of being called a lower life-form!"

Warlock rolled with the blow, and delivered an elbow to the side of Binary's head. "Not quite. The source of your anger stems from experimentation that improved you as a result. The High Evolutionary simply wanted to observe a complete evolutionary cycle in a controlled environment." Recovered from the blow, Binary tried to throw a punch but Warlock blocked it. "Everything is finite, including your power. Even stars die."

Warbird grabbed Warlock from behind, locking her arms around his neck. "Stars may die every instant. They're also born. Don't you dare say this doesn't matter, that our time fighting a potential danger didn't matter. Every moment for every individual matters!"

"Yes, but only to the individual." The slightest flex released Warlock from Warbird's grip. He twisted and elbowed her in the face. His palm was presented to Binary and a swirling green blast of power propelled her away. "Once, I had been connected to The Everything. I felt all minds and souls. Even that near-infinite consciousness is but a drop in the vast ocean of The Everything. Less than ten percent of All is matter, and less than one percent of that living."

"The smallest thread in the tapestry has meaning," Espirita preached. She had flown above Adam Warlock, and her fire was falling upon him. "Insects have purpose, spreading life in plants. We have purpose, and it is not to feed a false-god's mad schemes!"

Warlock raised a hand and the flames were deflected from him. "But the purpose of animals on Earth are to feed the mad schemes of human scientists? Were the apes and mice to rise up in revolt, you would fight them as readily as I battle you now!"

"No." Captain America's shield bounced on Warlock's back. The golden man barely noticed. "We would help them, and try to change things without violence. The High Evolutionary is free to experiment as he pleases, without putting others at risk!"

"To which I reiterate, none were at risk!"

Rays of green erupt from Warlock's gem, striking each of the four Avengers against him and even the semi-conscious Quicksilver lying near the Quinjet. Their souls were too agitated to be easily calmed, so Warlock had to push, and the forceful strike on their souls drove the Avengers unconscious. Floating above his defeated former allies, Warlock considered that only five were present.

"This was more than a conflict and debate," Warlock mused. "It was a distraction." His gaze lifted to the near distant power station, with the Living Monolith rising from the center.

Inside the power station, Stingray and Karnak were unaware of what existed at its center. They were concerned with weaknesses, however. The means to best disable the High Evolutionary's power source.

"There is a strange pounding that emanates from that statue," Stingray informed his Inhuman teammate. "Other sounds are in sync with it. That may be important."

"That's no statue," Karnak explained. "It's some kind of collection station. Notice how it extends beyond the Blue Area? Raw solar power, unfiltered by an atmosphere, is being collected here."

"Unless you can find a way to shatter it with one blow, this area's too big for us to destroy."

"No." Karnak was feeling along the way, taking in the pulse of energy rushing through the conduits. "But even something so big can't take this much power for long. By removing the safeguards, cutting off the bleed of energy from the collector, it will overload. There!" Karnak strode to a collection of thick cables past Stingray. "Once I split the insulation, you can fry the circuitry."

"Just be careful you don't get yourself fried," Stingray stated in reply.

"Haaiii!" Karnak struck, smashing folded knuckles against a spot just below the cables. There was an immediate display of sparks, but the Inhuman had thrust his hand back in time to avoid them. One of the cables had split almost completely down the middle. "Now!"

Electricity shot out of Stingray and against the cables. Behind him and Karnak, the roof collapsed with Warlock's arrival. He had appeared in time to be struck by an arc of energy and fell to the ground behind the Avengers. Power began to go out through the entire complex, in an outlying pattern that was moving toward the central statue.

"Fools!" Warlock gasped. "You don't know what you've done!"

"Weakened your master's power," Karnak answered. He stepped up to Warlock, a fist poised to strike that gem on his forehead. "Now to put you down like the dog you are—"

The complex lurched with tremendous force. Power conduits had ceased working, and energy was no longer being siphoned from the

unmoving statue that was the Living Monolith. With a great jolt, the gargantuan being that had once been a man awakened. It took only the slightest movement for Living Monolith's restraints to go crashing down. His arms spread wide, the Living Monolith let out a triumphant and angry bellow that cascaded across the Blue Area and shook the unconscious Avengers awake.

"My god, it was a heartbeat!" Stingray exclaimed. His head swiveled to Warlock's direction. "What did you do?"

"Restrained a villain while making him productive," Warlock replied. His eyes saw the immense power building up around Living Monolith seconds before this would be physically apparent. "Now quiet he is about to lash out. I must," his arm and outstretched hand extended. "Focus!"

Nearly a hundred yards away, Warlock's staff answered the mental summons and flew to the waiting hand. Warlock caught the staff and aimed the head at Living Monolith's direction. A torrent of energy extended from the giant, vaporizing everything in its path. Only the shield hastily erected by Adam Warlock withstood the assault, protecting himself, the two nearby Avengers, and the five distant Avengers along with their Quinjet.

"Not a conscious assault," Warlock breathed with a silent thanks. "He merely stretched his muscles, checking his condition post-confinement. Gather your teammates and flee, Avengers, before the Living Monolith takes notice of you."

Dust rose into the moon's thin air. Instead of turning his attention downward, the Living Monolith looked up. Directly overhead was Counter-Earth. As impossible as many would think, the Living Monolith nevertheless jumped, his powerful legs the size of skyscrapers taking him out of the Moon's atmosphere. Adam Warlock, Stingray and Karnak watched as a man larger than mountains literally jumped from the moon to Counter-Earth.

"How is that possible?" Stingray exclaimed.

"Grow five thousand feet and acquire limitless power," Adam Warlock answered. "My advice still applies. Leave, Avengers, with your short-minded task accomplished." He lifted off the ground and rocketed out of the Blue Area. "Leave the defense of Counter-Earth to me."

Larger than any asteroid, the Living Monolith tore through Counter-Earth's atmosphere and crashed on the continent equivalent to Africa. The heat of his landing ignited a blaze across all the jungles, and swept deserts to glass. Before the glass could properly form it

shattered, as fissures extended from the point of impact to as far away as the Australian equivalent.

Millions died with no awareness. Only the High Evolutionary, safe in his man-made Mount Wundagore base, knew the extent and circumstances of this threat. He took little notice of the tremors which shook his mountain, confident that his artificial Counter-Earth could withstand the stress. The High Evolutionary was equally confident that his numals could triumph against the Living Monolith, and thus would do nothing himself.

Minutes after the Living Monolith's crash, two species of numals made ready to assault the threat. Even for a creature so powerful, falling through space and crashing to Counter-Earth had a stunning effect, so there was brief time for his readiness. From beneath the ocean, technology developed without fire rose to the surface. Across Counter-Earth, tiny ships rocketed into the air and flew by the thousands toward the devastated continent.

"Teams break into scouting formation until we knew what this is," the flight admiral ordered. His flagship was the largest, about the size of a coffee table. All the crew, and the thousands of pilots in all the planes, were small anthromorphic mice, or nudents. Partly due to their small size, the nudents were also among the most intelligent of the Counter-Earth numals, able to design such planes that could safely rocket around the world in minutes.

The first such planes arrived over the devastated landscape, where so many millions of their brethren had died with no chance. As a consequence, these nudents on the first glimpse of Living Monolith. Though reduced by the energy expended in his crash, he was easily larger than Mount Kilaminjaro, its equivalent now dust. Swiftly, the tiny planes banked, keeping a half-mile berth from the enemy.

"Threat is confirmed." The flight admiral gave the command.
"Deploy proto-neutron missiles."

By the score, nudantity's most devastating weapons were launched. Though each was as small as a standard eraser, the proto-neutron missiles detonated with the force of atomic weapons. But to Living Monolith these were only stings against his skin. He turned, gazing across the landscape, but could not spot the miniscule enemy with his enormous eyes. The large mass coming at him from the west however, Living Monolith saw just fine.

"The nudents have made their assault," observed the nuphin naval commander. Like all nuphin, her voice had a high-pitch, and she pressed a fin to the controls in order to issue the commands.
"Prepare the weapon." Where aerial bombardment failed, a water based strike could succeed.

At the command, several dozen nuphin swam around the control chamber, working to activate the cold fusion particle cannon. Just above the surface, three interconnected circles spun rapidly around an isolated sphere of water. Immediately the water began to boil and glow a bluish white. It took only seconds for the complete conversion of matter to energy, that was directed straight at the chest of Living Monolith.

The impact of energy to flesh was thunderous, enough to actually stagger the Living Monolith. It only did that, however. Roaring with a near-mindless rage, the Living Monolith fixed his eyes on the nuphin weapon. Energy burst out of his eyes, destroying dozens of nudent planes on their deadly path to the ocean.

Adam Warlock dropped from the sky and directly in the path of Living Monolith's attack. His staff was raised sideways, and the two beams of crimson energy were suddenly redirected to either side.

"You have fought bravely, numals." Adam Warlock's voiced sounded across the communications equipment of each vehicle. "Please allow me to deal with this menace. There may yet be survivors you can recover."

As Warlock flew toward the Living Monolith, he spied a small shape streaking down from the heavens. It was the Avenger Binary, and she was hurling cosmic power down at the Living Monolith. "Stop, child!" Warlock cried. Instead of harming Living Monolith, the power cosmic seemed to reinvigorate him. A gigantic hand reached out and engulfed Binary.

"Hey!"

For all her strength and power, Binary was still a speck next to the awesome size and might of Living Monolith. Binary could not break free from his grasp. It took a beam of jade energy from his Soul Gem for Adam Warlock to affect the Living Monolith. The power of souls collided with his risk, and pained the Living Monolith opened his fist. Binary fell, and was caught by solid energy from Warlock's staff.

"Flee Avenger!" Warlock commanded. "Your power is of the stars. The power this monolith thrives on!"

"YOU!" Though recollections of his time on the outreaches of space were fogged, the Living Monolith had a sense that his golden man had been the reason for his imprisonment. **"IT IS DEATH TO TRAP A GOD!"**

The great bellows alone were enough to devastate regions as though a hurricane struck. Warlock fought the mighty winds as he

flew higher, above even the Living Monolith's head.

"I have done more than kill gods in my time," Warlock declared, his words carrying to those massive ears. "You are like many of them, a simple man with more power than most. Like all men you also have a soul!"

Atop Warlock's forehead, the Soul Gem flared with malevolent power. Tendrils of green energy reached out to the Living Monolith, into him. However large his body was, the Living Monolith's soul was a tiny thing, easily snatched and dragged. The man with delusions of godhood screamed as he disappeared into the Soul Gem.

"But even the dimension of my Soul Gem could not contain him."

Adam Warlock stood on the summit of Counter-Earth's Mount Wundagore. At one side was the towering High Evolutionary, exuding a power and regal majesty that dwarfed Warlock. On the other side were the assembled Avengers, the Quinjet at rest behind them. It was clear Warlock had placed himself between the two for a reason, his staff held as a clear obstacle to the Avengers. Most of the them, with the exception of Quicksilver and a stoic Captain America, seemed prepared to risk Warlock.

"So where did the Living Monolith go?" Quicksilver inquired. He then circled Mount Wundagore and inspected the lush surrounding forests before remarking a second later, "Clearly he isn't here."

"Expulsion from the Soul Gem dimension was random," Warlock explained. "The Living Monolith is most likely floating back in the void of space that dominates the universe." Warlock addressed his next words to the High Evolutionary. "Recovery and rebuilding efforts are now well underway. Once the continent has been fully repaired, the repopulation cloning will commence."

"Cloning!" Espirita stepped forward, and though Captain America placed a cautioning hand on her arm she continued to speak. "It isn't enough that you force change onto God's creatures, manipulating His plan for your own mad and blasphemous ends!"

"I have no interest in debate nor ignorant accusations," the High Evolutionary declared. He raised his hand toward the Avengers. "You've done enough, Avengers. Away, and consider how easily I could have killed you instead!"

Energy flowed from the High Evolutionary. Before any of them could react, the Avengers were struck by the energy and vanished, Quinjet and all. Warlock turned, and addressed the High

Evolutionary directly.

"Death may have been just for them, considering the lives lost by their actions."

"Have you been so hardened Adam that you care naught even for past allies?" The High Evolutionary inquired. "The mutant served me faithfully for a time, and all those Avengers have the potential for further use. As to their actions, they were affected more than I."

Warlock's eyes dropped and found the rocky ground. "And I most of all. Every life taken, I felt through the Soul Gem. Their hopes, fears, every piece of happiness and despair ever experienced. Each made differences in the lives of others, and while those actions did nothing for matter to the Everything, it reminded me..."

"Yes," urged on the High Evolutionary.

"I was brought about by the actions of insignificant, power-hungry men. It took a blind woman to first awaken compassion in my heart. You gave me a purpose beyond base lust. Even the Man-Beast served a purpose long ago, teaching me humility and the value of defeat. Individuals are capable to affecting The Everything, myself included."

The High Evolutionary nodded, pleased with Adam Warlock's assessment. "You came to me seeking a purpose, Warlock. While you have excelled at defending my experiments, we both know this purpose is too low for such as you."

"Yes, this is true." Warlock began to rise, his cape rippling in the soft breeze. "In the universe are countless lives, any one of which could affect The Everything in profound ways. By aiding these lives, I aid The Everything, protecting All and Nothing. Farewell, High Evolutionary."

"Farewell, Adam Warlock." With these parting words, the High Evolutionary turned back toward his citadel and laboratories. There was, as always, much work to be done.

They sat around the room, seven Avengers who had been humbled. No words were said between them, as all were thinking the same thing. The High Evolutionary had transported them back to Earth with little effort, and could have just as easily kill them instead. Worse, their actions had proven more destructive than intended.

It was Warbird who broke the silence first. "What did we actually achieve?"

Quicksilver was fast to answer. "We responded to the High Evolutionary's act of aggression. At the least, he now sees us as annoyances, and he'll leave Earth alone if only to keep from being annoyed."

Karnak nodded. "That could fit. The man I saw was the height of arrogance. Or close enough."

Quicksilver's response was to glower. Across the room, Captain America's head was hung low. Eyes to the ground, the Avengers chairperson said, "We avenged. Sometimes, that's the best we can hope for."

Next Issue: Innocents are put in harms way. Can the Avengers prevent the deaths of hundreds? Later, can they bring to justice those responsible? Difficult questions and hard answers to come, guest-starring the New Warriors!

Author's Note

So, last issue the Avengers were against a threat they couldn't fight. The only way it was defeated was by doing nothing, waiting it out. This issue, the Avengers tried to respond and, really, didn't achieve anything at all. Wow, I've been writing some downers. Hopefully next issue will see some real conflict with black/white sides and true goals reached. We'll see.

Until then, here's a letter on last issue from the spectacular writer of Doc Samson, Anthony Crute!

Ok some feedback for your title then.

This issue of the Avengers was great. It is a a high concept idea but I thought it fit well. It would have indeed been a great F4 story but I don't think it was out of place in this title.

The same could possibly be said of this story, which fits as it's a continuation of last issue. Good sci-fi fun all around. Glad that you didn't find it out of place Anthony. Still, at least this issue had some big action with the high-concept to whet the adrenaline appetite.

I was slightly conflicted/or am now over how it all played out. I would have loved to seen the little war going on in the miniverse but I fully understand the greatness of just looking at the fallout of the adventure...which I hope will continue since it seems they've been through a lot. See conflicted but perfectly happy with how it panned out.

Hopefully you caught the hints this issue of what some of the Avengers went through. Just what was Espirita saying? Look for more in the coming issues.

I've always loved the High Evolutionary, i've never seen too much about him as I never really read Thor where I believe he was most prominent (X-Men and Avengers though have let me see him) and I'm really happy to see him going to be featured in the next issue.

Sadly, I focused more on Adam Warlock this issue. High Evolutionary is one of those characters I consider out of everybody's class, so he's best used in the background or as a catalyst in the conflicts. Still, he's a character I love as well, so be on the lookout for more conflicts he's embroiled in.

If I could find one quibble over the issue it's the lack of feature for Ant-Man. Sure he's not on your team and so you'd want to focus on him less than the others but I always find it odd when a hero turns up and then suddenly opts out of a fight where they could help especially when it's an important one...they always seem a bit of a flake.

You have to admit Anthony, there's no much Ant-Man could have done to help against Adam Warlock or Living Monolith this issue. He worked well in his area of speciality last issue I thought, and eventually you'll see just how big a role he played in that conflict. By the by, Ant-Man may be a big part of an upcoming title in the future, so keep on the lookout!

Still great issue.

Thank, Anthony. Your remarks are appreciated.

~Steve Crosby

MARVEL 2000 PRESENTS...

"ADULT SUPERVISION"

Written by *Steve Crosby*

Avengers #57
Sept. 2008

**Captain
America**

Warbird

Quicksilver

Espirita

In the dark of night, Slyde's white bodysuit somehow made him blend in. Light slid off his body as easily as friction. Skating without skates across the rooftops, Slyde moved constantly while struggling to maintain his balance. It was so easy to lose control when it was almost impossible to gain traction. The simple act of stopping was a herculean task for the snatch-and-grab thief.

A blunt object struck the ground near Slyde, reminding him of why he did not want to stop anytime soon. The armored vigilante Night-Thrasher was on his tail, keeping up by riding a skateboard, of all things. Above, two beautiful women were flying on either side of Slyde, Night Thrasher's fellow New Warriors Ultra Girl and Turbo.

Ultra Girl swooped down to try smashing against Slyde, but at the same time Turbo created a wind funnel in Slyde's direction. The winds hit Slyde first, but slid off him as easily as everything else. Ultra Girl then found herself caught up in the mini-tornado and veered out of control. Only Night Thrasher's quick reflexes saved him from being crushed by the super-strong half-Kree teammate.

"Leave me alone!" Slyde yelled. A wall of flames appeared past the rooftop's approaching edge, but Slyde went through so fast the heat didn't affect him. "What's a team of super-guys going after me for?"

The smell of ozone filled the air. As Slyde cleared the next rooftop, he narrowly missed a strike of

Stingray

Binary

Karnak

electricity from the mutant Bolt. Out of the corner of his eye, Slyde saw a woman whose body was half fire, half ice sliding parallel to him on an ice bridge. Crux had set up the wall of flames, and now she was hurling ice spikes at Slyde. He spun to avoid them, and dropped straight down to slide along the building's face.

Running up the face of the building with the four spidery legs that extend from her back was Spider-Woman, right in Slyde's way. "It could have something to do with you stealing from a charity event." Of course, what Spider-Woman didn't say was that the charity was run by the Taylor Foundation, whose chairman Dwayne Taylor was also Night Thrasher, leader of the New Warriors.

Purple strands of psionic webbing sprang from Spider-Woman's free hands. Slyde wasn't sure if that webbing would stick to him, and he didn't want to find out. He jumped off the building's side, over the webbing and Spider-Woman. He hit the street in the middle of traffic, landing on his belly between cars. Slyde disappeared beneath a car and raced down the street like it was a Slip n' Slide.

All Spider-Woman could do was climb to the top of the building and join her teammates on the roof. Night Thrasher curbed to a stop at the roof's edge, with Turbo and Ultra Girl landing beside him. Bolt was heaving deep breaths, tired from the running he'd just done, while Crux simply hopped off her ice-bridge that suddenly melted into mist. Then, latecomer Ricochet, touched his feet to the building, having journeyed from ESU on the other side of Manhattan.

"So," Ricochet panted. "What'd I miss?"

The dreams of Espirita were rarely pleasant. Among the array of powers granted to her by The Lord, through radioactive waste that crashed from space, was a type of precognition. Espirita did not receive visions often, the last being just before the war with Ultron. But when she did, they always came true.

Children's screams could be heard through a thick fog of smoke, past a wall of flames. It was a school burning, Espirita knew. People were dead already. She could see their costumed bodies among the flames, but none that the Avenger recognized. She only knew that they were responsible.

"Espirita," A voice cut through the fire and smoke. "Espirita, wake up!"

Her eyes snapped opened and the dream was replaced by reality. Espirita was in her bedroom, looking up at teammates Binary and Warbird. Binary was in her powered cosmic form, an unusual thing while in Avengers Mansion. Espirita saw why once she sat up. The room had been ablaze while Espirita had dreamed. Everything inside was charred and smoking. Binary and Warbird would have been the only teammates capable of entering.

"I lost control." Of late, Espirita had grown fearful of the destructive nature of her powers. The thought of what she'd done several months ago, evidenced by Warbird's close-cropped hair, made Espirita shudder.

"You were just having a bad dream," Binary assured her. But Warbird, supplied with her own Seventh Sense, knew better and asked, "What did you see?"

"Fire and death," Espirita replied. She struggled to recall the details of her vision. Super-people were there, but I did not recognize them and couldn't tell if they were villain or hero. There was something else..." In her mind's eye, Espirita recalled words on the side of a building. It was the name of the school. "Stamford. It's going to happen in a town called Stamford."

Time passed. As he'd done so often before, Jalome Beacher had gotten away clean from the crimes he'd committed as Slyde. The money discreetly laundered through his sources and placed into his accounts as legitimate funds. Beacher was one step closer to opening his own manufacturing company.

Mass-producing the unique non-stick chemical Slyde used for commercial use was still a long way off, however. New businesses were getting harder and harder to start up, at least without investors. But Jalome had been burned by corporate greed before, and would only take their money by stealing it. Every cent stolen went to the goal of his own company. Everything else, including living expenses and upkeep of his costume, Beacher got from his job.

"Settle down class," Mr. Beacher called out, his voice carrying to every student in the room. He set a small sheaf of papers at the first desk in each column. "Take a copy and pass the rest down. Once everyone has a test you may begin."

Teaching high-school science wasn't too bad, Beacher reflected as he sat down at his desk. It helped to keep his mind sharp, and nobody ever missed the supplies he took for mixing his non-stick formula. Compared to his life as Slyde, though, it was boring as all hell.

It was glancing out the classroom window in this boredom that Jalome Beacher got the shock of his life. Out there on the front school lawn, walking towards the building, was the armored Night-Thrasher. They'd found him. Somehow, the New Warriors had found him.

Though he didn't have his costume at work, Jalome was not without resources. Discreetly, he rolled a pencil off his desk. Bending down as though to pick it up, Jalome reached for the soles of his shoes. He carefully removed the bottoms, which had been sealed on at the edges. This exposed the real bottoms of Jalome's shoes, that he had treated with the same frictionless chemical that coated his costume.

The students in the Stamford High School science class were surprised when their teacher leapt over his desk and for the door. They were even more surprised when an armored man none of them recognized as Night Thrasher crashed through their classroom window. This man threw a baton at their teacher, but somehow he was moving faster, sliding at near-impossible speed through the door and into the hall. The baton clattered harmlessly, and Night

Thrasher grabbed the skateboard from his back

"What the heck is that?" one student wondered out loud.

In the hallway, Slyde jumped onto the wall and skated along that for several feet before dropping back to the ground. He crouched low while rounding a corner, and the air shifted as a golden disc whizzed by his ear. At the far end of the hall was Ricochet, rushing toward him with more discs in hand.

"Give it up chump!" Ricochet called out. "The New Warriors have got you now!"

Slyde continued moving at high speeds to meet the young hero head-on. "Not on your best day kid."

"I have the New Warriors approaching."

"This is it then. Espirita's descriptions fit some of them. I'm calling the others now. Who do you have?"

"Night Thrasher and Ricochet are going inside. I make the others on the street, waiting. Should I intercept?"

"Don't go inside. Approach one of the others and share what we know. They can radio Night Thrasher." There was a silent approval of the New Warriors' tactic. They were smart enough not to enter a school with massive displays of force.

"Wait, there's...we have a problem. News vans are moving up the street and slowing down in front of the school."

"Somebody tipped this off."

"It wasn't the New Warriors. They look surprised too. This must be a setup. If something like what Espirita saw gets broadcast..."

"Understood. We are all en route. Expect

Quicksilver first. Approach the New Warriors now."

"Someone has left the building. He looks civilian, but moving too fast to be. I think it may be Slyde. He's just gone down, and Ricochet's coming out."

"Go to sonar. Get a clear picture before moving in. The catalyst has to be nearby. Identify it before you--"

"Identified! He's moving in! We need everybody now!"

Nearly fifty miles away, Captain America leaned forward to press more power out of his sky cycle. Elsewhere, Karnak was moving just as quickly through the sky on his own cycle. Air scorched around the bodies of Binary, Espirita and Warbird as each flew with urgent haste. Moving faster than all of them was Quicksilver, the sound barrier approached as his legs pumped with all the speed he had.

The Avengers were assembling on Stamford.

"-reporting life from Stamford, Massachusetts, where the heroic New Warriors have just apprehended a dangerous super-criminal posing as a schoolteacher." The cameraman had the picture set up in such a way that Slyde could be viewed on the ground over the reporter's shoulder, with the New Warriors Ricochet and Night Thrasher standing over him. It was virtually the same for all in the line of reporters.

Aware of the eyes on him but not caring, Night Thrasher pressed a foot against Slyde's back and bent down. Grabbing roughly at the man's feet, Night Thrasher removed the shoes with frictionless soles. He then pulled handcuffs from a pouch on his leg and clamped them around Slyde's hands. Ricochet moved past the pair, with his hands up and a smile for the cameras. The smile was a mask for his uneasiness. He could see the other New Warriors behind the news vans, walking towards him and shaking their heads to indicate they, too, are surprised.

Who had called the press?

Unnoticed by the New Warriors and by the media, a man wearing a wide-brimmed hat and a trench coat walked out of the high school. Stopping a few feet behind Night Thrasher, who was in the process of pulling Slyde to his feet, the newcomer removed his hat, revealing a mane of long grey hair. Smiling at the cameras, the super-villain Nitro let the trench-coat drop away to show off the purple-and-black bodysuit underneath. His eyes sparked with energy, and Nitro's body began shifting into explosive gas.

"It's show time!" Nitro declared, altering Night Thrasher and Ricochet to his presence. The two heroes had no time to react, as the villain exploded, on camera, in front of a high school.

Stingray was too late. With the sonar from his armor the Avenger had been able to "see" the unique body makeup of the man in the trench coat as soon as he'd walked out the door. Stingray had immediately leapt from his fifth-story perch, gliding rapidly toward the scene, the shimmer of electricity around his armor. A brilliant blue arc of energy leapt from him toward Nitro the moment the villain revealed himself. But as fast as electricity is it could not outrace thought. Nitro triggered the explosion before lightning could strike.

"No!"

Before the heat and force of an explosion could reach the civilians, super-people and students, Quicksilver was there first. A fuzzy afterimage of a man against the backdrop of burned air, the fastest man alive circled the explosive Nitro hundreds of times a minute. Scorched air was compressed and funneled upward, away from the bystanders that included New Warriors. Then Stingray's electricity struck the funnel, supercharging the air and gaseous molecules of Nitro. In another minute the explosion had run its course, leaving only dispersed pieces of Nitro in the whirlwind, unable to reform.

"You can stop now," Stingray advised

Quicksilver. He'd glided over the cloud and landed next to Night Thrasher.

Quicksilver did slow down, allowing the whirlwind to die and Nitro to reconstitute himself. "Aaaagh!" the villain screamed as the electricity scattered amongst his molecules coursed down through his body. He slumped down to the ground, unconscious and harmless. The day was saved.

Seconds later, the rest of the Avengers arrived. Captain America and Karnak landed their sky cycles on the school lawn. Binary, Espirita and Warbird touched down on the street, which softened briefly against the extreme heat. With natural instinct and no conscious thought, Captain America leapt into action, immediately taking charge of the situation. "Good work you too. Now scout the area, for any other surprises."

Stingray glided back up into the air to perform a thorough sweep with his sonar. Quicksilver merely blurred for a second and then said, "Done. They're it."

"Then let's make sure they're secured. Federal authorities have transport on the way. Warbird, please inform the school officials that the situation has been dealt with and apologize for the disruptions."

Reporters and cameras had surged forward, throwing a barrage of questions at Captain America. He raised his hands to quiet them down, smiled, and said, "A potential disaster has been averted by a joint effort of the Avengers and New Warriors. An official statement will be released from Avengers Mansion, but I'll do my best to answer your questions now."

Nobody in the New Warriors objected to losing custody of slide. And not one of them said anything to contradict what Captain America had said. They had all quietly slunk away in the frenzy of confusion, fully aware that they hadn't averted anything.

"The worst part of this job is the reporters," Jennifer Walters confided minutes after giving a press statement. Gathered in the opulent public meeting room were the Avengers themselves. "Steve, you did a nice job with damage control at Stamford, but too many of the wrong questions are being asked. It's like somebody's pushing this to go a certain way."

"Painting the New Warriors are incompetent children who nearly got dozens of innocent people killed," stated Quicksilver. "Not a difficult thing to do."

"Trust me, if a disaster like that had occurred, it would have affected more than the New Warriors," Jennifer argued.

Warbird agreed. "The press and public officials would have used it to attack any and all costumed heroes. We would have been labeled as untrained, interested only in our big battles and to hell with anybody that gets hurt in the crossfire. We need to find out who did this, before they set up something that works."

"If the kind of witch-hunt Warbird described happens, things would get very bad very fast," Captain America explained. "We've all seen and experienced it before. The government may even try to force an issue of registration."

"Perhaps your government is behind it," Karnak suggested. "How many agencies would like to have super-heroes forced into their service?"

"I certainly wouldn't put it past them," Binary added. "Look at what they tried doing in the sixties with protester groups."

Stingray went on to say, "As much as I hate to admit it, there isn't a government on Earth that likes the idea of independent super-teams running around without supervision."

"We have supervision," Warbird said, indicating Jennifer. Otherwise known as She-Hulk, she currently served as Avengers liaison to the government. "This isn't something our government would do, and I resent the

accusation that they would murder their own citizens like this.”

“As opposed to Tuskegee?” Binary asked with venom. Warbird whipped her head around angrily, and fortunately Espirita stepped between the two.

“Emotions are high right now, and this is not doing any good,” she cautioned. “We must also consider how those children in the New Warriors are feeling. In their state, if they are having the same arguments we are...” Espirita’s voice trailed off, leaving her teammates to reach the obvious conclusion.

“Espirita’s right,” Captain America stated. “We need to find the New Warriors and talk to them. Not just to be supportive but to find out what they know. Somebody arranged for them and Nitro to be there, and unfortunately Nitro was a dead-end.” The criminal had been contacted and paid by untraceable means, by a third party he’d had no contact with. “If we know who tipped off the New Warriors about Slyde’s whereabouts, we can trace this thing.”

“Unless they blindly followed an anonymous tip like the amateurs they are,” Quicksilver remarked.

“Did you just call every law enforcement body in the world a bunch of amateurs?” Warbird asked.

“We shouldn’t be so hard on them,” Espirita defended. “If it hadn’t been for my vision, for blind luck, we would have found out about this after the fact.”

“I’ll go see them myself,” Captain America decided. “The rest of you go cool off.” As he said that, Espirita’s words echoed in Captain America’s ears. If averting that near-disaster had put the Avengers on such an edge, could being almost responsible have driven the New Warriors over it?

The New Warriors headquarters, referred to by the team as The Crash Pad, was a scene of high

tension and hot emotions. Night Thrasher was in armor except for the helmet, his closed fists pressed a table he was leaning against. Turbo was being very quiet, unconsciously rubbing the stump of her missing right hand. Bolt and Crux were arguing with each other, as were Spider-Woman and Ricochet. Ultra Girl was watching the Avengers give a press statement on the television.

"Why would they cover for us?" she wondered out loud.

"Because they know what it means if people knew the truth," Night Thrasher answered. "Somebody set us up. We have to--"

"Do what?" Ricochet asked in a loud voice. "Run off half-cocked and almost get people killed? Because that is that just happened! If the Avengers hadn't shown up when they did..." The pitch of Ricochet's voice went up at the end as he chocked on the words. "Most of the dead would have been younger than us."

"We weren't responsible," Night Thrasher argued. "We need to get to Nitro, force him to tell us who hired him. Once we track down that tip, compare with that information, we can--"

"The Avengers will have already questioned him," Spider-Woman brought up. "What we should do is contact them, share information."

"Leave this to people who know what the hell they're doing," Ricochet finished.

Ignoring Ricochet, Night Thrasher approached Hindsight, the New Warriors' tech support, who was at the bank of computers. "Hindsight, what do we have about that tip you received?"

Before the young man could give an answer, Bolt gave a loud snort. "Hindsight, that's a laugh."

"Chris..."

Night Thrasher's warning went ignored, as Bolt went on. "No, we screwed up, and it wasn't the first time! If it wasn't for Maddie's," he indicated Spider-Woman, "random psychic flash I would

likely be dead by now, and Moses Magnum would have sunk the East Coast. Fortunately the ladies came after me," he made a point of leaving out Night Thrasher, "and Turbo *lost a hand!*"

"Bolt, don't," Turbo said quietly. "I knew the risks." She slammed her left fist against the table next to the couch. "If I'd only been closer. I could have pulled that trick Quicksilver did, then Bolt or Spider-Woman could have zapped Nitro."

"Should have, could have, would have," Crux stated. "Didn't. We didn't scout the area properly, opted to take Slyde in a public school instead of wait till he got home, and stood around in surprise while news vans showed up. If anybody had died it would have been our fault, and any of us that survived would have been strung up by the mob."

"She's right." Ultra Girl stood up. "What the hell are we doing here, playing super-hero?"

"We're saving lives," Night Thrasher argued.

"I could do that better as a spokesperson, somebody people will listen too." Ultra Girl looked down at her hands. "This isn't something I ever wanted. And there damned sure are better ways of getting famous. I'm out of here." She flew up into the air, and through the open skylight.

"Ultra Girl, get back here!" Night Thrasher yelled. "Spider-Woman, get after her."

"Sure, but I won't be coming back." Spider-Woman took a step toward him. "The Jamesons know who I am. When they heard about what happened, we had a long talk. It's one thing to put my life and reputation on the line, but they've been good to me and I'm done putting them at risk. I'm sorry 'Thrash, Ricochet, everybody. But I'm done too."

"Me too," Crux said, followed by Bolt, who added, "People think mutants are a threat just by existing. The best trial we have against that is by being responsible in our actions. I'm not going to add fuel to the fires."

Night Thrasher grabbed the large table and lifted it, then threw it through the air. It crashed against the wall and shattered into jagged pieces. "Fine, get the hell out. The rest of us will get the job done without you. Get out!"

Spider-Woman, Crux and Bolt went on their way. That left Ricochet, Turbo, Hindsight and Night Thrasher alone in the Crash Pad. Until the sound of a motorcycle pulling up was heard, followed by a knock at the front door. Hindsight couldn't breathe for a second when he saw who it was on the surveillance monitor.

"Uh, we've got Captain America here."

There was a second's pause before Night Thrasher said, "Let him in."

Captain America was buzzed in, and entered the large room. "Gentlemen," he greeted, and to Turbo said, "Miss. If you contact Tony Stark, he can help you with a prosthetic. He's done for brave people that have done."

"Maybe I will," Turbo said quietly. "Thanks."

"The Taylor Foundation received a tip about Slyde's whereabouts," Night Thrasher told the Avengers. "I've had Hindsight forward the information to your computers. Thank you for the help. We were taken completely by surprise."

"But we shouldn't have been," Ricochet yelled. "We should have been better! We can't afford to fail like that!"

"But we do fail," Captain America stated. "No matter how well trained we are, how prepared and how much better we get, failure is always a possibility. More than that. Everybody fails at some point, no matter what. In the end, most things come down to luck, like Stamford. But in this case somebody set you up to fail. You have my word the Avengers are doing everything we can to find that person, and we won't object to you investigating this on your own. I hope you realize though that the ultimate target was all of us, and working together is always the best option."

"Thanks for the offer," Ricochet said. "But it looks like we won't be able to do much of anything for a while. Half our team just left. The New Warriors are finished."

"That is a shame," Captain America said to the brave men and woman before him. "I hope that it's temporary. I hope you find your way again."

Next Issue: The planet Jupiter is mysterious, with none able to explore it, until now! Protected by his armor, Stingray visits the largest planet in our solar system on behalf of the United States government, and encounters a threat that may be too much for Earth's Mightiest Heroes! Meanwhile, Karnak returns home to Attilan and must face *his* greatest weakness.

Author's Note

After a certain infamous story, this was something I've felt had to be written. See, it's possible to have debate and major consequences for characters without a huge disaster to happen. In a way, this was as much a closing of the New Warriors as a tale of the Avengers saving the day. Some of those characters may be appearing elsewhere, but as far as the New Warriors team itself...if a new writer wants to tackle them he/she will have a nice clean slate. Hopefully Ricochet and Spider-Woman will see more use. I like them. Not as Avengers, but still...maybe I'll use them again.

There's some feedback that I'd like to respond to. First, from my friend and yours, Anthony Crute.

Hi

Just more feedback on The Avengers coming your way for this weeks update.

It's good as always.

And the streak continues.

I love the idea of Monolith jumping to Counter-

Earth and the damage he would cause while The Avengers were mostly powerless.

Sadly the words of prose just cannot equal the power if the image had been drawn. Say what you will about Bryan Hitch, he could have done a mean triple-page spread of this.

I also after reading the issue and then your reply to my last feedback I do think you could be right about The Evolutionary's role in the world and what it should be...I guess part of it is I'd love to see what his big plan is, simply to experiment or is there a goal behind all of it?

I'd like to think High Evolutionary has a goal, that he has an idea and is trying to reach it. But if he did, it would be far beyond anything we could comprehend.

I think the real strength you have though is writing the characters on the team as characters rather than just the heroes. You have Espirita's religious views conflicting with her ability to be unbiased.

When I had conceived of writing the Avengers for another site, I'd thrown Espirita on the team with Thor, knowing their religious views would make for great conflict. Even without that, I love writing the character, and just having anybody with strong values that others might not agree with makes for great character drama. Be on the lookout for further exploration between Espirita and her teammates, particularly the other non-Caucasian on the team, Binary.

The two relationships I just love are Karnak & Pietro (those two need a sitcom) who I love reading sniping at one another and Carol & Binary's relationship with all the different angles...all of this with Cap acting as a yard post for them to all bounce around.

With the time difference I thought into the title, Binary's no longer quite so green, and I'd like to think she and Warbird have found some understanding. Hopefully I've succeeded in showing a lessening of hostility already.

If I had one negative about this it'd be it went

very DC for a minute with the speed of light quinjet and flying through the Sun that said I did think that these are Earth's mightiest heroes it's about time they showed it...still hmm. I would have went to Strange or Reed and got some sort of teleport going on I think lol

Yeah, but if teleported how would they get back? Risks in transit, no telling if High Evolutionary had defenses against it, so on. I went with what I thought was strategically best, a swift approach by a route High Evolutionary would not have primarily expected. Plus I wanted to show teamwork among the team in a non-combat situation, pushing their powers to the limits and working together to stay alive.

Thanks for the great words Anthony. I hope you enjoy this issue as much as the others.

Now for some feedback on previous issues up to #55. Firstly Brent Lambert.

Ok, this issue was actually a very solid read and alot of fun. I liked the capacity that Binary was used in and I tremendously appreciate how Steve has used her in the series thus far. There is a great story to be told in that eight month gap I think, but I can understand why Steve glossed over it. The bigger fact is that The High Evolutionary is at work.

Brent, I hope you like what I did with Binary in issue 56. One of my favorite sequences with her.

And I wonder, did High Evolutionary get his inspiration from Warlock telling him about his experience with The Fallen One or was it something else? I look forward to the answer on that. And Living Monolith? Who would have thought?

Anyway good job Steve. Easily my favorite Avengers fic series.

Even better than your own? Wow, thanks Brent. Sorry I didn't provide an answer as to High Evolutionary's experiment, but I saw it as him trying to observe a full course of evolution without affecting anybody else. And aside from

some mild symptoms, it really didn't.

Thanks for the kind words Brent.

Oh, what's this? A review of issues 51 through 55, by Meriades Rai!

Okay, the first thing I have to say is that this is intelligent stuff. That's maybe an odd word to use, and it's certainly rare; fiction (be it fanfiction or anything else outside of sci-fi) can be well written and entertaining without ever taxing the brain cells, but with these five issues I felt I was being asked to really think. And that's no bad thing.

This is one of the highest compliments that can be given, and I'm honored to have heard it several times. Derrick Ferguson, for all his problems with a Batman issue I wrote, said it made him think and encouraged discussion. It's something I always strive for, and it's great to be successful every now and then.

I've always enjoyed anything I've read of Steve's (although, as with the majority of fanfic writers, I haven't read half of what they have to offer), but something about this run just feels... right. To paraphrase from Steve's author's notes he seems to have been waiting a long time to get his hands on this series and there are times when you can tell he's really in the zone. The most recent two issues especially are superb, mixing high concept with classic Avengers action and really knocking a reader back on his heels. I don't think that would be achievable if the author didn't simply love The Avengers.

Steve pitches Captain America and Quicksilver perfectly, and as two polar opposites they form strong bookends to keep the rest of the cast contained (although not without some problems; see later comment). A number of team fic books lack these pinions and can end up meandering, with one or two characters overpowering the rest, but that doesn't seem to be happening here. Stingray is also a welcome addition, especially removed from the water; in the hands of less skilled writers this would have crippled him, but on this evidence he's flourishing.

One of the core elements of a team book in my opinion is internal conflict. The characters need to be able to work well off one another, otherwise it could just as easily be Captain America and Friends. Stingray I've enjoyed writing, as I've found him to be far more compelling than the initial married man element I was bringing in. And after watching Dark Knight I recognize the scary implications for sonar, so be on the lookout for some exploration of that.

Issue # 54 totally blew me away. The Alkhema and Ultron scenes were truly chilling and full of menace - Real Marvel has often tended to forget that Ultron is a truly nasty bastard of a villain, one of the real classics - whilst the return of The Vision and the ensuing battle were expertly handled. Great to see Photon being used, even if she came a cropper here. Issue # 55 then maintained the momentum, which must have been difficult after such a long gap between issues and the Kang/Ultron War needing to be somehow juggled. The sub-atomica concept, complete with timeslips, was very, very clever. Will we ever get to see what happened during those missing eight months, I wonder? Even if just in a back-up story to an Annual one day?

When Kang/Ultron War finally comes out, you will not believe how terrifying Ultron can be. How is it that so few writers realize robots can rip people apart with little effort? Photon is a terrific character and I love that I keep finding excuses to use her. Two more planned appearances I promise.

All gushing aside, there were a couple of things I didn't like quite so much. A small one first; the sudden breakdown of narrative between issues # 51 and 52 was far too jarring and really spoiled that latter issue for me. At the end of issue # 51 the new team had been assembled with perfect pacing and structure and next time around there should have been a major battle with the At'La'Tique to showcase how everyone worked (or didn't work) together. The fact that this battle was never 'on-screen' and only referred to afterwards was a huge letdown and didn't work for me. Oddly we then get an At'La'Tique battle in issue # 55 instead, which in itself didn't really fit with anything else that was going on, like the

passage was transposed.

Okay, I screwed up by not have the big battle in my first issue. I thought I could make up for it in #55 (and reference events in Fantastic Four) but it didn't go so well. I'm sorry.

My second criticism would be the portrayal of Carol Danvers. I'm not one to take potshots at other writers' interpretations of characters - for me, one of the goals of fanfic is to be able to read about differing versions of familiar names, not everyone's interpretation has to be the same - but, in the context of this book... God, she's a harridan. She is really, really dislikeable, and not in a good way like Quicksilver.

I get what Steve's trying to do with playing Carol and Binary against one other, almost like older and younger sister, and the parallels between them should make for an excellent narrative. But Carol is portrayed way too harshly, so much so that her attitude detracts from almost every scene she's in rather than upping the tension. She mellows slightly in the most recent couple of issues but for me she's an awful character whenever she's on-screen and I can't help but feel her internal angst and whatnot has been way over-pitched. She's acting like she's an 8-year-old without respite.

Yeah, I'd hoped to progress Warbird and Binary's relationship further in Kang/Ultron War, and give Carol a better excuse for being crabby. Sadly that hasn't played as expected. It's really off too considering what I did in Warbird's solo story, and I apologize for my mishandling of the character against Binary. Hopefully though you'll notice in #56 that the eight month gap has helped in that regard. I'm finding my feet with Warbird in a team dynamic.

My third and final concern (and that's pretty good going that it's only three, showing just how high quality this series is) is that the team seems in desperate need of at least one more familiar face. For me, Warbird, Binary and Photon are all quite similar either in terms of personality or powers, whilst Karnak is either saving the day a little too conveniently or is redundant. I'm hoping The Vision somehow

makes it back on to the team proper, and I'd love to see another 'classic' Avenger in the mix here - Thor, Iron Man, Wasp, Black Panther, Hawkeye, Black Knight, Hercules, Black Widow - to give the team more of a balance, even if Steve has to cut a dirty deal with Josh to steal someone.

Everyone's just so... angry. The women especially. Even She Hulk, in her brief appearances, has been snippy. An old, familiar face with a more light-hearted contribution (not necessarily making jokes, just being cool and professional instead of shouting and carping and arguing) in the place of Karnak or Warbird would make a world of difference. The Karnak/Quicksilver enmity and the Warbird/Binary clashes are both provocative and well-written in their own right but to have both of them occurring simultaneously is really heavy-going at times.

I've tried several times to get Beast, but every time I've got Cory in the crosshairs he makes a move. I get what you're saying, and I'm trying to do better. In this story I've brought Espirita out as a motherly type to try and ease the others down. Once I've explored Binary more I intend to show she's not too similar to Warbird. As for Karnak, well, he certainly didn't save the day last issue, and I plan to show him in different colors next issue.

Hmmm, more familiar faces.... I'll see what I can do about guest-stars. Hehe.

All that said, I'm liking this series a lot, and very much looking forward to some more Ultron action. Also, any chance of a clash with the traditional Brotherhood, ie Avalanche, Pyro, Blob, etc? Or are these kids dead/reformed in M2K? Also, now that Steve's in charge of both Avengers and Thunderbolts, is there a crossover in the offing...?

Meri, hopefully you saw the spotlight on the Brotherhood old guard in X-Men Unlimited. I love those characters, and maybe down the road stars will align and they'll face the Avengers. As for a crossover with the T-Bolts, I'm not exactly in charge, and it's not in the plans Munn gave me. After those are done however, we'll see.

Thanks for the great words Meri!

Well, that's that for now. I think the issue's afterward is getting to be as long as the issue itself so I'm off!

~Steve Crosby

**Avengers
Annual 2009**

**Captain
America**

Warbird

Quicksilver

Espirita

Three figures shifted into the dimension of mist. They were natives of course, members of a powerful race that traversed the dimensions, often appearing as creatures of solid mist. It was one such lesser plane they had just arrived from, and these three were clearly amused by what they had done there.

"Did you see the look on that man's face when I took the form of his daughter? I thought his eyes were going to bug out of his head!"

"It was certainly enough to make him kill on my order," the second mist-being said with a laugh. "What exactly do you think that other man was?"

The third gave an equivalent of a shrug. "Perhaps he was their version of a god, or something else entirely. A great deal on that island didn't make sense."

"Heh, no it didn't." The first mist-being grinned. "And we made it all the more confusing for those creatures. In their confusion and despair, breakdown of that reality will advance. When next we return, none will stop us from ruling!"

"None but I, fiends!"

He shouted the words upon appearing into their midst, a fourth mist-being. But while those three carried evil and malice in their souls, this one struck with nobility and honor. Shifting among the criminals as easily as a breeze among the trees, he struck fast at each.

"Aarkus!" one of them shouted out as his form was momentarily dispersed. In the mist dimension all were equal, but the enforcers were specially trained to be the equal of any five others.

Therefore, with one of their own disabled, it came as no surprise the other two tried to run. Their mist-forms began to flow within the dimension, making the shift down into lesser planes. "No! I will not be imprisoned in Smokeworld's core!"

However, Aarkus had already anticipated and acted accordingly. Tendrils of himself wound around the criminals, intermingling and forcing the mists to remain on that plane.

"Enough! Your scheme has already failed, your retreat cutoff. Only by surrendering now can you hope to avoid the worst punish-aahh!"

Stingray

Binary

Karnak

The dimension of mist shuddered. A wave of great power rippled across, shifting all the mist and bringing great pain to Aarkus. His body fluttered, briefly scattering across the breadth of existence. This created an opening for his criminal opponents, and they used it to attack.

"Quickly! If we kill him now our plans may still be achieved!"

"Never!" Aarkus cried out as he endured piercing pains from a thousand directions. Drawing from his considerable will, three solid fists formed and Aarkus struck all three opponents at once. Their mists dispersed, and immediately the enforcer collected and restrained their forms. "Your choice was made. The core of Smokeworld it is, for all eternity."

And then, Aarkus knew, he would have to investigate the cause of that disturbance. Any threat to the mist dimension had to be addressed immediately. His eyes shifted downward, seeing down through the planes of reality. Somehow, Aarkus wasn't surprised when his gaze fell on a distant lower dimension, on the planet Earth.

MARVEL 2000 PRESENTS...

"THE RETURN"

*Written by **Steve Crosby***

Invisible energy of varying wavelengths bombarded the alien body of Captain Mar-Vell. He suffered this discomfort willingly, standing inside the sealed lab beneath Avengers Mansion. Observing from the other side of a glass shield was Stingray with his wife Diane Arliss and visiting specialist the Beast. As he studied the readings, Beast pressed a button so that his words could be heard by Captain Mar-Vell.

"If your extraordinary patience has limits, Captain, I fear they may be stretched today. It may help pass the time if you regale us with tales of your escapades, many of which I'm sure these extraordinary energies originate from."

Captain Mar-Vell flexed his hands, imagining that he could feel the energies Beast was referring to. "If you think it may help. But I should warn you, they aren't so much adventures as schemes. The

schemes of other men, to which I and others were nothing more than pawns."

As Mar-Vell spoke, he visualized the events in his head as they occurred. Or how he imagined they must have occurred.

"It was supposed to be a simple mission of espionage and sabotage that brought me to Earth. As you know, the Kree had visited Earth numerous times in the past, building a city on the Moon and creating the Inhumans. To watch over our interests, in a sense 'marking our territory', we had left a Kree Sentry robot behind in a dormant state. It was awakened and then deactivated, by the Fantastic Four, and the Accuser Ronan we sent to investigate was also defeated.

"In response, the Kree turned their eyes back upon Earth and sent my crew to determine if the human race was a threat. Because my commander and I loved the same woman, and she returned only my feelings, I was sent on the mission alone in the hopes that I might die."

In his mind's eye, Mar-Vell imagined himself in the uniform of Captain in the Kree Space Navy. "At the time I had no powers, only my advanced weapons as a soldier, made even greater with my modifications. And of course my Kree physiology made me stronger and faster in Earth's atmosphere. My weapons and training allowed me to survive all of Colonel Yon-Rogg's attempts to kill me, but sadly Medic Una was not so fortunate!"

Captain Mar-Vell remembered that day well, for to him it had only been a few months ago. Colonel Yon-Rogg had succeeded in painting Captain Mar-Vell as a traitor, but before an execution squad could perform their duty the ancient Kree enemies the Aakon attacked. "I may have been able to save Una, had I only trusted Earth science to help her. Instead I stole a rocket, foolishly thinking I could...I don't know what I was thinking!

Captain Mar-Vell's fists were clenched, and tears were beginning to form in his eyes. "Una died, and Yon-Rogg sent my rocket spinning through space. Eventually I was found by Ronan the Accuser and Zarek, an Imperial Minister of the Kree. They drugged me into believing a god-like entity had given me powers, but in fact they placed devices into my brain that enabled me to teleport and cast illusions, and it was a new uniform that appeared to make me stronger than ever!"

It was all so clear in Captain Mar-Vell's mind; the hallucinations of the entity Zo, actually Zarek using him as a pawn against the Supreme Intelligence. "I was meant to wreak disaster on the Kree, for which the Supreme Intelligence would have been blamed. When I instead averted disaster, the Supreme Intelligence transported myself and the conspirators into a private audience, where all was

explained to me. Then Zarek attempted to detonate a Negatron Sphere. I threw myself upon it not to save the Supreme Intelligence, but so those two who tormented me could not win. I survived, but the radiation threw me into the Negative Zone. It was all so fantastic and needlessly complex, I should have realized the Supreme Intelligence itself was behind it all!

"It wasn't until Immortus brought me to Limbo that I realized it, you see. The Supreme Intelligence used the schemes against it, the jealousy of Yon-Rogg and my part as a pawn all to get at Rick Jones! Those machines in my brain, never designed to be permanent, dissolved after the Supreme Intelligence had me cast illusions meant to lure Rick Jones to a long-hidden Kree bunker. You know what happened next, Beast."

Yes, no explanation was necessary. It was already documented in the Avengers computers that Rick Jones had discovered a pair of Nega Bands in that Kree outpost. After donning the Nega Bands, Rick discovered by that slamming them together he could switch places with Captain Mar-Vell, freeing the alien from the Negative Zone while at the same time trapping himself there.

"I was so eager at the time to be free that I never wondered why Rick Jones. Why not some other individual, any random person? It was because the Supreme Intelligence wanted Rick Jones, a youth already exposed to a variety of exotic energies, because he was the most likely candidate from which the Destiny Force could be awakened! More precisely, that it could be awakened in a human tied with the Kree!"

This Beast and Stingray also knew, but the final events of the Kree/Skrull War had not yet transpired for Captain Mar-Vell. He had been taken by Immortus before the Supreme Intelligence could awaken Rick Jones' dormant power, and before Mar-Vell could be bonded on a molecular level with the young man to save his life. Yet he knew of these events and more, through his recent time in Limbo, where all of time could be viewed at once.

"It is highly likely that the Supreme Intelligence hoped that some of the Destiny Force would – pardon the expression – rub off on you," said Stingray. "One of its many schemes to jumpstart the evolution of your Kree species. After you died, apparently with no children, the Supreme Intelligence engineered a war with the Shi'ar and detonated the Nega Bomb."

"Something we've yet to see the results of, while the augmentations done to Rick Jones continue to be seen today," said the Beast. "Our scans have finished at long last, Captain Mar-Vell. You may now depart that vestibule and, if you so desire, enjoy the company of friends and colleagues upstairs as we ponder the results. Or you could remain and watch us ponder, though I fear that may stretch even your patience."

Pleased to be done with his trip down memory lane, Captain Mar-Vell stepped off a small platform and moved for the door out of the containment room. "You underestimate my interest in the sciences, Dr. McCoy. But you are right, in that a man would go mad unraveling the mysteries of himself. I'll leave that to you, and wait out the answers in the comfort of friends."

Out in the main laboratory, Captain Mar-Vell warmly shook the hand of Stingray and the foot of Beast, whose hands were gripped to the ceiling. Diane also accepted a handshake, and said, "I hope the tests weren't too much of a discomfort."

But Captain Mar-Vell smiled. "Not when compared with my tests for acceptance into the Kree military."

Outside the laboratory, Warbird was speaking with Binary when Captain Mar-Vell emerged. "No, I'm only saying there are a time and a place for the unfocused Nova Burst. Even if it's the only way to win, we should never risk it around – hey!" She said at sight of Captain Mar-Vell. Warbird stepped forward and gave him a hug. "How did it go?"

"Fine," Mar-Vell said. "While I'm waiting for the results, we should talk, catch up. You certainly didn't have powers when I last saw you, Carol."

"Heh, well, about that," Warbird started as the three were walking toward the elevator. "The how of my powers happened not too long ago for you. The Psyche Magnetron."

"Ahh." Mar-Vell nodded with some regret. "I had feared being bathed in its energies would have had adverse effects, but at the time you were fine."

"It was one of those delayed reactions," Warbird said. "One that needed a catalyst, and in my case it was a, well, the only term that fits is 'split personality.' I end up reconciling my two halves though."

"And that is just the start of it," Binary said as they all stepped into the elevator.

"Like, the first five pages of a sixty-page file. It could take all day to get your results and Warbird still couldn't tell you the half of it."

Warbird fixed her cold eyes on Binary. "You've read my file?"

Binary looked around the elevator, suddenly uncomfortable. "Oh, wow. I thought this elevator was supposed to be fast. Oh there we go I'll see you around," she said quickly as she was out once the

doors had opened.

Captain Mar-Vell smiled. "I remember reading the files of everybody I served with. Including, when I first arrived at Cape Canaveral, yours."

"Not nearly as interesting as what came after, you can be sure," Warbird said. "But like Binary said, it's a long story and now isn't the best time for it. There are a lot of people eager to meet you."

"In my time, the Avengers barely trusted me," Captain Mar-Vell said. He and Warbird turned the corner and entered the public conference room. Luckily, there were no members of the press. Jarvis was offering appetizers, but the only guests were costumed heroes. "I suppose the Kree-Skrull War went a long way toward building my reputation."

"That and later events." Warbird led Captain Mar-Vell toward Captain America. Standing at the Avengers Chairperson's side was an African-American woman Mar-Vell didn't recognize. Her uniform was a silver body-suit with a black starburst on her chest and a small cape connected at the arms. Warbird smiled at the woman warmly.

"Photon, I'm glad to see you've recovered."

"Nuclear fallout isn't that dangerous when you can turn into it," Photon said. She then addressed Captain Mar-Vell and nervously offered her hand. "Captain, it's an honor to meet you. I go by Photon now, but I previously called myself Captain Marvell too."

"It's a pleasure to meet you." Captain Mar-Vell shook her hand. "Although you should know I never called myself anything. It was simply my rank and mispronounced name. Somehow I think Photon is more fitting in your case, if I inferred correctly that you transform into energy."

Photon nodded. "I took up the name after meeting your...son." Her face paled slightly. "I'm sorry. After what happened, this must be the last thing you want to discuss."

"Not at all. I'm glad to know Genis was once thought worthy of a legacy, something he proved again with his sacrifice."

"Hopefully we can find a way for you both to exist safely," Captain America said. "Then we can get to work on sending you back to your own time."

"I'm sure that Beast and Stingray will find a way," Photon said. "And if not, there are others who can help."

"Speaking of Beast," Captain America said, "You're supposed to check with him now that Mar-Vell's done. Photon, we can't risk any

permanent traces of radiation.

As Photon disappeared into the floor, Espirita and Karnak approached. "The last of the fires are out," said Espirita to Captain America.

Karnak contributed by saying, "I am finished pointing out most weaknesses that weren't obvious, and glad for it. That Damage Control is filled with fools."

Captain America frowned. "Keep an open mind, Karnak. They can surprise you. There were also casualties out west," he added for Captain Mar-Vell's benefit, "but the Avengers based there are already on their way back. I tried to keep Wasp here, but she was insistent."

The subject was then shifted again when Espirita said, "A great many reporters were following us here, asking us if the return was true." There was a touch of edge in her voice. Knowing Christian folklore, Captain Mar-Vell understood her attitude towards him.

"You've generated a great deal of interested," Captain America said. "And not just from the press. The government has demanded a full briefing."

"And I've kept them at bay thus far." She-Hulk had suddenly appeared at Captain Mar-Vell's side. The Kree warrior was initially startled at the presence of a green giantess, but quickly returned to his relaxed posture. "Sorry. Uncle Sam wants answers," she then said to Captain America.

"We'll send a briefing when we know more," Captain America said. "Depending on what the tests say, we may have a lot of things to figure out."

"The first being my place in this time," said Captain Mar-Vell. "There's a question of how much I should know."

"That may be a moot point," Warbird said. "Since merging with Genis, you've been able to fly and project energy blasts. It's likely you've also gained his Cosmic Awareness, a stronger version of what you haven't experienced yet."

"It eventually drove Genis insane," Karnak said. "But he was a boy, and untrained in the ways of a soldier as you are."

"Nevertheless, we'll need to have you monitored."

Captain Mar-Vell agreed with Captain America's suggestion. "I gained a sense of it in Limbo when our minds were linked. This Awareness seems to come in flashes, so before one comes I should be hooked up to sen-nnnnaahhhh!"

It came suddenly, and Captain Mar-Vell nearly dropped to his knees as a result. Warbird grabbed an arm to steady him, and was thrown into Binary as a result. Quicksilver was immediately at Mar-Vell's side, having moved almost as fast as Photon, while Karnak and Espirita instinctively readied themselves on either side of Captain America. She-Hulk wrapped her powerful arms around Mar-Vell's chest and lifted him off his feet, holding her ground as the powerful Kree thrashed wildly.

"Nnnhh, don't bother with me!" Captain Mar-Vell finally managed to speak. "They're coming! The universe is threatened! We have to stop them! Save everything!"

"Who is coming?" Captain America stepped forward so that he was only inches from Captain Mar-Vell's screaming face. "What is it that you sense?"

"I fear that he's Aware of me."

The mist accompanied the voice, seeming almost to fill the room. From the mist came a shape, unfamiliar to all save for Captain America. And when the Living Legend of World War II placed the figure, he didn't know whether to rejoice or shiver with terror.

"Vision! What are you doing here?"

"Vision!?" Quicksilver acted without thinking. He tried to barrel head-long into the greenish man of mist, but passed through as though it wasn't there. His arms moved quickly, creating mini-tornados. But the mist was not moved. "What is this? Proof the android had a soul after all? Or is this the final result of your vibranium upgrade?"

"Neither," said Captain America. "This is Aarkus, an inter-dimensional cop I encountered during World War II. At the time, the media had dubbed you Vision. Why are you here?"

"You have my congratulations for destroying Ultron," said Aarkus. He then raised a hand, and suddenly the Avengers and Captain Mar-Vell were all encased in ice. "But it was all for naught! That power touched my dimension, a threat the elders had deemed must be removed! Thus, Earth must die!"

In the lab below the mansion, those Avengers were ignorant of the goings-on above. As Stingray and his wife were looking over Captain Mar-Vell's tests, Beast was speaking with Photon.

"Once again my dear, I am captivated by your marvelous powers." Hanging from the ceiling by his feet, Beast wagged his eyebrows in

a Groucho Marx impression. "Pun intended. You flew into a nuclear explosion, duplicated and absorbed all the harmful energies, and harmlessly dispersed them while emerging none the worse for wear. Even with my considerable mental capacity, I can think of none other who could have performed such a momentous feat."

"I'm just glad that I'm okay." Photon recalled a previous incident when, in the form of electricity, she'd been dispersed across miles of ocean. "What happened to me before was only due to lack of experience. So long as I maintain concentration over every iota of my being, that can't happen again."

To this Beast said, "That which does not kill only serves to make us stronger." Just then, shouts could be heard plainly from above, and the temperature noticeably dropped. "Oh my stars and garters. With this mansion as compartmentalized as it is, we shouldn't be able to hear an explosion." He then frowned. "Before he left, Iron Man and I were discussing the chance that reality could have been weakened. This may be a sign of it."

"I had better go check it out." Photon flashed into light and flew up through the ceiling. She emerged into a scene that could have been out of Dante's Inferno. The Avengers were all encased in blocks of ice, surrounding a green-headed, misty figure that may have been the Devil himself.

Moving faster than thought, Photon flew through Vision. In her energy form it was a blast of power that could have destroyed a building, but Aarkus was merely staggered. Somehow his eyes were able to follow Photon, and with a gesture blasted her with unknown energy.

"Away woman! Progressed though your society has, even the greatest of you are less than nothing to one such as I!"

"Aahh!" Photon screamed as her energy form was ripped apart. This was only a pretense however, meant to hide that she remained in control. Photon's scattered self of heat washed over the ice, melting it and freeing her teammates.

While most Avengers began to surge toward Vision, Captain Mar-Vell grabbed Warbird by the wrist. "I see we can't win here! We have to flee!"

"No!" Warbird tried to break free, but before she could there was a flash. When it passed, she and Captain Mar-Vell were no longer in Avengers Mansion. It was instead a modest home, and out the window, Warbird saw that the sun was just rising. Warbird pulled out of the Kree's grip. "Where have you taken us? And how did you do that?"

"A short time ago to me, I had been given the ability to teleport,"

said Captain Mar-Vell. "I had assumed it gone along with my power to cast illusions, but it would seem my desperate act had reawakened it. As to where we are, given whom I wanted to see I assume we're in the home of-"

In the span between one word and the next, Mar-Vell threw out an arm and grabbed the baseball bat swinging for his head. Holding the bat, dressed only in a t-shirt and boxers, was-

"-Rick Jones, my young friend. You've aged well."

Letting go of his bat out of shock, Rick took a step back. Then a big grin splashed across his face and he rushed forward to hug Captain Mar-Vell.

"Marv! When Iron Man radioed me with the news I almost didn't believe it! Almost, because, well, I've seen super-heroes come back a million times!"

"Yes, good to see you too," Captain Mar-Vell said. He awkwardly returned Rick's hug, while still being a bit pulled back. "Rick, hips out please. We're both wearing rather thin clothing. And you're..."

"Oh, sorry!" Moving quickly, Rick stepped out of the hug. His face went several shades darker. "It's the morning, you know. The wife and I were in fact gonna...when we heard the noise and-"

"Hii-yaa!" Dressed only in a thin negligee, Marlo Jones came out swinging. The head of her golf club collided with Warbird's head, and promptly snapped off.

Warbird fixed her gaze on the wide-eyed Marlo and said only, "Ow."

"Honey, we've got guests. Throw something on," Rick said, then grinned as he finished with, "the stove."

The look Marlo gave her husband could have fried an egg. Fortunately, Captain Mar-Vell spoke before she could make further use of the broken club.

"We aren't here to socialize, Rick. All of Earth, perhaps the universe itself, is at risk. In fleeing the threat I came here, blindly. I know there must be a reason for it."

Rick's face suddenly became very grave. "I never knew you to run from a fight in your life, Ma-aahh!"

Along with Rick's scream, Marlo raised her broken club as the light form of Photon passed through the wall and solidified next to Captain Mar-Vell. "There you are. Captain America ordered me to find you while he and the others rushed that thing. Luckily, I managed to track the signal from Warbird's card."

"What the hell is going on?" Marlo shouted.

Warbird summed it up. "Ultron tried to use the Destiny Force to destroy reality. We stopped it, and in the process pulled Captain Mar-Vell from the past. Apparently other realities were affected by the battle and consider us a threat. An agent with incredible power has come to destroy humanity. We must be here because Rick's ties to the Destiny Force could be our only hope." She looked Rick up and down. "God help us all."

"Whatever it is you hope to do we'd better do it now!" Photon told Captain Mar-Vell. "I just barely outran it."

"Outran what?" Marlo looked over at Warbird. "That explained nothing!"

"No no no." Captain Mar-Vell's face had become a field of stars. He strode toward the front door, already Aware of what he could find on the other side. Sure enough, when Mar-Vell opened the door, he nearly stepped out into nothingness. "We've failed! Aarkus has already destroyed the Earth!"

"INDEED I HAVE!"

The voice came from high above, for Aarkus was far larger than the house of Rick Jones. Large enough that the house fit in the palm of his hand. Inside of sphere of green smoke that was his head, eyes burned white with judgment. With each word, his voice encompassed the Kree and last of humanity.

"YOU ARE ALL THAT REMAINS, SHIELDED ONLY BY HE WHO WIELDS DESTINY! WITH HIS HEAD, YOUR REALITY AND ALL OTHERS SHALL AGAIN BE SAFE!"

There had been a flash when Captain America ran at Aarkus. When that passed, he was no longer surrounded by his fellow Avengers. Instead, Captain America found himself in what appeared to be a bunker, in the presence of Namor and Jim Hammond. The Sub-Mariner and the Human Torch, Captain America's old partners in the World War II Invaders.

"What insult is this?" Namor asked in a heated tone. "Who dares to abduct me from the Baxter Building?"

"I recognize this place," Human Torch said quietly.

"As well you should." Smoke billowed and formed before the Invaders, solidifying into Aarkus. "This is where you murdered Hitler, Human Torch. I recreated it as the setting for our discussion."

"What is the meaning of bringing us here?" Namor approached Aarkus as he gave this demand, and impulsively tried to punch him. The Sub-Mariner's hand passed harmlessly through the smoke.

"Ah Namor, you are as rash as ever. But strength of force is meaningless in this, where your goal is to convince me not to go through with my task."

"So you already doubt your orders?" Captain America asked. "Then there's nothing more to be said, Aarkus. Don't destroy humanity."

Human Torch's android brain quickly deduced what the two were discussing. "This is because of Ultron."

Namor turned around to face Captain America. "So this is all your doing! If you had only called on the Fantastic Four, we could have settled things quickly and not drawn the attention of his kind!" With these final words, Namor pointed a finger at Aarkus, then addressed the other-dimensional cop. "Once I would have said kill the humans and be done with it, leave Earth to Atlantis and those who respect nature. But I made a promise to act as protector and with my last breath I shall fulfill it!"

Again, Namor tried to attack Aarkus by force. This time Aarkus waved a hand, and Namor went flying against the wall.

"Spare your last breath for speaking, Namor, and leave the physical conflict to those more suited. Even now I battle with your Sorcerer Supreme and god-like pantheons dependent on humanity."

"It sounds that you shouldn't have the power to waste in luxuries such as this," Human Torch said, indicating the bunker. "A real recreation, or simply an illusion? Many times in the past you seemed to either hold back or make an unnecessary show of power."

"Rest assured, I have sufficient power to do what I have been tasked. My only quarter in this is granting you three the opportunity to convince me otherwise."

Captain America shook his head. "This isn't a game I'm going to play, Aarkus. If you needed convincing we would already be dead. You've stayed your hand, but you're only one of many. You want your superiors to stay theirs."

In the moment before speaking, no smile was visible within the misty head of Aarkus. "This is correct. Since you first gained our notice, the denizens of Smokeworld have observed your cluster of tiny realities. You have been deemed a threat, and if I do not deal

with you others shall.”

“Let them come,” Namor said. “The Avenging Son shall face all and crush them.”

“This isn’t something that can be punched, Namor,” Human Torch said. “Nor do I think it can be burned, outthought, even reasoned with. You mean to satisfy with something other than Earth’s destruction.”

“Say your piece Aarkus,” said Captain America. “To save the Earth, I will do whatever it takes.”

“Do not be so certain.”

Captain Mar-Vell did not join when Warbird and Photon flew up to face Aarkus. The women flitted around that head of mist, firing blasts that did not so much as flinch the other-worldly being. It was this futility that Mar-Vell saw, and he turned to convey this to Rick Jones.

“My apologies, Rick. I was wrong to think that your access to the Destiny Force could save us from this thing.”

By the look on his face, it appeared as though Rick really needed to go to the bathroom. “Don’t be so quick to doubt me Marv. I’m trying, and whatever it takes I’ll access the power.”

“Don’t,” Captain Mar-Vell said to his young friend. “This Cosmic Awareness is new to me, but I sense that your attempts would only result in an aneurysm. Go back inside with your wife and close the door behind you.” The two men were standing on the front porch, overlooking nothing. “This fight won’t be won with force.”

“That your new Cosmic Awareness talking to you?” Rick Jones asked. “Because I know from experience, that’s not the best thing to rely on.”

“No,” said Captain Mar-Vell as he flew into the air. “This feeling comes from inside.”

Twin beams of force shot from Aarkus’ eyes. Warbird and Photon were struck at once. Photon found herself back as solid matter and fell from the air, with Warbird following suit. Captain Mar-Vell trusted in the woman he knew as Carol Danvers, and so caught Photon.

“If you can recover, return to the house with Warbird,” Captain Mar-Vell said. “I am going higher regardless.”

Photon found that she could recover, but once in her light form protested. Captain Mar-Vell simply looked at her with pleading eyes. Without another word Photon dropped. Bathed in an aura of photonic energy from his Nega Bands, Captain Mar-Vell continued to climb until he was eye-to-eye with Aarkus.

"You would have me believe that Rick Jones is blocking your power," Captain Mar-Vell said. "I am Aware that that is not the case. Inexperience allowed you to fool me, but this illusion is ended!"

Photonic bursts of light erupted from the Nega Bands, washing over even the white void that had been reality. When the light faded, the illusion was revealed. Above was the sky, below the earth, all around the California countryside. No longer was Aarkus a giant, now hovering a few feet from a Captain Mar-Vell he was the same size as.

"An impressive feat," said Aarkus. "However it would not be wise to deem my ruse a bluff. If pressed, I will destroy this planet, this entire reality, to eliminate the Destiny Force!"

"Killing Rick Jones would take much less effort. It is hypocrisy to ask of me a moral choice you are unwilling to make!"

Hovering, Captain Mar-Vell attempted to circle Aarkus, and Aarkus circled in turn.

"Good point." Aarkus spread his palm. A burst of wispy energy shot toward Rick Jones.

"No!" Faster than light, Captain Mar-Vell appeared in the energy's path. It took him in the chest, replacing the yellow starburst with his own blackened flesh. Flying against the pain, Captain Mar-Vell reached Aarkus' level and returned fire with photonic blasts. Aarkus raised a hand and the light dispersed. "You should realize now that you are no match for me."

"He's right," Warbird said on the ground to Photon, standing next to her. "We have to get up there and help him."

Photon gave her a sideways glance. "Not help him fight. That isn't what Mar-Vell's doing."

"And yet Rick Jones is still alive," Captain Mar-Vell said to Aarkus. "If you are unwilling to carry out your threat then what is the point of your being here?"

"Because Rick Jones is not the threat!" Aarkus had suddenly bridged the distance, gripped Captain Mar-Vell by the throat. "He is only one among humanity, billions with the potential for infinite power! Power that was awoken by a creation of the Kree! If you, one member of the Kree, are unwilling to erase your greatest

mistake, then what chance has the universe should humanity choose to expand?"

"This trial was already held."

"By the denizens of this reality," said Aarkus. "Now others have felt the threat, and they demand their pound of flesh! Humanity is a danger to all because it was altered, not only by the Kree but others across thousands of worlds. They all planted their seeds and must reap what they have sown! This is my task beyond the death of one man, and it will come to be if no one will take a step toward saving the everything!"

"It will not be me!"

"Then live with the consequences!" Aarkus' eyes glowed, and the mist of his head appeared to solidify. "Feel the pain of this universe as it slowly unravels from the inside out! Die a trillion deaths over all infinity at once! Experience the whole of my existence as it destroys your mind!"

Captain Mar-Vell felt it all, and if he possessed the mental capacity to he would have screamed. But he had none left. All was reserved for one act. While Aarkus was solid, Captain Mar-Vell punched him in the jaw, physically harming the other-dimensional alien.

"That I think we can help with," Warbird said. But Photon had already shifted into light, and Warbird raced to catch up with her. The two women blasted at Aarkus while he was locked in battle with Mar-Vell, and at the house Rick Jones cheered them on.

"Yeah! Get him!"

Sadly, Rick Jones would not be able to see the battle's end. It happened as Aarkus was grappling with Mar-Vell and deflecting the women's attacks. Light exploded from inside him, encompassing all four warriors. It then winked out suddenly, taking them with it.

It had been no reaction of energies that transported the three heroes and Aarkus away. A power greater than all of them had been responsible, and suddenly the heroes were in its midst. Warbird and Photon looked to either side and saw Captain America, Namor the Sub-Mariner, Jim Hammond the original Human Torch and even Doctor Strange floating with them in the wispy void. Captain Mar-Vell looked up and saw above them the towering forms of Eternity and the Living Tribunal. What he also noticed was the absence of Aarkus.

"Is this your doing?" Captain Mar-Vell asked the towering figures. "Are you also god-like beings, even more powerful than Aarkus and

dismissed him as such?"

Neither Eternity nor the Living Tribunal answered. Instead, the voice that addressed Captain Mar-Vell belonged to Doctor Strange. "Look beyond them, Mar-Vell. No one has been dismissed. We have all been transported here, all of us."

Captain Mar-Vell did look out beyond, seeing all with his Cosmic Awareness. Their wispy surroundings were not an infinite void; going out far enough they had an edge, the outline of a face. It was Aarkus, encompassing even the ultimate beings of the universe and communing with them at a range beyond even Mar-Vell's senses.

"So, the fate of the universe is being discussed...and those who live in it have no say?"

"I don't think so." Captain America turned to address the Human Torch. "Jim Hammond hasn't been seen since that bomb went off inside him. So take off his face and speak to us as yourself, Aarkus."

Jim Hammond smiled, and his fiery features shifted into smoke alone, taking on the visage of Aarkus. "Yes, at present Jim Hammond is beyond even my power. But I felt his voice needed to be heard in this, even if only by proxy."

Both Namor and Captain Mar-Vell had surged forward, reaching to take Aarkus by the throat. Captain America got between them however, blocking them with this shield.

"No. We're done fighting. Explain for them, Doctor Strange."

"As I was fending Aarkus off at the Nexus of All Realities, I was making contact with his superiors in the realm we call Smoke World. Now Aarkus is our intermediary, helping us to make a deal that will preserve reality."

Captain Mar-Vell fixed his eyes on Aarkus, on the being that had just tried to make him kill his friend. "What are to be the terms of this arrangement?"

Time has passed. Once again Captain Mar-Vell was in California, standing on the back porch of Rick Jones' home. With him are Rick Jones and Captain America, all drinking beers and watching the sunset.

"Thanks guys," Rick Jones said. "For coming and telling me things were settled, I mean. And, sure, saving my life and the world, but especially for telling me. Most of the time, us regular guys don't

know the world was saved until...we find we're still alive the next day."

"Sometimes you just don't know the world was in danger to beginning with," said Captain America. "All the things I've seen, I try not to think about before we were active, or the dozens of threats throughout the universe that we know nothing about."

"Yeah." Rick Jones sipped his beer. "Ignorance was bliss."

"One of the best things about childhood," Captain Mar-Vell said. "So I've been told. Youth of the Kree aren't shielded from these things. We're all told, from the moment of understanding, what threatens us so that we're encouraged to join the defense. There are no years of innocence."

Rick Jones looked at Mar-Vell for a long minute before saying, "Man, that's messed up."

"It kind of is," Captain America said. "Even during the Depression, I had some great moments. But what you describe...I know that it sounds worse than you meant it to be."

"Yes, there were always those times when you could forget the outside world and just enjoy the moment." Mar-Vell took a gulp from his bottle. "Moments like this."

The moment passed, and Rick Jones spoke. "So, how was it you guys saved the universe? You know, so I know for next time."

"No idea," Captain America said.

"Some higher powers got involved," said Captain Mar-Vell. "The enormity of the conflict sort of wiped the details from our minds."

"Doctor Strange was there."

"Ahh." Rick Jones nodded. "Yeah, pretty sure that's happened before. You get used to it Marv."

"I hope I don't. It isn't good to be complacent."

When Captain Mar-Vell teleported back to Avengers Mansion with Captain America, their moods were somber.

"Rick Jones seems to have a good life," Captain Mar-Vell said.

"There have been some bumps," said Captain America. "But overall I envy him."

"It's a shame, what we had to do."

"Lying to him seems to be the worst thing about it." Captain America put his hand on the handle of the door leading into the mansion from the roof. "Come on. Beast should have the results to your tests. I could use some good news."

"This is an unfortunate task for me to convey." Dr. Henry McCoy settled the spectacles on his face after cleaning them. "The prognosis is far less than good. Due to the frequent periods Mar-Vell and Genis spent in the Negative Zone, I had expected to find such levels of radiation in your body to warrant an elevated risk of catastrophe. Yet I discovered none."

"There shouldn't be any negative energy in Mar-Vell," said Quicksilver, who was there listening to the results with Captain Mar-Vell, Captain America, Warbird and She-Hulk. "I was there when it was all leeched away after Rick Jones helped him escape from the Negative Zone."

"Well, there also weren't any tachyons, the faster-than-light particles present in time-travel," said Stingray in a far-shorter explanation than Beast could have given. "It was present in all of us just from visiting Limbo, except for Mar-Vell."

"What does this mean?" Captain Mar-Vell asked.

"The process by which Immortus bonded you to your son was far beyond anything I've encountered," said Beast. "It is not dissimilar to the situation you had with Rick Jones, in which the Nega Bands allowed for spatial dimensional travel. There one of you needed to remain in the Negative Zone at all times, or as Quicksilver just said the negative energy would have had to be removed once you were both out. In this case you were brimming with energies that would have killed you, and Genis took them all into himself. This is only speculation, but I feel it likely that Immortus shunted Genis outside of time, where he is essentially frozen and safe."

"This doesn't make any sense," Captain America said. "If Immortus was capable of this, he could just as easily have shunted Mar-Vell outside of time. He could have done a million things to remove the energies and heal Mar-Vell, whatever he claimed."

"It's Immortus." Warbird said the name with a venom that explained everything. Captain Mar-Vell nodded. "Once again I am the pawn of a higher force. Is there any way to do what Immortus wouldn't?"

There was some hesitation before Stingray said, "Yes, but I wouldn't risk it."

"Well why not?" asked Quicksilver with no tact.

"The ideal scenario would be to collect Genis from outside time and then repair the damage to his body before it takes his life," Beast said. "Without access to his body and a proper assessment of his injuries, however, the chance of saving him in time would be less than marginal. First we would have to find him, something I fear Immortus will not have made easy."

"Actually there is a chance of that," said Stingray. "Once again, the Nega Bands are the key. It is remarkable how many Kree devices are thought-based."

"Not so remarkable. Much of Kree science is based in genetic and mental enhancement, in the hopes of furthering our stalled evolution."

"Be that as it may, the Kree managed to make some progress." Stingray pointed at the Nega Bands on Captain Mar-Vell's wrists. "As near as we can figure, the primary function of the Nega Bands is to create a link between two individuals. One in our reality, and another in the Negative Zone, which it would seem the Kree had discovered centuries before Mr. Fantastic."

Captain Mar-Vell looked down at his Nega Bands. They had mysteriously dissolved after Rick had saved him from the Negative Zone, only to suddenly return when Immortus had transported him to Limbo. He realized now that must have been Immortus, taking the Nega-Bands beforehand to make his own modifications on them.

"This is correct. While the power of the Nega Bands is to transform mental energy into physical power, the Kree possess no psychic potential with which to use them. So a means was devised to take subjects of other alien races and utilize their potential thru a mental link."

"So, the Kree trapped people in the Negative Zone to...to power weapons?" There was disgust in Warbird's voice.

"Worse," said Captain Mar-Vell. "Fearing the power the Nega Bands conveyed, the Kree trapped their own soldiers, allowing them to escape for only a maximum of three hours. Because the Nega Bands did not work for aliens, the Kree could safely imprison them until the soldiers were needed."

"That's barbaric," said She-Hulk. "But ultimately unsurprising. Somehow I don't think our government would balk at the same kind of research."

"Unfortunately no alien race possessed enough potential to the

make the power worth the effort. Even humans, in the low stage of evolution when first the experiments began, were not deemed viable. So the project stalled and was ultimately forgotten."

"And now that we've stumbled a few rungs up the ladder, the results more than speak for themselves," said Beast. "With Rick Jones you exhibited flight, highly augmented strength and durability, and powerful photonic energy bursts."

"And Genis isn't only a Kree," Stingray said. "His mother is an Eternal, an offshoot of humanity who had their psychic potential realized."

"This must account for the teleportation, and perhaps even the Cosmic Awareness," Captain Mar-Vell said. Then he nodded. "Of course. While not able to fly before, I did exhibit weaker variations of the enhanced strength and photonic bursts while I was in Limbo. It must be because, as a pink Kree from inter-breeding, I possess some psychic potential when compared with 'pure-blooded' blue Kree."

"As fascinating as these explanations are," said Quicksilver impatiently, "You did say the Nega Bands were the key to finding Genis."

Stingray nodded. "Mar-Vell and Genis are linked via the Nega Bands. In time, we could tap into that link and trace it back to Genis."

"Or perhaps..." Without warning, Captain Mar-Vell slammed his Nega Bands together. Nothing happened. "As I feared, Immortus modified these for more than a link across temporal boundaries." He looked to Beast. "Through this link, would you be able to discern my son's condition?"

Beast gave a moment's thought before nodding. "Yes, I'm sure we could eventually. But to study such technology could take months, even years."

"And is too dangerous on Earth," Captain Mar-Vell finished.

"What?" Warbird stepped forward. "Mar-Vell, I know you've just met a lot of the Avengers for the first time, but you can trust us."

"But we're not all you'd have to worry about," said She-Hulk. "Studying those Nega Bands could provide Earth with the technology, and could lead to similar experiments like the Kree did."

"And to avoid that, I cannot remain on Earth."

"So you're just going to leave?" Warbird asked Captain Mar-Vell.

"This could be the only chance to find your son?"

"The data we've collected already could be enough to start a search for Genis," Stingray said.

"Could," Warbird repeated. "And it would certainly take longer than if you remained to help."

"While another race could help me in a shorter amount of time."

"Who? The Kree!"

"Carol." Captain America put a hand on her shoulder, and Warbird started to calm down. "Mar-Vell, there have been a lot of advancements made by the Avengers and the Fantastic Four that have been kept from the government for exactly this fear."

"As I keep getting harassed about," She-Hulk said while shaking her head in frustration.

"It isn't only that," Captain Mar-Vell said. "Here, the world nearly ended. Nearly all of reality ended. Twice. In less than a day. Even now, I'm getting a sense of countless threats across the universe. People and planets and stars, dying. If I'm to be trapped in this time, it can't just be spent on this world, dealing with threats you are more than equipped to handle. Not when I can be out there," he looked upwards. "Fighting the threats no one even knows about. And yes, striving to more quickly save my son."

"Yes, it would be rather selfish of you to remain here," said Quicksilver.

"Then I suppose that's it," Captain America said. He extended a hand, and Captain Mar-Vell accepted it. "While you have yet to experience all of them, Captain Mar-Vell, the battles we have fought together were a great honor."

"This I don't doubt, Captain America. I look forward to them all, both future and past."

Quicksilver was next to shake Captain Mar-Vell's hand. "Though I was at first distrustful of you, you later saved my life. More than that, you saved my sister's life."

Stingray shook Captain Mar-Vell's hand while Beast patted him on the back. Both expressed their commitment to helping Genis, whatever it would take.

Not having anything to say, She-Hulk stepped back as Warbird stepped forward. She and Captain Mar-Vell were of nearly equal height, and looked into each other's eyes.

"Carol. I am sorry I ever entered your life."

"I'm not," Warbird said. Then she took Captain Mar-Vell's head in

her hands and kissed him.

Then they separated, Captain Mar-Vell stepped back and addressed the Avengers as a whole. "When I first arrived on Earth, it was to punish a planet that had dared to defy the Kree. But quickly did I see your worth, and knew that it was not defiance to advance where another race had stalled. Now Avengers, I part ways from you as a friend. One day, I shall come back. Until then, there must be no regrets, no tears, no anxieties. Go forth humans, in all your beliefs, and prove that I am not mistaken in mine."

With a flash of photonic light, Captain Mar-Vell was gone.

EPILOGUE

I travel now through space, alone in body if not in mind. With the Nega Bands I find myself able to survive the vacuum, sustained not by oxygen but free-floating energy. No longer on Earth, but not yet outside the system, I settled on a small asteroid in the large belt between Mars and Jupiter.

There was one last person I had to say goodbye to.

You loved this woman?

I nodded as I stood over the rock memorial I had made for the lovely and gentle Una.

Yes, I love her still. No woman has yet compared to her, though some I've come to

love in different ways. Carol, who was a woman of authority when first I met her, as close to a warrior Kree as any human I had met. Anelle, Princess of the Skrulls, should have been a sworn enemy yet won me over with her desire for peace.

And my mother? What of Elysius?

At this I shake my head. I have not yet met Elysius, know nothing of her save that she will bear my child, years after I die.

You could meet her now. Could meet Starfox and Mentor and all the other Eternals of Titan. It is not so far from you.

But will they want to meet me?

Of course. It is me they hate. Me that trapped them, Titan and all, into the Negative Zone. They raised me, and I made like I had killed them, so that the Kree would accept me.

The first step to making recovery is to make amends. Titan first, then the Kree.

You're going to make amends with the Kree? So you want to rejoin them, be a soldier. Or is it more? With your power, you can rule them all.

I fly through space, unwilling to teleport yet. There must be time to think, to contemplate what is to be done. I do not want to fight, do not want to rule. I only want to help. Help the universe, and my son. Before you can be freed, Genis-Vell, you must be helped.

Don't waste your time, Dad.

THE END OF THE BEGINNING

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This was a big thing Chris Munn and I discussed.

I'm uncertain when it was brought up. I think, way back when Mike Exner was involved, he had Chris had decided to use Captain Mar-Vell. It was all going to start in the Avengers Immortal story, and Captain Mar-Vell would participate in the Kang/Ultron War. I don't think the specifics were settled on, nor the role of Genis-Vell. At the time, Josh Reynolds hadn't even wrapped up that particular plot in Avengers West Coast.

Eventually, after a lot of e-mails between myself, Munn and Reynolds, the ending of the K/U War was hammered out, with the only sticking point being the fates of Captain Mar-Vell and Genis-Vell. Munn wanted Mar-Vell back, and so did I. So tentative plans for an ongoing series written by the two of us were made.

Then Mark Millar went and wrote Civil War, and Paul Jenkins wrote The Fucking Return. Munn and I discussed it again, decided we didn't care if people thought we were following Jenkins, and would go through with it anyway. Of course, then Secret Invasion and the revelation of that Captain Mar-Vell came out, so all was well and good.

Lesson learned though. The story had to be written. Beset with a number of problems (the latest being he's sick; get better soon man!) Munn had to drop to the sidelines. So I've handled much of this myself (please, no applause), and realized there was little chance an ongoing Captain Mar-Vell series could happen. I'm already writing Avengers and Captain America as well as scripting Thunderbolts for Munn, and all have stalled while K/U War was done. A fourth series? Hell, I doubt it would be allowed by The Powers That Be.

So why make the switch? Why not maintain the status quo, keep crazy Genis around and send Mar-Vell back to his own time? Because I'm a selfish bastard who wants to write his stories, dammit.

So here's what I'm going to do: the next installment of Avengers (hopefully out by next month) will feature a Captain Mar-Vell back up. Just a small tale, maybe a thousand words. We'll see how it goes, if I can keep it up for most if not every issue while maintaining a regular schedule.

Wish me luck.

- Stephen Crosby
