

AVENGERS WEST COAST

M2K Cyberback #1

Collecting original AWC issues #1-12 by Chris Munn & Russ Anderson

FEATURING:



Hawkeye



Iron Man



Warbird



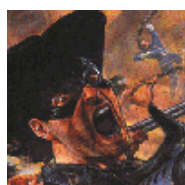
Vagabond



Darkhawk



Sons of the
Serpent



Two-Gun Kid



Captain Marvel



Hate Monger



Doctor Midas



Oubliette

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Now.

The business of money waits for no man. Those who dawdle are swept away as surely as kayakers who stop paddling in a heavy current. This is why ulcers and suicide are the most likely rewards of a career in stockbroking. And, to a smaller degree, it's the reason why the lines at your local bank are never anything less than atrocious, and why bankers feel secure enough in their jobs to work four-hour days.

The main Los Angeles branch of Metrobank was right in the middle of that four-hour shift on a Wednesday, when the plague struck.

Harold Carter, a 72 year-old veteran of the Korean War, was the first to succumb. One moment, he was standing impatiently in the line he'd been trapped in for the last twenty minutes, the next he was doubled over, wheezing, clutching at his chest. The moment after that, he was on the cold tile floor, his lungs too full of fluid to pull in any air.

Someone surely would have moved to help him, if twenty other people in the bank's lobby, fully half the people in the room, hadn't picked that moment to also fall over in various stages of suffocation. Tellers, customers, and managers alike were affected.

It didn't take more than a few seconds for someone to think of chemical weapons. And from there, it was only the flash of a synapse to the cry of "Terrorist attack!"

Most of the unaffected people in the lobby bolted for the door, even employees. A few lingered to see what they could do for the dying, but only a few, and those cleared out quickly when it became clear that the affected were either dead or as good as. No use sticking around and adding to the body count.

When all those who could had cleared out, when sirens had begun wailing somewhere nearby, when the strongest of the plague-stricken made one last attempt to pull air into their water-filled lungs and then fell into the unconsciousness preceding death, only then did the ghostly white man sitting in one of the plush chairs in the waiting area stand up, brushing off the knees of his black pants and adjusting the rolled sleeves of his trenchcoat.

"Off to a nice start," he decided. And then, stepping over the splayed body of a pretty, blue-faced account officer, he moved toward the door and the street beyond. Out where the negative emotions of the survivors would provide a nice appetizer to the feast that was soon to come.

Marvel 2000 Proudly Presents

#1 - MOVING FORWARD, PAST TENSE, Part 1

"Bringing Out The Dead"

Plot by Chris Munn & Russ Anderson
Script by Russ Anderson

Before - Seattle, Washington.

"The Avengers? Aren't they dead?"

The man in the six-and-a-half foot tall suit of gold and scarlet armor shook his head. "You should know

better than that."

Carol Danvers, once known as Ms. Marvel, now known as Warbird, leaned back in her chair and crossed her arms over her chest. "What would I know about the Avengers, Tony? If I knew the first thing about them, I wouldn't have gotten myself kicked out."

The man inside the Iron Man suit didn't say anything for a moment. Then, slowly, he nodded.

"Okay," he said. "I see how this is going to be."

He turned to leave. Carol's eyes bulged at his back as she sat up.

"Wait a minute!"

He did, pausing at the sliding glass door leading onto the balcony of Carol's Seattle apartment, but he didn't turn. With his back to her, he said, "I've been asked to put together a new west coast team, Carol. Since I'm of the opinion that the world is better off *with* the Avengers than without them, and because I know nothing about these people Thor has recruited to fill the East Coast ranks, I'm doing it."

"That doesn't change the fact that..."

"You're right," he said, looking back over his shoulder. "It doesn't change a thing. It doesn't change the fact that we were right for ejecting you from the team months ago. And it sure doesn't change the fact that in the intervening time, you've worked your ass off to get past an addiction we both know is worse than anything Kang or the Zodiac could ever do to us. You've earned your place back on the team, Carol, and it's there for you. But I'm not going to apologize for what we did, and I'm certainly not going to beg you to come back.

"You know where to find me if you change your mind."

He turned back toward the window, but before he could push aside the drapes, there was a flash of light from behind him and the sound of Carol clearing her throat. Iron Man didn't have to look to know that she had changed into her Warbird costume.

"What the hell," Carol said. "Maybe it'll give me some ideas for my next book."

Beneath the helmet, Tony Stark smiled.

Now.

"Twenty-one dead," the detective said, drawing the sheet back from the body she was squatting next to. "And nobody else in the building at the time of the attack has so much as the sniffles."

"So you're sure this was a chemical strike?"

"Not much else it could be, don't you think? Someone released an unidentified airborne agent in this building and it killed an assortment of individuals as close to instantly as these things ever do. Filled up their lungs and sinuses until they drowned in their own fluids."

"How can you be sure it's dissipated?"

"Because none of us have died since we got in here. Whatever the agent is, it kills fast and disperses quickly. Only good thing about this situation, to tell you the truth." She flipped the sheet back over the old man's face. "Sucks for these guys, though."

Iron Man ran an atmosphere check anyway, double-checking the seals on his armor while he did it. Nothing in the air except for Los Angeles' standard levels of air pollution, and the lingering odor of death.

"Why did the mayor call you in anyway?" the detective demanded, rising to her feet and snapping off her surgical gloves. "A terrorist strike seems a little below you guys. Unless a couple of towers are getting knocked down, that is."

Iron Man regarded her. *You guys?*

"Do we have a problem, Detective Gonzalez?"

"Yeah, we do. This is police work, Iron Man. I don't understand why a glorified bodyguard gets to stomp through my crime scene. Bad enough Homeland Security is going to be all over this one..."

Tony Stark allowed himself a rueful smile beneath the mask. There always had to be one, didn't there? Something told him he'd be seeing a lot more of Detective Gonzalez over the next months, especially once the public found out the Avengers were setting up shop in the neighborhood again.

But he was okay with that. He'd been a capitalist long enough to understand that a little discontent kept powerful people honest. And Tony fit that description in both aspects of his life.

"I'm only interested in catching the bad guys, Detective," he said, as a small compartment on his forearm snapped closed and sealed with a hiss of compressed air. "I've taken the liberty of obtaining an air sample. I'll be in touch if I come up with anything."

He felt the detective's eyes in his back all the way to the glass doors.

Before - New York City, New York.

"See you've gone back to the red and gold," Clint Barton said.

Iron Man chuckled, looking down at his armor. "It always happens sooner or later."

Clint opened the refrigerator, began to reach for the beer, then thought better of it and pulled out a couple of sodas instead. He offered one to Iron Man and the Avenger nodded, lifting his faceplate before he took it.

"So..." Clint began.

"So."

"The Whackos ride again, huh?"

"If I have my way. And it wouldn't be the same without you, Clint."

"That might not be a bad thing. The last time didn't end on a high note, you know."

"That was hardly your fault. Besides, I need somebody I can trust in the driver's seat..."

"See, that's another thing." Clint cracked his Pepsi open and took a swallow. "After the West Coast team was disbanded the last time, you brought everybody back together for Force Works. And even though it was your funding, your idea, and your house, you put the Scarlet Witch in charge. I wasn't around at the time, but I've talked to Wanda, Tony. She says you stepped all over her authority. It can't be that way with us."

Tony shook his head. "It was different with Wanda. I was going through a lot of things in my personal life, and I needed to feel like I was in control of *something*. That's over now. And I think I've demonstrated that I can follow your lead without complaint."

That was hard to argue with. Iron Man had been a member of the West Coast Avengers, under Hawkeye's leadership, for a long time. He was too much the boy billionaire to not suffer the occasional twinges of imperial arrogance, but Clint knew Tony had plenty of respect for his leadership abilities.

And at the end of the day, there just weren't that many other Avengers Clint would rather have at his back. If they were really going to try to make a go of the West Coast branch again, especially after the messy way the East branch had recently split up, it'd be nice to have Iron Man's power and a direct connection to Tony Stark's resources.

"Okay, you can count Br'er Hawkeye in. On two conditions."

Tony nodded for him to go on.

"One, I get final approval on all candidates before we approach them for active membership."

"Fair enough."

"And two, we're not living in that high-tech Jetsons place you set up for Force Works. No thank you. Intelligent machines make me nervous, especially after all that stuff that went down with the Vision."

"What did you have in mind then?"

Hawkeye smiled. "What kinda shape is the original Whacko compound in these days, do you think?"

Now.

Hundreds of masked faces looked with wonder upon the man on the stage, and why not? He was a great man, a *pure* man. And it had been his inspiration, his drive, which had brought them all to this place and time. A crossroads had been reached, and if his followers were only strong enough, the man known as Seth would guide them down the correct path.

"What sacrifice are you willing to make?" he asked the gathered men and women. His voice was low,

conversational, but it carried easily out over the makeshift auditorium.

There was no reply except for the uncertain mutterings of the audience, so Seth leaned forward, the stylized hood dipping low and making it look, for just a moment, like he actually wore a snake's face.

"Are you willing to die?" he asked.

More definite response to that one. A couple of scattered cheers. The question had caught them off guard, but at least they knew the answer to this one. Yes or no questions they could handle.

"Are you willing to die in pain? Because I tell you right now, early this morning, one of our brothers unleashed the Copperhead Strain in the heart of Los Angeles. Twenty people died. Our brother, who had refused inoculation, was one of them."

There was a solemn silence. Having given a death, Seth turned to the problem of turning the late Harold Carter into a martyr. For that is exactly what he would need if the Sons of the Serpent were to take the next terrible step.

And waiting in the wings, the white man in the black trenchcoat licked his lips and watched. Soon, soon.

Before - Phoenix, Arizona.

Tony Stark had always been a ladies man, and the fact that he spent most of his time with superheroines and starlets had never been able to diminish his appreciation for well-toned female bodies.

Bodies like the one performing a complex series of jumps, spins, and flips across the sun-bleached rooftop of KIKK radio station in downtown Phoenix.

"This...really isn't necessary, Miss Lyons," he said.

She spun around a large antenna -- Tony wincing inwardly, sure it would break under the strain -- then planted her feet and launched herself straight at him. She described a slow, graceful forward flip, and touched down in front of him.

"Not necessary?" she asked, grinning. She was breathing hard, but he got the feeling it was more from excitement than exertion. "But don't you want to see what I can do?"

"I know you ran with Nomad for a while," he said, putting his hand on her shoulder. "I know you know what you're doing and that you'd make a good Avengers. But even if I *didn't* know all that, just from looking at you... Captain America recommended you. That's more than good enough for me."

This is what he said. Inside the armor, he was wondering again if this had been a mistake. In terms of ability and skill, she was obviously everything Steve had said she'd be, but this unabashed eagerness worried Tony. If only there were just a few more established Avengers living on the west coast...

Her grin slowly spread as she understood what he was saying. "So I'm in?"

"On a probationary basis," he said. "Of course, you'll probably have to relocate to LA. If you're dug in here

in Phoenix..."

"Are you kidding? Who wants to be a radio traffic reporter when you can be an Avenger? I can be in LA in two days."

"Make it a week. We're still getting the compound ready." He fired his bootjets, rising into the air and tipping her a salute. "I'll see you then, Vagabond."

His sensitive audio receptors were still picking up the sound of her cheers when he roared out over the desert.

Now.

"Glad you could make it, Shellhead! Not interrupting your morning coffee, are we?"

"Uh oh. I know that tone." Iron Man dropped to the well-manicured lawn outside the command building of the Avengers West Coast Compound. Hawkeye was waiting for him on the front steps.

"This is Drill Sergeant Hawkeye I'm talking to, right? Not Jokester-Foil-to-Captain-America Hawkeye."

"It's Been-Up-All-Night-Looking-for-Avengers Hawkeye, actually." Clint turned, and the two of them strode into the building side-by-side. "Back in *my* day, we were stumbling over each other to be in the Avengers. Now..."

"Now everybody's too busy," Iron Man sighed. "Or disenchanted. The biggest problem is that only a few former Avengers live on the west coast. Just about everyone said, 'Call me if Thanos wants to blow up the planet', but no one is willing to relocate to serve as a full-time member."

"Leaving us with a very powerful lady with a chip on her shoulder, an overeager rookie, and a--"

"Don't forget the former supervillain and the recovering alcoholic," Iron Man said, looking sideways at his teammate.

"Yeah, them too. 'Morning, Conchita." Hawkeye raised a hand to the young Hispanic woman in a maid's outfit who was working in the kitchen as they passed.

"The staff's all in place then?"

"Yep. The cleaning crews just left yesterday. Too bad we couldn't get the old crew back, but the new ones seem to be working out just as well." Hawkeye pushed through a doorway to the left, and into a large room with monitor and computer equipment lining one wall.

"Welcome to the new monitor room. Or, as I like to call it, the House That Big Brother Built."

Iron Man gave a satisfied nod. "Hard air interface tech and Heisenberg-class chaos calculators based on my old PLATO technology. I take it it's all working."

"Who knows? I can't handle that Wizard of Oz crap." Hawkeye crossed to a bank of older equipment with

a massive picture tube monitor on top of it.

"Clint, that equipment is at least five years old!"

"And it took me that long to figure out how to use it, thanks." Hawkeye keyed in some commands and watched as the screen flickered to life. "I'm not emotionally ready to upgrade yet. Fortunately, this Beta does almost everything your DVD player does, just without all the pretty colors and flashing lights."

"You're worse than Cap, and he was born in the twenties!"

Before Hawkeye could reply, Iron Man put his hands out, palm-down, in front of the newer machinery, and began tapping on the hard-air keyboard that had materialized under his fingers. A moment later, a viewscreen had appeared in the air in front of him, and Hank Pym -- world-renowned microbiologist and co-founder of the Avengers -- was looking down from it.

"Iron Man. Thanks for returning my call."

"Good morning, Hank. Or is it still evening there?"

Hank chuckled. "Who knows? I don't keep clocks in my labs. Jan hasn't been in to chew me out for working all night yet, so it must still be the wee hours of the morning."

"What've you got for me?"

"Well, that air sample you sent me wasn't much help, since there wasn't enough of the agent left to learn anything. However, I was able to obtain some tissue samples of the deceased from the joint LAPD/FBI task force. Talked to a charming woman named Gonzalez. She sends her regards."

"I'm sure."

"Anyway, I think I've got it. You've heard of cystic fibrosis."

Iron Man nodded.

"CF attacks the respiratory and digestive systems, fills them with mucus and fluid. This agent is attacking its victims on a genetic level, inducing a kind of super-CF on them and pushing them in seconds through stages that would normally take years."

"A genetic plague..."

"It gets worse. Something you may not have noticed on the scene...every person who died in that bank was Caucasian. CF is *much* more common in whites than it is any other racial group. If I had to hazard a guess, I'd say--"

"Whoever's doing this is racially motivated."

"Right. That narrows our list of past offenders down to pretty much nothing. If it was an attack against a minority group, we'd have all sorts of suspects, but--"

"Offhand," Hawkeye said from across the room, "I'd say the Sons of the Serpent are behind it."

"The Sons of the Serpents are a white supremacist group, Clint. That doesn't make any--" The words died in Iron Man's throat as he turned.

Hawkeye had brought up CNN on the older monitor, and a man in a snake mask that covered everything except his cold-as-flint eyes filled the screen. It was obvious, by the skin around those eyes, that the man wearing the mask was black.

"--e have accepted and absorbed your slurs and slanders, made them part of our culture. Now we accept and absorb your masks and your methods. The original Sons of the Serpent were Egyptian--*black* priests of their death-god Set. And so are we.

"We have already successfully tested this plague. Ask your police and your government why they have not shared this information with you yet. And do it quickly, because very, very soon, the plague will be released among you. Three-quarters of the hate-mongering, slave-driving, overpaid, overfed whites in this country will die. We will make no accounting for age or gender. Only race. Just as you have always done to us.

"That is all."

The image changed to a very serious, very frightened young woman at a news desk. She was saying something, some witty summary of what they'd just seen, but none of the three Avengers watching her could hear a word.

"God," Hank said finally.

"Get the others in here," Hawkeye said. "Looks like we're getting our trial run, whether we're ready for it or not."

Before - San Francisco, California.

"You... want *me* to be an Avenger?"

"You already are an Avenger," Iron Man said, standing over the lithe kid in the black body armor while said kid went about trussing up a mugger.

"Was. For like five minutes. And yes, that's an exaggeration, but not by much." The vigilante known as Darkhawk straightened and tossed a purse to Iron Man. "Can you make sure the old lady he took this from down the street gets it back? I'd handle it myself, but I usually end up scaring people worse than the muggers do."

"Once an Avenger, always an Avenger," Iron Man replied, catching the purse. He wasn't happy to be here. Vagabond had been bad enough, but at least Cap had put in a good word for her. This Darkhawk kid... well, he was just a vigilante. A poor man's version of Spider-Man. But he had been an Avenger for a brief moment a while back, and they hadn't had much luck finding people who fit that bill. They were scraping the bottom of the roster barrel with this one, and Iron Man knew it.

"We'd like to have you on the team, Darkhawk. Since you're operating on the West Coast now, I can only assume you decided you needed a change. But if you're not interested..." He raised his arms, preparing to launch himself out of the alley and into the San Francisco sky.

"No...wait." Darkhawk rubbed the back of his helmeted head and shifted uncertainly from one foot to the other. "The team draws a stipend, right? And we get free room and board?"

Behind the mask, Tony Stark's eyes narrowed. "Yes, that's right. But if you're just doing it for the money and the perks..."

"No, no. Of course not. I mean, I beat this guy down for free, didn't I?" He nudged the mugger with his foot, and the punk immediately began threatening him with litigation. Neither of the costumed adventurers was listening, though. "But I can do a lot more good as an Avenger, and if you think I'd be a good addition to the team..."

"I wouldn't be here if I didn't."

Darkhawk nodded. "Then I guess I'm in."

"Guess you are," Iron Man replied, hoping he wasn't making a mistake. The last thing they needed on this new team was a mercenary.

"I'll return this to the lady it belongs to," he said, gripping the purse and rising into the air on his bootjets. "Report to the LA compound sometime in the next week, and Hawkeye will get you squared away."

"Sure," Darkhawk said. To himself, he was unknowingly echoing Iron Man's concerns that he was making the wrong decision. But then the armored Avenger was gone, and Darkhawk was committed.

"Guess you San Fran boys get a break, starting in a week or so," he said to the bound mugger. Then, at the sound of approaching sirens, he added, "Too late to do *you* any good though," and fired his grappling hook at a nearby rooftop. By the time the police roared into the alleyway, Darkhawk was long gone.

Now.

"Sacrifice," Seth said, pacing now on top of the stage as his followers looked on. "Nothing in this world that is worth anything is available without sacrifice. And when the goals, like ours, are tremendous, so must be the sacrifice.

"Too long have the inferior races played their games of self-pity and self-aggrandizement. Bad enough when we had to share our buses and our restrooms and our drinking fountains with them. But now you can't even speak of race without the dogs baying at your heels, demanding recompense for imagined slights.

"I am tired, my brothers. Tired of bowing to lower creatures. Tired of watching our children take the mongrels as mates. I would rather our daughters bedded *dogs* than niggers! At least then there would be no hope of half-breed children!"

Seth had to shout to make himself heard over the tumult now. He shook a fist in the air, and the roar that pounded him from the mouths of the gathered masses was nearly palpable.

The albino in the wings, still unseen, rolled his eyes and licked his lips at the taste of negative emotions filling the hangar.

"But not everyone agrees with us. There are many whites who actually *enjoy* kowtowing to the yellows

and the reds and especially the blacks. They have been seduced by their not inconsiderable but doubly insidious charms. Our children like to dress as the blacks do. Our companies hire Chinks and Japs out of some misguided belief that they work harder than whites. The bleeding hearts of this country refuse to persecute *any* middle-easterners despite the fact that they perpetrated the deadliest attack against our nation since Pearl Harbor!"

Someone in the audience managed to make a cry of, "Avenge the Towers!" heard over the general tumult, and it was picked up by others. Seth nodded, encouraging them.

"But we will make them listen, my brothers. We will make them listen even if we have to kill them. Only then, only when we release Copperhead and lay it at the blacks' door, only when the pure-born of this country realize what danger they are in, *only then* will they see the righteousness of our cause. Only then will they join with us in expelling all the lower races from our country."

The cheers had fallen silent. All of the men and women in the audience knew about the Copperhead Strain of course, and all of them knew what it was going to be used for. But to hear it laid out like this, so plainly, silenced them for just a heartbeat. Seth knew his control hung by a thread in that moment. No matter how strong their convictions, all of them knew that this virus would probably kill many people they knew and loved. One wrong word, and his army would turn on him.

"Drastic measures?" he began breathlessly. "Yes. Without a doubt. But incredible goals call for incredible sacrifice, my friends. A lesson must be taught to the misguided whites of this country, and nothing worth learning can be learned without pain. Our sole consolation in this is that the country we rebuild afterward will be all the better for the blood it cost to cleanse it.

"Each of you is inoculated against Copperhead, and you will carry on after it is released. But the war will be just beginning, and the strength you displayed in joining me in this endeavor must continue for a time afterward. Stand with me, my brothers, and understand that for the first time in the history of man, an *ideal* is about to be achieved. And understand that you are a vital part of it."

A beat of silence. And then the hangar exploded with the roars and applause of Seth's people, his army. He grinned, not quite able to hide his glee as his people joined with him once and for all.

He didn't notice the black cable with the claw on the end of it until it had looped all the way around his neck and pulled taut. The triumphant applause of the Sons turned into a collective gasp of surprise and outrage as their leader was yanked straight upward by the throat, all the way up to the rafters, and the black-clad vigilante who waited for him there.

"That thing about girls sleeping with dogs? That was gross, man," Darkhawk said, dangling the man by his claw-cable. "And it wasn't even the most disgusting thing you said."

"Who--who are you?" Seth croaked, clawing at the line.

"Me? I'm nobody. The people you really have to worry about will be here in just a sec." He pointed toward the far end of the hangar. "'Cause, brother, do you have some 'splainin' to do."

Twin repulsor beams tore through the sturdy metal wall of the hangar, pulverizing the concrete floor and kicking up a cloud of rock and dust. The Sons of the Serpent turned, and as the smoke cleared, leveled their weapons at the four colorfully dressed adventurers waiting outside.

"What are you waiting for?" Hawkeye demanded. He let an explosive-tipped arrow fly as he waved Iron Man, Warbird, and Vagabond into the hangar.

"Avengers Assemble!"

Next Issue: Do we really need to spell it out for you?

WHY THE WHACKOS?

Trust me... it wasn't my idea.

Chris Munn (writer of *Thunderbolts* over on the Knights Branch... if you're not reading it, you suck) put together a proposal for this series late last year. He picked the team members. He decided the new Whackos would be fighting the Sons of the Serpent in this first arc. He sketched out broad plans for the first 18 issues of this series. I looked at the proposal, liked what I saw, told Chris so, and promptly forgot about it.

Fast-forward a month or two. Chris has decided to step down from some of his fanfic commitments, trimming his impressive list of titles down to five. While *T-bolts* made the cut (thank God), the not-yet-begun *AWC* didn't. At least not until I threatened Chris with bodily harm should he refuse to continue it.

Fortunately (or unfortunately, depending on whether you're seeing it from my point of view) several titles I'd been writing for other sites had fallen through, due primarily to the death of those sites. I was looking at M2K again, the home I always return to, wondering if there were any titles open I'd be interested in taking up again. Also, I'd been trying to find someone to co-write a title with, to share ideas and swap scripting duties between arcs. Since Chris already had an 18 issue outline, this seemed like the perfect place to have my cake, eat it too, and even upchuck it if I wanted to. Hey, it's at least half my cake!

Besides, writing this title also means I get to write Iron Man again, which is also like coming home in a way.

What you can expect in this title (besides at least two more Avengers showing up before the end of the first arc) is an unintentionally more-traditional counterpoint to the mad stuff Brent Lambert is doing on the main *Avengers* title. Oh... and an *assload* of formerly lame supervillains. Chris and I both love to do new things with formerly lame villains, and he pulled out a fantastic assortment of them when putting together his outline. This is definitely going to be a hoot. Just wait until Toomba shows up...

Anyway, feel free to drop me or Chris a line if you like what you see here. If you *don't* like it... well, go read an X-title or something. Just come back in two weeks for the second part of our opening arc, wherein a whole bunch of asses get kicked in a whole bunch of interesting ways. And wait'll you see who pops in for a visit at issue's end...

- Russ Anderson
31 January, 2003

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- See current issues of M2K's *Avengers* to learn more about Thor's East Coast Team.

- Warbird was court-martialed and ejected from the Avengers for negligence brought on by her alcoholism in Marvel's *Avengers*, vol. 3 #7.
- Iron Man wore a new red and silver armor briefly in M2K's *Marvel Fanfare* #16 and *Iron Man* #16-18.
- The original West Coast Avengers were disbanded by the East Coast team in Marvel's *Avengers West Coast* #102.
- Iron Man formed Force Works from the remains of the West Coast Avengers in Marvel's *Force Works* #1.
- The Vision tried to kill the Avengers, and was killed himself by Giant-Man in M2K's *Avengers* #13. The East Coast team dissolved as a result of this, off-panel, before issue #14.
- Hawkeye began his career as a supervillain, only going straight once he'd joined the Avengers in Marvel's *Avengers*, vol. 1 #16.
- The Sons of the Serpent first appeared in Marvel's *Avengers*, vol. 1 #32. Different incarnations of the group have battled the Avengers, the Defenders, and the New Warriors.

Marvel 2000 Proudly Presents

#2 - MOVING FORWARD, PAST TENSE, Part 2

"Plague Carriers"

*Plot by Chris Munn & Russ Anderson
Script by Russ Anderson*

An hour ago. Avengers West Coast Compound.

The table was round, for tradition's sake, but there was no question about who was at the head of it. Clint Barton had done this sort of thing many times, had rallied more than his share of troops, but if he'd ever felt as uncertain about the team he was commanding, he couldn't remember a time. Maybe right after he'd taken up with the Thunderbolts--*maybe*.

"I'd have liked to get a couple more butts in these seats before going off on a mission," he said, indicating the table's two unclaimed chairs, "but, as usual, the bad guys aren't taking our readiness into account."

"We're ready," Warbird nodded. She sounded like she was saying that more for her own benefit than Hawkeye's, but maybe he was just being paranoid. He wanted Carol back as a productive Avenger as much as anybody, but he remembered vividly how she'd acted when they'd confronted her about her alcoholism. Iron Man vouched for her progress now, and considering IM's history with drink, that was saying a lot, but Clint knew they were going to have to watch her anyway.

"Let's hope so," he replied. He punched a control near his seat and a holo-image of a man in a black and silver uniform appeared over the tabletop. A stylized snake's head was emblazoned on the front of his uniform, and his black mask was engulfed in a cowl shaped to look like a snake's gaping mouth. Hawkeye took just a moment to congratulate himself for getting the tabletop controls right before speaking again.

"The Sons of the Serpent. A radical hate group that's locked horns with the Avengers, the Defenders, and the New Warriors. Usually, they're made up of a bunch of white guys looking to drive 'inferior races' out of the country. This time, their costumes and tactics have apparently been adopted by a group of blacks who want to kill off most of the country's white population."

"How are they going to do that?" Darkhawk asked. It was the first time he'd spoken since the meeting had begun.

"A genetic plague," Iron Man said from his seat to Hawkeye's right. "They tested it yesterday at a bank in downtown LA. It killed twenty people--all but six of the whites in the building--and didn't harm anybody else in the slightest."

Darkhawk didn't reply. He wondered if the virus would have any affect on him -- as Chris Powell, he was as white as the driven snow, but when he used the amulet embedded in his chest to become Darkhawk, he was wearing an entirely different body, one that wasn't even human. He hoped he wasn't going to get a chance to find out.

"We have to be ready to go as soon as we have a lead on where to find these guys. We're confident they're somewhere on the West Coast, since they chose to trial run their plague in LA, but...." Hawkeye paused. "Where's Vagabond?"

The table's four occupants looked around at the empty seat where Priscilla Lyons, aka Vagabond, should have been sitting. "She said she had to go to the bathroom," Darkhawk said.

"How long ago was that?"

"About fifteen minutes ago," Darkhawk replied sheepishly. Hawkeye's tone brought to mind images of Mrs. Myers from the fifth grade.

"Did she fall in?"

Warbird pushed her chair back. "Don't get your panties in a bunch, Hawkeye. I'll go get her."

"Don't bother," a new voice said from the doorway. They all turned and watched as Vagabond hurried in, clutching a roll of printer paper in one hand.

"I know you're new to this Avengers stuff, V," Hawkeye began, "but you can't just bail on these meetings when it--"

"Who was bailing?" she asked. Her tone wasn't defensive. If anything, she was bubbling with excitement. She rounded the table until she was standing next to Hawkeye, and started to reach for the holo-controls at his position, only drawing up short when she noticed Hawkeye's annoyed look. "May I?"

He sighed and slumped back into his chair. "Why not?"

She keyed in some commands, and watched as a mugshot of a thick-jawed middle-aged black man appeared over the table. "This is JC Pennyworth. Back when the Sons battled the Defenders, he was the guy backing them financially."

"But he's black," Warbird observed. "They were a white supremacy group at the time."

"I know. Wierd, huh? Anyway, JC did some of his time and was released on probation last year. Two months ago, he stopped checking in with his parole officer. Nobody's seen him since."

"Now, back when Pennyworth was a big money man, working for Richmond Industries, he owned a small airfield near La Jolla. The airfield, along with a couple of other small East Coast properties, was put into trust for Pennyworth's heirs before he went to jail, so the government couldn't confiscate it. DEA has nailed a couple of drug flights going into and out of the airfield since then, none of which seemed to have anything to do with Pennyworth himself." She pushed some more buttons, and a GPS map came up. "But nobody has used the field's two hangars in the last five years."

There was a beat of silence as the team took this in.

"You found all this out on your bathroom break?" Darkhawk finally asked. Vagabond tipped him a wink.

"Worth checking out," Hawkeye decided. "Bird, fire up the Quinjet. We're taking a trip to La Jolla."

Now. Pennyworth Airfield.

Warbird arrowed forward, her speed and durability turning her into an adequate battering ram as she

barreled through the ranks of masked racists.

"V, back her up!" Hawkeye shouted, nocking an arrow and firing it at a small contingent of Sons that were charging Vagabond from the side. The head of the arrow erupted, and a black steel mesh net flared out over the troops.

It was just the beginning. There were probably three hundred of these guys crammed into this hangar. Clint Barton marveled -- how could there be that much open race hatred left in this country?

Still, there would be time to mull over the philosophical issues later. He waved his bow arm at Iron Man while the other hand slipped over his shoulder for another arrow. "Shellhead, back Darkhawk up! We need to know where the virus is!"

With a brief nod, Iron Man stopped pummeling the Sons with low-grade repulsors and rocketed into the air, heading toward the beams at the top of the hangar.

The albino man stepped out of the shadows, walking slowly and casually across the eight inch beam that stretched across the roof of the hangar. His hands were in the pockets of his black trenchcoat, and his blank eyes seemed to be bleeding white radiance.

Further down the steel pathway, a child was interrogating the leader of this incarnation of the Sons of the Serpent, the man who called himself Seth. The trenchcoat man knew all about Seth, but the child...

He reached out, touched the boy's neuroses with empathic fingers. Oh *yeah*. Plenty of negative emotion to play with here. Daddy issues galore: feelings of abandonment, bitterness at being manipulated and lied to. Uncertainty about his place in the Avengers. Fear of screwing up. Not much hate, granted, but just because the man in black couldn't have the steak didn't mean he couldn't enjoy the sizzle.

He reached out, and gave his prey the merest *twist*.

"You've got one chance," Darkhawk said. "Tell me about the plague or I drop you on your sheet-wearing, cross-burning a--"

"Burn...in...*hell!*" Seth croaked, clutching at the line wrapped around his throat, the line by which he was dangling two hundred feet off the concrete floor. Darkhawk knew he probably should have pulled the guy up onto the beam by now, but *damnit*... something about these racist bastards really got under his skin.

"You're not listening," he said, jerking the line and feeling a sick satisfaction when Seth's breathing became even more of a whisper. The man's tongue lolled out of his mouth, his eyes began to roll back to the whites.

"Darkhawk!"

He looked up sharply. Hovering in front of him, in all his red and gold glory, was Iron Man. Iron Man, who'd all but accused him of only being into the Avengers for the money. Iron Man who reminded Chris entirely too much of his da--

Darkhawk shook his head. What the hell...? Where had *that* come from?

Iron Man was saying something about letting Seth go, but Darkhawk could barely hear him. Had he really been taking pleasure in watching a man strangle to death? What was going through his head? He--

"Darkhawk!"

His head snapped up again as Iron Man lifted the choking man and unwound the strangling cord. "We don't do things this way," he said, setting Seth down on the narrow beam.

"I--I don't know what I--"

"Shut up."

The words were matter-of-fact, but to Chris, they felt like two slaps across the face. He reeled for a moment--and did he see a pale white man, dressed all in black, standing at the far end of the beam in that instant? Yes, he thought he did, but he was gone in the next--and then the surprise and hurt flipped over into anger.

"You can't talk to me like that."

Iron Man didn't even look in his direction, he was too busy making sure that racist, hate-preaching pile of steaming crap was still alive. No time for rookie, mercenary teenagers and their little fits of temper. No, not from the big, bad founding Avenger.

"I said, you can't talk to me like that," Darkhawk pressed, slapping a hand onto his teammate's shoulder. Iron Man looked around.

"Remove your hand, Darkhawk. Or I'll do it for you."

That was it.

An ebony blast of energy exploded from the amulet buried in Darkhawk's chest, taking Iron Man in the sternum and flipping him backwards over the side of the beam. Sharp metal wings snapped into place under Darkhawk's arms, and he launched himself straight down at his teammate.

On the beam, the author of their rampaging emotions smiled and licked his chops. This just got better and better.

They had been doing pretty good, Hawkeye would reflect later, until the bad guys broke out the heavy artillery.

Before that, he was reflecting on what a pleasant surprise Vagabond was turning out to be. Clint knew she'd run with Nomad and with Captain America for a time, and knew from talks with Steve that she was a solid acrobat and fighter. But some of the things he saw her doing now--leaping straight over some guy's head, knocking another guy out with one punch, slipping beneath a hail of gunfire--went way beyond "solid". Some of the things the girl was doing now actually reminded Clint of Cap. Had she had some enhancements, or--

There was the sound of screaming metal behind him, and another of the hangar's walls sheared away.

Through the new hole marched a massive collection of pipes, pulleys, and hydraulics, vaguely man-shaped, with a single Son of the Serpent seated dead in its center. Five more suits of battle armor followed it in.

"Oh, you've gotta be kidding me," Hawkeye said, and nocked an arrow. These losers want to sit right out in the open like that in their junkbots, they had to know they made themselves big fat targets for a sharpshooter. Better Hawkeye disillusioned them with a concussion arrow than some SWAT cop put a bullet in them.

He let fly... and nearly got shot in the back by stray plasma fire when the armor's lightning-fast parry stunned him into momentary immobility. Vagabond hit him, knocking him to the ground and just under the flash of lightning that passed overhead.

"Watch it, fearless leader," she said, grinning, and then she was gone again, leaping back into the fray.

Hawkeye regained his feet, all his attention focused on the robots as they formed up and began moving in on Warbird. Okay, they were fast. But Clint knew somebody who was faster. And stronger. And shinier. He looked to the rafters.

Iron Man was nowhere in sight. Neither was Darkhawk.

"Oh crap," he muttered, and began sprinting towards Warbird, hoping he could get within earshot of her before the robots blasted her out of the air.

Another ebony bolt slammed Iron Man down, through the platform Seth had been giving his speech from, the entire structure crumbling as Darkhawk landed on top of him.

"Who the hell are you to give me crap about taking money?" Darkhawk demanded, driving a completely ineffectual fist into the side of Iron Man's helmet. "You're a paid bodyguard, for crying out--"

Iron Man's chest beam blazed, and Darkhawk just managed to get his own shield up before it struck. The impact was still sufficient to hurl him clear of the wreckage.

"What is *wrong* with you?" Iron Man demanded, shifting the rubble off of his shoulders. "Attacking me in the middle of a fight? Do you have any idea what being an Avenger means?"

"If it means being a righteous pain-in-the-ass like you...mister, you can take this job and shove it!" Another bolt lanced out from Darkhawk's amulet, but this time Iron Man fired himself up into the air above it. He began laying down a curtain of repulsor fire, but the kid managed to stay one step ahead of it. He was quick. Still, with onboard tracking and targeting computers, it was just a matter of time until...

Inside the armor, Tony Stark paused at the sound of a small, shrill beeping noise. He knew that tone. It was the one meant to alert him whenever an outside force was attempting to control his mind. The alarm flickered off, and then picked up again, as if it wasn't certain of its findings.

A few months ago, the Enchantress had managed to sidestep Iron Man's mind-control failsafes by manipulating his emotions instead of his thought processes. He'd recalibrated his equipment since, but there was just no way to account for that kind of magical control.

Could that be what was happening here? Darkhawk was a bit of a punk, but Tony was surprised at his

rage. Could some unseen force be trying to set them against each--

Darkhawk's grappling claw snapped around Iron Man's throat, pulled taut, and yanked the Avenger down and into the floor of the hangar. Before he could get back to his feet, Darkhawk swooped into him again, driving him backwards.

"Darkhawk, listen to me! You're being manipulated!"

"Not anymore, Iron Jerk! Never again, you hear me! I'm not going to end up like--"

Iron Man clamped his hands around the kid's pointed helmet, and fed 5,000 amps of backup power through his gauntlets. Darkhawk jittered and spasmed under the onslaught, then managed to kick away from his teammate.

"Not...not gonna--" he said, and then simply hurled himself forward again.

Iron Man dropped his fist on top of Darkhawk's head, and the kid was unconscious before he slumped to the ground.

The man his followers knew as Seth rolled over...and nearly dropped right off the side of the beam he was balanced so precariously on. He steadied himself, putting his hands to his bleeding throat, and despaired at how quickly his plans had fallen apart.

"Despair is nice," a voice said above him. "But you're not ready for that yet, son. You've still got work to do."

Seth looked up, and found himself face to face with the albino man, crouching in front of him on the beam.

"They'll tear down everything," the albino said, gesturing to the heroes making wreckage of his Sons of the Serpent. "Just like they did with Pennyworth's followers, and with every other incarnation of the Sons."

"No..."

"But you can still stop them, can't you? You can play this game out to its bloody end. Copperhead will probably kill all of them anyway. Poof. All your troubles gone. All at the push of a button."

Seth looked at his wrist, looked at the jacketed button built into the sleeve.

As a boy, one of Seth's heroes had been Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Roosevelt, who more than likely knew about the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in advance, but allowed it to happen because he knew it was the only way to wake his country up to the threat from outside.

Just like Seth was going to do. He would wake his people, the whites of this country, even if he had to kill three-quarters of them to do it.

Nodding at the albino, he flipped the cover off and pressed the button.

"Hawkeye!" Vagabond called, fighting her way through the army of racists, evading when she could but pummeling when she couldn't. One of the Sons had managed to clip her with the butt of his rifle a minute ago, and blood was getting into her eyes. Worse, her vision was starting to swim a little bit. Stupid, stupid, rookie mistake. It was so easy to get cocky, considering the advantages she had now, but--

She heard the scream of rending metal, and just managed to backpedal out of the way before a giant, severed robotic arm crashed into the floor where she'd just been standing. She looked up, and saw Warbird tearing into one of the giant robots -- they looked like those loading rigs from the movie *Aliens*, Vagabond thought -- while the others circled around, bracketing Warbird in.

"One thing at a time, girl," Vagabond told herself. Warbird was certainly capable of handling herself, and Vagabond would be no good against those metal behemoths, especially if that jerk with the gun had given her a concussion, as she was beginning to suspect.

She put her elbow in another Son's face and pushed through the last line separating her from her team leader.

"Hawk, these guys are white!"

"You noticed that too, huh?" he asked, not missing a beat as he nocked an arrow and let it fly at one of the giant robots. The blunt arrow went wide... then did a 180-degree turn and shot straight through the robot's lowered defenses, hitting the rig's driver in the back of the head. The driver slumped in his harness and the robot came to a shuddering halt.

"What do you think it means?" he asked, leaping over a spray of gunfire as Vagabond followed him.

"I think it means we've been had. This is the same ol' Sons of the Serpent, doing the same ol' thing. Only this time, they're blaming the lower races so that when people start dropping dead, they've got a scapegoat."

"And they get to turn at least one of those lower races into the biggest mass murderers in history. Good. 'Cause that's what I was thinking too. Now if only we could--"

The ground shook, throwing off Hawkeye's aim so badly that the blast arrow he'd meant for a knot of charging Sons flew high and nearly hit Warbird. The blonde woman looked around. They all did.

The hole Iron Man had punched in the hangar was big enough that all of them could see it. Outside, right next to the largest of the field's three runways, the ground had opened up and given birth to a gigantic, roaring missile. It was its liftoff that was still causing the ground to shake.

"Oh my god," Vagabond said at Clint's elbow.

Possibilities raced through his mind. Whatever was on that rocket--explosives or plague--it was bad news either way. Iron Man could handle it, but he wasn't here right now. Which left only one option, really.

"Warbird! Go!"

She was already on her way. Weaving in between the flailing arms of the giant robots and shooting out over the tarmac, she angled upward and chased the rocket into the Southern California sky.

Leaving Hawkeye and Vagabond alone against a couple hundred angry Sons of the Serpent and four

walking tanks.

Hawkeye nocked an arrow and drew the bowstring back slowly, deliberately, hoping all the while that Vagabond had her poker face on.

"Step right up, boys," he said. "Who wants the first whuppin'?"

The Sons of the Serpent rushed them as one.

Iron Man was turning away from Darkhawk when the ground began to shake. He, too, saw the missile leaving its underground silo, and he was just about to chase after it when his audio receptors filtered the sound of Seth's laughter out of the general cacophony. Seth, who was standing on top of the beam they'd left him on, high overhead, and shaking his fist in triumph like a villain from an old movie serial.

Warbird was already chasing the rocket, which made Iron Man's next decision easier.

"What are you laughing about, you maniac?" he said two seconds later, and Seth wheeled around, reaching for the gun at his hip. Iron Man crushed it, tossed it aside, and seized the man by his tunic.

"Stop that missile," Iron Man said. "Do it now." He moved backward so they were both hovering over empty space. He didn't have to outline the implied threat, but Seth didn't seem concerned. In fact, he was still laughing.

"I can't! It's all in the hands of God now! Let *Him* decide who lives and who dies!"

Iron Man shook him. Hard. He was beginning to understand why Darkhawk had lost it so easily with this guy. "There's got to be a way, damn you!"

"Even if there was, it wouldn't matter! The missile is a low-grade nuclear device, Iron Man. It will decimate Los Angeles. And all over this country, hundreds of my agents are primed to release the Copperhead Strain in public places at the same moment! It's over! There is no recall switch, nothing you can do to reach all those people in time!"

"We'll see," Iron Man said grimly. He cut power to his bootjets, enjoying Seth's frightened scream as they both plummeted toward the concrete, then fired them again at the last moment before impact, shooting them over the floor, over the heads of the Sons. If he could convince the other Sons what their leader had done, try to appeal to *their* reason... surely all of them couldn't be as insane as this--

Someone peeled open his armor, sliced his naked back open, and dumped hydrochloric acid down his spinal column. At least that's what it felt like. A black corona of energy engulfed him, and he couldn't help himself... he pinwheeled into the floor, losing his grip on Seth as he skated across the tarmac like a crashing jet.

The agony vanished, along with the crackling energy. Gasping, Iron Man pushed himself up to his knees. God, what was that? His HUD was telling him the armor had no idea what had just penetrated it. Something he couldn't detect, which made the possibility of fighting it all the more remote. Who were they up against *now*?

The energy corona sprang to life around him, and he screamed once again. Razor blades across his nerve endings, white hot pins in his eyes and boiling water in his veins. He began to crumple, but caught

himself before he could fall all the way to his belly again.

The Sons were all around him. They had begun to close in before the strange energy effect engulfed him again. Now they were keeping a cautious distance, their guns at the ready.

"I hate doing that," a new voice said. Iron Man looked up as the crowd surrounding him parted. Through the gap stepped a man so pale he might have been wearing mime's makeup. His hands were stuffed casually into the pockets of his black trenchcoat, and white energy, surrounded by the same black crackle consuming Iron Man, bled from his pupil-less eyes. He ran a grey tongue over black lips.

Iron Man wasn't going to wait to hear this guy's story. He raised one hand and released a repulsor in the albino's direction. The beam passed right through him, like he was a ghost.

"I'd much rather eat your hatred than spit it up and use it against you," the albino man said, ignoring the failed attack. "But I can't have you talking reason to these people, Avenger. Reason is the enemy of hate after all, and if the Hate Monger has his way, there won't be any reason left in all the world by nightfall."

The corona intensified, and the agony was so great this time, Iron Man couldn't even scream.

Warbird sliced through the sky, pushing herself to her limits as the rocket roared northward.

She wasn't going to be fast enough.

There had been a time, when she'd possessed the powers of Binary, that she could have swatted the ICBM out of the air with little more effort than it took to think about it. But her powers had been sapped drastically, and while she was still quite powerful by Earthbound hero standards, she wasn't powerful enough to do anything about this.

People were going to die, probably a whole lot of people, because she was weak. She was going to let her friends and her team and the entire world down. Again. And she wouldn't even be able to blame this failure on the booze.

"Nnnnoooo," she groaned, tears streaming from her eyes. The rocket drew closer to her outstretched hands with painful slowness. It wasn't going to be enough.

Despite their enemies' vastly superior numbers, the real trouble hadn't started until Hawkeye lost his bow.

With so many unarmored Sons swarming around the Avengers, the giant robots didn't quite dare to move in for the kill, worried about stepping on their own comrades, and nobody present seemed to have the authority to order the infantry back.

Hawkeye didn't like fighting in such close quarters--his expertise called for a little distance--but he'd been taught hand-to-hand by Captain America, so he could hold his own. Vagabond was still a little wobbly from a shot to the head she'd taken earlier, but the girl was a trooper.

And then one of the bastards got in a lucky shot and vaporized the top half of Hawkeye's bow.

Cursing, He tossed the remains aside. There was a spare, a collapsible rig hidden in his belt, but he

doubted he was going to get a chance to put it together. He drove a fist into the bow-killer's face with all the upper body strength that years of tugging a bowline had earned him, and was so happy with the audible *crunch* the jerk's nose made that he almost didn't hear Vagabond's cry from behind him.

She was being overwhelmed. There were just too many of them. They had her by the hair, the arms, the jacket. Hawkeye tossed a Son aside and began fighting his way toward her.

That was when the rifle butt came down on the back of his skull. Hawkeye collapsed to his knees right beside his still-struggling teammate.

Warbird could see the smog-shrouded spires of LA rising to the north. The rocket was making a bee-line for the city, just as she'd thought. She reached deeper, found she had just a little more speed to give, and fought her way through the rocket's slipstream. Reaching, reaching.

A beam of sparkling photonic energy slashed down from somewhere above her, vaporizing the nose of the rocket. Warbird covered her face, just barely curling her flight path out of the way of the beam, and therefore missed the second blast that annihilated the roaring engines pushing the rocket through the sky.

It took Carol another half-mile to slow enough to turn around and head back. She half-suspected what she was going to see even before she saw it. She *knew* that energy signature, after all.

A man was hovering in the spot she'd left the rocket, holding the remaining, central portion -- the part containing whatever nasty payload the Sons had stuffed it with -- above his head with one hand. He was covered in black, which was in turn covered with tiny white pinpoints of light. She knew him immediately, though they'd never met.

"Captain Marvel," she said, with a relieved smile. He was the Universal Protector, Genis-Vell, bearer of the Nega Bands and the mixed blessing of Cosmic Awareness. Warbird had a feeling this mission was going to get a lot easier from here on out.

She expected a smile in return--she'd heard the kid was an easygoing sort--but all she got at first were those coldly blinking, pupil-less eyes.

"If you humans can't play nicely with your toys," he said, "I'm going to have to take them away."

A hand slammed Hawkeye roughly against one of the hangar's surviving walls, the massive barrel of a gun pressed into the side of his bruised face. He didn't know where Vagabond was anymore. Wouldn't have been much help to her even if he had known.

"What's wrong with you?" the gunman was asking. "You're white! You should be on our side!"

"Nah," he muttered, "I scored too high on my SAT's to be a Son of the Serpent. You guys are even lower than the Lethal Legion when it comes to IQ stats."

A fist slammed into his stomach, blasting the air out of his lungs. He doubled over...then drove his head forward, taking one of his attackers in the sternum and falling over with him, sandwiched between five or six Sons. There was a brief, pointless struggle, and then he was yanked roughly back to his feet.

"Just shoot this nigger-loving asshole," somebody said, and the Son he'd just headbutted showed his mute agreement by getting to his feet, unslinging his own rifle, and raising it to Hawkeye's face.

There was a sharp duet of pistol reports -- *BANG! BANG!* -- and for half a heartbeat, Hawkeye thought the sound had come from the rifle aimed at his head. He hadn't yet put together that it couldn't have been that gun, since he was still alive, when large, black-rimmed holes appeared in the right arm of the man holding him at gunpoint. The gunman screamed and the rifle fell away from Hawkeye's face, hitting the floor with a clatter.

"I suggest," a familiar Texas drawl cut in from somewhere behind Hawkeye, "that you boys step away from that man. He happens to be a friend of mine."

The Sons turned, and Hawkeye nearly threw out one of his vertebrae swiveling his neck around to look. Because there was just *no way* that voice could belong to who he thought it did.

His savior was standing in the hole in the wall the team had made coming in. A black bandanna was tied around his eyes, with holes cut out to see through, and a black cowboy hat was perched jauntily to the left on his head. Jeans, a long-sleeve denim shirt, and an orange and black vest completed the outfit, complemented and defined by the gunbelts slung low on his hip.

"You're not..." Hawkeye began.

"What's a matter, Hawk?" the gunman said, thumbs ticking eagerly at the pistols waiting in either holster. "Don't you recognize yer old buddy, the Two-Gun Kid?"

Next Issue: Nega-Bands and Six-Shooters.

WEST COAST ASSEMBLERS

First issue seems to have gotten an overall positive response. First review is from Alex Cook (writer of *Fallen Angels* over on the X-Men branch).

WEST COAST AVENGERS: M2K #1 Plotted by Chris Munn & Russ Anderson,
Written by Russ Anderson

Billionaire Tony Stark / Iron Man funds a new round-up of West Coast Whackos lead by old-timer Clint Barton / Hawkeye. Add one more known Avenger to the cast of five shown in this time-jumping initial offering and you have a different mix of Avengers than any other out there. Throw in a white supremacist group acting decidedly anti-white, bake at three hundred and fifty degrees until Munn swears he's not McGee five times in a chat room (or roughly forty five minutes), and enjoy the launch of a damn interesting title.

Could use more salt though, don't ya think?

The good about this first issue is the way the story is constructed. By using a plot that moves quite fast set in present time, Russ flashes back to slower tempo scenes showing Iron Man gathering his new band

of Whackos. Some of these scenes are in fact the best parts of this issue. The villain is also a treat due to how different they are acting, but once the why is shown it makes eerie sense. That same twinge of the eerie also makes it a little more unsettling, which gets more marks on Mister Anderson's scorecard.

The time-jumping wasn't to everybody's taste (as you'll see when we get to Cory's review below), but I'm glad it worked for you. Trust me... it wasn't easy making the Sons of the Serpent come off as threatening.

The bad here is hard to describe. I almost felt like it ended too soon. In Russ' closing notes he says more will come before the end of this initial arc, which is good. But for some reason the cast shown in this issue didn't 'hook' me as much as I'd have expected. Sorry I can't articulate it any better for you though.

Completely understandable, Alex. Hopefully the new additions at the end of this issue roped you in a little more effectively. Keep your eye on some of these new guys though (Darkhawk and Vagabond, especially). We'll make you dig them yet.

Next one is from question maestro, Jason Trenner:

Awesome issue. I wonder why the Living Lightning wasn't asked to join the team. Darkhawk being a bad choice.. I wonder if Iron Man knows about Satana being a part of the team now. Now on to the questions:

I can't speak for Chris, who chose every member on this roster, but I'm guessing Lightning wasn't asked to join because we still haven't found out what happened to the kid over in *Thunderbolts*. Hopefully this doesn't bode ill for the guy, but we'll see.

And Iron Man is aware of Satana being on the East Coast team. We'll be dealing with some of the Whackos' reactions to the current bunch of Easterners in issue #4.

1) Is there any chance of the Original Human Torch rejoining the team?

No plans for *any* new members yet, but after reading Derrick Ferguson's take on Jim Hammond in recent issues of *Hulk*, I'd put the guy on the short list of characters I'd like to see on the team eventually.

2) Will the Whackos and Force Works cross paths?

Probably not anytime soon. Besides, the Works are currently heading into a crossover with *Hulk* (there's that title again... wonder if I enjoy it... :)

3) Is there any chance of Fastforward joining the team?

Nope. Don't even know who that is (tho I'll bet Chris does... boy is a walking Marvel U encyclopedia).

4) Is there any chance of the Orphan joining the team?

Not a big fan of Milligan's *X-Force* (tho it beats the pants off the previous version), so don't hold your breath on this one.

5) Will the Avengers fight Oort the Living Cloud and his Solar Squad?

If I had any idea who that was, I think I'd *have* to build a story around them. Keep an eye out for my next arc, though, which will feature an old Marvel monster with a similarly goofy name.

6) Is there any chance of the Whackos fighting the Omnivore?

See answer to number 3.

7) Is there any chance of Moondragon joining the team?

If Chris wants her. I've never cared too much for the character, myself. Her buddy Captain Marvel will be here for the foreseeable future though, so a guest-appearance probably wouldn't be out of order.

8) Is there any chance of the Avengers fighting a new Heavy Metal?

See answer to number 6.

9) Will the Whackos tell the East coast team what they think of Satana being an Avenger?

The Whackos will probably be running into Thor's Eackos sometime, but there aren't any firm plans at the moment.

10) Is there any chance of Sandman joining the team?

Probably not. We're going to try to give ourselves time to flesh out this roster before adding anymore warm bodies to it.

11) Is there any chance of the team fighting Ravage?

As in 2099? Isn't he in the future? Chris! A little help here...

12) Is there any chance of the Whackos fighting the Night Shift?

That has definite possibilities. No plans, though.

13) Is there any chance of any of the members Dr. Druid's Shock Troop showing up?

You are very close to unveiling the plot for our fourth or fifth arc here. Say anymore, and we may have to silence you.

14) Is there any chance of the Whackos visiting the Ultraverse?

Not on my watch...

Thanks for your interest, Jason.

Third and final letter is a review posted to the M2K message board by our Writer of the Year, Cory

Weigel. Cory is current pinch-hitter on *X-Men Alpha* and full-timer on *Iceman*.

Death to whitey!

Err... I mean...

You have no idea how badly I wish I had thought to title the first issue that.

West Coast Avengers #1
by Russ Anderson and Chris Munn.

The concept of this title sounds sort of like my original proposal for the Champions way back (which I sadly dropped). Tony Stark funds and recruits a mixed group of experienced and inexperienced super heroes to stand in the public's eye as the West Coast's very own super hero team. I'd say they ripped me off, but it becomes pretty apparent after reading the first issue that this is more their ball park than mine. And so far, I like it.

Wasn't even aware you'd ever written a Champs prop, Cory. Maybe Chris read your mind. :)

In any case, I'll bet you were at least smart enough not to put Darkhawk on your team...

Iron Man and Hawkeye are instant favorites as I'm sure they are with everyone, and they end up getting most of the spotlight throughout this issue. The two have always had a pretty solid chemistry about them, but as should be expected with Tony and Clint, there's more than likely going to be some problems down the road.

It should be apparent by now which Whacko Iron Man's going to have problems with... and it ain't Hawkeye.

Also, the first story-arc plotted by Chris Munn looks pretty fresh and promising, though I'm not gonna leak anything else out about it aside from those comments and the opening battle cry I issued.

A couple of bad things about this ish? Well... for starters, the structure of the story. It's not that the choice of the "Now and Then" alternating style keeps from the story, it's just that I think the simple and easy story used would have flowed better if the scenes were all put in order. To me, "Now and Then" has fast become a tired way of telling a casual story and there was really nothing special accomplished by using it here.

Tried yet true, I think if the first "Now" scene was put at the beginning of the story, then followed by all of the "Then" scenes, and then wrapped up with the last of the "Now" scenes, it would have allowed the story to flow with more spark and drive. Just my opinion, though.

I do tend to overuse this storytelling device... but I still think it worked in keeping the recruitment scenes from dragging the pace of the story down. Sorry it didn't work for you.

Second, I'm not sure about how I feel about some of the characters chosen to represent the Avengers. After some of his previous commitments fell through, I'd much rather see Russ continue his work on Scarlet Spider when it comes to making lame villains and dry second stringers kick ass than to just start all over with some new ones.

I mean, geeze... Warbird, Darkhawk, and Vagabond? The jury's still out, but who else is thinking these guys lack any real flavor to them? It's not that they're lame or anything, it's just there's nothing too unique

and new character wise to grab your attention. I can see some potential in Darkhawk, but the scenes with Warbird being kinda bitchy and Vagabond being chirpy about at the idea of being a super hero left me with a "whoop-dee-do, like we haven't seen this done with characters before" kinda feeling.

I'm not sure I understand this mindset. I mean, would you rather see the same old type of roster? Everybody knows Captain America and Thor and Photon and Quicksilver can be cool in their own ways (no smart-ass remarks from the peanut gallery, please), but nobody's ever really explored Vagabond. And while Darkhawk has been pretty thoroughly explored, I'm of the opinion that he wasn't handled very well for nearly the entire run of his solo series. I don't gravitate toward second-stringers and 'lame' characters just for the sake of being different... they're really the ones that are the most interesting to me as a writer.

As an example, nobody hated Feral and Shatterstar more than me when I started writing *Fallen Angels*, but by the time I finished my run on the title, they were two of my favorite characters in the book. Half the fun of fanfic--for me anyway--is finding out why these characters *aren't* lame.

Warbird, however, has never been nor will ever be 'lame'. How could you think such a thing when she wears an outfit like that? :)

But since Russ and Chris got a knack for making characters you can care less for interesting, I'll give them the benefit of the doubt this time around. My final stand? Check these guys out, if for nothing else but to read Russ Anderson write Iron Man again, and to see the start of a fresh and different kind of story by Chris Munn.

Hope this issue was more to your liking, Cory. Thanks for the in-depth review!

- Russ Anderson
February 11, 2003

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Hawkeye joined the Thunderbolts as team leader in Marvel's *Thunderbolts* #21. He was kicked out of the team later, as detailed in M2K's *Marvel Fanfare* #4.
- Warbird was court-martialed and ejected from the Avengers for negligence brought on by her alcoholism in Marvel's *Avengers*, vol. 3 #7.
- JC Pennyworth's stint as leader of the Sons of the Serpent happened in Marvel's *Defenders* #23-25.
- Iron Man's battle with the Enchantress happened in M2K's *Iron Man* #10-13.

Prologue - Carriers

In Seattle, Washington, Mark Kippenburger--Kipp to his friends--looks at the metal aerosol canister in his hand and marvels at the death that resides within. He believes he is doing the right thing, but as Abraham surely felt as he led his son to the mount, the right thing is an increasingly hard thing for this old man to do.

Outside the car, the Hammering Man stands proudly in front of the Seattle Arts Museum and diligently does as his name suggests. Black and steel. Soon, the sculpture will be surrounded by the panicked survivors of what Kipp is going to unleash in his building.

He is doing the right thing, he knows this. Sometimes it takes a kick in the ass to wake people up. And the contents of this can--well, this is going to be more like waking somebody up by chopping their arms off.

He checks his watch. Not long now. And somehow, he doubts he'll get the same stay of execution Abraham did.

Marvel 2000 Proudly Presents

Issue #3

MOVING FORWARD, PAST TENSE, Conclusion

"Hatred's Due"

Plot by Chris Munn & Russ Anderson

Script by Russ Anderson

When Clint Barton was a boy, long before he'd picked up a bow, he had wiled away perhaps hundreds of nighttime hours in the orphanage, under his blanket, a flashlight wedged under his chin, and the aging, battered, pulp western adventures of Matt Hawk, the Two-Gun Kid, open in his lap.

Two-Gun hadn't just been a made-up character like all the rest in those trashy novels, either. Young frontier lawyer Matt Hawk had actually rode the range in the mid- to late-nineteenth century, becoming one of many flamboyantly dressed precursors to the modern superhero. One of the greatest moments of Clint's adult life had been getting to meet Two-Gun, along with a handful of other western mystery men, through the machinations of the time-traveling warlord Kang.

That had been years ago. So what was The Two-Gun Kid doing here now, showing up in the middle of a battle, facing down a couple hundred angry Sons of the Serpent and four gigantic suits of battle armor with only a lopsided grin and his namesake pair of weapons?

Clint Barton had no idea.

"What's a matter, Hawkeye? You look like a rattler bit you in the privates." Standing just inside the hole Iron Man had ripped in the wall, Two-Gun tipped his hat up and regarded the Sons of the Serpent--all of them either too amused or too shocked to move. "Which I suppose ain't too much of a stretch, considerin' the company yer keepin'."

"You just walked into the wrong town, Wild Bill," one of the Sons said, lifting his own gun.

Before it could come all the way up, there were two loud reports. The racist dropped his gun and fell to his knees, a geyser of blood erupting from his shoulder and bicep. Two-Gun's pistols were up, but nobody had actually seen the bastard move for them. One moment they were in their holsters, the next they were in his fists, with smoke curling out of the barrels.

"Wild Bill is a peacock, boy. You're messin' with a cobra. Now," he said, "anybody else wanna duel?"

Nearly a hundred plasma rifles came up in response.

"The problem with the twenty-first century," the Hate Monger said, as Iron Man writhed at his feet, "is that it's *too* civilized. Too many people too well-educated, with their baser urges held down too firmly by law and order. It's hard to hate a coon just for being a coon when science tells you that, on a genetic level, there's no difference between you and him. Sure, there's all sorts of people hating other people out there, but these days, more and more often, people need a *reason* to hate."

Inside the Iron Man armor, Tony Stark imagined he probably should have been listening to the maniac's ranting, trying to figure out who and what he was, but the pain was so intense, Tony couldn't cut his attention in too many pieces at once. And right now there was something else that more immediately demanded his eye.

His armor hadn't been able to identify or block this energy the man in the trenchcoat was bombarding him with. Probably magic--or something so close to it that there was no practical difference--but if there was one thing he'd learned over the years, it was that *everything* was quantifiable, if you just knew what to measure it with. And everything could be pared down to a vibrational frequency.

All he had to do was find this guy's frequency. Preferably before he passed out.

The Hate Monger was still talking. Iron Man shut him out concentrated on the numbers streaming past on the armor's HUD.

The man known as Seth pushed himself up from the floor of the hangar. The act cost a lot of time and a lot of pain--he was sure he'd broken a couple of ribs when Iron Man dropped him here, and now his elbow was beginning to swell too.

That was okay, though. He'd known there would be pain.

Nearby, the albino man in the trenchcoat who'd talked to Seth while he was trapped near the hangar's ceiling, the one who'd helped him see that it was time to lay all his cards on the table, was doing something to Iron Man. Seth wasn't sure who the pale trenchcoat man was, and he didn't exactly care. As long as he kept hurting that bastard, he could be Satan Incarnate, and Seth would still gladly shake his hand.

But not until later. Not until he was safe in his bolthole. Once Copperhead struck, he would need a safe place to begin his war on the lower races. Then all this would be worth it -- kidnapping Pennyworth, holding him hostage, forcing him to make that tape they'd sent to CNN, and finally killing him. That had been easy compared to procuring the missile he'd just shot at LA and organizing the simultaneous,

countrywide release of the virus. It was unfortunate that he would have to abandon these followers to the authorities, but he could always release them after the plague had--

"Where do you think you're going?"

A black line with a familiar claw on the end of it looped around Seth's waist and yanked him backward. He hit the floor hard on his tailbone, and rolled over groaning, his eyes immediately finding Darkhawk's black-clad feet.

"The right answer is, 'To jail, Mr. Darkhawk'. That *is* what you were going to say, isn't it?"

INTERLUDE - Carriers

In Orlando, Florida, Frank Conway waits impatiently for the line into one of the DisneyWorld parking lots to move, and tries not to think about the aerosol canister in the leather hip pouch he's wearing.

In Chicago, Illinois, William Feldman stands on a platform, waiting for the El and fingers the canister in his pocket and wonders what the world will be like once the revolution begins. He hopes he's stockpiled enough ammunition to get him through the first days.

In Baltimore, Maryland, Hollis Banks checks the watch on his thin, heavily-tattooed forearm and suppresses a titter. He is sitting on a bench near the city's Inner Harbor, and he can't wait to pop the top on that canister.

In Phoenix, Arizona, Steven Gilbert rises from his seat at Phoenix Municipal Stadium, tells his family he'll be right back, and begins the long march up the steps to the concession area. He hopes his wife and son both survive the plague, but he will settle for just one of them.

And on it goes.

As full of piss and vinegar as the Two-Gun Kid was--*if that really is Matt Hawk under that mask*, Hawkeye silently added--he was no match for all the guns pointed at him. In Clint's experience, the man wasn't stupid. He should have been seeking cover, but as the wall of high-tech guns rose and centered on his head and chest, he just grinned and pulled the hammers back on his six-shooters.

Fortunately, it was at that exact moment that all hell broke loose.

The ground shook. Men were shouting from somewhere deep in the Sons' ranks, and all but a few eyes turned to see what was going on.

One of the twenty-foot tall battlesuits the Sons had unleashed was running amuck, kicking its legs out and sending Sons flying by the dozen. The three remaining suits turned laboriously to meet this new threat, and one of them immediately had its arms sheared off by the rogue suit's cannons.

Utter bedlam ensued. The other rigs seemed hesitant to open up with full firepower on one of their own pieces of equipment, which allowed the rogue to take another one out with its long, gangly arms. Sporadic fire began punching into the rogue from the infantry, but the suit simply swept them all aside and

kept moving for the last remaining rig.

Mounted in the rogue's open chest cavity, Vagabond paused just long enough to tip her team leader a wink.

Hawkeye let out a war-whoop and threw his head back. The nose of the man holding him collapsed under the blow and he staggered backward, releasing his grip just enough for Hawkeye to slip free. Whipping the man around, Hawkeye slung him into a line of Sons who'd been about to fire, then leapt towards Two-Gun. The Kid got out a, "Well damn, I'm happy to see you too, pal!" before the two of them fell outside, disappearing behind the wall.

"Get them!" somebody called, and the Sons charged forward, only to be driven back as an arrow sliced through their ranks, emitting an unbearably high-pitched squeal. Once it had passed, those who weren't concerned with their bleeding noses and their ringing ears saw Hawkeye step back into view, an arrow knocked into the string of his spare, collapsible bow, and the Two-Gun Kid at his side.

"I call that one my fat lady arrow, boys," he said. "She's singin' for you. Now let's finish this up, shall we?"

"I knew your fa--"

"Yeah, I know." The man clad in stars took Carol Danvers' hand. It wasn't a friendly gesture, more like a parent seizing a child after losing them in a crowded department store. "You're going to have to hold on tight, Warbird. We've only got a few minutes."

"A few minutes for *wwwhhhaaaaa--!*"

Captain Marvel rocketed straight upward into the California sky, dragging Warbird behind him as Los Angeles and its surrounding landscape diminished below. In moments, they had punched a hole through the stable, horizontal winds of the stratosphere, arrowed past fragile noctilucent ice clouds in the upper mesosphere, and emerged into the lower reaches of the thermosphere, far out on the bleeding edge of the void. Warbird's pilot's mind gauged their altitude at nearly fifty miles; she could see most of the North American continent from here.

And then, quite naturally, she realized that she couldn't breathe.

Captain Marvel had released her so he could toss the chunk of ballistic missile he was carrying out into the immense vacuum separating Earth from its moon. She fell back from him, clutching at her throat. Why would he do this? Why would he drag her into an environment she couldn't possibly survive in? She rolled over, looking at the planet far below, and knew there was no way she could descend to a suitably dense atmosphere in time, not under her own power. She'd suffocate before she cut half the distance between her and the planet.

And then, miraculously, she could breathe again.

"Sorry about that," Captain Marvel said, his voice transmitted into the sparkling, air-filled photon bubble he'd created around her. But he didn't sound particularly sorry at all, to Carol's ear. If anything, he sounded exasperated with her. "I forget sometimes that not everybody can survive near-vacuum."

"What the hell are you doing?" she demanded. "I'm needed down there!"

"You're far more needed up here," Marvel assured her, moving closer. His hands passed through the photonic skin of the bubble and reached for her face. She flinched back.

"What are you doing?"

Genis sighed, and now he really was exasperated. "That missile was the least of our worries, Warbird. Right now, right this second, a couple hundred people spread all over the United States are getting ready to release the Copperhead Strain. My cosmic awareness tells me where and who they are, but I need your help if we're going to stop them in time." He put his hands out again. "Now are you going to trust me, or are we going to wait up here until the world war starts?"

Stunned, Carol nodded. "How--how can I help?"

Genis put his hands to her temples, the rest of him still hovering outside the photonic bubble. "Just hold still. This is probably going to sting."

"Look at you go!" the Hate Monger crowed, crouching next to Iron Man as the armored Avenger quaked under the continuing onslaught. "Inside that bright, hard armor, you're gumbo. All sorts of negative feelings mixed up together. Fear, lust, anger. Tell me Tony, how long have you hated wom--eh?"

The corona of black surrounding Iron Man suddenly shuddered, pulled inward. The Hate Monger frowned, concentrated, and the field sprang to life again, though noticeably dimmed this time. He smiled anyway, so pleased with his power--if not necessarily the expenditure of it--that he didn't notice Iron Man's head coming around and facing him.

"Got you," Tony Stark said.

Twin beams of dim purple slammed the Hate Monger back and up, over the heads of the gawking Sons of the Serpent, until he crashed to the concrete floor a dozen yards away.

Iron Man stood up and began marching toward him, The Sons parting in front of him without complaint. The corona of black energy was gone, but his fists and the projector in his chestplate were crackling with a purple radiance that looked oddly like the Hate Monger's power had.

As the pale man propped himself up on shaky arms, he was laughing.

"That... was unexpected," he chuckled, and wiped his forearm across his nose, which was bleeding some kind of black ichor. His eyes swiveled up and met Iron Man's.

"The suit runs on solar power," Iron Man explained, raising his repulsors, "but in a pinch it can absorb just about any kind of energy. All I had to do was find your vibrational frequency. Demodulate it before feeding it back out through the repulsors, and I've got an anti-Hate Monger gun."

"Clever. You realize, of course, that stomping me doesn't accomplish anything."

"I'm betting you can tell me how to stop the plague carriers."

"You'd lose that bet, Avenger. I'm not the mastermind here, only a visitor to the feast." He got to his feet, Iron Man tracking him. "Though, to tell you the truth, I might have been messing around in the kitchen a little more than was proper. I like to experiment with recipes, you see. Like... what would happen if you

took a whole lot of hate, and subtracted the fear that accompanies it?"

"I have no idea what you're tal--"

They fell on him before he had a chance to ward them off. Dozens of the Sons of the Serpent who'd been watching the duel. They clawed at his armor, kicked at him; one of them even fired his weapon, only succeeding in killing two of his compatriots with the ricochet. They weren't going to harm the armor or Tony in the slightest, but as Iron Man pushed through the horde, trying to move them aside without hurting them too badly, he understood the one thing they most definitely could do.

The Hate Monger was gone. Whether through teleportation or his own swift feet, he'd used the distraction to make his break. And Iron Man *still* had no idea what his stake in all this had been.

The Sons weren't attacking quite so violently anymore. Some of them seemed confused, shaking their heads as they backed away from the Avenger. Others continued their assault, though their hearts didn't seem to be in it anymore.

Grunting with displeasure, Iron Man brushed them off and fired himself into the air.

Years ago, NASA Security Director Carol Danvers was caught--along with her lover, the Kree hero named Mar-Vell, more widely known as the first Captain Marvel--in the blast of a Kree device called a Psyche-Magnetron. The blast somehow imbued Carol with Mar-Vell's powers and knowledge, and a second incident involving another Psyche-Magnetron gave her abilities beyond Mar-Vell's.

None but the highest Kree scientists know exactly what the Psyche-Magnetron is and what it is capable of, and even they would be hard pressed to explain just what happened to Carol that day. But they would know that, aside from being a weapon of untold destruction, the device was also used for instantaneous, interstellar communication. It is linked into a web of energy--what Earth physicist Stephen Hawking calls "quantum strings"--that unites every time, place, and possibility in the multiverse.

Carol Danvers was given a piece of that link--it was the source of her "seventh sense", back when she had such a thing--and there has always been a shadow of a possibility of an unlikelihood that it would ever be something more than just latent potential buried deep in the genetic stew of her Kree/Terran DNA.

But Genis-Vell, the latest to bear the title of Captain Marvel, is Cosmically Aware, and as his fingers make contact with Carol Danvers' forehead, he understands how to ignite that potential, however temporarily.

He learned long ago that knowing everything that's happening in the universe doesn't mean much when he can't also be everywhere at once. But now--for once in his life--he actually *can* be.

He reaches out with quantum fingers toward the plague carriers.

DENOUEMENT - Carriers

In Seattle, Mark Kippenburger steels himself before pressing the plunger on the aerosol can. He isn't sure what he expected, but the thick stream of white foam--a lot like shaving cream--that sizzles from the nozzle and onto the tile floor of the Museum isn't it. He squints at it in silence for a moment, his head

cocked to the side and his finger still depressing the plunger, and then he realizes that no one is coughing. No one is dying.

At his feet, a melting pile of the foam bubbles harmlessly into equal parts liquid and gas. Utterly harmless. Utterly inert.

Kipp hears footsteps and he's just alert enough to push past his confusion and the adrenal rush and look up. A large black man, a security guard, is moving quickly toward him. If Kipp was younger, surely the black man would be stomping and yelling and getting ready to throw him out for vandalism. As it is, he probably just thinks Kipp is senile.

Tucking the can into his jacket, Kipp turns and, setting his cane firmly in front of him, hurries toward the door, leaving the guard to scratch his head in puzzlement over the pile of dissolving foam. He's not going to waste energy chasing down and further embarrassing a crazy old man.

What went wrong? Kipp doesn't know. But as he steps out into the air, his eyes falling once again on the sturdy black silhouette of the Hammering Man, he understands exactly how Abraham felt when God told him he didn't have to sacrifice his son after all.

* * *

All over the US--in Orlando, Chicago, Baltimore, Phoenix, and more than a hundred other cities--similar men are met with similar effects. A burst of photon energy, and the unstable, deadly spray becomes harmless foam, leaving the men confused and maybe a little frightened.

But all of them will remain free. Genis knows this as he pulls his consciousness back along the universal web and back into his own body, for what proof could he or the others bring to bear against these men? And in the grand scheme of things, compared to what his Cosmic Awareness tells him is coming, they are tiny things, easily dealt with.

He leaves them to their small-mindedness and self-destruction. There are more important matters to attend to.

Between the three of them--Hawkeye, Two-Gun, and Vagabond in the battlesuit--they already had the Sons on the run. When Iron Man roared overhead, strafing the lines of masked racists with his repulsors, it just made the clean-up go faster. They could all hear sirens approaching outside--a whole bunch of them--and the Sons were quickly coming to realize that the jig was up. They continued fighting, but not with as much gusto as they had before.

Iron Man circled around and dropped down next to Hawkeye.

"You called the cops, I take it?" falling behind Iron Man a bit so the much more durable Avenger could cover him while they talked.

Iron Man nodded. "Look, this isn't important anymore. I don't know how much time we have, but it can't be much."

"Time for what?"

"To stop them releasing the plague. They have agents set to let it go all over the US, according to the

man in charge. Might be a bluff, but we can't afford to--"

"It wasn't a bluff," a new voice said from overhead, "but it's been taken care of."

The two Avengers looked up. Captain Marvel was hovering overhead, and dangling limply from his arms was Warbird. Iron Man crouched, ready to fire himself up at the man, but Hawkeye stopped him with a hand on the shoulder.

"That's our teammate you got there, Marv."

"She's alright," he assured them, dropping down and handing her over to Iron Man. "The strain of helping me dissolve all those plague agents was a little much. She's just in a very deep sleep cycle right now."

"Huh," Hawkeye said, rubbing the back of his head. "I miss all the good parts."

"Hey, Hawkeye!" Two-Gun called from nearby, while clubbing an unwary Son over the head with the butt of his six-shooter. "These wranglers are just 'bout wrapped up! Where's the local pokey?"

"Where," Iron Man said, seeing the walking, talking anachronism for the first time, "did he come from?"

"Search me. I just lead this crazy bunch. Speaking of..." Hawkeye looked around at Captain Marvel. "You interested in getting your ID card back?"

"That's what I'm here for."

Hawkeye grinned. "Well alright then. And to think...I was worried about how short on power this team was. We'll get you squared away as soon as we get this bunch of bozos taken care of."

There were so few Sons of the Serpent left standing who still wanted to fight, that Vagabond was having no trouble holding them off with the battlesuit. Captain Marvel hooked a thumb at the lot of them. "Those bozos?"

"They're the ones."

He nodded and turned, rocketing into the air and toward the fray.

The fight--if it could even be called such--was over soon after.

The Sons had been rounded up while the local police tried to figure out whether to call in Homeland Security, the FBI, or SHIELD. A matter involving three hundred racially-motivated terrorists was going to be a nightmare of legalities and red tape. Vagabond had slipped out of the battlesuit's harness and was now sitting on top of it, her chin in one hand as she watched the show. She was very, very glad that her part of this had just involved getting shot at and hitting people. The real work was going to take months. Maybe years.

She saw Darkhawk move past the foot of the suit without glancing her way. She saw who he was moving toward and had to force herself not to watch. That was none of her business.

"Iron Man."

The armored Avenger turned from his conversation with one of the La Jolla detectives and looked Darkhawk up and down. "What is it?"

"I just..." he began. He wanted to say, *I'm sorry for attacking you back there, for the things I said*, but looking at his teammate now, interpreting the look in his eyes as naked disapproval, he couldn't do it.

"I turned Seth over to the police. They unmasked him."

"Anybody we know?"

"No. He was just--just some guy. White. Maybe around forty."

Iron Man sighed. His eyes softened. "It's easier when it turns out to be the Mad Thinker, isn't it?"

"I guess so. Yeah."

"Well..." For a moment, he didn't seem to know what to say. Finally, he just muttered, "Good job catching him," and turned back to the detective, leaving Darkhawk looking at his back and wondering if he'd made a mistake leaving San Francisco for this crap.

He looked around. Hawkeye was talking earnestly with the guy in the cowboy outfit. Darkhawk still didn't know who *he* was supposed to be. Nearby, Warbird was speaking in low, angry tones with Captain Marvel. Marvel looked unimpressed. Wasn't even paying the lady much attention. Chris didn't see how any red-blooded male could help but pay attention to the woman, especially in that costume, but maybe that was just him.

"Excuse me."

He turned. Speaking of paying attention... a stunning redhead in a knee-length skirt was jabbing a microphone in his face while, behind her, the fishbowl lens of a video camera stared blankly at him from its bearer's shoulder.

"This is Kathleen Kent with CBS Daily News. We're here live with Nightwing--"

"Darkhawk," Chris corrected.

--Darkhawk of the..." She gave him a smile that could melt iron bars. "What is your team called, Darkhawk?"

He resisted the urge to tell her they were Darkhawk and His Amazing Friends, but the thought still brought a smile to his face beneath the helmet.

"Don't you recognize us?" he asked, waving an arm at his teammates.

"Lady, we're the Avengers."

EPILOGUE - Carriers.

Mark Kippenburger climbs the three stories to the ratty apartment he's been living his twilight years in. He passes a couple very nearly having sex on the second floor landing, brushes by them without a word, and has to endure the low, sharp laughing of the negress, laughter that is surely aimed at him. Because he is old. And because he is obviously embarrassed by their shamelessness. And because he is white in this building filled with blacks.

His apartment is no refuge. He has done his best to reclaim some civilization and atmosphere from these cracked walls, but the sounds of them invade his room at night. He's been robbed twice in the last six months. There was a shooting on the first floor last year. He hates this place. But most of all, he hates</i> them, <i>hates that they have, in his eyes, stolen his twilight years from him.

He doesn't know what happened today with Copperhead, but he has a feeling the whole thing has gone down in flames. Leaving him alone in this place. He had been relieved when it didn't work. But now, now...

He hears the couple downstairs, leans against the inside of his door and listens as the negress calls up to him, asking if he'd like to join them. He closes his eyes, grits his teeth.

The gun is in a box, hidden in a corner in his closet. He has a license for it, but there is no license for what he now considers doing with it. Out the door. Down the stairs. Three bullets apiece. He wouldn't be joining them until they all met in hell.

Behind him, standing unseen in the center of his livingroom, a pale man in a night black trenchcoat stands and smiles broadly into the old man's trembling back.

One scheme may have been down the toilet, but in this world, in this time, the Hate Monger was never, ever going to lack for something to eat.

Next Issue: The mystery surrounding the Two-Gun Kid deepens as the team gets settled back into the compound.

WEST COAST ASSEMBLERS

And the train rolls on. Got another batch of letters/reviews for the last issue, so let's get right into them.

I *think* this first one's from Dino Pollard. No, really, I'm pretty sure. But, um, I'm not absolutely certain. You see, I forgot to write the poster's name down when I pulled it off the M2K message board, so... well, anyway, here's what Dino (or whoever he is) had to say.

I wasn't very happy when I found out that Chris Munn's Avengers series at Marvel Revolution wouldn't be continuing. I thought it was a fresh and innovative take on Earth's Mightiest Heroes. But then I found out Chris would be doing AWC at M2K with Russ, so that helps the situation.

I have no idea whether our current AWC run has any relation to Chris' proposed Avengers at

MRev. I tend to doubt it though. Chris has so many different damn ideas it frightens me. Somebody needs to hit the kid over the head with a brick or something.

First off, I'm glad to see Hawkeye and Iron Man working on a team together again. They are, without a doubt, two of my favorite Avengers, so props to Chris and Russ right off the bat for using both of them.

Second, Darkhawk. I dunno why, but I've always had an affection for this character. And Warbird is another character I grew very fond of during Busiek's run (pre-Davis, that's when I could barely stand the book anymore).

I don't know anything about Vagabond, but if the track record of these two writers is any indication, chances are she'll become a favorite of mine.

Chris is entirely responsible for the makeup of the team. As for whether you end up enjoying them altogether, I'll be glad to share blame for that.

And keep an eye out for Chris' scripting run, which begins with issue #5. I know he's planning a solo Vagabond story to answer some of the questions readers unfamiliar with her might have.

Either way, a great start to what promises to be a great run.

Thanks for taking the time to write, Dino (or whoever you are).

Next up is another M2K-ite, Jason Eberly.

M2KAvengers West Coast #2--Primarily a battle issue (and a good one at that), this story is really, really good. It really "feels" like the Whackos (which I've been with #1 of the original Marvel limited series, through the end of Force Works) out there, even with the oddball lineup. You can really tell that this group of strangers and misfits don't know how to work together as a team yet, and hopefully they get the chance to before those slimy Sons of the Serpents put them away! As for the Two-Gun Kid? Yee-haw!

Chris and I are gonna have a *lot* of fun with Two-Gun. We start to delve into what he's doing back in our era next issue, in fact.

Thanks for writing, Jason.

Last, but certainly not least, AWC #2 garnered a much-coveted Editor's Choice Award from our esteemed EiC/guru David Wheatley.

Wednesday already? It seems five minutes since the releases... oh wait, it almost is. Bad delay this week people, I'm afraid and kind of typical when you have 11 new issues out, though about half were written by Brent Lambert who has way too much time on his hands. or figured he'd stack the deck for an EC.

Boy, did he choose a bad week...

This week saw the return of Iron Man (in not one but two titles!) and the Heroes imprint kick back at the doubters who don't think it's good enough to compete against the Knights and X-Men, and Alternate

popped it's head up and looked about. So this week's Editor's Choice goes to

Avengers West Coast #2 By Russ Anderson and Chris Munn

Word. Heroes Branch, represent.

The fun thing about this book is while it's a typical Avengers line-up there's a certain amount of conflict there. It's not unlike the conflict in Excalibur when it first started, but they were forced in to it and these people were chosen to be Avengers. However what does show is that these guys, despite the differences are Avengers and they will do the job no matter what. Even against the Sons of the Serpent.

Lots of snake references at M2K of late... How odd.

You think so? Hmm, somebody oughtta write a story...

Anyway, the guys do a good job at showing the new team off and if there a downside, it's the fact they do get past the differences a little easily when it comes down to it. Be a bit more tense if they were at each other's throats all the time, but hey it's their book, not mine.

You think IM having to turn Darkhawk's lights out with a couple hundred Volts is getting past the differences a little easily? Somebody's gotta lose a limb to please you, don't they? *Don't they?*

Suffice it to say, there are still several character conflicts in this title, all of which will either come to light or be expanded on next issue.

So congrats, guys, you are this week's Editor's Choice!

Thanks, David. You're a prince.

- Russ Anderson
March 21, 2003

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- This Hate-Monger first appeared in Marvel's *Avengers* vol. 1 #341
- The Two-Gun Kid was last seen in the present day in Marvel's *Avengers* #109.

Marvel 2000 Proudly Presents

#4 - "Sweating Bullets"

Plot by Chris Munn & Russ Anderson
Script by Russ Anderson

Avengers West Compound.

"Just so you know... I'm not gonna go easy on you."

Priscilla Lyons, more and more frequently of late known by her codename Vagabond, smiled. "Who asked you to?"

From across the stretch of open ground that separated them, she heard Hawkeye laugh. He raised a red sash above his head. "You know the rules. Come over here at whatever speed you're able and take the flag away from me. All you gotta do," he added, tucking the flag into his belt, "is cross fifty feet of open ground."

"This shouldn't take long."

"You wish."

Vagabond took a step forward--and Hawkeye's right arm became a blur, flashing back over his shoulder. Almost before Vagabond's brain had registered he was moving, an arrow was flying from his bow. The blunt arrowhead popped open, and a wide black steel mesh net sprang out at her.

Instead of moving aside or ducking, Priscilla leapt forward, throwing her arms and legs out in all directions, making herself as big a target as she possibly could. The net splashed over her, but before it could close and entangle her, she whipped her arms and legs inward, yanking the net into a bundle that she then wadded up and tossed aside.

"Now don't get cocky," Hawkeye warned, twisting a finger in his ear as she continued moving toward him.

"Ew, shouldn't you use Q-Tips for that?"

He didn't reply, but another arrow was flying towards her in the next moment, this one emitting a high-pitched scream that seemed to punch through her eardrums like a railroad spike. She covered her ears and leapt to the side, waiting for the arrow to pass. It did so... but then it circled around, coming by her again. It continued toward Hawkeye, who didn't seem bothered at all by its wail, then turned *again*, heading directly toward her.

"Ah crap," she muttered, though she couldn't hear herself say it. The noise was starting to do a number on her, messing with her balance. She put her head down, still covering her ears, and charged towards her opponent.

Hawkeye leapt over her, planting his hand on her upper back as he went. She twisted beneath him, just managing to snag his ankle before he could complete the leap.

She couldn't hear him say "Uh oh," but she saw the words form on his lips. Priscilla slung him in the

opposite direction, slamming him down to the ground on his back, ripped the flag from his belt, pivoted, and snapped the flag at the arrow as it passed. The shot was perfect, the arrowhead popped open and fell silent just before dropping into the grass.

Vagabond grinned at her victory, but her face fell as she turned back toward her boss.

"Oh god, are you okay?"

"Nothing a little spine realignment wouldn't cure," Hawkeye grunted, pushing himself up into a sitting position. He dusted off his knees and stuck his hand out.

"Why didn't that arrow bother you?" she asked, helping him up.

He stuck his pinky finger back in his ear and twisted again. "Turned my hearing aid off before I shot it."

"You wear a hearing aid?"

"Yeah. I've gotten pretty good at reading lips though." He was eyeing her up and down. "That was good. Really good. Especially that snatch-and-toss at the end. But I thought you said you didn't have any powers."

"I don't."

"Uh huh," he replied, his tone saying just the opposite.

Fortunately, a low trundling sound distracted him before he could press the point. They both looked around as a small white golf cart bounced across the field, coming to a barely controlled halt directly in front of them. After sighing in relief, the middle-aged butler in the driver's seat turned the cart off, mopped his brow, and climbed out.

"Jarvis," Hawkeye said, "how's it hangin', buddy?"

Edwin Jarvis cleared his throat. "It is...erm...hanging well, Master Hawkeye."

"What did I tell you about dressing more appropriately? This ain't New York, you know, and we sure ain't living in the brownstone."

Jarvis' bald head turned pink as he gripped the lapel of his immaculate suit. "Master Hawkeye, this is the dress of my office, and I will not--"

Hawkeye laughed. "I'm just messing with you, Jarv." He patted the older man's shoulder. "Aren't you hot in that get-up though?"

"I hadn't noticed, sir."

"Did the staff pass your inspection?"

"With flying colors, I'm happy to report. But that's not why I braved that horrible machine to come out and see you."

"What's on your mind?" Hawkeye put an arm across his shoulders and began leading him back to the

'horrible machine'. Vagabond tagged along behind, feeling forgotten.

"Well, it's the East Coast team, sir..."

"They giving you a hard time for taking some time off to come out here and make sure we're shipshape?"

"No, not at all. And you know I'm happy to do it, sir." He paused as Hawkeye slid into the cart's driver's seat and Vagabond hopped onto the back. After a moment of uncertainty, he climbed into the passenger side.

"I'm concerned," he said, as the cart sprang back to life and Hawkeye turned it back toward the compound, "about the direction Master Thor has taken the team in."

Hawkeye squinted across the seat, taking his eyes off the road longer than Jarvis was strictly comfortable with. His easy smile had cooled somewhat. It wasn't quite a frown yet, but it was moving in that direction.

"That... is not a good sign," he said finally. "Shellhead and I talked about this a couple days ago, but I was hoping it was just distance and us being unfamiliar with some of those characters Thor recruited."

"I've served many different incarnations of the Avengers, sir, dealt with many rough-and-tumble sorts. But one of this new team claims to be the daughter of Satan. And I'm not so certain that it's fancy on her part."

"Satana."

"Yes. Though, that alone wouldn't have been enough to make me voice my concerns. My main worry lies with the Scarlet Witch."

Hawkeye looked at him sharply. "Wanda? What's the matter with her?"

"As you know, she's second-in-command, and her behavior since taking on those duties... I'm afraid she's under too much pressure, and the antagonism between her and Mistress Crystal is quite uncharacteristic of them both."

"Damn," Hawkeye breathed. He guided the cart over a final rise, and the central building of the compound came into view, an oversized, Western style affair that would have looked at home on a resort for the rich and famous. They pattered down the slope in silence, Hawkeye bringing the cart to rest in front of the building.

"I knew it wasn't a good idea for her to stay on the team after what happened to the Vision. And she doesn't exactly have a stellar history of emotional stability after losing loved ones." He turned the cart off and looked around at Jarvis, starting when he saw Vagabond hanging over the seat. He'd nearly forgotten she was there.

"Just talk to her, sir. That's all I ask. There are only a handful of Avengers she's closer to than you, and none of those are available right now."

"I'll do that," he said, nodding. "And maybe I'll have a talk with Thor while I'm at it. I know the big guy has always valued raw power over level-headedness, but--"

There was a loud *beep*, and Hawkeye jumped again. Sighing in exasperation to hide the blush filling his cheeks, he reached into his belt and drew out his Avengers ID card. Iron Man's face had replaced his own

picture on the front of the card.

"Hawkeye, I've finished checking the databases. Do you want to hear the results now or--?"

"No, hold on to them. I'll meet you in the med-lab in two minutes." He cut the transmission and hopped out of the cart. "We'll talk more about this later today, Jarvis, before you head back."

"Of course, sir."

He started to trot toward the building. "And V... get that man some bajas and a tank-top, would ya? He's killin' me with that suit!"

He disappeared into the building. Back in the cart, Vagabond and Jarvis shared a look.

"What if I showed you to the kitchen and made you a bite to eat instead?"

"Jarvis," Vagabond grinned. "Something tells me this is the beginning of a bee-yoo-ti-ful friendship."

"Okay, Shellhead. What've you got for me?"

Iron Man motioned for Hawkeye to join him at the monitor. "Just double-checking the results. Come take a look."

Hawkeye crossed the well-appointed med-lab, nodding in satisfaction as he passed equipment he vaguely recognized from the East Coast headquarters. It was probably unavoidable that the West Coast team would always be seen as second fiddles to the Easterners, but he would be damned if they were going to live like it.

"Looks like you were right. The man staying in our guest bungalow really is the Two-Gun Kid." Iron Man gestured toward the screen, which was running an indecipherable stream of numbers and facts that looked, from where Clint was standing, like a surefire cure for insomnia.

"He knew my name," Clint shrugged. "Not that I've ever worked very hard to keep my ID a secret, but it's not exactly common knowledge either. Besides that, he looks just like Matt Hawk under that mask, and talks like him. No way I'd forget that face *or* that voice."

"Well, whether you want to go with your gut, or with hard facts, the guy's a winner either way. It took a while, but I managed to dig up our records from the last time he visited our era. This Two-Gun's prints and retina scans exactly match the ones on record. If he's not the real thing, he's one hell of a facsimile."

"So how did he get here?"

"You tell me. Could be Kang again, I suppose. Two-Gun says he doesn't remember anything. Just went to sleep in his era and woke up in ours, not far from that hangar we were fighting the Sons in. If I didn't know better, I'd think--"

"Now I *knew* there was a reason my ears was burnin'."

The Avengers turned, and found Matt Hawk himself, the Two-Gun Kid, propped up in the doorway. He

had lost the mask and the colorful vest that made up his 'costume', but even with modern clothing to dress in, he'd still gone with blue jeans, boots, and a long-sleeve denim shirt. His guns, as ever, still hung from his hips.

"C'mon in, Matt," Hawkeye replied. "We were just talking about how we're gonna get you home this time."

"I do keep losin' myself in time, don't I?" He straightened and strode into the room. "I can find my way across the most barren stretch of Arizona desert, but give me a chance and I'll end up in the wrong dang year every time."

"Well, we'll get you back to the right time somehow. Kang isn't on speed dial, unfortunately, but we'll find a way."

"No rush, Iron Man, no rush." Matt waved his hands. "I do want to get back, but if I'm gonna be lost, I might as well be lost among friends."

Hawkeye couldn't help but grin at that.

"Regardless," Iron Man replied. "Just be assured we're working on it."

"Never crossed my mind to think otherwise." Two-Gun's eyes slid across the two men, finally coming to rest on the screen that was still active behind them. The screen with his mugshot and two sets of fingerprints on either side.

"Never crossed my mind to think otherwise."

The blonde beauty described a slow, graceful arc in the air before slicing arms-first through the surface of the pool, with nary a splash to mark her passing.

Carol Danvers liked to swim, and she liked to feel the sun on her face and shoulders, two sensations she'd had far too little of while living in Washington State. She *still* lived there, really--wouldn't do to move 1,000 miles away from her agent and her burgeoning literary career--but she had a feeling she was going to be spending more time here on the compound than back in her Seattle apartment over the coming months. After all... here, she had a bungalow. A *bungalow*, for crying out loud.

She arrowed across the bottom of the pool, coming up only when she'd reached the opposite end. Eyes still closed, she sluiced the water out of her hair with both hands.

"Nice dive."

Her eyes snapped open. There was a guy crouching nearby, on the edge of the pool. Not directly in front of her, but close. He had dark hair, and was obviously younger than her. Early twenties at the most. She'd never seen him before in her life.

"Thanks."

"Really, I'm not just saying that. That was a nice dive. I had a girlfriend once who was a diver, and I doubt she could have done any better."

Carol tilted her head, took another look at him. "Have we met?"

The kid laughed and tucked a hand into the collar of his shirt. Carol tensed, but the hand came back holding a purple-black amulet, shaped like an elongated diamond.

Carol's eyes narrowed. "Darkhawk?"

"That's me. You can call me Chris, though. Chris Powell." He crabwalked over and extended his hand. She shook it.

"So I see you're not too concerned about your secret identity..."

"Well, I had to tell Hawkeye who I was anyway, for the security clearance. Besides, I just finished moving all my stuff into the compound. If I'm going to be living here permanently, I don't want to have to be Darkhawk all the time."

Carol leaned backward and backstroked smoothly away. "Amen. That's definitely one difference between us and the East Coast branch. It's a lot easier to let your hair down during off-time."

"Got that right," Chris sighed, watching her move. God, she was gorgeous. Obviously quite a bit older than him, but still...

The patio door slid open behind him. Chris looked around, and felt his mood sour as Iron Man strode across the concrete toward the pool. He glanced at Chris twice, spotted the amulet, then nodded curtly.

"Going for a swim?" Chris asked, hoping it came across as a joke and not a jab.

"No," he said simply. Then he looked to Warbird. "I'm getting ready to head out."

"How'd it go with Two-Gun?" Warbird asked from the other side of the pool.

"He's who he says he is, as far as I can tell. We'll have to keep an eye on him, just in case, but I think it's safe to put our swords away for now."

"Good. We haven't been a team long enough to deal with any traitor drama."

Iron Man nodded. "Can I talk to you?"

"You *are* talking to me."

He flicked a glance at Chris. "Alone?"

"Hey, I'll leave you two alone if you--"

"No need," Iron Man said, firing himself up into the air. Chris watched him climb, then looked at Carol. She was standing in the shallow end, hip deep in water. With a sigh and a flash of transmuting light, she changed into her Warbird costume and shot up into the air after her teammate.

On the ground, Chris mimed throwing a ball up in the air and swinging at it with a baseball bat. "Stee-riker one, Powell. Better luck next time."

He turned and walked off, wondering if there was anything else to do in this joint.

"What is it with you and Darkhawk?" Carol said, pulling up alongside Iron Man as the two of them headed out over the ocean and turned north.

"I don't know what you mean."

"Oh, come on, Tony. We would have had to rename you Ice Man if you'd stood next to him much longer. What did he do that has you so clenched?"

They flew in silence for almost a full minute, Iron Man refusing to reply and Carol refusing to repeat herself. Finally, Iron Man sighed.

I was a bit of a jerk, wasn't I?"

"A bit."

"I'll apologize later. The kid just rubs me the wrong way. Something he said when I first recruited him... and the fact that his past is more than a little shady."

"I think he looks up to you."

Tony's eyes darted her way from beneath his mask. "Oh, *that's* nice. I get the impression he's got some issues with his father, too."

"You afraid you just got adopted?"

"What's to be afraid of? He's an adult."

"Not by much. I'm not even sure he's old enough to drink yet."

"Yeah, well you and I both know that being legal drinking age is no measure of maturity or the ability to cope with your issues."

Carol was silent for a moment, thinking on this. "So what did you ask me up here for? Something other than rubbing my problems in my face, I hope."

"Carol, that's not what I meant..."

"Don't sweat it. You can just apologize to me later." She pulled up short, and Iron Man rocketed nearly half a mile past before he realized she was gone. He turned back, sweeping up and hovering in front of her.

"Now what was it exactly that you dragged me away from my swim for?"

Inside the armor, Tony Stark sighed. He wasn't going to win this one.

"Captain Marvel," he said. "I still don't understand exactly how he managed to zap all those plague-

carriers..."

Carol shook her head. "I don't either. Something to do with how I got my powers from a Kree psychemagnetron. You'd have to ask him."

"He's not answering his ID card. But that's not what I'm concerned with. I know you never worked with him, but I did--briefly. Something's happened to him. He's harder and more distant now. I was hoping you could provide some insight into that."

"Why would you think I could? You just said I've never worked with the guy."

"No, but I assume you talked when you helped him beat the plague--"

"Barely."

"--and more importantly, you knew his father." He spread his hands. "I don't know what I'm looking for here, Carol. I just want to nip any problems in the bud now, so they don't turn into tragedies somewhere down the line."

She frowned. "He was kind of... abrupt when we were working on the plague thing. He's not as likeable as his dad was, that's for sure, but you can't micro-manage him just because he's a social retard, Tony. Let Hawkeye worry about this stuff. It's his job."

Iron Man waved a hand, as if to say, "Forget it," and turned, angling himself North again. "I'm heading home. You coming?"

"No, I'm going to hang out at the compound for the next couple of days, get settled in."

"Fine. Be seeing you."

"Yeah," Carol said softly, looking away as he fired himself up the coast. "Be seeing you."

"Naw, I haven't seen Rawhide or Kid Colt for years," Matt Hawk said, tugging on the bowstring and sighting the target down the length of the arrow.

He and Hawkeye were standing together in the sub-basement training center beneath the command building. The plain, metal-walled room was capable of flinging everything from holograms to giant, death ray toting robots at them. It was the size of a college gymnasium. The bullseye Matt was aiming for was half that distance from where they stood.

"Years? But you just..." Hawkeye's eyes widened, and he nodded in understanding. "It's been longer for you, hasn't it? Than it's been for us?"

"You mean since I came here last time? Well, that depends, I suppose. Has it been ten years for you?"

"Closer to three or four since the last time I saw you."

Matt released, and immediately barked "Damnit!" when he realized the shot was going wide. The arrow

missed the edge of the target by a good two feet, sailing on to bounce harmlessly off of the back wall.

"I suppose that's why I stick to my irons," he sighed good-naturedly, stepping back and letting Hawkeye take his spot. Hawkeye stepped up, one of Matt's six-shooters in one hand, and leveled it at the target.

"Ten years. So what've you been doing in the meantime? Hey, what about that girl you used to talk about... Nancy? Did you ever make an honest woman out of her?"

Matt didn't reply, and Hawkeye took his eye off the bullseye to glance at him. Matt's shoulders had slumped and there suddenly seemed to be more lines in his forehead. If the difference in his age from the last time they'd met hadn't been obvious before, it was now. Hawkeye lowered the gun.

"Oh, c'mon. No..."

"I made an honest woman out of 'er. But she died in childbirth, and then our little girl got sick and died when she was just four. Of rubella. You know, that sickness that you can fix with a shot in *this* day and age."

"Matt, I'm sorry. I--" Hawkeye collected himself. He wasn't much for the warm, fuzzy part of friendship between two men, but he also couldn't let it go without letting this man know that he understood. "I got married too. Well, you remember her. Mockingbird. The one you helped me save from the Phantom Rider after he went bonkers."

Matt nodded.

"She died too. Was killed, really. While I watched. It almost destroyed me."

"It *did* destroy me. For a while, anyway." Matt put the heel of one hand in his eye and swiped moisture away. Their eyes met, and something seemed to pass between them, an understanding. Hawkeye knew now why Matt hadn't expressed any great desire to get back home.

Then the cowboy laughed. "What a couple o' sad sacks we are, huh?"

"Yeah."

Matt swallowed, and pointed at the bullseye. "You gonna shoot that thing, or are you gonna let me be the only one who makes a fool out of himself today?"

"Can't let that happen."

"No way, no how."

Hawkeye raised the gun and fired. Missed it by a mile.

"The truth is I never really cared for guns," he said, tossing the pistol back to Matt. "I suppose if I did, I wouldn't go to the trouble of carrying around all these arrows."

"Always worked for--"

They both felt it at the same moment. A sudden heat in the room, followed a beat later by a glare of white light. They turned as one, Matt tossing the bow back to Hawkeye while he brought up the six-shooter that

was already in his hand.

A man--or a woman, it was impossible to tell the being's sex--had appeared between them and the bullseye, draped in a robe so white it hurt their eyes to look at it. His face was hidden in the dark folds of the hood, and a slender hand was raised to point in their direction. More specifically, to point directly at the Two-Gun Kid.

"You see that Clint?" Matt muttered, keeping his gun level.

"I see it," Hawkeye replied. The cloaked figure was hovering inches off the floor, the bottom hem of its cloak flapping aside and hiding his feet.

"Matthew Hawk," the figure said, and its voice was as undistinguished in sex as its appearance was.

"That's me, pard. Who are you?"

"I am Sayge, and I have come to make you see the truth that you would not be willing to see on your own."

"Uh huh." Then, through the side of his mouth. "You know this guy, Clint?"

"Never seen him before in my life," Clint said, slipping his hand into his belt and punching the panic button on his ID card, the signal that would bring all available team members running. "But keep him talking."

"Get out of town!" Vagabond crowed. "They did not do that to him!"

"I promise you its true," Jarvis replied, smiling as he poured her a cup of tea. "Master Simon--Wonder Man--had performed several successful pranks on Master Beast. So, while the others kept Simon busy one day, the Beast snuck into Master Simon's room and bathed all of his undergarments in Pym Particles."

Vagabond laughed out loud and took a bite out of the ham and cheese sandwich Jarvis had put together for her. "So how'd Wonder Man react?"

The butler returned the teapot to the stovetop. "Oh, the worst part was that he didn't realize what had happened at first. Master Beast hadn't shrunk the clothing down much--not enough to be apparent to the naked eye--so Master Simon simply continued wearing them. After an entire day, his... discomfort was starting to become apparent, so Master Beast finally broke down and told him what he'd done." He sighed. "Those two *are* the best of friends. A true example of the camaraderie that comes with being an Avenger."

Vagabond set her sandwich down and aimed a smile at him that Jarvis was utterly charmed by. "I'll bet you have all kinds of stories like that, as long as you've been with the team. I wish you were staying for a while, because I'd make you tell me every one of them."

"Yes... well I *do* have several hours until I'm scheduled to go. Perhaps we could--"

Vagabond's ID card, tucked into the inside pocket of her brown leather Avengers jacket, began to wail. She nearly dropped her sandwich, then, realizing what the noise was, pulled the card out and silenced it.

"Hawkeye," she said, springing to her feet. "Something's happening in the training room."

"You are all on the cusp of the greatest danger you have ever faced," Sayge said. "The threat is not a new one, but you will face it this time as you never have had to before."

"Is this a joke?" Hawkeye demanded. He had a concussion arrow at the ready, though he saw through his peripheral vision that Two-Gun had lowered his pistol. "You still haven't told us what the hell you are, or how you got in here, or why we should even listen to you."

"I am Sayge. I go where I please, and you should listen because I am the only one who can show you the truth."

"No matter how cryptic, right? You tell us we'll face a great threat. Yeah, that's an intellectual leap, ain't it? Like telling an accountant he'll have to look at a spreadsheet sometime soon."

"He said my name," Matt said. "How did he know my name?"

"Because I know you, Matthew Hawk. I know the long path you took to reach this place." Pause. "And I know you are not who you claim to be."

"Shows what you know," Hawkeye said, pulling the bowstring tighter. "We confirmed his identity just this morning, Madame Chloe. Guess the Tarot isn't working for you today."

"There will be three harbingers. Three destructive messengers--the parasite, the revived one, and the caretaker of ages--and then...the end of everything. You must be prepared."

There was a noise from behind them, and Hawkeye glanced back long enough to shake his head at Warbird, Darkhawk, and Vagabond as they came roaring into the room. Getting the message, the trio hung back.

Matt Hawk's eyes never left the apparition. "What do you mean I'm not who I claim to be? I am Matthew Hawk, you crazy--"

"Yes you are," Sayge replied. "But you are also not who you claim to be. And you must accept this before the lives of all your comrades and all the world are put into your hands."

"You're *lying!*" Matt bellowed, and even Hawkeye jumped at the sudden rage in his voice. "You're a goddamn liar, tryin' to slander me in front of my friends!"

"Your anger is no more true than you are, Matthew Ha--"

Matt's left hand vanished, and Hawkeye barely had time to understand what that meant before both of the man's pistols were roaring. Hawkeye leapt at him, eyes wide, shouting for him to stop, but it was far too late.

A hail of bullets whizzed through the air and found their mark, punching through Sayge's cloak, bubbling it back in waves as if there wasn't actually a body occupying it. As if the intruder was only composed of what could be seen--the cloak and his slender hands.

"Jesus, Matt!" Hawkeye cried, laying his hands on the guns and pushing them down. He looked into his

friend and hero's eyes, and, for just a second, saw only mindless fury.

"What the hell are you doing, man?"

"Doing? I--" Matt looked ready to pop Hawkeye in the jaw... but then it was like a hole opened somewhere in him and all the rage drained away. He looked from Hawkeye to his own raised hands, confused.

"What... what did I--?"

His eyes darted over Hawkeye's shoulder, to where Sayge still hovered, ragged holes punched in his cloak, but apparently none the worse for wear otherwise. One of his hands was still extended.

"Accept," he/she said. "And prepare."

Then there was a flash of light and he was gone, leaving four Avengers and one time-lost frontiersman with more questions than answers. Hawkeye looked at Matt.

"What did I do?" he asked.

Hawkeye couldn't answer. He was too busy hating himself for the small seed of doubt that Sayge had planted in him. He hoped it wouldn't flower into distrust toward this man, his friend.

But he thought maybe it was going to.

Next Issue: The return of Hydra! But don't expect any dudes in green pajamas spouting Nazi rhetoric for this go around. This ain't exactly your daddy's Hydra. Be here for the first part of "The Plan of Man" to see what we mean.

WEST COAST ASSEMBLERS

First letter this month includes comments on the first three issues, and is from David Ingram. David writes *New Warriors* and *Force Works*, both of which are killer reads. Check 'em out.

Issue1

Well, I've got to say that I like what I see so far. Some classic Avengers (Iron Man, Hawkeye) added together with a very odd bunch of other Avengers. I've always been a fan of Warbird and Darkhawk, and it looks like they will shine in this series. I wonder if there's still any friction between Iron Man and Darkhawk still. When they first met, Iron Man attacked Darkhawk unprovoked to see if his armor was created from Stark tech (can you tell I'm a Darkhawk fan? Darkhawk Annual 1, BTW). Vagabond seems like an odd choice as an Avenger, though. Maybe five people have heard of her, and I can't say (to me anyways) she's ever done anything all that impressive. Why not Free Spirit (if it's because she is going to be killed by the Lady Killer in Thunderbolts, I'm gonna be pissed. She's got to much potential to die like that)? I hope her 'Scourge in training' comes back to bite her in the ass. But still, a lot of characters were

no names when they first started out.

Keep an eye on V, David. Chris and I both know we're working with a character that has absolutely no emotional appeal to anybody (well, except for Chris, who picked her for the team, but he's pretty wierd like that), so we'll be working twice as hard to make her likeable and sympathetic.

As for why V was picked instead of Free Spirit... well, you'll have to ask Chris about that. I suspect it was because Vagabond is more of a blank slate, giving us more freedom to mess around with her. Or maybe Chris just didn't think of her. Whichever, you're stuck with V now, mister!

As for the villains, damn! Sons of the Serpent are classic choices, and it looks like they've smartened up a bit (not much, since they're still racist) and I hope their leader is who I think he is. Lame villains made cool? Sounds like fun. All in all, I have to say that you're off to a strong start.

I'm guessing their leader wasn't exactly who you expected, since we made him up.

Now for issue 2

Well, I wanted two more members and I got them. Captain Marvel and Two Gun Kid sure as hell seem like odd choices, but I suspect they'll work. If a pissed off crab can work, so can Cap and 2 Gun. The issue was pretty solid with good action. Amazing how all villains have a budget for super armor, eh? The actions carries most of the issue but one barely notices. No real complaints thus far, though I was hoping that Seth turned out to be Seth Thor foe and god of death. Two powerful villains screwing with the Avengers would have been pretty cool. Oh well. I know the answer is likely no, but any chance of the Fallen Angels showing up (for such a great concept, they get too little exposure)?

Whoa! That last question came out of nowhere! Um... don't look for the Angels anytime soon in this book. Besides the fact that they don't really fit the tone, I'd hate for FA writer Alex Cook to feel like somebody else was keeping his characters in the spotlight for him, thus ensuring that we won't see a new issue for *another* five months or so.

You reading this, Alex? People wanna see the Angels, man! Hop to!

And since I'm here, I may as well give you some feedback on issue 3.

With due respect, there's not much to say. It kicks all kinds of ass, but that's a given when it's the brainchild of Russ Anderson and Chris Munn. Damn you for raising the bar! Anyways, I what I liked most in issue 3 was that Vagabond, the 'always wanted to be a hero type' was actually useful and NOT tripping over herself to impress the old timers. Now that the roster's set, I have to say it's got that whole 'wacky' feel the old Avengers West Coast had. So, time for two fanboy questions/requests

1) Is Darkhawk using his second armor or first. IMO, the second was the coolest, what with invisibility, heat beams and flight, among others.

Um... probably his first, since that's what he was last seen in in the "real" Marvel U, to my knowledge (unless he's appeared since *Avengers* vol. 3 #1-3, that is). Fortunately, since this *isn't* a visual medium, as you point out, Chris can overturn this decision in the next arc if he likes.

2)As much as I like Brad's Cap. Marvel, can you give the guy another costume? Yeah, I know fanfic isn't a visual medium but still starlight costume doesn't work, IMO.

No way, man. I dig that costume! It's not going anywhere.

Thanks for the feedback, David. Now where's the next issue of Warriors?

Next letter is from the question man, Jason Trenner.

Interesting issue. Though I thought Seth was really the god Seth (guess not). Anyway on to the questions:

1) Any chance of the Scarlet Spider joining the team?

That's a good idea, but I think Scarlet's pretty happy in Baltimore right now. If Will Short and I had stayed on *Defenders* for a while longer, Scarlet would have shown up there, but don't expect to see him in this book.

(Of course, everything I say should come with a disclaimer: This is only my take on this. Chris may and probably will overturn some of my calls. And the book will probably be ten times as bitchin' for that. However, since I'm writing *Scarlet Spider* these days, I feel pretty confident about this one.)

2) Is there any chance of the Pacific Overlords coming back and fighting the Whackos?

Probably not. The Overlords never did much for me.

3) Is there any chance of Tigra rejoining the team?

Nah. Somebody oughtta mention her to Brent, though, as I think she'd really fit in to Mr. Lambert's current take on the East Coast team.

4) Is there any chance of the team fighting a new Evilhawk?

If so, Chris'll have to write it. I'll tolerate a Darkhawk, but not an Evilhawk, thanks.

5) Is there any chance of O-Force showing up and trying to take the media spotlight away from the Avengers?

Haha... Jason, you do this to me at least once in every letter. I have no idea who these guys are. :)

6) Didn't Two-Gun die in Blaze of Glory?

Yup. But how can you be sure that (a) this isn't a Two-Gun from before that point in his history, and (b) this is even really that Two-Gun? Stay tuned.

7) Is there any chance of the Whackos fighting Halloween Jack?

Aren't we like a hundred years too early for that? Or are you talking about another Halloween Jack than the one from *X-Men 2099*?

8) Is there any chance of Rage joining the team?

Probably not. I've got a short list of characters I wouldn't mind eventually seeing on the team, but Rage is nowhere on it.

9) Is there any chance of the Whackos fighting Godzilla?

Nah, Godzilla's busy over in *Marvel Fanfare*, last I checked. You wouldn't believe how close we came to using Fin Fang Foom for our third arc, though.

Thanks for the letter and the questions, Jason. Hope you keep reading.

Last letter was posted as a review to the Heroes discussion list, and it comes from the writer of this book's parent title, *Avengers*. Take it away, Brent Lambert.

Avengers West Coast #3 by Chris Munn and Russ Anderson

THE GOOD: Captain Marvel is by far my new favorite Avenger. The way Russ writes him is downright fun. I have to thank Brad for making all those bold changes in Genis's character. I also liked how he creatively utilized Ms. Marvel's powers. Vagabond has definitely grown on me some, as has Darkhawk. He had some really worthy lines in this issue that shows he's a heavy hitter waiting to be born. Iron Man of course continues to be a fave under Russ's pen.

Thanks, Brent.

THE BAD: The ending to the story seemed a little unnecessary IMO. But that's just me though.

Maybe. It was important to me that the Sons out in the field, the ones getting ready to release the virus, weren't just a bunch of faceless minions that you couldn't give a damn about. I may have overdone it a little bit, but I wouldn't cut the interludes out altogether.

OVERALL: A spectacular, action-packed ending to the first arc of this new Avengers West Coast Team at M2K. Check them out and give them reviews. I must support my fellow Avengers writers at M2K.

Haha. Damn skippy. Thanks for the review, Brent.

Letters concerning this issue can be sent directly to me or Chris at RussLee74@comcast.net and lxnay0002@aol.com, respectively. They can also be posted to the *Marvel 2000* mailing list (you can join at [Yahogroups](#)), or on the M2K message board, accessible from the [M2K main page](#).

- Russ Anderson
April 14, 2002

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- See current issues of M2K's *Avengers* to see what's going on with Thor and the East Coast team.

- The Two-Gun Kid previously came to the modern era, and briefly joined the Avengers, beginning in Marvel's *Avengers* (vol. 1) #173.

- To find out why Iron Man's concerns about Captain Marvel might be justified, see M2K's *Captain Marvel* #X, and #13-15.

- The Two-Gun Kid helped Hawkeye and Mockingbird out against the Phantom Rider in Marvel's *West Coast Avengers* #22-23.

On the outskirts of the small lakeside town of Mayfield, Washington, a hastily erected strategy station buzzed with life. Dozens upon dozens of men milled about like ants, preparing for what could easily have been mistaken for war. At the heart of the action sat a silver dome, roughly the size of a two-story house. This was the command center, the place where the decisions of the night were made.

The trenchcoated general, wrapped in a second skin of golden armor, exhaled cigarette smoke through the mouth-slit of his helmet. Cold, penetrating eyes concentrated on the myriad of computer monitors that stretched across the wall in front of his throne. The monitors displayed live video feeds, broadcast from the helmet cameras of the men making their way through the darkened streets of Mayfield.

"Status report, Isaac?" the general asked, the transmitter/communicator in his helmet relaying his query to the leader of the armed battalion that so captured his attention.

"We just hit Main Street, Sir," the soldier answered, his voice coming through in a blanket of static, "and so far we've found no signs of life."

"Keep searching," the armored figure ordered before inhaling again on his cigarette. The only light source in his terminal came from the video feeds of the regiment's night-vision equipment, causing his golden armor to reflect back an eerie mixture of the two colors. He listened and watched as Isaac gave commands, breaking apart his team of sixteen troops into eight groups of four, in hopes of searching the town's buildings more quickly.

He watched as the men searched through discarded homes and buildings, each squad sounding off their findings. The town indeed seemed dead, much to the armored one's chagrin. Then, unexplainably, four of the cameras changed their images, instead showing only white snow. "Isaac," the commander said calmly, "one of your squads has just went offline."

As if on command, four more of the cameras blinked off, displaying only the crackling static. "Anderson? Bailey? Sound off, men, talk to me," Isaac's ordered nervously, the static almost overwhelming his voice in the observer's speakers. One by one, the remaining video feeds lost their signals, leaving only Isaac and the three men by his side. The armored one lit another cigarette with the dying embers of his last as he watched the cameras of the four men. They made their way out of the building they had been searching, Isaac still shouting for his squad to sound off. By the time they made it to the street, no answers had been given.

"Sir, I think an immediate evac is necessary, something's happened to my men," Isaac asked, looking into the camera harnessed to one of his men's shoulder.

Beneath the golden helmet, the watcher's mouth twisted into a frown. "I don't think so, Isaac. Let's see how this plays out."

"What? Get us out of here!" Isaac screamed into his headset, staring directly into his comrade's shoulder-camera.

"Um, Sir," one of his men spoke up, tapping Isaac on the shoulder, "I think I just found where everybody in the town went."

All of the cameras turned, bringing into a view a crowd of people at the far end of Main Street. They stood perfectly still, perfectly quiet, for several tense moments. Then, they moved en masse, blocking the street as they moved toward the soldiers. One of the men turned to run but found their way of escape blocked by another crowd, moving just as silently as the first. "Weapons ready, men!" Isaac shouted, though the observer couldn't make out the words over the increasingly loud static. He watched carefully as the crowds continued to move toward his men, but the poor quality of the transmission made him unable to

focus on any details in the townspeople.

His eyes narrowed as the men began firing their weapons into the crowd, seemingly to no effect. Within moments, Isaac and the others were overrun, their video feeds joining the others in the display of crackling snow. The observer said nothing as he inhaled on the cigarette, clutching it between fingers covered by a large golden gauntlet. The only sign of emotion he gave to the events was a scowl, though even that was hidden beneath his helmet.

"Mr. Butler," he stated softly into his helmet's transmitter.

"Yes, Dr. Midas?"

"Get me the Commission on the telephone," the armored one said, smoke rolling from the mouth opening of his helmet, "I have need of some guinea pigs."

Marvel 2000 Proudly Presents

#5 - INFESTATIONS, Part 1

*Plot by Chris Munn & Russ Anderson
Script by Chris Munn*

"Uh, are you sure *this* is the best place to be having a discussion, Carol?" Clint Barton asked as he followed the tall blonde through the crowded bar. He and Carol Danvers, better known as Hawkeye and Warbird, had just finished a training session when she suggested the two go out and have a talk.

"I'll be fine, Clint," she said, sitting down at a corner table, "besides, I don't think I'm the one that you should be worrying about."

"That's the second time you've alluded to that, Carol," Hawkeye stated, deciding to order a Coke instead of a beer, considering his company, "so what's up? Why'd we have to leave the compound to talk?"

"We didn't *have* to leave, Clint," she answered with a smile, "but there's times when I like to at least pretend to be a normal civilian. I also didn't want anybody accidentally eavesdropping on us, either, since what I have to say concerns the others."

He raised an eyebrow at her statement, his chin resting on clasped hands. "What about the others? Sure, most of 'em are still a little green, but so were we once upon a time."

"That's not it, and I think you see it just as clearly as me. Would you like me to spell it out for you? We've got Darkhawk, who I've recently discovered is really a nineteen year old kid with raging hormone problems, and Captain Marvel, who frankly kind of scares me now. I saw him hovering above the compound last night, staring into space. He didn't move for *four hours*, Hawk. He's got problems."

"Okay, okay," Clint said with a grin, holding his hands in the air in a sign of surrender, "I see what you're saying. You know, I've wondered something about Marv myself. Last we heard, he was sharing a body with Rick Jones, right?"

"Right," Warbird said between sips of her drink.

"Then where's Rick been? We've known him for a long time, so why hasn't Genis let him out to say hi?"

"That's a good point," Carol replied, "now it's time for the big one. Clint, what about Two Gun?"

"Carol, I know Matt Hawk, and that man in our home, he is Matt. I know it, don't ask me how. I don't care what that creepy Sayge character said, my instincts would be screaming at me if something bad was going on."

"Still," she interjected, placing her hand atop his and looking into his eyes, "maybe we should be a little cautious. We're dealing with four unknowns on this team, so expect me to be sticking by you like glue."

"What I want to know," he asked, "is why we've left Shellhead out of this little talk. He's got just as many concerns as you do, *trust* me."

"Iron Man," Carol sighed, "is, I believe, a little biased when it comes to at least one of our new members."

"Darkhawk. Yeah, I noticed."

"I know that's just how he is," she corrected herself, smiling slightly, "but it's kind of irritating. It's like he's not even willing to give the kid a chance."

"I know, I *know*. He did what he could with what was available, though. The rest of the Avengers weren't really too open to joining up, considering what happened concerning Vision's death. Hell, look at the East Coast team, for cryin' out loud. Thor was scraping the bottom of the barrel even worse than we were, I think."

"Have you talked to him? Thor, that is."

"Nope, and right now that's probably for the best, especially after what Jarvis told us. I've tried to get hold of Wanda, though, but the team's currently out in space, so no dice. She's the one I'm really worried about, you know?"

"Yeah, I'm worried, too," Carol admitted. She then turned her attention toward the jukebox that sat a few feet from their table. "Hold on for a second." She stood from the table and walked over to the machine, her eyes fluttering over the various songs contained within. A quarter and a punch of a number sequence later, the bar came alive with the sound of the Cars' classic song, "Drive".

"Good choice," Clint admitted as Carol walked back to the table. Instead of sitting, however, she extended her hand to her teammate.

"Care to dance?"

"Bring it on, babe," Chris Powell said with a sneer, the mystical Darkhawk amulet dangling from his neck by a chain, "let's see what you got."

Priscilla Lyons simply smiled as she bounced the basketball in front of her, the only object between her and the goal being the over-eager Chris. "Be careful what you ask for," she commented. At an almost inhuman speed, the girl known to the world as Vagabond lunged forward, dribbling past him like he wasn't even there. A second later, the ball had fallen through the hoop, leaving a frustrated Powell wondering

how she'd moved so quickly.

"Want a beer?" she asked as she dug through the cooler. Chris nodded silently, still staring at the hoop in confusion.

"I thought alcohol wasn't allowed in the compound?" he asked as he caught the can she tossed at him. Priscilla smiled and made a shushing sound, her finger pressed against her lips.

"As long as you don't turn me in for giving booze to a minor, it'll be our little secret." The two took a seat in the center of the court, both tired and sweaty from their intense competition.

"So what's your story, morning glory?" she asked, slapping the boy's knee in a friendly gesture.

"Um, well," Chris muttered, trying to collect his thoughts around the firm-bodied female sitting in front of him, "see this amulet? Yeah, it allows me to switch bodies with an alien cyborg armor. Pretty stellar, huh?"

"Yeah, total *Farscape* stuff, man," she said with a grin, "and it sure beats what I have to offer to this group. But I guess every team needs it's Black Widow or Mockingbird type..."

Chris smirked.

"...not that I'm comparing myself to them or anything, I swear!" she exclaimed, trying to correct her otherwise egotistical statement. The two laughed for a moment, her embarrassment fading away pretty easily. Then, their moment was interrupted by the sound of someone clearing their throat. Loudly.

"Whoa!" Chris yelled as both he and Priscilla literally jumped at their visitor's presence. Captain Marvel floated a few inches from the floor, his arms folded across his chest and his head turned down. He stared intensely at them, though not a word passed his lips.

"Um, can we, like, *help* you with something, Mr. Marvel?" Priscilla asked, showing more daring than Chris would have even dreamed of expressing. Genis still said nothing, content in simply staring at the two youngest Avengers.

"I simply wanted to introduce myself to you," he stated coldly, finally breaking the air of silence that had permeated the gymnasium, "I am Genis Vell. That is all." With his purpose stated, the Captain shot upwards, exiting the gym through one of the numerous skylights, and eventually disappeared into the night sky.

Priscilla and Chris simply looked at each other in mute confusion about what had just occurred. "He's a real charmer, huh?" she finally asked. Chris could only nod in agreement.

Matt Hawk was fighting back tears. He'd already downed a bottle of Wild Turkey whiskey, and though he found it much less harsh than the alcohol of his time period, still found himself no less intoxicated. Sitting in his bungalow, the legendary hero of the Wild West could feel himself slipping into depression.

"It ain't fair, darn it!" he shouted, throwing the empty bottle against the wall with all his might, shattering it upon impact. The tears flowed afterwards, the Two Gun Kid unable to hold them back any longer. His thoughts kept going back to the creature in the white robe, Sayge, and the warnings he had given. He'd dared to throw suspicion on Hawk's identity, causing his friends to doubt him, whether they admitted it or

not.

His sadness quickly turning to rage, Matt grabbed his two six-shooters from his holster and bolted outside. He immediately began firing his guns into the night sky, no thought given to what may be travelling above him. "Come on out here, you pasty ghost!" he shouted to the heavens. "Come on down and fight me like a man!"

He fired several more times into the air, his vision now completely obscured by tears. His last shot, to his surprise, ended with a different noise than the others, the sound of the bullet ricocheting off metal. He stopped his tantrum for a moment, wiping his eyes with his sleeve.

"Something wrong, Two Gun?" a voice asked from above him, one that sounded hollow, almost mechanical. Matt backed away as the armored Avenger known as Iron Man descended slowly from the sky, his bootjets sitting him down gently onto the grass. "That isn't very safe, you know."

"You here to take me down, Iron Man?" he asked, the anger returning to him, and he raised his guns at his teammate. "You here to take down the traitor? Better kill me, 'fore I hurt one a'you'uns!"

"Calm down, Two Gun," Iron Man ordered, careful not to make any moves that could be mistaken as hostile, "go inside and sober up."

"Hawkeye too scared to come take me down?" Matt continued to yell. "He too yeller to do it his self?"

"Hawkeye's your friend," Iron Man said, again trying to calm his teammate, "we all are. Now put down those guns. Please."

Matt's eyes flared with anger, and for a moment Stark thought he might actually attack. Then, however, the anger seemed to drain from the man, and he lowered his weapons. "Ah'm sorry, Iron Man," he apologized, placing the pistols back into their holster, "ah'm...ah'm sorry. Ah'll just go inside now. Ah'm sorry."

Iron Man watched silently as the Two Gun Kid staggered back to his bungalow, shutting the door behind him. He thought about following him, talking to him, but his ideas were interrupted by the Avengers priority call that sounded off on his helmet's display screen. "This is Iron Man," he answered, his bootjets again flaring to life, sending him toward the compound's command center, "what can the Avengers do for you?"

"Yeah, so all this time, Hank and Simon were planning this joke. You can imagine their faces when Vision, he of the stoic, serious nature, flipped it around on 'em. It was priceless, I'm telling you."

Carol laughed along with Clint as he finished the story, the two walking along the stretch of beach that accompanied Avengers Compound. "I can only imagine Hank's face when that happened," she giggled, "priceless isn't the word."

"I talked to Simon the other day," Clint said, his demeanor changing from jovial to slightly sad, "he's out here in LA, trying to get back into the movie biz. He's still taking Vision's death pretty hard, I think."

"Did you ask him about joining?"

"Naw, I didn't think that would be wise. He just came back from the dead, and then had to watch the

closest thing he had to a brother turn evil and try to destroy the world. He knows what Pym did was right, but I still think he's hurting inside. He hasn't even spoken to Wanda since it happened, and he's in *love* with *her*. So I decided to just let sleeping dogs lie."

"Probably a good move," she admitted. Carol then stopped her walk, folding her arms across her chest as she stared out into the ocean. "It just feels so strange, knowing that Vision is gone. With all the danger we put ourselves in, it still comes as a shock when one of us doesn't come home."

"I know what you mean," Hawkeye agreed, taking position behind his friend, "hell, there's times when I still can't believe Bobbi's gone. Unfortunately, it kind of comes with the job, you know? Occupational hazard, I guess you could call it."

"You're not telling me anything I don't already know," she said softly, "especially in my Air Force days, I learned that this is part of what we do. It just doesn't make it any easier to deal with."

Clint placed his hands on Carol's shoulders, a lingering silence hanging between them. A minute later, however, their moment was interrupted by the beeping noise emitted from their pockets. Hawkeye reached in and pulled out his Avengers Communicard, finding the face of Iron Man reflected back at him. "What's up, Shellhead?"

"We got a priority distress call from the CSA, Hawk," the armored one stated, "are you on base?"

"Yeah, me and Carol are out by the beach," Clint answered, "we'll be there ASAP."

Carol cocked her head to the side, smiling at her friend. "Duty calls once again."

The Avengers, six in total, sat around the conference table, a holoscreen projector suspended in the air above them. They'd taken the time to change into their uniforms before joining the meeting, and Chris had activated his Darkhawk form, all knowing that it was time for their game faces in light of whatever tragedy had befallen the country this time. Hawkeye sat at the head of the table, remaining silent while Iron Man addressed the originator of the distress call.

"Avengers, this is Agent Crass with the Commission on Superhuman Activities," he related, though the contempt in his voice was plainly evident, "Hawkeye and I know him from our last mission with the East Coast team."

"After that debacle," Crass said though the video feed, a sneer plastered across his face, "you're lucky I didn't call in X-Force. Fortunately for you, the CSA is willing to overlook your past failure."

"Whoa, wait a minute," Hawkeye chimed in, pointing an accusing finger at the government agent, "that wasn't our screw-up, that was YOURS. You sent us after Goliath without giving us all the details, you little weasel."

"Regardless of that situation," Crass continued, blatantly ignoring Hawkeye's statement, "there's a situation in northern Washington that we think warrants your investigation."

"Give us the details," Hawkeye ordered, "all of 'em, this time."

"Mayfield, Washington is a small town about 100 miles east of Seattle, and only 20 miles away from Blackhawk Air Force Base," the agent explained, the assembled heroes all eyeing him suspiciously. "Two

days ago, the base lost contact with the town, which provides the military complex with supplies and food at times. Thinking it was simply a communication problem, Blackhawk sent a small regiment to Mayfield. They have yet to be heard from."

"So, what, is Kang abducting moose now or something?" Vagabond joked, prompting a smirk from Hawkeye and a shushing noise from Iron Man.

"After two more teams from the base disappeared in the town," Crass continued, "SHIELD were called in. They sent in a squad of their finest men, only to be met with the same results as the military."

"So you're wanting us to be the next guinea pigs?" Darkhawk commented.

"Believe me, Avenger," Crass said with contempt, "if we could take care of this without you, then we would have already."

"Send us the town's coordinates," Hawkeye said, "and don't worry. We'll be there as soon as possible."

With the push of a button, Crass' face disappeared from the monitor, leaving the Avengers to discuss the situation. Hawkeye listened to the concerns of his team (though a little surprised that Captain Marvel had remained silent throughout the briefing), but his mind soon drifted to the one member that had failed to join them. "Okay gang," he said, interrupting the discussion brewing between the others, "everybody to the hangar. We can talk about this more in the air."

Clint watched as his fellow Avengers filtered out of the room, leaving only himself and Iron Man remaining. "Hey, Tony," he asked, catching Stark before he, too, departed for the Quinjet, "have you seen Two Gun? I couldn't help but notice his absence."

"He wasn't feeling well," Iron Man answered with a slight hesitation, "he'll meet us in the hangar. We can fill him in then." Hawkeye said nothing as Stark walked out of the room. He didn't like the idea of it, but somehow he knew that he'd just been lied to.

Daybreak brought the blinding rays of the sun into the desolate streets of Mayfield, the blinding light reflected and in some cases intensified by the crystal waters of the nearby lake. High above the glistening water, however, were three figures that were definitely not part of the normal Mayfield scenery. Iron Man, Captain Marvel, and Warbird hovered high above the lake, awaiting communication from Hawkeye.

"Nothing unusual from this vantage point," Warbird commented into her headset, the cold Washington wind continuously blowing her blonde hair into her face.

"My sensors are picking up some strange readings," Iron Man commented, though he very likely was just talking to himself, "but nothing that could be ascertained as human life forms." He turned his head toward the grim-faced Captain Marvel. "Picking anything up with your cosmic awareness?"

"Something is very wrong here," Genis answered, giving no reason or explanation for his statement. Iron Man sighed before returning to his surveillance.

In the town below, the remaining four Avengers made their way down Main Street, not surprised at their discovery of an apparent ghost town. "No sign of life down here, either, Shellhead," Hawkeye commented into his headset, "but I'm staying on my toes regardless."

"Where did everybody go?" Vagabond asked rhetorically, wrapping her jacket closer to her body for warmth. "How can a whole town disappear?"

"Shore is creepy," Two Gun commented, his twin .45s in his hands and ready for action, "like everybody done just packed up and high-tailed it outta here at once."

"Um, not to be a complainer or anything," Darkhawk commented, "but I feel kind of out of place here in the middle of the street during broad daylight. I'm more of an 'avenger of the night' type of super-hero."

"Heh, part and parcel of Avenging, DH," Hawkeye said with a slight laugh, "we're a 24-hours-a-day super team. But, how about this...you and me, we'll go check out city hall there. Vagabond, Two-Gun, you guys stay out here. You see anything, give a yell."

Leaving their two teammates on the street in front of the large government building, Darkhawk and Hawkeye proceeded inside. "You're gonna get used to this outfit in no time, kid," Clint said reassuringly as the two entered the large meeting room, "just gotta settle in first."

Upon entering the center of the hall, both Avengers could only stare in wide-eyed wonder. A large gathering of the townspeople stood inside, almost as if they'd anticipated the heroes' entrance, their eyes glowing yellow with a vacant presence. Their skin displayed a sickly green color, the blue veins underneath the flesh clearly visible. The most shocking aspect of their physicality, however, came in the form of an unknown organism attached to their chests, an organism with the appearance of a small squid, tentacles wrapped around the humans in various ways.

"We've found our missing people, Avengers!" Hawkeye announced over the radio transmitter. "It looks like we're gonna need back-up, pronto!"

The townspeople then lunged forward, surging forth as if one expansive organism. Hawkeye pulled back on his bowstring, but hesitated in firing. "Dammit, I can't take the chance on hurting somebody!" The people were on the two in seconds, overwhelming them with their sheer numbers.

Darkhawk, projecting a force-shield from his chest amulet, deflected the first wave of possessed people. "Hawk, we gotta get outside!" he yelled, but when no reply came, he turned his head and watched in horror as his leader fell beneath the onslaught of attackers, disappearing from view altogether.

"Help! Avenger down!" Darkhawk exclaimed into his communicator, fighting as furiously as possible against the army of people. Throughout the battle, he could only think of how eerie the crowd's silence felt. Finally breaking free from their clutches, Chris blasted his way through the door upon which they'd entered, finally seeing sunlight once again.

"Pris! Two-Gun!" he shouted, as he ran outside, frantically desperate to warn his teammates of the coming threat. He stopped in his tracks when he found the street occupied by an even larger force of monster-enthralled people. Some were different than the normal townspeople, wearing military fatigues and SHIELD uniforms beneath the squirming squid creatures that clung to their chests. In the front of the crowd, to his disbelief, were Vagabond and the Two-Gun Kid, the creatures latched to their chests as well, making them two more of the mindless attackers.

"Aw, man," Darkhawk said into his headset, turning around as he heard the approaching footsteps of the army from which he'd previously fled. A lump formed in his throat when he saw that Hawkeye, too, had succumbed to the same fate as everyone else. "This is so not good."

"Hawkeye? Vagabond?" Iron Man furrowed his brow as he attempted to regain contact with his teammates, as their radio signal had went offline a minute prior. "They're not answering my hails," he said to the two Avengers that flanked him in the air, "so we're going in."

The three heroes rocketed downward, their speed carrying them away from the lake and into the town within moments. Warbird was the first to reach the crowd of desiccated zombies, spying the still-surrounded Darkhawk with ease. She plowed into the crowd, parting them like the Red Sea in her desire to assist her teammate. Iron Man and Captain Marvel followed immediately behind, covering their advance with a strafing action of repulsor rays and cosmic blasts. Seeing Warbird fly past him, Darkhawk took a gamble, firing his retractor claw directly behind her. With incredible luck, the grappling claw was caught in the grip of Iron Man, yanking the youngest Avenger away from danger and into the air.

Iron Man rocketed straight into the air, towing Darkhawk along with him, while Warbird and Marvel landed at the edge of the town, their backs at the large lake they'd previously hovered above. "Marvel, what's going on? Clint and the others were in that crowd..."

Marvel said nothing, jerking his head back in surprise, as if a heretofore-unknown revelation had been lain before him. He turned toward the lake, just in time to see the enormous green tentacles emerge from the water. He took to the air, too late to warn the unsuspecting Warbird, one of the tentacles wrapping around her with the strength of tensile steel. Genis shot into the sky, watching the helpless woman as she was dragged into the water, but found that his ascent was too little, too late. The second tentacle caught him by the waist, pulling him, too, into the water with hardly an effort.

"Oh my God," Darkhawk gasped as he looked down from his aerial vantage point, pulling and tugging on his grappling line in an effort to get Iron Man's attention, "look at that, man!"

The golden Avenger's jaw dropped open as he finally realized just what Darkhawk had seen. Perfectly visible from their altitude, writhing beneath the water of the lake, the creature stirred. The fate of Warbird and Captain Marvel was unknown. "That...that thing, it's like what's on the chests of those people in town," Darkhawk stuttered out.

Iron Man's eyes narrowed. "I think it's the queen."

TO BE CONTINUED...

Next Issue: "Infestations" continues as Iron Man and Darkhawk are forced to fight not only innocent people, but their own teammates!

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- See M2K's *Thunderbolts* #17-18 for the last errand the Avengers ran for the CSA.

Her name was Oubliette, and her body was like water, hips flowing seductively from side to side as she made her way down Main Street. Fingers tightened on the grips of her pistols, a wicked smile spread across her lips.

Mayfield, Washington was under siege. The entire town had been enthralled by a parasitic organism of unknown origin, and all attempts to engage the plague had only fed it. The military, SHIELD, and now the mighty Avengers... all had fallen victim to the strange malady that had gripped Mayfield.

Oubliette slowed as she neared the crowd at the end of Main Street. The entire township, along with three enthralled Avengers, waged war on a single individual, swarming over him as if they all possessed one mind. Her smile faded as she watched the hero fight on, alone in his battle.

"Get back!" the ebon-clad Avenger known as Darkhawk shouted, a blast of crackling energy erupting from the jewel embedded in his chest. A dozen townspeople were knocked aside, but they were immediately replaced by another wave of attackers. Darkhawk would be overwhelmed, it was an inevitability that even he realized.

The boy's problem, Oubliette mused, was that he was strapped down by his hero's code. She knew of the vow he'd taken as an Avenger, that the sacrifice of lives, innocent or guilty, was never an option. He would die himself before he allowed the enslaved people of Mayfield to be hurt. She watched as he fought his way free of the horde, breaking into a run toward her. He may have shouted at her, but both his cry and his bid for freedom were halted by his former teammate, the archer named Hawkeye. His mind subservient to the squid-like, parasitic creature attached to his chest, the bowman let fly an arrow that struck at Darkhawk's feet, letting loose an explosion sufficient to blast the hero into the air. When Darkhawk landed, he didn't move for several long seconds.

Adjusting her leather bondage mask, Oubliette ran toward the fallen hero. Her fingers squeezed rhythmically on the triggers of her pistols, round upon round of screaming death striking down the enslaved. Within moments, she stood between the mob and Darkhawk. The people stood back, unsure of what to do.

"They... they're afraid," Darkhawk stammered, his eyes focused on the S&M angel that stood before him, "they're afraid of you?"

"Of course they're afraid," she answered, flashing him a grin. "I'm the Exterminatrix."

Marvel 2000 Proudly Presents

#6 - INFESTATIONS, Part 2

*Plot by Chris Munn & Russ Anderson
Script by Russ Anderson & Chris Munn*

Iron Man saw the mob closing in on Darkhawk as he rocketed into the air on dual pillars of bootjet exhaust. Despite his increasing dislike for his young ally, he didn't relish the thought of leaving him, but he pushed those thoughts aside as he arced downward, focusing on the two friends that had been pulled beneath the lake on the outskirts of the town.

The eye and mouth slits on his mask sealed up automatically and his chest-mounted unibeam cut a swath through the rapidly-darkening water as he plunged into the depths. Whatever had yanked Captain Marvel and Warbird under the water had been enormous. There was no way something like that could

hide from all the detection hardware he had loaded into this armor for long. He dove deeper, knowing he only had minutes before Warbird drowned in this soup.

Suddenly, the creature exploded into view, its tentacles flailing right in Iron Man's path. He evaded them all -- barely -- and marveled again at the monster's size. According to sonar, it was taking up nearly the entire lake bottom. Even now, he was only seeing a fraction of it.

Though he knew the friction of the water would dilute their power, he let off his repulsor rays, driving off several of the tentacles as they moved toward him.

Something grabbed him around the waist, hard enough to constrict his shell. He fired his bootjets instinctively, boosting himself toward the surface, and when he broke out into the open air, he realized it wasn't a tentacle wrapped around him, but the arms of Warbird. He was relieved to see her until he spotted the green squid-like thing attached to her chest, a smaller replica of the lake monster.

"Sorry, Carol," he said as he cracked his iron elbow against her chin, "hope this doesn't hurt too much." The blow weakened Warbird's grip enough to allow Iron Man to twist around to face her. His repulsor beams exploded from his palms, striking her in the midsection and sending her careening back into the water.

Iron Man rocketed across the lake, circling the spot where Warbird had disappeared. His scanners hadn't yet had a chance to lock onto her bio-signature when a piledriver of super-charged photons slammed into him from behind, throwing him back toward the water. He managed to right himself before he hit, but that was the only good news he was going to get for the foreseeable future.

Genis-Vell, Captain Marvel, hovered above him, yet another parasite latched to his chest, his palms pulsing with cosmic energy.

"Wonderful," Iron Man muttered as he swooped toward dry land, a rain of photon beams chasing him. "Just wonderful."

"Bang, bang, kiddies," the Exterminatrix taunted as she shot a few more of the advancing townspeople, "step right up."

Darkhawk grabbed her by the waist. "Are you crazy?" he asked, tossing her to the ground behind him. "You can't kill these people! They're not themselves!"

Oubliette rolled across the concrete street, on her feet in a matter of seconds. "I'm not here for you," she said, raising her golden pistols, "but since you're here, why don't you eat me?"

Instinctively, Darkhawk's amulet exploded with energy, forming a small shield to block the gunfire. To his surprise, the bullets exploded upon impact, the force throwing him backward off his feet. He crashed into a nearby wall, shattering brick and mortar when he hit.

"Loser Hero #1 is down and out, Dad," Oubliette said, her voice carrying through the headset built into her facemask, "but no sign of the two you're looking for."

"How're the townspeople?" she reiterated, taking a glance at the creeping mass of enslaved citizens as she spoke. "The natives are restless..."

Iron Man dove into the dense woodland on the south side of the lake, his guidance system's screaming in warning as he took full manual control. Trees as broad as single-family homes whipped by on either side with inches to spare. He couldn't outrun Marvel, he knew, and he couldn't overpower him, but he could sure as hell outfox him.

At least that was what he thought until beams of pure cosmic force began dropping from the sky all around, smashing his cover to powder. Genis wasn't going to bother looking for him. Why do that when he could simply destroy everything and let God sort it out? Inside the armor, Tony Stark cursed and dropped to the ground.

He hadn't fully trusted this new Captain Marvel, ever since he'd just popped up talking doomsday prophecies during the Sons of the Serpent affair. In addition to the seemingly complete personality shift from when the two of them had worked together on the East Coast team, there was also the matter of Rick Jones. Rick was supposed to be molecularly bonded to Genis, but none of them had seen hide nor hair of Rick in the weeks since Marvel had joined, and Genis himself was evasive when the subject came up.

So Tony Stark, being the practical genius he was, had started mulling over ways he might put down a Universal Protector if it came right down to it. He had come up with one method -- in theory -- but he had never gotten around to testing it. He had no idea if his armor could handle what he was about to ask of it.

He was just finishing up his adjustments when his proximity sensors went off. He started to turn, but Warbird exploded from the underbrush to his right before he could complete the motion. Carol slammed into him from the side and arced upward, the two of them clearing what was left of the trees and soaring high up into the air.

Warbird's fists rained down on him as Iron Man activated his bootjets. Even without armor, Carol was almost as strong as he was, and he had no doubt she could severely damage the suit given enough time.

He caught one of her flailing fists and, reminding himself he couldn't afford to pull any punches, drove one of his feet into her midsection. Carol went limp as all the air left her lungs, and Iron Man whipped her around effortlessly, winging her back down into the trees.

He wheeled, knowing Marvel was there even before his proximity sensors went off again. The Captain didn't say a word, just raised his fists, glowing with the energy cascading off of his Nega Bands, and fired.

Iron Man took the shot right in the chestplate. More alarms went off as his energy couplers soaked in energy in form and quantities they were never designed to take. Systems began to crash all up and down his HUD.

But when the barrage was over, he was still there, still hovering in basically the same spot. His armor was blackened in places, particularly around the clear visor of his unibeam. His bootjets sputtered. He looked like a stiff wind might be enough to pluck him out of the sky.

The parasite wrapped around Captain Marvel's chest twitched, and the Universal Protector frowned, lifting his fists for another attack.

Iron Man was faster. His palms came up, his unibeam projector irised open, and a torrent of photonic power, leeching from Marvel's own attack, roared out. The blast caught Genis completely unaware, engulfing him and firing him out over the now-placid lake like a fiery comet. He disappeared beneath the

surface a moment later, sending up a gout of steam when he hit.

Iron Man didn't see the impact. He was already toppling out of the air, nearly every erg of energy expended in that final effort. Marvel's power had nearly fried the armor from the inside, but he was stopped for the moment, for now.

The armor was so low on power that it began to open up, to automatically fold into the pod shape it took on when Tony wasn't wearing it. In his last moments of consciousness, Tony rerouted everything the suit had left into its cohesion protocols. Then he was crashing back through the canopy of trees, and the world went away for a while.

"Loser Hero #2, out and accounted for, Dad. Right where you said he'd be."

"Good. Bring him back before the alien mobilizes its slaves again. Oh, and Oubliette..."

She paused, hovering over the twisted form of Iron Man. The wickedly sharp blade she carried in her right stiletto was poised over the mouth slit of the Avenger's mask.

"I will be very displeased if you harm this one in any way before bringing him in. Do we understand each other? Don't make Daddy cross."

Oubliette sighed and put the knife away. "Never, Dad," she groused. Then she grabbed the hero by his boot and began effortlessly to drag him through the patch of cleared woodland he had landed in.

Its name was SOL-7236, though even it knew that this was more a serial number than a name. It was a parasite drone, a living extension of the will of its Queen. Until recently, it had existed as a nameless suckling upon the Queen's skin, only earning its name and its place in the Mind when it attached itself to a living host.

SOL-7236 had no idea how unique the human it had attached itself to truly was. It was sometimes advantageous, when absorbing a race, to make the unjoined portions of that race believe that those who had joined still retained their minds and personalities, and so SOL-7236's race had evolved the ability to join with the host body's mind, to draw enough out to allow the new symbiotic entity to act and talk as the host had done before the joining. Because of this link, SOL-7236 knew that the host's designation before the joining was Matthew Hawk, and that he carried a secondary appellation of Two-Gun Kid. SOL-7236 also knew that this Matthew Hawk/Two-Gun Kid had been displaced from his proper time. This information did not interest the Queen in the slightest though, and therefore it did not interest SOL-7236. His only will was to use this host's abilities to serve the hive mind and to spread its Queen's influence as fa--

Nancy? I did what you said Nancy I hung up the guns and tried to raise our little girl right but then God went and took her anyway even though I've been the best man I know how and oh Lord it's so hard to see good men hang and bad men call the shots and all I can do is sit here and listen to some fat judge going on and on about 'justice' while our baby is feedin' the worms darlin' I can't hide the guns away when I'm starting to think they're the only answer to this awful, awful world...

SOL-7236 stopped, and the host did as well. More of the brethren continued to flow past as they moved down Main Street, but SOL-7236 paid them no mind. Something was... wrong with the host, something that was making it increasingly hard to keep him psychically leashed. The Queen knew about this

instantly, but She gave Her offspring no direction on how to solve the problem. She seemed to be occupied with other matters.

Troubled for the first time in its existence, SOL-7236 ordered its host to start moving forward again.

Genis-Vell.

Captain Marvel circled in the still air that hung over the lake, looking down, down, down. Even his eyes couldn't penetrate the dark near the bottom of those murky waters, but he knew what was down there. He could feel Her caressing his mind affectionately. Like a mother.

Cosmic Protector, She moaned in his skull. It sounded more like whalesong than a human voice, and still he could understand Her perfectly.

My Protector now, She continued as Genis swooped up and took position directly above the center of the lake. He could feel Her presence far below him, and he wanted to go to Her, but he would not do so until She commanded it of him.

Protect your Queen.

"Who the hell are you?" Darkhawk demanded.

The man in the boxy golden armor paused in the doorway. The armor covered him from head to toe; over it, he wore a white labcoat. Darkhawk could see the armor guy's eyes narrow through the helmet slits as he raised a lit cigar to his mouth.

Darkhawk approached the wall of the shimmering cube he'd woken up in. He already knew better than to touch that wall, but he got as close as he dared in order to stare down the new arrival. "Wait a minute," he said. "Why are you wearing Iron Man's old underwear?"

Darkhawk heard the *crack* of the whip in the same moment it tore through his chest. Green blood sprayed out from the wound as he fell backward, narrowly missing striking his head against the cube's opposite wall.

Oubliette had entered behind the armored man and now stood protectively at his shoulder, the whip already coiled around her shoulder. "You watch your mouth," she said, in a throaty purr that might have been more suited to asking the hero to take his clothes off.

"Hey, how did you do that through the--?"

The whip cracked again, going right through the wall of the cube and laying open another line of exposed flesh across Darkhawk's chest.

The man in the golden armor that had once belonged to Iron Man blew a perfect ring of smoke out through the mouth slit. "My name is Midas, boy. I'm a scientist. And I left something that looked a lot like you in my toilet this morning, so do as my daughter says."

"Daughter--?" Darkhawk flinched as Oubliette made to snap the whip again. She laughed at him and then

closed her eyes and ran her tongue over her lips in a way Darkhawk's mother definitely wouldn't have approved of.

Midas, on the other hand, seemed to forget that Darkhawk was there as he strode past the cube and approached the real Iron Man, dangling by his arms from chrome shackles that completely covered his hands. Midas stood regarding the armored Avenger for a moment, then he reached up, took the crown of Iron Man's head in one hand, and gave it a good shake.

Iron Man groaned, his voice muffled by the closed faceplate. The armor was nearly out of power, Darkhawk guessed, and probably didn't have enough juice to project his voice through the suit's external speakers.

"Hello, Iron Man," Midas said, stepping back and folding his hands behind his back. The cigar, which was now poking out of the faceplate, wiggled as he talked. "Your people messed things up, didn't they?"

"Who are--Where am I--?" Iron Man's head moved forward as he finally realized what he was looking at. "Where did you get that armor?"

"This old thing?" Midas took the cigar back in hand and dismissed the question with a wave. "The preserved brain of a dead Chinese scientist showed me how to build it."

"That's not funny."

"Was it meant to be?"

Iron Man fell silent. From his cube, Darkhawk saw Shellhead's eyes dart momentarily in his direction before returning to Midas.

"Are you responsible for those parasites?" Iron Man asked.

"If you mean responsible for them landing on our planet, no, I'm afraid not. If you mean responsible for them taking control of most of your teammates, yes I suppose I am. Though if I'd had any idea how incompetent the lot of you were, I never would have had you sent here in the first place."

"What do you want?"

"Everything," Midas replied, spreading his arms as if to encompass the entire room. Behind him, Oubliette tittered.

"Everything," Iron Man deadpanned.

"Are you aware how boring money becomes after you have enough of it? No, of course you don't. You're a hired lackey, you've never even approached the wealth your employer enjoys. And yet, I can tell you with absolute confidence that the only thing money eventually buys you is the desire to have the things it cannot."

"Like everything."

"Like *power*," Midas corrected, clenching a fist, his cigar bobbing fiercely in his faceplate. "Not the power to tell your wage slaves to shoot their wives in the necks, but personal power. *Physical* power. That enjoyed by you and your ilk."

Iron Man's eyes slipped to Darkhawk again. Chris dearly hoped that his teammate wasn't trying to communicate something to him, because he wasn't getting anything from all this except the fact that they were standing in about three feet of dog crap here.

"You've got the armor," Iron Man pointed out.

"Oh, this is nothing more than a Band-Aid. A temporary measure. I've been exposing myself to controlled doses of cosmic radiation, you know. I can't turn invisible or burst into flames yet, but my eyes did change color last week."

Iron Man shook his head. "You're insane."

"Today I'm insane," Midas sighed. "Tomorrow I'm the genius who unlocked the secrets of human potential and united the planet across several reality planes."

"How do the aliens fit into this?"

"The H'ythra? They are simply another means to an end. I do intend to halt their progress, of course -- wouldn't do to have them take over the planet before I'm ready to do so myself -- but I'm certainly not going to throw away a weapon when it's fallen from the sky into my hands."

"A weapon." Iron Man was quiet for a moment, mulling this over. "That's what Darkhawk and I are here for, isn't it?"

"Of course it is," Midas said, gesturing to Oubliette. She handed him her whip, and he began to slowly uncoil it. "My daughter retrieved your teammate Warbird -- I really must thank you for subduing her for us -- and she will serve well enough as a control study on the individual effects of H'ythra infestation. The rest of your team will show me how the creatures behave in a community."

"But you two... well, the boy is a walking pocket of reality inversion, whether he knows it or not, and you are, for obvious reasons, quite fascinating to me just the way you are."

The whip flashed out, trailing a line of greenish sparks as it snapped against Iron Man's chestplate. It struck hard enough to leave a long, blackened gouge in the armor, and the man inside cried out in surprise and pain as green energy engulfed him.

"You'll notice you can't move," Midas said, coiling the whip and handing it back to Oubliette. "That is because, while your armor is several generations removed from mine, there's enough similarity in the operating systems that I was able to hack my way in. You don't move again until I tell you to."

"I'm... I'm going to give you this opportunity to give yourself up," Iron Man gasped.

Midas just laughed. It sounded like the guffaw of every overacted movie villain in the history of cinema. Only Midas's laugh was scary as hell. "Yes, yes, Avenger. I give up. You stay right here and I'll go draw up the terms of my surrender."

He turned and moved toward the door, still making with that laugh. Oubliette gave the two heroes one last look, blew Darkhawk a kiss, and then followed her father out.

The room was very quiet for nearly a full minute after the two had left. Finally, Darkhawk looked at Iron Man.

"So, um, we got any ideas how we're gonna get out of this?"

"A couple," Iron Man replied, and that was all he'd say for a long time after.

The stunning blonde woman stood in the center of a cube similar to the one holding Darkhawk. She was in her mid-thirties, but easily looked ten years younger than that, wrapped as she was in a tight-fitting one-piece swimsuit costume and knee-high leather boots. In fact, even though her eyes were glowing a bright, alien green, she would have cut a very seductive figure... if not for the large green squid wrapped around her upper torso, pulsing in time with the beating of her heart.

The cube was in the center of a large burlap tent, the kind the military would use. There was nothing else in there, and the symbiote-bearing Warbird had heard or seen no one in the hour or so since she/they had awakened here.

The entry flap at one end of the tent flipped open, and a long, thin woman in a leather facemask and teddy strode into the room on four-inch heels. A whip hung from one side of her belt and a handgun from the other. She approached the cube and looked in at her captive, but Warbird's own stare seemed to go right through her. Like one of them wasn't there, and Oubliette was fairly sure it wasn't her.

"You ever get the feeling your father doesn't really love you for you?" Oubliette asked. When Warbird didn't respond, the Exterminatrix tilted her head and squinted at her, as if examining a racing horse. "No, look at you. What would your father have to be disappointed about? You're gorgeous."

No response. Oubliette touched the leather covering her left cheek dreamily.

"Let's see if we can fix that," she said, toeing open a small, camouflaged hood in the dirt at her feet and stomping on the button it left exposed.

The cube flickered and faded away to nothing. The parasite attached to Warbird's chest wasted no time trying to understand its freedom, it simply ordered Warbird to rocket straight up into the air, toward the tent's fragile cloth ceiling.

She got no higher than ten feet before Oubliette's whip snapped around her throat. She was yanked down hard, crashing shoulder-first into the hard-packed earth. She tried to get to her feet, but the heel of Oubliette's hand crashed into her cheek, sending her down again.

The Exterminatrix gingerly placed one of her heels on Warbird's throat. "Come on, beauty queen," she purred. "A little hot two-girl action. Let's give the crowd what they really want."

SOL-7236 was dying. It knew this, and yet it hadn't the slightest idea *why*. The Queen had ordered Her minions to begin marching toward the sinking sun, toward the collection of tents and the small building that marked the western border of this Terran colonyspace. SOL-7236 marched with the others because it was literally incapable of defying its Queen, but its control of the host's functions was imperfect, and the host stumbled, fell.

"Whu--? What in the hell...?"

Matthew Hawk came back to himself on his hands and knees, surrounded by tromping feet. The first thing

he saw was one of those squid things that had brainwashed the townsfolk, its paper-thin skin turned the pale green color of moss just before it dies in wintertime. It fell away from his chest and dropped to the pavement between his hands.

Matt groaned, and put a hand to his head. It felt like some mean old stud had been kicking it. His mouth and eyes were waterless badlands. He was so *thirsty*.

He was well-versed in the finer points of the morning after, and he had no doubt he was experiencing a dilly of a hangover at just that moment. But what had happened to that little varmint pinned to his chest? He wasn't an expert on brain squids, but the thing was just laying there, not moving. If it wasn't dead, it was pretty close, and it didn't look like it had happened to anybody else...

A hand fell on his shoulder, and Matt wheeled. It was Hawkeye, only the guy's eyes were glowing green and one of them damn squids was strapped to his chest. Vagabond was standing behind him, in exactly the same condition, as were about a dozen of the townsfolk. They surrounded Matt as the rest of the army marched on ahead of them.

"Oh hell," Two-Gun said. And then they fell on him.

TO BE CONTINUED...

Next Issue: "Infestations" comes to its (too) long awaited conclusion as the Avengers fight to defeat the enthralling influence of the Hy'thra and the machiavellian Dr. Midas!

WEST COAST ASSEMBLERS

The first letter this month comes from fellow writer Steve Seinberg:

Great issue! You had a lot going on. First, I like the character mix, overall. You have enough straight up "Avenger types" to make it feel like an Avengers book (Hawkeye, Iron Man, Warbird), but you've added in enough odd choices to make it seem like the less-standard type of title that the West Coast branch usually oughtta be. Like I told you, I dig Darkhawk, and even though I've never read Vagabond before, I'm liking her already.

Thanks for the kind words there, Steve! Glad to see Vagabond is catching on to the readers, 'cause I love that gal...look for a special spotlight issue about her coming in # 8!

You had some great team-dynamics happening, too. I like how we learned a lot about who relates to who on this team -- Darkhawk is developing possible lust for Vagabond, Iron Man doesn't like Darkhawk, Hawkeye and Warbird are friends (and maybe soon to be more...?), Marvel is a freaking weirdo, Two-Gun is hitting a personal low...like I said, lots going on, and really well-paced!

Thanks again! I wouldn't say that Darkhawk is "developing a lust" for Vags, more like he's just a horny teenager that gets turned on easily. Hey, I'm not a teenager, but if I were on a team with two hotties like Vagabond and Warbird, I'd get turned on, too!

And finally, I like the story, too. It reminded me of that DC villain Starro the Conqueror a little bit in the way that guy would attach little starfish to the faces of his victims to make them compliant little Stepford

drones. And it's both logical and cool, story-wise, that now the two guys in armor who will be toughest for the villain to affect, are the very two who like each other the least but now have to get along to survive. Really killer, man...and your prose is good, too! You and Russ are making a good team.

Now I need to read the issue or two in the middle that I haven't gotten around to yet...

Starro the Conqueror is indeed the exact inspiration for this arc...so, naturally, Kurt Busiek had to go and put the guy in like the first friggin' SCENE of JLA/Avengers # 1.

Finally, our second letter comes from Brent "This Dude is Everywhere" Lambert:

I enjoyed this issue a lot. I give it a 9.2 out of 10. It was really good and the inclusion of an unexpected foe made it all the sweeter. Who would have ever thought something from Earth X would ever pop up in an M2K title? Clint and Carol having a talk about Thor scraping the bottom of the barrel was great. It gave me a laugh. Matt's problems are really interesting to watch unfold, but the best part of this issue is that Darkhawk and Iron Man are going to have to fight together against their fellow Avengers. That's what I call male bonding!

A 9.2? SWEET! Yeah, I'm a huge HUGE Earth X fan, and I just had to include something from that series. As for Thor, well, you write the book, man...just LOOK at that team, lol.

I also wanna give an extra-special bearhug to my esteemed co-writer, Russ Anderson, for stepping in and finishing this issue for me (meaning: he wrote most of it). He rules beyond all conception of ruling.

- Chris Munn
October, 2003

Protect your queen. Protect the H'ythra.

The Kree native named Genis-Vell nodded his head slowly as the voice echoed throughout his mind. Captain Marvel, as he was known to his teammates in the Avengers, registered no emotion as the alien parasite across his chest pulsed with waves of cosmic power. It was leeching him, drawing forth the energy that coursed through the body of the Cosmic Protector, filtering it downward into the Queen of All. Genis-Vell knew this, the Queen told him as much, but as he hovered there above her resting-place in Mayfield Lake he found that he didn't really mind.

You will serve your queen. You will die for your queen. You will serve to die.

Genis-Vell was Kree, the son of Mar-Vell, and he knew loyalty like it was in his blood. Nothing about his new mission felt wrong to him, with the voice of the alien mother soothing his mind and dulling his senses. He was the Cosmic Protector, and to him, now, the Queen of All was *his* universe. His only reason for being.

{Genis!}

Serve to die.

{Genis, you have to listen to me!}

Captain Marvel blinked his eyes in rapid succession, the mixed signals that resulted from two separate telepathic connections shattering his senses, despite the attempts of his symbiote to calm him. He'd ignored the second voice for so long, consciously blocking it out, almost to the point that he'd forgotten it was there.

Listen only to your queen.

{Damn it, shut up you alien bitch. Genis, you have to break free of this! People are going to die if you don't!}

The Avenger tilted back his head, eyes snapped closed tightly. The second voice was so harsh, full of rage and contempt. All he wanted was for it to go away, for he feared it would drive him even more insane than he already was.

Marvel 2000 Proudly Presents

#7 - INFESTATIONS, Conclusion

*Plot by Chris Munn & Russ Anderson
Script by Chris Munn*

He dodged to the left, narrowly missing the arrow that whizzed past him. Though his pistols were cocked in his hands, he couldn't bring himself to fire. He just couldn't, not when it was his friend that he was fighting.

He dodged again, this time to the right, as a flurry of kicks came from the athletically toned woman he called "teammate". It didn't matter that he didn't know her very well, they were still supposed to be allies...

and besides, he never liked the thought of hurting a woman.

In an alley between two buildings directly off Main Street, Mathew Hawk was in serious trouble. The last thing he remembered, he and his fellow Avengers had landed in Mayfield, Washington to investigate the mass disappearance of the town's populace. The next thing he knew, he was on hands and knees with a squid the size of a small dog dead on the ground below him... and two people that were supposed to be friends, and if not that then comrades at the least, trying their best to kill him. As Hawkeye and Vagabond attempted to block off his avenues of escape from the small alleyway, the Two-Gun Kid gritted his teeth and cursed under his breath.

"This cain't be happenin'," he muttered to himself as the two enthralled heroes advanced toward him, the H'ythra parasites attached to their chests throbbing in tune to their heavy breaths. They closed the distance slowly, while the Kid's mind raced in an attempt to think of a way to get out of the increasingly bad situation he'd found himself in. He watched as Hawkeye slowly removed an arrow from his quiver, placing it in his bow and drawing back with no hesitation at all.

"Tarnation!" was the only thing Two-Gun could shout as he finally fired off a few shots from his twin pistols. Intentionally missing his targets, instead hitting the ground at their feet, the bullets did what was intended. With the two possessed Avengers off balance, Matt turned toward the window behind him, breaking the glass with his elbow. Seeing Hawkeye again take aim with his bow, the Kid took a dive through the window, landing painfully amidst a carpet of broken glass. Immediately after landing, the Wild West hero was on his back, guns pointed at the window in anticipation of the coming attack. He waited in this position for several moments before he finally realized that his pursuers had either given up the hunt or were looking for a different point of entry. Carefully scooting backwards on the glass-covered floor, his eyes and guns both still pointed at the window, Two-Gun eventually made his way to the other side of the room.

Confident that he wasn't being followed, he stood and took a look at his surroundings. "Lots of useful stuff in here," he whispered sarcastically as he walked down the nearest aisle of food items, deciding that he'd entered a general store of some kind. Rubbing his eyes with thumb and forefinger, he silently cursed the throbbing sensation in his brain, the result of his terrible hangover. He'd still yet to figure out just how he'd managed to break free of the alien's hold over him, but he thanked his lucky stars regardless.

A loud crash came from the front of the store, prompting Two-Gun to once again raise his pistols. The room remained silent for several long moments as the hero crept through the darkened aisles, his hearing strained in an effort to pick up on any movement around him. At the last moment, he dropped to the ground, just as a volley of arrows pierced the cans of creamed corn on the shelf above him.

"Clint, it's your pardner," he yelled from his position on the floor, looking around in front of him for any sign of the archer's presence, "it's Matt!"

Although no answer came in the form of words, a creaking sound from above was heard. The Kid rolled over onto his back, just as the enthralled Vagabond pounced down from the top of the shelving unit. She was on him before he could stand, delivering one strong kick to his head and another to his right wrist, knocking away one of his pistols. In desperation, Matt swept his legs to the side, catching the girl at the inside of her knees, toppling her onto the floor beside him. She moved too quickly for him to take advantage, however, and with hardly a passing second she was straddling him, the parasite latched to her chest bathing the small space with an eerie, glowing green.

"Get offa me!" he yelled, bringing up the gun that still remained in his left hand. Reacting on pure, desperate instinct, he brought the butt of the gun handle upward, cracking the steel against Vagabond's temple. She fell backward, disoriented from the blow struck upon her, allowing Two-Gun to sit up and begin to scoot himself back and away from his attacker. When he made it to the end of the aisle, however, his eyes were immediately drawn to the sound of a bowstring being drawn taut. He

immediately leapt forward, back toward the stirring Vagabond, as arrow after arrow were fired upon him. “Bolo arrow? Acid arrow? Glue arrow?” Matt asked rhetorically as he crawled across the floor as quickly as he could. “What’s next, a buzz saw arrow?”

Hawkeye offered no emotional response as he positioned himself at the end of the aisle, another arrow pulled back in his bow. Two-Gun lunged forward, leaping completely over the dazed Vagabond as the latest arrow was let loose, sounding off in a rapid hum as it sliced through the air toward its target. Matt went into a roll as he landed, the arrow missing its mark in exchange for a large can that rested on the shelf above the enthralled female Avenger. The buzz saw attached on the arrow’s head sliced open the can as it passed by, releasing its contents upon the parasite that rested on Vagabond’s chest. The woman screamed as the white powder rained down, her body reacting as an extension of the creature that was bonded to her nervous system. After another brief moment, the desiccated and dying H’ythra fell from the woman’s body, shriveling up in a mound of white.

“The hell?” Matt asked as he looked back at his teammate, who was weakly beginning to snap back to reality. With Hawkeye having disappeared from his position at the end of the aisle, the Kid cautiously inched forward until he was crouched over the dead parasite. With two fingers, he scooped up a bit of the white substance and placed it to his tongue. “Well I’ll be damned,” he muttered, “it’s salt.”

“Two-Gun?” Priscilla asked groggily. “What’s going on? Where am I?”

“Knee-deep in horse shit, little lady.” he said with a smile and a wink. “Fortunately, that’s where I happen to do my best work.”

Christopher Powell, the young man also known as Darkhawk, gazed from his invisible cell at the villain in the golden armor that stood before him. A cigarette dangled from the mouth slit of the helmet, the smoke it produced rolling up through the eyeholes of the smooth, metal face. Dr. Midas grinned beneath his faceplate as he stood, observing and studying the first of two Avengers that he’d captured earlier.

“Can I, like, *help* you with something?” Darkhawk remarked at his captor, his metallic voice echoing out from beneath his own silver and black helmet.

Midas remained silent, amused at his prey’s defiance in the face of assured death.

“Say something, damn it!” Chris yelled in frustration. “You couldn’t shut up when we first got here. You’re starting to freak me out, man!”

“My daughter seemed quite taken with you,” the doctor finally answered, “which is why I sent her away. She’s not like other girls, I’m afraid... something I discovered when she was much younger. She had an imaginary friend, you see, much like any other child in their elementary years. My Oubliette, however, had taken it one step further. One day while playing in one of my laboratories, she shoved one of her guardians into a matter disassembler. Her imaginary friend was in truth a frantic and scared man that had been rendered out of synch with the physical and visible worlds. Somehow, only she could perceive and communicate with him.”

“That’s...” Darkhawk stuttered, “That’s just... damn.”

“As you may have noticed,” Midas continued, “she’s her daddy’s girl.”

“Sounds like ‘daddy’s girl’ is a psychotic bitch with her bondage mask on too tight,” a voice interjected, prompting Midas to turn to his right. Suspended on the wall was Iron Man, whose armor had been drained

of power and rendered inert. “You decided to take me up on my offer to let you surrender?”

“As long as *my* systems maintain control over *yours*,” Midas said with a stifled laugh, “I don’t believe I have anything to fear.”

“Where are our friends?” the armored Avenger asked.

“The lovely Ms. Danvers is currently being treated to my daughter’s particular form of hospitality,” Midas replied, butting his dying cigarette on the top of Iron Man’s helmet, “while that magnificent Kree bastard you call Captain Marvel is hovering over Mayfield Lake.”

“What about the others?” Darkhawk asked in an attempt to divert the madman’s attentions back toward him. “Hawkeye and Two-Gun... and Vags?”

“I would imagine,” Midas said as he returned to his previous position in front of Darkhawk’s invisible prison cube, “that they are fully enthralled by the H’ythra Township. The alien can keep those three for all I’m concerned. I have all but one of the individuals I need, and he shall be mine quite soon.”

“You mean Captain Marvel,” Iron Man again interrupted, “don’t you?”

“The Kree energies flowing through your young Cosmic Protector are incredibly powerful,” the doctor explained, his head turned to look at Iron Man through the corner of his eye-slits, “and shall provide a rather plentiful battery for my tests into cosmic radiation.” The scientist then walked with heavy, clanging footsteps to a coat rack that stood near the room’s door. “I’ll be leading my men to acquire him,” he said as he wrapped a brown trench coat around his massive, metal body, “but fear not. I *shall* return.”

“I don’t think so,” Iron Man said confidently as Midas reached for the door handle. To the villain’s surprise, he found his armor systems locked in place, making movement of any kind an impossibility.

“What is going on?” Midas yelled in confusion as he attempted to bring his system back under his control. “You are doing this?”

Tony Stark smiled as he answered. “Your open datalink into my system was a smart move, Midas. What you forgot, though, was that my employer *designed* those systems, including *yours*... so now guess what?”

Midas’ eyes grew large upon realization.

“Now, *I’m* in control.”

With a violent jerk, Midas’ steel encased arm swung backward, twisting the villain’s body around until he was facing a large bank of machinery and hardware. With a flash of light, the repulsor beam in the palm of his gauntlet flared to life, unleashing an incredible surge of energy at his own computer systems. “No, you cannot do this to me!” he shouted as several more beams were fired from his hands, striking several other important-looking targets around the room.

“Darkhawk,” Iron Man addressed as the noise from the repulsor beams finally died down, “you want to take care of this for me?” His own armor system still not online, Tony Stark could only direct his eyes at his teammate from inside his red and gold helmet.

Darkhawk slowly reached to where the wall of his prison cube had been, and with a surge of excitement

found that it was there no longer. "Oh, *hell* yeah!"

"I am Midas!" the villain shouted as he attempted to wrench back the controls of his armor system. "I will flay the flesh from your bones and use your skulls as ashtrays!"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Darkhawk said as he implemented his own abilities, the ebony crystal affixed to his chest bursting forth a large blast of energy, "who hasn't heard *that* threat before?" The beam hit Midas like a colliding bus, blowing him through the wall directly behind him. The rookie Avenger felt vindicated, and just a little proud of his accomplishment.

"Iron Man, you okay?" he asked, attempting to remove his teammate from the wall restraints.

"My systems are finally coming back online," Stark answered, relieved that he could again move his second skin, "but don't worry about me. You need to go find the others. Start with Warbird, since Midas inferred that she was already captured."

"Okay," Darkhawk agreed, "but what about golden boy out there?"

Iron Man grunted as he ripped his arms free of the steel restraints. "Leave him to me."

"Oh baby, baby, *baby*... in case you couldn't tell, the skin-tight leather really turns me on."

Oubliette, the Exterminatrix, licked her lips in anticipation as she ground her heel into the base of her captive's spine, her electrified whip wrapped tightly around the other woman's throat like a leash. Warbird, enthralled by the alien H'ythra that was attached to her chest, offered no emotion from her place on the floor, offering only the smallest amount of struggle against the masked woman standing atop her.

Stepping off the woman's back, the daughter of Midas crouched down over top her. With a jerk of her wrist, the whip drew tight, snapping Carol's head backward. "Can I tell you a secret?" she asked, whispering the question into the Avenger's ear. "I can be a bit of a bitch sometimes. So when I kill you, y'know, don't take it personal or anything."

Slowly, Oubliette raised her golden pistol to her victim's temple, taking pleasure in her sadism. "This won't hurt much," she said with a giggle, "unless I happen to miss and just blow your jaw off or something."

"That's awfully charitable of you," a voice said from behind the women, prompting the Exterminatrix to implement a swift turn of her head, "too bad I have to interrupt." Darkhawk, from his position at the tent door, let loose with another blast of ebon energy from his power crystal, targeted directly at the leather-clad assassin.

Oubliette went into a forward roll, the blast of energy of barely missing her head. "Sorry, sexy," she said as her roll ended with her facing the Avenger, her pistol raised in a perfectly fluid motion, "but we're kinda *involved* here. Girl talk, y'know?"

Darkhawk dove for the floor as the woman began to fire, her gun blowing holes the size of watermelons through the tent canvas where the Avenger had previously stood. Moving across the room as quickly as he could, the hero barely dodged each subsequent bullet as they burned past him. "Stand still, goddamnit!" she yelled, firing one final round at her target just as he dove behind a large bank of computer systems.

“Oh shi-“ were the only audible words for the leather-clad woman as her bullet struck the system, resulting in an immense explosion.

Several long minutes later, amidst the smoke and wreckage of the tent, a single figure stirred. “Ohhhh, man,” Oubliette groaned as she crawled from underneath several broken pieces of machinery, “that was rough.”

Suddenly, a hand snapped closed around the back of her neck, gripping her throat with incredible strength. Hoisted from the debris like she weighed less than nothing, the murderess struggled and choked as the smoke around her attacker began to clear. Her eyes narrowed as she came face to face with the H'ythra possessed Warbird, her eyes glowing with an incandescent green. “Great,” she gurgled as Danvers pulled back her fist, “just great.”

“Wakey, wakey, boss... sleeping on the job doesn't really set a good example for us rookies, y'know.”

Hawkeye's eyes slowly fluttered open, the influx of light causing him to wince with pain from a brand new migraine. After a moment, once his vision began to snap back into focus, he realized he was on his back, the grinning visage of Vagabond hovering above him. “What the hell's goin' on?” he mumbled as she helped him sit up. “Last thing I remember... huh, I don't seem to remember the last thing I remember.”

“We'd been taken over like props in a puppet show,” Two-Gun said from his position at the nearest door, the only entrance into the room from the outside, “but me and Vags managed to get you back on the side of the good guys.”

“The aliens, yeah, that's right,” the Avengers chairman said as he slowly stood, making sure his unsteady legs could support his weight, “and the townspeople. They swarmed over me after Darkhawk and I went into the courthouse. I assume they nailed him too, then?”

“Dunno,” Vagabond answered, “we haven't seen him or Iron Man in quite a while.”

“What about Carol?” Clint asked, looking curiously around the room as he spoke. “And where's my bow?”

“She's M.I.A., too,” Priscilla again answered as she pointed to the shelf behind her, “and I kinda had to take your bow away from you. I was afraid you might hurt yourself.”

“We got ourselves a big ol' problem, gang,” Matt said from the door, his pistols raised and cocked as he scanned the streets, “there's a whole mess a folks with those critters on their chests, and they're all startin' to converge on this here building.”

“That's not what's got me worried,” Hawkeye said as he fell in behind his partner; bow now firmly in hand, “since we may have a few mind-controlled Avengers out there to fight as well. Now, I'm fairly sure Iron Man and Darkhawk are okay, since they got armor covering their whole bodies. Warbird, yeah, she could be a little difficult to handle, but nothing we couldn't take care of if needs be...”

Two-Gun cocked his head backward, catching the archer in the corner of his eye. “I think I see where you're goin' with this... might as well say it out loud, though. Make it official and everything.”

Hawkeye frowned. “Captain Marvel.”

“Ah, crap,” Vagabond moaned, realizing the implications of her leader’s thoughts.

“Alright, look,” Clint said, shooting his two teammates a look of utter confidence, “this ain’t gonna be no cake-walk, but remember... we’re *Avengers*. We do this kinda stuff in our sleep, right?”

All three smirked in unison.

[Propulsion Systems – **Offline**]
[Uni-beam System – **Offline**]
[Internal Environment Control System – **Offline**]
[Tactical Guidance System – **Offline**]
[Communication/Network System – **Offline**]
[Repulsor Array Systems – ***Online***]

Tony Stark breathed a heavy sigh as he finished the diagnostic scan on his battered armor, hoping for a little better news while stalking through the remnants of Midas’ ersatz research base. “Repulsors are better than nothing, I suppose,” he thought to himself as he toggled another menu on his HUD, “but boot jets would be really nice right about now.”

[Propulsion Systems – ETA on Nano-Repair: **2 minutes, 37 seconds**]

Iron Man sighed again at the time estimation... a sigh cut short by a force blast that caught him in back, hitting his shoulder blade with enough power to send him spinning to the floor. Dr. Midas emerged from the shadows cast by the late afternoon sun, his golden armor dented and blackened from Darkhawk’s previous assault. “I feel a certain kinship with you, Avenger,” the madman said as he lit a cigarette, a puff of smoke blowing from his helmet’s mouth slit, “much like the one Cro-Magnon assuredly had with the Neanderthal. I’m going to stamp on your brains and shit on your heart, you worthless scab.”

Midas took another drag off his cigarette as he awaited his opponent’s reply, expecting yet another heroic gesture of bravado in the face of certain and inevitable death. To his surprise, however, no answer came from the fallen hero... Iron Man lay still on the ground, having remained that way since the villain’s sneak attack. “Could it be,” Midas asked himself aloud, “that the mighty ‘Golden Avenger’ has been felled by the vengeful hand of Midas?”

Carefully, the doctor walked to his foe’s still body, and after a moment planted a swift kick to Stark’s midsection. No movement... no reaction at all. Midas grinned beneath his helmet, and after taking one final drag of his cigarette, flicked it downward, the ashen remains sparking into dust as it collided with the back of the hero’s own helmet. “Superior technology, indeed. Hmph.”

[Propulsion System – Nano-Repair Complete: ***Online***]

His ruse having worked, Iron Man rolled over as swiftly as possible, bringing himself directly underneath his surprised enemy. “Two words, Midas,” he said as he activated his repulsor blasts, the beams from his palms hitting the doctor squarely in the abdomen, the force momentarily lifting him several feet in the air.

In this moment of gravity defiance, Stark activated his now operational boot jets, sending him blasting into the air. “Superior tech!” he finished as he slammed into the villain full-force, the jets in his armor’s heels propelling both men into the sky at a phenomenal speed.

"Can't we talk about this," Oubliette choked out between gasps of air, Warbird's grip tightening across her throat with each passing moment, "like two... two civilized girls?" Consciousness was beginning to fade on the Exterminatrix as her lungs screamed for air. As the realization that she was actually going to die began to set in, a surprising figure emerged from the smoke behind the enslaved Avenger.

"Warbird, you're killing her!" Darkhawk yelled as he leapt at his friend and ally, tackling her around the midsection in an effort to wrestle her to the ground. Successful in one aspect, Danvers released her hold on Oubliette, dropping her to the ground amidst a fit of coughs and desperate gasps. Unsuccessfully, however, Chris quickly discovered that his enhanced strength was no match for that of the Kree-powered woman. Warbird easily dislodged his hold on her, tossing him aside like a rag doll.

With both of her enemies at her mercy, the H'ythra slave did the unexpected. Instead of finishing off her captors, she instead took flight, wanting only to be reunited with her hive and queen. Before she reached too severe an altitude, the recovered Darkhawk decided on a desperate gamble. Raising his arm, his claw cable shot into the air as well, wrapping and snagging around Warbird's leg with uncanny accuracy. Unfortunately, this didn't stop her ascent... and before he could ready himself, the ebon Avenger was jerked into the air behind her, carried into the sky by the steel cable attached to his arm.

The two quickly made their way through the air, back toward Mayfield at an amazing speed. It wasn't long, however, until Warbird realized that she had a stowaway. "Whooooaaaaa!" Darkhawk yelled as Carol underwent evasive maneuvers, throwing him in every direction as she soared toward her destination.

"Hey, is that... Hawk, look!" Vagabond yelled from her position on the street, fighting the H'ythra township alongside Hawkeye and Two-Gun. A few feet away, Hawkeye's eyes drifted skyward in the direction of Vagabond's gesture, and sure enough he spotted Warbird and Darkhawk performing their aerial acrobatics.

"I got an idea!" Vagabond again yelled over the din of battle. "Cover me!"

The archer and the gunslinger could only watch in slack-jawed amazement as their teammate began a series of backward somersaults, the timing executed in such a perfect way that her movements disabled no less than ten of the fighting thralls. With her last flip, she crashed through the window of the general store they had left only minutes earlier. "She shore can move, huh?" Matt asked with a smile, but noticed only a semi-worrisome look on his friend and leader's face.

"Hawkeye!" Vagabond shouted as she emerged from the store, standing on the broken frame of the window she'd used as an entrance. "Catch!"

Tossing one of the many attacking enemies out of his way, Barton jumped and caught his teammate's thrown object in a football catch, cradling it in his arms as he fell backwards onto the pavement of the street. "Salt?" he asked confusedly as he examined the large cardboard cylinder.

"Salt dries those aliens up!" Two-Gun said, cracking together the heads of two H'ythra pawns. "That's how we got free!"

Realizing just what Vagabond's plan entailed, Hawkeye dove for the nearest open area he could find. Executing a roll, he came onto his feet with an arrow in one hand, the salt container in the other. "This better work," he mumbled as he shoved the round tube of salt crystals onto the arrow, the head piercing the soft cardboard easily. Whipping out his bow, Clint took aim at the sky, lining up the erratic Carol Danvers in his sights. With his arm held steady, the archer took several shallow breaths, waiting for just

the right moment.

“Got it!” he yelled as he let the arrow fly into the air, the shaft connecting a moment later with the H'ythra parasite attached to Warbird's chest. The pinpoint accuracy of the bowman had the desired effect, the salt container on the end of the arrow exploding upon contact with the sickly green organism. The woman screamed in agony as the alien shriveled and died, all moisture leaving its body in one rapid burst.

“I have you, Warbird,” Darkhawk said as the woman fell from the sky and into his arms. For a moment it seemed as if both Avengers were falling to their deaths, but the glider wings beneath Darkhawk's arms slowly took effect, easing them to the ground.

“What happened?” the groggy Carol Danvers asked as the two touched down. Any response Darkhawk could have given was then interrupted, however, by the sound of screaming metal arcing across the sky above them. Iron Man and Midas were locked in battle, their jet thrusters carrying them in erratic patterns across the sky... neither man would relent, and it appeared as if a stalemate had occurred. Though not fully in control of her senses, Warbird shot into the air toward the two, concerned only with the safety of her teammate.

“A golden touch!” Midas declared as he landed a repulsor-enhanced punch across Iron Man's face, sending him spiraling backward through the air. “I turn everything to my advantage, you insects. Everything!”

“You're *obviously* the bad guy here,” Warbird said as she collided hard with the villain's back, carrying him away from the recovering Iron Man, “that much is easy to figure out, at least.”

“You!” Midas said as he easily turned the tables on his attacker, planting a volley of repulsor blasts to her midsection. “My daughter was to have exterminated you. What have you done with her? Tell me before I'm forced to rip the words from your severed throat!”

“I have absolutely no idea what you're talking about,” Danvers said as she dodged several more beams of energy, “but does Iron Man know you're tooling around in his hand-me-down underwear?”

With a smile across her lips, Warbird implemented her own abilities, firing an arc of energy blasts at the armored doctor. Midas' own boot jets easily outmaneuvered the Avengers' assault, and laughed maniacally as his own palms again began to blaze forth with power. “Get ready to experience my golden touch, you inadequate little trollop!”

“Out of the way, Warbird!” Iron Man shouted as he rocketed through the air behind her. As soon as she moved, his gauntlets flared forth, two streaking repulsor beams exploding toward their target. The two force blasts made their way across the distance in the span of an eye blink, striking Midas' outward palms just as his own repulsors kicked on. The resulting explosion blew the screaming scientist backward across the expanse of sky, his armor scorched and blackened from the strike.

“Nice shot,” Carol commented as she and Iron Man flew toward the still out-of-control villain.

On the ground below, Darkhawk watched the aerial battle unfold, both relieved and disappointed that he had been excluded from the fight. He could hear the din of action coming from the center of town, where three of his teammates were still embroiled with their fight against the enslaved townspeople, but was having decision-making troubles. Should he go back to the town and help there, he contemplated, or should he attempt to help against Midas?

"Hey, happy pants," a female voice said from behind him, followed by the crack of a whip across his back, sending him reeling to the ground in pain, "we're not finished yet." Darkhawk turned, seeing the bruised and battered Oubliette preparing another strike with her energy whip.

"Lady, I don't know what your problem is," he began as the whip struck again, only this time it was blocked by a quick swipe of a wrist claw, "but I'm not in the mood to deal with you again."

Deciding to take the fight closer to his opponent, Darkhawk lunged forward in an attempt to tackle the woman. A mistake, he discovered, when he found himself on the receiving end of her knee against his solar plexus. "My problem? I have serious paternal issues, you moron. Anybody can see *that*."

"I stand corrected," Darkhawk replied as he jumped backwards, swiping at the woman with his claw. The sharpened edges caught her at the temple, and her leather bondage mask came off with a loud tear. The woman stood in mute terror as the mask fell to the ground in ragged pieces, a stuttered gasp her only sound. Darkhawk stood ready for battle, confused at the woman's reaction.

"How dare you!" Oubliette shrieked as she jumped forward, knocking the hero over and landing atop him. "I wear a mask for a reason," she continued to yell from her straddling position, landing punch after violent punch across his chest and helmet in her fury, "nobody's allowed to see my face! I'm hideous!"

Darkhawk was taken aback, trying to defend himself the best he could. His sight focused on the face of Oubliette, as tear-streaked and angered as it was, and couldn't understand her reaction. She had a small scar on her cheek, but other than that she was... well, she was *perfect*. "Stop it, you crazy hooker!" he yelled in protest, but nothing was calming her.

"I'm not pretty, not like all you heroes!" she continued to scream, and with one last punch underneath his chin, knocked Darkhawk's helmet completely off his head. "I'm not... not... oh my god." She choked out as she jumped back in surprise at what lay beneath the helmet. The face of Darkhawk was hideous, scarred and discolored. The face of the alien entity whose body Christopher Powell possessed in his Darkhawk form was more dead than alive, and enough of a shock to take the woman completely by surprise.

Using the moment of hesitation that his disfigurement had bought him, Darkhawk released as powerful a charge of energy as he could muster from the crystal imbedded in his chest. The ebon energy collided with Oubliette, knocking her several feet into the air. She was unconscious before she hit the ground.

Darkhawk stood slowly, aching from the beating he'd just received, and walked over to where his helmet had fallen. Placing it back on his head, he let out a heavy groan. "That'll teach her what ugly *really* is..."

"You think you can stop Midas?" the villain said through gritted teeth as he hovered in the air, his trenchcoat torn and tattered as it flapped in the wind. "I have prepared for every eventuality, insects. Prepare to have your genes flushed down the metaphorical toilet of space/time!" Iron Man and Warbird hovered a few yards away, their eyes widened and mouths dropped open in mute despair. Midas, however, wasn't the reason for their concern as they were now positioned directly over Mayfield Lake... and behind the villain stood the H'ythra-controlled Captain Marvel, his entire body pulsating with emerald energy.

"I turn everything to my advantage..." Midas continued as his armor crackled and sparked, slowly dying from the injuries he had sustained. The two Avengers could only watch as Captain Marvel raised his hand and let fly a blast of cosmic energy, striking Midas in the back. He lurched forward, a large hole blown in the back of his armor, and a moment later he began to spiral downward to the lake below. Iron Man and

Warbird held their position as the Kree warrior then turned his attention toward them.

{Genis, they're your friends!} The voice chimed in again. {Don't do this! Fight the alien presence, man!}

Destroy the enemy. Protect your Queen.

{Shut up! God, no wonder your slaves are mindless. Genis!}

This other presence is not in control.

{My name's Rick, you leech... Rick Jones! Genis is my friend... er, sort of... and I'm not gonna let you make him murder his friends!}

Your wishes are insignificant. Only the H'ythra can be in control.

{Genis, c'mon, man!}

Universal Protector. Do your duty.

"Enough!" Genis-Vell screamed as he brought his hands to his overcrowded head, allowing his two teammates to breathe a silent sigh of relief. His eyes began to glow with cosmic power as he slowly moved his hands down to the alien attached to his chest. "I... am nobody's... slave!" With a scream, both from the parasite and the Kree, Marvel slowly ripped the green creature from his body, pulling it loose from its points of contact. Holding the monster in his hands, he let forth with a furious blast of power, incinerating it instantly.

"Marvel," Iron Man said as he and Warbird carefully made their way to their ally, "are you okay?"

"Leave here, Avengers," Vell answered, directing his gaze at the lake below, "I have business to attend to. This creature must be... dealt with."

"Wait, you can't just make a decision on your own, Marvel," Iron Man began, despite Carol's tugging on his arm, "we're Avengers, and this thing is a living creature!"

"I am the Universal Protector," he replied in a cold tone, "and this is a threat to my universe. I will only ask once more, Iron Man. Leave... now."

"Come on, Tony," Warbird whispered to her friend, "he's right. Let's go help the others."

"We're going to have us a nice long chat in the future, Captain Marvel," Iron Man said before he flew away.

"I look forward to it." Genis watched as the two Avengers made their way back to town, and when they were a sufficient distance away, began the accumulation of cosmic energy that he needed. "You sought to control all life, eh?" he asked the H'ythra Queen that thrashed and raged beneath the waters of Mayfield Lake. "Not on my planet..."

With every ounce of energy he could employ, the Universal Protector directed his impressive cosmic blast into the lake. On the ground below, the other Avengers could only watch as an incredible flare of energy that exploded skyward from the lake bottom illuminated the sky. A scream echoed through every mind

present, causing most to buckle over in pain. A moment later, both light and sound had dissipated.

“What the heck was that?” Hawkeye asked as he watched the assembled townspeople reclaim their senses, the H’ythra organisms falling away from their slaves, each one dying along with the Queen.

“An action that’s going to have serious repercussions,” Iron Man answered as the Avengers gathered in the center of Main Street.

Captain Marvel watched his team from his aerial position, as all eyes seemed to turn toward him. Instead of joining them in their victory, however, he chose to simply fly away, back toward the military base a few miles away.

“So, uh, I guess we won?” Darkhawk asked as he approached the still angry Iron Man.

“You could say that,” Stark answered, extending his hand toward his younger teammate, “and in no small part thanks to you. You did good today, Avenger.”

Darkhawk shrugged as he took Iron Man’s hand in a firm shake. “Only doing what comes natural, man. But it’s good to hear you say it.”

“We’re not finished yet, gang,” Hawkeye said as he pointed back toward the confused and disheveled community of Mayfield, “anybody care to do the honor of calling SHIELD and telling them it’s all clear?”

Hours later, long after the departure of the Avengers, a lone woman sat in the woods on the outskirts of Mayfield Lake, sitting on the ground with her hands buried in her face. Oubliette was crying to herself, the realization finally setting in that her father was possibly dead. “I’m so sorry, daddy,” she mumbled between sobs, “but I’ll avenge you. Don’t worry.”

“No worries, daughter,” Midas said as he emerged from the thick tree line, barely able to stand in his nearly destroyed armor, “it takes more than that to destroy Midas.”

He lit a cigarette as Oubliette walked toward him, a sad smile formed on her lips. “I failed, Dad. I couldn’t stop them from killing the alien... it was all I could do just to avoid the SHIELD troops when they moved into town.”

“It’s okay, dear,” Midas replied as he embraced his daughter in a hug. He then pushed back so as to look her in the face, running a steel finger down her cheek. “I regret, however, that there must be some form of punishment for your failure.”

“Daddy?” she asked, the tears starting again as he moved the cigarette toward her face.

“Now hold still,” he said, burying the lit butt into her cheek, “this will only hurt for a moment...”

THE END

Next Issue: The spotlight turns on Vagabond in a stand-alone issue titled “Turn Signal”! With no one to help her, what will the newest Avenger do when she’s targeted by the deadliest mofo in the world... the Scourge?

He watched intently through the rifle-scope, his gaze focused at the target below. Normally, he hated using such cowardly weapons, the sniper rifle removing him from the feeling that the executions gave him. He usually preferred to accomplish his mission in as direct a way as possible, brutal and unwavering violence being the solution to the pre-programmed goal in his mind.

This time, however, this target . . . things had to be handled differently. The girl was across the street, taking advantage of a special gymnasium designed and owned by millionaire Anthony Stark, unaware that she was being watched by a man that sat over 1,000 yards away. He rested atop a building, his rifle bearing down on the girl, seen perfectly through the gymnasium's windows.

Things had changed considerably, for the both of them, since he last saw his target. Had he known then what he knew now, he'd have possibly ended her life without a second thought. But, to his surprise, something held his finger from the trigger, a hesitation he'd never known in his current form staying his hand from dealing the deadly shot.

It was at that moment that she turned toward the window, her body suddenly grown still as she looked around her. Could she have somehow realized what was about to happen to her? After a moment of coiled fury, Priscilla Lyons relaxed once again, content that she was indeed alone. He sighed heavily as she went back to her workout, mentally kicking himself for being worried. Yes, the girl was an Avenger, but that didn't automatically make her superhuman.

Of course, she *was* superhuman now, he remembered. The Scourge focused his sight once more through the scope, the crosshairs falling directly on the head of the woman called Vagabond.

And then he pulled the trigger.

Marvel 2000 Proudly Presents

Issue #8

Turn Signal

*Plot by Chris Munn & Russ Anderson
Script by Chris Munn*

"Ah, please, gentlemen, I can't allow you to go any farther. Agent Crass is currently very busy, and he specifically asked not to be disturbed."

His protests going unheeded, Gerard Freemason continued to stutter and stammer as he followed behind the two men making their way through the administrative offices of the maximum-security prison known as the Vault. Being the on-duty security head, Freemason liked to feel as if he truly was in charge, that when he spoke others listened and obeyed his orders. In reality, the scrawny 47-year-old found things to be exactly the opposite, and the disregard for his status by the two unannounced visitors was making this realization even more difficult to swallow.

Hawkeye and Iron Man, two senior members of the Avengers, ignored the balding government official that shadowed them, their eyes scanning the names on the office doors as they stalked down the corridor. "This the one?" Hawkeye asked, pointing to the door that read WARDEN in gold lettering.

"Avengers, please, I could get *fired*," Freemason admitted futilely as Hawkeye, the current Chairman of the newly reinstated West Coast branch of the hero team, knocked twice on the oak door. To their total

lack of surprise, a dismissive 'go away' was their answer. "Guess we'll need to knock louder, Shellhead," the archer said with a smirk.

"Mr. Freemason," Iron Man began as he placed a steel hand on the smaller man's shoulder, gently pushing him away, "I would suggest you go back to your post. Things are fine, I assure you."

"Well, if you say so," Gerard agreed in defeat, and then he slowly began to make his way back down the hallway. Not a moment later, he heard a strange sound, followed by a flash of light and a crash. When he turned, he saw the door to his superior's office was completely gone, blown off of its hinges. Iron Man's hand was still outstretched with the palm turned out, a small whiff of smoke fading from where his repulsor blast had burst forth. Freemason ran all the way back to his post, not bothering to look back.

"How's it hanging, Agent Crass?" Hawkeye said as he and his armored companion strode into the office, where a slightly angered Commission agent sat behind a desk, "hope we ain't interrupting anything."

"You owe me a new door," was Warren Crass' only reply as he set down his pen and pushed his paperwork to the side of his desktop, "and you're lucky I don't bring every Guardsman in this facility down on your heads."

"I've taken Guardsmen down before," Iron Man commented, preferring to stand, while Hawkeye took a seat in a leather chair positioned directly in front of the Agent's desk, "so choose your threats more wisely next time."

"So how'd you get a cushy job like this, anyway?" Hawkeye asked as he kicked his feet up, resting his boots on the corner of the desk. "Gyrich get fired or something?"

"Henry Gyrich was murdered a few weeks ago," Crass answered, "during a break-out. Is there something I can help you two with, or is this strictly a social visit?"

"We want to know just what your association is with a madman named Midas," Iron Man replied, cutting to the chase, "a villain we encountered during our excursion into Mayfield, Washington . . . a place *you* asked us to investigate. Midas implied that he had us sent there on purpose, which shines a rather interesting light on you and the CSA."

"First Hammer and the Thunderbolts," Hawkeye chimed in, "and now this. You think we're stupid or something, man?"

"The request for super-human assistance in Mayfield came straight from SHIELD," Crass answered sharply, "and I made a judgment call, assuming that you people would be the best suited for the mission. X-Force is currently in shambles, we didn't want to include the UN and Excalibur, and your East Coast team is a train wreck in slow motion. The CSA asked Tony Stark to reinstate you West Coast Avengers, so I decided it was time we actually *used* you for something."

"Mr. Stark didn't rebuild the Avengers because the Commission asked him to," Iron Man interjected, a hint of anger in his tone of voice, "he did it because he felt it was necessary. The Avengers aren't here at the government's beck and call . . . too many lives can be lost that way."

"You stopped an alien invasion and defeated a big, bad super-villain," the agent said, shooting both heroes a look of irritation, "so I don't see what you have to complain about. Go back to your ranch or whatever it is you people call home, and the next time I need to know how high you can jump . . . I'll just call."

"Listen to me, you petty little man," Iron Man said as he leaned over the desk, his knuckles digging into

the cherry wood as he braced himself on his arms, "we're through. From this point onward, the Avengers have officially severed all ties with the CSA. You put us in danger by withholding information again, and *you'll* be the one we take down."

Finished with the talk, Iron Man turned on his heels and left the room, realizing that if he stayed his anger could possibly get the better of him. Hawkeye, however, lingered for a moment more. "You know something, Crassy?" he said while swinging his legs off the desk, prompting the Commission agent to sigh in frustration. "You really oughta move to a bigger office. Big shot like you needs a lot more room for his ego."

"Get out before I *throw* you out," Crass ordered through gritted teeth.

Hawkeye walked toward the door, but before he left he turned and shot the agent a wink and a smile. "I have a feeling you're gonna see us again real soon."

He had an uneasy feeling. Standing outside the building where his target had been sanctioned, the Scourge looked upon the shattered glass and bullet-riddled concrete with a sense that something was wrong, *off* somehow. He'd seen her go down after the first shot had been fired, but instead of the direct hit he'd aimed for, the bullet had instead only grazed her temple. She had moved at the last possible moment, whether by accident or by realization he didn't know. Before she'd even hit the ground he'd already begun firing again, the bullets coming this time in the form of a furious onslaught, spraying forth like a mini-gun in a wave of pure destruction. The façade of the building was annihilated, and the glass from the shattered bay windows crunched under his feet as he made his way inside.

Smoke hung in the air like a dense fog, forcing him to change his cybernetic perceptions from normal to night vision. While his information systems told him that nothing could have survived his attack, the part of him that was still human thought otherwise. His suspicions were proven true when he approached the spot where the heroine had fallen, finding her gone.

He turned his head to both sides frantically as he brought his pistol up to a defensive position. His infrared detected nothing, not a single trace of his target. With a sudden epiphany, the Scourge froze in his tracks. A second later, head and gun directed their sight straight up, just in time to see the girl's foot coming down at him.

She landed like a cat to his left, her foot having struck him squarely in the side of his head on her way down. "I don't know who you are," she commented while placing another kick, this one to his wrist, effectively disarming him as his pistol flew across the room, "but you picked the wrong chick to try and assassinate."

The Scourge said nothing as he blocked another kick with his forearm. Despite her bravado, he could tell that the girl was scared to death. Kick after kick was placed, each one blocked by the assassin's inhuman reflexes, and he was quickly growing irritated at the assault. Vagabond grunted as she threw her leg forward once again, but instead of blocking it, the Scourge *caught* it. Twisting his arm around the woman's calf, he decided to move from defense to offense. His hand shot out, the back of his fist connecting hard with the Avenger's jaw. As she toppled over, he followed his first blow with a second downward punch with the opposite fist. She was unconscious before she hit the floor.

Leaving the heroine where she lay, the killer slowly walked to another part of the room, his cybernetic sensors scanning the smoky area. After a brief moment of wandering, he reached down and picked up his pistol. "Of all the people I've killed over the past few months," he said to his unconscious opponent,

"you're probably the only one that'll give me pleasure."

Slowly, Vagabond began to stir back to consciousness, her eyes valiantly fluttering from her fight to return from oblivion. Standing over her, the Scourge lowered his pistol, aiming it at her face. "Justice is served."

The flat screen television that sat in the downtime room in Avengers Compound was on, spewing forth the ramblings of a Dennis Miller comedy special. On a normal night, this room would perhaps be filled with a collection of heroes that were taking a break from their mission . . . but on this night, only one occupant was in attendance, and the television was the last thing on his mind. Christopher Powell sat at the bar in the corner of the room, a lit cigarette resting between his fingers and a half-full cup of coffee on the counter in front of him.

"I didn't know you smoked," a voice said from the room's entrance. Matt Hawk waited for a reply, but Chris didn't even bother to turn around and acknowledge him. The Two-Gun Kid sighed and walked toward the bar, taking a seat next to his teammate. "Care if I get one of those there cigarettes off of you?"

"I *don't* smoke," Chris answered as he tossed the pack over to Matt, "but I thought it might help me get my mind off something."

"Ain't we all just a bunch of emotional wrecks?" Matt said with a slight laugh as he lit the cigarette. "But I got me a feelin' that this somethin' of yours is pretty bad, right?"

Chris turned his head, giving the other man a curious look. "How could you tell?"

"When the world catches up to us," he explained, his head lowered so that his eyes were completely hidden by the brim of his Stetson, "in those moments when we stop t' gather our wits and reload our guns . . . that's when it hits us. My Nancy, when she died of rubella a few years back . . . hell, son. I had that same look you got right now."

"That Exterminatrix girl, back in Mayfield," Powell began, "she said something to me that really hit hard. She thought her face was all scarred, but when I saw her she was . . . man, she was *beautiful*. Her father had lied to her, told her she was ugly, and she had no idea."

"Ah, I'm sorry," Matt offered confusedly, "but I don't think I follow."

"My dad was a lot the same way," Chris continued after taking a sip of his drink. "He was a cop . . . a dirty one. I caught him taking bribes from a scumbag drug lord named Phillipe Bazin. Found my mystic amulet on the same night . . . guess luck comes in twos, huh? But anyway, yeah, I hated him after that. And then he died."

"Oh, dang . . . I'm sorry."

"Don't be," Chris answered with a laugh, at the same time wiping the corner of his eyes with the sleeve of his shirt, "he faked his death, came 'back to life', and shacked up with my mom again. Just one more lie on top of all the others, I guess. That Oubliette chick, though . . . she made me realize that as a bad as my dad was, hers was even *worse*. But yeah, hey, anyway, I wanted to ask you something, man."

"Shore thing," Matt answered, somewhat relieved at the change of topic.

"You explained how Vags and Hawkeye got loose from those Hydra things," the youth asked, "but how

did *you*?"

Matt hesitated, the question taking him somewhat off guard. "Well, 'tween you and me," he finally answered, "I was sufferin' from the biggest hangover of my life. I guess the lack of fluid in my body dried that critter up, though I never thought I'd actually be happy about pukin' my guts all over the floor."

"You went on a mission while you were *drunk*?" Chris asked in disbelief. "Does Hawkeye know you did that?"

The Kid held up his hands defensively, an embarrassed look on his face as he spoke. "I wasn't drunk, kid . . . 'sides, Iron Man knew all about it. I may not've felt too good, but I was stone sober that whole time."

The two Avengers fell into an uncomfortable silence after Two-Gun's confession, Chris not really knowing what to say to the older cowboy. In an effort to change the subject, the two men turned in unison back toward the television, where a grimacing Dennis Miller stood alone on a stage.

"Now I don't want to get off on a rant here," the televised comedian began, "but we have become a culture of buck-passers, Winona-riding across ethical boundaries with impunity and then blaming everyone but ourselves when we get caught. These days there are more people pointing fingers than a Superman sighting over Beijing."

"What the hell is that guy talkin' about?" Matt asked in confusion.

Chris shrugged. "I have no freakin' idea," the 20-year-old answered, "but that's what makes it funny."

"Of course that's just my opinion," the talk show host finished, resulting in an even more confused look on the time-lost cowboy's face, "I could be wrong."

"Vengeance is served."

The three words hit the semi-conscious Vagabond like a freight train, shocking her back to the closest her muddled mind could come to full alertness. Her eyes widened in horror as she saw the gun barrel staring down at her from her position on the floor, and she did her best to brace herself for the inevitable death that was assuredly coming for her. To her puzzlement, however, the killing shot never came. The Scourge stood hesitant, the black sockets of his eyeless skull locked on the face of his target. He was feeling a strange confusion, much like the one he'd felt not long before on the rooftop.

"You're the Scourge," Priscilla choked out, her words coming out carefully so as not to shock the man into pulling the trigger, "aren't you?"

The question hung in the air, unanswered, for several long moments. "Yes," the assassin finally responded, "I am."

"But that's impossible," the girl said in disbelief, "Scourge Inc. was destroyed. I was *there* when it happened!"

"You were once a Scourge," the skull-faced killer stated, his gun still pointed directly at Lyons' face, "I know this. But that's not why I'm here to kill you."

Priscilla's eyes began to tear up, despite attempts to control her fear.

"You have a horrible secret," the Scourge continued, "one that has marked you for death."

Suddenly, the intimate moment was disturbed by the sound of glass being crushed underfoot. The Scourge cocked his head to the side and scowled as four police officers were now standing at the broken window, their guns drawn. "Put down the gun and step away from the girl!" one of the policemen commanded. "Don't make this any harder than it has to be!"

"No!" Vagabond screamed, "He'll kill you all!" As if on cue, the Scourge whipped his pistol to the side, and with four simple pulls of the trigger made the heroine's warning a very moot point.

"Bastard!" she exclaimed, as she pulled her legs to her chest. Using her attacker's momentary distraction to her advantage, the athlete kicked her legs upward. Her heels collided hard with the Scourge's chest, knocking him backward onto the floor. She then scrambled backward on her elbows, desperate to make her escape while she could. Only a few feet from a door that led to the building's stairwell, Vagabond ignored the assassin as he rose from the floor. She reached the door at the same moment he began to fire, the bullets sailing over her as she dove for the floor, sliding through the exit.

From the floor, she kicked her leg back at the open door, slamming it shut as even more bullets tore through the wall. Taking a chance, she stood and dove for the stairs, miraculously evading each random shot. Bounding up the steps as quickly as she could, Priscilla finally collapsed at the door to the fourth floor.

"Oh god, please, someone help me," she whispered while digging through her pockets. With a sigh of relief, she removed the Avengers Communicard that had been given her upon approval of membership in the team. It was time to call in some reinforcements.

Carol Danvers watched from the entrance to the Avengers' Ready Room, her gaze focused curiously on the young man that sat in front of the large computer system that was the room's trademark. Genis-Vell, the Cosmic Protector known universally as Captain Marvel, was deep in thought as he read through mission files from many years before. The war between the Kree, Genis' own race, and the Skrull had raged for eons until the intervention of the Earth heroes . . . but for the first time, the son of Mar-Vell was able to read the events in such detail that he could almost picture himself there.

"You knew my father," Genis said, his eyes never faltering from the computer screen, "didn't you, Ms. Danvers?"

Warbird gasped, as she was sure the young Kree had been unaware of her presence. Genis feigned a weak smile. "Cosmic awareness, remember?" he explained half-heartedly.

Taking the explanation with no further questioning, Danvers walked into the room. "Yes, I knew Mar-Vell. He and I were very close for a short time."

Captain Marvel turned his head toward the woman as she took a seat next to him. "What was he like?" he asked. Carol smiled, and if she hadn't known better she'd have sworn Genis had been crying.

"He was incredibly brave," Warbird replied, "and fiercely loyal to his people. The fact that he had been branded a traitor brought him much despair, but he never let it affect his mission to help people." She

hesitated, thinking back to her first days as Ms. Marvel. "He was my friend."

"Then I bet you're wondering," Genis said as he turned back to the monitor, "just how his son turned out the way he did."

"Genis," Danvers began hesitantly, "I need to ask you something."

"I already know your question," he replied coldly, "and I can't answer it."

Carol's brow wrinkled in frustration. "Rick Jones was bonded to you on the molecular level, Captain. One touch of those Nega Bands on your wrists can bring him here, back to Earth. I'd like to have a chat with him, if its not too much trouble."

He again turned his head back toward his teammate, but this time his face was contorted into a look of just-barely suppressed rage. "You don't want to press this subject, Ms. Danvers," he warned through gritted teeth, "because I know what happens to you in the future."

Before Carol could respond to the cryptic warning (or was it a threat?), the distress signal in front of her began buzzing with life. "This is Warbird," she answered, "Captain Marvel and I are here."

"It's Vagabond," the voice on the other end said in a hushed yet desperate tone, "please, I need help. Somebody's here and they're trying to kill me and . . . and I don't think I can fight them off on my own."

"Stay there, Vags," Danvers said, standing from her seat, "I'm triangulating your position now, and we'll be there as soon as possible."

Moving from the console toward the door, Carol allowed one last look back at the characteristically indifferent Captain Marvel. "This discussion isn't over, Genis," she said as he finally acknowledged the emergency by turning off the monitor, "not by a long shot."

The Scourge stalked silently through the darkened building, having tracked his prey to the fourth floor after her daring escape. Maneuvering between large boxes, crates, and draped articles of clothing; he realized that the completion of his mission would be taking place in a storage warehouse, possibly one belonging to a shop of some kind. He was mentally kicking himself for wasting the opportunity he had to finish the kill, but something inside him had given him pause . . . and he didn't care much for being indecisive. At first he thought the connection between them came from the girl's own time as a "Scourge" of sorts, an employee of the defunct Scourge Inc. that the geriatric hero known as the Angel had implemented a few years before. But no, that didn't ring true to him. He knew why he felt an affinity toward Priscilla Lyons . . . it was through a third party, and it seemed that everything in his life now revolved around this singular individual.

"You just don't give up, do you?" Vagabond asked, announcing herself as she emerged from behind a large crate, again using her fighting prowess to take the antagonist by surprise. Again, the Scourge's weapon was kicked out of his grasp, and he had no time to stop the sharp jabs from her fist that connected squarely with his masked face.

"I'm not afraid of you, you madman," she declared, keeping on the offensive without allowing the Scourge a moment to breathe or collect his thoughts, "and I don't care what you think you know about me. You're not going to kill me!"

With that last affirmation, Priscilla executed a stunning roundhouse kick to the side of the man's head, sending him crashing to the ground. He lay there for several moments before rolling onto his back, the heroine poised over him like a bird of prey. "That Super Soldier Serum running through your veins," the Scourge taunted, "really gives you an edge, doesn't it?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Vagabond replied, accentuating the statement with a kick to her attacker's ribs.

"Oh, I know you *do*," he continued, his skull face twisting into a strange sort of smile, "because I was there when you sold your soul to the devil incarnate. I know about it all, 'Avenger' . . . and I know what you're *going to do*."

Priscilla paused, not knowing what to make of the Scourge's confession. "Who are you?" she whispered, not expecting a truthful answer.

"I thought that would've been fairly obvious by now," he replied. Vagabond gasped as the skull features began to fade and distort, slowly morphing into a visage that she knew all too well. Techno, the former Thunderbolt and Master of Evil grinned back at her for a split second before the features snapped back into their default skull appearance. The girl couldn't say a word, as any attempt at sound simply came out as a choked stutter. She began to back away, not able to face up to the sins that the Scourge had purposely forced her to face.

"Now, not that I don't enjoy a bit of reminiscing every once in a while," he said as he raised his arm, his cybernetic appendage transforming into a high-tech weapon, "but it's time to say goodbye."

Suddenly, before the murderer could execute his victim, the outside wall of the building exploded with a fury the likes of which neither individual had ever seen. Through the smoke and debris, four Avengers flew inside, all of them immediately spotting both their teammate and her assailant. "Two-Gun, Darkhawk," Warbird commanded as she and Captain Marvel set the two non-flying Avengers onto the floor, "check on Vagabond. Marvel and I will see about our skull-faced friend here."

"Why is it you people always seem to interrupt me at the most inopportune times?" the Scourge asked rhetorically as he blasted away with his arm canon, the two Avengers barely managing to evade the destructive beam. Warbird and the Captain returned fire in their own ways, blasting forth cosmic energy bolts at the killer. Jumping backward, Techno easily evaded the blasts, one of which unintentionally creating a large hole in the ceiling.

"Not to be rude," the former Fixer said as his cyborg body twisted and changed, his legs becoming two large jet thrusters, "but I've just decided that I have bigger fish to fry elsewhere." Before any of the Avengers could stop him, the Scourge exploded through the hole in the roof, rocketing into the air at an incredible speed.

Immediately after, both Warbird and Captain Marvel emerged from the building, but both quickly realized that the unknown villain had both speed and distance on his side. Returning to the damaged building, Warbird looked worriedly at the shaken and bruised Vagabond.

"Who was that guy, Vags?" Darkhawk asked as he put his arms around her, helping her walk toward the rest of the team.

She hesitated for a moment, taking long looks at each of her teammates. "I have no idea who he was," she finally replied, hating herself more with each word she uttered.

Hours later, Vagabond sat alone in her room at Avengers Compound, having been "put to bed" as Two-Gun had affectionately called it. The events of the night kept swimming through her mind, the true face of the Scourge causing her to grow increasingly depressed at the slightest recollection. Then the phone rang, causing her to jump in surprise. Though she didn't want to answer, to talk to *anybody*, the phone continued to ring and ring and ring.

"Hello?" she answered, finally deciding to pick up.

"Guten abend," the raspy voice on the other end of the line replied.

"What are you doing?" Priscilla asked hysterically. "You can't just call here like this!"

"No need to be upset, my dear," the man told her, "I've taken the necessary precautions. According to the Avengers logs, this phone call will have never existed."

She said nothing in return.

"I was simply calling to make sure everything was going according to schedule," the voice continued, "to make sure that my investment was paying off."

"You know it is," she whispered, her voice cracking against her strongest wishes.

"Good," the caller said, satisfied, "I will contact you again. The time table has been pushed up. Ich werde Ihnen zuschauen."

The click of the receiver told her that he had hung up, cutting off any reply she might have given. Techno had said that she'd sold her soul to the devil for the Super Soldier Serum that coursed through her body, giving her what she needed to finally become the hero she'd always wanted to be. For the first time, she realized just how accurate his statement really was . . . for if any man could be called the devil, Baron Helmut Zemo was most definitely he.

THE END

Next Issue: Russ is back for another 4-issue stint (thank god, no more late issues!) that brings forth the most menacing threat ever . . . MOOMBA! Be very afraid . . .

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Agent Crass sent the Avengers to apprehend Goliath in **Thunderbolts #16-18**.
- Techno was revealed to be the Scourge in **Thunderbolts #20**.
- Henry Gyrich was in fact *not* murdered, as he's currently in the custody of SHIELD for vigilante actions against superhumans, seen in various issues of **X-Force**. A Life Model Decoy of Gyrich was put in charge of the Vault by the Commission in order to silence any suspicions of a rogue agent, but it was destroyed by the Scourge in **Thunderbolts #20**.

- The last known whereabouts of Rick Jones can be seen in **Captain Marvel # 18**.
- Vagabond served as one of the many Scourge agents in Marvel's first **US Agent** mini-series.

"Oh, it's *cute!*"

Chris made a face as Carol Danvers, his teammate and friend, popped open the tiny plastic bubble and let its contents fall out into her hand. It was a tiny wooden figurine, crudely sculpted and vaguely man-shaped. The flat face on its elongated head scowled up at her.

"Cute?" Chris asked.

"Well, yeah," Carol replied, tilting her head at the shelf that sat against one wall of Chris's bungalow. "Don't you think so? That's why you've got them all, right?"

The shelf was indeed crowded with what must have been more than a hundred of the tiny wooden figurines, each of them different from the rest either because of the differing black markings on their torsos or the shapes of their heads and limbs. You had to look closely to tell them apart.

"Well, I mean... no. My Little Pony is 'cute'. The Powerpuff Girls are 'cute'. Moombas are 'cool'. Sometimes they're 'sassy'. There have been moments I've thought they were even 'study'. But never 'cute'."

Carol rolled her eyes and tossed him the figurine. "I've never even heard of these things. Where do you get them?"

"EBay mostly," Chris shrugged, catching it easily. "You're supposed to get them out of those quarter vending machines-that's where I got this one-but that's always a crapshoot, because you don't know which figure you're going to get."

"How many are there?"

"A few hundred, I think. I've only got 132 of them." He set the figure he'd just caught down on the shelf. "Sorry, 133."

"It felt like real wood."

"It is, or that's what they say anyway. That's the gimmick. They're supposed to be these African tribal wood spirits, and each one has a different backstory and name and personality. It's really very complex..."

"I'm sure." Chris was dismayed to see that the smirk hadn't left Carol's face yet. "They're still cute, though."

"So you're saying that if I have any more girls in the bungalow, it might be a good idea to tell them these are for my little brother."

"Might be," she agreed, looking at her watch. "C'mon. We'd better get going if we don't want to miss the first inning."

Chris gave the shelf one more look, then grabbed a baseball cap off a nearby chair and shoved it on his head as the two of them started for the door. "Tell you what," he said with a grin, holding the door for her, then following her out. There was a blue Mustang convertible idling on the curbside pavement at the end of his walk. Carol's car.

"Tell me what?"

"You don't make fun of my toys, and I won't remind you that you only asked me to the game today because Hawkeye stood you up."

She paused, her eyes narrowing, and for a second Chris thought he'd made her mad, but then she grinned.

"Deal," she said. "Now get in the car before I forget I'm a lady."

Marvel 2000 Proudly Presents

Issue #9

TOTEMS
Part 1

Plot by Chris Munn & Russ Anderson
Script by Russ Anderson

"This is takin' things a little far, don't ya think?"

Priscilla Lyons looked up from the steaming steel cauldron full of potato soup, and met a familiar pair of blue-grey eyes on the other side of the table. He was a man of average height, with dirty blonde hair that was just sloppy enough to be fashionable, wearing baggy Levi's and a long-sleeve cotton shirt, and if not for the eyes and the foghorn of a tanline across the top of his forehead, Priscilla probably wouldn't have even recognized him.

"Matt?" she asked. "Where's your hat? Where are your guns?"

The man who, in another time and place, had been renowned as the Two-Gun Kid, chuckled and ran a hand across his mop of hair. "Well, Clint says that carryin' mah guns off-duty is a no-no, and you and Carol've been riding me about dressin' more modern-like, so..."

"You look nice," she said.

"Thanks."

"But what're you doing here?"

"Ah was about to ask you the same thing," Matt replied. Someone cleared their throat noisily to his left, so he stepped aside and let the next man in line—a rough-and-tumble looking fellow with a too-long blonde beard, wearing an LA Lakers jersey that had seen better days and a pair of cut-off shorts that had been patched with duct tape—move forward. Priscilla ladled some of the soup into his bowl.

"Just doing some good in my off-time," Priscilla said lightly, moving on to the next person. The lunchline in the shelter was long today, and she wondered briefly how long Matt had to stand in line in order to make that entrance. "If you want to help, you're welcome to grab an apron and—"

"Actually," he said, looking up and down the line, "I was hoping you could take a quick break so we could

talk."

She met his eyes, her ladle hovering uncertainly over the soup bowl and the man she'd been about to serve visibly wondering if he should stick his bowl underneath it to catch the soup before it spilled.

"You been here twelve hours," he said softly. "Fifteen minutes ain't gonna make or break the place."

She sighed, and looked down the line. Then she nodded at one of the other girls, who stepped up to take her place as she whipped her apron off.

"Wait by the door," she said to Matt. "I'll be out in five minutes."

Genis-Vell, son of the Kree cosmic protector Mar-Vell, crossed his legs in what Earth men called the lotus position, and allowed Saturn's gravity to take him. He hurtled through the void, bound to the same orbital plane that had once held the moon Titan.

Titan was Genis's birthplace, home to his mother and her people, who had loved his father as one of their own. Though it had never felt any more like home to him than any other place, still he felt bonded to Titan through his dead parents.

And Genis... well, Genis had tried to sever that bond by shunting Titan whole into another dimension, into the Negative Zone.

There had been more to it, of course. Some days, Genis could even fool himself into believing that he had done it to save Titan from the machinations of Thanos and the Intelligence Supreme, but even on those days, he had to admit that it had been a very roundabout way of doing it.

No, he had removed Titan from local space out of fear, he realized—fear that he could never be more than his father's pale reflection so long as those who had loved Mar-Vell were around to remind him how great the man was. Even Rick Jones, who Genis had been molecularly bonded to, had constantly rubbed Genis's nose in that fact. Rick surely hadn't known how much it hurt, but that didn't make it any easier to put up with.

He'd thought shunting Rick into the Negative Zone along with Titan would sever the link between the two of them, and for a time that seemed to work, but then Rick had talked to him during the H'ythra affair. Hell, Rick had saved him from the H'ythra Queen, and now Genis wondered. If he tapped the Nega Bands on his wrists together, would Rick appear in his place and he in Rick's? Would Rick find himself floating in this void, helpless to survive, while Genis found himself stuck on a planet full of Eternals who were, in all likelihood, very, very angry with him?

He didn't know. He had been afraid to try, and Rick hadn't talked to him since the H'ythra affair. But Genis felt... awake now, for the first time since the Intelligence Supreme had made him doubt himself. He couldn't go on the way he had been. He needed advice, he needed someone to tell him what to do. The Avengers were no help—none of them trusted him anyway, least of all Iron Man, and he couldn't exactly say that he blamed them. Even the extensive files the team maintained on his father hadn't shown him what he should do—they'd only reinforced that fact that he *had* done something wrong.

No, the only one he could talk to was Rick. If he could only make Rick hear him.

Far above the rings of Saturn, disrupted and blurred over these last months by tidal forces brought about

by the disappearance of Titan, Genis-Vell–Captain Marvel–closed his eyes and sent a name out into the void.

Rick... Rick...

"Didn't expect to find you here."

From his seat in front of the large monitor, Hawkeye grumbled something impolite. Iron Man decided, as he stepped into the room, that he'd just pretend that his audio receptors hadn't picked it up.

"Weren't you and Carol going to the Dodgers game?"

"Were," Hawkeye clarified as Iron Man reached the console and looked over his shoulder. "Operative word: were. I had a brainstorm."

"One that couldn't wait until after the game?"

"Yeah, it actually probably could have." Hawkeye leaned forward, put his elbows on the console, and drywashed his face. "Chris–Darkhawk–went with her though, so the extra ticket didn't go to waste. What are you doing in town?"

"I wanted to check in on the rebuilding of that gymnasium the Scourge shot up last week. Do we have any more clues as to why he was trying to kill Vagabond?"

"Nope." Hawkeye shook his head. "We're gonna have to find out what's going on with this guy soon, though, Shellhead. Historically speaking, the Scourge is a guy with a gun and a mask, period. But according to Carol, he turned his legs into freaking rockets, and just about took Vags in a face-to-face before that, and I don't believe for a second it's a coincidence that he hits us right after Crass tells us about his little massacre at the Vault. There's too much we don't know, damnit, and I'm not just talking about psychotic supervillain-killers."

Iron Man studied the back of his friend's head for a couple of seconds, then returned his eyes to the console. "What are you working on?"

"You weren't here for this," Hawkeye said, pecking clumsily at the keyboard until a still image from one of the compound's security cameras appeared on the screen. They were looking at the facility's only indoor combat training room. All of the Avengers West Coast, minus Iron Man, were arrayed on one side of the screen facing a floating figure in a long, fluttering white cloak. Hawkeye and the Two-Gun Kid had their weapons drawn, while the rest were visibly hanging back.

"This Sayge guy shows up, teleports right in past our defenses, and starts making with the cryptic prophecies."

"As I recall," Iron Man said, choosing his words carefully, "Two-Gun didn't take it well."

Hawkeye bristled. "Can you blame him? This Sayge guy tried to tell us that Matt isn't really who he says he is, when we *know* he's Matt Hawk. The guy's been through a lot, Tony, cut him some slack."

Iron Man briefly considered pointing out that trying to gun down this Sayge character on Avengers property—regardless of whether he was successful or not—constituted something a little more worrisome

than 'he's been through a lot', but held his tongue. He hadn't told Hawkeye about how he'd found Two-Gun drinking and firing his guns into the air on the compound last week yet, and he thought maybe that had been a major oversight on his part. Still, this probably wasn't the time...

"Anyway," Hawkeye said, drawing a rectangle around Sayge with the mouse and zooming in on the figure, "something Sayge said came back to me this morning, and I wanted to look into it. He gave us the standard spiel—'you are about to face a terrible threat'—but he gave us some details too, and they slipped my mind until I was mulling over this whole Scourge thing."

He pressed a key, and the video began to run.

"There will be three harbingers," Sayge said. "Three destructive messengers—the parasite, the revived one, and the caretaker of ages—and then... the end of everything."

Inside the armor, Tony Stark scowled. "Why can't these people ever just come out and say what they want to say?"

"Heard that." Hawkeye paused the recording and leaned back in his chair. "But here's the thing: Not a week after this happened, we get the call to help out with the Hy'thra. Days after we get done with *that*, Vagabond is fighting for her life against the Scourge..."

"Who's died more times than your average X-Man," Iron Man agreed. "I think I see what you're saying, though the Hy'thra were more symbiotes than parasites..."

Hawkeye flapped a hand. "Whatever. This Sayge guy wouldn't be the only one who missed that day in Biology class."

"So what are you saying? You think we should expect a visit from a 'caretaker of the ages' now?"

"Maybe." Hawkeye looked around at the other man. "Who do you think he means? Kang?"

"That's the most likely culprit, but Kang isn't much of a caretaker. Maybe his better ha—"

A buzzer sounded on the control panel beneath the monitor, and both men swiveled toward it. That was the intruder alarm.

"The hell...?" Hawkeye spun his chair back around and punched at the keyboard.

Iron Man leaned over his shoulder. "Are we under attack?"

"I don't know. Whatever it is, it was activated manually. Hold on."

The close-up image of Sayge vanished and was replaced with a familiar face, plump and boyish above a meticulously knotted bowtie. Juan was the head of the compound's staff, and while he wasn't as unflappable as the much-missed Jarvis, still the frantic wide eyes and glistening sweat on his face were uncharacteristic. He was somewhere on the grounds, at one of the field com stations.

"Sirs!" he cried, relief joining the sweat on his face.

"What's going on, Juan?" Hawkeye asked, keeping his voice calm. "Did somebody breach the

perimeter?"

"Not yet, sir," he replied.

Hawkeye blinked. "Well... what's going on, then? Why did you punch the alarm?"

Juan looked incredibly distressed and afraid as he glanced at something over his shoulder. "I... I think you'd better come take a look, sir. I don't... I don't think I can describe it."

Hawkeye heard the soft hum of bootjets behind him, and wasn't surprised when he turned around to find that Iron Man had already left. "We'll be right there," he said, and sprang out of his seat, snatching his bow off the console before following Shellhead out the door.

"Nice part of town," Matt said, eyeing the other people on the street as he and Priscilla walked down the sidewalk together. Young men with anger in their eyes and weapons hidden in their clothes watched him back. Down the block, an old man was vomiting into the gutter while the people around him either passed by or stared with only mild interest. Nobody moved to help him.

Priscilla grunted noncommittally, her own eyes on her feet.

Matt looked at her, then sighed and patted her shoulder. "See, this is what I'm talkin' about. This is why I been worried about you."

"What?" she snapped. "Because I'm spending my off-time working in a soup kitchen? What's wrong with that?"

"Not a thing," he replied, putting his hands up. "Not a thing, little lady. It's just... you haven't been yerself since that Scourge business, and I'm startin' to think these do-good all-nighters have something to do with it."

"He almost *killed* me, Matt. Big-time gunslinger like you, I'm sure you've been in situations like that more times than you can count, but when he tossed me down on that mat, and then when he chased me upstairs... he had me dead to rights both times. That's as close to the grave as I've ever been." She looked away, crossing her arms over her chest. "So excuse me if I need to find some way to work off the chill."

Matt mulled this over for a moment, his thumb poking out and rising to push up the brim of a hat that wasn't there. He realized what he was doing before he completed the movement and dropped his hand, sighing.

"Those are pretty words," he said. "But I ain't a child, Priscilla. I know the difference between altruism and guilt."

She stopped in her tracks and rounded on him. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

She was no taller than he was, but she had broad shoulders for a woman and radiated physical power that was intimidating to people twice her size. Matt didn't flinch as she leaned in close to him, just squinted right back into her eyes.

"What it means," he said softly, "is that guilt, loss, and me are old friends. I watched my wife die givin'

birth to our daughter, and then I watched my daughter die from some stupid little disease that you all haven't given a second thought to for damn near a hundred years. You know I tried to get a message to Hawkeye? Bought a safety deposit box, left him a note and gave directions so's it'd be delivered to him. Kind of like a time capsule. I *begged* him to get the medicine back to me somehow. Turns out the entire bank was blown up in a botched midnight robbery two years later. And by then, it was too late.

"I don't know why that fella was after you, Pris, but I get the feelin' that maybe you think you deserve it just a little bit." He put up his hands, warding off her protests before they could be voiced. "You got secrets, and that's fine. We all got 'em, and we all live with 'em. All I'm sayin' is you gotta stop wearing it on your sleeve like this, 'cause as soon as Hawkeye realizes..."

"He won't let me off the hook until he finds out what the problem is," Priscilla said. She'd backed off, and her voice was low, troubled. Matt let her have her space and her time. He glanced down the street and saw that a police officer had shown up and helped the vomiting derelict out of the gutter. The man was delirious though, and tried to wrench his arm free, crying out obscenities at the officer. People were stopping to watch now, and many of them were joining their own voices with the derelict's, bad-mouthing the cop.

"Cryin' out loud," Matt sighed as the officer's partner got out of the cruiser to help. "Some things never change, I guess. No respect for the law..."

"... says the frontier lawyer moonlighting as a masked gunfighter," Vagabond muttered, just loud enough for him to hear. He was just about to bid her 'so long'—even a career optimist like himself could recognize a lost cause when he saw it—when he heard the chanting.

"What's that?" Priscilla said, and Matt put up a hand, shushing her. Other people on the street were taking notice now, looking around in confusion as the noise, which had no visible source, continued to escalate. Two syllables, repeated over and over again.

"moom-ba! Moom-ba! Moom-BA! MOOM-BA!"

A flood of civilians rounded the corner down near the police officers and the derelict, stampeding down the sidewalk. One of the officers was jostled, and he and the derelict spilled into the street. Tires squealed. A shiny new car slammed on its brakes as it bore down on the two.

Matt was running before he'd finished processing all this, legs and arms pumping, knowing there was no way he was going to reach them, but knowing he had to try. A flash of movement passed by on his right, thumped off the hood of a moving car, and tackled both of the falling men, throwing them back onto the sidewalk just as the car that had been barreling at them screeched to a halt in the space they'd occupied. There was a crash as a van that had been trailing a little too closely smashed into the car, but nobody was hurt.

Vagabond picked herself up off the sidewalk, helping the cop and the derelict to their feet. Matt's eyes slid over her, amazed again at her speed and strength, and moved naturally to the nearby corner, where the terror that had driven all those people down the street had finally appeared.

"MOOM-BA! MOOM-BA! MOOM-BA!"

"Oh Lordy," Two-Gun breathed.

"This is the place?" Leena asked, looking uncertainly through the cab window at the simple iron and brick

gates.

The cabbie snapped his bubblegum—he'd been snapping it for the entire drive, and he seemed incapable of shutting his mouth when he did it—and pointed at the massive wrought iron **A** at the top of the gate. "That's the place, miss. Avengers West."

She clutched the ragged, leatherbound volume that had brought her to this place tightly to her chest, and wished that she'd thought this out more fully. "There... there's no buzzer. How do I let them know I'm here?"

The cabbie squinted at her over the seat, and for a few seconds, the agitated snapping of his gum was the only sound in the cab. "I got no idea, miss," he said at last, grinning amiably. "Mebbe you could call the Enquirer. They seem ta know everything goes on in there."

Leena gave a short, uninspired laugh. Then she paid the man and got out of the cab. As it sped away, she cautiously approached the gate.

She wondered again if she should have come here. The diary was heavy in her hands, and its contents, she knew, might hold the key to stopping a terrible menace. Or it might just be loaded with the incoherent ramblings of a senile old man. She didn't really believe the latter, of course, but the possibility made her feel a little better.

She was two feet away from the gate when chrome pillars sprang out of the sod on either side of the driveway. A red laser beam sprang to life between them and she stopped just short of passing through it.

"Welcome to the headquarters compound of the Avengers West Coast," a pleasant female voice that put Leena in mind of her third-grade teacher said from the pillars. "A compound employee is currently on his, her, or its way to greet you. Please be prepared to state your full legal name, costumed alias (if any), and business. If you are a wanted criminal, terrorist, or vigilante, wishing to infiltrate the compound and/or engage the Avengers in open battle, please be advised that the full and potentially lethal power of the compound's defenses *may* be brought to bear against you, in addition to the abilities of those Avengers present.

"Further, you are advised not to cross the beam before the arrival of the aforementioned compound employee, as you will be forcibly restrained."

Leena frowned and looked back over her shoulder, flipping the old book over and over in her hands. She didn't have *time* for this. She probably should have just called ahead, but she was afraid no one would take her seriously unless they saw the book. Hell, *she* hadn't even taken it seriously until the signs started piling up on each other.

She cocked her head, listening. The road in front of the compound entrance wasn't a busy one, so there wasn't much to hear besides the ambient noise of any LA suburb—a lawnmower running somewhere nearby, a nearly-inaudible growl that might have been a plane passing overhead, the distant roar of traffic from a nearby freeway. But now there was something else. A tiny sound that may have been high-pitched chanting.

It was coming from inside the compound. She leaned as close as she dared to the glittering line of the laser, straining to hear.

"*Moomba! MoomBA! MOOM-BA!*"

Leena wasn't aware she'd dropped the book until she heard it *thump* to the pavement at her feet. Startled,

she bent to pick it up, not thinking, and the crown of her head passed right through the laser.

Steel tentacles sprang from the grass on either side of the driveway, snaking around her arms and legs. She cried out in surprise, and inadvertently sucked in a lungful of the green, odorless gas spraying from the tentacles' joints. She slumped, barely conscious as they drew her gently to one side of the driveway and held her there.

Her body had been sedated, but there was enough consciousness left to feel despair as she caught sight of the line of figures cresting the rise at the top of the Avengers' driveway.

She was too late, she thought. And then she went to sleep.

"Now there's something you don't see every day."

Iron Man grunted in reply. Whether he was agreeing or just expressing his disbelief, Hawkeye wasn't sure.

Marching toward the two men across the southern courtyard of the compound was a platoon of tiny wooden figurines, all of them carved into crudely man-like shapes. As they marched in perfect lock-step, they were chanting a cadence of *"Moom-Ba! Moom-Ba!"*

For the first time in recent memory, both men were completely stumped as to how to handle the situation.

"They're not hurting anything," Hawkeye pointed out.

"Are you suggesting we just let them march off the compound like... like that?"

"Well..." Hawkeye shrugged, suddenly very uncomfortable with the situation. "They... they're kind of cute, aren't they? It's like telling the Smurfs they can't take a walk."

Iron Man looked at him in disbelief, and Hawkeye threw up his hands. "Okay, okay! Just... go see if you can reason with them." Iron Man moved off to do as he was told, and Hawkeye waved a hand at the compound's staff, almost every member of which was gathered nearby in mixed terror and fascination. "Juan! C'mere for a minute."

Juan approached slowly and carefully, keeping his eyes on the little wooden men. Hawkeye sighed inwardly—somehow he doubted Jarvis would have come undone over a bunch of action figures coming to life.

"Y—Yes, sir."

"Do you have any idea where they came from?"

"Lucy—she's part of the cleaning staff for the bungalows, sir—she says that they came out of Darkhawk's bungalow."

Hawkeye blinked. "They just... got up and walked out of his bungalow?"

"That's what she says."

Hawkeye looked over at Iron Man, who was shouting "Hello! Excuse me!" in vain as the toys simply marched around his feet. Clint sighed and reached for his ID card.

"I hope those two aren't too into the game yet..."

"Do you have a death wish?"

"What?" Chris asked, adjusting his Mets cap. "You don't mean this thing?"

Carol drummed her fingers on the steering wheel, creeping up a little bit as the line of cars waiting to get into the stadium parking lot inched forward. "You live in LA now, Chris. I didn't think anybody even liked the Mets in NYC, but they sure don't like them here."

Chris rolled his eyes, apparently oblivious to the two broad-shouldered men passing by on the sidewalk and glaring at the top of his head. "Lady, I'm from New York, the US capital of unwarranted hostility, and even we don't get worked up if somebody wears an Angels cap to a New York game."

Carol shook her head. "Your funeral."

"Besides, I've got you to protect me."

She laughed and took her hands off the steering wheel long enough to slap them to her heart. "Oh! My *hero!*"

"Hey, if we ever get, like, Squirrel Girl on the team, I'll be happy to play knight in shining armor, but as long as I'm hanging with a woman who can clean and press a tank, I'm gonna have to live with being the damsel." They both fell silent as the car crept forward a little more, then Chris said, "So you never told me why I got to tag along today. What happened to Hawkeye?"

Carol shrugged. "Team leader stuff. He had some Two-Gun business to deal with."

Chris frowned. "And that doesn't piss you off?"

"Why should it?"

"Well... I mean, you guys had a date, right?"

Carol shrugged. "I wouldn't call it a date... I got the tickets from my agent, and I know Clint loves baseball. It's not like we were going out for dinner afterward."

"Really?" Carol nodded. "So you two aren't...?" He trailed off, wagging his eyebrows up and down suggestively.

Carol's mouth dropped open. "Is that what you think?"

Chris raised his hands in surrender. "Hey, I heard it from Two-Gun."

"You what?" Carol rolled her eyes. "God, you people gossip worse than a knitting circle. No, okay? For the record, Hawkeye and I are not..." She wagged her eyebrows. "I don't date co-workers."

"So I guess that means you're not buying the hot dogs today, huh?"

She grinned. "Keep it up, you—"

Traffic, which had already been crawling, came to a jarring halt. Carol hit the brakes to avoid hitting the Passat in front of her, and cursed as they felt the car behind thump into her rear bumper.

"Oh, I don't *believe* this!" she snarled, slapping the steering wheel. She spun around, waving a fist at the guy behind her. "Get off your cellphone and *drive*, you inattentive yuppie jerk!"

But the driver wasn't looking at her. He was staring ahead of them, at the stadium. Carol turned back to follow his line of sight, and heard Chris gasp from the seat beside her.

Blocking the road was an eighty-foot tall colossus. Carol spent two seconds wondering who had put a statue in the middle of the freaking highway, when the statue—which looked like it was made of wood, now that she thought about it—turned its flattened face up to the sky and roared.

Windshields shattered all around, including Carol's own. She slapped her hands to her head and fumbled for the door handle, stumbling out into the street, dimly aware that Chris was doing the same. She stepped on something small, something that squirmed beneath her feet, and she fell back into the car with a startled cry.

Streaming between and under the cars was a river of small wooden figurines, all of them heading for the giant creature blocking the road. The ones she'd stepped on clambered back to their feet, shook their little wooden heads, then started off again, some of them pausing only long enough to shake tiny fists at her.

"Oh my god," Chris said from the other side of the car. He was still standing in the road, staring down at his feet. "Carol, they're—"

I HAVE RETURNED, EARTHMEN! the colossus bellowed. I HAVE RETURNED TO CLAIM THAT WHICH WAS STOLEN FROM ME!

YOU'RE INDEPENDENCE IS OVER! YOU NOW BELONG BODY AND SOUL TO... MOOMBA!

In the stunned silence that followed, Carol and Chris shared a look across the car. With a sigh, Chris reached for the black amulet under his shirt.

"Hope somebody remembered to bring an axe..."

TO BE CONTINUED

Next Issue: Russ is back for another 4-issue stint (thank god, no more late issues!) that brings forth the most menacing threat ever . . . MOOMBA! Be very afraid . . .

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- The Scourge's attempt on Vagabond's life occurred last issue, as did Iron Man and Hawkeye's visit to Agent Crass. (See what happens when you miss an issue?)
- Captain Marvel shunted Titan into the Negative Zone in M2K's **Captain Marvel #18**.
- The team's confrontation with Sayge happened in issue #4.

The first thing Lena Myers saw when she woke up was a pair of striking blue eyes looking back at her from behind a golden faceplate. She was still pretty groggy from the gas, so instead of flinching in surprise or asking where she was, she just kind of smiled dreamily and asked the eyes if she could see the face they were attached to.

"I'm afraid not, Miss Myers," Iron Man replied, his voice all business. "How do you feel?"

She shrugged and, still smiling, looked around. She was still outside the front gate of the Avengers West Coast compound, though she was mildly happy to see that the metal tentacles had let her go. She was currently propped up against a tree. Iron Man was leaning over her while a group of well-dressed people she guessed were the compound's cleaning staff stood nearby. Lena shared her smile with all of them . . . and then blinked.

"How did you know my name?" she asked.

Iron Man's eyes were apologetic, though his faceplate of course remained expressionless. His arm came into view, holding the strap of her purse. "I took a look at your ID while you were out. Sorry about the gas, but that's why we warn visitors not to trip the laser."

"The lase---?" Lena shook her head, her pink mop of hair flopping with the motion. "The book! Where's my book?"

"Right here," a new voice said, and the Avengers' Chairman, Hawkeye, appeared over Iron Man's right shoulder. He was holding a battered, leather-bound volume, which he snapped closed and handed back to her. "Was this really written by Frank Myers?"

Lena nodded as she took the book from him. "Yes! Yes, he was my grandfather . . ."

Iron Man glanced at Hawkeye. "Frank Myers?"

"He was an African explorer in the fifties," the archer explained. "There were a whole bunch of cheap adventure novels written about him."

"Nobody else seems to remember him," Lena said, getting her hands under her and starting to stand.

"Yeah?" Hawkeye shrugged. "I grew up in an orphanage, and the library was about the only good thing about the place. I think I must have read every single one of your grandpa's books."

Most of his attention was directed down the street that ran in front of the compound, and his disquiet was mirrored on the faces of the cleaning staff. For the first time, Lena wondered how her breaking in rated the presence of two Avengers and what she could only guess was the entire crew.

"So what brings you here, Miss Myers? I assume you weren't actually trying to break in . . ." That was Iron Man that time. He seemed distracted as well, like he was ready to fly off the second he determined this discussion wasn't immediately important.

"This book is a journal," she said, leaning against the tree and putting one hand to her head. "It tells about a giant alien creature that took over the world for a couple of days back in the fifties. You don't read about it in history books because the alien made everybody forget about it when he was driven off, but grandpa remembered because he had already written it down in his journal."

"A giant alien," Iron Man said doubtfully, "who took over the world." His eyes were glazing over. He'd

already pegged her as a kook or a prankster. She could hear his bootjets cycling up.

"Wait! I know how that sounds, but you've got to listen to me! Moomba is coming back! He may be here already!"

Everybody within earshot froze. Slowly and in unison, the two active Avengers turned to fully face her. Hawkeye was the first to find his voice.

"Did you say 'Moomba'?"

Marvel 2000 Proudly Presents

Issue #10

TOTEMS
Part 2

Plot by Chris Munn & Russ Anderson
Script by Russ Anderson

There were thousands of them, maybe tens of thousands, swarming down the sidewalk in downtown LA. A wave of tiny wooden figurines, they moved quickly and they were utterly unstoppable. For the most part, they ignored the pedestrians and the vehicles, but if any tried to stop them, they found themselves quickly buried beneath the wooden throng.

This, Trevor decided, was because nobody had tried shooting the little bastards yet.

He knew what this was about, of course. One of the government's secret war experiments had finally gotten away from them, and now it was up to the fella on the street, the American common man, to take back the country that should have been his to begin with. Starting here, starting now.

Trevor pulled the gun out of his bag -- an old Glock, unregistered, untraceable; he'd intended to save it for a trip he'd planned to Disneyland in the fall, maybe plug him an animated mouse or two. But a bunch of godless freak action figures would do just as nicely, thank you. Better even, as they were a more immediate threat to his way of life than even those talking animals.

The gun had barely cleared the bag, and he'd only gotten out half of his carefully thought-out battle cry -- "Eat hot lead, punk-ass bitches!" -- when the fist connected with his face, right at the turn of his jaw, and turned all his lights out.

"Ah don't think you're in any condition t'be wavin' that weapon around, pardner," Matt Hawk said, stooping down and plucking the gun out of Trevor's fingers. "Ah'll hold onto it while you sleep off that knuckle sandwich."

He tested the heft of the weapon, and *tsked* at its nearly unnoticeable weight. Shooting with it must be like shooting with a toy. He'd probably find out about that real soon, one way or the other. He dragged Trevor into an alcove in front of a hair salon, then hurried across the sidewalk, leaping up onto the hood of a parked car just before the wave of wooden figurines washed past.

"Any luck gettin' hold o' the others?" Matt asked, tucking the Glock into his belt.

Priscilla Lyons, sometimes known as Vagabond, touched a pressure switch on her Avengers ID card and nodded. "Yep, and if half of what Warbird just told me is right, these things aren't as harmless as they seem to be. Let's go."

"Go where? These things're all over. They're carryin' people off with 'em, they're so thick."

Priscilla grabbed his hand and leapt. Matt gave out a startled cry and leapt with her, just managing to reach the trunk of the next car. She gave him a grin.

"Think you can keep up?"

He grinned back, hiking up his jeans a little. "With a little thing like you? Shoot, Miss Priscilla, you'd best worry about keepin' up with *me*."

They leapt for the next car together.

"Aaaaahhhh! Get 'em offa me! Get 'em off!"

The pedestrian sprinted past Carol's car, waving his arms and throwing off the figurines that clung to him. Darkhawk briefly considered helping the guy, but the Moombas didn't seem to be hurting anybody. They were just walking over anybody who got in their way.

And Darkhawk had bigger problems anyway.

Carol had changed into her Warbird costume, and the two of them were standing in the front seat of her convertible, watching a seemingly endless army of toys march down the road to join their mass with the immense creature who stood in the middle of the highway. As the toys reached the creature's feet, they were absorbed seamlessly into its mass; it had visibly grown in the minutes since it had first appeared.

"Here," Carol said, reaching out a hand. "I'll give you a boost."

Chris took her hand, and Carol flew them both up and over the street, angling slightly toward the giant wooden creature. She released him, and he spread his arms, letting his glider wings snap into place.

WHAT IS THIS? the creature boomed. YOU SOFTLINGS HAVE LEARNED TO FLY IN THE YEARS MOOMBA HAS BEEN AWAY?

Darkhawk swooped in low, heading directly for the giant's head. Moomba took a swipe at him with one wooden paw, but he avoided it easily and alighted on the giant's shoulder.

"Look man," he said, leaping over the hand as it tried to brush him away again, "I don't want to be rude, but this has got to be the worst thought-out world domination plan I've ever seen. You're made of wood, bro! A toddler with a Zippo could take you out."

YOU MAY NOT TOUCH MOOMBA, SOFTLING!

"At least you got the talking about yourself in third person thing, right, but let's not kid ourselves, big guy."

You've already caused psychiatric trauma to an entire generation of American kids. Why don't you just-- AAAGHH!"

The shoulder Darkhawk was standing on pulsed upward, and several hundred of the toys burst out of it, clinging to Darkhawk, coating him. Outside of some vicious pinching, they weren't doing him any harm, but Chris suddenly realized why the pedestrian on the street had been wiggling out. Having so many tiny things crawling all over him like that was exactly like being a doormat for a thousand bugs. You couldn't help getting terminal heebie-jeebies. He stepped back blindly, and tumbled off of the giant's shoulder.

"Darkhawk!"

"I got it!" he called back, snapping his wings out again and swooping upward just before he would have hit the ground. He alighted on somebody's hood and brushed the Moombas off. One by one, they bounced off the car and rejoined the procession of toys still flowing by on the street.

"Okay, diplomacy didn't work," Warbird said from above his head. "Let's see if we can punch some sense into him."

Darkhawk watched as she arrowed across the sky. Solar power flashed from her fists, scoring the giant's hide, but not having any other visible effect. It swatted at her, but she evaded more easily than Darkhawk had.

KNEEL DOWN AND PUT ON YOUR CHAINS, SLAVE!

"Bite me," Warbird replied, and fired a blast right into the creature's eye. It howled, slapping one clumsy hand up to its face, and staggered backward. A Datsun crumpled and exploded beneath its foot.

"Okay, so it *can* be hurt!" she shouted. "Darkhawk, let's---"

Moomba opened its mouth, and instead of promising vengeance, it sang a low, pulsing note that was at once lovely and nauseating. Darkhawk could feel his bones vibrating.

And then---

"What the hell---?" Chris Powell said, looking down at his hands. He had transformed to Darkhawk, but he couldn't remember doing it. Nor could he remember why he was standing on top of someone's car in the middle of LA. Civilians were standing on the sidewalks, shaking their heads, looking just as confused as he felt . . . and they were surrounded by a flood of tiny wooden Moomba action figures.

"What kinda Twilight Zone crap . . .?" he started, then froze as he caught sight of the roaring, giant Moomba standing in the middle of the street. Warbird was hovering in the air between him and it, looking just as dumbstruck by all this as everyone else. Her back was to the giant, so she didn't see him raise his hand.

"Warbird! Heads---"

The hand descended, and swatted Warbird out of the air. She rocketed down and through the roof of an abandoned car, and the vehicle exploded, throwing marching Moombas in every direction.

"Oh crap," Chris breathed, as the giant turned to face him.

"Moomba tried this once before," Lena explained, holding on tight as Hawkeye whipped his skycycle over the wall of the compound and aimed it at LA. "He used his little wooden avatars to infiltrate every country, every city, and then he used them to seize control of . . . everything."

"And you say he's an alien," Iron Man asked, pulling up alongside them.

"That's what granddad thought. After Katu drove him away, he flew off into space."

"Wait a minute," Hawkeye interrupted. "Who's Katu?"

"An African shaman. Or a witch doctor. Or something. Granddad met him around the time Moomba made his move. Katu must have had some previous relationship with Moomba, because he was able to brew up this mist that drove him off."

"A mist," Iron Man said.

"Can't we just like, I don't know, chop him down or something?" Hawkeye asked, tuning his cycle's radio to the police bands.

"He only *looks* like he's made of wood . . . or if he is, it's wood that's so dense it's not really the same thing anymore. Bullets bounce off of him, fire doesn't do a thing."

"But this Katu guy drove him off with some smoke."

"Right," she said.

"Look," Iron Man said, pointing down. Hawkeye and Lena leaned over opposite sides of the skycycle, and saw the roads leading into downtown flooded with the tiny wooden action figures. Even from this high up, they could hear them chanting, "*MOOMBA! MOOMBA!*"

"Crimeney, how many of these things are there?" Hawkeye demanded.

"Hundreds of thousands," Lena replied. "Maybe millions. They were supposedly manufactured by an outfit called Congo Toys here in LA. I think we should---"

"---anybody who's on the horn! This is Darkhawk! I repeat . . . this is Darkhawk, and I'm in some serious trouble here!"

Hawkeye stabbed at the bike's console, and a small viewscreen was filled with an image of the sharp-edged, black metal of Darkhawk's helmet.

"Hawkeye! I need backup ASAP! I'm in the middle of LA, near the stadium, and a giant Toys R Us monster is wrecking the joint!"

"Why is he calling it in again?" Iron Man asked. "We already told him we were on our way."

"Just sit tight, 'Hawk," Hawkeye said. "We told you, we're coming as fast as we can."

"Told me? What are you---? *Ow*, damn it! *Get off of me*, you creepy little . . ."

"Oh no," Lena breathed over Hawkeye's shoulder. "He forgot. He doesn't remember calling you."

"Don't be silly. Of course he remembers, he just---"

"No, don't you understand?" Lena tightened her grip around Hawkeye's midsection and gave him a shake. "This is how Moomba made everybody in the world forget about him the last time. He uses sound . . ."

"Then why do we still remember?" Iron Man cut in.

"I don't know," Lena admitted. "Maybe he's not strong enough yet. Maybe he's only got so much range."

"If that's the case," Iron Man said, "the best thing we can do is hang back until we figure out how to---"

"Can you guys put a little lead on, for god's sake?" Darkhawk shouted over the link. "Warbird's already down, and I don't know how much longer I can---"

"Warbird?" Hawkeye demanded. "Is she okay?"

"I don't know. She got punched into this car, and it blew up. I haven't been able to---"

"Hold on, Darkhawk," Hawkeye said, cutting the link. "We're coming in."

The skycycle dove out of the sky, and Iron Man had to cut his jets and refire them in order to make the turn and keep up.

"Nobody listens to me anymore," he grumbled inside the armor.

Darkhawk sprinted from car to car. The little Moombas, instead of moving toward the big Moomba, were now swarming up the sides of the vehicles, intent on taking him down.

"This *sucks!*" he shouted at no one in particular. Man, where was Lodestone or Savage Steel when he needed them? Give him a fight with an ordinary supervillain psycho any day of the week, but this whole thing was giving him *Child's Play* flashbacks. Any moment now, Optimus Prime and the Green Power Ranger were going to jump out from behind a car and kick his ass, he just knew it.

He needed altitude, and then he needed to work his way back to that car and check on Warbird. The amulet embedded in his chest flared, and wiped a wave of Moombas off the trunk of the Chevy he was standing on. Getting a running start, he leapt, fired his grapple claw at a nearby lamppost, and retracted it sharply, catapulting himself into the air. His glider wings snapped into place and he swooped around, heading back the way he'd come.

And it was at that moment that he realized one of the creepy little bastards had gotten into his helmet.

"Gah!" He clutched at the helmet. He could feel the Moomba crawling over his face, scratching and biting.

It didn't hurt much, but it was distracting as hell, and focused as he was on getting the helmet off, he wasn't concentrating on gliding. He began to corkscrew out of the air.

"moomba!" the toy in his helmet declared, its tiny voice echoing in the narrow confines.

Something stopped his fall, something other than the ground, and the impact knocked the wind out of him. The sudden exhalation sent the Moomba caroming around inside the helmet, finally popping out through the bottom and falling with a "moooooommmmbaaaa!" of dismay to the street below. Darkhawk looked up.

"You've got the luck of the Irish," Vagabond said, setting him down on top of the bus she was standing on. "I looked up and you practically fell right into my arms."

"Who's . . . who's driving this thing?"

"Two-Gun." Vagabond stomped on the roof, and the bus began to move again, trundling slowly through the swarm of Moomba's covering the sidewalk. "It was the only way we could get anywhere near this place."

"Looks like the gang's all here," a new voice said, and both of them looked up to see Hawkeye and Iron Man descending toward them, an unfamiliar pink-haired woman riding shotgun on Hawkeye's skycycle. "Where's Warbird?"

Darkhawk pointed. "She's still in that burning car somewhere. I tried to go back, but I---"

"Shellhead, go!" Hawkeye said, hopping off the cycle. He tossed Vagabond a wrapped bundle of leather and iron. "Here's Two-Gun's belts, I imagine he feels pretty naked without 'em."

Vagabond nodded and ran toward the front of the bus. Hawkeye turned toward Darkhawk.

"Hawk, you know how to fly this cycle?"

Darkhawk shook his head. "No, but---"

"Look, it's just like a motorcycle." Hawkeye leaned closer and pointed. "Here's your throttle, here's your clutch. Steer with the handlebars. I need you to take Ms. Myers out of here."

"Wait a minute," Darkhawk demanded, stealing a look at Lena. She was cute -- not his type, really, but he wasn't in the mood to notice either way at that moment. "Why me? Why not send one of the guys without powers?"

"Because this Moomba guy can affect people's memories. You've already been hit by him once---"

"I have?"

"Listen, I'm not shielding you from the action. You guys are going to go check out the toy company that made these things, see what you can find out." Hawkeye slipped his bow off of his shoulders and reached for an arrow, his eyes already moving past Darkhawk, toward the monster standing in the middle of the street. "Check in every five minutes or so, just in case we need reminding what we're doing here. And call if you need backup."

He moved away, toward the front of the bus. Darkhawk sighed, then threw a leg over the skycycle and sat

down in front of the girl.

"My name's Lena," she said, wrapping her arms around him uncertainly.

"Good for you," Chris growled. Then he gunned the throttle. The skycycle rocketed into the air.

Iron Man roared down the street toward the column of fire where Warbird had apparently fallen. How long had she been in there? Two minutes? Three? Carol's powers made her skin tougher than normal, but as far as Tony Stark knew, she wasn't exactly fire or bulletproof. Then again, *nobody* -- least of all Carol herself -- knew exactly what was going on with her powers these days.

He scanned the blaze, and found . . . something. He wasn't sure exactly what. It was human-shaped, but . . .

"Oh God, Carol," he said, dropping toward the flames, "please be alright."

That was when the screaming started.

"What the hell is *that*?" Hawkeye asked, squinting at the giant Moomba and the fire that raged in front of him.

"That's pure suffering," Two-Gun replied. He had crawled up onto the top of the bus once he had his guns, allowing Vagabond to take the wheel. Hawkeye gave him a confused look and he explained, "I made a sound like that when my wife and daughter died, Clint."

Hawkeye stomped on the roof of the bus, pulling out the biggest, meanest explosive arrow he could find as he did it. "Damnit, Vags . . . *move* this thing!"

The bus surged forward through the moving sea of children's toys.

"There it is," the woman -- Lena, she had said her name was -- said, pointing over Darkhawk's shoulder.

Chris considered saying something smart, like, "Ya think?" but managed to restrain himself. It wasn't her fault he was being sidelined. Then again, it wasn't exactly *his* fault either. Just when he thought he'd proven himself to Iron Man, now Hawkeye had to start treating him like a third-stringer.

The skyscraper they were descending toward was topped by a giant sign proclaiming it as the world headquarters of CONGO TOYS. Darkhawk eased up on the throttle, and came to a rough but non-destructive landing on the rooftop.

"Nice digs for a toy company," Chris said, swinging his leg off the cycle.

"I agree," Lena said, clutching her grandfather's book to her chest and looking around. "When I looked up the address, I assumed they just had an office in this building . . ."

"No, Congo Toys owns the entire thing," a deep, heavily-accented voice said from behind them. "Though we do lease out the lower floors to promising young businesses, if you are interested."

The two of them whirled, and found themselves facing a powerfully-built black man, all broad shoulders and square jaw. His head was shaven, and he was dressed in an immaculate black powersuit. He gave them both a startlingly white grin.

"Who are you?" Darkhawk demanded.

"Your guide," he said, gesturing toward a door behind him. His accent was African, though Chris didn't know enough on the subject to tell just *where* in Africa the guy might be from.

Lena had stepped slightly behind him, clutching her book to her chest. Chris's mind raced over the possibilities. Could be a trap . . . hell, it almost certainly *was* a trap. He didn't mind jumping into the lion's mouth himself -- he was in the mood for it, honestly -- but he had the girl to think about.

Then again, if he didn't follow this guy, what *would* he do? Say no, then break in through a window?

"Yeah, okay," Darkhawk said, moving toward the man. "But you lead the way. And no funny stuff."

"I am renowned for my lack of humor," the black man said, and began walking toward the door. He didn't look back as he walked, and Chris had to hurry forward to catch the door as he moved through it.

"Should we be doing this?" Lena hissed as she caught up to him in the doorway.

"You got a better idea?"

She didn't answer, her lips pressing into a tight line. Chris walked into the stairwell first. Their guide was already a flight below them. His movements were unrushed, but steady, and his stride was long. Even in Darkhawk's body, which was a good four inches taller than Chris and a helluva lot stronger and faster, Chris had to hurry to keep up with the guy. When they exited the stairwell six floors later, he could hear Lena was out of breath behind him.

They passed through a large, open office space. People wearing badges that marked them as employees of Congo Toys stood up in their cubicles to gape as they passed. Darkhawk drew the most stares -- none of them seemed particularly impressed by the black man or by Lena. Chris stood up straighter and raised his helmeted chin, feeling a little of his confidence coming back.

Finally, they'd crossed the main room and come to a closed door with no name on it. There was a stunning black woman sitting at a mahogany desk directly in front of it. She looked up, but returned to her work after their guide gave her a curt nod.

"Place is kinda stuffy for a toy company, don't you think?" Lena whispered.

Darkhawk shrugged. His attention was focused on their guide, who had paused at the door only long enough to rap twice before pushing it open. He crossed the threshold, and Darkhawk and Lena cautiously followed.

They were standing in a sizeable office, with one glass wall looking out over downtown LA. The walls were colored a dark green, and hung with brightly-colored, wooden tribal masks, some of them more than four feet tall. There was a short, hunched old man in a pinstriped black suit standing behind the desk with

his back to them, facing the glass wall and the city spread out below.

"Thank you, Elihu," the old man said in a creaky voice that reminded Darkhawk of cricket-song. Their guide nodded once, folded his hands in front of him, and stepped back against the wall. Once there, he became completely motionless, almost disappearing amidst the enormous wooden faces suspended to either side of him.

The old man turned. He was black too, and at least seventy years old. Still, he moved easier than Darkhawk would have expected; he was in pretty good shape for his age. He smiled, and Chris and Lena were treated to a mouth only half-full of rotten and chipped teeth.

"Hello," he said, looking right past Darkhawk. His accent also sounded African to Chris's inexperienced ear. "I was expecting you, Ms. Myers."

"My name is Darkhawk, and I'm a member of the west coast branch of the Avengers," Chris said, trying not to feel slighted by the fact that the old man didn't seem impressed or even interested in him. "We need to talk to you about your Moomba toys, Mr. . . .?"

The old man continued to grin at Lena for a moment more, and then his gaze wandered distractedly over to Darkhawk. The smile faded, and vague irritation replaced it . . . which was fine, considering it meant he closed his mouth and shut off those horrid teeth from the world's view.

The old man grunted. "I expected one of your kind too, of course," he sighed. "I don't exactly have a surname anymore, Mr. Hawk; so I suppose you both can call me what Lena's grandfather did when he met me in the jungles of the Amazon.

"You can simply call me Katu."

TO BE CONCLUDED

Next Issue: Can Earth's Mightiest Heroes defeat a walking tree and a geriatric African shaman? Tune in next time to find out!

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Moomba's first (and last) appearance was in *Tales to Astonish* #23.

Carol Danvers was on fire.

It wasn't an experience that was completely alien to her. Once, as the cosmic wanderer Binary, she had held the power of a dual star inside of her, constantly burning even in the airless void of space. But that was behind her now, and the only time she burned these days was when she fell asleep sunbathing.

Until now.

An alien conqueror named Moomba had backhanded her into a parked car, which had then exploded around her. The blow had knocked her senseless, and when she'd awakened, she'd awakened to a world of flame and agony.

So she screamed. And she hit Moomba back.

"Bloody hell!" Iron Man veered off sharply as a bolt of flame erupted from the burning car Warbird had been trapped in. It took him a moment to realize that the bolt was also the source of the scream they were all hearing, and by that time it had already struck the giant alien that was the cause of this mess.

Flame splashed across Moomba's chest, and the giant lurched backward, roaring in surprise and anger. The fire couldn't consume the creature, no matter how much like a totem pole he looked, but he had obviously been hurt.

The bolt drew back, still burning brightly, and Iron Man saw that Carol was at the center of it. Flame covered her from head to toe, and her skin had gone bright red. Moomba swatted at her, but she slipped around his arm easily and rammed him again, driving him back. The thousands of toys gathered at his feet kept up their chanting—"Moomba! Moomba!"—as the giant opened its mouth again.

A purple-shafted arrow sliced past Iron Man, and dove straight down Moomba's gullet. The explosion that followed vomited out of the creature's mouth like lava, partially vaporizing a Mazda at its feet.

Hawkeye was standing on top of the bus Vagabond and the Two-Gun Kid had requisitioned, already nocking another arrow. "Don't give him a chance to talk, Shellhead!" he yelled. "We don't want him to pull his memory whammy again!"

Warbird had corkscrewed down the street. She wasn't screaming anymore; she was probably still in pain, but she didn't appear to be in any mortal danger now. Grimly, Iron Man turned to the task of restraining the giant.

Marvel 2000 Proudly Presents

Issue #11

TOTEMS
Conclusion

Plot by Chris Munn & Russ Anderson
Script by Russ Anderson

"You can't be Katu," Lena Myers said to the diminutive black man. "His son, sure, but Katu was an old man even when grandpa met him."

Katu spread his hands. "Be that as it may, I am the man your grandfather encountered in that African jungle half a century ago. I am that 'shaman'. Elihu, the book please."

"Hey!" Lena cried, as the giant who'd led her and Darkhawk into this office materialized at her elbow, crunching down hard on her shoulder with one hand and yanking her grandfather's journal out of her grip with the other.

Darkhawk wheeled around and put out a hand to stop the big ape, only to be batted aside like a ragdoll. He flew across the room and hit the opposite wall hard enough to shake loose some of the African tribal masks that hung there.

Elihu had released Lena and handed the book over to Katu by the time Darkhawk got to his feet. The old man ran one hand lovingly over the leather cover of the journal, then dug a fingernail into the top and tore the cover open. He rooted around for a moment, then pulled out a tiny figurine, about the size and shape of the tiny Moombas currently taking over the city, but cast in wood as black as obsidian.

"Here we go."

"Who *are* you?" Lena's fists were clenched and tears rolled down her face at the destruction of her grandfather's legacy. "You're not some African medicine man, that's for damn sure."

"I'm a businessman," Katu said simply, tossing the journal aside and holding up the figurine. "And this, young lady, is what you might call a hostile takeover."

Hawkeye's arm was a blur, flashing from quiver to bow and back, and a rain of trick arrows pounded the wooden giant in the middle of the street. Iron Man continued to flit around Moomba's head, pouring it on with his repulsors.

Behind Hawkeye, Two-Gun was beginning to feel a little useless. He'd even put his six-shooters back in their holsters for the time being. For a few minutes there, he'd been occupied with clearing the little fellas – the toys that all hooked together to make the really big toy they were supposed to be fighting – off of the top of the bus he and Hawkeye were standing on. But they seemed to have given up on the direct attack, instead choosing to head for the big guy, join up with him and bolster his strength.

"Here comes Vags!" Hawkeye called. Two-Gun looked over his shoulder and saw Vagabond hopping from car to car, Warbird's limp form tossed over one shoulder. He moved to the edge of the bus, and when she leapt up and grabbed the edge, he was there to help her up.

"How is she?" Hawkeye asked, risking a look back while the other two kneeled next to Warbird. "Is she brea—?"

"*Hawkeye!*" Iron Man trumpeted from above. "*A little help he—*"

There was a heavy metal *thwok*, and they all looked up to see a ton and a half of red and gold iron alloy rocketing toward them. Hawkeye shouted "Oh, shi—!" and then something hit Two-Gun in the chest, blasting all the air out of him, throwing him backward and over the side of the bus as Iron Man slammed

into it.

The bus crumpled like a paper sack. The sound was enormous, and a wave of fire washed by just overhead as Two-Gun and Vagabond – it had been her that tackled him – continued to fall. He twisted instinctively, not wasting time trying to angle their fall, just rolling so that he was on the bottom when they hit.

The trunk of an old Buick broke their fall, the Detroit steel crumpling just barely at the impact. Two-Gun felt whatever air was left in his lungs head for higher ground, and for a moment the world swam out of focus.

When it snapped into place again, the first thing he heard was Hawkeye yelling. Vagabond was still on top of him, shaking her head to clear it. Matt tried to roll over, but his entire body was numb from the neck down, except for his feet and hands, which were unpleasantly tingly. All he could manage was twisting his neck around to look.

Hawkeye had missed the cars, landing roughly on the sidewalk instead. He was propped up against the side of a building, one leg bent funny on the sidewalk in front of him, obviously broken. He had to be hurting, but he was scrabbling for his bow, drawing another arrow out of his quiver.

"Get up!" he shouted. "Don't let him put the whammy on u—"

For just a second, Two-Gun could hear a strange, warbling rumble coming from the wooden giant. And then the strangest thing happened...

A metal spike drove itself deep into Tony Stark's head before he could get back to his feet. He was still buried deep in the twisted wreckage of the bus, and his helmet had sealed against the flame and debris. An LED flashed in a particular pattern near his left eye. The signal that the firewalls he'd put in the armor and in himself to prevent against mental attack were deflecting a psychic signal. If he listened, he could hear the warbling cry of Moomba's memory-deadening sonic attack through the flames and secondary explosions.

For the moment he was safe, but the others didn't have the protection he did. Pushing aside the pain still throbbing below his eyes and deep in his sinuses, Iron Man set to work peeling himself out of the bus.

"Your grandfather was a good man, Lena," Katu said, strolling back behind his desk with the chip in hand. "Good... but not terribly bright, I'm afraid."

Elihu had placed himself between Darkhawk and the old man. Chris would have liked to punch the giant through a wall, but he wasn't sure he could, considering how the guy had just manhandled him. Best to stand back and listen for the moment, try to get a better idea of what was going on here. He'd already activated the trouble beacon on his card, but he didn't really expect anybody to break off fighting the giant alien totem pole to come help him against a geriatric dwarf. As he watched, Lena stepped forward with quiet dignity and picked her grandfather's torn journal up off the floor.

"It never occurred to him, for instance," Katu continued, "to wonder how in the world a primitive medicine man from deepest, darkest Africa would have any inkling of how to drive off an alien despot. Frank Myers subconsciously lumped everything he couldn't understand together in his mind... and if all that stuff was

the same, why couldn't a magic mist be just the thing to defeat super science and alien life?"

He held the figurine up and took a long look at it; the sun pouring in through the window glittered off its shiny black skin. "But Frank, as dim as he was, served my purpose well enough, I suppose. It was vital that Moomba be erased from the world's memory, but I needed someone to stay behind, someone I could leave a memento with and be reasonably certain they wouldn't unknowingly destroy it. Other men might have eventually decided they had hallucinated the whole thing and destroyed the journal just to have it done with. But not your grandfather, Lena. He was too *hungry*. He was too sure that someday, somehow, he would be able to prove what had happened, and that would be his meal ticket. He would finally have all the fame and glory he'd struggled all his life for."

"You're in it with him?" Lena asked, the bewilderment plain in her voice. "You're going to help Moomba take over? I don't understand. Why drive him off in the first place if you're in his pocket?"

Katu laughed, a high-pitched childish sound that made Darkhawk want to cover his ears. The old man wiped his eyes, still chuckling, and grinned his yellow grin at them both.

"I'm in *his* pocket? You really think that?" Katu shook his head and put his back to them, staring out the window. "You stupid little girl. I'm not helping Moomba conquer this world. Moomba is conquering this world for *me*."

Priscilla Lyons – occasionally known as Vagabond – blinked. *What in the world...?*

She was on the street in downtown LA, lying on top of a Buick while something big burned behind her. She could hear metal rending, as if somebody was tearing strips out of the world's largest soda can, and there was a wooden giant stamping down the street in her direction. She was wearing civilian clothes, though she could feel the cool strips of spirit gum holding her domino mask to her face. She had no idea how she'd gotten there.

Even more puzzling, she was straddling her teammate Matthew Hawk, the time-displaced Two-Gun Kid.

And he was looking at her... kinda funny.

"Nancy...?" he breathed.

Priscilla shook her head, confused. "Nancy? No, Matt, I'm not..."

"Nancy," he repeated, more certain this time, and cupped a hand over her face. Tears were welling in his eyes. "Nancy, I had the most awful dream. I—"

But then he apparently decided the time for talking was over. He pulled her down to him and kissed her.

And, despite herself, Priscilla kissed him back.

"I was a student in London around the turn of the 20th century," Katu explained. "I was the third child of an African prince— don't bother asking what country; you've never heard of it, and it has since been swallowed by Africa's constant warfare. While coming along so late in the line meant I was never likely to assume my father's throne, it did net me certain educational privileges others of my race and creed were

not generally allowed in those days.

"I studied anthropology, with a particular interest in studies relating to my home continent. In particular, I was enthralled by the mythologies of the... more savage native peoples. It was during this period, one rainswept night far back in the dusty recesses of the university's library, that I found the one and only written mention I've ever been able to find of the creature.

"Africans assign special significance to trees. Every tribe has legends about their trees, and most assign deities to them. Moomba was such a deity. A wood spirit, who would rise up to protect his people when the end of the world came.

"I was intrigued by the fact that I couldn't find anything else on the creature. I had been looking for an unusual subject for my thesis, and decided that night that it would be Moomba. I was on a plane heading back to Africa at the end of the semester. I fully intended to come back the next year with the beginnings of my paper under my arm, but I never returned.

"I found the tribe that worshipped Moomba – the tribe I would eventually mislead your grandfather into thinking I was a part of. They almost killed me on the spot, but my father's name had some influence, even that deep in the Congo, and I was able to ingratiate myself to the tribe's medicine man. He would eventually tell me everything I needed to know about Moomba, and he would unknowingly give me all the clues I needed to find this." He held up the tiny black figurine again.

"By the time I met your grandfather, that old shaman had died, but not before teaching me dark and secret ways to prolong my own lifespan. Everything from my old life – my school, my father's throne – was a distant memory. I was obsessed with summoning Moomba and making him my instrument of conquest. And I did it."

"But then you turned around and sent Moomba away," Lena said. She actually sounded interested in all this, apparently unmindful of the danger they were in. Darkhawk noted this, realizing that he was going to have to worry for both of them.

Katu was nodding. "Yes. As I said, Moomba is a god. And, as with most gods, his power derives primarily from others' belief in and knowledge of him. I knew, as powerful as he was, and as far-reaching as his tiny avatars were, there was no way he could gain enough of both quickly enough to repel a full attack by the world's powers. Some idiot would have burned the Congo to the ground with a hydrogen bomb before most people had even realized Moomba existed. So I used Moomba to erase the world's memory, sent the creature back where he came from, spun my tale for your grandfather, and hid this figurine where he would unknowingly keep it safe."

"But what is that?" Lena demanded, pointing at the figurine. "And what does it have to do with all this?"

"This tiny wood carving is the cause of all your troubles, Lena. For all intents and purposes, it is Moomba."

"I don't understand."

"Think of Moomba as a virus, and then think of this figurine as patient zero. Even though Moomba doesn't have an actual body, he can 'infect' wood and shape it to his needs. In order to do that, Moomba must be believed in. More importantly, one who believes in him must be in close proximity to this figure to 'activate' him. Your grandfather's belief wasn't enough to do the job all those years ago, after I'd banished the monster – it was like a pilot light without any gas to ignite it – but there are many, many more people in the world who know of Moomba now. Even if they only know of him as a child's toy. And thousands more are learning every minute, as news of his arrival is broadcast instantaneously around the world." He

grinned his ugly yellow grin. "God bless CNN."

Lena's face went white. Her mouth fell open, but for a moment, she couldn't say anything. When she finally managed, her voice was shaky.

"Are you saying that when I found grandpa's journal and read it...?"

"Your knowledge of what actually happened activated Moomba, yes. For which I am deeply indebted to you."

Lena swayed on her feet, and Darkhawk moved to catch her. Elihu stepped in his path, and Chris was ready to fight his way past the giant, but Lena managed to steady herself.

"So... so what happens now?" she asked.

"Now," Katu sighed, looking out through his window again. A thick ribbon of smoke was visible to the east, near the stadium where the Avengers were fighting the monster. "Now millions of 'toys' all over the world will turn on their owners. Indestructible and unwavering, they will swarm over the capitals, ports, and military bases. Within days, they will have eliminated all serious threat, and I..." He chuckled excitedly, a little breathless now. "I will finally have that throne daddy could never provide for me."

Rick... Rick... Rick...

Okay, Marv! Okay! I give already!

Far away from Earth and its troubles, high above the orange-yellow surface of Saturn, Genis-Vell, Protector of the Universe, opened his eyes. At first, he had no idea how long he'd been out here, riding the former orbit of the moon Titan, but a quick peek at his Cosmic Awareness told him it had been about twelve Earth hours. No time at all, cosmically speaking.

Then again, the matter he was here to deal with was far from cosmic.

Rick?

From somewhere deep in his head, seemingly from the spot where his spine joined his skull, the familiar voice came again. *Yeah, Marv. Rick. Rick Jones at your service. For god's sake, you've been going on for hours now. What the hell do you want?*

You— you've been able to hear me the entire time?

Oh yeah... the whole time. And I got the migraine to prove it, thanks very much.

For a moment, Genis had no idea what to say, all his carefully-rehearsed words sucked out into the vacuum.

At one time, he and Rick Jones had shared a molecular bond. What this meant, practically speaking, was that both of them couldn't exist on the same plane of reality at the same time— while one was on this plane, the other was stuck in a place Earth scientists had dubbed the Microverse. The bond had been severed – at least to the extent that they were both able to exist on the same plane at once – just before Genis had caused his birthworld, Titan, to be sucked into the Negative Zone, yet another

extradimensional territory. This admittedly rash act had ostensibly been to protect the place from Thanos and the Kree Intelligence Supreme, but Genis had had reason to doubt his own motivations recently.

Rick had been on Titan when it had been displaced. Genis had assumed that their bond was severed for good. But if that was the case, how were they talking now?

You saved me from the H'ythraa Queen.

Rick sighed. *Yeah well... don't get all maudlin about it.*

If there had been atmosphere anywhere nearby, Genis would have taken a deep breath. He was trying to hold on to his temper, but it was so hard to do that lately. *Rick, I know that you're upset, but I really need to—*

Upset? Upset? Is that what you call it?

—I really need to talk to you about some things.

There was a long, pregnant pause... so long in fact that Genis was afraid he'd lost the signal, but then Rick's voice came back, low, angry, but very clear. *Listen to me, Genis. You stuck me on this planet, and then you exiled me to another freakin' universe. I haven't eaten a Cheeto or watched Will & Grace or seen my wife in months. In all that time, you've never made an effort to get Titan back where it belongs, never even tried to talk to me until I saved your ass from that Aliens reject.*

I know. But trust me, Rick, I'm working on it now. I'm going to find a way to get you back here.

Have you seen Marlo?

Excuse me?

Have you seen my wife? Does she know what happened to me? You were making googly eyes at her back when you and I first got stuck together... is that why you stuck me here, to get me out of the way?

That... that's the stupidest thing I've ever heard, Rick.

Oh yeah? You think that's dumb? I'll tell you what's dumb, Marv: The idea that you might ever get around to moving Titan back into the Milky Way.

I told you I'd do it, Rick. I want to make amends...

That's not what I'm talking about. I'm not the only one you stuck here, Marv. Not by a long shot. Remember the people who lived on Titan? The Eternals? All those immortals who have enough power to go toe-to-toe with Thor? They're in the same boat I am, Marv.

Out on the edge of Saturn's orbit, Genis-Vell's eyes snapped open.

And boy... are they pissed at you...

"Mmu guh... geh ah... *get off!*"

Vagabond yanked herself out of Two-Gun's grip and swiped an arm across her mouth. The cowboy's eyes were clearing now, realization at what he'd done slowly filling them.

"Aw... aw hell, Pris. Ah'm sorry, I don't know where mah head—"

"Save it for later," she said, rolling off of him and getting to her feet on top of the Buick's hood. They were in downtown LA... giant monster down the street... big burning wreck nearby that looked like a bus. Check and roger that. Ignore the tingle in your lips and get moving, Priscilla.

Hawkeye was on the sidewalk, pulling himself into a standing position. He looked hurt, and Vagabond was about to head for him, when something whistled through the air behind her. Bootjets that normally ran as silent as bird's wings roared as Iron Man rocketed out of the burning wreck, arrowing directly for the monster and laying down a barrage of repulsor blasts. He wasn't doing much besides irritating the thing, but at least it wasn't having any luck hitting him back.

She hopped down and hurried across the sidewalk.

"Pris," Hawkeye said, looking relieved. "How did we get here?"

"Got me, boss." She slipped his arm around her shoulders and began moving him carefully back toward the Buick. "Me and Two-Gun aren't equipped to fight that thing, though. It's up to Iron Man."

"Where are Warbird and Darkha—?"

Another whistling sound, and both of them looked around to see a fiery comet explode straight upward from the flaming husk of the city bus. It was gone in an instant, lost over the skyscrapers... but for just a moment, Vagabond thought she'd seen Warbird in the center of that ball of fire.

Darkhawk decided that if he was going to make a move, the time to do it was rapidly passing. He hadn't quite figured out what he was going to do – what with Man Mountain Elihu blocking his path – but he'd always been a good improviser.

Unfortunately, Lena beat him to the punch.

"You *monster!*" she screamed, lunging for Katu. The old man danced backward out of her reach, much nimbler than he looked, and in the next moment, Elihu's massive hand had closed over Lena's wrists. He lifted her up into the air and held her dangling there.

"That's enough!" Katu spat from the shelter of his mahogany desk. "Kill them both!"

The amulet in Darkhawk's chest flared, and a bolt of opalescent power slashed outward, flying right past Elihu and hitting Katu's desk dead center. The bolt blew the desk in half, sending wood chips in all directions. Katu disappeared behind a cloud of sawdust, but Darkhawk could hear him screaming.

Elihu whipped around, flinging Lena into the wall and facing Darkhawk. Chris fired his grapple hook out, taking the goliath by the wrist; and without missing a beat, Elihu shifted his weight backward and yanked.

Darkhawk was wrenched off his feet and into the air.

Chris somersaulted and planted his feet in the bigger man's face. It was like kicking a redwood, but it did drive Elihu back. Retracting his grapple, Chris pushed off the man's skull and leapt at the remains of the desk.

Katu was on the floor, covered in dust and blood, shards and splinters from the shattered desk imbedded in his skeletal face and thin chest. Chris knew he had maybe two seconds before Elihu caught up with him, and he didn't think it'd be a good idea to try to take the old man hostage. Super-villains never believed you when you threatened to kill them anyway.

So Chris seized the witch doctor by the wrist and squeezed until his hand popped open. The tiny black figurine – which looked just like one of the Moombas Chris had in his bungalow back at the compound – fell out of Katu's hand and into Darkhawk's.

A wrecking ball – or something that hit a lot like one – slammed into his side, hurling him across the office. He smashed one of the hanging tribal masks to kindling and left an impression of himself in the wall beneath it, but he held on to the figurine.

Elihu was helping Katu to his feet as Darkhawk regained his own. To Chris's astonishment, the old man was laughing.

"What will you do with that?" he asked. "You can't destroy it, and as long as it exists, so does Moomba. Only I know how to send him back where he came from, you fool!"

Chris was fighting to catch his breath. It felt like Elihu had caved in some of his ribs with that last shot; he could feel Darkhawk's sticky green blood coating his side. He looked at the figurine in his hand. He couldn't destroy it. What could he do? Think, Chris, think!

"Crush him, Elihu," the old man gasped, and the giant strode forward to do just that.

Flames were still crawling over her, particularly in her hair as she shot north along the Southern California coast. But the pain and the disorientation were gone; if anything, Carol Danvers felt exhilarated. Her mind was clear, as was her purpose.

She found the factory inland and south of Carmel. Dropping into the compound, she explained her situation to the first security guard that approached her. He took her to the plant manager, and five minutes later she was on her way back to LA, salvation resting on her shoulders.

Elihu bore down on Darkhawk like the world's fastest, blackest glacier. For the barest of seconds, Chris wondered if it might be possible to escape, to get out of sight and change from Darkhawk to Chris. Would Katu and his manservant be able to—?

Elihu brought his fists down against the wall, but Darkhawk wasn't there anymore. The bigger man wheeled around, fists clenched, feet pounding across the expensive carpeting, swiping his big arms at Darkhawk as the Avenger backpedaled out of reach.

"Cover your eyes!" Darkhawk shouted at Lena. Standing against the wall on the opposite side of the

room, she goggled at the fight, either not hearing or not realizing he was talking to her. Chris couldn't wait for her to get the hint.

He reached up with one hand, the one that wasn't gripping the figurine, and tore Darkhawk's helmet off.

He'd only ever looked beneath the helmet a couple of times, and had no desire to see it again. The body he transferred into when he became Darkhawk had a Lovecraftian mass of tentacles and chitinous exoskeleton for a face, a horror that made Chris physically sick when he thought about it too much. A visor in the helmet made the world look right to him, but without it, Elihu was split into a hundred red-tinged lumbering segments in Darkhawk's vision. The giant drew up short, face twisting in revulsion, and across the room, Lena began to scream.

"Kill him!" Katu screeched. *"Stop looking at him and just kill him!"*

Chris felt around on Darkhawk's face, looking for the leathery anus that acted as this body's mouth. Then he popped the black figurine in and swallowed it.

"Stop him! Stop him now!"

Elihu's fist was descending toward his head. Knowing it was probably the last thing he was ever going to see, Chris shut Darkhawk's eyes, grasped the amulet in his chest.

And switched back to his real body.

Iron Man swooped around Moomba's head, keeping it busy with repulsors and uni-beam bursts while his processors tried to decode the creature's wavelength. There had to be some sort of vibrational harmony going on inside the thing to keep all those tiny action figures melded together like this. If he could lock it down and create a counter-vibration, he might be able to...

"Shellhead! Incoming!" Hawkeye's voice burst inside his helmet, and Iron Man twisted, narrowly dodging Moomba's large paw. He looked up.

Warbird was dropping toward them, carrying an enormous chrome barrel over her head. She was still on fire, orange-white flame rising up from her blonde hair to lick the underside of the container, but it didn't seem to be bothering her.

"Uh... Iron Man..." Hawkeye's voice again. "Maybe you'd better get outta the way, pal."

Iron Man fired his bootjets, shooting up and over Moomba's head. He expected the creature to be as distracted by Carol's arrival as the rest of them were, but Moomba was far more interested in ridding himself of a certain, persistent metal pest. Its hands came together hard, smashing Iron Man between them.

NOW SOFTLING, Moomba boomed, LET US SEE IF YOU ARE AS TROUBLESOME WITHOUT YOUR COLORFUL SHELL.

"That's enough, Moomba," Warbird shouted from overhead. "Time to go back where you came from."

Moomba didn't even look at her. Instead, the monster twisted its elbows up and pressed its palms together. Hard. Alarms sounded in Iron Man's helmet, warning lights strobing as the armor's seals

buckled and stretched.

Carol smiled, and then she tipped the barrel.

A pungent wave of pinkish-white fluid washed out, sloshing over the street. Nearby, Vagabond finished hauling Hawkeye onto the hood of the Buick where she'd left Two-Gun just as the wave went past. The smell was terrible, and the fumes stung their eyes like ammonia.

Carol had finally earned Moomba's attention. As the wave washed past his feet, he looked down at all his tiny avatars being washed away, and then up at the source. Carol was setting the barrel down on the sidewalk.

WHAT IS THI—?

"Oh god, just shut up." Carol lifted her arms, and that flame atop her head leapt down her face, over her shoulders, through her arms, and finally out. Except that wasn't really right, because there was a lot more fire roaring out of her than there had been on her head. A *lot* more, and it seemed to have a mind of its own. It roared over the chemicals, but steered clear of the cars still sitting in the roadway.

The tiny Moombas were the first to scream.

The toys sent up a mass, insectile squeal of pain. On the ground, Two-Gun looked over the side of the Buick, and was amazed to see that the indestructible little buggers were... melting.

Moomba saw it too. The chemicals hadn't been harmful by themselves, and the flames alone certainly couldn't hurt him, but together...

The creature whirled, still pinning Iron Man between its hands, and began sloshing away from Carol and the fire, kicking vehicles aside as it went, knocking over a McDonald's signpost, shouldering the corner off an old brick building.

But the chemicals were all over the street, and the flames leapt forward to follow. Moomba made it two steps before its pace noticeably slowed. The next time it lifted its foot, it came away from the chemical pool with a slurping sound, leaving bits of itself stuck to the ground behind it. Another step, and the chemicals hissed as half its leg was consumed in the acid.

Hawkeye turned his eyes up to Carol. She was still pumping that strange orange fire out of her hands. And she was smiling. Her lips moved, and Hawkeye didn't have to be able to hear her to know what she'd said: "Burn!"

Moomba took another shambling step. Its legs were completely gone now, its minions reduced to floating white mulch that caught on tires and lampposts as the chemicals finished washing down the street. Its head and torso ran like warm taffy in the flames.

YOU CANNOT DEFEAT ME THIS WAY! I AM SUPREME, CURSE YOU! I AM MOOM—!

Repulsor rays screamed out of its hands, reducing its arms to mulch, and Iron Man roared up into the air in their wake. The giant stumbled, and bellowed all the way down as it bellyflopped into the chemicals, vanishing beneath the plain of fire that had engulfed the street.

"That's enough, Warbird!" Iron Man called, waving his arms at her. "That's enough! Stop it! He's finished!"

For a moment, it seemed like Carol didn't hear him. Then she jerked suddenly, as if awakened from a dream. Her eyes went to Iron Man, then to the fire. The flame stopped pouring out of her hands and, incredibly, the flames on the street flickered out moments later.

Moomba, the Conqueror from the Stars, had been reduced to a large, whitish-brown mound of paper mulch. His followers, all the hundreds of thousands of wooden figurines that had gathered here to join with him, had also been dissolved.

"Now how did that work if bullets and fire didn't stop the guy?" Hawkeye demanded. He looked around at the others perched on the Buick's hood, as if to say, "You're not gonna buy that, are you?" and so happened to be looking in the right direction as the flames on Carol's head vanished and she tumbled unconscious out of the sky.

His hand moved of its own volition. Before Carol could hit the ground and maybe break her tough-but-not-invulnerable neck, the leader of the Avengers West Coast had nocked an arrow and fired. It sailed right at Carol, the head popping open and releasing a net that enveloped her. The arrow dropped in its flight, but its momentum was just enough to carry her over a parked convertible rather than the street. She landed heavily, caving in the trunk of the car, and lay still.

Very slowly, sure that he was tempting fate but not able to help himself, Chris Powell cracked open an eye.

Elihu's fist was hovering three inches from his face, so close that it filled his field of vision. He had to tilt his head to see what was happening in the rest of the room.

It wasn't just Elihu's fist that had frozen. The big man was absolutely motionless from his well-trimmed hair to the soles of his dress shoes. His expression was blank, but that wasn't anything new. Chris hadn't seen the guy so much as smile since they...

Waaaiittt a minute...

Stepping carefully to the side, Chris reached out a finger and tapped the knuckles that, until seconds ago, had seemed destined to ruin his good looks. They were hard. No give at all, and certainly no warmth. The sound the tapping made was distinctive, dull.

"No way." Chris straightened, and poked Elihu in the chest. Underneath the dress suit, he felt the same rigidity. He leaned in close to look at the man's face.

Elihu had turned into wood.

"What did you do?" a high-pitched voice screeched from the other side of the room. *"What did you do with it?"*

Katu was leaning up against his desk. He looked terrible, ashen. As if all the blood and most of the water had been drained out of him. He took a shambling step forward, and Chris heard something like the snapping of dried kindling from the old man's unsteady knees.

"All my magic..." the old man wheezed, seeming not to notice the fine cloud of sawdust that erupted from his mouth when he said it. "All of it... bound up in that... figurine... I was... invincible as long as it..."

existed..."

He was moving toward Lena, who was still standing near the door. Her eyes were clear. She didn't seem afraid anymore, and she certainly wasn't making any move to get out of the old man's way.

"*What did he do with it?*" he screeched, and then he seemed to implode. His head toppled off his shoulders, and those shoulders collapsed inward. What struck the office floor at Lena's feet wasn't a man anymore, but an uneven pile of rotting, multi-colored wood chips.

Lena hadn't even flinched.

"Oh God," Chris moaned, putting a hand over his face. "Oh *crap*. I think I killed him..."

"Where's Darkhawk?" Lena asked, not looking up from what was left of Katu. "What did he do?"

"I... I'm Darkhawk," Chris said, not terribly concerned about his secret identity at that moment. "I switch bodies when I turn into him."

"What did *you* do, then?"

"He kept talking about how everything revolved around that figurine, and how it was indestructible. I figured... Well, when I change, the body I'm not using gets stored in another dimension. That means whatever's there doesn't exist, as far as we're concerned, so..."

"So Moomba is in that... thing's belly on another plain of reality?"

Chris shrugged, looking at Elihu. He couldn't look at Katu anymore... it was starting to make him feel sick. "Yeah. That's right. Hopefully that should take care of the big Moomba too."

"Quick thinking," Lena said mildly, as if she were complimenting him on a good game of Battleship. She stepped carefully around Katu, and started toward Chris, extending her hand. "My name's Lena, what's you-?"

She fainted, and it was only because he'd been half-expecting it that Chris was fast enough to catch her.

Epilogue.

Two days later.

It was Friday afternoon, and terminal 1 of Los Angeles International Airport was standing room only. No less than two hundred and fifty people hovered near the stagnant baggage carousels, impatience burning their souls. Nobody spoke, even those who had met family here. They just stared at the conveyor belts, as if they could make them start moving through collective willpower.

"This is preposterous!" a young man with stark white hair spat. His face had been fixed in a permanent scowl from the moment he'd stepped off the plane. "How can it possibly take them this long to unload our bags?"

"Cool yer jets, Pete," his companion said, her voice steady and calm. "Everybody else here's gotta wait

too."

"Everybody else *had* to take that interminable plane ride. We could have been here four hours ago if we'd come under our own power..."

"Don't you ever just feel like relaxing?" she asked.

"Of course! I relax all the time! But I'm refreshed and bored again in the time it takes most people to kick their feet up— oh, for God's sake!"

He vanished, and the girl rolled her eyes up to the ceiling, knowing what was coming. The rubber flap at the end of the conveyor belt moved once, and three suitcases appeared on the still-motionless conveyor belt. Before the bystanders had a chance to register this, two duffels and a golf bag appeared beside them. Then an assortment of backpacks. A baby seat. Four more suitcases. A duct-taped cardboard box.

Within fifteen seconds, everyone's luggage was stacked up on the conveyor belts, and the young man had reappeared next to his companion. His vanishing act had gone unnoticed, thanks to the luggage.

With a scowl, he handed her bag over. "If you ever manage to talk me into taking public transportation again, we are only bringing carry-ons."

The two of them started for the double doors leading out onto the sun-drenched sidewalk. "This is your last chance, Marie," the man said, sobering suddenly as they reached the doors. "You can still back out of this."

"Has t'be done," she said as they stepped out onto the sidewalk and she summoned a cab. "Actually, shoulda been done a long time ago."

He harumphed and opened the door for her as their cab rolled up to the curb. "Well, let's get it over with then."

Marie slipped into the seat and Pietro, the mutant more often known as Quicksilver, slid in beside her. He put an arm around her shoulders and she settled her head down against him, comforted by his presence.

"Avengers West Coast compound," Quicksilver said to the cabbie. "And be quick about it."

Smiling at that, Marie – Rogue – closed her eyes and tried not to think about what she would say to Carol Danvers when they got there.

Next Issue: A quiet day on the compound is disrupted when the woman who ruined Warbird's life drops by for a visit. Will Carol be able to forgive and forget...?

Yeah, right. Remember what book your reading...

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Captain Marvel shunted Titan into the Negative Zone in M2K's **Captain Marvel #15**.

"I appreciate you making the house call, doc," Hawkeye said, moving down the hall alongside his guest. The crutches were a pain in the ass – almost as bad as the thick white cast that encapsulated his right leg – but they allowed him a long, long stride, and he could move pretty fast on them, so that keeping up with his surprisingly spry guest wasn't difficult.

"No trouble at all," Doctor Stephen Strange replied. He walked sedately, his hands joined in front of him, his massive red Cloak of Levitation billowing out dramatically behind despite the fact that there was no breeze in the hallway. The truth was, *real* magic folk (a class that didn't include Wanda, the Scarlet Witch, as far as Hawkeye was concerned) had always kind of creeped Clint Barton out. Strange was by far the least creepy of that lot, but he still wasn't the kind of guy the archer would feel comfortable sitting down to a game of poker with.

"You say Mr. Powell *swallowed* the Moomba figurine," Strange said, "and then changed from the Darkhawk body to his own human form."

"Right. From what he told me, whatever body he's not using gets stored in another dimension. That cut the connection between Moomba and the witch doctor, Katu, and killed their power."

"But you believe there is some danger of Moomba, and perhaps even Katu, rising again if Christopher changes back to Darkhawk."

"Right, because then the figurine would be back in this reality, full of people who believe in it." Hawkeye tried to shrug, found it was impossible with the crutches in his armpits, and settled for tilting his head instead. "We don't know anything for sure, doc, but we don't want to take any chances. He could switch to his Darkhawk body and try to sick it up, but he said he's not even sure he can make that body vomit. It's some sort of android/clone thing . . ."

"Very well. I think I may be able to—"

The wall to Hawkeye's left erupted like it had been hit by a mortar round. A body flew through the hole, less than a foot in front of their noses, the wind of its passing blowing the archer backwards off of his feet. Strange stood his ground, unperturbed, and Hawkeye thought he heard him mutter something quickly, under his breath. The next thing Hawkeye knew, he was standing upright again, several feet farther down the hallway.

A woman was sitting against the wall, struggling to get to her feet. Hawkeye only caught glimpses of her around Strange's billowing cloak – a striking figure in green and black street clothes, a distinctive white skunk stripe splitting a head full of fox red hair.

"Damn it, Carol!" skunk girl was saying. "Ah didn't come here t'fight!"

A familiar yellow-white energy blast shot through the hole, exploding against the woman's chest and driving her into the opposite wall. A second woman – blonde, sheathed in a costume that was little more than a bathing suit – followed right behind it, slamming into the other's midsection and carrying both of them through the wall at her back.

"*Warbird!*" Hawkeye shouted. He yanked out his ID card, thumbed the pressure pad that would call a general alert.

"This is Hawkeye," he said into the card. "All available West Coast Avengers, gather on the South lawn of the compound STAT. That means 'pronto', Two-Gun."

"Unless I'm mistaken, we've got one of those punch-'em-up team crossovers going on out here."

Marvel 2000 Proudly Presents

Issue #12

UNFORGIVABLE

*Plot by Chris Munn & Russ Anderson
Script by Russ Anderson*

One hour ago.

The blue-furred man sat with his butt in the chair and his feet on the console. He was bent double, tapping on the keyboard between his bare toes as if this was the most comfortable position in the world. A floating, holographic image of a DNA helix appeared in the air over the console, and he studied it for a moment before sighing and leaning back in the chair.

"I don't know what to tell you, Carol."

Carol Danvers, dressed in her Warbird costume, stepped down out of the spectroanalysis machine – a device custom-designed by Tony Stark years ago to study what was going on in the bodies of superhumans with energy-manipulating talents. It was several hundred million dollars worth of equipment, but Carol dearly would have liked to tear it into little tiny bits at that moment.

"Come on, Hank," she said lightly, making a heroic effort to hold onto her temper – Iron Man had once called it her "famous" temper, for which she would have slugged him, if that wouldn't have proved his point. "Are you telling me that master geneticist Henry McCoy can't figure out why my powers are fluctuating?"

Hank McCoy, the Beast, raised a furry arm and scratched perplexedly at the crown of his head. He looked just like a monkey when he did it, and Carol had to bite her lip to keep from laughing. It would only occur to her later that Hank had intended it to be funny, to lighten her up a little bit.

"As you know, your powers aren't genetically-derived," he explained. "Not entirely anyway. It's not like you're a mutant, with a nice, convenient little X-factor I can isolate and poke with a stick until I get the reaction I want. Your powers are derived from a subspace connection with a binary star system, Carol. I'm not even sure how a star is supposed to give you the powers of flight and energy generation, much less how to fix glitches in the power line."

"I thought my powers had leveled off. I haven't had any problems with them for months now."

Hank nodded, tapping his chin thoughtfully. "I've been thinking about that . . ." His mouth twisted, as if he was reluctant to go on.

"Just say what's on your mind, Hank. There's a reason I asked you to come out here and check me out rather than Hank Pym or any of the other bazillion scientists we've got on hand. You're among friends."

He kicked off the console and swiveled the chair her way, whipping his legs around so that they were hanging over one of the arms now, and he was stretched across the chair sideways. "How's your drinking, Carol?"

"Excuse me?"

"Your drinking." He put up his hands, palms out. "You told me to be straight. I know it's a sore subject, but I need to know: have you been drinking?"

She raised her chin, looked him in the eye, and said, "I haven't touched anything stronger than cough syrup in six months."

He nodded. "That's what I thought." He kicked his feet around again, and lifted himself so that he was now squatting in the seat. "Do you remember when I first looked you over, back when the team was getting back together following that Morgan Le Fay business? Your powers were in flux at the time, cycling between your current levels and the cosmic power you enjoyed when you went by the name Binary."

"Right. But they settled right after that."

"That was when you started drinking heavily though, right? I mean, obviously the roots of your," –pause– "alcoholism were already in place, but *that* was when you really started diving into the bottle. You needed the release, between the pressure of proving yourself as an Avenger again, the uncertainty surrounding your powers, and whatever else was going on in your life at the time."

Carol was looking away. She had passed anger and now felt only ashamed. Talking about this with a doctor was bad enough, but Hank was her friend, and she hated – *hated* – that her friends knew about this terrible weakness in her. "Yeah," she said finally, "I guess your right."

"It's obvious then," he said. "It's stress."

"I don't follow you."

"Your powers freaked out at a time when you were torn between coming back to Earth and continuing to fly around space as Binary. They leveled off after you joined the Avengers and started boozing it hardcore. Alcohol is a depressant, Carol. Despite all the trouble your drinking was causing, it was keeping you relaxed enough that your powers were able to stabilize."

"So you're saying that I'm in flux again because I haven't had a drink in so long." She dry-washed her face with both hands, and her voice was despairing when she spoke again. "Great. Let's go. You can buy the first round."

Hank had propped himself up, with two hands on the arms of the chair like parallel bars while his crossed legs dangled in-between. "That's not what I'm saying. You just need to make a conscious effort to remove some of the stress in your life. Take some yoga classes. Tell your agent you're taking a year off from writing."

"And if none of that works?"

He frowned. "We both know what causes most of the stress in your life, Carol."

"You're saying I should quit the team."

It was a while before Hank would answer her. Finally, he looked her with an emotionless doctor's stare – not the look of a concerned friend at all, because a friend would never suggest what he was about to.

"If nothing else works," he said, "I'm saying you should strongly consider it."

"Lena! Lena Myers!"

The girl paused and looked back over her shoulder, pushing bright pink hair out of her eyes and smiling politely at the young man walking toward her across the lawn. The other man in Lena's life at the moment, the butler who had met her at the gate and was escorting her into the house, stopped beside her and waited patiently, his hands joined in front of him.

"Darkhawk, right?" Lena said as the first guy caught up to them. He was good-looking . . . in a dorky kind of Ed Norton way.

"Not at the moment, no," he said, extending a hand. "Just Chris."

She blinked in surprise, but took his hand. "Nice to meet you, Just Chris. But don't you have a secret identity to keep?"

"It's only kind of secret," he said, shrugging. "If anybody out there is really dying to know who Darkhawk is, they could figure it out. Besides, you already saw my face."

"Oh yeah, how is that going? Have you changed back at all?"

"Not yet. We don't want Moomba to get another foot in the door. In fact, we've got a specialist coming in today to have a look at me." Chris glanced at the butler, who still hadn't said a word. "Juan. How ya doin'?"

"I'm doing well, *Senor Powell*." As if Chris talking to him had given him permission to move, he looked at his watch. "I'm afraid I have other duties to attend to. Would you mind escorting Miss Myers to the house?"

"Of course! No problem at all."

Juan gave Chris a small, knowing smile, and turned down the walk. "Thank you. Good day, *senorita*."

"*Ciao*, Juan."

He left, and Chris waved an arm toward the main house. "So," he said as they started along the walk, "what brings you back here? No more African tree gods, I hope . . ."

She shook her head, and hitched up the canvas backpack she was wearing over one shoulder. "I'm here to see Hawkeye, actually." –Chris's face fell– "I think he's the only person in the world who remembers who my grandfather was, and he asked if he could see some of grandpa's stuff some time. I couldn't find much except for the journal, but there were a couple of notebooks and I found a shoebox full of pictures

from one of his expeditions."

They had reached the house. Chris held the door open for her, and she stepped into the entry foyer, a grand, upward-sweeping room with eggshell-colored walls and adobe sensibilities. Lena paused to look around as Chris closed the door behind her.

"So what do you do when you're not changing into hideous, armored monsters, Mr. Powell?"

The question caught him off-guard and he laughed. "Not much," he said, leading her down into a sunken great room with one glass wall and a skylight overhead. "The truth is, I don't really feel like I'm settled here yet. I don't know anybody besides the other Avengers . . . and you, of course."

"Of course," she agreed.

He pulled his ID card out. "Hold on and I'll see if I can get Hawkeye up here for you."

"No rush," she replied. She was looking through the glass wall when she said it, so she didn't see Chris smiling at her.

"Well, in that case . . ." He cleared his throat and put a hand on the back of his neck. What in the world was wrong with him? He was no Casanova, granted, but neither was he completely without a track record. He knew how to talk to a woman... but something about this one turned him into Charlie Brown trying to mack on the little red-haired girl.

She wasn't really his type. He'd always dated straight-laced white girls, corn-fed and not too wild. Good wife material, in other words. Lena Myers didn't look like she was ready to be anybody's wife. That pink hair and that jagged, almost 80's punk-ish 'do . . . and she couldn't have been any taller than 5'4" . . . and she wasn't as stacked as Chris would have liked either, to be perfectly honest. So how did she do it?

He opened his mouth again, to offer her a tour of the compound this time, but Lena, who was peering out the window, beat him to it.

"Hey. Looks like I'm not the only visitor you've got today."

Chris stepped forward to have a look for himself, but whoever the newcomer was, they'd already moved too close to the house to be seen from the window. A moment later, the doorbell rang.

"Weird," Chris said.

"What's weird?" Lena asked.

He started across the room. "If it's an Avenger, they should have just walked in. If it's *not* an Avenger, they should have been met at the gate and escorted by one of the staff. I don't think I've ever heard that doorbell ring, come to think of it. What did they look like?"

"I don't know. Man and woman, both tall. Funky hair."

Chris paused on the threshold. "*You* thought they had funky hair?"

She smirked and flipped him off good-naturedly. Chris's heart fluttered. He turned . . . and almost walked

right into Warbird, who was striding quickly across the entryway in full costume, headed for the door.

"Oh! Hey, Warbird . . ."

Chris had suffered prolonged lust for Carol Danvers ever since he'd arrived at the Avengers West compound, but in the weeks they'd been working together, spending time together both on and off the battlefield, that lust had faded into the background of his regard for her. She liked the same things Chris liked – the same sports, the same cars. Hell, if it wasn't for that amazing body and those killer blue eyes, Chris might have eventually come to regard her as one of the guys. She was definitely the best buddy he had on the team.

She brushed by him now with hardly a look, lips pressed into a thin line and eyes narrowed to dangerous slits. She was in a mood, that was for sure, and Chris took a step back as she reached for the front door.

"Don't worry," she growled, finally deigning to address him as she pulled the door open. "I'll get it."

A man and a woman were standing on the stoop, and as Lena had pointed out, they did indeed have funky hair. The guy – whose features looked as if they'd been chiseled rather than grown – had a head full of windswept locks as white as bleached bone. The woman was a redhead, with a white stripe peeling down the middle that just *had* to be a dye-job.

Carol froze in the doorway, her shoulders and back going rigid. Chris couldn't see her expression, but he had a great view of all the blood draining out of the white-haired guy's face.

And that was when all hell broke loose.

Hawkeye had almost reached the hole in the wall when a man-shaped blur flashed past him, following the battling women. Hawkeye started to tip over, caught himself, and straightened.

"He-eeey," he said, slipping his bow off his back and reaching for an arrow. "I *know* that blur."

"Would you like assistance?" Strange asked from his shoulder.

"Nah," he replied, nocking the arrow he'd selected. "I got this, Doc."

The women – the first was Warbird of course, which made the other the X-Man known as Rogue, which in turn made this a big, fat mess – had punched all the way through the building to the South lawn, which they were now in the process of demolishing. The blur was circling the combatants now, looking for an opening. Hawkeye watched carefully, eyes narrowing, heartbeat slowing, bowstring tightening. Then he released.

The arrow hit the grass directly in the blur's path, exploding into gooey white foam. The blur hit it, sending it splashing to either side in twin waves. And then the blur stumbled and fell flat on his face, digging another furrow in the lawn before coming to a halt.

Hawkeye slipped the bow back over his shoulder and hopped across the lawn on his crutches. Splayed on the ground, groaning and shaking his head groggily as he got to his knees, was Pietro Maximoff, more widely known as the mutant speedster Quicksilver.

"How's it hangin', Pete?" Hawkeye said.

"That . . ." Quicksilver paused to spit sod out of his teeth. "That was a trifle . . . unnecessary, Barton."

"We're old pals, Pete. I knew there was no way you were gonna slow down unless I made you do it."

"I'm trying to stop those two before they destroy the compound!"

"Me too. So tell me why your girl wanted to start a fight."

Quicksilver vibrated his feet, shattering the glue that had hardened around his ankles and lower calves. He glowered at Hawkeye as he got to his feet. "Then you know of my and Marie's . . . relationship?"

"You mean Rogue? Sure I know, Pete. I still talk to Wanda, and she talks to you."

"Rogue didn't come here to fight. She came here to apologize. I *told* her it was a bad idea."

Hawkeye winced. "What Rogue did to Carol . . . that's not just something you can pop in and say, 'Sorry girlfriend', and walk out again. She should have known Warbird would—"

"Spare me your excuses!" Quicksilver spat, slicing a hand through the air between them. "Danvers struck her before she could get a word out! You people do not understand the changes Rogue has been through. Her power is much greater than it has ever been, and the only reason Warbird isn't dead yet is because Rogue is practicing the restraint that your Avengers apparently cannot." He shook his head in disgust. "I don't have time to stand here and discuss this with you."

"If Warbird is in danger, perhaps I should stop them," Strange said. Hawkeye jumped at the sound. He hadn't even been aware the wizard was standing nearby. "The Crimson Bands of Cytorrak should do the job, no matter how powerful Rogue has become."

Hawkeye started to nod, then he got a good look at the combatants and shook his head.

"No," he said, raising a hand, keeping his eyes fixed on Warbird's face. "Let's let this play out a while longer."

"Are you *mad*?" Quicksilver demanded. "I won't be responsible for—"

Rogue, who had been taking the hits without retaliation for minutes now, had finally had enough. She whipped an arm out, catching Warbird in the stomach and sending her hurtling past the men. Quicksilver pulled Hawkeye out of the way as the blonde heroine rocketed through the space he'd occupied moments before, and crashed into one of the still-standing walls of the main house.

"Do you see?" Quicksilver demanded as Rogue hurtled past them in pursuit. Then, without waiting to see if Hawkeye did, in fact, see, he disappeared in a now-familiar blur of blue and white.

Carol shrugged off the portion of ceiling that had come down on top of her, and rose to her feet. That blow had been a lot harder than she'd expected.

Once, years ago, a young member of the Brotherhood of Evil Mutants codenamed Rogue had used her

ability to absorb memories and skills to wipe Carol Danvers' mind like a slate. The absorption was supposed to be temporary, but something went wrong – Rogue held on too long, Carol's unique hybrid body chemistry interacted strangely with the girl's power, something – and the transference had been permanent.

It had taken Carol years to climb up out of the hole Rogue had scooped out of her. Things changed in those years – Rogue became an X-Man, seeking redemption, and Carol went from damaged human being to demigod and back to superhero. Nowadays, Carol's power levels were approximately what they were when Rogue stole them from her, which meant the two ladies should have been about even.

But Rogue had just clobbered the hell out of her, no mistake. Carol's head was still ringing.

She looked up and saw the witch soaring toward her, and all thought of being outclassed vanished underneath all that hatred and frustration again. She laced up her fists and heaved them upward, catching the mutant underneath the chin and sending her looping backward through the air. Carol followed, taking to the air and hammering her with energy blasts.

"Do you have any idea what you took from me, you *bitch*? Do you have *any idea*?"

Rogue crouched on the ground, covering her head again as the beams washed over her. Deciding that shooting her wasn't satisfying enough, Carol dropped out of the air, aiming a kick at the girl's head.

To her surprise, organic steel shimmered into existence over Rogue's skin. Carol bounced painfully off of her and then, before she could hit the ground, was struck with a ruby red optic blast. The shot sent her spinning through the air down the hill, finally crashing into the compound's outer wall.

"You think Ah don't know?" Rogue roared as she soared at her. They collided, and Rogue didn't allow her enemy time to get up. She just armored up her hands again and rained blows down on Warbird's head.

"You think there's a day goes by Ah don't think about what Ah did to you?" Rogue wailed. "Ah came here to apologize, you—"

Something blue and furry hit her in the back. She stumbled forward, but kept her footing, feeling strong hands weave under her arms and behind her neck, putting her in a full nelson.

"That's enough, Rogue," the Beast said, his voice falsely mild. "Why don't we all sit down and settle this over a nice game of Parcheesi, huh?"

Rogue roared and bent forward, thrusting her arms forward. Strong as the Beast was, she was stronger, and faced with the decision of holding onto her or having his arms separated from their sockets, he wisely chose to let her go. The next moment, she'd wheeled around, grabbed him by the ankle and flung him away.

"Damn it, Hank," she muttered, as she turned back toward Carol. "Even *you* aren't on my side in this . . ."

"Some things can't be forgiven, you skunk-haired sl—"

That was as far as Carol Danvers got. She'd been ready to sucker-punch the nose off the X-Man's pretty little face when she turned, but Rogue was suddenly covered in silvery organic steel again. Carol's punch drove her back a couple steps, but the Avenger hadn't been ready to hit something so hard, and her hand crumpled at the impact.

Carol fell to her knees, holding her damaged hand, while Rogue wiped an arm across the blue oily blood coming out of her metal lips, and then stepped forward.

"Ah don't just have your powers anymore," she said, grabbing Carol by the hair and lifting her face up. "Ah can access any set of powers Ah've ever absorbed now, honey. And trust me when Ah say Ah've absorbed a whole lot o' people since you and me went at it."

She punched Carol in the gut, but held onto her hair so she couldn't spill over onto the ground.

"Ah've fought the bad guys, Ah've sacrificed and bled and hurt all these years, tryin' to make up for what Ah did t'you. And Ah finally reached a point where I was sorta happy, ready to like myself a little bit again, feelin' like maybe Ah'd paid enough. Ah thought Ah'd clean the slate by coming to talk to you.

"But you won't. Let me. *Forget.*"

She punctuated this by releasing Carol's hair and drop-kicking her at the wall. She hit it hard, and slumped to her knees on the ground below the damaged brickwork, barely conscious.

Thick, glowing bands of red sprang to life around Rogue, binding her arms to her sides and lifting her up into the air. She whipped her head around as far as she could under the circumstances, and saw Doctor Strange standing next to Hawkeye and Pietro.

"That's enough . . . Marie, is it?" Hawkeye hobbled over to Warbird. "Let's everybody just calm down and talk about this."

"*Calm down?*" Rogue demanded. There was a hollow imploding sound, a poof of black smoke, and suddenly she was standing three feet away from the bands that had been holding her, swathed in the smell of brimstone. She took a step towards Warbird, and found the narrow bulb of one of Hawkeye's trick arrowheads hovering right in front of her face.

"It's over," he said.

"Where were you when she was pounding on *me*?" Rogue demanded. "Where were you when she sucker-punched me and knocked me through your damn building, you purple asshole?"

"I'd say she's paid for that."

Rogue blinked, then paused and shook her head. "But Ah haven't, have I? No matter how much Ah fight and try. Ah'm never gonna pay enough. Not in her eyes." She looked up, locked Hawkeye's gaze with her own. "Not in yours."

Her hand whipped around far faster than he could see, snapping his bow in half and knocking him backward. He sprawled out on the grass, fumbling at his belt for another arrowhead, but Quicksilver zipped in-between the women before the archer could make his move.

"Stop it, Marie," he said, his hands up to ward his lover off. "Just stop it. She's had enough, and so have you."

"Don't you tell me when I've had enough, Pete."

"Get out of the way, Quicksilver," Warbird snuffled from behind the speedster. Remarkably, she was

getting to her feet. "I can handle her."

"Oh shut up, you adolescent harpy," Quicksilver snarled, not even bothering to look at her. Then, to Rogue, "If you keep going, you'll kill her. Is that what you want?"

Rogue was so angry she was trembling now, her fists clenched at her side. "Ah can't believe you're standin' there, tryin' to lecture me on restraint. *You!*"

"I'm not lecturing you," he insisted. "But you came here, seeking redemption, when there was nothing forcing you to do it. If you want it so badly, how much farther out of your reach will it be if you kill her?"

Warbird's hand fell on his shoulder. "I'm telling you, Maximoff, get out of my—"

A detached arrowhead struck Carol in the chest and popped open, releasing a green mist that quickly engulfed her upper body. She choked once, then collapsed into the trampled grass. Quicksilver vibrated from head to toe, dispersing the gas before it could knock him out too, and nodded in gratitude at Hawkeye.

"Why are you on her side?" Rogue demanded, jabbing a finger at Carol. There were tears standing in her eyes now. "You know what Ah've been through! You know how much I've tried to make up for what I did!"

"Marie, I'm *not* on her side. I just don't want you to make a mist—"

Rogue screamed, and the sound seemed to carry years and years of frustration and self-loathing out into the open air, out where everybody could see it, leaving her even emptier than before. She batted Quicksilver aside and drove both fists into the ground next to Warbird's unconscious body. Everybody from Hawkeye to Quicksilver to the just-arrived Chris Powell and Lena Myers were thrown off their feet by the impact, and Warbird flopped limply. Only Stephen Strange kept his footing.

"Stay away from me," Rogue growled, turning eyes that suddenly glowed ruby red on Quicksilver and the rest of them. "If Ah'm such a damn monster, you all just stay the hell away from me. And that goes double for you, Quicksilver."

And then she rocketed up into the air. Quicksilver took a step forward, calling out her name, but she was already out of sight. A hand fell on his shoulder.

"Hang on, Pete," Hawkeye said, trying to balance on his one good leg without benefit of his crutch. "We'll scramble a Quinjet for you. You'll have a better chance of catching her in—"

Quicksilver shrugged the hand off. "Don't touch me, Barton! What kind of team are you running here? Since when did the Avengers turn into a grade school for superpowered bullies?"

Clint opened his mouth to reply, but Quicksilver was already gone, leaving nothing but a blue-white afterimage in his wake as he ran over the wall and disappeared from sight. Hawkeye stammered, then sighed and shook his head.

The Beast, dripping wet, strode up to them, stooped, and used the hem of Dr. Strange's Cloak of Levitation to wipe his glasses off before putting them back on his face.

"Well," he said. "That might have gone better. Good thing that pool was there though, eh?"

Warbird groaned, and pushed herself up to her knees. The exertion left her breathless, and she had to

pause before trying to rise to her feet.

"Don't... don't everybody rush to help me at once," she said, tottering and reaching back to steady herself against the shattered wall with her one good hand.

"Are you okay, Carol?" Hawkeye asked. "Anything broken?"

She started to shake her head, decided that might not be a good idea, and instead said, "No."

"Good. You're on probation."

Her head snapped up. "*What?*"

"You heard me," Hawkeye said, swiping a hand through the air. "Fighting is what we do, Carol, but that was just . . . just stupid. I'm so damn disappointed in you right now, I can't even explain it."

"You— you know what she did to me, Clint! She *stole my life!*"

Hawkeye didn't even try to argue with that one. He just turned and began to hobble away, followed closely by Dr. Strange.

"Hank?" Warbird pleaded, looking toward the Beast. "Come on, Hank. You know what I go through, every single day. How could I just forget about that?"

But the Beast couldn't even meet her eyes. He looked at the grass, turned, and began to follow Hawkeye and the wizard back toward the compound. After a moment of uncertainty, both Chris and Lena fell in behind him.

"Where are you going?" Carol demanded, swiping the blood off her swelling lips. "Don't turn your backs on me! Don't you understand? *Don't you see what she did to me?*"

Carol roared – but by that time it was more of a heartbroken wail – and drove her fist through what was left of the wall at her back. When she turned back around, she was alone. The others had retreated into the house.

"Warbird?"

She looked up sharply, cocking a fist back, ready to beat the hell out of anybody else that wanted to tell her she'd been wrong. She was disappointed to see that it was Captain Marvel, hovering a dozen feet overhead, and that he didn't look like he wanted to fight.

"What happened?" he asked, dropping to the ground beside her. The star effect that normally covered his face and hands swirled away to reveal handsome, blonde Caucasian features. "Looks like Ultron dropped by for a visit."

"What do you care?" she snapped. "Since when do you give a damn what happens around here? You only show up long enough to beat the bad guys down and then you're off again before anybody can ask you any questions. Right? So *what the hell do you care?*"

"Whoa." Genis reeled back, putting both hands up in surrender. "Hey, obviously I missed out on something here. I just . . . I needed to talk to somebody. I know I've been distant since I joined, but I think

I'm ready to talk about it finally, you know. Since you knew my dad, I thought maybe you would—"

"Go talk to Hawkeye," Carol spat. "He's so good at right and wrong, he'll have some good advice for you. Or maybe he'll just put you on probation."

She crouched, and then shot up into the air, into a straight ballistic climb. Genis followed her with his eyes, his mouth hanging open, and then he looked again at the ground, at the rubble left over from whatever battle had taken place here.

All alone. Just a stupid kid, trying to pick up the pieces of daddy's life. And nobody around to understand him.

Genis scowled, and the blue-white star effect swirled to life again over his skin. Picking a direction other than the one Warbird had just retreated in, he flew away as fast as he could go without peeling the atmosphere off this stupid, fragile world.

Next Issue: While half the team heads off to San Francisco to call on an old friend, a forgotten enemy from their past brings tragedy to their doorstep. Meanwhile, Iron Man begins his investigation into just what is going on with Captain Marvel and Rick Jones. Be here for the return of Chris Munn to scripting duties, and for part 1 of "Thermodynamic".

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Rogue absorbed Carol Danvers' powers and memories in Marvel's classic *Avengers Annual* #10.
- Rogue and Quicksilver left the X-Men in M2K's **X-Men Omega #50**.