



M2K Cyberback #2

Collecting original AWC issues #13-17 by Chris Munn, Russ Anderson, & Mike Exner III

FEATURING:



Hawkeye



Iron Man



Warbird



Vagabond



Darkhawk



Beast



Wasp



Two-Gun Kid



Captain Marvel



Hank Pym



Stingray



Wonder Man



Moon Knight

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**King County Hospital
Brooklyn , New York
Three Weeks Ago**

The door to the emergency room burst open, four paramedics rushing into the hospital with their attention focused solely on the young black girl that writhed on the stretcher between them. "For god's sake, what's wrong with her? She's burning up!" Met immediately by a group of nurses and a doctor, no one paid any mind to the older man that followed behind.

"Help my daughter, please, help her..." the man pleaded, watching with hurt-filled eyes as his only daughter convulsed on the table. Sweat poured from her body, mixing with the tears that streamed down her cheek as she bit down on her lower lip in an attempt to keep from screaming.

"Sir, please, I need some information," a nurse said, placing her hand on the father's shoulder, "what's the girl's name."

"Janet," he answered, never taking his eyes off of his little girl, "her name's Janet Sorenson."

"Are you her father?" the nurse asked, writing the information down on her clipboard.

"Yeah," he again answered, "I'm her father. Terry Sorenson, her father."

"Sir," one of the doctors called out from the girl's side, "we need to know what caused this. I can't begin to treat her because I don't know what's wrong with her!"

Terence Sorenson gritted his teeth as a dozen different explanations ran through his mind. "If I tell you," he finally said, "then you won't help her..."

"Sir, the doctors need to know what's wrong with your daughter," the nurse chimed in, returning her hand to the man's shoulder. Terry lowered his head and sighed.

"She's a mutant," he stated slowly, causing every nurse and doctor in the area to snap their heads backward to look at him, their eyes wide with horror. "Please," Terry again pleaded, "help her."

The medical staff exchanged nervous, confused glances with each other, stunned into silence by Sorenson's revelation. One of the doctors turned his gaze back down toward the girl, and his eyes got impossibly wider as he saw a strange mist slowly seeping from the girl's pores. "Is that...steam?" he mumbled to himself.

And then Janet Sorenson *exploded*, a concussive wave of flame discharging from her body in one agonizing burst. The flesh was seared from the bodies of the hospital staff, reducing them to blackened skeletons in the span of a mere second. Steel and concrete proved to be no obstacle as well, as the explosive force thoroughly destroyed the entire emergency room, and nearly took the entire wing of the hospital along with it.

After a moment of sustained silence following the obliteration of the building, the sobs of the girl could be heard. Curled into the fetal position amidst the liquefied steel gurney, only one audible word could be understood amongst her choking cries. "Daddy," she called out, "daddy."

"I'm here, honey," Terry said as he knelt down, wrapping his large arms around his daughter, "everything's going to be okay."

He looked around at the massive amount of death and destruction that surrounded them.

"I promise."

Avengers West Coast # 13

"Thermodynamic" Part One

*Written by Chris Munn
Plot by Chris Munn and Russ Anderson*

San Francisco , California Present Day

The city was gorgeous. Sitting at the street-side café, enjoying possibly the finest cup of tea she'd ever tasted, Janet Van Dyne could only smile at the beautiful California day. Granted, it was much the same as every other California day, but it seemed as if this was the first time she'd actually taken a moment to appreciate the area. Despite her brief stay in Los Angeles during her tenure with the West Coast branch of the Avengers, she always considered herself more of a New York kinda gal. Taking another sip of her tea, she realized that perhaps she'd have to change perspectives a bit.

"This seat taken?" a familiar voice asked from behind her, causing her to smile widely. Turning around in her seat, an old friend gave her a wink of his eye.

"Clint Barton, you are absolutely no good at sneaking up on people," she replied as her former teammate bent down to give her a hug, "glad you could make it down." As Clint took a seat beside her, Janet noticed the two other people making their way to the table. While Carol Danvers carried almost a permanent frown on her face (not to mention the numerous bruises that accompanied said frown on her features), Hank McCoy was all smiles and waves, his normal bestial appearance concealed by a holographic image inducer.

"My dear Ms. Van Dyne," McCoy addressed as he took her hand in his, kissing it like the gentleman he liked to pretend to be, "it's been way too long since this bashful blue-hued Beast has had an excuse to be gallant."

"Not counting the three sorority girls he chatted up on the trolley earlier," Clint remarked with a smirk. "It seems our buddy's still got a little bit of the ol' Avenger charm kickin' in."

"Actually, were you privy to the goings-on of the not-so-merry mutants over the past year or so," Hank stated, a slight tinge of sorrow in his normally jubilant demeanor, "you'd understand why being back with the Avengers is reawakening the little bit of goofball that this old throw-rug has left."

"The Avengers will always be your home, Hank," Jan chimed in, offering seats to him and Carol, "just like it'll always be ours."

"Don't mind Carol," Clint said to Jan, flicking a lemon from his complimentary water glass at the brooding Ms. Danvers, "she's still peeved at me for putting her on probation after she did something stupid."

"It's because I don't like having a chaperone when I go out," she answered, batting away the lemon with ease. "Just because my powers may be in flux somewhat doesn't mean the walking hairball has to follow

me around everywhere I go. No offense, Jan, but I wouldn't have come today if Clint hadn't made me as part of my *probation*. And remember, Clint, what's stupid to *you* was completely rational to *me*."

"Worry not, my slightly moody sparrow of Kree aggression," the Beast stated, hoping to turn her attention back to him, "I'm not here to make sure you don't smoke or miss your curfew. Hawkeye asked me to stay along until we can determine just what's making you go all wiggly...literally, not emotionally. So, until I do, consider me the very large monkey on your back."

"Why didn't Tony come?" Jan asked, removing her sunglasses as she spoke.

"He said he had something else he had to check up on," Hawkeye replied, "but for us to give you his best regards."

"The old guard seems to be growing apart lately," Jan commented, "I had a very brief chat with Thor a few weeks back, and he was strangely distant, almost *cold*."

"Yeah, well, that's nothing compared to the new reality show that's hit the airwaves," Clint added. "Have you seen *Champions* yet?"

"Please, guys," Henry said, holding his hands into the air as a show of peace, "*ixnay* on the *Ampionschay*. I invited somebody else to our impromptu luncheon, and we *are* all still friends, despite our current career choices."

"You know, when I was starting out as an actor," a voice said from the sidewalk next to their café table, "they always told me that timing was everything." The four Avengers all looked over, feet firmly planted in mouths, at the slightly perturbed Simon Williams.

"No flying cameras following you around today, Simon?" Clint asked, a hint of irritation in his voice. "Didn't know your brother gave you guys time off."

"Clint!" Jan chided, shooting him a wicked furrowing of her eyebrows before turning back toward Wonder Man. "Simon, please, take a seat and join us. It's great to see you again!"

"I told Erik that if I saw a camera following me today," Simon explained as he took the final seat around the circular table, "I'd break his fingers. So don't worry, the world won't get to see that *World's Most Amazing Archer* spin-off any time soon."

"Focus, people," Carol interrupted, halting any reply Hawkeye may have had for the current Champion member, "Jan asked us here for a reason. Maybe we ought to get right to business..."

The Wasp sighed heavily before speaking, stirring her tea with the swizzle-stick as she gathered her thoughts. "It's about Hank – Pym, not McCoy – and the way he's been acting lately. Clint, Simon, you were there with me when the Vision..." She paused. "...when *Hank* did what he *had* to do. That one act nearly crippled him emotionally, and I don't know if he's getting any better."

"What are you saying, Jan?" Simon asked, leaning back in his chair with arms crossed against his chest. "Are we looking at a return of the old Yellowjacket or something?"

"He's not having another breakdown, if that's what you mean," Jan answered, rubbing her eyes between moments of speaking, "but he's intensely focused. He doesn't want to be a superhero anymore, or have anything to do with them...and I'm starting to think that includes *me* as well."

Rick Jones...the man that created the Avengers.

Iron Man had to stifle a small laugh as the thought ran through his mind. Soaring over the greater Los Angeles area, he found Rick to be a constant memory...whether it be as the deciding factor in the war between the Kree and Skrull races, as Captain America's former partner, or as the man responsible for the creation of the incredible Hulk, Rick Jones was as much a part of the superhero community as Stark himself. *And he's only half my age*, Tony thought to himself, sighing softly inside his helmet.

His bootjets flared as he changed direction, moving downward from his high point in the sky. The grass of the lawn scorched slightly as he touched down on the suburban lawn, his arrival drawing stares and gasps from the neighbors of the woman he was coming to visit. Normally, he hated giving any kind of connection between himself and civilians, but Rick's association with superheroes was public knowledge. Hell, he'd even written a best-selling book about it.

Striding confidently to the front door of the home, Iron Man hesitated slightly before knocking. He knew he needed to find out what the woman knew, but he still felt a twinge of guilt...would he be reopening wounds of which he wasn't even aware? Quickly coming to a decision, he rapped his steel knuckles lightly against the wooden door and waited.

"Can I help..." the words died in the young woman's throat as she threw open the door, expecting anybody but the imposing figure that stood in her doorway. Stark looked her over, his helmet covering up any expression on his face. The red-haired female was every bit as beautiful as he remembered, despite a few years passing since he'd last seen her.

"Marlo Jones?" he asked rhetorically. The still-stunned woman nodded slowly, as if it took her a moment to realize he was addressing her. Iron Man scowled. "I'm here to talk to you about Rick."

Henry Pym found it difficult to relax. Even sitting on the deck of the ocean-side home that he and Janet had bought after moving from New York, the sun baking his shirtless chest as he lay stretched out on a lawn chair, he found his mind wandering back to his work. With all the tests he still needed to make on the refinement of his Pym Particles, relaxing made him feel guilty...and Hank already felt guilty enough as it was.

His eyes squinted as he lowered his gaze along the horizon line, noticing a breaking of the waves. Finding his sunglasses to be little help in blocking the sun's reflection off the water from his eyes, he could actually see very little. Only when a large figure broke through the ocean's watery surface did he finally realize what he was looking at. Silhouetted by the sun behind him, the man's expansive wings stretched out into the sky, running the full length of his body and further. Gliding through the air, the winged man made his way to the wooden deck upon which Pym sat, and with a wet *thud* landed beside him.

"Hello, Walter," Hank greeted as he pushed his sunglass away from his eyes, positioning them atop his head. Walter Newell, also known as the undersea adventurer Stingray, nodded as his large glider wings fell limply to his arms, the wooden floor beneath him now soaked wet with the water that dripped off his suit.

"Was in the neighborhood, Hank," Stingray said as he removed the full-face cowl from his head, letting it drape down his back, "so I thought I'd stop in and say hello."

"This in a science capacity," Hank said with a slight frown as he stood from the chair, taking Newell's hand in a firm grip, "or an Avengers one?"

"I was an Avenger for all of about 5 minutes, Hank," Walter answered with a slight laugh, "and I've been an oceanographer for quite a bit longer than that. I'm actually curious about the new Pym Particle applications I hear you're working on."

Sliding open the glass door to his home, Pym motioned for Walter to follow. "Things are going slow right now, I have to admit. I've been trying to apply the Particles to mass reproduction efforts instead of just size changing. Imagine taking a glass of water and enlarging it to the point where it can irrigate an entire desert, or increasing the amounts of oil and coal that are slowly being depleted every day."

"Quite the lofty goal there," Stingray admitted as he stepped lightly across the carpet, trying not to leave soaking wet footprints as he followed Pym to the basement door. Henry said nothing in reply as the two descended down the staircase, entering a large underground lab below the house.

"Look, Hank," Newell began hesitantly, stopping his friend with a soft hand on the shoulder, "I heard about what happened with the Vision. Everybody's worried about you, and I know what it's like to drown yourself in your work – literally, in my case."

Pym sighed as he turned to face Stingray. Upon seeing the concern on the man's face, however, Henry forced a smile to form on his lips. "I appreciate the concern, Walter, really. I'm not breaking down again, no matter how many people think I'm going to."

"Hank, that's not..."

"No, it's okay," Pym interjected, raising a hand to cut off his friend's statement, "people are doomed to expect the worst, and I understand why. I've got Jan here with me, I've got my work, and I'm out of the superhero business...and that's everything I've ever wanted."

Before Stingray could offer any words of support, a large computer screen on the far end of the room suddenly came to life, attracting both men's attention. The face of a beautiful woman appeared on the screen, her natural beauty marred only by the blank expression on her face. "I apologize for interrupting Dr. Pym," the woman said, her voice echoing through the lab by way of a speaker system, "but you have a visitor at the front of the house."

"Thanks, Jocasta," Henry answered as he and Walter walked closer to the screen, "put whoever it is up on the monitor."

At Pym's command, the woman's face disappeared from the monitor, replaced by a camera view of the home's front porch. "Jocasta," Stingray commented, "why does that sound familiar?"

"Just a name I gave to the low grade A.I. that runs the house," Pym answered as he ran his hand over a mouse, moving the angle of the security camera, "a program with the personality of a block of wood. Sentient machines are something I've had my fill of, believe me."

"Now who," Pym muttered as a large black man came into view on the screen, a young girl cradled in his arms, "is *that*?"

"Open the door, Pym!" His daughter held in his arms, Terrence Sorensen paced back and forth frantically on the front lawn. He'd made the trip cross country, from New York to California, by way of a string of stolen cars. He could feel Janet's shallow breathing against his own chest, and he knew that she didn't have much time left. The man he'd come to see was a genius, however, and if anybody could save her it was him.

A man he had nearly killed years before.

"Identify yourself," a female voice said from a speaker above the front door, "and state your business with Dr. Pym."

"My daughter," he yelled, speaking to the speaker for lack of a better target, "she's deathly ill, and she needs his help!"

The woman's voice took longer to reply, but a reply indeed came. "I'm sorry," the dull, seemingly lifeless tone making the words impossibly hurt even more, "but Dr. Pym is not a medical doctor. His areas of specialty are biogenetics and cybernetics. I will happily call an ambulance to this address if you need..."

"No, no hospitals!" Sorensen yelled, setting his daughter on the grass while fighting back tears. "We'll just do this the hard way then, you cold hearted witch."

Walking to the front door, the black man's hands began to pulse with an unexpected glow of energy. While his right hand burst into a ball of flame, his left hand grew white with a coating of solid ice. Placing his frozen hand against the door, a blast of ice flash froze the wood. A kick from his leg shattered the brittle ice, causing the door to fall from its place in broken chunks.

"Warning!" the woman's voice said from the speaker box. "You are violating the privacy of Dr. Pym. Security measures are enab- *awwrkk*!"

Returning to the lawn, Sorensen picked up his daughter with his now normal hands, the speaker through which Jocasta had spoken now nothing but a melted slag of wires and metal. Turning back toward the open door, Terry narrowed his eyes at the two men that now stood in the house's foyer. He recognized Henry Pym immediately, but the man in the red and white winged costume was a mystery.

"Can I help you?" Pym asked, not pleased with the damage to his home.

"Pym, my daughter," Sorensen said forcefully, "she's going to die if you don't help her. Please, man, I'm sorry about what I did to you years ago, just...just *help* her!"

"Hank," Walter whispered from beneath the Stingray mask, "you know this guy?"

"Walter," Pym answered with a confused look on his face as he glanced over the desperate older man and his daughter, "I haven't the slightest *clue* who he is..."

Pietro Maximoff grunted in frustration. It had taken him 13.2 seconds to pack and load his few belongings into the Quinjet that rested in the hanger below Avengers Compound. Inactivity had slowed him down.

"Are you sure you have to leave so soon, Quicksilver?" Vagabond asked as the silver-haired mutant's hands became a blur, his destination programmed into the Quinjet's computer navigation system in a matter of seconds.

"My daughter is in New York ," he answered, not even bothering to glance at the young woman standing behind him, "and it has been too long since I have held her in my arms. I will bear even a reunion with my estranged wife for only a moment with little Luna. If you had children, Ms. Barnes, I'm sure you would understand."

Priscilla furrowed her brow as Pietro zoomed past her and down the jet's ramp, heading back into the compound for some forgotten item. He'd been at the Compound for only a few days, but anyone could tell how restless he was. His sister and daughter were on the other side of the country, and the woman he'd loved had left him. She understood his frustration, but still...he didn't have to be such an ass about it.

"Hey, Matt," she said as she slowly disembarked from the Quinjet, immediately spotting the Two-Gun Kid at the hanger door. "You here to see Quicksilver off?"

"I suppose so, darlin'," Matt answered, pushing his hat up farther on his head, exposing his eyes, "but it don't seem right, us being the only ones here when he leaves. We barely know the guy...Hawk and the rest are his friends."

"I intentionally planned my departure while Barton and Danvers were away," Pietro himself answered, once again in the room, a small teddy bear – a gift for his daughter – gripped in his hand, "I begrudgingly accepted the offer to stay here, and it is best that I take my leave sooner rather than later."

"You all set, then?" Priscilla asked, extending her hand to give Quicksilver a farewell handshake. Pietro merely turned his nose up at the two Avengers.

"Tell Iron Man that I will contact him after I arrive at Avengers Mansion," he said dismissively, "but that the situation yesterday between Danvers and Marie has brought shame to the proud name of the Avengers, as I'm sure he will understand."

Walking toward the Quinjet, Quicksilver stopped and turned back toward the three heroes. "The life of an Avenger is a difficult – and often tragic – one," he advised, "and I have seen great men crack under the pressure...myself included. Be well, Avengers."

With a blink of an eye, the son of Magneto was gone from their sight. The engines of the Quinjet flared to life, rocketing the small plane out of the cliff side hangar exit. Vagabond and Two-Gun watched the plane sail into the sky, finally disappearing from view as it changed direction to head for New York.

Vagabond shrugged her shoulders, turning toward her teammate with a beaming smile. "So, who's on monitor duty?"

"Can I, um, offer you some coffee," Marlo said hesitantly as she offered Iron Man a seat on her sofa, "or something?"

"No, thank you," Stark answered. He also decided to stand instead of sit, as his armored body had broken more than a few sofas in its time. "Ms. Jones, when was the last time you saw Rick?"

"It's been a few months," she admitted, deciding to take the spot on the couch that the Avenger had declined, "he disappeared out of bed one morning, as he did frequently whenever Genis wanted out to play. Usually, he was back in a few days...this time, though, he never came back."

"I'm sure you've seen the news," Iron Man continued, "that Captain Marvel has rejoined the Avengers here in Los Angeles."

"I kept telling Rick that that spoiled alien kid was going to get him killed," she stated sadly, "but he never listened."

She paused.

"Rick's dead, isn't he?"

"That's what I'm trying to find out, Marlo," Tony said, "but I hope that's not the case. Rick Jones is an Avenger...and we're going to do everything in our power to find out what's going on."

From the vantage point of a distant cluster of trees, the watcher adjusted the focus on his binoculars. Henry Pym and Stingray he recognized immediately, the first from personal experience and the second from reputation. It was the black man carrying the teenage girl that held his interest, however. He'd followed Terrence Sorensen all the way from New York City, determined to hold him responsible for the destruction of a Brooklyn hospital weeks before. Positioning his long distance microphone at an appropriate angle, the hunter watched and listened.

"My name's Terry Sorensen," the man said to the confused Hank Pym, "do you remember me?"

"The name sounds slightly familiar," Pym admitted, "but whatever it is you think you did to me years ago obviously didn't leave a lasting impression."

Sorensen sighed heavily. "Look, it doesn't matter anymore. All that matters is that Janet is dying, and you are her last hope. She's a mutant, and her power is killing her."

"Set her down for a moment, so I can take a look at her," Pym requested, to which Sorensen quickly complied. Turning back toward the still guarded Stingray, Henry motioned for him to return inside. "Walter, go call an ambulance, just in case. What's her mutation?"

"She spontaneously combusts," Terry explained, watching intently as Pym did a very quick examination, "and she gets weaker with every burst of power. She's only a teenager, Pym...she can't control it."

Feeling her pulse, Henry's words died in his throat. "Her heart's stopped beating," he said as he placed his hands on the girl's chest, "you didn't notice, man?"

"I...no..." Terry stuttered out, unable to do anything but scramble around to his daughter's side, "it must've been when I set her down to open the door. Oh, god, Pym, don't you let her die!"

The former Avenger grimaced as he pumped her chest with his hands. "I'm trying my best..." he paused to breathe air into her lungs, "but I don't think..."

With the sound of an ambulance siren heard in the distance, Hank continued to try breathing life into the girl's still chest. Janet's father was frantic by this time, his eyes darting from her blank, expressionless face over to Pym's scowling visage and back again. Finally, as the ambulance finally arrived at the drive to the house, the scientist stopped his attempt at resuscitation and scooted back. The paramedics ran to the girl's side, with the attention of everyone present focused on her dead form.

"Get away from her!" Sorensen screamed as he pushed the paramedics away, scooping his now deceased daughter into his arms. "You're not taking her away from me! I told you no hospitals!"

Before Pym, the paramedics, or even the newly returned Stingray could offer a rebuttal to the man's ravings, Terence Sorensen broke into a run across the lawn, Janet's body clutched tightly to his chest. "I got him, Hank!" Stingray stated as he took to the air, his large wing foils propelling him into the air to take chase.

“ **No !**” Sorensen shouted with a voice harsh and choked with emotion. Still running, he allowed his hand to point behind him, and a stream of fire exploded from his palm. The dry California grass caught fire immediately, the flames rising just high enough to cut off Stingray's pursuit. By the time the ocean hero climbed higher into the air, he had lost sight of the grief-stricken father.

Having witnessed the entire scenario, the unknown hunter finally let the binoculars drop from his eyes. Any hopes he'd had of Sorensen turning himself in to the authorities were now dashed, and he realized that once again he would have to take the law into his own, vengeful hands.

“Nobody moves, nobody does anything stupid, and nobody gets hurt!”

The patrons and operators of the Bay Area Diamond Exchange all nodded in unison at the commands of the gaudily dressed man with the large tank strapped to his back. He was called the Trapster, and the solid block of adhesive glue that he had sprayed on the store's security guard had showed that his intentions were clear as glass.

“Remember, you call the cops after I'm gone,” the villain said as he backed out of the store, the bag of diamonds clutched in one hand while his other wrist was pointed at the collection of people, “and I'll come back and paste you guys into oblivion!”

Pushing open the door to the store with a shove of his shoulder, the Trapster smiled at his own brilliance. California was so much nicer a locale to apply his criminal tendencies...sure, there were heroes, but not one on every street corner like in New York . Just as the thought crossed his mind, however, he suddenly found himself jerked into the air by the paste tank on his back.

“Paste Pot Pete,” the Beast mocked from above, his feet gripping onto the tank while his mutant strength allowed him to easily lift the criminal into the air, “perchance people purposely purport your power to be...hmm, what's another P word?... *poopy*, perhaps?”

“Lemme go, monkey man!” the Trapster shouted in embarrassment as he attempted to aim his wrist shooters at the hero.

The X-Man turned Avenger stifled a chuckle as he swung his furry legs forward, releasing his feet's grasp on the villain's tank. “Your wish, my lavender amigo, is my command. Over to you, Simon m'boy!”

The Trapster flew through the air, propelled by the Beast's throw. Looking in front of him, he flinched as he approached the smiling form of Simon Williams, whose fist was pulled back in preparation. Wonder Man's punch collided with the Trapster's flailing body, knocking him back across the street once again like a human ping-pong ball. Colliding hard with a brick wall, the criminal was unconscious before he hit the sidewalk.

“I believe these are yours?” Beast offered as he tossed the bag of diamonds back into the eager hands of the Exchange's owner. A crowd had already formed around Wonder Man, the people of San Francisco immediately recognizing the celebrity, and Hank McCoy felt right at home as he joined in the audience's approval with his old friend. Still sitting at the café less than a block away, Hawkeye, Warbird, and Wasp could do nothing but watch and laugh.

“I'd almost forgotten how much those two love to ham it up,” Carol admitted, turning back toward Jan and Clint, “and it looks to me like they're all we need to make Avengers PR skyrocket.”

"I'm sorry I made you all come down here," Janet said with a slight smile, "I guess paranoia just got the better of dingy little Janet Van Dyne."

"Aw, don't start talkin' like that, Waspie," Clint said, tossing a wink in her direction, "we'll all go pay Hank a visit with you. I wouldn't mind seeing ol' High Pockets myself."

As if on cue, the cellular phone in Janet's purse began to ring, the vibrating feature causing the contents of her purse to shake slightly on the table. Digging through her bag until she found the phone, she hesitated to read the number on the caller I.D. Not recognizing the sequence of numbers, she pressed the "answer" button and placed the phone to her ear. "Hello?"

"Jan," the person on the other end of the line greeted, his voice barely audible through a haze of cellular static, "it's Walter Newell. I had a visit with Hank today, and something kinda weird happened. Some strange guy brought his sick daughter to your house and begged Hank to save her life. She died on your lawn, and then the guy ran off with the body. Hank's kinda down about it, so...well, just thought I'd let you know."

"I appreciate it, Walter," Jan said, holding one finger in her open ear in hopes of hearing him better, "but where's all that static coming from? I can barely hear you."

"Oh, it's probably because I'm under water," he answered, "calling from my helmet's radio transmitter. But anyway, take care Jan, hope to see you soon."

"You too," she said before disconnecting the call, her attention turned back toward Clint and Carol. "You guys mind if we go see Hank right now? I think something bad might've happened..."

Wonder Man and the Beast, having approached with the unconscious Trapster slung over Simon's shoulder, shot concerned glances at Hawkeye and Warbird. "I've got to get back to Hawaii anyway," Williams said, "but I'll drop Trapster off at the jail as I head off. You guys go check on Pym, and if you need me..."

He gave Janet an assuring smile.

"We'll be fine, Wondy," Hawkeye said, "and so will Hank. The Avengers take care of our own."

"Yeah, whatever," Simon muttered as he turned back toward the side alley in which he'd parked his Champs-craft.

"So what's the good word, Mr. Powell?"

Chris Powell shrugged his shoulders in response to the girl's question. Lena Myers sat Indian-style on the bed, waiting for her newest friend to tell her what he'd learned about his condition. Chris couldn't believe how smitten he'd become for the short, pink-haired girl, especially considering how short a span of time had lapsed since the two had met. "Dr. Strange checked me out after all that stuff with Carol went down," he began, bracing his backside against the dresser that ran across the bedroom wall of his bungalow, "and, well..."

"Pregnant pauses may make you seem dramatic to other ladies," Lena said with a smile, "but with me, it's best if you just spit it out."

"Well, it's like this," he continued, rubbing his hand through his brown hair, "see, Dr. Strange is *the* authority when it comes to weird stuff. He knows everything there is to know about ghosts and monsters and other dimensions..."

Lena sighed, loudly and on purpose. "You're stalling," she accused.

"Strange didn't have a freakin' *clue* what to do about that little Moomba totem that's floating around in Darkhawk's stomach," Chris finally admitted, "and, to be honest, that doesn't really instill me with a lot of confidence."

"Actually," Powell continued, "it was Dr. McCoy that finally came up with a theory. Because the Darkhawk body is an alien cyborg clone – don't ask – he thinks the totem could very well have been dissolved in alien stomach acid by now."

"Now *that's* a lovely image," Lena teased with a slight giggle.

"So," Chris said slowly, "I think I'm just gonna suck it up and trigger the transformation. If we get flooded by an army of Moombas, well, at least we know how to beat them again."

Lena didn't say a word as Chris rubbed his fingers across the black diamond that hung around his neck. The boy closed his eyes, and was immediately engulfed in a surge of ebony energy...a moment later, the form of Darkhawk stood in his place. He looked surveyed the area, running to look out the window, and found no evidence of any unwanted consequences.

"I guess," he said through his helmet's voice filter, "that everything's cool."

"Is there really any way to know for sure?" Lena asked.

"I've never had to go to the bathroom while in this body," Darkhawk answered, a reply that probably would have been accompanied by a blush had he still retained his normal body, "so I guess we just play it by ear."

The sun had slowly begun its descent past the horizon, bathing the secluded park with an orange haze that filtered through the dense tree-line. Terry Sorenson, nestled beneath a large palm tree with his daughter's body cradled in his arms, tried his best to hold back the tears. Janet's mutant powers had finally burned her out, her biological systems unable to cope with the violent expulsion of fiery energy that flared uncontrollably from her over the past several years. His wife had long left the two of them to fend for themselves, and for a time Terry had blamed his daughter for bringing back a part of his life that he had hoped was over. He used to beat her, and the thought of that just made him cry even harder.

Control your emotions, Terrence Sorensen.

Terry's head shot up in surprise, the voice in his head catching him by surprise. He had been sure that no one had followed him after he left Pym's home, careful to avoid any police that happened along his way. Pym was an Avenger...could he have called out the heroes on him?

This is not the voice of a surface dweller, my friend, the telepathic voice stated, but the voice of one who wishes to help you. I guided you to this place with you none the wiser, as I wished to speak more directly with you.

"Who...who are you?" Sorensen stammered, looking frantically around the darkening wood.

My name is unimportant...it is my desire to provide you aid that is the concern. I know who you really are, Terrence, and I know the power that rages inside you. Your only daughter, your precious offspring, has been taken from you by the people on this world. It is revenge you wish, true?

Looking down at the cold face of his only child, Terry balled his fists and nodded his head in affirmation.

I have brought you to this place because of its location. You are at the direct center of the city, Terrence. From this point, you can apply your power and gain vengeance on the people that terrorized and persecuted your daughter unto death. Half in fire, half in ice...do you understand?

Allowing his daughter to rest on the grass, Sorensen stood up. Energy began to flow around his form, and while half his body burst into flame the other half crystallized into a sheath of solid ice. "I do understand," he said, the flame and ice pouring over his body in an ever-flowing wave, "but my name isn't Terrence."

He raised his hands into the sky, one fist pulsing with red fire and the other with white cold. "My name is **Equinox**."

And then the energy in his body exploded outward, fire from the left side of his body and ice from the right. While the park ground on one side of his body instantly caught ablaze, the wave of fire rapidly flowing away from him, the other side instantly froze in place. The energy burst continued across the park, spilling out into the surrounding city area in moments. He stood static, pouring more and more energy out of his body, the stranger's voice coaxing him on inside his head.

"Let half the city burn!" he screamed into the night, feeling his power flow over the city of San Francisco .
"Let half the city freeze! So commands the Thermodynamic Man!"

To Be Continued...

Next Issue: "Thermodynamic" continues as San Francisco is transformed into an ecological disaster...half a burning pyre, half a frozen wasteland! Will the Whackos arrive in time to save the city? Who is the mysterious stranger that's followed Equinox all the way from New York ? Who has set the Thermodynamic Man on his disastrous mission? Answers, answers, and more answers next issue!

Bibliography

- Equinox and his daughter, Janet, were last seen in Marvel Comics Presents # 147 . He nearly killed Henry Pym (as Yellowjacket) in Marvel Team-Up # 59 .
- Pym was forced to kill the insane Vision in Avengers # 13 (M2K).
- See upcoming issues of Avengers for Quicksilver's visit to New York City .

Los Angeles , California

Iron Man couldn't help but feel uncomfortable. Standing in the living room of Marlo Jones, he could do nothing but watch as the young woman attempted to stifle her tears. He'd come to see the woman in hopes of finding out information on the whereabouts of her husband, Rick Jones. Rick was an Honorary Avenger, and half of the symbiotic partnership he shared with Iron Man's current teammate, Captain Marvel. Rick hadn't been seen in months, and Marvel had been less than forthcoming with information.

Unfortunately, Marlo had no answers for the iron-clad hero. Instead, *she* had looked to *him* for assistance in finding her missing husband. "Mrs. Jones," he said, attempting to reignite the conversation, "is there anything else – anything at all – that you can think of that might provide a clue as to what's happened to Rick?"

Wiping her eyes with the sleeve of her shirt, the redhead tried to collect her thoughts. "Rick did mention something," she stated, "but I didn't really pay much attention to what he told me about Genis. I felt better not knowing sometimes, y'know? Right before they disappeared, Rick said that Genis had a talk with some alien Supreme thing, and that he'd been acting strange ever since."

Stark's eyes narrowed beneath his helmet. "The Supreme Intelligence?"

"That might've been it," she answered with a shake of her head, "I'm not real sure."

Before Iron Man could question further, he was interrupted by a slight buzzing noise in his ear. "Excuse me, Marlo," he said, raising one hand to the side of his helmet, "I've an Avengers Priority call coming through." Concentrating on the incoming communiqué, he switched on his own transmitter and answered. "This is Iron Man, what do you need?"

He listened carefully as his teammate, Darkhawk, explained the situation to him. "I'm in L.A. ," he said, turning away from his host as she stood from the couch, "I'll get to San Francisco as quick as my bootjets will carry me. Iron Man out."

"Duty calls?" Marlo asked with a faint smile, walking with the Avenger as he moved toward the door.

"I'm afraid so," he replied, "but you have my word, Ms. Jones. We'll find out what happened to Rick." He paused his statement as he turned the knob, swinging the door open wide. "Captain Marvel and I are going to have a nice, long..."

He was going to say "chat", but the words died in his throat as he looked outside. Marlo gasped loudly, echoing the armored hero's expression. Hovering approximately six feet or so from the ground, his arms folded across his chest and a scowl set on his face, was Genis-Vell...Captain Marvel.

"Going behind people's backs, digging up dirt on them," the Kree man said venomously, "is that how the Avengers treat their friends now?"

"Captain," Iron Man answered hesitantly, "I'm worried about Rick – about *you* – and that's the end of it. If you need our help, all you have to do is ask."

"I **tried** that," Genis yelled, his body now pulsing with cosmic energy, "and nobody would **listen**! I came to see you, Marlo...to tell you everything that happened, to explain how badly I screwed up. But now I see you here with *him*, a man that's done nothing but distrust me from the beginning!"

"I want my husband back!" Marlo shouted from behind Iron Man, instinctively standing behind the Avenger for protection.

"Calm down, Genis," Iron Man advised, taking a step forward, "we're all friends here..."

"Liar!" Marvel screamed, a blast of photonic energy erupting from the Nega Band on his right wrist. The burst of energy hit Iron Man squarely in the chest, the resulting impact and explosion sending the Avenger careening backward into the Jones' home, crashing through walls as he flew through the air. Marlo, who had been standing directly behind him, was knocked unconscious from the force of the metal armor that hit her, knocking her to the side like a rag doll.

Flying into the air, Captain Marvel took an aerial view of the home...and blasted again with the energy produced by his Nega Bands. The blast hit the roof of the home and exploded outward, leaving only a caved in shell of broken glass and wooden wreckage. With one last, hardened look at the destruction he had wrought, Genis scowled again.

He flew into the air, headed for space...and didn't take another look back.

AVENGERS WEST COAST # 14

"Thermodynamic"
Part Two of Three
Written by Chris Munn

San Francisco , California

"Oh my god," Priscilla Lyons choked out, holding her hand over her mouth as she fought back tears, "what happened to the city?"

From the Quinjet that soared through the smoke-filled sky, three Avengers could only look on in shock and horror at the devastation leveled upon the city of San Francisco . The city had been caught in an instantaneous flash fire, turning the area into a giant funeral pyre. Vagabond, trying to quell her emotions as she piloted the jet, took a look at her teammates. While Darkhawk's expression was hidden beneath the black and silver helmet of his cyborg form, the face of the Two-Gun Kid echoed her own.

Whatever had caused the fires had happened nearly an hour ago, immediately forcing California into a state of national emergency. The gravity of the situation had hit the three heroes the moment they were contacted by the governor. Not only was the death toll unknown, but a group of fellow Avengers had been visiting the city earlier that day...and hadn't been heard from in hours.

"Where do we even start?" Two-Gun asked, pulling his brown Stetson hat over his eyes. Darkhawk looked over at his friend, noticing the welling of tears in the corners of his eyes.

"We have to find Hawkeye and the rest," Darkhawk answered, his voice the usual hollow monotone that accompanied his alternate hero body, "because let's face it, the three of us can't do jack against something like this."

"Bull!" Vagabond shouted as she brought the Quinjet to a sudden stop, tossing the two men forward from the momentum. Leaving the plane in a hover position in the sky, Priscilla jumped from her seat and ran toward the exit hatch without saying a word. Attaching a winch cable to her outfit, the redhead opened the hatch with determination in her expression.

And when the hatch was open, she jumped out into the open air.

He couldn't believe he'd lost him. Cursing to himself, he refused to believe that he could have followed the villain Equinox all the way from Brooklyn to San Francisco , to the doorstep of Henry Pym, and then lost the trail. He'd retired to his motel room to collect his thoughts before returning to his search.

And that's when a wave of flame blew his windows in and caught nearly every piece of furniture afire.

After several frantic slaps on his body to smother the small patches of fire, he regained his composure. Quickly donning his pure white outfit, he took off into the night, helping survivors as he moved through the city. The destruction worsened as he moved deeper into San Francisco , and he took that as a sign that he was nearing his target.

He'd followed Equinox all the way across the country, and the Moon Knight was determined to finish his mission of vengeance.

Standing atop the highest hill in the park, Terrence Sorenson looked stoically over the situation he had brought to fruition. To his left was a city on fire while to his left was a city bathed in ice, and if he felt remorse for his actions, his expression refused to acknowledge it. His only daughter, Janet, who he loved more than life itself, had been taken from him. She'd been murdered by those who had refused to help her, struck down because of the mutant genetics that had made up her body.

So the city of San Francisco had been judged and executed by his hand. He had hardly questioned the strange voice in the back of his mind that had goaded him to action. The voice had aided him in his time of need, and that was all he deemed to be important.

The city burns , the voice said, almost answering his thoughts, *and the city writhes in ice. I commend you, Equinox. You have taken righteous retribution against the humans.*

"As long as I live and breathe," Equinox shouted, answering the voice by announcing his words to the heavens, "this city shall never be free! Let it burn! Let it freeze! Let them all know the grief of the Thermodynamic Man!"

My minions are arriving even as we speak, my friend , the voice said in return, *and we shall back up your words with force. The city is ours.*

Sorenson fought to suppress the smirk that made its way upon his face.

"Yes...it *is* , isn't it?"

Henry Pym's eyes fluttered open as he fought to regain consciousness. He'd been in his lab, pondering over the strange event that had happened previously in the day, searching his memory for the identity of the man who had come to his home claiming to have once wronged him. The man's daughter, a mutant, had died on Pym's lawn. The police had come, long after the stranger had disappeared into the city, and Henry could tell how upset they were when he was unable to give any information.

The lab, nestled beneath his San Francisco home, had been designed to California specifics...meaning it was earthquake proof, the walls and foundation lined with shock absorbers. To his surprise, it wasn't an earthquake that hit, but a short circuiting of every electrical device in his laboratory. The resultant electrical explosion had engulfed the whole of the room, sending the scientist headlong into unconsciousness. As he finally came back to reality, Hank's first thoughts were on the *why* and *how* of the situation.

And those thoughts were immediately interrupted by the pain in his legs. He looked down, his body flat against his back on the ground, and saw the huge bank of machinery that had fallen atop him. Panic set in for the briefest of moments, but Pym quickly fell into the battle honed instincts that had made him a founding Avenger. Placing his fingers softly against the blackened steel, his body released the Pym Particles that suffused his totality...and the machinery *shrunk*. Whereas before he had felt the crushing weight of the impossibly heavy console, his legs now knew freedom. With a kick of his right leg, the miniscule computer bank was flung to the side.

"No damage done," Henry muttered, thanking the God that he didn't believe in that he had not been crippled. With a forlorn sigh, the scientist surveyed the irreparable damage done to his laboratory. He knew, in his heart of hearts, that the destruction had not been caused by something natural. A person had been responsible, as always, and he hated the thought of what he knew he had to do next.

Treading lightly over the debris scattered across the floor, Pym slowly made his way to the solid steel cabinet that had miraculously been left untouched by the destructive force. Steeling his resolve, he threw open the cabinet doors, revealing a stockpile of advanced weaponry. It only took him a few moments to shrink the arsenal down, his pockets lined with every piece of defensive and offensive machinery conceivable.

Stocked with his tools, Henry Pym turned toward the stairwell that would lead him to the surface. He hated it more than anything else, but when duty called he knew he couldn't turn away.

It was time for the hero to rise again.

Vagabond crashed through the glass, the smoke-filled night air hitting her with almost as much force as the window. She hadn't had much time to think over her plan, and now – as she fell to the ground from the seventh story of a blazing apartment building with two small children cradled under her arms – she realized that perhaps she'd made a rash decision after all. The ground rushed toward her as she fell, and through it all she wished that the two children in her arms would just stop screaming.

"Hey babe, you going my way?" Vagabond found herself in the arms of another with that question, her ebon-clad teammate Darkhawk grabbing onto her and the children at the last moment. His grappling claw attached to a nearby flagpole, Darkhawk and the others swung skyward in an arc, and Priscilla felt a wave of nausea overcoming her from the jerking motion of the claw disengaging.

Landing atop an adjacent, lower building, Christopher Powell released his grasp on his comrade, who in turn released her hold on the two children she'd rescued. "This building's on fire, too," Vagabond stated as she stopped the children from running away, "hell, *all* the buildings are on fire."

"Grab onto Uncle Darkhawk, kids," the fearsome Avenger said, his mere presence scaring the kids even more, "and I'll get you down to your parents." Scooping up the children, despite their protests, Powell's glider wings snapped in position. Jumping from the edge of the building, Darkhawk and passengers glided down to the ground like a feather, leaving Vagabond alone on the burning roof.

"Thanks a lot, Chris," she muttered, feelings of abandonment entering her mind. The thoughts were interrupted by the signature sound of a Quinjet overhead, prompting her to look up. A ladder fell down to her, and she eagerly climbed aboard.

"You scared the tarnation outta us, darlin'," the Two-Gun Kid said as he helped her aboard, the Quinjet left in hovering auto-pilot mode, "jumpin' out this plane like you did."

"Did it on impulse," Priscilla Lyons answered, taking a seat near the jet's exit hatch, "but yeah, I'm sorry. Teach me to think before I leap, huh?"

"Don't apologize, gal," the Kid answered with a wink of his eye, "you saved a couple a young-un's, didn't you?"

"Hey guys, if you don't mind," Darkhawk's voice buzzed through the Quinjet's communicator, "could you get down here?"

"What's up, 'Hawk?" Two-Gun asked in reply, receiving a worried look from the girl beside him.

"Just...get down here!" was the frantic answer.

Darkhawk couldn't believe his eyes. After setting the young children to the ground, where they had eagerly ran to their parents, he caught sight of something truly terrifying. Now, being a superhero meant you saw some strange sights in your journeys, and Chris had seen his fair share. But the army of men that seemed to break free from the earth itself...men that seemed to be formed of the very rock from which they emerged...men that were afire with molten lava cascading down their bodies...made him realize that things could *always* get weirder.

"You people get back!" Darkhawk ordered the crowd behind him as he began to cautiously step forward. The silent stone men moved forward slowly, the ground melting under their feet with each footstep they made. More and more of the creatures emerged from the ground, breaking through the concrete and pavement all around the solo Avenger. Within moments, the monsters had Darkhawk surrounded, and were closing in on him with slow, methodical steps.

Deciding that snappy banter and witty one-liners would be wasted on his silent opponents, the ebon avenger decided to let his actions speak more than words ever could. A burst of black energy erupted from the diamond that was imbedded in his chest, and the force struck a grouping of the monsters. Instead of simply driving them back, as he intended, he gasped when he saw the fiery creatures shatter into pieces upon the energy's impact.

"What the hell are these critters?" Two-Gun asked as he and Vagabond touched the Quinjet down onto the empty street a few yards down from their teammate.

"Beats me, Matt," she answered, following the Kid on his way out of the jet, "but I have an even better question. If Darkhawk can't stop these things, what good can we do?"

"Guys, help!" Darkhawk yelled as the creatures swarmed over him, their flaming hands burning his cyborg body as they grabbed onto him, pulling him down to the ground. Another fissure opened below the fighting Avenger, with more of the monsters emerging beneath his feet. Half a dozen hands grabbed at his legs, pulling him with inhuman strength into the ground. There was nothing his friends could do to help him, he realized, after seeing several of Two-Gun's bullets bounce off the rock monsters...he was going to die, and nothing could help him.

"Get down, Avengers!" a voice shouted from above the heroes, prompting Vagabond and Two-Gun to turn their heads in surprise. Standing atop a building was a man in a red jumpsuit...a man that rested a type of rocket launcher on his shoulder. A second later, the weapon was activated and a blast of fire signaled the release of a rocket that zoomed toward the periled Darkhawk and the mass of monsters that had piled on top of him.

The other two Avengers watched with gaping mouths as the missile struck the mass of molten men, exploding not in fire and concussion but instead with white foam. The foam burst across the rocky skin of the creatures, solidifying around them and effectively freezing them in place. "Darkhawk!" Vagabond shouted as she ran toward the now-statue-like figures, disbelieving that their rescuer would so wantonly disregard the life of their friend.

"You're a damn fool!" Two-Gun shouted as the man made his way down the fire escape. His pistols were drawn in a defensive stance as the newcomer approached him, but the illumination of the flames against the man's face made the battle-hardened cowboy pull his guns back into the air as quick as he could. "You...you're..."

"Henry Pym, at your service," the former Avenger greeted, the bazooka shrinking into his palm as he approached, "glad to see I got here in time. You newer Avengers obviously haven't fought Lava Men before."

"You killed Darkhawk!" Vagabond accused as she charged at Pym, caring not a bit about his status as a legendary hero. Before she could reach him, however, a blast of energy erupted from beneath the ground that sat between the two, causing her to jump back in surprise. Slowly, a clawed hand emerged from the smoldering crater, and a blackened and burned figure pulled himself onto the street.

"*That*," Darkhawk said as he weakly stood to his feet, his journey beneath the city street having been an incredible ordeal, "was not fun."

"Glad to see my faith in your abilities wasn't unfounded," Pym commented to the startled and confused neophyte Avengers, "though I hate to say that the power level combined by the three of you doesn't amount to much against those things. Where are the other Avengers?"

The other Avengers exchanged looks of annoyance, prompting Darkhawk to simply shrug his shoulders as a silent reply.

Pym sighed heavily. "Where are Hawkeye and Iron Man," he again asked, "and where is my wife?"

I should be used to seeing the unbelievable, the Moon Knight thought, but this...

He had followed the fiery destruction, helping the many injured San Franciscans along the way, making his way toward the center of the city. If he'd had any doubt of the involvement of the Thermodynamic Man, the sight before him silenced the thought. He stood straddling a line of demarcation, one foot in a charred, ashen firestorm and the other in a frozen wasteland of ice and cold.

The entrance to a park, once vibrant with green life, yawned before him, and over the din of catastrophe the Moon Knight could hear the frantic screams of the man responsible. Vengeance would be served, for all the innocent victims of a madman's rage. Marc Spector took a confident stride toward the park entrance...

...but was grabbed by the shoulders before his step was completed. Lifted high into the air, the Fist of Khonshu flailed madly in an attempt to dislodge his attacker's grip. In return, the massive creature behind him threw its arms to the side, tossing the Knight from the park entrance into the side of a flash-frozen automobile some twenty feet away.

Rubbing the back of his neck, Spector leered from under his white hood. The creature, ape-like in appearance with a coating of snow-white fur, lumbered toward him, snarling through a fanged, foaming mouth. "Abominable snowmen?" Moon Knight asked rhetorically, standing from the pile of broken ice beneath him.

"Snowmen?" the creature bellowed in reply, surprising the Knight with its ability of speech. "The Cold People are no mere snowmen!" The monster punctuated its statement by slamming its fists on the ground, causing tremors to issue forth from the impact point.

"Whatever," Marc commented as he leapt into the air, escaping the seismic attack. In a fluid, blur of a motion, the servant of Khonshu flung his arm in a wide arc, releasing five sharpened crescent moon shurikens at the monster. The snow-beast howled in rage as the shurikens dug deep into its flesh, but the weapons failed to halt its advance.

Landing on the ground in a crouch, the Moon Knight reached to the pouch that was secured on his back, behind his cape. A pair of steel nunchaku emerged in his hand, accompanied by a scowl that formed faintly beneath his mask. Snarling, the beast lunged toward the smaller hero, claws and fangs eager to dig into human flesh. Almost faster than the eye could follow, Moon Knight again leapt into the air, turning his midsection on his downward fall...and landed square on the back of the massive creature. While the cold dweller bucked like a bull, desperate to dislodge its passenger, the servant of Khonshu brought the tightly gripped nunchaku to action. He wrapped the weapon's chain across the throat of the monster, and then began to choke the life out of it. After several long, strenuous moments, the beast fell to the ground...whether it was dead or just unconscious, the Knight cared not. Taking a moment to catch his breath, the vigilante looked once more at the entrance to the park where Equinox was residing. He took a step forward...but the growls coming from behind him stopped him in his tracks.

Moon Knight turned his head slowly, a quiet curse muttered on his breath upon seeing at least a dozen more creatures like the one he'd just defeated. The one in the lead leaned forward, his silver and black markings making him the only unique individual among the monsters' ranks.

"I am Ternak of the Cold People," the leader stated, "and you are the first sport we have found in this unholy place."

He awakened to a blink of light flashing in his cornea, the telltale of his on board diagnostic screen doing its best to get its owner's attention. As his eyes slowly fluttered open, Anthony Stark moaned, his voice echoing throughout the metal helmet that rested atop his head. The last thing he remembered was Genis-Vell hovering over him, and then the blast of energy from the alien warrior's hands.

[Full System Scan Complete: Power Reboot Successful]

Toggling his onboard CPU with his chin, Iron Man finally realized what had happened to him. Shifting his weight, he felt the pressure of the tons of debris that had fallen on top of him, the remains of Marlo Jones' house having buried him alive after Captain Marvel's destructive tantrum. Gritting his teeth in frustration, Stark twisted his hands in the compressed area, placing his palms up.

"Hope there's no body in the way," he muttered to himself before activating his repulsor blasts, blowing the debris away from him. His bootjets activated immediately after, carrying him up from the crater in which he'd been trapped. After reaching the open sky, he saw that the street in front of the Jones' home had become crowded with police, firefighters, and emergency workers. Ignoring the audible gasps of awe that came from the mouths of most watching, he immediately locked onto Marlo, who was sitting on the back of an open ambulance.

"Mrs. Jones," he greeted as he touched down with a blast of air on the cracked pavement, "are you okay?"

"I fell into the yard," Marlo answered, obviously shaken by what she'd experienced, "but you fell in the basement when the house collapsed. They'd been trying to dig you out, but I guess we really should've have worried, huh?"

Noting that the sun had long set, blanketing the street with darkness broken only by the flashing lights of police cruisers, Stark placed a hand to his helmet's temple. "How long have I been out?" he asked.

"About three hours," the red-haired woman replied.

"There was an Avenger emergency in San Francisco," Iron Man stated, "and now I can't raise them on their communicators..."

"There was a natural disaster of some kind in San Francisco," a nearby EMS worker said, having overheard Iron Man's statement, "they're not letting anyone into the city."

"I have to go, Marlo," Tony admitted as his bootjets flared to action, "but I'll be in touch as soon as I possibly can. I promise."

With a sad wave of her hand, Marlo Jones bid the Golden Avenger goodbye, watching him as he blasted into the night sky. Her eyes then drifted back to the destroyed building she'd called him, her expression twisting to one of disgust. "I hate you, Rick Jones," she whispered, "why do you have to do this to me?"

"This is insanity," Vagabond commented as she stared out the windshield of the Quinjet. The city of San Francisco was a firestorm, completely burned down to the Earth from which it had sprung. Finally dislodging her gaze at the devastation, Priscilla looked back over her shoulder at the living legend that had joined them aboard their craft. She'd heard stories of Henry Pym from the older Avengers, and all of them had spoken of the man in hushed awe and reminiscent sadness. Pym had known nothing but tragedy throughout his life, but still he had managed to persevere. Narrowing her eyes, Vagabond could only sigh...if *that* was the great Hank Pym, she was far from impressed.

"Judging by the fact that the blaze gets worse the deeper we go," Pym commented aloud to Darkhawk, the only one of the three Avengers to remain in the back of the jet with the scientist, "the cause must be somewhere near the center of the city."

"Makes sense," Darkhawk replied, pointing his finger to a spot on the map laid across the small table between them, "and this park, while not equilaterally in the city's middle, would make a great place to plan and set off this...this *bomb*, or whatever we're dealing with."

"I agree, Avenger," Pym replied, rubbing his chin with his fingers as ideas rolled through his prodigious brain, "but this doesn't seem like a bomb. There was very little force to the explosion, but it's also not a natural wild fire. It spread too quickly..."

Turning back to the front of the plane, Priscilla grunted loudly. "Since when is Chris a tactician?"

"Don't look t' me like you're helpin' none," the Two-Gun Kid responded, his concentration focused on flying the Quinjet through the smoke created by the blaze, "so don't you pay that boy no nevermind, gal. Let 'em do the job, and don't be getting' all jealous just cuz you ain't the center of attention."

Vagabond blinked her eyes rapidly, taken aback by her teammate's comments. "I don't...Matt, seriously..."

"Pris, you got one serious chip on your shoulder," Two-Gun continued, "and I've been trying to help you, to get you to talk through whatever it is that's eatin' you alive. But you ain't gonna get no help if'n you don't let us through this wall you've built up around yourself. We're your friends, but we ain't gonna be for much longer if you keep treatin' us like this."

Priscilla stuttered in an attempt to answer the Kid, her self-confidence shaken by what he'd said. Thankfully, her need for a response was brought to a halt by the interrupting Dr. Pym, who positioned himself directly over the cowboy pilot's shoulder. "Keep going straight," he told Two-Gun, pointing out the windshield as he spoke, "I don't think you'll be able to miss where we're going."

Our enemies are coming for you, Terrence , the voice told Equinox, but I am near to you now. You shall not be alone much longer.

The Thermodynamic Man nodded, not knowing if the mysterious stranger that had aided him would be able to see his movement. He had brought the city to its knees, made it pay for what its people had done to his daughter. Janet was dead, this he knew, but at least he had made her murderers suffer for their crime. Walking down from the blackened hill upon which he had stood, the grass alternately sizzled and snapped with each footstep.

Making his way toward the gate to the park, he immediately saw the scene of carnage that had apparently just ended. Lying strewn about the icy lawn to his right were monstrous beasts, animalistic creatures that had been brought low by the man standing across the way from him. The caped man in white, whose cowl extinguished any light that attempted to touch his face, stood definitely, his costume ripped and blood soaked.

"**Equinox** !" the Moon Knight shouted, a golden ax stained with blood gripped tightly in his hand. "The Fist of Khonshu has come for vengeance!"

"Vengeance?" Terrence Sorenson asked in return, his fiery hand raising as he spoke. "I will show you the meaning of the word, hero!"

The Moon Knight leapt into the air, barely evading the stream of flame that erupted from Equinox's hand. The jump allowed the vigilante to gain much needed ground on his opponent, bringing him within striking distance with the axe. The Fist of Khonshu brought the weapon down in a furious strike, the force of which caused his hand to shake with tremors.

"Heh," Equinox breathed as the Knight pulled back his weapon to find the blade of the axe broken into metal shards, having shattered against the villain's ice-coated right side. "Is that all you have?"

Spector immediately spun into a roundhouse kick, his boot catching fire as it grazed against the flaming abdomen of the man that had caused so much chaos with such relative ease. Knocked off balance, the Thermodynamic Man reached out with this fiery hand as he fell backward, catching hold of the Knight's

billowing cape. The cloth caught fire immediately, prompting Spector to unleash another furious kick to the villain's abdomen.

The air rushed out of Equinox's lungs as he hit the ground, but the force of the blow wasn't enough to keep him from unleashing a blast of ice from his right hand. The stream of ice struck Moon Knight in the shoulder, spinning him like a top until he, too, hit the ground.

"Down, Moon Knight!" a voice bellowed from above, amplified by an external loud speaker. The Fist of Khonshu went into a diving roll away from the villain, barely evading the barrage of repulsor blasts that rained down from the flying Iron Man, just arriving on the scene of the battle.

"Good to see you, Avenger," Spector commented as Stark landed a few feet away, his sensors still trained on the reeling Equinox.

"This guy's all mine," Iron Man ordered, "shouldn't take more than a minute."

From the smoke and flame, Equinox leapt with amazing speed, catching the armored Avenger in a fierce bear hug. "You couldn't be more right, hero," the villain agreed as he sent wave after wave of heat and cold across Iron Man's armor. Stark's sensors screamed in his ear, and as his power cells began to falter he found himself distressed.

"You're small potatoes, Equinox," Iron Man stated as he blasted himself free with the force of the Uni-Beam on his chest plate, "I want to know who's really behind all of this."

"Then turn and face him!" a voice, deep and guttural, announced from behind the Avenger. Iron Man turned, his vision filled with the giant barbarian that stood a few feet back. The creature was eight feet tall, easily, and was obviously possessed of immense strength. The Moon Knight struggled uselessly, held above the ground by his throat in the grasp of the monster's massive hand.

"I am Grotesk," the giant said, a wide grin revealing broken, yellowed teeth, "welcome to my new kingdom..."

To Be Continued...

Next Issue: "Thermodynamic" comes to it's senses-shattering conclusion, as the Avengers are faced with Equinox, Grotesk, and the amassed army of Lava Men and Cold People! But where are Hawkeye, Warbird, Beast, and the Wasp?

Bibliography

- The Cold People made their first and only appearance in Fantastic Four # 145-146.
- Grotesk and the Lava Men last appeared in Thor # 481.
- Captain Marvel attempted to get help with his problem from Warbird in Avengers West Coast # 13, but was turned away.

San Francisco, California

Marc Spector fought to keep from blacking out as the gargantuan's hand tightened around his throat. Even with the steel fibers wove throughout the insulation of his costume, the Moon Knight could feel his throat being crushed with each passing second.

The monster that held him high above the ground, outstretched into the air by an arm locked at the elbow, tossed his head back to knock the hair from his face. He turned and smiled a row of yellowed, sharpened teeth at the Fist of Khonshu. The creature had introduced himself as Grotesk, and amidst the burning and frozen wasteland that had once been a major coastal city, he was akin to a god.

"Put him down," Iron Man ordered as he slowly approached the giant subterranean, energy coursing through his suit to his palms, repulsor beams ready at the slightest notice.

"This land is mine by right of salvage, shelled-one," Grotesk answered, his voice rough and gravelly, "and I shall lead an army across the surface of this world. Your time is over...the era of Grotesk has begun!"

The Moon Knight narrowed his eyes as he fought the oncoming darkness, the lack of oxygen causing his vision to blur and go grey. With the last remaining bit of strength, Spector reached behind his cape and grasped one of his last weapons: a dagger.

"Now, Avenger!" the Knight choked out as he stabbed the knife into the meat of Grotesk's shoulder, twisting and breaking it off in the monster's muscle. He immediately released his grasp on his hostage, allowing Spector to fall to the ground.

The eight-foot giant immediately went on the offensive, swinging his massive war-hammer with his uninjured arm. The Moon Knight rolled to his right, barely evading the spiked club that crashed against the ground where he had fallen. Grotesk howled a cry of anger and prepared to swing again, but was interrupted by a tap on his shoulder.

The subterranean behemoth swiveled his head, finding his face reflected back at him on the chrome metal of Iron Man's helmet. "You monster," Stark said as he struck a thunderous punch across Grotesk's face, knocking the tunnel-dweller back. With space between them, Iron Man shot out a series of repulsor bursts into the villain's midsection, causing him to buckle and fall to his knees.

"You destroyed this city," Iron Man said as he planted another iron-knuckled punch to Grotesk's face, "killed possibly hundreds of thousands of people, and you *dare* to crown yourself a *king*?"

"Enough, Iron Man," the Moon Knight stated as he grabbed his former teammate's arm, stopping him from placing another punch, "no more."

"No more?" Stark questioned, the blank expression of his faceplate masking the look of confusion on his face. "I find that hard to believe, coming from you."

"You are a hero, Iron Man; an Avenger," Spector replied and he moved in front of the beaten Grotesk, "and make no mistake, this creature must pay for his crimes. But that takes someone who is not a hero...it takes an agent of Vengeance. It takes a *fist*."

Grotesk then began to laugh, staring up at the two men through bruised and battered eyes. "You are both fools," he said between fits of laughter, "for did I not say I would lead an *army* onto your shores?"

Suddenly aware of the presence of others, both Moon Knight and Iron Man looked from left to right. On side emerged a collective of burning rock creatures called Lava Men...on the other came a pack of

snarling, furred beasts known as the Cold People. The two men were surrounded by a virtual army of unnatural predators...

...and Grotesk continued to laugh.



#15 - "Thermodynamic"
Part Three of Three

Written by Chris Munn

This issue takes place before Avengers # 36-41 and Thunderbolts # 25-26

"Oh, that *can't* be good," Darkhawk said as he peered out the windshield of the Quinjet, the vehicle quickly approaching the park that was serving as the epicenter of the city's destruction. The jet emerged from the cloud of ash and smoke into suddenly clear sky, the reflection off of the ice on the other side of the park illuminating the dark, giving the four assembled Avengers a clear view of what was transpiring below them.

"There's Iron Man," Vagabond said as she joined Darkhawk, "who's the guy in white?"

"Moon Knight," Henry Pym answered from his standing position behind the pilot, "but what's he doing here? New York is his usual stomping ground."

"Looks t' me like they're in a heap of trouble down there," Matt Hawk, the Two-Gun Kid, stated as he circled the jet around the park, "safe t' say we're gonna help 'em?"

Pym touched a finger against a digital LED screen to the Kid's left. "Sensors are picking up both Lava Men and another group of unidentified creatures coming from the frozen side of the city. But we're also picking up another person going into the ice, away from the park."

"And still no sign of Hawkeye and the others," Priscilla said as she moved to the back of the Quinjet. "Set us down, Matt...not even Iron Man can do this alone."

"No, I have a better idea," Hank said as he took the co-pilot seat beside the gunfighter. "Vagabond and I are going after the person fleeing the scene. Two-Gun, I want you to let us out a few hundred feet away and then circle back and land, help out our two wayward allies."

"Wait, what about me?" Darkhawk asked.

"You," Pym answered with a smile, "are bailing out here..."

"You take the molten ones," Moon Knight said to Stark, the two men back to back as the armies moved in against them, "the snow beasts are mine. I've already taken care of some of their number."

"Fair enough," Iron Man immediately agreed, the Uni-beam in his chest flaring to life. The beam plowed a path through the advancing Lava Men, knocking them aside with ease. Anthony Stark then took flight, gritting his teeth as he made his way through the path he'd carved with his laser blast.

The Lava Men, though slow-moving, still had the upper-hand simply through sheer force of numbers. Iron Man collided hard with one of the fire-beasts in his way, shattering the stone that made up the creature's body. Stark touched back down and immediately let loose with a volley of repulsor blasts, firing single bursts in as wide an arc as he could muster. It was imperative that he kept the Lava Men at a distance; the heat generated by their bodies was enough to eventually damage – even melt- his armor.

Toggling his on-board CPU with his chin control, Tony was sweating profusely as the Lava Men moved closer, too many to keep at bay by himself. His bootjets activated, lifting him into the sky and hopefully away from danger...until the hand of the closest creature grasped onto his ankle, halting his ascension.

Stark lowered his hand and fired a repulsor blast dead in the beast's face, damaging it enough to dislodge it from his leg...but it was too little, too late. More of the underground denizens had grabbed for him, pulling him back down to the ground even as he added more and more thrust to his jets.

Iron Man cursed under his breath as the Lava Men swarmed over him. If he didn't get help soon, things could possibly start to go very badly for him. He struggled against the creatures' stone arms, fighting valiantly to free himself...but then, unexpectedly, he found himself scooped up in unknown arms, pulled free and into the air in the span of a heartbeat.

"The almighty Iron Man in over his head," Carol Danvers, Warbird, said with a cynical smirk on her face as she carried the smoldering and ash-covered Stark into the air, "thought I'd never see the day."

It didn't matter that he couldn't see the full moon hanging in the night sky – the Moon Knight could still feel its presence. His strength enhanced to superhuman proportions, Spector snapped the neck of the first beast-man he approached, the animal falling to the ground in front of its peers.

"Haven't I killed enough of you already?" Marc asked as the Cold People moved around him, surrounding him in a complete circle. His weapons were gone or destroyed, and all the Moon Knight was left with was his own strength and skill...and that suited him just fine.

Spector leapt backward as the first mammoth creature lunged, raking claws across the moon emblem on the vigilante's chest. As the Fist of Khonshu jumped back his leg extended, cracking violently against the monster's jaw, shattering the dense bone. When the one monster fell, however, a throng of others took its place.

The Moon Knight cursed in his thoughts, knowing that even he wouldn't be able to fend off such a force. Then he heard the sound from above, his hooded head lifting to the sky to witness an answer to his silent prayers.

"Banzai!" the ebon-armored figure yelled as he fell from the sky like a missile. Darkhawk landed amidst the crowd of Cold People, his boots cracking the skull of the monster beneath him like an egg-shell. Upon touching down, the neophyte Avenger immediately activated the jewel that rested on his chest, black energy hitting a group of the beast-men with enough force to knock them off their feet.

"Moon Knight, right?" Chris Powell asked as he fought his way to the side of his fellow vigilante. Spector nodded affirmatively before slamming the palm of his hand into the bridge of an enemy's nose.

Grotesk stood atop the nearest hill, hands placed firmly on his hips and head cocked back in maniacal laughter. His army would soon destroy the interloping surface-dwellers, and he would be free to conquer every land his eyes surveyed. He paused his triumphant basking when he heard the strange clicking noise behind him.

"Don't you move, ugly," the Two-Gun Kid said from behind (and slightly below, due to Grotesk's immense height), his revolver placed only centimeters from the back of the warlord's head. "Why don't you do the right thing and call off them critters of yours? I'd be mighty obliged..."

Grotesk snarled as his body twisted at the waist, hammer swinging above his head with plans to crush that insect daring to threaten him. The Two-Gun Kid stood calmly, taking the time to adjust his Stetson cowboy hat as he pulled the trigger on his gun with little hesitation. The bullet exploded from the barrel, striking the giant villain square in the face with enough force to cause his head to jerk backward, toppling him down the slope of the hill.

"Don't say I didn't warn you, hoss," the western hero said as he slid down the hill after his downed foe, stopping when he reached Grotesk's unmoving body. Matt realized his mistake too late, unable to escape when Grotesk's hand reached out and grabbed him by the neck. As he stood, the warmonger slapped his other hand against Two-Gun's wrists, knocking the twin pistols from his grasp.

"My mental powers have grown in my years of seclusion, Avenger," Grotesk said as he tossed the cowboy back to the ground, "and your bumbling thoughts were warning enough. I have withstood the immense pressures beneath the earth's crust, and you thought a mere bullet could kill me? I am Grotesk! I have plotted and planned the destruction of this city for months; I destroyed the mental blocks that controlled the Sorenson girl's mutant powers, I subtly guided Equinox to this location, and I made sure no terran gave him aid! Who else could have brought the lumbering Lava Men under submission? Who else could have tracked down the elusive Cold People, blinding them promises of their own land in my new kingdom?"

Stunned, but still conscious, Two-Gun rolled over onto his back, his eyes fighting to focus on the imposing gargantuan that stood over him. "All of ancient Lemuria shall whisper my name this night," Grotesk said as he raised the war-club over his head to strike, "and all on this planet shall know my wrath."

Grotesk failed to notice the thin shaft that flew toward his face until it struck, the head of the arrow exploding as it hit directly between his eyes. He stumbled backward, shaking his head to clear his vision of the smoke and spots of light that danced in front of his face. When his sight finally returned, he saw the Two-Gun Kid scrambling to his feet, running to meet the group of people that had come to his rescue.

"And here I thought for sure the Mole Man was behind this," Hawkeye said with a smirk, another arrow nocked in his bow and ready to fire. Beside him crouched the Beast, ready to pounce at the Avenger chairman's order; the Wasp fluttered a few feet ahead, helping the injured Two-Gun behind them; and above hovered Warbird and the rescued Iron Man, energy pulsing in their palms. The missing Avengers had finally returned...and Grotesk tightened his grip on the war-hammer, readying himself for war.

Equinox, the self-named Thermodynamic Man, trudged through the frozen side of the park, the crystalline grass snapping and shattering under his footfalls. Cradled in his arms was the body of his daughter, Janet, who had died only hours previous, killed by her own mutant power of fiery combustion. It was he, Terence Sorenson, that was responsible for the destruction of San Francisco, but upon seeing the face of the monster that had guided and goaded him to act he did the first thing that entered his mind.

He ran.

Grotesk had spoken to him through telepathy and convinced him to take his pain and suffering out on the innocent people of the city. And now the Avengers were here to make him pay for what he had done. He could only hope that Grotesk would keep them occupied long enough for him and his daughter to make an escape.

"Stop!" a man's voice commanded from the southern exit of the park, awaiting the running Sorenson as he tried to leave. Equinox slowed into a walk, determined to kill whoever stood in his way.

Henry Pym, his hands shoved into the pockets of his oversized red coat, stood defiantly as the Thermodynamic Man approached. "I remember you now," the former Avenger said as the villain stopped only a few feet away, "years ago you nearly killed me."

"You dare to show your face," Equinox said as he gently placed his daughter's corpse onto the frozen ground, carefully easing her head down as if she were still alive, "after you let my daughter die? I allowed a monster to transform my grief into destruction, Pym...I should have taken my pain out not on this city but on *you* !"

"I'm sorry for your loss, Terrence," Henry said, still refusing to show any acts of aggression toward the grief-stricken villain, "and had you come to me earlier, before it was too late, I possibly could have found help for her. There's a school on the East Coast that helps mutants, I know the founder. But it doesn't do any good now, does it? I know how you feel..."

"You know **nothing**!" Equinox shouted, a blast of flame erupting from his hand, striking the ground just in front of Henry. Pym didn't move, not even a backward step.

"Month's ago," Pym continued, "I was forced to kill a man that – for all intents and purposes – could have been considered my grandson. He'd gone mad with anger and frustration, much like you, and caused the deaths of too many innocent people, like you have today. I had to *kill* him, Terrence, and there's not a moment gone by that I don't wish I'd have died instead of him. The guilt has eaten at me; it made me abandon my friends and family, made me neglect the woman that I love more than life itself. That's what my grief over losing a "child" did to me, Equinox...so yes, I know *exactly* how you feel."

Sorenson found himself unable to reply, his head lowering to stare at the body of his deceased daughter. "How..." he finally choked out, the fire that danced randomly about his body dying down to embers, "how do you cope with such pain, Dr. Pym? I can't stop my suffering, can I?"

"No," Henry answered, walking across the distance between the two men, "I don't think so. But you can stop the suffering of all the people you put in jeopardy, Terrence. I know you've become a good man since we fought all those years ago...you raised a child. Think about all the parents who may be going through the same thing as you now because of what you've done."

Pym placed a hand on the man's shoulder, ignoring the blistering cold from Equinox's body. The Thermodynamic Man nodded in pained agreement, and from behind him – ready to attack if things had

gone awry – Vagabond could merely watch. She had been quick to question Hank Pym's heroism, but after hearing his impassioned speech she realized that maybe, just maybe, she had been wrong about him after all.

The park had quickly become a war zone after the appearance of the missing Avengers; the battles with Grotesk, the Lava Men, and the Cold People having merged into one fantastic melee. The two distinct armies were careful, despite their brutish natures, to keep within their determined boundaries. The Avengers fought across the line of demarcation that separated flame from ice, and amidst them all towered Grotesk, his laughter heard even over the din of battle.

“Warbird!” the Beast shouted as he ducked down, avoiding a swing of Grotesk's hammer, unaware that his teammate was approaching from behind. The stone club struck Carol Danvers across the face, sending her flailing above and away from the chaos.

“Mind telling me just where you've been?” Iron Man asked as he soared above the Cold People, littering the area with volleys of repulsor blasts, while the winsome Wasp flew just below, her own stings subduing a number of the creatures.

“We were on the south side of the city when the blast hit,” Janet answered as she flitted between two of the beasts, causing them to collide into one another as they lunged, “and had to fight our way north through the ice, stopping to help people along the way. Have any of you seen Hank? I couldn't get hold of him at the lab.”

“We picked him up,” Darkhawk answered from a few feet away, his claw-cable pinning several Lava Men together, “and he and Vags went to catch some guy that was running out of the park.”

“Equinox,” Iron Man stated as he turned to bear down on Grotesk, “he caused all this.”

“Is this all you have?” Grotesk shouted, raising his club into the sky to meet the oncoming Iron Man. The armored Avenger collided hard with the giant, driving him backward into a crowd of Lava Men, fiery stone exploding as the two titans pushed through.

“We're badly outnumbered, way outgunned,” Hawkeye said as he fired arrow after arrow, gas for the snow-beasts and explosive-tips for the fire-dwellers, “anybody got any ideas?”

“We have to defeat Grotesk,” the Moon Knight answered as he protected the archer's back, kicking his foot across the face of an attacker, “he is the key. Without his mental control, these others may simply return underground.”

Hawkeye's reply – and, truthfully, all comments by any of the battle's participants – was cut short as their attention was drawn skyward. Iron Man sailed over their heads, his dented armor sparking and shorting out across the numerous cracks in his plated shell. Then, unexpectedly, the Lava Men and Cold People all broke away from their fights, backing away from the huddled group of Avengers.

“Anybody see which way Shellhead fell?” Hawkeye asked as the heroes found themselves encircled in a ring of aggressors.

The circle of monsters parted, allowing the smugly confident Grotesk to stride through into the circle. “Not even the mighty stormbringer, Thor, could destroy me,” he taunted as the Avengers prepared to attack, “and as I said earlier, my mental powers have improved vastly since last we met.”

The giant employed his telepathic abilities, and the Avengers all fell, their minds burning with psionic fire. "Can you feel it, Avengers?" Grotesk asked as wave after wave of mental energy leapt from his mind to theirs, searing their thoughts with his unbridled power. "Can you feel your lives ending as I erase you, thought by thought? I would say for you to make peace with your god, heroes, but it would be a futile gesture...I am your only god now, and I know *nothing* of mercy."

"Grotesk!" the voice boomed from behind him, causing the subterranean to turn in surprise. Towering sixty feet in the sky, a naked Henry Pym loomed over the park, his size multiplied exponentially by the Pym Particles that had bonded to his cellular structure. Before the murderous creature could act – before he could even think – Pym's massive hand slammed down, crushing Grotesk into the ground with enough force to split the earth beneath them. The Lava Men and Cold People fell and tumbled to the ground as the shockwave reached earthquake proportions, and the Avenger once called Giant-Man struck again with his fist, driving the warlord farther and farther into the crevice dug by the hero's momentum.

"Oh, man," Hawkeye muttered as he regained his senses, unable to do anything but watch in shock as his friend and former teammate assaulted the enemy again and again.

"Hank!" Iron Man shouted as he flew toward his fellow founding Avenger, followed by Warbird. "That's enough!" he yelled as he and Carol pushed Pym back, and Stark refused to acknowledge the similarity to Henry's outburst and his own earlier. Finally, when it was clear that Grotesk was very much unconscious, Pym nodded and acquiesced to his friend's request.

"God damn you," Hank Pym said to the fallen villain while shrinking back down to his normal height, "for making me do something I swore I'd never do again."

"Your clothes, Dr. Pym," Vagabond said as she handed the discarded uniform back to the man she had so casually dismissed only hours before.

"Uh, guys," the Beast announced as he and his fellow Avengers returned to their feet, "we may have ourselves a problem."

The throng of Lava Men and Cold People milled about the heroes, confused and agitated by the return of their facilities due to Grotesk's defeat. No longer were either race dominated by the monster's mental thrall, and they were very unhappy indeed. Growls began to come from the lips of the snow beasts, as each member of Grotesk's inhuman army attempted to decide whether or not to kill the human interlopers in their midst.

"Enough!" the voice of Equinox commanded as he stepped between the creatures and the Avengers, his body once again swirling with flame and cold. "We have done a grievous wrong to the people of this city, my brethren," he spoke, mesmerizing the simple beings with the energy coursing across his frame, "and I ask you – *beg you* – to return to your kingdoms. Grotesk shall pay for what he has made us do this night...this I promise."

Slowly, the two races began to back away, leaving the park to return to the tunnels through which they'd entered the city. The Avengers crowded around Equinox as the creatures departed, unsure of whether or not they would be faced with subduing a second villain. "Thank you, Terrence," Pym said, stepping up to face the grief-stricken Sorenson, "you're doing the right thing...you're doing what Janet would've wanted her father to do."

"Make sure my daughter is buried," Equinox requested, "and before you arrest me, Avengers, please allow me to try and correct what I've done here."

The Avengers each looked to Henry Pym, who nodded in acceptance of the Thermodynamic Man's request. Stepping back atop the hill he'd stood upon hours prior, Equinox raised his hands and closed his eyes, implementing the power that was his to command. Across the destroyed city of San Francisco, the fire that consumed half of the area was drawn away and blanketed in a pocket of extreme cold, putting out the blaze that had consumed so quickly. On the southern side of the city, and immense warmth pulsed across the frozen streets and buildings, melting the ice that had accumulated. After several agonizing moments, Terrence Sorenson fell to his knees, his task completed.

"S.H.I.E.L.D. are on their way, along with the National Guard stationed at the city's borders," Iron Man said with a hand raised to the temple of his helmet, "they'll take Grotesk and Equinox into custody."

"Jan," Pym said as he took his ex-wife, the woman he loved, into his arms, "I've come to a decision tonight. I know I've been difficult to live with these past few months, but I promise things are going to change. If you want, I'd like you to rejoin the Avengers...be the hero that I can't be anymore."

Janet Van Dyne looked into her man's eyes, smiling at the weight she could see had been taken from his shoulders. "If you'll have me," she said to Hawkeye, who stood to the couple's left, "I'd be happy to come back."

"Aw, like I could say no to you," Clint replied with a smile of his own.

"We've got a lot of clean-up to do here over the coming weeks," Iron Man said to the assembled heroes, "but we may have a bigger problem on our hands. We need to talk about Captain Marvel..."

Standing apart from her teammates, Priscilla Lyons wrapped her arms around her chest and stared at the people she called her friends. She hated herself at that moment, hated what she was doing to the men and women that had taken her in and accepted her. Unnoticed by her, however, was the Moon Knight, who also apart from the Avengers. His eyes narrowed as he stared at Vagabond, his thoughts known to no one but himself.

Next Issue: For months, Vagabond has been acting as a spy for Baron Zemo...so how will the Avengers react when her betrayal is discovered? Don't miss a story of secrets, lies, and desperate measures in my final issue as the regular AWC writer!

"Baron Zemo is dead."

Assembled around the large table in their compound meeting room, the Avengers all sat up a little straighter, their attention fully captured by the words of their chairman. Hawkeye stood at the end of the table, his words lingering in the air before he continued speaking. "I just saw his body, and according to our good buddy Warren Crass it's been 100% verified that it's Zemo."

"Who did the deed?" Warbird asked. "I'd like to shake their hand, if only to throw handcuffs on it immediately after."

"Dunno yet," Hawkeye answered, "but I've got a pretty good guess."

"The Scourge," Iron Man stated, finishing Hawkeye's thought for him. "If that's indeed who did it then he's apparently stepped up his choice of targets."

"Serial killers do tend to escalate if left unchecked," the Beast said as he adjusted the small pair of glasses that rested on his nose, "perhaps that's what we're looking at here?"

"Okay, maybe I'm just stupid," Darkhawk spoke up, raising his hand almost timidly, "but who the hell is Baron Zemo?"

"Looks like someone hasn't been reading the history files like a good little Avenger," Hawkeye commented with a wink and a smile at his youngest teammate.

"He's a madman," the Wasp began, "son of the original Baron Zemo, founder of the Masters of Evil. A few years back, he organized a massive strike on Avengers Mansion and came close to killing a few of us, including poor Jarvis."

"Wait," Darkhawk interrupted, "is this the Thunderbolts guy?"

"That'd be him," Hawkeye answered, "but he'd dropped off the grid a while back. Now he's suddenly found dead in an abandoned warehouse here in Los Angeles? Sounds like there's some pieces missing from the puzzle, if you ask me."

Hawkeye continued to drone on, his statements accentuated by comments by the other various heroes. But one Avenger, sitting at the far end of the table, her head hung low, remained silent. Priscilla Lyons was thankful that none of her teammates had glanced her way, for they would have noticed the color draining from her face after she heard Hawkeye's opening statement. Baron Zemo was dead, and that meant only one thing to the young girl.

"Vags, you got anything to add or ask?" Hawkeye asked, prompting the rest of the Avengers to turn in unison to stare at Priscilla. She lifted her eyes to look at the people she'd betrayed so many times without them ever knowing. If Baron Zemo was really dead, then her greatest wish had been granted.

She was finally *free*.



#16 - "A Dead Giveaway"

Written by Chris Munn

This issue takes place after Avengers # 36-41 and Thunderbolts # 25-26

"Would you mind explaining just what you think you're doing in here?"

The Moon Knight paused in his typing, stopped his eyes from their rapid movement across the words displayed on the computer monitor, and sighed. "You didn't invite me to your meeting," Marc Spector answered, "and the death of such a powerful man as Helmut Zemo interests me highly."

The light from the rows of computer banks reflected and bounced off of the sheen of Anthony Stark's armor as he stepped forcefully into the archive room. "We didn't invite you," Iron Man replied, "because you're not an Avenger."

Spector swiveled in his chair, allowing the white lenses in his mask to shine beneath his cowl. "I seem to recall accepting an invitation to stay with you for a bit, an invitation extended by your chairman."

Iron Man's eyes narrowed beneath his helmet. "And I seem to recall the Avengers court-martialing you."

"Once an Avenger," Moon Knight responded, "always an Avenger...isn't that the saying?"

Stark's teeth began to grind in irritation. "How did you know -?"

"I placed a bug in your meeting room," Spector interrupted, "to listen in. This Zemo murder has me intrigued, especially if your theory of the Scourge being the perpetrator is correct. I've been following the killer's movements over the past few months, trying to work out a pattern to his seemingly random attacks."

"Listen, Knight," Iron Man began, pointing an extended finger at the sitting man in white, "just so we're clear. A guest here you may be, but you do anything like this again and I will happily boot your smug ass through the gate. We're not to be used by you, no matter what your intentions may be."

"Fair enough, Avenger," the Moon Knight agreed as he turned back to the computer console, "fair enough."

Priscilla Lyons fell back onto her bed, unable to hide the grin that had grown across her face. She reveled in her newfound freedom, ecstatic that she could finally be the hero the others believed her to be. She had fought truly and valiantly, to be sure, but the thought was always lingering in the back of her mind.

She was a traitor to the Avengers, a spy for one of their greatest enemies, but now that enemy was dead and she was off the hook. The only remaining person that knew of her connection to Baron Zemo was Norbert Ebersol, the former Fixer and current Scourge, and who would believe the word of a serial killing villain such as he? The weight of her betrayal was finally off her shoulders, and she could start enjoying her role as an Avenger.

And her future in the league of Earth's mightiest heroes was looking bright indeed. She was the one that had been chosen to lead the Avengers' relief efforts in the devastated San Francisco, and she had - in her own opinion - excelled in the position. If she stuck with it, she thought, maybe she could follow in Hawkeye's footsteps...from wide-eyed over-eager rookie to sure and steady chairman of the Avengers.

Rolling across the bed onto her stomach, Priscilla reached to the laptop computer that sat resting on her bedside table. It had been several days since she'd last checked her e-mail, an act that had always been implemented with a foreboding sense of dread. Logging into the account created with false personal information, she opened the in-box of the e-mail address known only to herself and the deceased Helmut Zemo. It was time to purge the account, to erase it from online existence before someone stumbled across it.

What she saw when the page loaded made her blood run cold.

The details of our arrangement have changed, the electronic letter read, and it is time for us to meet in person. Your work is not finished. Be at the Hollywood Sign at 2:00 A.M., tonight, and we shall settle the business between us.

She gasped and fought back tears as she read the message over and again. She hadn't recognized the sender's address, but that was no surprise, as Zemo had regularly switched addresses between each contact. No one else knew of their method of communicating, not even Ebersol. In a fit of panic and rage, Vagabond tossed the laptop off of the bed, smashing it against the closest wall.

The devil was alive, she forced herself to accept, and it was time for her to pay him his due.

"Interstellar tracking systems are few and far between, Tony," Henry Pym said as he leaned back in his chair, tossing a screwdriver onto his work table in a sign of frustration, "and until we get one, I think we're at a stand-still here."

Iron Man nodded his head at the man that had helped him found the Avengers all those years ago. "I expected as much, Hank," he replied while leaning over the table, his fingers dancing lightly over the pieces of electronic equipment that had been cobbled together by the two inventors, "and in case I haven't said it yet, I think it's great that you took up Clint's offer to stay here at the Compound."

Pym chuckled slightly. "I didn't have much choice, did I? Equinox destroyed my home and lab along with San Francisco, so it was either here or back to New York. And, really, I don't think I could face that just yet."

Tony bit his tongue, halting his instinctual desire to ask Hank how he was holding up. He knew that his old friend was still carrying around tons of guilt over what had happened to the Vision not long ago, but he

was proud of Pym nonetheless. Moving back with the Avengers, even if he insisted on remaining nothing but scientific support, was a major step in the right direction. "So who do we have to contact for this tracking system?" Iron Man asked, deciding to steer the conversation back on target.

"Well," Pym began as he tapped a few keys on his makeshift keyboard, "there's always Peter Corbeau and Starcore, but I'm not sure what his status is these days. The East Coast team apparently have a solid relationship with the Shi'ar Empire, so that's an option as well. What about Starfox and the Titans?"

"The Titans..." Iron Man said softly, prompting him to begin a slow back-and-forth pace across the metal floor of Pym's lab. "If what we were told about Captain Marvel is accurate, he was born on Titan and raised by Mentor, Starfox's father. Maybe that would be the best place to start, since we know Genis isn't on Earth. Maybe he went home?"

"Certainly a possibility," Hank replied, "but if you don't mind my asking, what's the rush in tracking Marvel down? I'm sure his cosmic responsibilities weigh on him just as much as his role as an Avenger."

"I think he's a major problem in the making," Iron Man answered, "and the last thing we need is another Avenger taking a wrong turn. We barely recovered from the Vision's betrayal, something you know all too well...and based on Marvel's recent actions, I think we may be looking at a similar situation."

"I hope you're wrong, Tony," Pym stated, "because when it comes right down to it, I don't think we've got what it takes to stop Captain Marvel if he has gone rogue."

"I know, Hank," Stark said in return, "and I pray I'm wrong as well..."

Four hours and counting...

Priscilla grunted as she slammed her fist into the heavy-bag that swung from the ceiling of the exercise room, the sand within the bag rippling with the force of her punch. Again and again she punched at the bag, each collision increasing in ferocity. She ignored the slight twinge of pain in her side, disregarded the layers of sweat that were collecting across her body, and closed her eyes. She could see the face of her tormentor vividly, the smile beneath the mask of Baron Zemo mocking her.

Finally, she screamed, not out of pain but from frustration, and kicked her leg into the air. The top of her foot struck the bag with as much force as she could muster, amazingly snapping the metal chain that held it affixed to the ceiling. The bag fell to the ground with a dull thud and skid several feet before she realized what she'd done. Placing her hands on her knees, Priscilla attempted to catch her breath and slow her heart, but the stress was evident on her face.

"I always knew that bag was out to get you," a voice thick with a western drawl said from the entrance to the room, causing her to jump slightly in surprise. Matthew Hawk, the time-lost vigilante known better as the Two-Gun Kid, leaned on the facing of the door, a bottle of water in his hand. "But you shore showed it who was boss in these parts."

He walked over to the panting Vagabond, the water bottle extended out to her as he approached. She eyed him suspiciously before snatching the bottle from his grasp, but there was no hesitation when she poured the refreshing liquid down her throat. "We ain't had much time to talk lately, Pris," Matt said as he took a seat on a nearby weight bench, "and you look like you got a lot on your mind."

"Now's not the best time, Matt," she answered, crouching down to sit on the floor, "I'm not in the mood for a chat."

"I kin tell," he replied with a smile on his roughly hewn face, "but what kinda friend would I be if I let you brush me off so darn easily?"

Priscilla sighed loudly and threw up her hands. "Fine, okay, let me pose a question to you, you sage o' the sagebrush. Say you had a secret, something that not only embarrasses you but could also result in your friends turning against you. What would you do to keep those friends from finding out? To what lengths would you go?"

"We all have skeletons in our closets, darlin'," he answered, his head hung low, his eyes hidden in the shadow of his wide-brimmed Stetson, "myself included."

"Oh, Matt," Vagabond said as she pulled her knees to her chest and buried her head between them, "I've done something stupid. I made a deal with someone, but now that it's come time for me to repay him...I can't. The price is too high!"

"I kin help, Priscilla," Matt said, placing a tender hand on her shoulder, "all you have to do is ask."

"No, you can't," she responded, brushing his hand away from her body, "this is something personal. But don't worry, it all ends tonight. I'm going to take care of it."

Two-Gun watched as she walked away from him. When she was gone from the room, he tipped his hat at the door and nodded. "Here's to you, gal. Hope you have more strength than me."

The Hollywood sign loomed over her, the lights shining up and upon it, illuminating the wooded area with an almost eerie incandescence. Vagabond had arrived an hour early, hoping to take Zemo by surprise when he approached. Of course, she knew that the chances of taking a master planner like the Baron by surprise were slim to none, but she couldn't let her hopes be dashed. Tonight would be the end, she had decided, and she would no longer bow down to the villain like a slave. There was only one way to redeem her traitorous acts toward her friends and teammates: she had to bring Zemo to justice.

She stepped carefully, softly, through the brush behind the sign high in the Hollywood Hills, as silent as a cat. When she emerged into a small clearing, bathed in the radiance of moonlight beaming down from the heavens, she was greeted by a most curious sound...clapping.

Her head shot up and to the left, where perched atop a large rock sat the absolute last person she'd expected to meet. Not Baron Zemo at all, the white-clad vigilante named Moon Knight sat above her, his hands clapping together slowly, rhythmically, even methodically. "I'm almost surprised you're here," Spector said once his clapping ceased, "but I suppose it's the role of a good lapdog to come when called."

"Moon Knight?" she asked in astonishment and confusion. "What the hell are you doing here? What are you talking about?"

"I've been watching you since the moment we met in San Francisco, Priscilla," the Knight answered, "you were, after all, the only Avenger in California that I knew next to nothing about. All I knew was that you had been targeted by the Scourge a few months ago and lived to tell the tale...would you mind explaining just how you managed that little feat?"

"It's none of your goddamned business!" Vagabond shouted, the wheels beginning to turn in her mind. She silently prayed that things were not how they seemed at the moment.

"When I discover that an Avenger is acting as a spy," he said firmly, each word hitting her with near physical force, "I *make* it my business."

"No, no," she whispered, tears beginning to well up in her eyes, "this can't be happening."

"All electronic signals sent into and out of the Compound are logged by the core computer system, even those sent out from a personal notebook," Spector continued, "of course, you did take steps to clear your tracks, but I still recovered fragments of your correspondence. You and your contact were careful not to use names, so when I sent a similar message to you earlier I could only assume it was you. I know all of the others personally...but you, again, I knew next to nothing about. Suffice it to say, young lady, I know plenty now."

"So what happens now?" Vagabond asked.

The Moon Knight leapt from the large rock and landed on the ground in front of her, making the move look effortless. Now face to face with the accused, he acquiesced to her question. "Now we return to the Avengers," he stated, "and you own up to what you've done."

She hesitated, then took a step forward. "I don't think so. I've seen how the others talk to you, Moon Knight. They don't trust you at all, so you must've screwed up royally when you were an Avenger. Do you really think they'll believe you over me?"

"You misunderstand," Spector said in turn, "I'm not giving you a choice."

"Get bent, you pasty nutcase," Priscilla said as she threw forward her fist, the speed of her punch nearly blurring her motion. To her surprise, her fist was caught in the Knight's open palm, only a few scant inches from his cloaked face.

"Very well," the Fist of Khonshu said through clinched teeth, "the hard way it is."

Despite the late hour, the halls of Avengers Compound were still alive, specifically the second, smaller laboratory held deep within the complex's sub-basement facilities. It was there that Carol Danvers, the former Ms. Marvel, was discovering that fate was a cruel mistress indeed.

"By Pama," she shouted as the hydraulic weight at her sides, held aloft in her arms by the steel bar affixed between them, crushed down upon her, "this is freaking ridiculous!"

"I'm powering down the hydraulics," her teammate, Henry McCoy, told her as he turned a nearby nob with his large and dexterous foot, "but you're not going to like what I have to say."

"Just say it, Beast," Warbird said as she stepped away from the weight lifting device, wiping away the sweat on her brow with a small hand-towel, "my power's almost gone now, isn't it?"

"As I told you a few weeks ago, Carol," the brutish but brilliant Beast replied, the large white labcoat covering his blue-furred body, indicating his scientific passion, "your power is still fluctuating wildly. With the constant stress that we champions of justice undergo on a day to day basis, your body simply can't keep up with the demand."

"But I don't understand," Danvers argued, "I was fine when we fought with and against the Justice League. I couldn't access my Binary power like I did when we faced Moomba last month, but I've long accepted that my star-traveling days are behind me. This is just so damn frustrating!"

The former X-Man spun around in his chair to face his long-time friend just as she slumped into the seat next to him. "I implore you, Carol," he said sincerely, abandoning the humorous prankster that normally defined his personality, "take my advice and step away from all of this for a while. Let your body adapt to the changes its undergone, because I'm afraid that if you keep this up you may lose a lot more than just your powers."

"I've fought so hard to get back here," she replied, "I don't know if I can just walk away again."

Far above the two Avengers that struggled with an unfortunate but perhaps inevitable decision, in one of the surface bungalows that served as the living quarters for the team members without local homes to call their own, Christopher Powell found himself unable to stop smiling.

"What's that look for?" the young girl named Lena Myers asked as she stared at Chris' face from atop him, the two laying in an embrace across his large bed.

"I just can't believe that everything's going so good for me now," Chris answered, his voice almost a whisper, "I'm a member of the greatest team of heroes ever and I'm actually pretty good as an Avenger. Plus, I'm laying here in bed with a beautiful girl that I don't have to hide my secret identity from. Not bad at all for a kid from Brooklyn, huh?"

Lena laughed softly. "I'm not sure if I should be offended that you put being an Avenger over me, but I suppose I can't complain too much. You saved the world, Chris...you saved us from Moomba. *You're* my hero, much more so than Iron Man or any of the others."

Chris smiled even wider at the words of a girl he'd fallen in love with so deeply in so short a period of time. No more words were necessary as the two leaned into one another, kissing passionately as if they had been together since the beginning of time.

Elsewhere on the Compound, in another bungalow only sparsely furnished, another pair of Avengers sat on a bed not unlike the one currently being used in Powell's abode. These two, however, were not lovers but lifelong friends and allies, their bonds much deeper than any romantic couple.

"Is it naive of me to think of this as a fresh start for me and Hank?" Janet Van Dyne, the wondrous Wasp, said as she unpacked a box at her feet. "Things have been bad for so long, after what happened to the Vision, but now Hank is closer to his old self again."

Clint Barton grinned at his friend's statement as he cut the tape that held another box sealed tight. "I wouldn't be too worried about it, Jannie," Hawkeye said. "Ol' Hank Pym's made a career out of coming back from the worst life's thrown at him, and this time won't be any different. I'm just happy as a lark to see you guys back with us again, right where you're supposed to be."

"And it feels good to *be* back," Jan admitted, "but I still feel guilty about leaving Hank like I did when we answered Thor's summons last week. I'm just glad the poor dear was able to regain his normal size before I came back....I could only imagine how sore he'd have been if I'd left him stuck somewhere at ant size."

"I've been meaning to ask," Clint began, "just what were you two doing when the call to assemble went out?"

Jan giggled and blushed slightly, her cheeks turning a light scarlet. "Let's just say that he and I were celebrating being back with the Avengers in our own, special, little romantic way..."

Hawkeye stopped and stared at the woman, his mouth hanging agape as he realized the true answer to his question. "Oy vey, Wasp," he remarked, "you shouldn't be putting thoughts like that into a single guy's head."

Before Janet could respond to Clint's comment, the room was pierced by a shrill cry, an alarm claxon resounding through every inch of Avengers Compound. "That's the Priority Red signal!" Hawkeye shouted as he and the Wasp both rushed from the bungalow, moving as quickly as they could to the meeting room contained within the main building.

Each Avenger made similar advancements toward the assembly chamber, coming from the labs below and the residences outside. All arrived at their destination at roughly the same time, a grim determination evident on each of their faces as they prepared for what might be awaiting them. Whatever new threat stood ready to challenge them, the mighty Avengers were confident that they could meet and best it.

When they entered the room, however, the facial expressions of the eight heroes changed and moved into looks of confusion and outrage. Standing at the controls of the alarm system stood their guest, the Moon Knight, but his presence was not what shocked them. For, cradled in the ebon hunter's arms was the bruised and bloodied Vagabond, only just beginning to stir from the unconsciousness beat into her by a man the Avengers had brought into their home as a friend and former member.

"Knight!" Iron Man yelled, breaking the silence as he rushed into the room, followed by the others. "What the hell is going on? What did you do to her?"

"It is my suggestion that you convene a tribunal, Avengers," Spector commanded as he dropped the awakening Priscilla into the nearest chair, "for I have news of betrayal most foul, perpetrated by one you call your own."

It was now early in the morning hours, and the Avengers sat side-by-side across the large table that had only hours earlier held their last meeting as a team. Each member had changed into their uniforms to make things as official as possible, with only Henry Pym declining to sit in, due to his declining of an official position with the team. For an hour, the Moon Knight had presented to them the evidence he had accumulated against Priscilla Lyons, and each of them had in turn discussed what was to be done.

But the time for discussion was over, and they were ready for the testimony of the accused.

Vagabond sat in the lone chair positioned in the center of the room, and she tried her best to avoid eye contact with the seven men and women now sitting in judgement of her. She sat silently as Hawkeye stood from the center of the table, a wooden gavel held tightly in his hand. "As Chairman," he began, "I hereby begin the deliberations of court-martial against Vagabond, who has been accused and proved a traitor to the Avengers by our former member, Moon Knight. For the record, the court is being held by the current roster, consisting of myself, the Wasp, the Beast, Iron Man, Darkhawk, the Two-Gun Kid, and Warbird. Before we come to a conclusion, Priscilla, this is your opportunity to give us your testimony and tell your side of the story."

Vagabond sighed and tried to collect her thoughts, trying to figure out which lie would work the best to help her save face in front of the heroes she had emulated and worshiped for so long. Finally, she decided that the only way to save face would be to tell the truth after all. "It's all true," she said flatly, "every bit of it. Since my first day as an Avenger, I've been acting as a spy for Baron Helmut Zemo. I did this of my own free will, with no "brainwashing" or manipulation on his part."

"Why, Pris," Darkhawk asked, the first of the heroes to speak up after a moment of silence, "why would you do something like this?"

"For years," Vagabond answered, "I tried to be a hero. As most of you know, I was Nomad's partner for a brief time, but my career wasn't what you would call perfect. I was a joke, a little girl trying desperately to be something more. Even Jack eventually ditched me. Even when I helped the U.S. Agent shut down the Scourge program, I was still a failure. I was bumming around different towns in the Midwest, homeless and penniless, when Zemo found me.

"He offered me a chance to gain the power I needed to become a hero, and what else could I do but accept it? When opportunity knocks, I'd learned, one has to open the door. So, along with his partner, Techno, Zemo gave me what I needed: their synthetic version of Captain America's Super-Soldier Serum."

"But there was no way Zemo could've known you'd be invited into the Avengers," Iron Man interrupted, "what was your original deal?"

"After they enhanced me," Priscilla continued, "I was sent out to reestablish contact with Zemo's most hated enemy. I was originally supposed to betray Captain America, to lead him into a trap of Zemo's devising. Before I could, and to as much my surprise as anyone's, Cap suggested me to you for Avengers membership. So my deal changed, as Zemo saw an opportunity of his own to take advantage of."

"And the Scourge, a few months back?" Warbird asked.

"Somehow," she replied, "Techno got turned into this new Scourge and severed ties with Zemo. I guess he considered me a "villain" to execute, and he tried his best until you guys saved me."

"Do you have anything else to add before we make our decision?" Hawkeye questioned.

Priscilla's eyes began to wet with tears despite her best efforts to fight the urge to cry. "I didn't want to do it, guys, I swear. But what was I supposed to do? If I hadn't done what he asked, Zemo could've taken away the gift he gave me. I can't go back to being a normal woman again; I'd just as soon put a bullet in my brain. Please, you have to believe me...I love all of you, and nothing means more to me than being an Avenger. Zemo's dead now, and I won't lie about anything else. Please, just...*please don't make me leave.*"

"It's only because Zemo is dead," Hawkeye responded, "that I'm voting against criminal charges being pursued. You put all of us in danger, Vags...I'm sorry, I vote for expulsion."

"You lied to us, gave information to one of our worst enemies," Iron Man said as the judgements moved down the table. "Expulsion and prosecution. Wasp?"

"I don't know you very well, Priscilla," the Wasp said, trying to ignore the tears that were now flowing freely down the accused girl's face, "but even if I did I don't think my decision would change. Expulsion."

"I have to ask, Ms. Lyons," the Beast began, "where did you think this would end? Baron Zemo would not have rested without every person under the banner of Avenger being dead. I understand that you made a mistake, and I believe you when you say you regret it. But, nevertheless, I vote for expulsion."

"Vags, we joined at the same time," Darkhawk stated, "we were both given the opportunity of a lifetime, and I know you did what you thought you had to do to keep from losing it. And, honestly, I don't know if I

would've done things differently were it me in such a messed up situation. I vote for probation, guys. We can't turn our backs on her because of one mistake, no matter how bad it was."

"It wasn't that long ago," Warbird admitted, "that I sat where you're sitting right now. When I was kicked out of the Avengers, I was bitter and I hated them for turning against me...but now I understand that they were absolutely right in the decision they made. I'm voting for expulsion, Vagabond, but if I can come back and be counted as an Avenger again, I think you can as well."

All that remained to pass judgement was the Two-Gun Kid, who sat silently at the end of the table, his face hidden by the pulled-down brim of his cowboy hat. "Matt," Priscilla whispered, "please...please believe me."

"Out of all of us in this room," Matthew Hawk began, finally lifting his head and removing the Stetson hat, "no one has seen as much needless violence as me. My wife and kid - my poor Nancy - they're dead and gone, and as much as I hate to say it, I'd turn all of you over to the Devil himself to get 'em back. I love y'all as much as any man can love his pardners, but I also understand the lengths that people will go to get what they think they can't ever have. I vote for probation, Pris, 'cuz I wanna *help* you, not turn away from you."

"That's one vote for prosecution, two for probation, and six for expulsion," Hawkeye stated, "and per the rules set forth in our By-laws, the majority decision rules. Priscilla Lyons, a.k.a. Vagabond, you are hereby expelled from the ranks of the Avengers, and all privileges associated with said membership are thereby revoked. You will remove yourself from the Compound as soon as humanly possible, and your name will be stricken from the roster. Do you have anything else you'd like to add?"

Priscilla shook her head from side to side before burying her face in her hands, unable to halt her sobbing. "I'm so sorry," she repeated over and over, "I'm so sorry..."

"You should've come to us with your suspicions before confronting her," Iron Man said as he stared out the window facing the gate of the Compound, his arms down and hands held behind his back, "she didn't deserve to be beaten up by you."

The Moon Knight stood behind the Golden Avenger, standing alongside Hawkeye and the Wasp. "I gave her the chance to turn herself in," he replied, "and she chose to fight me rather than take the honorable way out."

"I feel terrible," Janet admitted, "the poor girl's life has been ruined, and we can't even nail Zemo for what he did. That maniac better be glad he's dead."

"If he's actually dead at all," Hawkeye countered, "because let's face it, even when there's a body these guys tend to creep back into our lives."

"I was worried about Captain Marvel being the one we should be wary of," Iron Man mused aloud, "but I never guessed this was happening right under our noses."

"You're not detectives, Stark," Spector stated as he walked away from the team he had long ago disavowed, "and now that my role is finished, I shall be taking my leave of you."

"Don't let the door hit you on the way out," Iron Man mumbled as he and his two teammates watched out the window.

Vagabond walked slowly down the walkway that led to the Compound's gate, her duffle-bag thrown over her shoulder, containing as many things as she could pack in a rush. Her shoulders slumped and her head hung low, she paused to take one last look at the building that had been her home...

...and then she walked away, disgraced.

THE END

Next Issue: With the Avengers at their lowest, will the team survive when more members depart their ranks? Don't miss the first issue by the series' new writer, Mike Exner III!

WEST COAST ASSEMBLERS

So there we have it, the final issue of AVENGERS WEST COAST written by yours truly, and after the last two issues I have to honestly say: I'm going to miss writing these guys. Luckily for me, I'm sticking around as co-plotter on the series during the tenure of the next writer: none other than he-who-kicketh-ass, Mike Exner III! As anyone who's read his CHAMPIONS series here at M2K knows, Mike is an old hat when it comes to writing the Avengers, and I'm happy as can be to join him in chronicling the next great era of AWC. Maybe I'll even write an issue sometime down the road...who knows?

What I DO know is that I'm not going very far now that my scripting run on this book is finished. In a very short while, you will all be able to witness my brand-new ongoing title, AVENGERS IMMORTAL. If you're a big fan of Avengers history, odd-ball rosters, or Kang the Conqueror, then you most certainly need to stay tuned for this new series. You should also keep an eye on my other ongoing title at M2K, THUNDERBOLTS, for what happens to our recently court-martialed Vagabond. I'll just say that her story is FAR from over.

Lastly, before I head off into that good night, I want to give thanks to the man that helped me kickstart this series and essentially carried my ass all the way until he left. Russ Anderson is the reason AVENGERS WEST COAST exists, and everyone that enjoys this title needs to thank him for being both an awesome guy and one incredible writer that helped the book find its sea legs early on. Russ, this issue's for you.

So, with that said, I want each and every one of you to come back next issue to see what Exner and I have in store for the Whackos. Big changes are coming...trust me.

~ Chris Munn

02/12/06

"You can't do this to me, Carol. We need you here."

Carol Danvers, better known as Warbird to the people who didn't have the time to read her books, looked up at the man sitting on the edge of the bed in her living quarters at the Avengers West compound. Clint Barton was watching as Carol placed her clothes and other necessities neatly into her traveling bags. Every piece of clothing was folded meticulously, and everything else was packed with careful precision. Carol was a military girl from long back, and old habits died hard. But sometimes it was necessary to let them go.

"I can't stay, Clint. Please try and understand."

"But I *don't* understand, 'Bird." Clint ran his fingers through his hair, and the lines of his face creased as he frowned deeply. "I know your powers are a little kooky right now, and I know you're worried about it. Hell, I'm worried about it too. It hasn't exactly been smooth sailing here, especially lately, but this is the right place for you. We have Hank here. *Both* of them. I'm not all that bright, but it doesn't take a genius to realize how smart *they* are. They can take care of you better than you can on your own."

Warbird shook her head. "But that's just it, Clint. I don't want that. I don't want to be the Avenger that everybody has to constantly glance over at to make sure she isn't losing control."

Clint opened his mouth to speak, but Carol lifted a hand to silence him. "Don't tell me it isn't happening, okay? I know. I see it out in the field. I was in the Air Force for a good portion of my life, Clint. We had to constantly watch one another out in the open air. We fought together as a unit, and it was one of the happiest times of my life."

"Then I really don't get it," Clint said. "You have that here with the Avengers. It isn't any different, is it?"

"No, you're right." Carol smiled softly, and Clint felt a lump rise into his throat as he was taken once again with her beauty. "It's actually better in some ways. My time as an Avenger is something I cherish. Even through the nightmare of my alcoholism, my expulsion from the east coast team, and everything that happened here with Rogue and the situation with my powers. I wouldn't trade any of it. You're my family, and I love you. All of you. And when we're fighting side-by-side, I feel alive and pure. I feel like I matter, and that I'm making a difference in the world. And there's no better feeling than that."

"But when I was in the Air Force and one of the pilots had a problem, that pilot didn't fly. And the other pilots kept away from him. Not because they were trying to be cruel or because they didn't want the injured pilot to get better. It was just because they didn't want something holding them back. They didn't want any of what had afflicted that pilot to strike them too. Because when you're flying you can't let *anything* distract you. And there's no way you let a pilot who has an injury, whether it be physical, mental or emotional, get into a plane. They stay grounded. They stay with the doctors trying to fix whatever it is keeping them from climbing into the sky."

Carol had dropped her eyes while she was speaking, but now she brought them back up to regard Clint. Tears slipped smoothly down her cheeks, and she swiped at them with the back of her hand. "I'm grounded, Clint. I'm a pilot who can't fly. And I can't stay here and sit on my hands while the Hanks try to figure it out. The temptation to take to the sky again is too hard to ignore. I joined the Avengers again because Iron Man asked me to, but he didn't even really have to. I wanted to get back into action, even though I knew I wasn't ready. And it was a mistake."

Clint closed his hand over Carol's, and she placed her free hand on top of his. "I don't believe that. Not for one second. You're an asset to this team, and I don't want you to think any differently. But if there's nothing I can do to convince you to stay--"

"There's not," Carol said, and the tears were gone now. "But I can promise you I'll be back just as soon as I'm able."

"You better," Clint said, and then tugged gently on her hand. "Now give me a damn hug before I change my mind and chain you to the gate."



#17 - "Weapons of Mass Subtraction"

Written by Mike Exner III
Plotted by Mike Exner III and Chris Munn

"Oh, you've got to be kidding me! You're leaving too?"

"I'm afraid so, my bow-slinging friend," Hank McCoy said. He was busily tossing clothing and sturdier lab equipment over his head and into a large crate using his large hands and feet. He wasn't looking back to make sure the items were finding their mark, but it would have been pointless anyway. Nothing hit the ground around the large wooden box. It wasn't as painstaking a job as Carol's packing had been, but it was definitely efficient. "I have a number of responsibilities elsewhere that require my immediate attention, and now that Ms. Danvers is no longer in need of my services I see no need to remain here."

"No reason to-" Clint pressed his fingers between his eyebrows in an effort to relieve the pressure building behind his eyes. "So you already know Carol is leaving?"

"Of course. I believe I was the first person she informed."

"Terrific," Clint said. His eyes immediately darted over to where Hank Pym was sitting, hunched over his own lab station. "Did you know about this, Hank? I'd hate to think that I'm the only one in the dark about the comings and goings of the members of my own team."

"Dr. Pym was unaware, Hawkeye. He knew I was leaving, and therefore graciously offered to shrink the considerable bulk of this crate I'm using to pack my life away using his Pym particles, but nothing more. Carol called me up to her room so we could have a private discussion. Think of it as doctor-patient privilege if you like."

Hawkeye leaned back onto the workbench Beast was gradually clearing of his belongings. "So I'm losing three Avengers in the span of a week. This is ridiculous. It took me the better part of a month just to put this team together, and now everybody is turning tail on me."

"Clint," Beast said, and paused long enough to place a blue-furred hand on the shoulder of the purple-clad archer. "I don't want you to think of my departure, or that of any of the others, as a reflection upon you. Carol made the decision she felt was best for her and the team. She hasn't taken this course of action because she thinks you're incapable as a friend or a leader, and neither have I. There are things in life more important than a roof over our head and a monthly stipend, Hawkeye. Carol needs to get her head right, and I need to get back to what is ultimately the most important thing in my life. My work. Don't begrudge us that simply because things aren't working out exactly as you planned. In life, I'm afraid, plans are often no more than words misplaced in the wind."

Hawkeye felt the grin rise to his lips, and he made no effort to conceal it. "You know something, Hank? That is the *corniest* thing I've ever heard. Seriously, did you get that out of a Cracker Jack box or something? I expect more from your motivational speeches, and that honestly wasn't up to par. You're supposed to be making me feel better. You *are* a doctor, aren't you?"

"Ah, there he is," Beast said, rolling his eyes as he went back to his work. "There is the Hawkeye I remember so well. I shall miss you dearly once I'm gone. Perhaps I'll leave a steaming, putrescent present on your pillow before I catch my ride to the airport."

"You do and you'll be leaving with an arrow in your butt, fuzzball," Hawkeye said, narrowing his eyes. He clapped Beast good-naturedly on the back, and that's when Hank Pym, who had been silently tinkering for the entire exchange, finally cracked. He began to laugh, and he swiveled on his stool to regard his friends. There were tears streaming from his eyes, and his face was bright red. The scientist had to grip his knees to keep from falling forward off of his stool and onto the floor. Hawkeye and Beast stood looking at their friend, dumbfounded into slack-jawed astonishment. A moment later, the guffaws of Hank McCoy and Clint Barton joined him.

"Well, as nice as I'm sure the moment was, it still leaves us in a bit of a quandary, Clint."

"You can say that again," Hawkeye said. He was looking down at Iron Man as the golden Avenger tinkered inside the guts of the large picture-tube monitor attached to the system Clint - and *only* Clint, Tony would have happily pointed out - used for monitor duty and to perform research on the numerous case files and other pertinent information housed within the Avenger database. "Still, it was nice to hear Hank laugh. There were times when I honestly thought I'd never hear it again. He's made some pretty big strides since that tussle we had in San Francisco. Hopefully we can keep him on the right track."

"Mmm hmm. Can you hand me that soldering iron?"

"Don't you have one in your armor?" Clint said, as he reached into the toolbox sitting beside him, and slapped the device into Iron Man's open palm.

Tony sighed, and maneuvered the tool into his cramped working environment. "I do, but sometimes I like to work with my hands."

Clint smirked. "So why are you wearing the armor then? Don't tell me you're more comfortable with it on rather than off now. I think that might necessitate a little one on one with the company therapist, *Anthony*."

Stark reached his other arm out of the monitor housing, and for a moment Clint thought he'd flip him the bird. Instead a single crimson digit pointed across the room to the large, glass viewing-screen leaning against the far wall. "Do you have any idea how much that thing weighs?" Tony said, his electronically amplified voice carrying perfectly through the metal and wires he was toying with. "The screen is so old I think the glass we used to craft it was made from vintage Coke bottles. You have really got to get with the

times, Barton. The new computer and monitoring system is user-friendly. I promise it won't hurt your widdle brain."

"Low blow, tin-pants," Hawkeye said, and bounced a tiny screw off the hull of Iron Man's armor.

Tony slowly backed out of the frame and straightened. "Well, it's fixed. For now. But I'm honestly not sure how much longer she'll hold out. We're going to have to wean you off of this old-timey equipment."

"All right, all right. I'll give it a shot, okay? Now about this problem we're having with the roster--"

"I think crisis might be a better word for it," Iron Man said. He tossed the soldering iron back into his toolbox and snapped the lid shut. "Three members out the door, a fourth is AWOL, and only five of us are left. And no offense, but as battle-tested as you, Two-Gun, and the Wasp are, I don't like our odds power-wise either. Darkhawk is our second most-powerful member, and that doesn't sit too well with me. The way things stand if we have to face another fiasco like we experienced in San Francisco, we're toast."

Hawkeye stifled a frown. "I hear you."

"I honestly think we're going to need to go on another recruitment drive here pretty soon," Iron Man said, getting to his feet. He moved over to the glass picture screen and picked it up with a grunt. "There have to be some proven reserve Avengers out there willing to buckle down and return to active status."

Hawkeye stroked the back of his neck, watching as Iron Man fitted the glass fixture into place. "Well, if all else fails we can at least try to make a run with the five-man roster. Hell, if I could get the kooky quartet running as a well-oiled machine, I'm sure I can manage this motley crew."

"Oh, so it was *your* leadership abilities that pulled the team together when the rest of us took a leave of absence," Iron Man said as he thumbed the power to the computer bank and watched as it hummed to life. "I could have sworn somebody else was leading around that time. Big guy, blond hair, penchant for wearing the American flag as a costume. Maybe you know him."

Hawkeye grinned. "See, that was what the media *wanted* you to think, chrome dome. It was really all about your friendly neighborhood Hawkeye. In our quartet, Steve played the tuba. He had the biggest instrument, and he made the most noise, but I was the conductor, buddy boy."

"Give me a break," Iron Man said, and turned to leave. "You're on monitor duty, fearless leader. Enjoy."

Hawkeye spread his hands and grinned. "What? What'd I say?"

"Care for another, pard?" Matt Hawk said, and extended his hand out to the man sitting across from him.

"Don't mind if I do, friend," Clint Barton said, and removed the icy cold can of beer from the clutches of the Two-Gun Kid. He curled his fingers beneath the tab, and the can barked as the seal was broken. Hawkeye took a long swig, and set the can down on the control panel in front of him. "Just don't tell Tony I was sharing a six-pack during monitor duty. And definitely don't tell him I had an open beverage anywhere near his equipment."

Two-Gun smiled. "My lips are sealed. 'Course, seein' as I'm the one what brought you the beverage in the first place, I doubt I'd be any better off if the locomotive-man came steamin' in here."

"You're probably right," Hawkeye said around a chuckle. "Man, it is nice to finally get a chance to sit down and unwind. The way things have been going lately, I thought I'd never get the chance again."

"Has been a bit rough 'round here lately," Matt said, and dropped his eyes. "Pris was a good gal though, don'tcha think? Didn't sit too well with me the way that Moon Knight fella took her to the woodshed. Had a mind to put hands on him afterwards myself."

Hawkeye nodded. "Agreed. But as much as I hate to say it, if Vagabond had just owned up from the very beginning with us, all of the things that happened could have been avoided. Hell, the death of Zemo might have even been avoided. I'm not going to shed any tears for that megalomaniac, but he'd be in custody right now if Priscilla could have trusted us enough to tell us her secret. We could have handled it for her. That's what a team does for you."

Clint, I..." Matt said. He was gripping the neck of his bottle so tightly that his knuckles had turned white. He forced himself to relax his grip. "I have something I need to talk to you about, and-"

"Clint Barton!"

Matt whirled around, and Clint nearly fell from his chair as he took his feet off the control panel of the monitoring station. Hawkeye glanced sheepishly behind him and was greeted by the stern gaze of the former Avenger chairwoman, Janet Van Dyne, more famously known as the Wasp.

"Uh..." Hawkeye said, dropping his eyes from Jan down to the beer in his hand and back up to regard her again. "Hey, Jan. This, um... This isn't what it looks like."

The Wasp was rapidly tapping her foot on the tile of the floor, and she pointed a finger directly at Clint. "I can't *believe* you, Clint. I come in here to find you drinking, goofing off with your friend, getting crud on the control panel from your dirty feet-"

"Well, my feet aren't really *that* dirty, and-"

Jan sliced at the air with her hand, silencing Clint. "And you're actually on monitor duty while you're doing it? Are you crazy? Get out of here you big lug. I'll take over for you."

"Okay, okay. You better leave, Matt, before-" Hawkeye did a double-take. "Wait, what?"

"You heard me. Take it out into the parlor before I change my mind," Jan said. She was smiling openly now.

Hawkeye started laughing as he hoisted himself from his chair. "You had me going for a minute there, Jannie. I was having flashbacks to the hardnosed east coast team-leader of times past."

Jan swatted Hawkeye on the shoulder as he and Matt Hawk filed past her on their way out. "You keep messing around on the job, and those days will be back sooner than you think."

"Yeah, yeah," Hawkeye said, pantomiming a talking motion with his hand. Matt Hawk rolled his eyes at Clint.

"That's just gonna get ya into even more trouble, pard."

"Don't I know it," Hawkeye said. He nudged Matt with his elbow as they walked down the hallway towards the parlor. "Now what were you about to say before we were so opportunely interrupted? Something you needed to talk to me about?"

Matt shrugged. "Naw, nothin' so important that it can't wait while we finish our beers. I've still got ta drink ya under the table, after all."

"Fat chance of that happening," Hawkeye said. He moved into the parlor and set his beer down atop one of the end tables next to the sofa. It was then that he noticed Matt hadn't entered with him. The sound of breaking glass caused the avenging archer to whip his head around.

"Matt?"

The Two-Gun Kid was standing in the doorway that led into the hall that stretched into the heart of the west coast compound. He was looking down in horror at the broken shards of the beer bottle that had shattered when it hit the floor.

"No. No, please. This can't be happenin'. Not now," Matt said. Hawkeye was struck by the wavering quality of his voice. It was almost as though Matt were talking through static.

Hawkeye took a step forward. "It's all right, Matt. It's just a little glass. We can clean it up. It's not a problem."

Matthew Hawk lifted his head to look at his friend. Clint Barton was struck again, but this time by the haunted look in the eyes of the Two-Gun Kid. The look froze him to the spot, and turned his blood into ice.

"Matt, what is it? What's wrong with you?" Hawkeye said, and then his sharp eyes caught movement from the other side of the room. He turned his head, and watched in wonder as a section of the air began to ripple. A shimmering light filled the wavering portion of space, and as Hawkeye and Two-Gun watched, the enigmatic figure known as Sayge floated through the opening and into the room.

"Matthew Hawk," Sayge said, the words flowing from the dark void enveloped by the brilliant white hood concealing his - or her, Hawkeye hadn't a clue - features. "Your time has come. You are no longer needed on this plane of existence."

"This is getting ridiculous," Hawkeye said. He was already activating the beacon in his Avengers ID card. The rest of the troops would be along in moments. "Looking like a reject from The Christmas Carol doesn't give you the right to bust in here anytime you feel like it with your weird warnings and premonitions. I'm getting awful sick of-"

"No!" Matt said. Hawkeye was stopped cold by the hard, ugly tone of voice his friend used. He looked over, and Matthew Hawk was stalking towards Sayge. His face was twisted with rage. "It ain't time yet. He said I'd be able to stay 'til I saw Kang, and I ain't seen him. You damn monster. You can't take me from here now. I've already lost everything. Ya can't take *this* from me too."

"Matt, what are you talking about?" Hawkeye said. The mention of the word Kang had sent his mind spinning. Everything was happening so fast. "What in the hell is going on here?"

"Hawkeye," Matt said. Hawkeye looked past his friend, and he was pleased to see that Jan was running down the hallway toward them from the monitor room. It only took Hawkeye another second to realize that he could only see down the hallway because he was looking right through the Two-Gun Kid. His friend was beginning to fade away.

"My god, Matt. What... what's happening to you?"

"That's what I'd like to know," Iron Man said. He was stepping into the parlor behind Hawkeye with Darkhawk and Hank Pym trailing just a few steps behind.

Matt Hawk shook his head and ran his hands over his face. Hawkeye half-expected them to pass right through. "I didn't want it to come out like this, ya'll. I hope ya believe me when I say that."

"Didn't want *what* to come out like this, Matt?" Darkhawk said. Even through the modulated tone his helmet caused, Hawkeye could still hear the emotion in his voice.

"I'm..." Matt said. He dropped his eyes, and kicked gently at the floor in frustration. His foot passed right through the ground. Jan had passed by him, and was standing near Hank. Two-Gun raised his eyes, and looked intently at the Avengers gathered before him. "I'm not the man you thought I was. Not entirely, is what I mean to say. I'm Matt Hawk, and I'm an Avenger, but that's not the only reason I'm here."

Hawkeye felt a lump rise into his throat, and he wasn't surprised to find he couldn't speak around it. Iron Man had no such difficulty, and his voice was as hard as his namesake. "And what is the reason, Two-Gun? What is it you have to tell us?"

"This is a pointless conversation, Avengers. I will show you what you wish to see," Sayge said, and passed a hand through the air. Energy erupted from the cloak enshrouding the apparition, and from it, images began to form. The Avengers watched as the Two-Gun Kid stood before the graves of his wife and daughter. They watched as he walked away, and didn't stop until he found his way into the unrelenting, unforgiving heat of the desert. They watched as he wailed in rage at the sky, and tore at his clothes and his hair in pain and grief. They watched as he walked, birds of prey circling overhead in eager anticipation of the inevitable. They watched as the man finally collapsed, content to die. They watched him close his eyes a final time; but when he awoke he was no longer in the desert. The Avengers watched as the Two-Gun Kid looked up and found the cold, calculating eyes of Immortus regarding him.

"That's enough, Sayge! I've seen enough," Matthew Hawk said, and swiped at the visions. To his surprise, they actually did fade. Sayge did not protest, and so the Two-Gun Kid turned his attention to the Avengers. "I can't live it over again. The things I went through. How desperate I was. Ain't no point in avoidin' it no more. You saw Immortus found me out there in the desert, but what ya didn't see was that he saved my life. He... he gave me a chance at new life. And he said all I had to do in return was do him a favor."

"You're a traitor," Iron Man said. His voice was no more than a growl, and his piercing blue eyes blazed from the slits in his golden helmet. "What was the plan, Two-Gun? Were you sent here to study our weaknesses and formulate the best time for Immortus to strike? Maybe gun us down in our sleep? You actually sat in judgment of Vagabond with the rest of us, and you're no better than she was, you miserable-"

"That's enough, Iron Man," Hawkeye said. His look was enough to stop Iron Man from continuing. He looked back to Two-Gun. "I want to hear it from you, Matt. What was it you were doing here? Was it just to work for Immortus? Were you trying to have us betrayed? Were you trying to have us *killed*?"

Matt shook his head. "Clint, I'd never do something like that. Ya gotta believe me. I didn't want to hurt anybody. If Immortus had asked me to do anythin' ta hurt ya'll, I'd a spit in his face. He just asked me to keep an eye out fer that Kang fella. That was all, and that was it."

"To watch for...?" Hawkeye said. He spread his arms in frustration. "Fine, you were sent to watch for Kang. I'll take you at your word, Matt. But why do it at all? Why would you even consider working for Immortus? You know what he is. What he's done. I know he saved your life, but--"

"I know, Clint. Believe me, I know it. But after--" Matt Hawk lifted his head, and even though his corporeal form was nearly gone now, Hawkeye could still see the terrible pain behind his eyes. "After everything I went through. What with losin' Nancy and Virginia. My little Ginny. You got to understand that I fell, Clint. I fell into a hole so deep and so dark that I never thought I'd climb my way out again. Not ever. I needed somethin'. Somethin' to help mend that awful wound splittin' my heart right down the middle. And I ain't sayin' it was right, because I know it wasn't. But he gave me the chance to come back to a place where I knew I'd be wanted, if only for a short time. Right here with ya'll. All I had ta do was keep my eyes open and let 'im know if I saw that green 'n purple-clad bandit anywhere. It seemed like such a small price to pay. And seein' you again, and joining up with this wild bunch has shown me that even if what I did wasn't the right thing, it was *still* the right choice for me. Because I got the chance to see ya'll again. To be a part of the Avengers, and to make a little bit of difference again. Ain't nothin' can ever take that away from me.

"I wish I had more time now. Time to explain everything, and time just to, I don't know- to sit down with all a ya and share a drink, I guess. And say goodbye the right way. But I ain't got the time, and I'll regret that to the day I die. I didn't want to wrong nobody, Clint, least of all you. I consider you the best friend I got left in this or any other time. That may not mean much to ya now, but I promise ya it's the truth."

"Matt," Hawkeye said, and tried to place his hands on the shoulders of the Two-Gun Kid. His fingers passed through the cowboy as if Matthew Hawk were nothing more than a ghost. "I don't have the words."

"I know. I ain't got 'em neither." Matt tipped his hat and caught Hawkeye's eyes with his own. "Take care of yerself, archer. I got the feeling we'll see one another again before long."

As Hawkeye and the other assembled Avengers looked on, Matthew Hawk turned on his heels and began walking toward the apparition hovering a short distance away. The flowing robes that surrounded Sayge, already a white so pure it was difficult to behold, suddenly flared with a piercing light that enveloped the Two-Gun Kid. Hawkeye shielded his eyes with the back of his hand, struggling to keep his sharp eyes fixed on the ghostly form of his friend. But as the light melted the shadows and filled the room completely, Hawkeye felt his retinas begin to sting and his head begin to swim. He reached a hand out and took hold of the arm of a nearby sofa to steady his senses, and though his eyes left the spot where Matthew Hawk had stood only seconds before, when he looked again the Two-Gun Kid was gone.

"I should have known you'd be sticking around, Casper."

Hawkeye was looking at the floating form of Sayge, and the rest of the Avengers followed his gaze. Sayge beckoned towards them ominously with a long-fingered hand. "The last time we conversed, your ranks were greater. But though your numbers have weakened, the threat to your world has not. You and your ilk shall still be called upon to combat a great peril. Three harbingers: the parasite, the revived one, the caretakers of ages, and then the end of all that is. Nothing has changed."

"But wait," Hawkeye said. His face was wrinkled in confusion. "We already fought a parasite. The H'ythra. Was that the parasite you meant? Is Immortus the caretaker of ages? And what about Matt? What did you do with him?"

Hawkeye stepped forward, but it was impossible to read anything in the ebon depths that served as the face of Sayge as the entity faded from sight. The echo of its final words reverberated throughout the parlor. "Prepare yourselves."

Iron Man frowned behind his faceplate, and though Hawkeye couldn't see it, he could hear it in his voice. "What was that you were saying before about the kooky quartet?"

"Last call for Flight 162, Los Angeles, California to Seattle, Washington. All passengers are required to present their boarding passes at the gate."

Carol Danvers stepped forward as the line she was in steadily shuffled forward. Most of the plane had already been boarded, but there were still a number of passengers still waiting. Every fifth person was required to step aside and remove his or her shoes as a security precaution. Carol had her Avengers identification card - as good as any state license - and her boarding pass clutched in one hand, and a carry-on over her shoulder. She had briefly considered just shipping her luggage from the compound and flying home along the northern coast, as it was truly beautiful during this time of year. She'd done it before more than once, and usually made excellent time. But as much as her powers had fluctuated over the past few weeks, she knew it'd be a bad idea.

There were only a few more people between her and the gate, but as soon as she felt the hand wrap around her arm near the elbow she knew it was going to be another few minutes before she got on board. Maybe if she flashed her Avengers ID card they'd reconsider making her remove her shoes. She turned toward the security guard who had grabbed her, and her mouth popped open to protest. Before she could say anything, Clint Barton leaned forward and planted a kiss firmly on her lips. She drew back slightly in mounting surprise, but the archer followed her, and soon she was returning his kiss with her own sweet vigor. They stood there, and Carol lost her place in line as the other passengers reluctantly trundled by on their way to the gate.

They finally broke the kiss, and Carol felt a deep blush rise into her neck and spread its way through her cheeks. Clint Barton was blushing a bit himself, and his breath came in quick bursts.

"I rushed here as quick as I could," Clint said. He exhaled heavily and grinned. "Managed to get past security by flashing my ID card. I couldn't let you leave without telling you how I felt. I'm not so good at-

Carol stopped him by leaning forward and locking lips with the archer again. Clint lifted his hands to her face, and cupped her chin. Carol's hand found the back of Hawkeye's head, and she ran her fingertips softly through his hair. The world melted away around them.

"Uh, excuse me," a voice said, intruding on their moment. Carol felt a finger gently prod her shoulder. "Ma'am, you're going to have to board now, or you're going to miss your flight."

Carol broke the kiss, and her face was alight. Clint took his hands from her soft skin and clasped them together to keep from grabbing her again. "I guess you should probably get going now."

"Yeah," Carol said. "I guess I should. Clint, I'm... I'm really glad you came."

Clint smiled, and he motioned to the gate behind her. "I'm glad I did too. Now get on before they leave without you."

Carol turned around and strode into the gate. Clint watched as she moved down the walkway and disappeared around the corner. He watched as the plane taxied away from the gate and made its way onto the runway, and then watched as the plane took flight. He was still watching long after it disappeared from sight.

Next Issue: The ranks of the Avengers have been pared to four. Can Hawkeye, Iron Man, Wasp and Darkhawk face down the vilest villains of the Avengers? Of course not! So they're going on vacation to Hawaii instead.

THIS SPACE FOR RENT!

Well, that was an interesting issue, wasn't it? Howdy, folks. My name is Mike Exner III, and I'll be writing Avengers West Coast for the foreseeable future. First of all, I'd just like to thank Russ Anderson and Chris Munn for putting together a truly stellar run to this point. I am a huge fan of both the concept of this series, and the content that has come before, and I'll do my very best to live up to the tradition of the Whackos.

With that said, I'm sure you might be wondering why the heck I've disassembled most of the roster Chris and Russ built. Well, Chris Munn is still heavily involved in this title, so if a member of the team you loved is gone now, it was probably his fault. If a member you didn't like left, that was all my idea.

Love me!

In all seriousness, the seeds of this issue were planted long before I knew I'd be writing this title. Chris Munn and Russ Anderson cultivated this storyline, and all I had to do was harvest it. And while Two-Gun, Warbird, Beast, and Vagabond are gone now; they will not be forgotten. While the disassembling was rapid, the things that took place in the early stages of this title will have ramifications on my run for issues to come. And don't forget Captain Marvel. I certainly haven't.

But this is a new era for the Whackos, and therefore I'd like to rename the letter column. If anybody has any ideas about that, feel free to send me your suggestions. The one I feel is the best will be utilized, and I might even give you credit for it.

I'm going to try and have a lot of fun with this title, and I hope you stick around for the ride. And don't worry too much about the roster. I'll fill it in before long. We won't be renaming this title **The Kooky Quartet** anytime soon.

...But it'll be fun while it lasts.

-Mike Exner III
02/10/06