



M2K Cyberback #4

Collecting original AWC issues #46-50 by Meriades Rai

FEATURING:



Hawkeye



Iron Man



Wasp



White Tiger



Lady Kingfisher



Rocket Racer



Spymaster



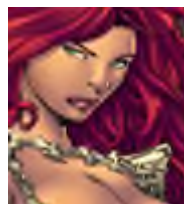
Elsa Bloodstone



The Straw Man



Conan



Red Sonja



Princess Python

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MARVEL 2000 PRESENTS...

"NEW BLOOD"

Chapter One of Five:

**"They Fill You With The Faults They Had
And Add Some Extra Just For You..."**

Written by Meriades Rai

Few people appreciated the lethal potential of arrows these days. Modern warfare, regardless of scale, was all about explosives and bullets and blades; the fact that a simple length of aluminum core sheathed in carbon fiber (the successor to traditional wood) could still prove to be a deadly projectile tended to come as an unpleasant surprise to those on the receiving end. Evidence of this was presently undeniable in the form of a dozen bodies littering the Plaza in Bunker Hill, the blood of unsuspecting morning shoppers and office workers running in scarlet rivulets along the gullies between the Art Deco flagstones.

All of these victims, you see, had been felled by arrows, and now lay spread-eagled with shafts protruding from necks, chests and foreheads as if cut down on some medieval battlefield rather than in the midst of downtown Los Angeles.

Sascha Gutiérrez didn't know much about arrows. She was, after all, only six years old. However, this was a mature enough age for her to realize that she was the next intended target for the man in the colorful costume and mask who had just shot her attendant custodian, Miss Alvarado, and who was now standing some forty feet away with his bow still raised.

Sascha didn't cry, a tiny mouse of a girl but brave beyond her years. She just clutched her toy giraffe Bobby to her chin and silently waited for the inevitable. Across the blood-splattered Plaza the masked man nocked a new shaft, pulled back his bowstring, and then let fly.

The arrow sliced through the air...

...but then, in the space of a blink, the shaft stilled and then splintered into four perfect quarters of shattered filament as it was struck in the course of its flight by *another* arrow, this one released from just behind Sascha's shoulder and traveling at a trajectory expertly designed to counter the first projectile.

Sascha flinched and exhaled a gasp. The masked man faltered momentarily, then dived for cover behind an ornamental statue as a second arrow speared through the air towards him. This arrow struck polished marble but didn't penetrate; instead, the shaft's rounded arrowhead exploded in a colorful cloud of sparks and dust and fog, obscuring the immediate area from view.

Sascha turned to see another man crouch down behind her. He too was dressed in mask and costume and carried a bow, but he was wearing an elaborate tunic of violet and indigo rather than the more sinister black and crimson of the first man, and his bow was a gleaming golden affair. He was also smiling, although even at six years old Sascha knew that this was just for her benefit; she suspected, correctly, that the last thing her guardian angel felt like doing was smile.

"Does that giraffe have a name?"

Sascha nodded. "Bobby," she said. Clint Barton smiled a little wider.

"That's a good name," he said, softly. "I knew a Bobbi once. She was a lion, though. Brave, just like you."

Clint ruffled Sascha's hair with one gloved hand, then turned his attention to the woman who was lying at the girl's side. The woman – Hispanic, late 20s, in a plain ivory blouse and gray jacket and skirt now soaked through with blood, courtesy of the arrow embedded in her right shoulder – was, miraculously, still alive. She met Clint's gaze with dark, pretty eyes, then grunted in pain as she slipped her left hand into her jacket and retrieved a slim black wallet. Clint took the wallet and glanced inside.

"René Alvarado, US Marshals Service," he murmured. "WITSEC?"

The woman, Alvarado, nodded briefly. She looked across at Sascha, and Clint did likewise. WITSEC was the Federal Witness Protection Program.

Alvarado said, "Her mother was a district attorney in Boston. She and her partner were murdered because of a case they were working on. Sascha here was a witness. We've been trying to keep her safe, but this goes beyond traditional organized crime. This assassin... we're up against a mask here. We... we..."

Alvarado faltered. Clint held her, fearing the worst.

"Protect the girl, Hawkeye," Alvarado said, blood suddenly pooling in the corner of her mouth. "He can't have her. He *can't*."

And that was all.

Clint Barton, the Avenger known as Hawkeye, stood then and gathered Sascha Gutiérrez close. The sound of distant sirens was drawing close, heralding the arrival of medical assistance, but Clint knew that it would be too late for René Alvarado or for any of these other victims of some maniac assassin's kill-spree. Across the plaza, there was movement in the cloud of murk released by the smokescreen arrow he'd fired earlier. The killer had been buttonholed temporarily but now he was back on the offensive.

He can't have her.

Clint grimaced, his eyes darkening in the holes of his mask.

"He won't," he said. "I promise."

"Here we go, Mr. Stark, just as promised," crowed Bartholomew Knott, flourishing his wide-brimmed hat in the direction of an expansive assortment of white, silver and ecru buildings, an installation collectively known as the Avengers West Compound. "We've been working round the clock to make sure everything's shipshape for your official reoccupation," he said, "and I'm proud as punch to say we've beat the deadline. Now, if you can confirm precisely how many team members the on-site staff will be catering for, I'll -"

"Three."

Bart Knott's beaming smile sagged. "Three?"

"Three," said Anthony Stark, the Avenger known as Iron Man. "Just... three. For now."

"Oh."

Behind his faceplate of gleaming gold, Stark grimaced. Bart had every reason to sound disappointed. As the Compound's new head of operations it had been his responsibility to assemble a team of grounds-

staff and housekeepers to attend to the facilities here after an extended vacancy period, and on initial inspection a grand job had been done by all. It was a shame such enterprise couldn't be admired by a full compliment of Avengers.

"Hawkeye and The Wasp will take up permanent residence on-site," Stark explained, "and I'll also be here or hereabouts on a regular basis. And, rest assured, we *will* be inducting new recruits as soon as possible..."

He made this last claim with authority, although the truth was it had been two weeks since the departure of Moon Knight, Spider-Woman, Doctor Druid and Sir Halifax of Wundagore from the West Coast ranks, and the three remaining members of the charter had barely had a moment to consider replacements, despite an unanimous agreement that this was an obvious priority. The decision to return to Los Angeles had been a fair one, what with the rebuilding and renewal of San Francisco's long-suffering infrastructure now proceeding apace, but a fifteen-acre stretch of Pacific Coast real estate (replete with state-of-the-art living quarters, maximum security underground laboratories, surveillance databases and medical facilities, a Quinjet hangar, a training complex, two hundred feet of private beaches, and provision for a dozen sports and leisure activities) was a little grandiose for just three people. Still, as Clint had mentioned in that cheeky-cheerful way of his, at least the Jacuzzi would never be overcrowded. And -

"If you're planning to join us for lunch, would you please be so kind as to remove your... contraption?"

Stark turned at the sound of a woman's voice. He found himself face-to-face – or, at least, face-to-faceplate – with a lady of immaculate bearing, tall and curve-hipped, with treacle-black hair swept back from a severe yet lovely face and pinned precisely with a number of ivory clasps. The woman was young, without question, but she wore a starched gray dress with a high, lacy collar and sensible shoes in a fashion that hadn't been in style for at least two centuries. She wasn't smiling but she had the most lucidly beautiful amber eyes that Stark had ever seen. Who needed smiles and fashion sense with eyes like that?

"Remove my what?" he asked, a trifle dreamily. The woman sniffed, and Bart Knott cleared his throat uncomfortably.

"Ah," he said. "Yes. Mr. Stark, this is Miss Salome N'Kitka-Foyle, from Wakanda by way of Gloucester in England. She's our new Head Housekeeper. Wonderful credentials, I'm sure you'll - "

"I like my floors clean, Mr. Stark," said Miss N'Kitka-Foyle, with that deep, polished glass accent that was so quintessentially Wakandan. "Spit-spot. No muck, no grease. Ergo, no armor in certified areas, including the kitchen and dining room."

Stark blinked. "I don't leave *grease*," he said, evenly. "This *contraption* I'm wearing is a holistic exoskeleton of ionized proto-alloy, augmented with extradimensional Nth Metal and layered over a weave of sophisticated, submolecular microcircuitry of spectrofuturistic design. It's not the stripped out engine of a 250cc Honda scooter."

"Pish."

"Pish?"

"Pish-pish. My mother was attendant in the royal palace of T'Challa, and she brooked no excuses any more than I shall. No grease, Mr. Stark, ionized or otherwise." Miss N'Kitka-Foyle drew herself to her full height and curled an eyebrow. "Will there be a problem with that?"

Stark scowled. "Well, let's see. If Graviton or The Absorbing Man launch a surprise attack on us in the middle of dinner, do you promise you'll hold the fort whilst I go suit up in the back yard?"

Miss N'Kitka-Foyle sniffed disdainfully and turned away with an elegant flounce. "Lunch in ten minutes, gentlemen," she said. "Parsnip and chick pea soup. If you're late, there'll be no reheating, understood?"

"I hate chick peas."

"How spectrofuturistic of you."

In the woman's wake, Tony Stark glanced down at his armored form of crimson and gold, a circular cavity of blue-white light burning furiously in his chest like a beacon. The unibeam could release a electromagnetic laser pulse of pure concussive force that, deployed without restraint, could cause fatal impact injuries to an average, unprotected person. Which was tempting, but Stark decided to count to ten in his head instead. Or maybe twenty.

"Welcome home, Avengers?" Bartholomew Knott said, hopefully. Iron Man cast him a baleful golden stare.

"Yes," he said, through gritted teeth. "Delighted, I'm sure."

"Tell me about my father."

Janet Van Dyne was alarmed when Maureen Lippmann started speaking to her, but this was unsurprising, what with Maureen just being a face on the television. It was a pleasant face, that of a dark-haired, middle-aged woman with kind eyes and a broad smile, and her voice was also soft and well-pronounced with an educated English accent that Miss Salome N'Kitka-Foyle would have approved of, but that was all beside the point. Maureen had no business speaking to anyone. She was an actress in a television show, performing in the background as Janet emerged freshly-showered from the bathroom of her private suite in the Avengers West Compound before settling back on her bed in her nightgown, with balls of cotton wool stuffed between her bare toes and a nail file and bottle of cherry red polish to hand.

It was all very undignified.

"Are you talking to me?" Janet asked, eyes wide beneath the careless hook of her chestnut brown fringe as she sat up and stared across the room. The face on the television smiled back at her eerily.

"Oh yes," she said. "Hello, mother."

Janet flinched. Then her expression darkened and she set aside her cosmetics.

"Nikola."

"Yes." The face on the screen nodded slightly, then inclined, eyes sparkling. "Please don't waste your time attempting to track my transmission, my relays are encrypted far beyond the human capacity to decipher. Even Stark wouldn't be able to triangulate my current position in the spatial schematic, especially -"

"What do you want, Nikola?" Janet snapped. "Believe me, after the night I've had the last thing I need is a confrontation with you, let alone a conversation."

Maureen – or rather, the invisible intruder who had appropriated her likeness as a mask – continued to smile. "Yes," she murmured. "You've been such a *busy* little bee, haven't you? Flitting through the darkness of the city like Florence Nightingale on gossamer wings. Responding to one metahuman incident in San Pedro, then aiding the emergency services in Garvanza after a bridge collapse... it must be difficult, providing a protective blanket for millions of needy citizens with such a depleted team, yes?"

You've been on call for eighteen hours and thirty-nine minutes. You must be exhausted. I think you deserve a dip in Lake You."

"I deserve a *what* now?" Janet looked on, incredulously. "Listen, you want my advice? No more cybernetic interfacing with the cable network. Especially Oprah. It'll only end badly. And, what, are you saying you've been *watching* me?"

"I can access and arrogate the intended function of any electrical network or mechanical appliance for my own purposes, including the manipulation of pixilated broadcasts."

"So you *have* been watching me."

"Yes."

"Are you watching me *now*?"

Maureen said nothing, but continued to smile. Janet shivered, then snatched up the television remote in fury and directed it at the set. The screen went black. Five seconds later, the radio alarm clock on the bedside table nearby bleeped into life, and the warm, familiar tones of the mid-morning KCBS presenter began to spill from the speaker.

"I just want an answer to my question, mother," Nikola said, in another stolen voice.

Don't call me that, you monster. Janet scowled as she began to pluck cotton wool from between her toes, the intended application of nail polish suddenly no longer a priority. "You want to know about your father," she muttered. "Of *course* you do. It's your overriding desire. But what am I supposed to say? What could I possibly tell you about Hank Pym that you don't already know? He used his own brain-patterns to give you artificial consciousness, and if that wasn't enough *you stole his corpse from his own funeral!* Don't you understand, Nikola? There's nothing left. You already *possess* him, mind and body."

"But not soul."

Janet rounded on the alarm clock, fists clenched. "What could something like *you*," she asked, in a poisonous whisper, "know about the human soul?"

Janet slid from the bed and stalked across the bedroom of her suite, only shedding her robe when she reached the door of her walk-in closet and passed inside. She was disgusted by the idea that Nikola's synthetic eyes, in any form, might be gifted the opportunity to roam over her naked body for so much as a second, but evidently she'd been a victim of the creature's voyeurism all day, most likely longer. Such an invasion of intimacy, worse than any direct confrontation... the psychology of the situation didn't bear thinking about.

The closet was filled with all manner of clothes, from business suits to cocktail dresses, but none of these interested Janet at that moment. Instead she snatched a small golden bracelet from a hook on the back of the door and slipped it over her slender wrist, thumbing a nigh-invisible switch on the inner curve as she did so. Instantly there was a rush of air and a shiver of fabric caressing skin, and in the next heartbeat her robe fell away and inside her petite body was sheathed in a sleek suit of jet-black streaked with slashes of amber-gold. A weave of nylon and tessellated steel microfibers, bountifully laced with a concoction of unstable molecules (copyright Reed Richards) and Pym particles (copyright her late husband, and Nikola's 'father', Henry Pym). Henry had manufactured the bracelet and the costume contained within to Janet's specifications a few weeks before he'd died during an incident the Avengers had come to call the Kang / Ultron War. His parting gift.

Janet's heart contracted with sorrow even as her blood boiled in fury.

The bedside radio silenced, replaced by the renewed hum of the television and the return of Maureen's smiling face as Janet emerged from her closet and stalked past, heading for the bay windows on the far side of the suite. "I understand more about humanity than you give me credit for," Nikola called out in her wake. "I'm endeavoring to learn, to adapt. And I appreciate now that the dignified tributes of mourners means nothing without other less decorous anecdotes, those that illuminate a man's *true* nature. It's the darkness of a person's soul that gives shape to the light."

Janet snorted, pausing to cast a scornful glare back over her shoulder. "Oh, how lovely," she purred. "Most poetic Ultron ever. 'I wandered lonely as a toaster'? 'On either side the river lie, long fields of corpses, now you die'? Or maybe Larkin's more your style. *This Be The Verse*. You know how that one goes? Access your databanks and get back to me."

"My father - "

"*Your father was a failure!*" Janet screamed. "Is that *indecorous* enough for you?"

She gulped back a breath, tears stinging her eyes, but didn't turn away no matter how much she wanted to. This was something that needed to be said. Perhaps it had needed to be said for a very long time now.

"Hank Pym was a brilliant, wonderful man," she snapped, "but, yes. He failed. Over and again, he *failed*. In *his* mind, at least. Because he was haunted by his limitations. Nothing he achieved satisfied him because he was the most conflicted kind of person anyone could ever meet: a genius in his field, an egotist and a perfectionist, but also afflicted with low self-esteem and manic depression. He made such incredible discoveries and indulged his fascination for science and his craving for adventure, but he was intimidated by his peers – Stark, Reed Richards, Bruce Banner, T'Challa in matters of the mind; Thor, Captain America and even The Hulk in body – and he was obsessed with the notion of *proving* himself, a tragic preoccupation considering how his fellow heroes already accepted and admired him in ways he could never appreciate.

"People, ordinary people, they see us – the superhumans, the gifted ones – through the lens of a camera, or captured in all our glory in the pages of comic books. They don't see the flaws. Hank could never be Thor or Captain America, because in truth none of us could hope to be, but the rest of us accept those limitations and pledge to be the best we can be regardless. I was a semi-successful fashion designer for a while but not through any real talent on my part; I was a quirk, a superhero flashing my sequins and clicking my heels for the celebrity magazine circuit, and as soon as someone else oozed into the spotlight my star waned. I was a nobody again, a token girl in a man's world, an insect, a laughing stock... but not in my own mind. I survived that experience, just as anyone might persevere. Then, for a time I excelled as leader of the Avengers, but ultimately I was in charge when Baron Zemo's Masters Of Evil invaded the mansion and came close to destroying everything we held dear. I endured that too.

"That survival instinct is what drives many of us on, no matter what. But for Hank... for Hank, that deficit of inner strength nagged at his spirit like a splinter. It made him reckless, unstable. It cost him everything. It... cost him me."

Janet slumped against the wall, her head in her hands.

"You want to know what's at the crux of all this, Nikola?" she breathed. "Part of me is surprised you've never suspected, although I guess that would take human sensibilities. *Hank was infertile*. He couldn't have children. *Human* children. I don't expect you to understand, but to a man given to questioning his own worth this was a cruel reality to accept. There's no way of knowing for sure but, in my heart, I'm convinced his fixation with the genesis of true artificial intelligence stemmed from that realization. Crueler still, though, is the fact that I *didn't* regret the situation.

"Shock, scandal! Call the wicked wife police! *I don't think Hank Pym would have made a good father*, and I don't say that as a challenge to you. It's what I truly feel. I believe his eventual creation – you, in your

primary incarnation – was a child built to a blueprint in more ways than one. Hank was obsessed with the process, with the *idea* of you. I can't speak from personal experience but I'd imagine most *good* parents value the actuality of their child, not the theory."

"You consent to deprecate a dead man's memory, then?" Nikola hissed, almost amused. "A different edge to The Wasp's sting, yes? Unexpected. And curious."

"It doesn't mean I loved him any the less back when we were together, or thought of him as anything less than a brilliant, capable man. Or that I miss him less now."

"But I requested the truth, as perceived by you."

"Yes."

The face on the television screen flickered. "There is an evident flaw in your observation. Surely it can be said that my father evolved, just as I have done over time? He created *me*, after all, and I am *not* Ultron. I'm an upgrade, an improvement over all that had gone before. He gave me a new capacity for emotion, compassion, sensibility. A new *name*."

"But not a new face," Janet murmured, her eyes shining darkly. The image on the screen shivered in agitation, then broke into a colorful swirl of pixels before reconstituting a few seconds later.

"Explain."

"Consider this," Janet said. "Hank created Ultron, however inadvertently. A *killer*. He seeded and gave birth, in terms of wires and metal and computer coding, to a soulless monstrosity that has become synonymous with fear and blood and death over so many years. Those terrible eyes, that jack o'lantern grin, that burn of fire and hate deep in the shadows of an adamantium skull. When we humans – Avengers and ordinary folk alike – see that familiar *inhuman* face, we're reminded of nothing more than nightmares. For Hank to have conceived a face like that for his child *once* is chilling.

"But then, Nikola... then he did it again. With *you*."

"Do you see? He could have made you anything, Nikola. Male, female, young, old. Plain. Beautiful. He could have shown me, shown the team, shown the *world* that he understood the significance of creating life and that he'd come to terms with previous failings. Instead he built you, and arrogantly, ignorantly, *unforgivably*, it never occurred to him to alter the visual template. *He gave you Ultron's face*, with every last measure of horror it represented, because it was never about *you*. It was about *him*. It was about redemption, a chance for him to tell everyone that he'd finally succeeded in what he set out to do so long ago."

Janet breathed deeply, her heart fluttering in her throat. "You're not a person, Nikola," she said, quietly. "Regardless of brain templates and advanced emotional synthesis you can never be human. Because, no matter what he claimed, Hank didn't create you for humanity's sake. In the end you were just another project, conceived not out of love but through simple neurosis."

"And yet, I know that you want to be accepted, Nikola. To be loved. And in that, without doubt... *you are* your father's son."

For a moment there was silence. Janet glanced across at the television set, wondering what would happen next, secretly relishing the prospect of Nikola instigating some technological manifestation. She was no longer exhausted, her blood now hot and her muscles quivering with tension; perhaps a battle was exactly what was required. But there was to be no such release.

As Janet watched, the face on the screen slowly faded to black – and Nikola spoke just once more, its words lingering in the air in residual hum.

"I feel I must disagree, mother," Nikola whispered. "In this moment, assimilating your words, I can't help but feel the same shame and worthlessness you attribute to my father. And, beneath that, the black tide of resentment and desire for murderous retribution against a world that treats me like flotsam. I wish to scream, to cry, to kill... should I therefore consider myself anything *but* human?"

And then the presence was gone, leaving behind only the soft chur of the air conditioning and the chirrup of birds beyond the bay windows. Janet blinked against the morning light as she stepped out onto the balcony, a sultry breeze ruffling her chestnut brown hair. Her heart ached.

Fly, she told herself. And she would. As weary as she'd be when this rush of adrenalin faded, she needed to be out there, in the world, helping people. Surviving. But, first...

Janet unclipped a communicator from the belt of her costume and hit the central red button.

"Mr. Knott?" she said. "It's Janet Van Dyne. Yes, the room is perfect, thank you. There's just one thing. Could you have someone remove the television set? Yes. Yes, I think from now on when I want to relax I'll just curl up with a good book..."

"Down!"

An arrow snapped into the side of the bookcase where Sascha Gutiérrez had been cowering a split second before, and she screamed as felt her hair sting with a burst of oak splinters. Hawkeye grunted and yanked the girl clear of the assassin's firing line as a second arrow whistled along a parallel trajectory to the first, this one punching a hole through the heart of a leather-bound first edition of Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon* and pinning it the wall just above the Avenger's head. Clint wasn't one for books as a rule, but he'd seen the film and he knew it kicked off with the death of a character named Archer.

"Irony so thick you could butter toast with it," he muttered, plucking his six-year-old companion from the floor like a kitten and tucking her carefully but firmly beneath the cove of a mahogany writing desk.

"Stay," he said. Sascha nodded, mute and wide-eyed and clinging on to Bobby the giraffe for dear life. Clint grimaced. According to the Marshal, Alvarado, the girl had already witnessed her mother's death, and now today's atrocities on top of this... no child should have to deal with that. Someone needed to pay.

Hawkeye stood and looked back towards the area where he knew the assassin was lurking. "Okay, you son of a Mongolian goat," he growled. "Let's see who can keep their nerve under fire..."

Realizing that they would have been easy targets out in the open, Clint had made the decision to seek cover at the closest opportunity: an antiques store littered with furniture and books. That instinctive judgment had certainly kept them alive these past few minutes, and squirreling Sascha away in a shadowed corner would buy her a little more time. Unfortunately Hawkeye was aware that his enemy had him at a disadvantage. Whereas he used blunt arrowheads, the type designed to stun or deliver some manner of concussive impact or other trickery rather than to maim or kill, his opponent wasn't as merciful; he was employing an especially wicked brand of mechanical broadhead, a wide-edged steel blade that deployed upon contact to rupture flesh and cause massive injury and blood loss in the hunter's prey. Worse still, Hawkeye was convinced that these arrows were treated with some kind of poison. Of the specimens he'd had a brief few seconds to examine he determined that both steel head and shaft were serrated with tiny, barbed teeth that glistened with some lethal anointment.

The man to whom these arrows belonged was more than just a killer. He was a sadist. Which meant that Hawkeye couldn't even afford to incur a flesh wound, let alone a direct -

Thwok.

Another point embedded into the wall to Clint's right, driving him onto his opposite flank – just as the rapidly encroaching assassin anticipated. A new arrow let fly, lashing past the edge of an antique standing lamp with no more than a quarter-inch to spare, and Hawkeye only managed to twist his neck and deflect the strike by straining every nerve and instinct in his body. Even then, if not for the quiver strapped across his back there was every chance that the deadly broadhead would have penetrated the tessellated mail of his costume and tainted his blood with toxic death.

Hawkeye grunted and rolled, hurling himself over a teak coffee table and whipping his upper body around in a tight arc even as he tucked his legs beneath him. He slid his golden bow across his ribs and extended his arm with a muscular snap, already nocking one of his own arrows and letting fly before the soles of his boots were planted back on firm ground. The assassin, caught by surprise at his rival's dexterity and sheer force of will, tried to seek cover by flattening himself back against an authentic Sixteenth-Century Swiss grandfather clock – but here was where Hawkeye gained the advantage. *His* arrow wasn't intended for impact; instead it was guided by a hair-trigger timer switch laced into the blunt, and it detonated some four feet before reaching the target's immediate vicinity.

The air was filled with an explosion of fine, wet mist, but this substance began to solidify instantaneously upon contact with oxygen, forming an expanding cloud of white foam that adhered to everything it touched inside a three-meter radius... including the assassin. The foam then hardened still further, achieving the density of concrete in the space of a heartbeat.

The man in the colorful mask and costume who had killed US Marshal René Alvarado and a dozen other bystanders that morning shrieked and cursed as he struggled to free himself from the white crust that had suddenly engulfed him, pinning him bodily to the clock behind.

"Quit your bleating, Billy Gruff," Hawkeye informed the assassin, advancing slowly. "You had your shot, and you missed. You *lose*."

The trapped killer's mouth curled into a snarl beneath the ridge of his scarlet and black half-mask. "Tell that to the people bleeding out over the asphalt outside," he spat. Hawkeye glowered.

"In the right hands an arrow can be as singularly fatal as a bullet from a scope rifle," he murmured. "You wanted the girl dead, you could have downed her outright from distance. Why the kill-spree? Just for kicks?"

"I wasn't contracted to bleed the girl, just abduct her. It was easy to identify her immediate guard but I couldn't take a chance on there being other plain-clothes Marshals in the zone."

"So, what? You just shoot everyone?" Hawkeye was trembling with rage. "Just tell the damn truth, you psychotic piece of filth. You knew you were cutting down the regular morning shopping crowd, the mothers and kids, the office guys out buying coffee and bagels, and you - "

Anger makes a man sloppy. All his years in the business, Clint Barton should have remembered that. The trouble was, he was the kind of man who gave into his passions, a guy who could display icy cool reserve and clinical reactions one moment but with an infuriating tendency to get cocky and distracted the next. In this instance he was so riled by the callous attitude of his foe – a nightmarish reflection of himself in terms of costume and weapon of choice – that he didn't register that the assassin wasn't as incapacitated as he'd originally believed.

The killer wasn't just armed with a traditional shortbow and arrows. There was a heavy clasp about his left wrist, and a flick of a switch ejected a miniature crossbow from the incurve of that clasp into the man's waiting palm. In that moment, time slowed.

The assassin began to raise the crossbow, pre-loaded with a sharpened iron bolt laced with the same poison as his serrated arrows. Hawkeye instinctively lifted his own bow, reaching back over his shoulder towards his quiver even as he shifted his body to the left, turning himself sideways-on to offer less of a target as well as to line up his aim. Chances were he could still, even then, nock and shoot before his enemy. Quick on the draw.

But his quiver wasn't there. His enemy's previous strike had shredded the crucial shoulder strap and the quiver had snapped and fallen clear when Hawkeye had vaulted over the table a minute before. *No arrows. No arrows!*

Clint's eyes widened behind his mask and a curse formed on his lips.

And that was when he heard the voice.

Trust in me. Let me flow through you.

They weren't words, of course, not really. It was more a song, sweet and breathless, a gentle murmur in the base of his brain. And his reaction, in that crawling moment of time, wasn't truly his own, as not even the most heightened human instinct could compensate in such a fashion. But, still, it was Clint Barton who continued to raise his golden bow and lock his right arm without hesitation despite his lack of arrows, and it was Clint who reached out and drew the bowstring back, and it was Clint who felt an unearthly power he couldn't possibly understand – at least, not yet – sparking in his gloved fingertips and then stretching out, out, *out...*

Hawkeye let fly. And, with a lightning crack of bowstring and a sudden, inexplicable flare of light, an arrow of pure incandescence shot forth, enveloping the poisoned iron bolt that had just been released from the lock of the assassin's miniature crossbow and then surging on to spear through the killer's exposed shoulder, causing him to scream and spasm in his hardened foam restraints with such fury that the three-hundred-year-old wood of the clock behind him cracked along the spine and sagged with a weary sigh.

Hawkeye's arm fell, his bow clutched in his fist. He gaped. He looked down at the bow, then looked back to his enemy, who was slumped and groaning and expelling amber smoke from his shoulder even though there was no visible wound. Of the iron bolt there was no sign. The archer pursed his lips.

"Well paint me with whiskers and call me Felix," he murmured. "That's *not* something you see every day..."

"Jagged Bow."

Hawkeye leaned back in his chair and frowned as Tony Stark, in his Iron Man armor sans helmet, flourished a gauntlet and caused a sequence of three-dimensional virtual data images to begin to cascade in mid-air above the table at the heart of the Avengers West Compound conference room. "Never heard of him," Clint said, shaking his head in despair. "How can we have a criminal file on a villainous archer and I've never heard of him?"

"Because you don't read the criminal files," The Wasp murmured, scanning Stark's data-stream. Hawkeye rolled his eyes.

"Well, yeah. I mean *aside* from that..."

"Joseph Emberlin, born Virginia, age 25," Stark reported. "I'd call him Z-list but even that's being generous. An idle rich kid wannabe, a few years back he and two friends handed over a fortune to our old sparring partner The Taskmaster, presumably expecting to emerge as fully-fledged super-criminals. The Taskmaster probably taught them a few moves and gave them fancy costumes and was planning to do a

flit with their money when the operation was trashed by Spider-Man and a renegade mercenary named Solo. No further records.”

“Well, record or not, he’s been busy since then,” Hawkeye said. “He was skilled. Almost had the drop on me if not for...”

He faltered. Janet glanced across at him curiously. “If not for what?”

Clint smiled. “If not for the old Barton charm,” he lied, making a circle with thumb and forefinger. “What else?”

Hawkeye’s golden bow was resting against the table nearby. It wasn’t glowing and it wasn’t singing to him, but he could feel its presence all the same, as if it was a part of him. He shivered, and hoped neither of his colleagues had caught his momentary lapse. He hadn’t told them the truth about the conclusion of his battle with the man who called himself Jagged Bow, just as he hadn’t yet filled them in on all his adventures back in the time-lost world of the Hyborian Age where he’d spent a number of weeks in the company of barbarians, she-devils and all manner of strangeness. He didn’t know *why* he was being secretive, not being a reticent sort by nature, but there was something about the bow he’d innocently appropriated from that bygone era, something more than the fact that it could apparently conjure and shoot arrows of blinding light. It –

“What happened to the girl, Sascha?”

Clint looked up as Janet spoke again, and his expression was melancholy. “Back in the care of the authorities,” he sighed. “Poor kid. The Marshals have promised to try and keep her safe this time around, but if whoever sent Bow after her penetrated WITSEC once then chances are they’ll do so again. Next time she might not be so lucky. I just wish there was something more we could do...”

“It never feels like a win when people die,” Stark murmured. “I’ll liaise with SHIELD, see what added protection they can offer. In the meantime...”

“We need recruits,” Janet said. “As soon as possible. Nikola’s out there and he – *it* – isn’t going to go away. If anything it’s becoming more unstable.”

“There’s been another incident?” Clint asked. Janet flushed slightly, her eyes bright with fury.

“Let’s just say I’m upgrading our Compound and personal communications tech beyond Nikola’s capability to hack it,” Stark said. “But I’m in complete agreement with Jan. We’re too stretched. The Sascha Gutiérrez-es of this city need the Avengers – a full compliment of Avengers. So here’s what I propose. I’m already talking with Steve and Carol about putting out the feelers out east, see if anyone in that vicinity wants to relocate, but we may have just as many untapped opportunities on our own doorstep. We just need to go out and find them.”

“Old stalwarts or fresh faces?” Janet enquired.

“I prefer experience,” Hawkeye said, authoritatively. “Maybe one rookie, but no more. All that training, worrying about their first day in the field...”

The Wasp arched a delicate eyebrow. “I remember a time when we were *all* untried,” she smiled. “And you, Clint, part of Cap’s Kooky Quartet with Wanda and Pietro... I think there’s something to be said for new blood.”

“There’s new blood and there’s new blood. Personally, bearing Nikola in mind and the proximity of the threats still at large in San Fran, I vote for honed skills. No kids.”

Stark nodded. “I’d agree with that.”

Janet shrugged. "Fair enough. So - "

At that moment there was a strident bleep of a comm. link, followed by an equally strident voice. "Mr. Stark? Are Mr. Barton and Ms. Van Dyne with you? Because I told you explicitly that I'd be presenting dinner at 7pm sharp, and it's now five minutes past. I had no idea that *tardiness* was a requisite for those oft charged with saving the good people of the world..."

Janet looked at Clint and Clint looked at Janet. Then they both looked at Stark, whose expression was as dark as a black cat on a moonless night.

"Think Mary Poppins," he said, in answer to his colleagues' unspoken question, "liberally dosed with Agatha Harkness. And the *Dora Milaje*. And maybe a touch of Thanos."

The three friends grinned. Welcome home, Avengers West Coast...

Elsewhere.

In a half-lit bedroom, decorated with posters and toys and all manner of things designed to make children feel safe and loved (but not, alas, *all* children), Sascha Gutiérrez lies awake in bed, toy giraffe clutched to her heart, muffling her weary sobs with her pillow.

She's witnessed more death than anyone should be exposed to in an entire lifetime, let alone at six years old. However, she isn't without hope. She remembers the man who rescued her; Hawkeye, that's what poor Miss Alvarado called him, and how the policemen and the Marshals service referred to him thereafter. Of course she remembers. How can she forget him? He is her savior, her guardian angel.

And that bow of his, the one that shot an arrow of pure light, pure hope and inspiration...

Sascha smiles to herself through her tears. She'll see the archer again, she knows that. And, maybe, she'll see that *real* angel again, the woman in the white robes and with the flowing hair of gold and snow and fire who appeared at Hawkeye's shoulder at the end of his altercation with the masked assassin. The woman who reached out and touched the bow with such reverence, as if it belonged to her...

Elsewhere.

In Santa Monica Bay, beneath the silver haze of a full moon, the harbor police are dredging a body from the water. A mutilated corpse. A middle-aged man whose identity will only be discovered the following day when forensic tests identify him as a member of that exclusive set: a superhero. But which costumed vigilante has met his end in such bitter circumstances?

In another part of the city, a young man with dreams of success in his chosen field sleeps peacefully, unaware that in the days to come his life – his new life, the life he's worked so hard to build after a recent past filled with turmoil and bad decisions – will be transformed once more, by design and by happenstance. This young man once believed he could outrace any adversity. Will that prove to be the case?

In another corner of the night, an order of saints cavort in the fire and the shadows like creatures possessed – which, of course, they are – whilst the stitched eyes and fleshless smiles of those who govern them watch on in wicked amusement. But what dark and terrible secrets lurk in those paintings that line the walls of this cursed gallery at the heart of this once-holy residence, now daubed with innocent blood?

And finally, confined within a shell of metal – in more than one sense – a troubled mind rails against thoughts of what are, what have been, and what might be. It wanders, it seethes, it broods... and then, when it catches sight of its reflection in a polished wall, it ponders. It has attempted to improve itself in days past, to refashion, to *recreate*, but before today – before its encounter with Janet Van Dyne – Nikola's endeavors were hopelessly limited in scale. Wicked eyes, however softened and decorated, remain wicked; a jack o'lantern smile continues to leer with barely disguised threat when delicacy is administered with a clumsy hand.

What is needed is grace. What is needed is *tenderness*. Femininity, sensuality, to understand oneself at heart and to allow those secret, inner desires to blossom. Yes, Nikola will show her mother that she *can* evolve, and be the loving child that her late husband's physical inadequacies so unfairly denied her. After all, whilst the relationship between father and son descends so inevitably into conflict, there can surely be no more rewarding bond than between *mother and daughter*.

Elsewhere...

...for the Avengers West Coast, the trials are beginning anew.

TO BE CONTINUED!

Coming Soon in AVENGERS WEST COAST

A man has been murdered in terrible fashion. But he was no ordinary man - and he will leave an astonishing legacy for his unsuspecting successor, one that will change her life forever! Plus: who is the mysterious Lady Kingfisher...? Be here next time as "New Blood" continues!

MARVEL 2000 PRESENTS...

"NEW BLOOD"

Chapter Two of Five:

**"When I Was Young, They Lay Me Soft
Upon A Snow White Tiger's Skin..."**

Written by Meriades Rai

Now...

"Twelve hundred dollars," the young Puerto Rican girl said, counting out a number of bills into the outstretched hand before her. "That's what we agreed, yes?"

The landlord, Clancy, was short and round and wearing an off-white vest beneath an old, plum-colored sports jacket. He chewed on the stub of a cheap cigar as he stared guiltily at the cash in his palm, unable to meet the gaze of the young woman standing before him in the dimly-lit foyer of his rundown tenement block. "Look, kid," he drawled, exhaling twin plumes of smoke from his nostrils. "This ain't right, y'know? I -"

"My family pays its debts, Mr. Clancy. My uncle died owing you rent, I get the bill. It's the way the world rolls."

Clancy sighed. "Yeah, but even so. Your uncle... he was a good guy, y'know? Not like some'a these dirtbags who'd stick you in the eye soon as look at you, and trust me, I've met had than my fair share of *those* freaks come stinking up my halls. What happened to Hector... he deserved better."

The girl's eyes, dark as an encroaching summer's storm, now flashed with warning. "I'd say most men deserve better than to be tortured and murdered, and for their butchered corpse to be dumped in Santa Monica Bay," she replied sharply, before she caught herself and softened her tone. "I'm sorry," she murmured. "It's been a long haul out here from New York, and I'm tired. If there's nothing else you need from me, Mr. Clancy, I'd like to see my uncle's apartment."

Clancy said nothing for a moment, his expression cheerless. Then, with a shrug, he fished a wad of keys from his jacket pocket and led the way along a narrow corridor. It was stifling - no air-conditioning - and ripe, and the route was lined with carpet of indistinguishable colour, worn away to the floorboards and lit by fizzing fluorescents. A slum hotel, populated by drug addicts, hookers and dregs. Clancy was right.

The late Hector Ayala had warranted a more dignified end than this.

The Puerto Rican was a striking girl, with cappuccino skin and rich, chocolate hair worn long and straight, and a boyish figure in shapeless black Levis and cream fleece jacket. Dark, sad eyes, the kind that stared back at you from the bottom of a glass. Surely no more than twenty years old. She didn't belong here. The two of them stopped at a door marked with cracked paint and the number 419, and Clancy fitted one of the keys on his ring into the lock. As the catch turned he glanced back over his shoulder, his smile nervous, almost shy, through the haze of cigar smoke.

“So, your uncle... it’s true what they say, right? That he was... y’know, back in the day... that he was one’a *them*?”

The girl’s expression flickered, just briefly. Now it was her turn to avert her gaze. “Masks and costumes?” she mused. “Pitched battles with merchants of evil in the city skies? I’ll be honest with you. The last time I saw Uncle Hector I was twelve years old. He was gentle. He made me smile, laugh, whenever he’d visit. We read poetry together, translating from Spanish to English and back again simply because it pleased us to do so. That’s how I’ll remember him. Everything else Hector Ayala was – everything that happened – came after. And now he’s dead, and as next of kin I’m here to take charge of whatever possessions and memories he held on to in his final days on God’s Earth. That, Mr. Clancy, is all that matters.”

Fluorescents hummed. From somewhere in the building came a dull, relentless throb of music. Toothache drum n’ bass. Somewhere else a hungry child cried itself unconscious while its parents argued. Clancy cleared his throat, stamped out his cigar underfoot, and then nodded. He opened the door of Room 419. Inside it was like being presented with the aftermath of a localized tornado: upturned furniture, splintered wood, scattered books and magazines, shattered glass. A warm breeze stirred through a broken window, skewed in its frame with a busted lock. Clancy swore. The girl looked on, solemn, those unhappy eyes once more the bruised hue of gathering stormclouds. Clancy was apoplectic, launching into a tirade against crackhead kids breaking and entering into the premises of decent people and how the LAPD just couldn’t care a squat. The girl wasn’t listening.

“They killed you, didn’t they Hector?” she said to herself. “It wasn’t some random attack. Someone *targeted* you. And then they came here and tore your room apart. I wonder... did they find what they wanted? Or are they still looking?”

Her eyes narrowed then, and a line of poetry drifted through her memory.

When I was young, they lay me soft...

Then... e days earlier...

As Hector Ayala appraised his surroundings it occurred to him that, if he were to die tonight, it would at least be in the midst of beauty. The thought made him smile. When a man sinks to a certain depth of rank in life he clings to the frailest of condolences.

The parlor was furnished in a hundred shades of gold and green, bright and shining in delicate candlelight, with walls and ceiling adorned with drapes of gauzy vermilion silk. The ivory floor was scattered with scarlet rose petals and apple blossom, and the scent of the blossom mingled with the vapors of sandalwood and chestnut that smoldered gently in incense wells positioned artfully about the room. The air was warm and murmured with the whisper of running water emanating from a pair of understated fountains on marble plinths. Peeking between the drapes were glimpses of paneled tapestries, canvas and wood stretched between pale green bamboo posts. Hector studied each new feature in turn, a calmness enveloping his heart in spite of his misgivings. Perhaps he had misjudged the woman who’d summoned him to this location with a mysterious message delivered via an emissary... or perhaps it was simply difficult to accept the unpalatable fact that evil wasn’t always a beast cloaked in ugliness and shadow.

The door through which Hector had entered the parlor had been closed and locked behind him. Now a second door opened opposite and two Japanese women, slight and of indeterminate age, arrived bearing a small wooden table and a wide tray laden with teapot, jug, saucers and bowls, all of a fine bone china. The women were dressed in white kimonos embroidered with elaborate images of gold, blue and crimson, their black hair styled to the contours of their faces in swirling knots pinned with blue seashell

clasps. They set the table, quickly but effortlessly, then withdrew, to be replaced by another Japanese woman flanked by a swarthy, rakish man.

The man had shoulder-length black hair, his fringe swept back from his face by a red headband. His skin was sallow, his eyes deep and dark beneath thick brows. There was much of the polecat about him, Hector mused. He wore khaki fatigues and black leather boots and gloves. A black baldric was slung quite carelessly from left shoulder to right hip, and Hector counted no less than eight daggers in sheathes buckled into the strap-weave. The man also wore a belt, with four more scabbards each containing larger weapons. The shape and fit of the scabbards suggested machetes.

The woman, in contrast, was a picture of elegance in a trailing kimono of blue upon blue: sapphire, cobalt, Persian, cerulean. *Kingfisher*. The colors were a tide of silken shimmer that fell from her slight shoulders, her arms crossed before her and hidden beneath voluminous sleeves. She wore her hair, again inky black, in a similar knot to the serving girls, although where they had kept their faces dipped low this woman regarded Hector with a direct gaze. Her expression was icily serene, her eyes black against skin rendered snow-pale with rice-powder base, her top lip painted with a glisten of deep red. She did not smile.

As the woman sat cross-legged on the floor behind the table so the candlelight caught gold in her eyes like fireflies.

“We shall take tea, Señor Ayala,” she said, softly, “and we shall talk of faerie tales.”

At first Hector didn't move. There was an evident anxiety about him, and his manner suggested a man who recognized that he was currently both out of his depth and out of place. Hispanic, a Puerto Rican immigrant, he'd lived a rough and often unrewarding life in New York City and now here in Los Angeles, and the extravagant finery of this environment was alien to him. His hardships were manifest in his face, young in years but aged with weariness, a dark reflection of the woman in the kimono of myriad blues who was waiting patiently for his response.

Eventually Hector sat, seeing no alternative and resigned to his fate. The woman bowed respectfully then smiled, just slightly, and commenced to pouring tea from the pot into two bowls. The liquid had an olive tinge and steamed with a tang of mint. When the woman spoke it was with a precise voice that was gentle yet without frailty.

“In the eyes of the western world the eastern nations are often integrated into a singular entity, an indistinct Oriental society,” she said. “This casual ignorance diminishes the ancient and entirely disparate cultures of China and Japan especially, as well as scores of other Asian and Pacific countries. It would undoubtedly astonish you for me to list the numerous discrepancies in custom and tradition, but it is enough for you to know that the tale I now relate is rooted deeply in Chinese folklore rather than that of my own heritage.”

The Japanese woman sipped at her tea, her dark eyes holding Hector's gaze as if with a physical grasp. “Deep in the Himalayan peaks of Tibet there is a magical city that by turns exists and does not exist,” she said. “On the occasions that it appears it emerges from the snow and fog as if afire, a body of blazing towers and turrets, gold and bronze against the ice and slate of the mountains. This city is named *K'un L'un*, and those who reside there are not of this earthly realm: not human and not god but something in-between. These people live by codes we could never understand, and magic – such powerful magic – flows among them like rainbows and diamond dust. *K'un L'un* and its otherworldly boundary are also home to a shape-shifting breed we have come to know as *dragons*.

“In times past – although the passing of ages within the margins of the city is perhaps as alien to us as its mysticism – one of these dragon-kind, named in certain texts as *Chiantang*, sought to destroy *K'un L'un* whilst in a frenzy of madness and rage. During the beast's rampage a ceremonial idol, carved from jade

and magic in the representation of a leaping tiger, was one of many such artifacts destroyed, but in this instance three fragments of the idol found their way into the earthly realm. Here they were crafted into amulets – two claws and one tiger’s head – that retained a measure of their sorcerous essence.

“The magic of the amulets granted whoever wore them certain powers, channeling the spirit of the sacred tiger into a human body to augment physical prowess and to instill a warrior’s spirit. Regrettably the amulets were also seemingly cursed, bringing ill fortune to any individual who possessed one or all three of them. Of course, this is something you are all too familiar with, Señor Ayala... after all, custody of the amulets has torn your life apart piece by piece, has it not?”

Hector bowed his head, the candlelight casting his eyes in deep shadow. Suddenly the scents of the tea and the incense were overpowering. A sheen of sweat glistened upon his forehead, where his dark hair was prematurely receding.

“You readily adopted the persona of the tiger,” the woman continued, her voice still so calm and sweet. “But misfortune has never been far from your side. You never once achieved the adulation nor the sense of purpose you desired. You were shamed by one adversary, unmasked and displayed for all to see... another foe hunted you and mercilessly slaughtered your family for his own ends. You are a broken man, Señor Ayala. Alone. Destitute. You have tried to rid yourself of the amulets and their curse yet their pull is too strong, always too strong. But now *I* can offer you salvation...”

Hector could hardly breathe. The smell of the incense was cloying, thickening in his throat and nose like rust.

“The passage of the amulets, from one hand to another, cannot be forced through bartering or theft,” the woman said, her tone now sharp as steel. “Magic flourishes through the workings of serendipity. But destiny *can* be guided by a skilled hand. I make you an offer, Señor Ayala: a deposit of five million US dollars in a bank account of your choosing, not for the artifacts themselves but rather for you to vacate the city *without* them.”

Hector raised his head then, and the glow of the candles touched eyes that were filled with tears.

“You think that’s how it works?” he croaked, the first time his deeply accented voice had been heard since his arrival at the parlor. “It’s that easy? I hit the road, ‘accidentally’ leaving the amulets behind, and you come along and pick them up?”

“Precisely like that, yes. You would be free of your curse, rich, still relatively young. You can put your life back together, pull yourself up from the pit you currently find yourself wallowing in...”

“And you?” Hector asked. “What’ll you do with the amulets?”

The woman in the kimono of infinite blues inclined her head then, just ever so slightly, but enough that Hector glimpsed something brief but terrible in her countenance – a contortion, a flash of fire and scale, there and then gone like an overlaid apparition – that caused a wild shiver to worm its way along his spine.

“That... would be none of your concern, Señor Ayala,” she breathed. “Now, do we have a deal?”

Hector licked his lips, then glanced across at the man in the khaki and leather who remained standing, silent and motionless, at the back of the room. “What happens if I refuse?”

The man smiled, cruelly, his dark eyes glinting like splinters of glass. He touched a hand to his array of knives in their sheathes.

“Señor Lopez is a mercenary of great pedigree, commonly known by the name of his signature weapon,” the woman in the kimono stated. The man’s hand moved to his belt, grasped a hilt, and then withdrew a thick wedge of blade. Machete. “He can kill a rival in the blink of an eye by a hundred different methods, and has done so in every corner of the globe. He has a penchant for gutting and skinning, as a hunter would. Sometimes a situation calls for him to do this *before* death. He enjoys his work. And, I must confess... I enjoy to *watch*.”

Hector stared at the woman as she sipped once more at her bowl of tea. She was elegant and beautiful, her intonation polite and so desperately sweet. In so many ways the antithesis of a spider in its web. Hector believed that he’d seen the face of evil in his time, believed that he would always recognize it in any form. He’d been wrong. He thought of the amulets and their power, the spirit of the tiger, and he thought of that power in this woman’s hands.

“Well then,” he said, finally, with a quietude that he certainly did not feel. “I guess there isn’t much alternative, is there?”

*When I was young, they lay me soft
Upon a snow-white tiger skin...*

Now...

Angela Del Toro still remembered the day her Uncle Hector had been publicly unmasked as a superhero with perfect clarity. She had been ten years old, and when Hector’s familiar face had suddenly appeared on her television screen she had been both surprised and thrilled. However, then she’d noticed that what she was watching was a man in pain, and in peril, and suddenly the spectacle hadn’t been that thrilling any more.

Hector Ayala had been a student at Empire State University in Manhattan back then. A raving lunatic calling himself The Lightmaster had convinced himself that Hector was the costumed adventurer known as Spider-Man, and had attacked and kidnapped his enemy, intending to reveal his secret identity nationwide via live broadcast. Hector wasn’t Spider-Man, of course. But The Lightmaster’s deductions had at least been based upon credible evidence, for Hector *was* a hero; it was just that he operated under a different name.

The White Tiger. Or *El Tigre Blanco* as he was hailed by the Hispanic people who took this man - one of their own - to their hearts on that day when his secret was revealed.

Regrettably Hector’s own family had been less inclined towards worship and more towards embarrassment, and fear. What if one of The White Tiger’s psychotic adversaries came after *them*, they’d said? Had Hector’s foolishness placed them in danger? Angela was so young, so vulnerable...

Hector had been ostracized, and only his niece had kept in regular contact with him, albeit without the knowledge of her parents, her mother Awilda being Hector’s sister. It soon transpired that the extended Ayala family had been right to be concerned. Some time after Hector’s exposure another deranged criminal, a man named Gideon Mace, had mercilessly slaughtered a number of Hector’s relations in his attempts to locate and butcher The White Tiger. By then, Angela Del Toro had turned twelve - the age, as she’d told the landlord Clancy, that she’d been when she’d last seen her Uncle Hector. That sorrowful parting had occurred at her mother’s funeral, seven years before. And now here she was, aged nineteen.

As Clancy bustled away, muttering something about contacting the cops - although they both knew nothing would come of such a pointless course of action - Angela moved sadly through the small

apartment. There was nothing here that would have been of any particular value even before some unknown interloper had broken in through the fourth-story window and trashed everything at hand. However, Angela wasn't concerned with assessing the financial merits of Hector's possessions. She was only interested in anything that might prove to be of sentimental worth. She had loved her uncle, after all. It had taken her years to forgive, to accept that what had happened wasn't his fault, but eventually she'd realized that love and blood were stronger than anything. A tragedy, then, that there'd never been an opportunity to find him and tell him that...

There was an overturned bookcase, one side of the frame splintered and bearing a mark that appeared to have been inflicted by a sharp, heavy impact. A blade of some kind. Books were strewn all over the floor. Angela bent down and began sifting through them. Some novels, some texts. A lot of poetry. Angela smiled, then frowned. Her casual exploration abruptly became a more purposeful search. There was one book she remembered from those days when Hector had used to visit and they'd read together. A hardcover volume of modern works, many attributed to anonymous authors. The line of verse that had drifted through her head before now returned as she recalled an old favorite in its entirety.

When I was young, they lay me soft
Upon a snow-white tiger skin.
Now I'm old, and this tiger I know:
That tiger's nature works within.

Simple, beautiful, evocative. And, of course, so perfectly appropriate considering Hector's alter ego. Was that book here...?

A rush of tears stung her eyes. Yes. Yes, it was. She found the volume she was looking for in the pile and pulled it free. *This* was what she'd come for. She hadn't known until now, but this was it. This was enough. She'd arrange for all these other possessions to be removed, farmed out to charity shops where she could, but this one item she would keep for herself, to remember her uncle. She stood, flicking through the pages, seeking out that old poem - and then, suddenly, she froze, the book almost tumbling from her hands.

The inside of the volume had been hollowed out, the paper blocking carved through to create a hidden cavity. And inside this secret niche there lay a prize, altogether unexpected.

A set of amulets. A jade tiger's head, its maw twisted into a snarl, plus two identical casts of claws, all threaded upon entwined loops of silver chain.

"Oh my God," Angela breathed. "Oh my *God*."

The amulets shone. So beautiful, so perfect. For a moment she didn't move, didn't dare. Then, almost as if she was unable to help herself, she brushed the fingers of one hand forward and she touched the cool, polished jade... and, in response, the amulets began to *glow*.

"*Gracias, cariña*. My employer had a feeling that keeping this apartment under surveillance would be worthwhile, and in this - as in so many things - the intuition of Lady Kingfisher has proved correct..."

Angela turned at the sound of the voice, her eyes widening as she saw a man crouched in the splintered frame of the window. *A swarthy, rakish fellow with much of the polecat about him*. She could almost hear her uncle's voice whispering at her ear. *Run, little one. Save yourself. Else he'll butcher you as he did me*.

The man slid gracefully into the room, the rats' tails of his black hair flickering in the breeze. His smile was reprehensibly mean. He said, "Give me the amulets and I'll let you live," but the both of them knew that was a lie; the man would slaughter her in cold blood with the gleaming machete currently clutched in his

fist. Angela understood this... and thus she was also aware of what must come next if she instead wished to survive.

The jade amulets burned in her palm. She felt pain and joy, a thrill rippling upon her dark skin, arousing a shiver of gooseflesh. *You can refuse*, murmured the ghost of Hector Ayala. *In this moment the choice still belongs to you.*

"Then that's no choice at all," Angela breathed in reply. "Because our family pays its debts, and that's just the way the world rolls."

Angela Del Toro closed her fingers about hot crystal and closed her eyes - and in that instant, time froze. She felt the power flood through her in a quivering rush - light, heat, the spike of an electrical charge - and then there came the roar, a sudden and deafening holler of anger and pride that frightened her in the same way that a first encounter with a caged animal might terrify a small child. The world was dark, then white, then dark again, and in the shadows there loomed a pair of ferocious green eyes. There was the sound of claws on wood, the shifting of muscle, the resonance of a heavy, breathless purr...

...and then the passage of time ignited once more with a jolt, and Angela gasped, staggering backwards. She stepped down on something, some broken shaft of furniture, and her ankle began to turn - but then she instinctively shifted her weight to compensate, her balance so precise she barely registered what she'd done. A normal person would have stumbled or fallen, left herself vulnerable. But Angela was no longer normal. She looked to the window and saw that her enemy was hesitating, his expression stricken - and with good reason.

Angela glanced down at herself.

It was still *her*; still her body, her boyish figure so lean and sharp; but instead of Levi's and fleece jacket she was now sheathed in a figure-hugging outfit of some strange fabric that was midway between hide and fur, all of it a brilliant snow white save for a series of black stripes about her hips and midriff, the tops of her thighs, and also her shoulders. The glowing jade amulets were now looped about her throat upon their chain, and when Angela raised her hands to her face she traced the outline of a half-mask, rigid at the temples and brow to sweep her hair back from her eyes. She saw that her hands were gloved in the same icy white as the rest of her, and that her fingers were tipped with ivory claws, each approximately two inches in length. She heard a low rumbling sound and only after a moment's pause did she realize that it was *her*, the snarl of her breath in the back of her throat.

Animal, yes. But not caged. Let loose.

And this I know: That tiger's nature works within.

"Hector Ayala conjured the beast on the last night he was alive," said Ferdinand Lopez, the man otherwise named Machete. His sneer returned now as he regained his composure. "It didn't prevent me from shearing the flesh from his bones. He was too old, in spirit. Too wearied."

"Hector was my uncle," Angela breathed. "He was a proud and gentle man, and for that I loved him. But you face a *new* White Tiger now, you murderous *hijo de puta*."

Machete flinched, then growled. And then he threw himself forward, slashing with the flattened blade of the weapon in his right hand whilst snatching a dagger from his hip belt with his left and letting fly. Angela Del Toro, heir to the legacy of the White Tiger, didn't shy away; instead she moved in to meet the man's attack with a roar of her own, whipping out one hand to deflect the low trajectory of the dagger whilst rolling her opposite shoulder, head ducked to slide beneath the arc of her enemy's cleaver. She slammed

into Machete's midriff and twisted her weight with the impact, effortlessly dislodging the man's footing and flinging him into the air despite his greater mass and strength.

Machete swore, legs kicking and arms flailing, but then his head snapped back and blood and teeth guttered from his ruined mouth as a stiff, white arm shot up and clubbed him square beneath the angle of his jaw. That same hand then reversed its strike, claws raking down Machete's face on the backward glide, literally ripping his lower lip away from his cheeks like a strip of jerky.

Machete mewled and staggered, blood spilling from his horrific wound. The White Tiger looked on with black, stormcloud eyes, feeling no pity and not inclined to falter. This bastard had inflicted worse upon her uncle - and as far as she was concerned retribution for that crime was *far* from served.

The Tiger snapped forward, claws slashing. Even through the mist of his blood and pain, however, Machete was a man of immense skill and poise. He dodged his enemy's attack and jabbed a crooked elbow into her ribs, then turned on his heel and lashed a kick against the back of her legs. The White Tiger saw the strike and bent low, taking her weight in her knees and then flipping backwards as Machete's boot brushed past her calves. Machete struck again, a savage stamp, and then unleashed a high kick towards the Tiger's face, but she pulled back and twisted aside to avoid both assaults with a half-second to spare.

"Fast, *bruja*," Machete hissed. "But I only need to slit your throat *once*..."

The villain snatched another of his signature weapons from his baldric, then palmed a dagger in his free hand. He ducked and feinted, pushing in close, then suddenly straightened and executed a reverse slice over his own shoulder with the cleaver whilst stabbing back with the dagger at hip-height. The White Tiger swayed to avoid the first strike but the second blade skidded across her waist, penetrating the snowy hide of her costume and drawing blood beneath. She hissed at the flare of pain but didn't recoil; instead she embedded a set of ivory claws into the nape of her foe's neck and shredded his swarthy flesh all the way down to the base of his spine in one movement, leaving behind four parallel scores of glistening scarlet.

Machete screamed and pitched forwards - towards the window. The White Tiger's eyes flashed.

"No!" she snarled. "No, you do *not* get away. Not from *me*."

As Machete's momentum saw him lurch helplessly across the threshold of the broken window frame so the White Tiger threw herself into his bleeding back with all her strength, pushing the villain out into thin air before he could stop himself. The narrow alley the fourth-floor window overlooked was a significant distance below. Given the opportunity Machete could have jumped for the underhang of a fire escape overhead, from where it would have been easy enough for him to reach the rooftops if so inclined. *No*, the Tiger repeated in her mind. *No escape*.

She pulled her enemy away from safety even as he grasped desperately for a handhold, then curled her body about him and angled him in a new direction. The pair of them slammed into the brick wall of the building opposite, Machete first. His nose burst on impact, joining his ruined mouth, and one leg snapped outwards at the knee with a ruptured cruciate. The villain exhaled a burbling shriek through a veil of blood. And then they fell.

Machete hit the ground with a sickening crunch of breaking bones. The White Tiger landed not on her feet, as the proverbial cat, but instead with a perfectly executed tuck and roll that not only absorbed her impact without incurring damage but also carried her clear of her enemy's blood splatter. She stood, eyes bright and breath even, and strode across to where Machete lay.

The man was barely conscious, delirious in his pain, but he was still alive. There was no fight left in him, however. And, regrettably, there would be no information forthcoming from that ruined mouth of his.

“You mentioned an employer,” the Tiger said. “A *Lady Kingfisher*, yes? Which would make *you* the human equivalent of one your weapons; a blade to be brandished, to spill blood, but at the order of another. And so I’ll learn who this little river bird is, this hag who decreed that Hector Ayala should die and who so desperately craves these amulets that now belong to me. I’ll find her, and I’ll do to *her* what she commanded you do to my uncle. And as for you...”

The White Tiger bent low over her fallen enemy and gently rested the points of her ivory claws across his brow. “I would guess there’s little market for a *blind* assassin,” she purred. And then she flexed her wrist, and there was a gelatinous pop and another spurt of blood, and the man known as Machete screamed anew.

In her opulent parlor furnished in a hundred shades of gold and green, with its walls of paneled tapestries and canvas and its ivory floors strewn with rose petals and apple blossom, the Japanese woman in the silk kimono of infinite blues sat before her low table, her tea untouched in its delicate china cup.

As ever, her expression was icily serene, her eyes black against skin rendered snow-pale with rice-powder base, her top lip painted with a glisten of deep red. As ever, she did not smile. In fact, the only difference between this moment and that evening when she had briefly entertained the company of Hector Ayala was the stench of charred flesh that now filled the room where before there had been the perfumed vapors of sandalwood and chestnut.

Ten minutes ago, the smoldering corpse in the parlor doorway had been a serving girl unfortunate to be the bearer of bad tidings. Ten minutes ago, the rage of Lady Kingfisher had been... dramatic. But now she was calm again, her blood cooling, the fires in her throat dampened.

“So, there is another,” she murmured. “The jade amulets elude me still, and unpredicted confrontation has cost me my finest hireling. But the advantage remains with me, young one. For I know every detail of your existence - but you, as yet, know so precious little of mine. That will be your downfall.”

The woman reached out and lifted her cup. She sipped her tea. And then, even though her eyes remained black and full of hate, she finally smiled.

“Beware, Angela Del Toro, the new White Tiger. For Kingfisher is coming for you...”

The Puerto Rican girl stood in the shadows of one of the tall cypresses that lined the perimeter of Santa Monica’s Woodlawn Cemetery. She was dressed casually once more, although she still wore the jade amulets of K’un L’un about her throat, hidden beneath a gold neckscarf. Her dark hair was tied back, her eyes lost behind a pair of sunglasses, the storm temporarily abated. She wasn’t smiling. She looked tired.

And now, whenever she was plain Angela Del Toro and not the White Tiger, she couldn’t help but feel vulnerable and lost.

Hector Ayala was honored with a small, inexpensive grave marker here. Angela hadn’t left flowers yet, disinclined to make herself known in case there were other assassins out there just waiting to engage her in bloody warfare and strip away her newly acquired legacy. Perhaps it would have been wise to stay

away altogether. But she had to come, even if to observe from a distance. Her uncle deserved that, at the very least.

She's out there, somewhere. She'll be coming for you.

Hector's ghostly voice at her ear, or perhaps just the warm Californian breeze. Angela smiled thinly.

"Let her come, then," she said. "Because the White Tiger will be waiting."

"I was wondering if you'd take on the name."

Now, *that* voice? That voice was real. Angela whirled, her recently acquired mystic powers already building inside her chest, but the sight that greeted her caused her to gasp and falter. A man had joined her in the shadows, the sound of his approach disguised by the whirr of cicada and the low hum of distant traffic, and he was now leaning against the trunk of a cypress with an infuriating nonchalance. This newcomer was a stranger to Angela in the sense that she'd never actually *met* him before, but there was no mistaking his rather dashing costume of blue, indigo and violet. The elegant golden bow strapped casually to the man's flank was also a rather glaring clue to his identity. Although Uncle Hector had never been a member of the Avengers, Angela knew that *this* fellow was a stalwart of that celebrated group, most pertinently the west coast branch. His name was Clint Barton, otherwise known as -

"Hawkeye?"

The man grinned, his cheeks dimpling with a certain charm beneath the curve of his half-mask. "I love it when I'm recognized," he said.

"You're very... distinctive."

"I know. Aren't I, though?" Hawkeye cocked his head. "But *you*... you, young lady, are a mystery wrapped in an amoeba."

"Enigma."

"Well, in Los Angeles you can never be too sure. You know, you've been very difficult to track down. If you hadn't turned up here today I don't know where I would've started searching next. I mean, I probably would have started with the Pizza Huts, what with it being lunchtime and all, but..."

Angela Del Toro removed her sunglasses and arched an eyebrow. "You've been looking for me?"

"If I said *all my life*, would you slap me?"

"I'd consider it."

"I should hope so too." Hawkeye's smile widened. It was infectious. Angela felt herself respond despite her misgivings.

"The thing is," Hawkeye said, "I've got witnesses who claim they saw a woman in a white cat costume take down a knife-wielding assassin at a location not far from here three days ago. And, once the name Hector Ayala cropped up in conversation with a guy called Clancy - you know *him*, I can tell - it was easy enough to start piecing the clues together. Which is why I'm here. Now. And... yeah, all kidding aside? I'm sorry to hear about your uncle."

Angela breathed deeply. "Thank you. Is that why you wanted to find me? To tell me that?"

"That, and because knife-wielding assassins who fall under the jurisdiction of the Avengers West always trigger alarm bells. *And*, one other thing." Hawkeye's manner was deadly serious now. "Honestly? I don't know who you are, Miss Del Toro, outside of your name. I don't know anything about you or whatever your current situation might be. But I know enough that this road you may well be about to start traveling? It's a lonely one - unless you're willing to accept a hand of friendship."

"You?"

"Me. And some buddies of mine. See, a couple of days ago I made an offhand statement about kids, and me being me - and me being me is to be contrary and lovably unpredictable, let me just say - I've gone and started wondering if I wasn't being a tad unfair."

Angela Del Toro looked confused, as well she might. Clint Barton grinned.

"I've got an offer for you, cat lady, the kind of offer that comes around once in a lifetime. Because as a good friend of mine Greer Nelson would agree, no project's complete until you've got a tigress on the team..."

TO BE CONTINUED!

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MARVEL 2000 PRESENTS...

"NEW BLOOD"

Chapter Three of Five:

**"What Do We Care For Men's Bodies Or Souls?
Bring Us Deliverence, Spy..."**

Written by Meriades Rai

When Robert Farrell thought back on the first heist he'd ever pulled it was usually with embarrassment. Still, there was one moment he couldn't help but recall with a secret bloom of pride. He could even remember exactly what he'd said when, racing along the side of a building, he'd looked over his shoulder and seen none other than the amazing Spider-Man bearing down on him. Of *course* he could remember. Dude, how could he forget?

"Uh-uh, ace... you ain't getting' your sticky little fingers on *me!*"

Hah! Oh man, what was he about back then? Nineteen years old and mixing it up on the city streets with Spider-Man. *Spider-Man!* Damn. Balls of brass, it had to be said. Brains of a goat, though. Not more than five minutes later and he'd been trussed up in a web net and staring at a jail-stretch. Just like that. There'd been other days, better days, on both sides of the moral line, but it was that first encounter that sometimes got stuck on perpetual reply in his head. Because -

"Robbie?"

Robert blinked and twitched, and then turned to gaze sheepishly at the pretty red-haired girl sitting alongside him. She was giving him that goofy grin, the one that made her nose wrinkle and her freckles dance, and it melted his heart. Robert wasn't nineteen any more, he was twenty-five, and Johanna Taylor was actually two years older, although no one would ever believe it; all shy sweetness and dimples and Heidi plaits, she was the kind of girl who'd probably look eighteen forever.

"I'd ask you where your head's at," Jo said, with a teasing smile, "but I doubt I'd understand the answer. What was it today? Gyrometric provocation?"

"Force precessed gyroscopic propulsion."

"See? I *was* listening when you tried to explain, I swear I was, but - "

"It doesn't matter. I don't get your lawyer stuff either. Despite the fact I've spent so much time inside a courtroom..."

Robert looked abashed. It wasn't obvious to observe him now, seated to attention on a bus heading west along Santa Monica Boulevard in his smart suit and polished shoes and his four-hundred dollar spectacles and his black dreadlocks neatly trimmed, but he was well acquainted with the law; twenty-five years old and he'd already seen out two small prison sentences that could have been much worse. But he wasn't a bad guy, not really. He was just an idiot. An ESU graduate in advanced sciences and an expert in gyroscopic engineering (described by no less than Tony Stark as one of the potential geniuses of his generation!), but still an idiot - and a thrillseeker. Because that was the crux of it, wasn't it? Some people went rock-climbing or abseiling, some got their kicks from parkour... but *his* personalized brand of

extreme sports hedonism had involved vertical acceleration up the outsides of skyscrapers on a rocket-powered skateboard, often after engaging in illicit activity. As wastes of talent went, Robbie was the proverbial poster boy.

Still, in the last few months he'd turned things around. He was presently employed by the experimental and developmental research division of Stark Solutions in Los Angeles, he was earning a high enough salary to enjoy a modest lifestyle as well as help out his six brothers and sisters and their sick mother back in New York, he'd been dating a bright and attractive junior lawyer since early fall - man, he couldn't ask for more. Really, he couldn't.

So why did his mind keep drifting back to the old days? And why, in his spare time, did he keep tinkering with designs for that blasted old -

"There you go again. Earth to Mr. Farrell, are you receiving?"

Robert flinched again like a startled cat, then groaned. "Damn, I'm sorry. I just - "

"Don't worry. I'm just riding your tail." Johanna leaned in and kissed him, softly yet urgently, her slender arms sliding around his waist. "You know how that genius intellect of yours gets me all... tingly."

"Don't give me too much credit. I'm - "

"Just being modest, as usual," Jo said, briskly. "You gotta go, beautiful dreamer, this is your stop. So, you still on for dinner tonight? *Luigi's* at eight?"

"I... yeah. Yeah, that's - "

"Oh, wait. Almost forgot. I found this under the hall table this morning, it'd fallen out of your bag again."

Jo held out what looked like a BlackBerry smartphone but which was actually a substantially more sophisticated device called a StarkPAD. All Stark employees had one although they weren't yet available on the direct market. Robert sighed and shook his head as he took the PAD and zipped it into his jacket pocket. "Man, how many times is that now?" he muttered. "Seriously, I try and keep it safe, but it's like the damn thing's alive and just wants to escape."

"It must be mad. Who'd want to escape from you? I love you pressing my buttons..."

Johanna stroked her boyfriend's thigh, then gave him a saucy smack on the backside as he stood. "Get going, ace," she grinned. "I've got a busy day too. But text me later, okay?"

Robert smiled shyly as they parted, then stood on the sidewalk and watched the bus roll away, his girlfriend waving at the window, her copper-red plaits shining in the morning sunlight. Sweet, sassy, clever... she was wonderful. She really was. But, damn, did he feel guilty now. Because if she even suspected that his mind wasn't drifting to his real work but instead to those times he'd kit himself out in some garish, armored costume and go hurtling around the rooftops on a souped-up board, well... she'd be more than disappointed. She'd be *ashamed*.

Brains of a goat. The world's stupidest genius.

"Just get to work, Farrell," he sighed. "And pull your damn fool self together before you've got yet another thing to regret..."

"Mr. Farrell? Could you come this way, please?"

Robert frowned as the two men in charcoal suits who had just approached his desk now shepherded him towards a private elevator. It didn't take a genius - world's stupidest genius or otherwise - to work out that he was in trouble. These individuals weren't scientists or affiliated to the installation in any way. They were outsiders, part of an elite division of personal assistants answering to one very important man...

"I didn't do anything."

"Mr. Farrell, please..."

"But I didn't *do* anything."

Glum, Robert had no choice but to ride the elevator up to the seldom-used seventh floor, whereupon he was directed into a conference room. The two suited men remained present, flanking the door. They'd obviously been instructed to prevent Robert from trying to leave of his own volition. Robert wondered why they were so concerned that he might run, but he was correct when he supposed that he was about to find out.

On the far side of a broad oak table that filled the conference room, a man sat forward in his leather chair, fingers steepled as he studied a laptop monitor. He was dark-haired and handsome, a rugged strength to his features that few men could boast. He didn't look happy. It was only the third time in his life that Robert had met Anthony Stark, and he wished with all his heart that it wasn't happening now.

"I didn't do anything."

"So you said in the elevator," Stark murmured. He looked up, his eyes dark and hard. "I've got ears everywhere, you know. Some people would call that an invasion of privacy, but where my company's concerned I find it pays to be aware of everything."

"Well, that's good," Robert said, becoming angry now rather than fearful. "Because that means you know / *didn't do anything.*"

"The lady doth protest too much, methinks. Not that I'm calling you a lady, Robert. It's a quote from - "

"*Hamlet.* Yeah, I know. Poor black kids from Brooklyn read Shakespeare too. You want to quiz me on some Elvis lyrics now?"

Stark grimaced. "Sorry. I just wanted to point out that you're being very defensive for someone who's done nothing wrong."

"Really? Well, the kind of life I've led, I've learned to recognize trouble when it comes looking for me."

"The life you *used* to lead," Stark said. "When your name was suggested to me I looked past your previous criminal identity as the Rocket Racer and instead focused on the glowing recommendation stating what an asset you could be to my company and me. Eight months ago, when I employed you, I believed that was the right decision."

"But now?"

Stark fixed Robert with an iron gaze. "Can you hand me your StarkPAD, please? Because if I find what I think I'm going to find, then you're in a world of trouble..."

Robert glowered. He'd never appreciated being talked down to. Stark was... well, he wasn't doing *that* exactly, but he was coming over all authoritative, and Robert hated that too. That was part of the reason he'd fallen into crime so easily. He respected Stark - hell, he was in awe of him and always had been, even as a kid dismantling his first radio - but that didn't mean he had to go woof when The Man said bark. Nevertheless, he had no choice.

He fished his PAD from his pocket and skimmed it across the table. Stark snatched it up and connected it to his laptop with a remote cable, all without another word or glance. Then he went to work on the keyboard for a minute or two before stepping back, his scowl so deep that his dark brows almost met in the center of his forehead.

"Goddamn it."

"What?" Robert asked. But the mulish vitriol of before was somewhat diluted now, and his shoulders were slumped. He already knew what Stark had found before the other man spun the laptop around to show Robert the tri-colored schematic on the screen.

"You want to explain?" Stark snapped. "There are those who wouldn't agree, but I've always considered myself fair. You've got ten seconds."

"Ten?"

"Down to eight now."

Robert sighed. "Listen, I don't know why you think this is any of your... no. No, okay, *alright*, I'm sorry. Okay? I know I told you way back when that I wasn't interested in the whole Rocket Racer shtick any more, but it's something I've been tinkering with in my spare time, and... man, it's not like I'm going to go and start robbing banks again or anything like that. I never even thought about rebuilding the suit or the board, not really. It's just a cerebral exercise, to..."

Robert trailed off. Stark was just staring at him, his expression a little less fierce now. More... bewildered?

"Robert, do have any idea what I'm showing you here?"

"Of course I do. It's the design print for my Rocket Racer armor and jetboard."

"Uh-huh. Look closely."

Robert frowned. He had no idea what Stark's problem was, but -

"Wait."

Robert's heart skipped. He moved forward, pushing his spectacles down the bridge of his nose and scrutinizing the schematic on the screen in front of him. "Dude, what the...?"

"This is your design?"

"Well, yeah. But... no." Robert looked up, confused. "This is the basic template, but there are alterations. Augmentations. Some of this circuitry, it -"

"It's mine."

Robert blinked. "It's what now?"

"It's Stark tech. Experimental, nothing your division is working on. It's been leeching from my private files over a supposedly secure network - we're talking quadruple-encrypted data at the *lowest* strata - and grafted onto the existing schematic via your personal interface."

"My what?"

Stark tapped the StarkPAD. "Every one of these has a unique identity chip that can be tagged and tracked whenever it connects with the core drive, as the owner does every morning when he or she comes to work. In the past six weeks, however, there have been three separate anomalies recorded when someone's hacked into those aforementioned private files - using *this* machine. Your PAD."

"What? No."

"I agree. It's impossible. Even if someone as gifted as you were to try it they shouldn't have been able to penetrate as far as they did, especially not three times. But it's happened. It was only on the third occasion, last night, that I personally managed to decipher the scramble built around your data ID, otherwise I'd still be the none the wiser where the incursion was originating from."

"But I didn't... I mean, I never let this machine out of my sight, I swear, I - " Robert faltered. He stared the screen, then looked at his StarkPAD. His heart skipped.

Oh, wait. Almost forgot. I found this under the hall table this morning, it'd fallen out of your bag again.

"No," he said, quietly. Then again, more firmly, "No."

"No what?"

It was only on the third occasion last night -

Stark's eyes were narrowed thoughtfully. He was a clever man in so many ways, but his most commonly overlooked talent was surely his uncanny perception. Tony Stark had always been able to read people. Admittedly he hadn't been sure about Robert Farrell for a while there, but now he was beginning to see the real picture. He said, "Has someone else had access to your StarkPAD?"

Robert felt sick. "No."

"Have they?"

"She couldn't have done it."

"Who?"

"My girlfriend. But she doesn't like computers. She's not interested. She couldn't - "

"How long have you been seeing her? I'm guessing just over six weeks, right?"

In the past six weeks there have been three separate anomalies...

Robert made to turn away. Stark placed a firm hand on his shoulder.

“Robert, listen to me. Your initial designs here, they’re brilliant, even before being augmented with my tech. I think you’ve got something special about you, even more than I realized, and I’d love to sit down with you sometime and brainstorm together. Believe me, I don’t say that lightly. But this is serious. The expertise needed for someone to have pulled this off and the implications of what they might do with the stolen tech... I’ve been there before. It’s not good. Now, please. This girl. I need her name and address.”

Robert looked up. His eyes were glistening behind his spectacles.

“I’m not saying she’s guilty of anything,” Stark said, gently. “But if you’ve been played here, well... trust me, I’ve been *there* before too.”

Robert chewed his lower lip, hesitating. Then, his heart breaking, he gave Stark the information he wanted.

Stark set to work immediately, bypassing the laptop keyboard and progressing to voice recognition and virtual projection software. A three-dimensional grid-net in pale green and white flickered into life in mid-air, and Stark began to filter intangible data streams with both his fingertips and precise verbal instruction with all the elegance of a virtuoso at an imaginary cello. Robert looked on, agog. At first he thought that Stark was accessing police database files, maybe FBI, but then he saw a brief flash of a SHIELD logo and whistled beneath his breath. He’d known Stark was connected, but *this* -

“Is this her?”

Stark flexed his wrist and a floating image aligned with Robert’s eyeline. It was Johanna. Robert swallowed painfully, then nodded. Stark wiggled his fingertips, his brow furrowed in concentration. Not a musician, Robert thought. A magician. Once upon a time mankind would have decried even the most basic engineering science as mysticism. Hell, fifty years ago they would have scoffed at the Internet. But the world was always changing, and men like Stark not only kept up with the flow, they directed it.

“All hard data cross-referencing is negative,” Stark murmured. Talking to himself, Robert noted. “Facial recognition pattern, nada. Let’s try recent image capture and cell phone activity...”

“Wait. What? Is that allowed?”

Stark said nothing. His eyebrows were beetling again. Then, suddenly, he cursed so vehemently that it made Robert jump.

“What happened?”

“Do you know this man? Have you seen him before?”

Stark waved his hand angrily, and another image aligned. This one showed Johanna standing outside a coffee shop close to her apartment, a location Robert had come to know well these past few weeks. In this recording, however, Jo was talking with a man with reddish-blond hair and a pinched, mean expression but who was otherwise remarkably... average. Forgettable. The pair seemed to be arguing. The brief segment culminated with Jo handing the man something - a computer disc by the look of it - and the man sliding it into the pocket of his coat. The sight made Robert feel weak at the knees.

“I don’t know him. Who is he?”

Stark said nothing again, his face like thunder. Robert swore.

“Come on. I’ve been screwed in this just as much as you. I deserve to know.”

Stark scowled. “His name’s Sinclair Abbot. He used to be a rival of mine in the business arena, but these days he’s renowned more for being a highly accomplished criminal strategist and for his forays into industrial espionage and terrorism. A spy, in other words - operating under the name *The Spymaster*. Abbot’s incredibly gifted at what he does. One of his talents is advanced cyber decryption, which explains how he managed to hack into my systems once he’d got his hands on an active StarkPAD. He’s probably one of only a dozen individuals on the planet who could have achieved that, and certainly the only one who’d want to. The thing is, his presence in the image shouldn’t really be possible.”

“Why?”

Stark breathed deeply. “Because this visual capture we’ve just seen is only an hour old. And, according to all the official data, The Spymaster is presently in the middle of a lengthy criminal sentence as a resident of The Vault...”

Robert Farrell had never been in love before. Crushes in high school and college, of course. A six-month relationship at ESU that had been founded more on mutual infatuation at the time than anything romantic, but nothing more serious. Johanna Taylor had changed all that. For almost two months now he’d been thinking that maybe she was The One. But not any more.

Robert was standing outside Jo’s apartment an hour after his meeting with Tony Stark when she turned the corner just ahead. She stopped in surprise when she saw him, and after a moment’s hesitation she smiled - but in that moment Robert knew that everything Stark had said was true. Because in that instant, behind all the freckles and the dimples and the Heidi plaits, she looked guilty, and Robert had never seen that look before. Not from her.

“I thought you said you had a busy day?” he asked, flatly.

Jo cocked her head, smiling. “I forgot some papers, had to trek all the way back. How about you? Aren’t you - ”

“I’m guessing you hitched my StarkPAD up to some kind of remote server last night while I was sleeping. Right? Used something standard to retrieve my passcodes, something you programmed in without me suspecting the last time the PAD ‘accidentally fell out of my bag’ when I was staying over, then just worked from there. Or not you specifically. You set it up, but it was your friend who executed the hack.”

Jo’s face turned white. Robert saw her tremble.

“What? I don’t - ”

“I need to know two things. First, who is Abbot to you? Just an employer? A relative? A... your...”

Your lover?

“Your real boyfriend?”

Johanna had the temerity to look hurt. “Oh, please. He’s...”

Her shoulders sagged. The jig was up and she knew it. “He’s my godfather, alright?” she sighed. “He and my dad are practically brothers. That’s all.”

Robert looked down at the ground. He'd wondered what she would answer and whether it would make him feel any better. Now he realized it didn't matter. "Second question, then," he said. "Did he set everything up? Did he target me because I was a Stark employee and get you to come onto me so he'd have access to Stark through me? Or did he just take advantage of the fact that I was your boyfriend? What part came first?"

Jo buried her face in her hands. "Dammit."

"Just answer, will you? Because this is tearing me up."

"Okay, okay." Jo sighed. Her red hair flickered in the breeze and her freckles danced as she wrinkled her nose. Eternally eighteen. But that was the thing, Robert mused; when someone looks that young, and when they've perfected that little girl act, it's difficult to accept how sharp they might be inside. How cold.

"Sinclair's in trouble. He made contact a while back and told my father that he'd got himself mixed up in something that... wasn't good for his health. He needs money. I saw a way to help him get it."

"Stark tech."

"Actually, no. That came after, just something he took advantage of because it was there. Oh, Robbie... don't you see? I told you, you're too modest for your own good. It was *you*. You were the target, not Stark. Or, rather, your designs were."

Robbie blinked. "The Rocket Racer plans?"

Jo sniffed. "Well, I was never taken with the name, but yes. I knew you were still tinkering with the project, even though you kept it secret - I'm not as tech-dumb as I made out, which I guess is obvious now - but you were too bewitched by the minutiae, you couldn't appreciate the potential. Individualized transport modules? It's the future, Robert. All I wanted to do was pass the plans on to someone who could do something with them. But Sinclair's always been... greedy. It was him who suggested we go for broke and loot Stark's tech into the bargain."

"To enhance my design?"

"Only to gain a working knowledge of how the tech could be incorporated into an existing model. Sinclair knows he can accrue a fortune on the black market by selling off the tech piecemeal, a hundred times more than by putting the new Racer suit and board up for grabs, but to be able to *demonstrate* that tech in action... that was the key."

Robert's eyes darkened behind his glasses. "You talk about it like it's something real, not just screen data and blueprints."

Now Johanna looked even guiltier, if that was possible. Robert groaned.

"Oh, man. Tell me you haven't -"

"It's what prospective buyers need, isn't it? Something corporeal. If you wanted someone to buy your new processor you wouldn't just show them a chip, you'd demonstrate its power within a core unit. So -"

"You've actually *built* the new suit and board?" Robbie barked.

"Twice. For different colour schemes and application highlights, all with Stark tech incorporated. I was just gleaming the latest execution codes last night, so Sinclair can go live for clients later today."

Robbie shook his head in despair. "Goddamn, Jo. Listen to you. How could I think you *loved* me...?"

"I did. I *do*. I - " Jo ran her hands over her hair, her expression desperate. "Come on, Robbie. Honestly? You're wonderful. You have a wonderful mind and a wonderful personality. But... you needed this. You needed a push. The world isn't black and white, I thought you'd understand that. *I do*. You think I enjoy being a lawyer? When I started out, I was so... idealistic. Trust me, that changed pretty damn quick. This opportunity, it - "

"You're not right. In the head, I mean. Everything about you, it's... skewed."

Johanna looked crestfallen. "Robbie, please. What, you're saying we're over? I did this for us as much as Sinclair. I promise. I - "

"I want to see it. Them."

"What?"

"The new suits. And the boards. I want to see what my design looks like as prototype."

Jo grimaced. "I don't think Sinclair will - "

"Make it happen, Jo, or I swear we *are* finished."

The woman with the red hair suddenly looked hopeful. "You're not angry with me?"

"Angry? I'm *furious*. But... I love you. That doesn't just stop just because you've turned out to be crazy."

Jo grinned. Reluctantly, Robbie smiled in return. It was at that point that he heard a voice buzz in his ear, carried via a micro-transmitter so small it was nigh invisible.

"*What the hell?*" the voice crackled, for Robbie's benefit only. "*This isn't what we agreed, Robert. Your remit was to elicit her confession and try to learn Abbot's location, not to become further involved yourself. Our arrangement was that I'd enlist Iron Man to -*"

Robbie pressed a receiver button in his pocket and Stark's voice immediately cut out. Robbie's expression didn't change. He just kept smiling at Jo with just the right measure of believability whilst inside he was consumed by one burning emotion - and it wasn't love.

He'd been used. Played for a fool. Broken.

Now Robbie Farrell wanted revenge...

Sinclair Abbot, The Spymaster, sat in the near-darkness of an unfurnished apartment and stared out of a bay window onto a private deck that overlooked an exclusive residential district on the edge of Franklin Canyon. He didn't own the building, of course, and nor did he lease it in any shape or form, but for a man of his talents locked doors may as well not have existed. The views were nice, but he'd chosen to set up temporary occupancy here because the pre-installed alarm system was elaborate but familiar, offering

him a measure of security, and because four-fifths of the apartment had been converted into an enormous, singular space. Perhaps the owners intended to let the property to some filthy rich young thing to throw wild parties four times a year. Or perhaps not. In all honesty, Abbot didn't care.

The only thing that mattered was that the lunatic who called himself The Taskmaster - a man whose wrath Abbot had incurred some time ago over a small matter of a missing six million dollars - wouldn't be able to track him here, at least not immediately. That, and the apartment was a suitable space in which Abbot could show off his wares at a private auction scheduled to begin in a little over an hour.

Until then, Abbot merely sat, quiet and still, like a spider in its web. Dressed in an all-in-one costume and mask of black Kevlar weave with magenta bands of cushioned armor plate and cybernetic circuit-piping about the upper torso, there was almost something of the insect about him. He'd rarely worn his Spymaster garb during his period of incarceration in The Vault, even when secretly vacating the prison on his many and varied personal missions, but now that he was a free man - unofficially - he'd been spending more and more time in the mask. A supervillain persona was like that. Addictive. All-consuming. Or perhaps it was his despair at being reduced to The Taskmaster's lackey that was causing him, an inherent control freak, to slowly lose his sense of... perspective.

Abbot grinned. But now the boot was on the other foot, wasn't it? That insidious bastard with his sepulchral mask and his cowl and his flair for the dramatic - *he* was going to find out what it was like to be subjugated now. The Taskmaster had arranged for an LMD - a Life-Model-Decoy, a hyper-realistic android construct as developed by SHIELD - to take Abbot's place in The Vault on a recent mission. When the time came for the real Abbot to return to his cell, however, he'd executed a sleight-of-hand only one as accomplished in the arts of stealth as himself could have hoped to achieve.

Fooling The Taskmaster as much as the chumps in charge of The Vault, Abbot had engineered a scenario whereby the LMD had been left *in situ* whilst he had escaped and gone underground. The Taskmaster had seen through the deception quickly, of course, but by then it was too late. And the authorities? So far as Abbot was aware, they were still oblivious to the turn of events. Imbeciles.

Now The Spymaster's plans were proceeding apace. With his goddaughter's aid he'd gained access to a modest selection of Stark tech, enough to earn him a tidy little sum, plus the schematics for a particular apparatus with which to demonstrate the properties of that tech for his clients. In truth, the unlawful acquisition of other men's achievements was such second nature to a fellow like Abbot that the name of Robert Farrell barely registered on his radar.

That was about to change.

"Sinclair...?"

The Spymaster almost slithered from his chair in shock when he heard a female voice echoing about the walls in the gloom. Johanna.

"What in the world?" Abbot spluttered behind his mask as he saw two figures emerge into the over-sized central room. "What are *you* doing here, girl? I told you never to come here without contacting me first. *Especially* today. And, what... you turned off the alarms to get in here? Dammit, Jo, you - "

"You took something that belongs to me."

Now it was a man who spoke, a fellow with short black dreadlocks and glasses who had entered the room in Johanna's shadow. He eyed the costumed Spymaster with disdain then, without further comment, he strode towards the only real items of interest in the room: a pair of bulky shapes covered with a sheet

close to the far wall. As Robert whisked away the sheet and stared, sickened and dumbfounded, at what lay beneath, Abbot skittered like a nervous cat.

"Whoever you are, you'd better stay away from there, else - "

"What, you're going to get all proprietary on my ass?" Robert snapped. "With *my* suit? Bite me, you leech."

Cursing, The Spymaster strode forward. His gloved hands were clenched into fists that were now beginning to spit and glow with a faint blue energy discharge. "Do you have any idea whom you're talking to?" he asked.

Robert sniffed, evidently unimpressed. "Uh-huh. But do *you* know who you're *listening* to?"

He reached up and plucked the transmitter from his ear, then tossed it. Spymaster caught it and held it up to the side of his mask.

"*Hello, Sinclair,*" a familiar voice crackled. "*How many times is this you've stolen from me now? I guess I should be flattered.*"

"Stark...?"

"I just wanted to warn you that Iron Man is currently hovering some fifty feet above your exact location. Assuming the ownership of the residence in question isn't officially in your name, I'd rather I didn't have to give the order for him to tear through the roof to get at you. But you know how excitable he gets..."

Spymaster made a choking sound and hurled the transmitter to the floor. Then he turned on Johanna.

"You idiot!" he bellowed at the girl, who was looking on in confusion. "You brought him here when he's in contact with *Stark*?"

"I didn't... I wasn't..."

"Don't blame her," Robert said. "She just doesn't credit anyone with the same aptitude for duplicity that *she* has."

Spymaster turned back towards Robert, then baulked. The man who'd designed the original Rocket Racer suit when he was just a teenager - and who'd been tinkering with it ever since - had taken advantage of Abbot's distraction, stepping up onto a plinth and removing a number of items that were displayed there. He now slipped a newly-constructed steel micro-weave vest and power harness over his shoulders and then connected a segmented belt around his waist. The Racer suit he'd chosen, perhaps out of nostalgia, was predominantly crimson with threads of gold and black, beautifully streamlined and gleaming even in the semi-darkness. When Robert fitted the stylishly angled helmet over his head it automatically attached to the flared collar with a hiss and a series of rapid electronic blips. The golden goggles whirred softly as they immediately conducted an ocular calibration test and adjusted accordingly to the wearer's specific field vision, and when Robert thumbed a pressure pad on the curve of his belt the limbs and torso of the suit ionized in response, stiffening to establish an incredibly resilient, hard outer shell that was simultaneously cushioned with an inner vacuum layer that protected the wearer's body whilst allowing complete freedom of movement.

Which, Robert now overcame his much-maligned modesty to admit, was *awesome*.

"Get away from that!" Spymaster shrieked. "It's mine."

Robert snorted. “No,” he said, his voice digitally filtered through the transparent micro-crafted quartz visor that shielded his lower face. “It *really* isn’t.”

Spymaster raised a hand, now burning fiercely with barely restrained energy leaking from a circular repulsor disc in his palm. Johanna wailed. And then, from up above...

Spymaster cringed away from the sound of splintering wood and slate. “For pity’s sake!” he snapped. “He really *is* coming through the roof! Can’t Stark keep that armored psychopath on a *leash*?”

Abbot glared at Robert from behind his own mask visor, desperately wanting nothing more than to punish this upstart for daring to spoil his plans but also knowing that he couldn’t afford to be caught. Muttering oaths beneath his breath he turned his repulsor upon the bay windows instead, shattering them with a shimmering laser pulse, then ignited his boot jets and shot forward, out over the wooden deck and into the air above the secluded valley beyond.

In response, Robert Farrell reached out for the last - and arguably most important - piece of kit incorporated into the Rocket Racer design. Once upon a time he’d made do with a souped-up skateboard, customized to within an inch of its life but still a skateboard at heart. *This*, however - this four-foot-long platform of layered steel threaded with Stark-tech-augmented bands of sophisticated microcircuitry, magnetized plating, anti-gravity gyroscopic rings and self-perpetuating funnel jets fuelled by hydrogen extracted from the very air itself - *this* was something more. Much more.

Robert stepped up onto the platform and immediately the soles of his boots were aligned with instable energy flow pads that would allow him to move his feet and ankles without risk of injury or loss of balance whilst also being able to guide his trajectory with millimeter precision. With a cybernetic command from his helmet he triggered the anti-grav rings - AGRs - on the underside of the board and instantly levitated without so much as a tremble. With another instruction he fired up the jets. Then, when he was ready, Robert - The Rocket Racer - turned and looked back over his shoulder at Johanna.

“You were right,” he said, coldly. “Individualized transport modules? It *is* the future. *My* future.”

And then he departed at speed, following the Spymaster’s jet trail, leaving Jo behind to stare miserably at the wreckage of her plans - and also at the *second* suit developed by the Spymaster from the stolen schematics. This suit was turquoise, green and gold, and was every bit as strikingly rendered as the first.

Slowly, Johanna Taylor began to smile...

Spymaster was flying low over a swathe of almond trees and there was already a distinctive figure on his tail - the crimson and gold human bullet that was Iron Man, Tony Stark’s personal armored bodyguard. Robert wasn’t surprised. Iron Man had made such an elaborate fuss supposedly breaking through the roof of the residence where Abbot had been quarried that it could only have been a ruse; he was flushing the Spymaster out, like a hound with a hare, and was now giving chase.

Robert didn’t care. *He* was a victim of industrial theft every bit as much as Stark, so he felt justified in having a say in what happened next. As far as he was concerned, Spymaster belonged to the Rocket Racer.

The Racer gunned his jets with a cybernetic command and shifted his weight to the right. His board responded instantly, banking to a lower altitude whilst remaining perfectly synchronized to its rider’s posture, and with his aerodynamically engineered and reinforced suit protecting him from velocity friction and wind shear he felt no more discomfort traveling with such rapidity then if he’d been taking a leisurely

stroll in a summer breeze. He may not have been as fast and durable as Iron Man but he was close - and, crucially, the AGRs on the underside of his board afforded him superior maneuverability at close quarters. When the Spymaster dipped further and attempted to seek shelter in the orchard of almond trees, causing a number of laborers to scatter in alarm, Iron Man was able to track the villain with his vast array of on-board radar detection sensors; however, he was hesitant about continuing close pursuit without incurring property damage and injury to the workers. Racer didn't have that concern.

Angling his board, Robert executed a seamless swan dive at a shallow trajectory and swept down below the tree line without sacrificing speed. He curved about one laborer without so much as tipping the brim of the man's straw hat then cut between two more with only the energy ripple of his jetstream to mark his passing. He then spotted Spymaster directly ahead, stumbling among the trees. Evidently the man's body-armor wasn't geared towards soaring more than short distances, especially at high speed, which was why he was seeking sanctuary at ground level.

"Maybe you should have kept this prototype suit for yourself," Racer snapped as he shifted his balance and sliced down in front of the fleeing villain, his board purring with power. "Unscrupulous jerk like you, you could've gone on a crime spree like no one's ever seen. You would've still made your money, it just would've taken a little longer."

"Time I don't have," Abbot replied, whipping out a glowing fist. He released a sequence of repulsor bolts from his palm but the Racer dodged easily, the AGRs responding to his every thought. The Spymaster snarled and unleashed another volley, this time sweeping his arm from side to side, but again not a single one struck home. It wasn't that the Racer was faster, swift as he was, it was more that he was in complete control of every nuance of his body. He could shift and spin and duck without fear of vertigo because his board compensated to the nth degree with every twitch of muscle, maintaining perfect equilibrium. It was a masterpiece of calibrated efficiency. Even Tony Stark, the man inside the Iron Man armor, was impressed. Not that he could show it, of course.

"Stand down, Mr. Farrell," the golden Avenger commanded as he finally caught up with the sparring combatants. Robert cocked his head, his scowl plain even through his visor.

"You out-ranking me?" he asked.

"I have official governmental authoritative powers through my association with the Avengers West Coast."

"Yeah? Impressive. But I bet your boss *still* won't let you borrow his Lamborghini Murciélago on the weekend..."

"Funny. You can tell you spent time around Spider-Man."

The Racer looked back at Spymaster, who was standing motionless at the third point of the triangle and observing the exchange before him, ready to attack or make another attempt to flee at a moment's notice.

"You want to know what *I've* got?" Robert asked, eventually. "See, the anti-grav and the pulse jets, they're great - just how I envisioned them - but there's one more upgrade I'm dying to see in action. Way back when I called it my 'rocket-powered punch', if you can believe it."

"And now?"

Robert crooked his arm. "Same name," he said, with a grin. "Why mess with a kitsch classic?"

And then he triggered a micro-boost through three narrow, parallel tubes that ran along the flat of his forearm, causing his fist to snap forward at five times the normal speed and slam into the Spymaster's

face before he'd even seen it move, spinning him around on the spot and then ramming him backwards into a tree with a resounding *crack!*

Sinclair Abbot slid to the ground, head lolling. Shielded faceplate or not, he wasn't getting up from that any time soon. Iron Man strode forward, gauntlets on hips. He looked down at Spymaster, then across at the Racer.

"Rocket-powered punch," he murmured. "Sweet. Guess I'll have to get me one of those..."

Robert Farrell settled back on his board but every muscle remained visibly tense even through the gleam of his armored suit. "So what now?" he asked. "You're in contact with Stark, right? Is he going to want to ace this prototype?"

"Well, Mr. Stark's tech and execution codes *have* been incorporated into your design. I'd say that makes it a joint venture."

"That's not an answer."

Iron Man turned, and the Racer saw himself reflected in the metal hero's faceplate.

"If I say yes," Iron Man said, slowly, "Does that mean you'll give the suit and board up without a fight? Or are you going to try and out-gun me?"

"I could."

"You could *try*. But regardless of whether you succeeded you'd be wasting these last few months of working to make something of your life, not to mention placing yourself on the wrong side of the law and becoming a fugitive for the foreseeable future."

Robert bowed his head. "... thought I loved her, you know?"

"The girl?"

"Johanna. What happens to her now?"

"I don't know. We may not even be able to track her down immediately. I was more interested in making sure Abbot was apprehended. But, for now, I do know that you shouldn't throw everything away because of a broken heart."

"So what's your suggestion?"

For a moment, Tony Stark said nothing. Then, inside his helmet, he suddenly began to smile.

"Well, actually," he said, "There is something that's been mooted just recently that may be perfect for you. A certain... *initiative* proposed by certain parties within the Avengers."

"Which is?"

"A recruitment drive. See, now, the general consensus was that we wouldn't be taking on rookies - Hawkeye was adamant about that, in fact - but now I'm thinking one new youngster wouldn't actually be a bad thing..."

Iron Man held out a crimson hand. Hesitantly, a little confused, but ultimately knowing he had little choice, the Rocket Racer accepted it and shook.

“Robert Farrell, I think your life is about to change beyond anything you could have imagined...”

A short way away - but gaining crucial distance from any potential pursuers with every passing second - Johanna Taylor simply couldn't wipe the grin from her face, despite the fact that her day had recently degenerated into total disaster. It was just so exhilarating, you see. She could understand now how Robbie had never been able to put the past behind him. Once a person had a taste of *this*, how could they give it up?

Jo shifted her weight into her right hip and then, in mid-air some one hundred feet above ground, she executed a perfectly calibrated pirouette. She'd always wanted to be a prima ballerina when she was a girl. Funny how the child just bubbled up at times like this, wasn't it? Maybe she was a little... *maladjusted*, as Robbie had intimated. Still, what was wrong with crazy when crazy was so much damn fun?

Sunlight gleamed on the secondary Rocket Racer armor, a shimmering beacon of turquoise, green and gold skimming through the sky on an anti-gravity board, as Jo spiraled and dipped and skated on towards the horizon. She and Robbie would meet again, she was sure of that. Maybe as boyfriend and girlfriend. Maybe as enemies. Who knew? But until then... well, sometimes a girl just had to dance.

TO BE CONTINUED!

Coming Soon in AVENGERS WEST COAST

California's been a hotbed of supernatural activity for some time now. Vampires and an assortment of undead, dark sorcery, Dracula himself... and now - *demonically possessed nuns!*? Who can stand tall amidst such blasphemous brouhaha? Well, there's a certain young English lass with a shotgun full of trouble who'd like to stake a claim... Be here next time as "New Blood" continues!

MARVEL 2000 PRESENTS...

"NEW BLOOD"

Chapter Four of Five:

**"We Are The Stuffed Men, Leaning Together
Headpieces Filled With Straw..."**

Written by Meriades Rai

Before...

At seventy years of age, recently retired William Hyatt was looking forward to spending his dotage with his family and indulging his three wonderful grandchildren. He was therefore surprised one fine spring day when a man he'd never previously met came knocking at his door with three items of note: a cell phone, a photograph of William's youngest granddaughter Cecily (a peach of a four-year-old with wily plaits and sky blue eyes and a cheeky, gap-toothed smile), and a large, flat package in brown parcel paper.

The man at the door – a hired thug with nothing to say for himself but with eyes that could drill through brick, the sort of fellow William had once been well-acquainted with in his working life – handed William the phone. The voice on the other end of the line said:

"I'll spare you any amateur dramatics, Mister Hyatt. I have a job for you."

William eyed the brown package and its familiar, rectangular shape. "I'm legitimate now," he said. "I don't do that kind of work any more."

"You will," the voice on the phone replied, "or I take little Cecily kitten-fishing. You know what that is, Mister Hyatt?"

There was a certain infamous practice that involved groups of men – always men – taking baskets of specially-bred kittens out to sea on yachts, whereupon they'd spear the animals one by one through the scruff of the neck on four-inch fish-hooks and lower them over the side of the boat. The kittens would thrash and mewl and bleed in the water, which was their job: they were bait. It was, it was commonly agreed, the best way to catch sharks.

"Yes," said William Hyatt, defeated. "I know what kitten-fishing is."

The man at the door handed William the package and William unwrapped it with liver-spotted hands. Inside was an oil painting on canvas in a lightweight gold frame. The painting was of an old house on a hill on the cusp of a wheatfield beneath a bleak, cloud-scarred sky. In the middle of the field was a scrawny, dreadful figure. A scarecrow. William frowned. It was an ugly piece.

"My apologies in interrupting your retirement, Mister Hyatt, but your outstanding reputation as a master forger *par excellence* marks you out as the only man up to the task," said the voice on the phone. "I would like thirteen copies of this work by the summer solstice, if you please."

"Thirteen...?"

William squinted at the painting, specifically the scarecrow. And, as he looked, the scarecrow slowly turned its head and stared back at William, its face of dirty cloth suddenly animated beneath the wide brim of its hat and its stitched mouth gaping with a terrible, terrible grin.

William gasped and almost dropped the painting, but some steely resolve inside remembered Cecily and he held on for dear life. *Her* life.

"I anticipate your best efforts, Mister Hyatt," said the voice on the phone. "As will *all* the Lords of Fear..."

Now...

Sister Constance Elizabeth, of the Holy Convent of St. Mary's in downtown Los Angeles, was a rare beauty; a willowy young thing, she wore her soft chestnut hair tucked back beneath the band of her habit, and her lucid eyes, the colour of the ocean in a seaside postcard, were complemented by a shy, heartbreakingly vulnerable smile. She was also the gentlest of souls and the children of the local community adored her, especially on those warm mornings when she stood outside the convent gates and gave out ice cream cones from a small freeze-box. Sister Constance was known to remark that her fondest memory from her own childhood was enjoying a similar treat after Sunday School in the summer months, and to be able to pass on such a simple yet wonderful pleasure was a deeply personal delight.

All this considered, little Henry Lee Elmsworth was obviously distraught when, just as Sister Constance was handing him a raspberry ripple cone (and complementing him on what a fine young man he was growing up to be at the age of seven), a bullet impacted in the middle of her forehead and detonated her skull, splattering the immediate area – little Henry Lee included – with blood and skin and chestnut-colored locks and a few gooey pellets of brain.

As Sister Constance Elizabeth staggered backwards on bent legs (her hands reaching up for a split second to where the uppermost third of her head had once been before falling away), little Henry Lee stared at his ice cream with wide eyes. One of the nun's pretty eyeballs was lodged there, having exploded outward from its socket, and there was a lot more dribbly scarlet than before. Not all of it was raspberry sauce.

It put him right off, to be honest. Which was actually just as well.

"I wouldn't eat that if I were you," said the lissome blonde who now approached the convent gates, a decrepit old shotgun slung over one shoulder and a smoking Colt .45 in her other hand. "On account of the arsenic," she continued, briskly. "Nasty stuff. Stomach contractions, cardiac arrest, the lot. Ruin your whole bloody day and then some."

Henry Lee looked at the girl. She was young, late teens, and extraordinarily pretty, her curvaceous figure fitted snugly into an ivory shirt and khaki jacket and slacks. Her hair, so pale it was almost white, was tied back in a careless braid and her eyes were a gorgeous blue. She wore a stylish Victorian choker about her throat, a ruby-hued jewel the size of a duck's egg set into a web of black lace. The jewel was glowing softly.

"You're English," little Henry Lee said, noting the girl's accent.

"That's right."

Henry Lee looked at his ice cream, then looked down at Sister Constance Elizabeth's twitching corpse. Blood was pooling from what remained of her head, scarcely more than a few slivers of skull and hair attached to a jagged stump of neck. The blood had reached the toes of Henry Lee's shoes. It was then that the shock gave way to sheer, shrieking terror, and the poor boy dropped his cone and ran. The blonde girl stared after him indignantly.

"Hey!" she yelled. "It could be worse! I could be *Welsh!*"

Sighing, the girl looked back towards the Holy Convent of St. Mary's. She was oblivious to the cries of numerous bystanders who were now seeking cover from the gun-toting lunatic who had pitched up on their street, although one or two advanced on her instead, horrified and angered by what had just transpired. These irate few were only baulked when the girl waved her shotgun absently in their general direction.

They needn't have worried, of course. Buckshot of concentrated hellfire – or bullets from the Colt, like the one that had given Sister Constance the ultimate migraine – was harmless to regular humans, and would pass through mortal flesh with only a tingle to mark its unnatural course. *Demons*, on the other hand – that is to say, any entities of otherworldly origin with malignant intention at heart – would be advised to make sure their infernal affairs were in order before they boarded the train to Boomsville. As the fiend that had been inhabiting the body of the unfortunate Sister Constance up until a minute ago had just discovered...

"Right then, chaps," the blonde murmured. "Swear to God, a girl finds herself preoccupied with storming the gates of the netherworld for a week or three and when she gets her arse back in gear she finds that everything's gone to... well, hell. Honestly, ritual bloodletting and vampires in the streets? Dracula resurrected and then vanishing mysteriously? Demons taking over a convent so they can poison children and no doubt get up to all kinds of other nasty mischief? If I'd known Los Angeles was going to be like *this* I'd have ignored my bloody visions and stayed in London. Snuggled up in bed with the Sunday papers, nice mug of tea and a buttered crumpet? Lovely. But no. Not me. Me, I've got to come sniffing out a bunch of sodding - "

Overhead, a sudden eruption of brackish smoke darkened the morning sky, spooling out from the crest of St. Mary's like volcanic smolder – or like the black fingers of some gigantic claw, grasping wickedly at the light. The girl looked up, scowling. As she watched, a number of figures shot upwards from the chapel, screaming and writhing and scratching in their masses. A half-dozen, a dozen, a score. They weren't nuns, of course, not any more – they were *things*, inhabiting nuns' fleshly shells, their tattered habits charred to ash and their hair ablaze with dark, liquid flame, carried aloft on streams of bodily gasses that now ignited at hands and feet and from their mouths stretched so wide with their unholy ire that their dislocated jaws hung loose at their throats.

Infernal, airborne nuns. The girl named Elsa Bloodstone rolled her eyes.

"Bugger," she said.

"You know, if that young lady is who I *think* she is, then a certain somebody hasn't been entirely accurate in his assessments..."

"How so?"

The scarecrow at the window glanced back over his shoulder, his eyes – jagged cutouts in the soiled brown sackcloth of his face – glowing an unearthly red. He was grinning, even though he didn't feel particularly cheery. It was simply that his approximation of a mouth was stitched that way.

"Because she's supposed to be *dead*, that's *how so*," the scarecrow rasped, flecks of straw poking out of his cloth orifice. "Or, at the very least, having the flesh roasted repeatedly from her pretty little bones in one of Erebus's tar and brimstone pits."

"But she isn't."

"No, she isn't. She's standing outside our sanctuary taking potshots at our unholy legions is what she's doing."

"Who said she was in Hell?"

"Belathauzer."

The second scarecrow – the one sat in the armchair reading a copy of the Los Angeles Herald – put aside his newspaper and gave a snort. "Ah, well, there you go then," he said. "Handy with a pitchfork that one, but never the most reliable of demonspawn, especially when his right head starts contradicting the left one. Whom exactly are we talking about, anyway?"

"Elsa Bloodstone. Daughter of the late Ulysses Bloodstone, ten-thousand-year-old Hyborian warrior, adventurer, monster-hunter and demon-slayer."

"Really? Well, that's torn an arse-sized hole in things."

"My thoughts exactly..."

The first scarecrow was about to say something more when another voice interrupted. Scarecrows One and Two turned to see scarecrow Three in the doorway of the shadowed vestry. In his scruffy rags and with his scrawny, shambling gait, this specimen was identical to his fellows.

"We've got trouble," said three.

"Oh, you noticed, did you?"

"Get stuffed."

"Already am, dear boy."

Scarecrow Three sighed. "We're assembling in the gallery. You know, just in case you were inclined to preserve your immortal souls in their present forms and not take a hellfire bullet or two in your hay baskets?"

The first scarecrow grunted. The second stared at his newspaper mournfully.

"Damnable shame," he murmured. "I was just getting a taste for all this."

"What, consecrated ground?"

"I was thinking more of the nuns," scarecrow Two mused. "Always had a thing for convent girls. All that denial and pent-up libidinous angst just begging to be tapped, then all that delicious guilt when they let themselves go..."

"I must say, demon seeds do germinate wonderfully well in these devout types, don't they?"

“Quite.”

The third scarecrow narrowed his red eyes. “Yes, yes,” he snapped. “We all feel the same – obviously so, considering that we’re multiple manifestations of The Original – but I never said we were *leaving*, now did I?”

The other two scarecrows exchanged a glance. “What?” said One. “So we’re not beating the proverbial retreat?”

“Absolutely not,” the third hissed. “After all, never let it be claimed that The Straw Men, loyal emissaries of the esteemed Lords of Fear, are as timorous as the fleshlings upon whose terror our masters gladly feed...”

Four nuns descended from the skies, two on either flank, trailing plumes of dark fire and black, sulphuric smoke. They shrieked in unholy chorus, their habits fluttering about their burning legs, their arms outstretched and culminating in snatching claws. Standing on the sidewalk outside the Holy Convent of St. Mary’s, moments away from being torn limb from bloodied limb, Elsa Bloodstone cocked her hip and arched an eyebrow.

“Oooh,” she said. “Scary Mary, quite contrary. And there was me just dying for some proper target practice...”

Elsa extended one arm, the one with a supernaturally suffused Colt .45 at the end of it, and squeezed the trigger twice in succession. The two demon nuns on her right detonated in explosions of blood and bone as bullets of concentrated hellfire impacted in the middle of their chests at an upward trajectory, reducing their ribs to splintered kindling and punching their blackened hearts up the funnel of their necks and out through the backs of their skulls. Elsa then shifted her weight nonchalantly and brought the shotgun cradled in the crook of her other arm to bear. The shotgun’s name was *Emily*. It had been a gift from a friend. Elsa had been delighted.

She pumped both barrels into the first of the two nuns on her left, earning a cloud of fiery backdraft and blood mist, then readjusted her stance and pumped again, taking the second sister’s head clean off at the shoulders. The nun’s body kept on coming due to her momentum, spiraling in a black and white death dive, but Elsa simply sidestepped and allowed the decapitated missile to slam into the asphalt beyond her with a *whumpf* of dark flame.

Someone screamed. Actually, it was more than one someone. Elsa turned to see that a crowd was gathering on the perimeter of the chaos – if indeed chaos had perimeters, as these gawping cretins seemed to believe – and that the general reaction to what they were witnessing wasn’t overly positive.

“It’s their own fault,” Elsa declared. “I *told* them I was Agnostic, but they just wouldn’t let it lie...”

No one laughed. Tough crowd. A screaming nun hurtled forward from Elsa’s blindside, eyes on fire and vomiting blood, and Elsa only just managed to stuff the business end of Emily into the witch’s mouth and incinerate her demonically possessed brain with a second to spare. Elsa scowled. These sodding nuns were getting on her wick now.

“Right then, my monochromatic darlings,” she said as she stalked forward, pausing only to level her Colt and blow a neat hole in an airborne nun’s stomach, along with an enormous notice board asking *What Would Jesus Do?* Staring at the message through the smear of intestines, Elsa sniffed.

"I tell you what he'd do," she said. "He'd hitch up his smock, slap his finger on the trigger, and then he'd find out who was behind all this malarkey and spank his impious backside all the way back to Hell."

Someone nearby gasped. Elsa smiled.

"Don't worry love. I'm English. We've been getting away with blasphemy for bloody years..."

One large room, a library, dominated the left wing of the convent. The library had been instituted almost fifty years ago and had initially been stocked predominantly with religious texts, but in the last decade the resident Mother Superior Helena Suárez had diversified, indulging a personal predilection for crime fiction. According to the evidence that lined the shelves her favored authors included Robert Crais, Elmore Leonard and Henning Mankell, as well as the classics such as Dashiell Hammett, and there were also an outrageous number of lurid pulps from the 1940s and 50s.

The Straw Man – or, to be precise, *The Original* as the others now called him – was confident that he would have liked Helena Suárez had he known her in life. Regrettable, then, that she'd been one of the first tenants of the convent to be... transformed.

"*The Strange Case Of The Fiery Hand,*" The Straw Man mused, tapping a scrawny finger against the brim of his hat as he scrutinized the cover of one battered old paperback. The design depicted a blonde with prominent cleavage and sleek legs, tethered with ropes and at the mercy of a scowling man in a trench coat and trilby with a revolver in his mitt. The Straw Man's inhuman face twitched as cloth and hay and stitched black thread creased into a wry grin. "Ah, my sweet Sister Suárez," he cooed. "You racy little minx, you..."

From outside there came the sudden roar of a shotgun discharging, followed closely by unholy screams. The unmistakable sound of demonic purging. The Straw Man glanced up in interest, then eased himself from his chair and shuffled across to the library window. He looked out open the street, his black eyes narrowed.

"Hello, hello. What have we here, then?"

The Straw Man saw the girl stride through the convent gates, idly sweeping her weapon from side to side and putting paid to any potential attack with precise bursts of consecrated hellfire. He looked down at his book, then back out the window, then back to the book. Blonde hair, legs, cleavage. And an attitude, if he wasn't mistaken. How delightful!

"Always was a great believer in providence," The Straw Man said, his grin now even wider. He strained to get closer to the window in want of a better gawp, but of course he couldn't. Not with the manacle of black magic locked tight about his right ankle, and linked to the leg of the chair where he'd been sitting with a chain of plaited faerie-dust.

He grimaced now, kicking irritably at the otherworldly chain with the toe of his free boot.

"The question is," he muttered, "Has fate sent her to *free* me or foul me up worse than I am already...?"

Elsa glanced up sharply at one particular window as she sauntered along a flagstone that skirted the perimeter of the convent's left wing. She huffed, fighting back a nigh-irresistible urge to twitch her nose. She hated most of the habitual mannerisms that came with the arousal of her preternatural senses, none

more so than nose-twitching. It was just so... *Bewitched*. Still, her instincts could always be relied upon. There was someone – *something* – beyond the glass, watching her as she –

An infernal nun dropped from the roof, trailing black flames. Elsa couldn't swing either of her guns up in time to fire off a shot, but that wasn't the end of the world. She wasn't entirely dependent on firearms after all. Instead she took a quick step backwards and twisted her upper body, catching the nun on one shoulder whilst throwing her weight into the other, and the resulting shift of momentum allowed her to slam her attacker against the brick wall alongside the window that had momentarily distracted her. She then snapped up her right knee into the possessed nun's gut with such force that it caused the beast's stomach to explode and its ribcage to rupture outwards through its lower chest like a decidedly inappropriate piñata. The demon looked surprised, glancing down to see that much of its immediate insides were now outside. Then Elsa placed the nub of her Colt against the nun's forehead and pulled the trigger, detonating the fiend's cranium like a pumpkin. It was oddly therapeutic.

Unfortunately, that wasn't the last of them. Not by a long chalk.

Elsa whirled at the sound of further vile screeching and saw that she was becoming surrounded. Flaming nuns were encroaching on almost every side as well as gathering along the guttered roof above like smoking gargoyles, and they were forcing her away from the window that had interested her. On purpose? Elsa frowned. Okay, then. This was all getting a little more *intimate* than she'd anticipated...

Glancing along the only length of the convent wall left open to her, her senses were now all a-riot – especially when she saw a luminous, crimson glow spilling from another window, just ten meters distant. She sprinted for it, laying down a sweep of covering hellfire with the shotgun hooked backwards under the crook of her arm, and without breaking stride she leapt. There was an explosion of glass and slate and lead, and then Elsa was hitting the ground beyond the window and rolling to her feet, both guns brought to bear upon... nothing?

No, not *strictly* nothing. The area in which she now found herself was unfurnished - just a long, narrow gallery rather than a room, with bare board floors and dark paneling – and there were no nuns in here, infernal or otherwise. There were paintings on the walls however, however. Lots of them, thirteen in total, canvasses of uniform size and depicting an identical rural scene of a field, with a dark house in distant perspective and a single figure in the foreground. A scarecrow.

Each scarecrow was staring out of its respective painting, mouth stitched in sinister grin and eyes glowing a bright, bloody red. This was the crimson luminescence that Elsa had witnessed flickering through the window, and now that she was viewing the source up close the blonde girl found herself experiencing an unusual fluttering in the pits of her stomach and a dryness in the back of her throat.

Palpitations, sweaty palms, an iron taste on the tongue... Elsa scowled. Was this what she thought it was? Was she... afraid?

She heard soft, mocking laughter and she turned, expecting to see the hideous faces of the possessed nuns congregating at the shattered window, but there was nothing there. Too late, she realized that the chuckling was emanating from the paintings.

"Come join us, pretty," a papery voice crooned. "There's room for one more in the world of straw..."

And then Elsa felt the crimson glow wash over her, and felt an insistent pulling at her clothes and hair and skin – at her very soul – and, despite herself, she couldn't help but scream.

“Daddy?”

Elsa knew that he was there, even in the darkness. Maybe it was his scent – odors were supposed to be timeless weren't they, the barest trace of something that was once familiar dredging up distinct memories no matter how deep in the past they were buried? – or maybe it was more spiritual than that. Maybe she'd always known this day would come, and on some subconscious level she'd been ready.

“I knew you'd come back for me,” she said, quietly. “I knew you wouldn't leave me forever, Daddy. Not with all these monsters in the world.”

He was close. She reached out for him, and found his shoulder and then his arm. She curled her hand into his, so much larger than her own, as if she were still a child. So firm, so comforting. Even with no more flesh left on the bones.

Elsa whimpered and flinched, trying to pull away, but then the skeletal hand closed about her and held her tight.

“Don't be skittish, pumpkin,” slurred a cloying breath. “Come give your old Dad a hug.”

And suddenly the darkness was filled with a harsher stink, the perfume of earth and beetles and dead flowers. And straw. Bundles of straw on a hot summer's afternoon...

Elsa screamed. Not through shock this time, or fright, but through rage. They were using her secrets. They were using her secret wishes *against her*.

“Trust me, lads,” she hissed, eyes narrowed to slits, “that's *not* the brightest thing you could have done. Some things should remain private.”

She concentrated, willing the blackness away – and in the next instant there was a flood of light, so sharp and wide it caused her to squint. She gazed up into the widest expanse of sky she'd ever seen, far wider than anything England could ever have offered, a panoramic sweep of pale blue mottled with swathes of cloud. Beneath that sky there were fields of crops – wheat, corn, maize, barley whatever the hell it was; it was yellow and green and there was lots of it – and in the distance there was a dark building on a hill. A farmhouse, with a scattering of barns and outbuildings close by. Elsa was lying on the ground, in a patch of tawny grass, one leg tucked beneath and one arm behind her. The other was reaching forward, her hand splayed as if to pull herself up the hill towards the house. Because...?

Because she'd have to crawl, obviously. She couldn't *walk*. Her legs didn't work, because her body was twisted with polio. She –

“Not me.”

Elsa pushed herself to her knees and raised a hand to her neck. Her fingers traced the familiar outline of her black choker with the ruby red jewel that rested at the delicate curve of her throat, and she smiled grimly.

“Poor Christina Olson, she didn't have a bloodstone,” she murmured. “This is *her* painting, not mine. So you may as well show yourselves, you little tossers, because patience was never one of my virtues...”

Elsa looked around and saw them then: a horde, encroaching from all sides in much the same way as the demon nuns, although these blighters were even more horrific in their own way. They walked with a swift shamle, their clothes mismatched rags and their limbs flickering at their sides like broken wings, their

faces a ghastly gallery of stitched sackcloth spewing thatched clumps of straw. Scarecrows. Elsa scowled. They looked like something out of a nightmare, but in truth she reckoned they were the only real aspect of the world in which she found herself.

She stood, arms crossed, and in that moment comprehension dawned that she was empty-handed. She really, *really* wished that, wherever it was she'd been brought, her shotgun and her Colt had come with her...

"We can feel your fear, missy," the nearest of the straw men gurgled, his eyes burning with delight. Elsa raised an eyebrow.

"Bollocks you can."

The scarecrow faltered, as did its companions. "What...?"

"You heard me, Worzel. What, do I look like a jackdaw? Going to flap away screeching *caw, caw* through a beakful of sunflower seeds, am I?"

The straw men snarled, circling warily. Elsa sniffed, flicking her hair, then fixed the first scarecrow with a stern eye.

"You can't imagine what *my* interpretation of fear would be," she said. "My dreams were filled with vampires and werewolves and boggle-eyed, hairy-legged whatjamacallits before I'd even turned two years old and could articulate what it was that woke me up screaming every night. When I killed my first demon at eighteen it exploded in a ball of flame and acid and I had no idea if the bloodstone I'd just started wearing would honestly protect me like it was supposed to. *And* I grew up without my father. Believe me, there's nothing worse than that. Those deep, dark secrets you tapped into to try and put the frighteners on me? That trace scent? Memories from when I was a baby. I didn't have a Daddy – and that was because of things like *you*. Fear? Stitch-boy, how's about I give *you* a lesson in fear...?"

The lead scarecrow reared back, his sackcloth mouth no longer curled into a grin. "But... but you don't have your guns - "

"No, I don't. How unfortunate for you – because guns would be *quick*."

Elsa hurled herself forward and grabbed her enemy about its skinny chest, then wrapped one arm around its neck and twisted. The scarecrow's head came loose with a *foomph* of straw and dust, but Elsa had no use for this; she discarded it and instead hefted her foe's now decapitated body as a makeshift weapon, swinging it by the scruff of its collar and felling three more Straw Men with the flailing legs of the first. The scarecrows scattered, some shrieking and wringing their stitched approximations of hands whilst others looked on in disgust.

"Stand your ground, dammit!" the lead scarecrow barked. "Remember who you are! Remember *what* you are! She can't hurt us, not here, not - "

Elsa stepped forward and punched the scarecrow so hard in the face that the back of his head erupted in a cloud of cloth and stalk, his attacker's knuckles protruding from the hole. Scowling, Elsa then pulled her hand free again, dragging a tangle of musty, straw-and-mulch cerebellum along with it.

"Well, look at that," she declared. "Seems like L. Frank Baum was wrong."

The scarecrow looked confused. Or maybe just cranially eviscerated. One of the two. As she set about the rest of the pack with just her fists and boots and the periodic accompaniment of a traditional Glasgow headbutt, Elsa began to whistle.

“Oh, I could while away the hours, conferrin’ with the flowers, consultin’ with the rain...”

The blonde girl was cutting down the scarecrow horde like... well, like wheat. And she seemed to be enjoying the exercise, because she didn’t spot one particular foe approaching from behind, a gleaming, copper scythe clasped in his straw mitts.

“...and my head I’d be scratchin’, while my thoughts were busy hatchin’...”

The scarecrow raised the blade of the scythe high, his sinister face twisted into an expression of pure evil.

“...if I only had a - ”

And then the scarecrow struck, cackling in vindictive triumph as the scythe’s curved edge cut down into the back of the girl’s neck with a resounding *thwack*.

In the convent library, the Original Straw Man had watched with growing irritation as Elsa Bloodstone had been waylaid by the legion of infernal nuns just beyond the library window. He’d then witnessed her being forced through *another* window, into the defiled prayer hall that now acted as a gallery for the paintings that had been copied from his own months before by a septuagenarian art forger named William Hyatt. The nuns had shepherded Elsa away from whatever help The Straw Man might have offered, and requested in turn. Presumably the girl had subsequently been drawn by mystical means into the *other* world, where her enemies would seek to restrain her or kill her, whichever came easiest.

The Straw Man scowled, staring down at the magical manacle about his ankle. As he looked, however, he saw that the chain of plaited faerie-dust that held him in place like no earthly constraint ever could was now beginning to tremble, flaking specks of colorful light and losing its maddening hue.

“Oh,” The Straw Man said, with a flicker of a stitched smile. “Oh, I say. Now *there’s* an unanticipated twist that Sister Suárez would have appreciated, I’m sure...”

Elsa screamed and fell, hands clutching at the back of her neck. Her fingers came away covered in blood and her summer-sky blue eyes shot wide. She turned, still sprawled on her knees, and saw the scarecrow with the scythe behind her, his astonished expression mirroring her own.

“That blow should have taken your head clean off,” the fiend hissed. “How...?”

“Actually, my bloodstone renders me impervious to physical harm, including attempts at sneaky decollation,” Elsa countered. “Or at least it should,” she continued, frowning. “But then why am I bleeding?”

“Isn’t it nice that in this day and age where knowledge is everything that we all *still* have the capacity to be surprised?” a rasping yet melodious voice interjected.

Elsa and the scarecrow both turned to see another Straw Man – The Original, in his disheveled yet strangely stylish rags and his swallow-brimmed hat – standing close by, his cloth face carved with a jack o’lantern grin.

“You!” the scarecrow screamed.

“Me,” agreed The Straw Man. And then he reached out and touched his fellow, and the scarecrow erupted in a sudden whorl of ghastly green flames, howling and spitting as he combusted. The Straw Man turned nonchalantly, and executed another handful of his dark reflections in similar fashion. He didn’t even have to touch these ones, he just waved his hands in their general direction and up they went. *Foomph*, indeed.

Elsa stood, grimacing and still pressing tenderly at her neck. The Straw Man glanced at her.

“This... place, it works to different rules,” he told her. “You’re vulnerable here, although not to the same extent as if you didn’t have that pretty little jewel of yours augmenting your physical being. But, by the same token, *they* were vulnerable to you too. They underestimated you. I bet they didn’t expect you to start fighting back, any more than they’d anticipated you subtly altering the composition of their painting. Andrew Wyeth, *Christina’s World*, right?”

“It was always one of my favorites.”

“Right. Beauty *and* impeccable artistic taste. Anyway, best thing of all? When you fought back against them you disrupted the ethereal magicks they’d bastardized to chain me up in the human world – and this allowed me to break free and re-cross the dimensional threshold. See? Lovely jubbly, everyone’s a winner.”

The Straw Man grinned, then glanced across at the burning, writhing effigies that had once been his fellow scarecrows. “Well,” he amended, “apart from *them*, obviously.”

Elsa gazed at The Straw Man in disbelief. “Okay,” she said, slowly. “But who exactly *are* you...?”

The Straw Man tipped his hat. “I’m The Original, toots,” he beamed. “And soon to be the one and only again, once I’ve rounded up and put the match to the last of these here varmints. And then, the cherry on the cake... I’m your ticket back to Kansas. Or, in this instance, Los Angeles. Just click your heels together three times, Dorothy, and say - ”

There’s no place like home.

Elsa pouted as she stood and stretched, scanning the darkened gallery that she’d disappeared from earlier and which she’d now returned to.

“Home being *England*,” she said, pointedly, “which this certainly isn’t.”

“You can’t leave yet,” the voice of The Straw Man retorted. “You’ve got to go shopping on Rodeo Drive, catch some rays on Palm Beach, save a million innocent souls from the Lords of Fear...”

Elsa turned to stare at the scarecrow in the hat, who was now standing next to her here in the human world just as he had been in the world of the painting. The Straw Man’s eyes flashed. “It’s why you were drawn here,” he told her, suddenly serious. “Someone – or something – desecrated this holy ground to

curry favor with a pride of otherdimensional demonkind, despoiling nuns and forging my painting in a plot designed for a singular purpose.”

“Feeding children arsenic in their ice cream?”

“Instigating *fear*. My duplicates may be gone but that mystery someone’s still out there. They’ll strike again.”

“And you think I’m the one to stop them?”

“That’s your job, isn’t it, toots? You’re the daughter of the demon-slayer. The legacy lives on through you. But maybe you don’t have to go it alone...”

Elsa smiled thinly. “You want to be my partner, Stitchley?”

“Love to, Peaches. But no, not me. Reckon we’ll meet again, right enough, but for now I need to destroy *these*.” The Straw Man indicated the thirteen paintings on the gallery wall, now depicting identical rural scenes but without scarecrows in the foreground. “And I need to find my own painting, which they knew better than to keep anywhere around here. These bastitches couldn’t have destroyed it any more than they could destroy *me* – The Original’s for keeps, baby – but I won’t feel safe and snugly until I’ve got it back in my hands.”

“So who...?”

There was a sudden blare of siren from outside, followed by an urgent voice echoing through a loudhailer. Elsa rolled her eyes.

“Wonderful. The local constabulary.”

“We call them cops.”

“Whatever. Think they’ll believe the nuns I killed were demonically possessed?”

“You’re English. They wouldn’t expect anything less.”

Elsa turned to say something more but The Straw Man had already slipped away into the shadows. Curious bloke, she thought to herself. But, considering how bizarre her life was on a day-to-day basis, entirely acceptable. Grimacing, the blonde girl collected her Colt and her shotgun and climbed out of the gallery window into daylight. There were coppers – cops – everywhere beyond the perimeter of the convent grounds, all with guns trained on her person, which was expected. One thing entirely *unexpected*, however, was the close presence of a disarmingly alluring brunette with a stylish 1920s flapper haircut, dressed in a black and gold bodysuit, hovering ten feet above ground on a pair of delicately curved wings that shimmered like frosted glass in the morning sun. At no more than eighteen inches tall, the winged woman resembled a fairy – or a hornet. Something in-between.

“Ah,” said Elsa. “Wait a minute, wait a minute... it’ll come to me... oh! Oh! I know you! You’re The Wasp, aren’t you? Of The Avengers. Which is appropriate, because you really *do* have this whole Emma Peel, Diana Rigg thing going on...”

The winged woman cocked a perfectly manicured eyebrow. “How sweet to be recognized,” she said, with an inscrutable smile. “Now, young lady... how about you tell me what the *blazes* is going on here before I see if a bioelectrical sting that can sear through six-inch-thick steel can do the same to *you*?”

Elsa Bloodstone grinned, her ruby jewel shining. "Actually, that *would* be an intriguing experiment," she said. "But do you think we could talk about this over lunch? There's much to discuss and I'm gagging for a cup of tea..."

"Ah, the mysterious workings of fate," murmured the shadowed man - who was, it should be noted, so much *more* than a man, existing in a place that was not a place. "I pity those who refuse to accept the workings of destiny, serendipity and other such whimsical shenanigans in their day-to-day existence. One doesn't need to believe in God, but one would be foolish indeed to ignore the telltale clatter of His dice..."

In the darkness of the not-place, *things* shifted. One of these things raised its head and winked an eye the colour of dead people.

"Blehhdh?" it said, to which the shadowed man nodded.

"Indeed," he sighed. "Still, as entertaining as the Straw Man was, those infernal duplicates were never more than a means to an end."

"Blehhdh?"

"Yes, of course. But we have other strategies to employ, each more cunning and lethal than the last, yes?"

"Blehhdh."

The shadowed man sniffed. "You worry too much," he said. And then he smiled, at least in as much as a face like his *could* smile. "In fact, there might even be a way to turn this development to our advantage. As the scarecrow advised Miss Bloodstone, she doesn't have to face our machinations alone. *But*, if we can convince her that her potential new allies might prove more hindrance than help, then perhaps - "

There were no doors in this place that was not a place, and yet there came a knocking all the same. The shadowed man scowled, than flourished a hand that was not a hand and conjured the darkness apart in ribbons of satin and flesh, encouraging a crack to appear within crevices forever untouched by moonlight. Beyond this aperture, a woman waited with infinite patience. She was serene and elegant, resplendent in a kimono of shimmering silk colored with myriad blues. Her eyes were delicate brush-strokes of black against skin rendered snow-pale with rice-powder base, her top lip painted with a glisten of deep red as she sipped at a china cup. When she felt the gaze of darkness upon her she glanced up and smiled a smile of glass masked in cloth.

"Greetings, honored emissary of the Lords of Fear," the Japanese woman murmured. "Forgive my intrusion. But I thought we might take tea... and discuss these *strategies* of yours."

The shadowed man's scowl deepened.

"Indeed, Lady Kingfisher," he breathed. "Indeed."

TO BE CONCLUDED!

Coming Soon in AVENGERS WEST COAST # 50...

"No kids," they said. "No rookies," they said. So what will happen when Hawkeye, Iron Man and The Wasp discover that they're about to be joined by White Tiger, Rocket Racer and Elsa Bloodstone - three young people with no previous Avengers experience between them? One thing's for sure, the Lords of Fear aren't going to just accept the defeat of their Straw Men - not when they can conjure up another threat in the form of an honest-to-goodness classic Avengers West Coast foe! Be here next time as "New Blood" concludes!

MARVEL 2000 PRESENTS...

"NEW BLOOD"

Chapter Five of Five:

**"This Is My Prayer In The Desert,
And All That's Within Me Feels Dry..."**

Written by Meriades Rai

Fours days earlier...

It began in Maricopa County, Arizona, in the Sonoran Desert, just after dusk as the temperature of the day rapidly cooled and coyotes went hunting cottontail and quail beneath a deep indigo sky resplendent with stars. The desert itself colored now, from tan and amber through the pink, cerise and gold of sunset to swathes of moonlit black. A faint wind blew. Out here, five miles distant from the nearest town, there was a heavy silence broke only by the intermittent calls of animals and birds... and by Rose Carnegie's soft moans as her new boyfriend Brett explored the mysteries of her nineteen-year-old body for the first time beneath a blanket in the back seat of his truck.

Brett was inexperienced, but a quick and enthusiastic student. Rose was an eager teacher. Between them they'd drunk a quart of bourbon before parking up and getting down to business. It was no wonder they didn't hear the approach of the creatures - at least, not until it was too late, and Rose happened to glance past Brett's shoulder and out of the near window with heavy, happy eyes, and see what was staring in at her.

Rose made a sudden, strangled sound. Brett grinned and kissed her throat, believing that this was a sign he'd earned his diploma in the finer arts of love. Then Rose screamed, and Brett panicked and rolled off her with a blanket tangled about his legs, and Rose clasped a desperate arm across her lively, naked breasts, and screamed again.

Outside the truck, the enormous creatures swayed as one as if listening to some inner music.

And then, still as one, they turned and began to shuffle away. They weren't interested in the fleshy mechanics of young lust, for that was a human quirk; they were utterly *inhuman*, driven by some other urge entirely, and their calling was in a place far from here.

Abandoning the girl to her plaintive cries and the heave of her bosom in the pearly moonlight, the creatures set off towards Los Angeles, California...

...the home of their hated enemies, the Avengers West Coast.

Now...

"...what in the world were you *thinking*...?"

"...of all the irresponsible, harebrained..."

"...honed skills, you said. No kids, you said..."

For any child who'd ever grown up in a household where their parents occasionally retired to squabble in another room, there was something disturbingly familiar about the situation in which Angela Del Toro, Robert Farrell and Elsa Bloodstone now found themselves. They *weren't* children, of course, but that didn't change the fact that they still felt mortified as they listened to the muffled grumble of raised, angry voices coming through the walls. The only difference was now they were expected to sit around on sofas and drink tea instead of being able to hide under their bedclothes with a flashlight and some old comic books. It didn't make the experience any easier.

"I get the feeling we're not going to be as welcome as we were led to believe," Angela said, gazing sadly into her teacup. To her left, Elsa nodded.

"Darling, I've been to Hell and back. And, let me tell you, this is far more excruciating."

"I feel like I'm ten years old," Robbie murmured, to which Elsa and Angela exchanged knowing glances.

"Well, to be fair," Elsa said, "you *do* have a bit of the cute babyface thing going on..."

Robbie glowered. Angela grinned. Through the wall someone called someone else an insufferable ass, which wasn't what one would expect to hear from the Avengers. Then again, maybe all meetings of the Earth's mightiest heroes ended like this. The three companions looked at one another and suddenly the tension spilled over and they began to giggle. A moment later, when Elsa accidentally snorted tea from her nose, the howls of laughter became uncontrollable.

Bloody kids.

"Well, I'm glad *someone's* finding this amusing."

Tony Stark stared at the three-dimensional holographic display being projected in mid-air just ahead of him and shook his head, his expression furious. To his right, seated primly on the edge of a circular conference table with a scowl that could scorch steel, Janet van Dyne could only concur. Even Clint Barton, known for his usually irrepressible humor and considered the man most likely to make comedy noises with his armpits at a funeral, was solemnly irked as he languished in his chair, his golden bow across his lap. Tony, Jan and Clint - the Avengers known respectively as Iron Man, The Wasp and Hawkeye - were three of the world's greatest heroes, highly regarded for their length of service, coolness under pressure and formidable acumen. However, that didn't mean they weren't prone to making horrendous mistakes on occasion...

"We *explicitly* agreed that we'd be bolstering our ranks with trusted, experienced individuals," Stark snapped, turning on his companions. "But, here you are, bringing the exact opposite to the table!"

"Hey!" Jan barked. "Don't you dare take that tone with me! Not when you've done the same thing. How old *is* that lad you've got in there? Twelve?"

"He has got youthful looks, I admit. But at least he's not been featured on all the local television networks blasting nuns out of the sky with a shotgun!"

"Hello? *Possessed* nuns. The whole out-of-the-sky thing's the giveaway, what with most normal, *un-*possessed nuns *not* flying around on with fire coming out of their backsides."

Stark waved his hands. "*It doesn't matter.* Hellfire shotguns don't scream Avengers material to me."

"Says the walking tin can arsenal with lethal weapons plugged into every square inch of his body..."

"It's the magic thing," Clint said. "He hates magic, remember?"

"Oh, yes, of *course.*" Janet rolled her eyes, realization dawning. Stark glared at Clint, who snorted.

"Listen, don't you think one armored Avenger is enough for any team?" the archer asked, leaning forward. "My girl, Angela, she's something different; something special. Fighting skills, speed, close-range combat... she can give us everything T'Challa would, in time."

"We don't *have* time," Stark insisted. "We're not a crèche, or even an academy. We need recruits who can hit the ground running, even if they're raw. Robbie, he's a genius, and this suit he's designed-

"You want a protégé."

"No, Jan. I want *Avengers.*"

"Elsa can be an Avenger."

"So can Angela," Clint snapped. Stark waved his arms some more, even though it didn't seem to be doing much good thus far.

"But Robbie, he's got this rocket-powered punch..."

"...that sounds completely lame and nowhere near as impressive as mystical amulets from a city that only exists when it wants to..."

"...and his anti-gravity board..."

"...and she can turn into a *tiger* - sort of - and..."

"Elsa's blonde, English, pretty, and completely uninhibited."

Stark and Clint both faltered and looked at Janet. Then they looked at one another. Then they frowned. Okay, actually, when someone put it like *that*...

---EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE---

At this sudden explosion of high-pitched whine Clint jumped in his seat like a scalded cat, his hand instinctively closing about the polished curve of his bow. It began to glow, but neither of his companions noticed, being preoccupied with a new holographic projection that had fizzled to life before them: a schematic of the Avengers West Los Angeles compound, where their meeting was currently taking place.

"Perimeter alarm," Janet cried. "We're under attack! Is it...?"

"Not Ultron," Stark murmured, correctly guessing his colleague's concern and deliberately refusing the use the name *Nikola*, the name this version of the homicidal robot had chosen to answer to.

"What then?" Clint asked. "Masters of Evil? Doom?"

Stark shook his head. "Multiple bogies detected, but no genetic or technological match on the database, Ultron or otherwise. No robotics... but no heat signatures either? Whatever they are, they're not... alive. So what in the world...?"

Stark flicked a hand and the virtual image before him shimmered. "Going to standard visual. Let's see what the hell's swarming past our automatic defenses and... oh, man. Oh, you've got to be kidding me..."

Jan and Clint both leaned forward, eyes wide. Like Stark, neither of them could believe what they were witnessing as they studied the relayed scene playing out in mid-air before them.

They were under attack, that was beyond question. But the unliving creatures undertaking the full invasion of the compound could scarcely be believed.

Jan bowed her head, the corners of her mouth twitching. Clint snorted. Stark just looked incredulous.

"*Cactus?!*" he roared. "Oh, because today just wasn't awful *enough*..."

Once upon a time there was an alien race, the Quist. A militant faction of Quists, the Arcane, created a sentient computer module called Dominus, which they used to conquer other worlds by mentally enslaving its dominant species - and one of the planets they had their eye on was Earth. The Dominus machine, adopting a humanoid form, was dispatched to Earth and made its base in the Arizona desert, whereupon it intended to triumph over mankind. Dominus failed in its mission due to the interference of a team of costumed heroes known as the West Coast Avengers... and everyone lived happily ever after. Or not.

But none of that is particularly important.

What *is* important is that Dominus used advanced, extraterrestrial technology to create an army of synthetic creatures out of whatever it had to hand, and set this army against his enemies. The legion consisted of mutated lizard clones known collectively as Gila, golems fashioned from rock and mineral known as Butte, and multiple manifestations of animated saguaro pulp known as Cactus. There were, at the commencement of battle, over fifty individual specimens of each creature in existence at once, but despite these overwhelming odds the Avengers team of the time - including Hawkeye, Iron Man, Tigra, Mockingbird and Wonder Man - hadn't been overly bothered. In fact they'd found the whole experience amusing, which was justifiable considering that their foes were more ridiculous than threatening.

Especially Cactus.

But that was then, as they say, and this...?

This was something else entirely...

"Right then," Elsa Bloodstone said, in a sweet and understated English way. "Did anyone decide if I was an official member of this merry little band of yours? Because I'd like to know if I have to put my resignation in writing."

"Oh, come on," Rocket Racer grinned. "This is awesome and you know it..."

Cactus was everywhere and it was deeply unpleasant.

It numbered in the dozens, but - unlike the last occasion this creature had been abroad in the world - each individual Cactus wasn't identical to its brethren; this time there were tall, skinny Cactuses and short, fat Cactuses, and twisty Cactuses and blobby Cactuses and even a few bizarrely animal-influenced Cactuses with multiple legs and beaks and wings and tails and teeth and all manner of other odd appendages. And they were all a deep, mottled yellowish-green and covered in a thick hide of spines, and they all had approximations of faces: black eyes and contorted holes for mouths and a definite wrinkling to the pulp flesh that suggested screams of rage.

They were swarming over the walls of the compound, navigating a web of defensive stun lasers and wire net trapping without much effort due to their sheer numbers and the fact they didn't seem to feel pain. Localized bursts of sonic disruptors or electromagnetic pulse didn't faze them as they would even the most sophisticated automated invaders. Anything that hindered or snared or bludgeoned them had no real *lasting* effect; the Cactus army just kept pushing on and through and over and under, overwhelming whatever was before them.

And there, the last line of defense before the main body of the compound itself, were the Avengers West Coast - Iron Man, Hawkeye and The Wasp to the fore and their possible new recruits Elsa Bloodstone, White Tiger and the Rocket Racer alongside. No one appeared particularly impressed, and a few stern stares migrated in Iron Man's direction.

"Don't blame me," Stark's electronic voice sounded through the grille of his gleaming golden faceplate. "These defenses are state-of-the-art, designed to withstand armed assault from the world's most malevolent threats. I never anticipated they'd be put to the test by *rampaging vegetable matter*."

"Some futurist you are," Clint sniffed.

"Oh, shut up."

"Excuse me, boys..."

Elsa Bloodstone stepped forward and shouldered her shotgun. Iron Man made a sound of disapproval, but Elsa just cocked a pretty eyebrow at him. Then she pulled the trigger.

Both barrels of the gun erupted with a barrage of pure hellfire, engulfing a half-dozen approaching Cactuses before they could cover the twenty feet of distance that remained between them and their quarry. Shrunk to her insect size, Wasp recoiled with a gasp, and Rocket Racer squeaked like a girl, of which he was instantly ashamed. Iron Man swore. Hawkeye had been on the money earlier: Stark loathed magic. When a man surrounded himself in a shell of cold, hard steel, and based every principle of his existence on theories of mathematical physics, the very idea of the unreal - the supernatural, the mystical, the *theological* - brought him out in a cold sweat. Elsa Bloodstone claimed she'd been to Hell and fetched a piece of it back with her. Until he was able to analyze hellfire itself and break it down into its elemental constituents - if he even could - then Stark wasn't going to trust it, or the girl wielding it, in any way whatsoever.

The Cactuses roared as they burned - but they kept on advancing, the hellfire dropping from them like liquid gold and smoking in the shape of clubbed footprints in their wake. They looked annoyed, as was only to be expected, but they weren't scorched or fried or boiled, and they certainly weren't exploding, in the manner of the demonically-possessed nuns Elsa had recently encountered. They were just... alight.

"Cactuses on fire," Hawkeye noted, helpfully. "Fiery Cactus."

"Nicely done," Rocket Racer agreed, sarcastically. Elsa was unperturbed.

"They're not supernatural," she said. "Or even truly organic. They're synthetic. But, in any case, hellfire doesn't work on them. Apparently."

"So you'll be sitting this one out then?"

Elsa snorted. "Not bloody likely, Robbie Rocket. There's more to me than guns. Oy! Spiky!"

Elsa casually altered her grip on the shotgun, resting it against her chest, and stepped forward to meet the nearest of the smoldering Cactuses. She then swung the weapon like a club and lobbed off the creature's blazing head with one almighty chop, sending it spinning upwards through the night sky like a falling star heading in the wrong direction. She smiled, gratified. Then the headless Cactus reached out and grabbed her by the face with one spiny, fiery paw, and began to shake her like a doll. The heels of her boots clacked together and obvious parts of her wobbled. Cactus only let go when Iron Man aimed a repulsor blast and slammed the beast backwards off its feet, sending it skittling into a number of its fellows.

Elsa righted herself shakily, blowing a lock of singed hair from her eyes and smoothing out her shirt as best she could. She'd lost a button, and she'd only had two to start with. Any more of that and she'd be positively rude instead of just cheekily racy. Thankfully, although her face was blackened it was merely with flakes of Cactus's peeling pulp flesh, and her own skin was unharmed.

"It's okay," she said, tapping the ruby pendant around her throat. "It's fine. Bloodstone choker. Virtually invulnerable, et cetera."

Then she grimaced, sulking. "Bloody good job too," she muttered under her breath. "Big green lump of porcupine broccoli bastard..."

"Right everyone, look lively!" Wasp commanded, flitting and back forth among them on quivering wings. "Yes, it's Cactus, and that's all very amusing, but he's still dangerous, and there's civilian staff on site here whose lives are at risk. So let's stick it to this overgrown pot plant! *Avengers Assemble!*"

The Wasp shot forward, aiming a volley of bioelectrical stings in the direction of the Cactus horde, whilst Elsa weighed in with more hefty swings of her shotgun. Rocket Racer gunned his jet-board with its AGRs - anti-gravity rings - and rose into the air, his slimline armored suit of crimson, gold and black gleaming with the reflected light of spotlamps from the surrounding rooftops. He then shot forward with a whoop of delight - because, seriously, in his years of inactivity since his misspent youth he had so missed this - and treated a gaggle of Cactuses to his swift and deadly rocket-powered punch. In his wake, Angela Del Toro clutched at the emerald amulet about her neck and immediately transformed from a slight Puerto Rican girl in sweater and Levi's into a lithe, barely suppressed warrior clad in a costume of snow white hide marked with distinct black striping: the White Tiger. The Tiger then leapt into the fray, her black hair snaking out behind her and her ivory claws glinting eagerly.

Iron Man and Hawkeye watched the young, would-be-Avengers launch themselves into battle, and they exchanged glances. They'd all agreed the kids weren't ready, but sometimes a situation just took matters out of a person's hands...

Hawkeye sighed and readied his bow, but without reaching back over his shoulder to his half-empty quiver and retrieving an arrow. Instead the bow began to glow brightly all on its lonesome, and a shaft of pure, brilliant lightning materialized from thin air, ready to fire.

Behind his faceplate, Stark raised an eyebrow. "Well, look at that. You know, I *thought* you'd taken to carrying less arrows recently. New toy, Clint...?"

Hawkeye looked guilty. "Yeah. Well. I was going to tell you all about it, but the right opportunity never came up. See, back when I was lost in time and hanging around with these couple of barbarians-

"It's magic, isn't it? Again with the magic. You bastard."

"Look, I didn't pick it up on *purpose*-"

But that was where the conversation ended, because a tall, twisted Cactus chose that moment to hurl itself forward from the pack and wrap its spiky arms about Iron Man's chest. Hawkeye aimed and let fly, and the shaft of crackling light arced out and speared the Cactus through the head, detonating the entire upper half of its body. The air darkened momentarily with green mist and the taste of charred pulp, and the remnants of this particular Cactus stumbled, spilling pulpstuff from its sundered waist. But it didn't fall. The legs staggered on, albeit in the wrong direction.

"Totally not like *Resident Evil*," Hawkeye lamented. "There, if you take out the head then the rest goes with it."

"*These are Cactuses, not zombies!*" Wasp cried as she circled overhead, attempting to elude a Cactus that had clambered over the shoulders of one of its brethren to clutch at her. She spiraled elegantly and released volley after volley of stings, detonating her enemies wherever possible, but it wasn't stemming the tide. Indeed, despite her speed and intuitive reflex she was almost tagged by a spiny fist until Rocket Racer intercepted the blow, angling his board with the deftest touch of his foot to put himself between Wasp and Cactus. He charged his arm and then unleashed a rocket-powered punch, the impact of the strike reducing his foe to pulp dust.

But they still. Kept. Coming.

White Tiger was a blur of motion, snarling and clawing in the midst of a dozen Cactuses, some of them still smoldering with Elsa's hellfire. The Cactuses clubbed and swatted at her as she moved among them but the majority of them ended up clobbering their fellows rather than her, her speed and instinct too much for them to counter. When one did manage to grab at her, pinning her down, it was Elsa who came to her rescue, grappling the offending Cactus about the midriff in an armlock and then bodily hefting it from the ground, over her head, her bloodstone enhancing her physical strength as well as her endurance.

She hurled the Cactus as far as she was able. Another one pawed spikily at her jeweled choker but Tiger returned the other girl's favor and severed the outstretched pulpy arm with her claws. The hand fell away and the remaining stump flapped uselessly. But the creature didn't fall.

"Everyone hold on!" Iron Man suddenly barked, raising both gauntlets and revealing glowing circles in his open palms. "*Auto-lock and fire.*"

It had taken a minute or two to configure his targeting system with the Cactus army's physical templates but now he was ready to act. Employing his onboard computerized guidance matrix he locked on to no less than forty-seven individual Cactuses at once - approximately a half of the overall mass - and then set the release code for a high-speed repulsor cascade, drenching the immediate area in a firecracker display of light and power. Pulse bolts launched in all directions, slamming into spiny Cactus trunks and reducing them to a fog of pulp tissue. The air and ground was instantly awash with dry, pulpy splats. Wasp screamed as she got some in her hair, which was doubly unpleasant for her as anyone else considering her present diminutive state.

A few seconds later the mist cleared.

But the Cactuses kept on coming, whole or otherwise.

"Oh, for... this is insane!" Hawkeye yelled, letting flying with lightning shaft after lightning shaft but to little avail. "Make one big Cactus into a thousand little Cactuses and they just don't stop. How the hell are we supposed to wipe these things out...?"

"Water."

It was the White Tiger who spoke, from above. Everyone looked up to see her crouching on the rooftop edge of one of the compound residences, framed against the dusky skies. "My college flat-mate," she said. "She had the touch of death."

"She was a mutant?" Rocket Racer asked, skimming between two Cactuses and causing them to impale upon one another. Tiger glared at him.

"No, muppet. Hush. I mean she was one of these people who couldn't help but kill plants. You know? Friends, family, they kept buying her potted flowers and shrubs, and... *muerte*. They didn't stand a chance."

"Right," Elsa said impatiently, punching a Cactus in the general vicinity of where its genitals would have been, if it had any among the needles. "Delightful. This flat-mate, is she on hand? Because-"

"*Listen!*" Tiger snapped. "Cacti, they're supposed to be the hardiest plants you can get, right? They survive in the harshest conditions. Well, my friend, her mother bought her a cactus and my friend killed it inside a week. She *watered* it to death, see? She thought, coming from the desert, it probably fancied a good old drink. But cacti, they can only take on so much liquid before swelling up and... well."

The Wasp flitted forward. "Not too bright then, your friend?"

"She was a bit thick, yes."

"But the moral of the story being-"

"We give Pulpy here a drink?" Hawkeye asked. "Which is quite handy, because the Avengers West compound..."

"...is situated smack bang on the Pacific coastline, a stone's throw from the ocean," Iron Man finished. He turned on the horde of Cactuses, grinning behind his faceplate. "So, who fancies a midnight swim?"

The Avengers vacated the compound as one, Iron Man, Wasp and Rocket Racer leading the way on high with White Tiger, Hawkeye and Elsa following at ground level. They passed the perimeter with an anxious backwards glance, worried that the Cactus army wouldn't follow them, but their instincts were on the button; it was them the Cactuses were after, so wherever *they* went their enemies followed, be they whole or be they maimed, crawling or limbless. Thereafter it was easy to lead the creatures away from the handful of innocent staff resident at the compound and down to the nearby beach where, among the sand and rocks, they proceeded to commit one final, necessary act:

Hurling Cactuses out to sea.

Most of the creatures didn't come back. The ones that did, the tougher specimens, swollen but undefeated, were simply thrown out once more. Or Iron Man and Rocket Racer flew them out and dumped them a half mile from shore, from which point it would be impossible for them to return. Because the Cactuses weren't truly alive there was always a chance that this ploy wouldn't work - but, if that had been the case, the heroes would have just had to think of something else.

They were the Avengers, after all. And winning is what the Avengers do.

Fortunately, White Tiger's suggestion worked. Angela Del Toro, through quick-wittedness, had saved the day.

"I bet you're thinking that makes you our prime candidate for Avengers membership," Iron Man said sternly, after the mass cactus cull was done. He glared at the woman in the white-and-black striped costume, moonlight reflecting on his golden faceplate. The White Tiger simply stared at him in return, her expression unimpressed. She then turned to her two companions, Elsa and Rocket Racer.

"Actually," she said, "I was thinking my new friends and I would be better off forming our own group. One for adults. You know, where the supposedly mature and even-headed heroes don't squabble like spoilt adolescents?"

"Spot on, love," said Elsa.

"Absolutely," Rocket Racer nodded. "I think tonight's been a bit of an eye-opener, tell the truth."

The Wasp and Hawkeye stared at one another. Then they both glared at Iron Man.

"She's talking about you, you know," Hawkeye said.

"And *you*," Wasp snapped at Clint. "Men and your silly one-upmanship..."

"...oh, don't pretend that you're not part of this..."

"...can't believe you'd start this again..."

"...honestly, Steve Rogers would die of embarrassment if he could hear you..."

"...don't you *dare* take that man's name in vain! You..."

Elsa Bloodstone, White Tiger and Rocket Racer exchanged weary glances.

"Trial period."

The three younger heroes turned at the sound of Iron Man's voice. They saw that Wasp and Hawkeye were blushing, and they suspected Stark was doing the same behind his faceplate.

"A trial period, for all three of you," Iron Man murmured. "To see if you've got what it takes."

Elsa, Angela and Robbie each grinned.

"We'll think about it," they said.

In Maricopa County, Arizona, in the Sonoran Desert, the shadows stirred... and the Lords of Fear muttered among themselves whilst their not-quite-human companion studied the stars overhead, his expression inscrutable.

"Blehdh."

The man frowned, glancing away from his nocturnal perusings. "An unmitigated disaster?" he said. "Poppycock. And certainly *not* like our business with the Straw Man, which I maintain-

"Blehdh!"

"Yes, well. It was never intended to be a *serious* gesture. A test, nothing more."

"Blehdh."

"And they were always likely to pass it!" the man snapped, before recovering himself and holding up a gloved hand of apology. "But. Now, at least, we know more about them. We've observed them through the eyes of our emissaries, felt their heat and the flood and pulse of their hearts, tasted of their auras..."

"Blehdh?"

"It's enough for now, yes."

In the shadows, beneath the bleak desert skies and in the chill stillness of the twilight, something smiled. Something with such terrible, terrible teeth. The man grimaced and couldn't help but shy away.

"The Master says we should take our time," he murmured, almost to himself. "Shred them piece by bloody piece. And what the Master wants, the Master gets..."

End of First Blood

And now...

In this celebratory 50th issue, a homage to Josh Reynolds' 28-issue run on Marvel 2000's Avengers West Coast, specifically the pinnacle of his awesomeness that was the Hyborian Avengers! Cheers, Josh - we wouldn't be anywhere near #50 without ya!

MARVEL 2000 PRESENTS...

The Hyborian Avengers

"Twilight Of The Witch"

Written by Meriades Rai

The old witch's name was Karefina. Once upon a time she'd been something to behold: young, beautiful, tremendously powerful... but that was long ago. Now, hunched down in the gutters that lined the dark, narrow streets of the Hyborian city of Stygia, she was a beggar hag, clothed in filthy rags and praying for death as ardently as she pleaded for food and coin. There was precious little magic left in her, and when the sorcery had bled away so had her will to live. Or so she'd thought.

One fateful night, Karefina's prayers were answered. This was the night the snake woman crossed her path and gifted the witch something priceless in passing; something she'd believed she'd never grasp again. It wasn't the three gold pieces the snake woman kindly deposited in Karefina's outstretched hand, although this was more petty wealth than Karefina had seen in over a month. It was the *hope*. Because magic flowed through the snake woman like the richest wine, and no matter how far she'd fallen the witch had never forgotten the luxury of that particular taste.

It was in that moment that Karefina had decreed that the snake woman's power would belong to her. And she was willing to kill to claim it...

"This, my ludicrously over-developed barbarian buddy, is what's known as a killing," Clint Barton said. He beamed as he rattled a polished shell containing four dice carved from the tusks of a giant skunkrat, then cast his wrist. The dice rolled counter-clockwise about the swell of a huge ceramic dish, and numerous pairs of eyes followed their rattling dance. When the dice came up sixes – all four of them – there were understandable gasps of disbelief from all those gathered about the table.

"Witchcraft!" someone bellowed. There were murmurs of agreement. Clint looked aggrieved.

"All in the hand action," he retorted, spinning his shell on his finger. He then snatched up the jangling leather pouch that he'd just won in his wager and turned and grinned at the enormous hulk of a man who was sitting beside him. The man didn't smile in turn. Smiling wasn't Conan the barbarian's thing, as a rule.

A swaggering cyclops pushed forward, slamming his hooped fists down on the game table and fixing Clint with his single, bloated eye.

"Cimmerian," he spat. "Your *buddy* here... can he be trusted? Or is he cheating us honest Stygians of our hard-earned coin?"

Conan glowered, his eyes black pits beneath his pronounced brow. "You're suggesting I consort with charlatans, Winkie?" he snarled, rising slowly to his feet and flexing his shoulders, causing rivers of thickly defined muscle to ripple beneath his scarred, copper-tanned hide. "Better men than you have spent their twilight years hobbling like arthritic washerwomen for accusing me of *less*."

The cyclops blinked, then hurriedly shuffled backwards. His monocular gaze flicked suspiciously towards Clint, who covered his left eye with his hand and purposely made the other one do tricks. Just because he could. The cyclops snorted furiously and one hoof fell to the dagger at his waist, but then Conan reached for his broadsword – scabbarded and slung about the back of his chair – and that hoof froze in mid-clutch.

Clint blew Winkie a kiss. Winkie scowled.

"You won't always have your nursemaid to protect you, outlander," the cyclops hissed, as he turned to leave. "Mark my words, I'll-

"Be keeping an eye on me?"

Conan glared wearily at Clint, who waved the Cyclops goodbye then spread his arms in a gesture of innocence. "What? I promise, I won't cheat and square. Don't go getting all Steve Rogers on me now..."

Conan reached out and plucked the coin pouch from his companion's grasp, prizing Clint's reluctant fingers apart with an effortless flex of his thumb.

"I care nothing about whether you cheated or otherwise, archer," the Cimmerian said, good-naturedly. "But you *will* show me how you can roll dice so expertly, else I'll happily abandon you to the attentions of your new fun club."

"That's *fan* club, Arnold. But that's okay, we'll have you speaking twenty-first century lingo in no time. Now, about that pouch. I think it's only fair if-"

A woman's scream erupted, high-pitched and undulating, rising above the general hubbub that filled the tavern where Clint had spent the last hour fleecing slow-witted gamblers. There was something other about the shriek, however; something more than just sound. The hazy tavern air rippled with magical residue, and Clint experienced a flicker of that plaintive cry in his mind as much as with his ears.

He jumped up from his seat and vaulted over the game table, scattering bowl and dice and snatching up his bow as he passed. "That was Zelda!" he barked. "She's in trouble, upstairs. I swear, if Voelker or one of his slimy snake-weasels has tried to pressgang her again..."

But Clint faltered then, scanning the main room of the tavern as he sprinted towards the staircase in the far corner. Seth Voelker, the criminal otherwise known as Sidewinder, was seated at a nearby table, dividing his rather sozzled attention between a flagon of the most virulent ale he'd ever consumed and an amply proportioned Lemurian lap dancer who could do unmentionable (but entirely wonderful) things with peacock feathers. The other members of the Serpent Society who had traveled back through time to the Hyborian age from Clint's own era, thousands of years hence, were also seemingly all present, as were The Sphinx and Rama-Tut. In fact the tavern was host to a veritable cornucopia of chronally-displaced individuals, including a surprisingly affable agent of AIM named Karl who had been stranded in the past after being forcibly removed from his mandroid armor and who had since discovered his liking for all things Stygian.

By Clint's estimation there were therefore only two familiar faces not currently on show: Zelda DuBois, otherwise known as Princess Python and the perpetrator of that brain-chilling scream... and the ferocious warrior woman named Red Sonja, the She-Devil with a sword. Clint swallowed, his expression one of deep concern.

Oh, this probably wasn't going to be good...

"Unshackle me, hag!" Red Sonja roared, adding a colorful curse for good measure. "When I get free, I'll make you sorry your mother ever nurtured your miserable carcass at her breast..."

Zelda glanced across the room to where Sonja was struggling unsuccessfully to free herself from a series of glittering red rings of pure magic, bound tightly about her upper torso. Zelda herself was enchanted in similar fashion, although she was prudent enough to realize that the more she wriggled the more unyielding the magic became.

"You know, I've never understood why anyone demands to be let loose and then, in the next breath, proceeds to tell their captor exactly *why* letting them loose would be a very bad thing," she muttered.

"Also? Angry, desperate witch. Angry, desperate witch who wants to cut a magic gemstone out of my head with a rusty knife. So, please, can we refrain from the parental insults, hm?"

Sonja snarled and writhed. Zelda rolled her eyes. There was honestly no speaking to some people...

Sonja and Zelda were both highly alluring women, although in different ways. Sonja was a veritable Amazon, statuesque and provocatively attired in scarps of chainmail and animal hides that left plentiful flesh exposed. The fact that this flesh was decorated with a litany of scars didn't detract from the primal appeal of a bare, shapely thigh or the firm swell of uncovered breast. Her hair was the brilliant orange-red of bonfires. Zelda, in contrast, was rather more understated; curvaceous and quirkily pretty, with soft, dark hair and eyes, sensually clad in figure-hugging swathes of green and black silk.

The hag witch, Karefina, couldn't help but admire their beauty, and was eager to steal it for her own. The key to this crime would be the source of the snake woman's power she'd detected earlier: the scarlet jewel presently embedded in Zelda's forehead. This was a shard of bloodstone, an artifact of immense mystic potential that had come into Zelda's unwitting possession during a sequence of recent adventures. She hadn't yet learned to tap more than a fraction of the stone's power, but even now she was exerting tremendous force of will to resist Karefina's assault. The Ruby Rings of Cyttorak were struggling to contain Zelda in their grip, and the witch's magical resources were all but depleted.

Karefina's eyes narrowed and she stepped forward, emerging from the shadows on the far side of the room with a meager blade at hand. The dagger was decrepit, little more than a rusted knife as Zelda has noted, but it would do the job just fine. Karefina extended her hand, with the blade primed to dig into Zelda's flesh beneath the edge of the jewel...

"Get away from her!"

Clint appeared in the doorway, nocking an arrow against taut bowstring and then letting fly. He was an archer, and a remarkable one: he never missed his target. In this instance his arrowhead glanced off the witch's wrist, purposely not penetrating flesh and blood – Clint was no killer and had no wish to nick an artery – but causing her pain enough to drop her blade. The attack also resulted in Karefina losing concentration, and in that moment the Ruby Rings she'd conjured slipped away and both Sonja and Zelda staggered free.

"Scoundrel!" Sonja bellowed, snatching up her broadsword and advancing. Clint eyed her with a pout.

"How come you never call *me* a scoundrel?" he asked. "Sincerely, call me a scoundrel and I'm yours forever. Actually, that would apply to pretty much anything you wanted to call me..."

Sonja shoved the archer aside and then did the same to Conan, who had just appeared in the doorway brandishing his own weapon. Zelda, however, wasn't having any of it.

"Wait in line, Red," she snapped, moving forward to grab Karefina by the scruff. "Whatever she did to me stopped me using the power of the stone. But now I'm free, all bets are-"

There was a sudden flash, followed by a warping of reality. The five individuals in the room each seemed to stretch and twist and fade, momentarily blinded by a swirl of glittering lights...

...and then, when the world righted itself a few seconds later, their environment had changed drastically. The group stared in different directions, eyes widening with each passing heartbeat. Where there had once been a poorly furnished bedroom over the bar of an inn there was now an arid landscape with a ground of red dust beneath a turgid, orange sky, their immediate surroundings punctuated by countless stalagmites of contorted red rock. Zelda moaned, her hand pressed faintly to her forehead.

"It's the bloodstone," she breathed. "One aspect of it, at least. We're *inside*. We-

"The power!" Karefina screamed. "It calls to me. It wants *me*! It felt me reaching for it, a kindred spirit, and now it wants to take me to its heart..."

"You know, it's an endless source of disappointment to me that so many women have the capacity to sound like sixteen-year-old girls at a Justin Timberlake concert." Clint nocked another arrow and directed it at the witch, refusing to be distracted by the shift in his environment. For someone who had endured a half dozen such reality slips in his lifetime, many of them recently, this was no great shakes. The witch, however, was getting on his nerves.

He released his bowstring... but Karefina whirled upon him, impossibly fast, and with a gesture of her hand she caused the shaft to disintegrate into a flurry of red powder before it had spanned a quarter of the distance between them.

The witch smiled, her lips darkest red. She was younger now, the filth and degradation of age and squalor fading from her hair, her skin, her robes... she was becoming empowered before their eyes. And Zelda was growing weaker, now sinking to her knees.

"Fight it, snake lady!" Clint bellowed. "You're a Princess, remember!"

"O, but I shall be *Queen*," Karefina hissed. She gestured with her hand again and now the ground began to crack and rise about her, issuing great gouts of rose-colored steam. The rock fractured, floated and then reformed, pieced together meticulously but with a swiftness the human couldn't hope to follow. With an artisan's hand the witch was conjuring a champion, a Golem of scorched earth to do her bidding – and her desire was an uncomplicated one.

"Kill them!" Karefina screamed. "Grind their bones to bloodied dust, whilst I claim the stone of power as my *own*!"

"Not this day, hag," Red Sonja snarled, planting her booted feet with long legs apart and brandishing her sword in challenge. By her side, Conan the Cimmerian raised his own weapon and looked on with fearful countenance.

"Aye," he roared. "*Hyborian Avengers assemble!*"

To which Clint Barton may have responded with a pithy reply if the Golem hadn't lurched forward at that moment and attempted to remove his head from his shoulders with one rocky fist. Clint ducked and rolled, saved by an instinct honed by many years' service in the company of the likes of Captain America and the Black Panther, and then Conan stepped forward in his place and swung his sword with all his incredible strength. The blade impacted with the Golem's outstretched arm and carved a wedge of red stone from the creature's bulk, but no more; the Golem countered with its opposite fist, battering Conan square in the gullet and causing him to stagger backwards, gasping for breath.

Red Sonja shrieked and dived in, her sword arcing with an overhead strike. Her blade bit deep into the Golem's shoulder, cleaving another hefty shard of rock from the beast's torso, but still it didn't falter. It launched a fist towards her fast but she sidestepped, bringing her sword around in a circle and thrusting it home with a grunt of exertion. The Golem twitched now, the flame-haired warrior's blade slicing into its gut, but still it came. It had no heart, no organs, no blood, no soul. It was sculpted earth irradiated with the power of the bloodstone, and it wouldn't fall until it was sundered utterly.

With a bestial growl, Conan delivered that telling blow, whipping the flat of his blade into the beast's face with such force that its neck splintered and its head came loose in three equal pieces. As the Golem

staggered, Conan and Sonja set to work with a flurry of bludgeoning thrusts, hacking it down to its magical foundations.

Karefina the witch merely watched with a smirk. Where one had fallen, she would just conjure another. Two, perhaps. She extended her hand in readiness.

It was then that Clint slipped forward, unnoticed, and wrapped his arms about Zelda from behind. He nuzzled the back of her neck with a curious intimacy, and whispered at her ear.

"Don't let this happen, Zelda," he breathed. "I know you're tired. I know how much you've been through. The Sphinx, the Dwarf... but you fought them all and you beat them all. The bloodstone doesn't want her. It wants strength of purpose. It wants nobility. It chose you. Show everyone why, just one last time."

Zelda's eyes flickered open. She half smiled.

"You're always so full of crap, Barton," she said, weakly. Clint hugged her tighter.

"Yeah," he admitted. "But that's what makes me so damn adorable, right?"

"In your dreams..."

Karefina glanced across at the pair of them, suddenly realizing she'd been distracted from her goal. She was fully restored now, young and beautiful, with a delicate throat and high, full breasts and mesmerizing eyes. She smiled and reached for the stone in Zelda's forehead. "No need for a knife now," she purred. "I'll just pluck it out and leave you to bleed, yes?"

Her fingertips closed upon the bloodstone. And then Zelda reached up and grasped the other woman about the wrist, twisting it sharply to the side until she heard the stark crack of bone and Karefina's immediate, spine-chilling scream of anguish.

"That doesn't belong to you," Zelda said, softly. "And, speaking from experience, trust me when I tell you that thieves never prosper..."

Karefina fell, wailing and writhing, clutching uselessly at her ruined arm. In the next instant she began to regress, growing old and ragged once more before everyone's eyes, her skin withering on the blood and darkening with filth and misery. Her breasts sagged, her legs bowed. Her hair whitened and thinned. Her beauty failed, and then her body did too, her decrepit organs unable to withstand the horror of the reverse transformation.

Reality warped once more, the red earth and the red sky distorting and fading back to what it had been before, an ill-furnished room above the bar of an inn. From below there came the raucous drift of music and laughter, the carousing of allies and strangers. In a heartbeat, the world of the bloodstone was gone... for now.

Zelda sagged in Clint's arms, utterly exhausted by the effort she'd expended to regain control. Conan and Red Sonja both looked on with guarded concern, their thoughts unvoiced but apparent all the same. Zelda couldn't meet their gaze, instead burying her face in Clint's chest and seeking comfort in the most familiar succor on offer.

"Is this how it's going to be for me?" she asked, her voice trembling. "Marked by power. A target. And the stone reaching out for any new host it thinks an improvement on what it's already got..."

"It's bonded with you," Clint murmured. "That has to count for something."

But even he didn't sound sure.

What did the future hold for Zelda DuBois? Was this her destiny, now, to become a potential conquest for any power-hungry adversary? Was her humanity lost?

Clint glanced down at the twisted body of the witch, Karefina. She was little more than a fleshless cadaver now, all life drained away. She'd risked everything to return to the person she once was. Would Zelda one day risk the same?

Conan and Red Sonja departed the room without a word, their hearts heavy. But Clint remained.

For that, Zelda DuBois was thankful.
