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Eager to serve his country during World War Two, Steve Rogers was transformed into a physically perfect man by the government's Super Soldier program, becoming the United States' Sentinel of Liberty! Armed with an indestructible shield and the physical prowess of an Olympic athlete, Rogers fought valiantly to uphold the ideals and principles of democracy. At the end of the war, he was accidentally frozen in a block of ice and preserved for decades until discovered and revived by the Avengers. Now a man out of time, he is ever-vigilant in his battle to protect the innocent and uphold the beliefs upon which America was founded. Willing to sacrifice his own life for the greater good, Steve Rogers is the physical embodiment of truth, justice, and honor.



VOLUME 1
#19 – “OPERATION: SWORD STROKE Part Two –
American Enemies”
Written by David Wheatley

Author's Note: You might want to read Excalibur #22 before continuing!

Agent 13 was working in her office in the SHIELD building in Washington. She was typing up the latest field report on her activities, which these days seemed to include a certain Steve Rogers. Captain America wasn't an official SHIELD agent, but he was an advisor. He had developed a lot of the training programs with Nick Fury, and though the two men had their differences, Steve had always come to the aid of the organisation when it was needed. Sharon Carter smiled as she looked at the picture of the man she loved.

When Steve had been an active member of the Avengers, he'd been able to charge his expenses to the account that had been set up for them by Tony Stark, but these days she had noticed that Forge was paying the expense for the Star Spangled Avenger. She'd not asked for it, and Steve certainly wouldn't, but Forge had done it anyway and the cheque ended up on her desk for him. She had considered asking him to join SHIELD, but she knew he'd refuse and she didn't want to go that route, not with things as good as they were between them..

Then her telephone rang.

"13," she said as she grabbed the handset.

"Miss Carter, I have Director Forge for you." Sharon recognised the voice of Angela, Forge's personal assistant.

"Thank you, Angela," said Agent 13 and she heard the click as her call was transferred.

"Hi, Sharon," said the Director's voice.

"Forge," she replied. "What can I do for you?"

"I've got you an assignment, one in which you might need the help of our... special advisor."

"I see," said Sharon, not happy that she was being used as a link to Cap. He could ask him for help himself and she wondered if Forge heard it in her tone.

"I know it's not protocol to operate like this," he said, "but time is pressing. I need you to go to Georgetown, Massachusetts. We've reason to believe it's a hidden store for a sentinel army."

"Sentinels?" she said, getting the connection to the situation in Latveria. "Is this Doom as well."

"Yes," said Forge. "Which is why you'll need specialised help. I'm rounding up X-Force to accompany you, but I'd feel better if the Captain was with you on this one."

So would I, Carter didn't say. "Understood, but if the sentinels are capable of detecting meta-humans..."

"I'd prefer metas and one of my best operatives than a regular SHIELD cadre," Forge said. "I've also a call in to the West Coast to get hold of Tony Stark to see if he's got anything he can help with."

"I thought Tony was up East this week, doing a business deal of some kind," said Sharon, quickly covering how she'd know that. "He knows Steve through the Avengers and I think they were planning on going out for lunch.

"Even better," said Forge, "Thanks, Sharon."

"When do you want me to go?" she said.

"ASAP," Forge said. "If Doom starts something it may be that he uses the sentinels here to cause a distraction that can't afford. Just imagine what trouble he could cause if the heroes were distracted, or even exhausted from an all out battle. We didn't exactly do too well during Onslaught..."

"Understood," said Agent 13.

"X-Force will be in touch," Forge said. "Good luck, Sharon."

"Thank you, sir," she said and the line went dead and she gave a sigh, though she wasn't sure if it was relief at putting off the paperwork or apprehension over the assignment and she grabbed her jacket. Maria would have to be with the sitter again. It was a good job SHIELD now provided that service as well...

Steve Rogers smiled as he looked upon his adopted daughter Maria. It was something he had never imagined he would have - a family. In the war he'd done his duty and that had been what

mattered, then when he was rescued from hibernation by the Avengers, he focused on them, on being the best he could be in a world where heroes and mystery men had started to become common place, as well as adapting to the rigours of the modern world. He'd had his fair share of romances that was certain, but there had never been anything with the potential for family.

His liaisons with Sharon Carter had been the best relationship he had worked on, but she was not exactly the type who would have been able to settle in to motherhood easily or take the time to be pregnant. He knew that was not who she was, and adopting a child had been such a simple solution to the ideals. He loved Sharon, he loved Maria and he had time to be with both. While he was still a reserve member of the Avengers, the new team had not called on him, and Tony's team had been too far for him to relocate.

Then he heard the door open and he went to greet Sharon.

"Hi," he said and then his face fell as he saw she was accompanied by Agent Deborah Walker and he knew that Deborah was here to keep an eye on Maria. "What is it?" he asked and Sharon explained the situation to him and he nodded, in resignation. "I'll suit up, and then we'll head for Mass."

"I'm sorry," she said as she followed him in to his bedroom. "I know..."

"No," he answered, "it's fine. Honestly. It's a clear and present danger."

"You're doing it again," she said. "That whole line."

"What line?" Steve said as he fitted his mask in place.

"The whole patriotic thing which tells me you're annoyed."

"I'm not annoyed," the Captain replied as he pulled his shield on to his back. "It's just... a little warning would have been nice."

"There wasn't time," said Sharon. "With getting a sitter for Maria and then I got the call from Maverick at the X-Force office and then I headed out... and I forgot I hadn't called you. I'm sorry."

"It's fine," he said again. "Don't worry about it." Then he smiled her. "We've got work to do."

Georgetown, Massachusetts was a quiet town. Located in the northern Essex County, between the Merrimack River Valley and the communities bordering Plum Island Sound, the place was widely forested, with many acres of state forestland. It was a rural town, with limited facilities and nothing much ever happened in Georgetown, except lately there had been a spate of disappearances. Locals and tourists had gone wandering in the nearby forests. Officer George Isamerde had been looking in to things for a while and not getting anywhere.

The problem was he was local town cop and these kinds of things were out of his league. He knew he was never going to be a big noise in law enforcement and he'd had enough problems with his bosses of late in regards to his attitude and behaviour, but he hoped that if he could solve this he'd clear the slate. His boss had given him another day or so and then he was calling in the feds, and he certainly didn't want that.

So when he saw the blue uniforms of SHIELD, in a remote part of the town, he was less than impressed. He felt a growing sense of unease in his gut as he saw another blue uniform and he recognised Captain America. Now that a superhero was involved his chances of clearing the slate were gone and he walked over.

"Hi there," he said as he approached. "Can I help you people?"

"No," said one of the SHIELD agents, and Isamerde could swear he heard a German accent.

"But thank you anyway," said Captain America. "It's not something you really want to get involved with but we can handle it from here."

"Is this anything to do with the missing persons?" the officer asked and they looked at each other.

"I'm afraid we can't comment at this time," said a blonde SHIELD agent and Isamerde began to feel his frustration growing.

"Now wait a minute," he said. "This is my town, I'm the law here and so it concerns me as to what is going on here and I demand you tell me."

"Oh we don't have time for this," said the German and he threw a stone towards the forest.

"What the fu..." Isamerde's voice died as he saw the imagery of the forest dissipate to reveal laser sights, armaments and the stone bounced off an invisible force field shielding the entrance to a cave. "What's going on here?" he said, finding his voice.

"Now you see what we're trying to keep quiet," said Captain America. "Your missing persons may have been the unfortunate victims of the person who set this up. They wandered in to the area and were killed by the weapons."

"My God," said the officer. "I could have, it could... My God."

"Yes," said the blonde agent. "Now, unfortunately, you're going to have to forget you've seen this."

"That's not possible," he said and he could see one of the SHIELD agent's eyes glowing and then they weren't there, and he wasn't sure who they were. Had there been someone here? Maybe he was thinking of the missing people and he got back in to his car and drove off wondering what he'd been doing.

"That was a bit distasteful," said Cap and Sharon nodded.

"But it needed doing," she said. "We can't have people around while we get this done."

"Maverick," called Lydia Del Ruiz as she walked from within the forest, "we have a problem."

"Figures," said the X-Force field leader and Cap could hear the despondence in the man's voice. He had seen the reports, watched the news items on the defection of Peter Wisdom and Katherine Pryde to Hydra and he felt a measure of responsibility because he had spent so long fighting the Neo-Nazi group and they still managed to come back.

They had lost so many good people to them of late - Nick Fury, Wolverine, Pryde and Wisdom and who knew who else had joined them. Cap sympathised, remembering a time when his world had fallen apart after he had darker side of the American dream and he'd lost faith in himself and his country. He had bounced back, eventually, and he was sure the others would as well, but he could see the lifelessness of the team at times. He wandered over to listen in to what was going on.

"The system's extensive," she was saying. "Stretches quite a way and the tech's a lot more advanced than anything I can deal with."

"It is Doom's work," said Cap and Maverick nodded.

"There's got to be a way in though," said North. "The sentinels are in that cave and we've got to make sure they stay there."

"Perhaps I can help," said a metallic voice and they turned to see Iron Man land nearby. "I was in the area and Tony Stark got a call from Forge, requesting assistance."

"Glad you could make it, Shellhead," said Cap and the two Avengers shook hands.

"You think you can deal with the tech?" asked Maverick.

"Oh, I think it's possible," said Iron Man and Maverick could swear that he could see a smile in the slight gap behind the mouthpiece of the helmet. "I did a quick overhead survey and I could see where the cloaking technology extends from."

Lydia nodded and she went over to speak to Iron Man, as Maverick regrouped with Cap.

"So what do you know about fighting sentinels?" he asked. "Only Siryn knows about them from our team and she's out of action."

"Not a great deal," Cap admitted. "However, we'll find a way and these things that Forge had made for us should keep us out of their scanning range."

"Fine," said Maverick. "I really hate sentinels..."

"I'm just sorry the Avengers haven't done anything about them either," Cap said. "Quicksilver, Scarlet Witch, Beast... we should have sorted something out. There's enough of us with enough connections." He put his hand on the man's shoulder. "Whether it's Nazi guards or robotic ones, history is littered with the same mistakes."

"And that should do it," Iron Man was saying and he unleashed a pulse from his gauntlets that hit the cloaked area and shut it down and there was a the dying of a low pitched hum as the weapon systems were all taken off line.

"Now that was cool," said Marcus.

"Not really," said Iron Man. "Doom needed to get the tech for this from somewhere and I know some shutdown codes. Just took a little time to figure which ones were which."

"Let's go," said Cap and he led them in to the cave only to be met by a repulsor blast that threw him back and he grimaced as he landed on the shield.

"What an interesting group of Avengers," said Doom as he looked at them, his gauntlets primed. "Please don't make a move. Consider yourselves prisoners of war..."

"Like hell!" said Maverick and shot at Doom with a kinetic blast of his own and the dictator was struck in the face, but Doom still stood and he laughed.

"Is that all you have?" he said and he fired his own weapons, making the heroes scatter.

"Doombot," said Iron Man, thinking that the shot should have blinded the Latverian Dictator if nothing else.

"Understood," said Cap. "Take him down!" The heroes fired their weapons, Lydia and Agent 13 using their side-arms, with Marcus putting some extra force on the shots with his telekinetics as Maverick used his bio-kinetic blasts, Iron Man used his repulsors Cap threw his shield and the Doombot's head was taken clean from it's shoulder and the headless Doom staggered and fell to the floor under the assault.

"He doesn't make them like he used to," Iron Man said, looking at the robot.

"Very true," the head of Doom said, "I make them better." Then they all heard the noises, the gears and machinery coming to life as the sentinels awoke.

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VOLUME 1
#20 – “THE PUSHER”
Written by Gregg Epstein

Captain America was out patrolling around midnight that night in New York City. He was far from his home at his apartment in Brooklyn, but he enjoyed the city just as much as he did his birthplace.

He saw a figure above him, flying around his hurtling form. He looked at the African-American man and knew instantly that it was Sam Wilson, the super hero known as the Falcon. He seemed to be upset about something or someone in particular.

Both men landed on a rooftop. Cap tied his shield on his back and on his shoulders. "Hi, Sam. What's up?"

"Nothing much. Just doing my usual crimefighting business in Harlem. I found this guy who has been supplying drugs to the kids on the street. He calls himself the Pusher. I may need your help on this one, Cap."

"I'll be glad to help. Does this guy have any super powers? I'm sure you're aware that other drug dealers have been granting his addicts super powers through the use of synthetic drugs. He calls himself the King Snake. Crisis and Sonik have apprehended him recently."

"No, this is an entirely different entity. The Pusher is a normal guy but his influence is far wide." The Falcon paused, as he guessed that Cap was wondering why he would be needing his help on this at all. "No, I don't think we would need any more help on this, which includes Crisis and Sonik, but we could use Agent 13. She is living at your apartment, isn't she, Steve?"

"We could pick her up now."

"Let's."

Steve Rogers' Apartment

As Sharon Carter was talking to Cap and Falcon, SHIELD Agent Deborah Walker escorted Maria to her room. They were going to play hot Wheels together. Maria needed a sitter while the two parents were off playing hero with Uncle Sam.

"I definitely want to help you to stop this drug dealer," Sharon Carter said, eyeing the closed door to Maria's room. "I just think of Maria getting near drugs at such a young age and I just shudder."

"Enough talk," Cap said. "Let's go. You everything ready, Shar?"

"Yes, I do, Captain. I got my SHIELD uniform on and my service revolver." Agent 13 paused. "How do you expect me to travel all the way to Harlem without a car?"

The Falcon stepped up. "That's easy. I'll carry you."

"Just don't get fresh."

The three adventurers laughed uproariously.

And then, they were off, with the Falcon taking to flight with Sharon Carter in his arms, Redwing by his side.

As they were flying over Harlem, minutes later (Cap was bounding from rooftop to rooftop), Captain America asked a question. "So, Sam, you think that the Pusher is at this crackhouse tonight?"

The Falcon answered. "Yes, I do. He visits it every so often because he wants to keep track of his addicts and his drug dealers. So, let's not waste another minute and go in there and bust some heads..."

There was a loud crash within the crowded crack house in Harlem. In came Captain America on his motorcycle, the Falcon by air, and Sharon Carter, Agent 13 of SHIELD carrying her service revolver. She was the only one who had the power to kill the crack heads by outside means. She was also the first one to move, seemingly immune to the sad state of affairs in front of the three heroes.

Sharon had faced many threats to humanity and the people that inhabited NYC in the years that she has been a covert agent of SHIELD. She has faced gangs, terrorists, other drug dealers, and even super powered threats to the human race like the Red Skull. She took this all in stride.

"All of you are under arrest for trading drugs and other illegal substances by order of SHIELD!" Sharon ordered, waving her revolver in the air and pointing it at the fleeing druggies.

"Look, it's the man only it's a woman," one druggie said, as he took out a switchblade and unsheathed it. He approached Agent 13.

"Stop your activities this instant or I'll shoot!" Sharon shouted. She pressed on the trigger but didn't shoot yet.

Cap hurled his shield at the attacking drug user to knock the knife from his hand, barely hurting him, as the knife fell to the ground and the shield returned to Captain America.

"We don't kill innocents," Cap said. "I thought I made that clear when we fought White Light."

Sharon smirked. "And it just so happened that a beam that White Light shot at you, bounced off your shield, and killed him instead. How convenient."

Cap lowered his shield. He then faced Sharon, ready to trade words and blows with her. "I thought you were on my and Iron Man's side on this."

"This is a war like time that we're living in. And I'm not talking about the American occupation in Iraq. We've been on a war against drugs for decades now. We have to stop it at the source. Now. Before it's too late for the young children."

Cap frowned. "But that doesn't mean we have to kill the ones responsible. They need to be brought up on charges and face the trial that is theirs. Killing is never the answer for criminals." He paused for effect and then continued. "I know all about war, Sharon. I know about the effects of war. Many of my colleagues and friends have died under the hand and thrall of Nazi aggression."

The Falcon felt that now was a good enough time to intervene and play the part of referee. He stepped between the two warring factions and made an observation that was not too obvious to them. "Well, incase you two haven't noticed and while you two were talking, our perps have escaped. The crack house is empty. And the Pusher was nowhere to be found."

Sharon returned to her angry face. "Oh, that's just great! If you didn't stop me from stopping them, this wouldn't have happened, Steve."

"C'mon, guy and girl, let's go back to my apartment and regroup," Cap said, and soon the three heroes were out the door before the cops came.

While the Falcon flies over the sky with his super-powered wings and his bird Red Wing by his side, Captain America rides in his motorcycle, talking to the Falcon via CB radio headsets.

"I think it was a smart idea for you to leave Miss Carter at home with Maria," The Falcon said. "It seems that when the two of you are together, you do nothing but argue."

"Yes, she has issues with me. For instance, she didn't approve of the idea of me adopting Maria when I had no experience of being a father. She has been very headstrong recently."

Suddenly, there was a gunshot and one of Cap's tires blew, sending him hurtling onto the sidewalk and against a brick wall.

Seeing the damage to his tire, the Falcon made a left arc down to the waiting streets below. "Cap, Steve, are you all right? What happened?"

Cap took off his helmet and set it aside by the wrecked vehicle. "Yeh. I'm fine. Just caught me by surprise is all."

"What do you think caused it??"

Then, a man in a three-piece suit appeared, brandishing a firearm.

"That's the Pusher," the Falcon screamed. "I'll get him." The Falcon swung in circles around the Pusher, while the drug dealer fired an array of bullets upon bullets on the Falcon. But he evaded them with ease.

There were wails of sirens as cop cars came onto the scene. Out of a parked police van came dozens of Code: Blue agents. They hurled more bullets at the advancing Pusher, not even coming close to hitting him. The Pusher fired back, nicking some Code: Blue agents on their body armour.

"Hold your fire, police officers, I'll handle the Pusher," Cap said. Cap hurled his shield at the Pusher, maneuvering another move like he did in the crack house, and made him drop his gun.

With him weaponless, the Code: Blue agents rushed the Pusher and arrested him.

"I'm sorry about your 'cycle, Steve," the Falcon, Sam, said. "I feel like this is my fault."

"It's not your fault, Sam."

"But if I hadn't dragged you into this mess, then the Pusher wouldn't have shot at you."

"But he didn't shoot at me. He shot the tire on my 'cycle. I'm okay, Sam. I'm not hurt, only winded. But it was a stroke of good luck because he found us before we found him. He must have been damaged by that crack house attack. He probably heard about our blunder on the news and wanted revenge."

"You're right, Steve. Let's go home."

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VOLUME 1
Annual 2003 – “BUCKY RETURNS”
Written by Gregg Epstein

Author's Note: This story follows the events of M2K's Captain America #16, where Bucky from an alternate Earth visits the current Captain America. And also, part of the plot of the last section of this annual was suggested by David Wheatley.

Nazi Germany, 1945

Clad in a soldier's uniform, Steve Rogers and James Buchanan Barnes was tied to the back of a drone plane, with hardware style twine. Baron Zemo was at the controls, about to set off the plane. It had a bomb attached to it.

Zemo turned to one of his officers, who had a question for him.

During this time, Steve Rogers had used his shield to cut off the rope for both of them. Zemo had seen that they had escaped but he had other, ulterior motives.

"Verdammit," Zemo cursed. "Captain America and Bucky may have escaped but that doesn't mean that this drone plane will not fly to America and blow up the White House. Commence the countdown."

"Yes, mein oberfuhrer. At once. Plane will embark in three... two... one!"

"Now, Kapitain Amerika's country will die as soon he shall. Death to Democracy! Death to Amerika!"

With those words spoken, the plan started to take off.

"C'mon, Bucky, let's stop those Nazi plans of destruction."

"Whatever you say, Cap'n."

Riding on two motorcades, Captain America and Bucky sped towards the drone plane. But Bucky was closest. Only he could stop them.

"I'll get them, Steve."

"Bucky, get down. Let me."

Bucky was dangling to the drone plane, trying with all of his might to defuse the bomb that was attached to it. Bucky was dangling in the air with the plane several feet above Steve Rogers.

Captain America dove into the air, trying to catch Bucky who was still on the plane.

"Bucky, no!!!!"

The plane and Bucky exploded.

Propelling Cap into the frozen waters below. Some of his uniform ripped, revealing his Captain America costume underneath.

He couldn't live with the fact.

Bucky was dead.

And it was all his fault. His fault

Not Earth 616 (Bucky's Universe)

Steve Rogers woke up from the dream. He was dripping in sweat. It was another of those dreams that he remembered from his past.

After Bucky died, he has dim memories of decades flying by and then Namor, his old friend, hurling him frozen in a block of ice into the waiting waters below, after being the idol in an Eskimo religious ceremony.

Then, in 1964, the Avengers found him in their sub after fighting both the Sub-mariner and the Hulk, who was a member of the Avengers for a short time.

He looked around. He was on a couch in Avengers' Mansion. That was odd. Why would he be in the Mansion, when he wasn't an active Avenger anymore? Unless Thor recruited him without him knowing it.

Iron Man stepped in, acknowledging Cap.

"Don't tell me that Avengers West Coast moved to the East Coast. Where's Thor?" Cap asked him.

"Uh, Cap?" Iron Man hesitated. "Thor's not an Avenger anymore. After the Vision died, Bucky kicked him off the team. Said he was a hazard to us. Since he killed the Vision. "

"Tony, this is not the time for jokes."

Iron Man lifted up his face mask to reveal a visage of an African-American man. One he recognized from Stark's offices. "Tony Stark hasn't been Iron Man for a while. I'm Jim Rhodes, who he used to call Rhodey."

"But-but you used to be War Machine until you retired and that other guy became War Machine..."

"Uh, Cap, what's a 'War Machine'?"

"Never mind. You said that Bucky is the leader of the Avengers?"

"Yes, in fact he's right behind you."

Iron Man pulled his face plate down. "Bucky."

Bucky smiled. "At ease, soldier. I'm glad that you got a chance to get to know Captain America. I came now because I have need to talk to you, Steve."

"I don't understand something, Bucky," Cap said. "Last thing I remember is tucking Maria in and having these terrible nightmares."

"I'm afraid I'm to blame for that," Bucky said. "While you were sleeping last night, I teleported to your bedroom, snatched you, and brought you to Avengers' Mansion."

"But why, Bucky? Surely, the heroes of your world can handle it."

"No, I'm afraid not. Because it includes all your old enemies..."

With Captain America's help, Bucky had assembled the remains of the Avengers and the Invaders to form one aingle team to attack the Red Skull's Masters of Evil. The team comprised of the Whizzer, Miss America, Iron Man, the Wasp, Yellowjacket, Hawkeye, and the Hulk.

"Whizzer," Cap said, acknowledging the speedster. "I want you to scout the surrounding area to make sure that all the Masters are in that warehouse down the street and not anywhere else."

"Gotcha, boss." He sped off.

"Now, Hulk, I-" Cap began but he was interrupted by a gust of wind at his side.

"Back, boss," the Whizzer said, returning. "No one in sight."

"Right. Thank you, Whizzer. Now, as I was saying, Hulk, I want you to smash that warehouse and and tell them we're coming."

"What is this?" the Hulk asked. "The old 'Hulk Smash' routine?"

"Hulk, do it," Bucky suggested. "It's the only plan that will work in our favor."

"Whatever you say, Bucky." The Hulk flexed his muscles and started to run at top speed at the warehouse. He smashed the front entrance and in seconds the whole building collapsed in and of itself.

The Hulk then reappeared, holding a Red Skull robot with his head off.

"It looks like you got some false info, Bucky," the Hulk said snidely.

Bucky put a hand on Cap's shoulder. "I'm sorry, Steve, but I thought we had him this time."

Cap extended a hand and Bucky shook it. "I'm sorry, Bucky, but I can't stay here. I'm needed in my own world now. I have a daughter and a girlfriend that needs my love and care now."

"Ok, Cap. I won't keep you any longer. I just thought that we could catch up on some good old times, but I guess you can't redo the past."

"No, James, you can't. I've learned that now, also."

It was a split second later that Bucky's teleportal transported Captain America to his Brooklyn apartment. He awoke in his bedroom, with Sharon Carter right next to him. He didn't see Maria anywhere.

"I'm back," Cap said. "I'm home."

"Yes, you are," Sharon said. "Where were you? I saw that alternate Bucky for a second. He must have brought you back to his world."

"Where's Maria? Sleeping, I guess."

"No. She's in the next room with Iron Man."

"What's Tony doing here? Kinda late for a visit."

"Why don't you ask him yourself?" Sharon questioned.

Cap and Sharon exited the bedroom, only to have Maria arced to hug her foster father. She was crying.

"Daddy, I don't care what he has to say about you, you're my daddy, you're a real person..."

"Ssshhh. It's okay, Maria. I'm here. Your father's here." Cap faced Iron Man. "What's going on, Tony?"

Iron Man approached Captain America. "I have something to tell you, Steve. Remember when we fought Onslaught a couple years back? Well, we died, only to be resurrected by an alternate version of ourselves from the Franklinverse. The Franklinverse is another world of heroes where we lived."

"What are you saying, I.M.?" Sharon asked, concerned.

"I'm saying that the heroes of this world aren't the real ones. We died."

"Liar!" Cap tensed up, ready for action, and punched Iron Man, hurling him across the room.

TO BE CONTINUED IN IRON MAN ANNUAL 2003...

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VOLUME 1
#21 – “The AIM Agenda”
Written by Gregg Epstein

It was late at night, as midnight hit the night sky, and Captain America was out patrolling for criminals to be wreaking havoc on the city. He found none so far. He heard from Tony Stark after their recent discussion about the Franklinverse that Iron Man had recently tangled with AIM and that they were back in business.

It wasn't too long ago that Tony investigated AIM's hideout in London, Canada, where the beekeepers fought Alpha Flight there. And to complicate matters entirely, the Canadian AIM force escaped from the Alpha Flight prison.

What he surmised that they were doing now was planning and plotting revenge on all Avengers, or some former Avengers like Captain America and one West Coast Avenger like Iron Man.

As he landed on a rooftop, coming to a stop after a long sprint, Captain America heard oncoming footsteps approaching him from behind. He whirled around to see who it was but wasn't fast enough to avoid a punch to the jaw.

The punch hurled him against a brick chimney. His brain reeled from the impact. As he grew more dizzy, he saw that it was Crossbones who had attacked him.

"What do you want, Crossbones?" Cap asked. "Kidnap more little children?"

Crossbones breathed heavily through his mask. "No, I don't. This is bigger. I thought I may just, oh I dunno, kidnap you."

"Not on your life, Crossbones." Cap took his shield and slammed against his opponent's face. Crossbones reeled backwards, ever backwards, and had to hold onto a railing to hold his balance.

Satisfied that he was down for the count, Cap started to gather his bearings and walk away. What he didn't notice is that Crossbones had stood up, lifted him in the air, and smashed him against the chimney.

Crossbones took Cap's shield and repeatedly slammed it against his face. When he saw that Cap's face was bleeding and bruised, Crossbones slammed his shield repeatedly onto his torso.

When he saw that Captain America was unconscious, Crossbones carried the patriot over his shoulder and with his one free hand he carried Cap's shield.

Crossbones unflipped his cell phone and dialed a very specific number. "I got the item. Am on my way."

"Good. Schmidt out."

"Good to have you back in business. Crossbones out."

Crossbones hung up the phone, pocketed it, and carried Captain America and his shield to the new headquarters of Advanced Idea Mechanics.

Captain America woke up, the several hours a complete blur to the dim recesses of his finetuned memory. When consciousness came to him, he had vague recollections of being tied to a table in chains. He was staring into the face of MODOK and various agents of AIM. Toward the back of the giant floating head was Crossbones.

"What do you want from me, MODOK??" Cap asked. "I feel like I've really been through the ringer with Crossbones whuppin' my ass."

"That is accurate, Captain," MODOK said. "He did kick your ass, as was his instructions to do so by me and the rest of AIM. But we have made contact with one of your old enemies."

"Damn you, who? Baron Zemo or his hatefilled son who has troubled the Thunderbolts recently, along with Justin Hammer."

"Why, him." MODOK stretched and pointed his little arm to the man approaching the Captain from behind him.

Captain America saw who the figure was; Johann Schmidt, the original Red Skull. "Where did you dig up this Nazi? Last I heard, he was dead."

The corners of the Red Skull's mouth curled up in a smile. "Au contraire, mon Kapitan. I live. But I am not from your world. I am not from Earth 616. You do remember your ex-partner, Bucky, don't you? The reason why he couldn't find me was because I had fled to this world to get revenge on my most hated enemy."

Cap struggled against the chains, but not breaking in his weakened condition. "You bastard! You will pay for this."

"I don't think so. Observe. Behind the curtain is your inevitable doom."

MODOK revealed what was behind the curtain. What Cap saw was a horror unimaginable. He saw a man dressed in the black Captain America costume, the one devised by D-man when Cap was the Captain. He even had a shield similar to his.

"What have you done?" Cap screamed, as his indomitable strength broke his imprisoning chains, freeing him.

"It is a simple matter to clone you once I have extracted your blood and scientifically duplicated the metal alloy in your shield." The Red Skull paused for effect. "I will take my leave now, my two Captains. And let the winner follow me to the end of my reign."

As the Red Skull departed, Captain America regained his shield and launched himself into battle. He was really after the AIM agents, MODOK, and of course, the Skull, but the Captain blocked his attack. They clashed, shield for shield.

But while the battle of former Avengers raged on, MODOK ordered his AIM agents to kill both of them. Several AIM agents fired their laser pistols at them, but their shields blocked the blasts.

As Captain America bends down on his knees to hold his shield in position, the Captain squeezes on his foe's neck.

"What are you doing, fool? They're trying to kill you too."

"I rather see you dead, fool of a fool. You may be my father, but you will die by my hand."

The AIM agents stopped firing. "Let them fight it out. I'm sure they'll kill one another."

"Yes," MODOK said. "But I'll kill them a helping hand."

MODOK fired a mental blast at the clone's forehead, barely zinging him. He fell silent.

"What have you done? He was innocent of the crimes purported against him." Captain America hurled his shield at the AIM agents, knocking their pistols from their hands.

Cap went across to see if his clone was all right.

The clone kicked Cap in the stomach, having the former Avenger clutch it in pain. The clone was as strong as he.

Then, the clone hurled Cap out the window and Cap fell in a mess of garbage cans and trash compactors. As Cap looked up, he saw that a ship, carrying the Red Skull, MODOK, the AIM agents, and his clone had begun to fly away.

Captain America returned to his Brooklyn apartment, just in time to tuck in Maria in her bed. After she said, 'Good-night, Daddy,' and fell fast asleep, Cap went into his room and took off his costume, changing into his sleepwear. Sharon Carter was already in her nightie in bed, waiting for her man to join her.

"Boy, am I beat," Steve said. "That fight really took a lot out of me."

"So, the Skull is really back, along with manufacturing a clone of you."

"It appears so. But this is a much more ruthless Skull than the one we remember. Part of the reason of that is that he is not from our earth. But then, I'm not from this earth either."

"Oh, you mean he's from Bucky's world and you being a figment of Franklin Richards' imagination. Of what he remembers of the real Cap."

"Sshh. Hush up. I don't want Maria to hear that I'm not the real Cap. It upsets her."

Sharon lowered her voice. "I know, I know. I'm sorry, Steve. You can tell me all about it in the morning, after Deborah takes Maria to school."

"Yeh. That's probably best. Goodnight, Sharon."

"Goodnight, Steve."

As Sharon shuts off the lights, Steve Rogers rests his head on the buildup of pillows on the bedrest and thinks about the Skull and his recent team-up with AIM. This was disturbing news indeed. He wonders how the Skull was about to clone Cap while he was asleep. And what was Crossbones doing in the employ of AIM. But that was something, like he said to Sharon, to discuss and ponder in the morning.

Right now, all he desired was to rest up, sleep, and dream good dreams. But he knew his dreams would be haunted by the Skull and everyone in his employment.

Now, he was only glad to be in the company of his daughter and his girlfriend.

Eager to serve his country during World War Two, Steve Rogers was transformed into a physically perfect man by the government's Super Soldier program, becoming the United States' Sentinel of Liberty! Armed with an indestructible shield and the physical prowess of an Olympic athlete, Rogers fought valiantly to uphold the ideals and principles of democracy. At the end of the war, he was accidentally frozen in a block of ice and preserved for decades until discovered and revived by the Avengers. Now a man out of time, he is ever-vigilant in his battle to protect the innocent and uphold the beliefs upon which America was founded. Willing to sacrifice his own life for the greater good, Steve Rogers is the physical embodiment of truth, justice, and honor.



VOLUME 1
#22 – “Skull and Crossbones”
Written by Gregg Epstein

"Come at me, my Captain," the Red Skull said. He was dressed in a thong and nothing else. He wore his mask and the two criminals were housed in a workout room, similar to the ones used by the super hero teams all over the world. "Just as you have destroyed my life over and over again, now I will destroy you. You killed me many times. Now you will die.'

"You can't kill me, boss," the Captain said, upping his shield so that the Red Skull's wouldn't demolish him. "I'm one your side. I'm one of the bad guys.'

"Shut up, herr kapitan. Die, you misbegotten fool."

The Red Skull removed a .44 magnum from his cloak on the floor and fired at the Captain. The Sentinel of Liberty's doppelganger blocked the blast by using his shield as a barrier and the bullets ricocheted off the walls.

"Any coward can use a gun. Fight me fist for fist."

"You asked for it, Rogers," the Skull said, dropping the handgun.

The Captain dropped his shield. He extended his arm and made 'come at me' gestures with his hand. "You're finished, Skull."

The Skull hurled a roundhouse kick to the face of the Captain, who parried and punched his master in the face. This caused the Skull to bleed profusely because the punch and the attack was that powerful.

A door swished open and Crossbones entered, clapping his hands and applauding uproariously. He seemed impressed with the display.

"Very good, boss," Crossbones said, his applause dying down. "You just proved that singlehandedly, you have no chance of laying even a hand on the real Captain America."

"I was better off in the background, anyway," the Skull responded, slightly despondent. "But this did prove that our 'Captain' has a better chance of destroying Rogers than ever before."

Brooklyn

The Captain dressed in his costume and a tan overcoat walked through the streets of the New York town. He was in a mad mood because he got orders from the Skull to kill the real Captain America. He was an exact copy, a virtual doppelganger of Steve Rogers, and he wanted to be the only Captain on this earth. On his back was his shield, a cocncoted copy of Cap's defensive weapon.

He was prepared to kill Cap.

This is the place, the Captain thought. This is where Steve Rogers lives. Time to die, Steverino!

He knocked on the door, then he released that there was a doorbell so he rang that several times too.

He heard talking on the other side so Cap didn't live alone.

Sharon Carter looked through the peep hole and saw a mysterious gentleman on the other side. The door was open ajar so he was able to break it open and start fighting.

The Captain smashed Sharon across the jaw with a left jab and then, downed her with a roundhouse kick to the stomach. She didn't have a chance to pull out her service revolver in time; it dropped to the hard floor beside her.

"Auntie!!" the Captain heard a young girl scream at the top of her lungs. The little girl was standing in front of the Captain, crying her eyes out. She was hysterical.

"You must be Maria," the Captain said, snidely. "I hope I have the right apartment."

"I'm not supposed to say this, but my Daddy can beat you up."

"And who's your father?"

"Cap'n 'Merica."

"Oh, really? I'd love to meet him. Where is the boy scout?"

"Right here," Captain America said as he punched the Captain in the face, making him topple over. "No one threatens my daughter and the rest of my family in the privacy of my apartment."

The Captain was on the ground, and had picked up Sharon's revolver, aiming it at Cap's heart.

Blam!

The bullet hit Cap right in his kevlar vest and the patriot went down. Maria went over to her father's side, sobbing.

"The Skull would be so pleased and proud of me," the Captain said, as he took his leave, dropping the gun at the Captain's chest. "A job well done."

Later

"Daddy, daddy, please wake up!! I love you more than the world! Please wake up!"

Those words were uttered by Maria Rogers, who had seen her father gunned down by a man wearing a trenchcoat who had on a similar costume than his own, than Captain America's. She was worried sick over her loss. And not more than a few feet away was her Aunt Sharon Carter. She was so much like a mother to Maria.

Maria's chin was lowered and she was sobbing her eyes out, crying furiously. She was hugging her father, wanting nothing more than for him to be alive. "Daddy, I love you so much," she said, in between sobs.

Steve Rogers opened his eyes. "It's all right, Maria. I'm okay. See, I'm still alive."

Maria raised her head, wide-eyed. "But how?"

He reached into his kevlar costume and had taken out the bullets, then throwing them in the garbage. "This costume sure comes in handy when I am dealing with a villain using my partner's service revolver, right, Shar?"

"Uh, right, Cap." Sharon Carter had woken up minutes before, hearing the talking between the two. "I shouldn't have opened the door, I guess."

Cap took off his mask and sat himself down on the couch. He was dogtired. Even though he wasn't wounded from the bullets, he was still shocked by it. "No, don't blame yourself, Sharon. It could have been anyone. A solicitation, anything."

Maria sat on Steve's lap, as Sharon wined her way to the other side of the couch. "I'm just glad yer alright," Maria said, pleased at her foster father's well-being.

Steve picked up the phone and dialed a very specific number. "Hello, SHIELD Headquarters. Please get me the number for Agent Deborah Walker. I have a job for her."

"Steve, what's going on?" Sharon asked. "Don't tell me you're going to enlist her aid in getting the Skull."

"No, I need a babysitter." Steve waited another few moments until Agent Walker picked up. "Deborah, could you please watch Maria, while Sharon and I handle a skull-faced cretin?"

Steve nodded after her answer and then hung up.

"What did she say?" Sharon said.

"She'll be here in a few minutes. Flying cars can work wonders in this day and age. We better get going." Steve turned to Maria, as he pulled on his mask and changed into another fresh suit. "You will be on your best behavior for Debbie, won't you, Maria?"

"Sure, Daddy," she said, as she raced to her room to get her Barbie dolls ready for Deborah to play with.

The Red Skull's HQ

"You will be my first line of defense," the Red skull said to his assemblage of associates. He looked at duplicates of himself. Maybe not as scary or threatening but vicious in still the same way. "You call yourselves the Red Skull Gang. You tried to kill Captain America once and almost succeeded. You have my namesake and have branded yourselves in my own image. Go, find Captain America, and destroy him."

The Red Skull Gang picked up their weapons and departed.

The Red Skull turned to another gang. This one not made in his own image but effective, nonetheless.

"You are the Thunder Gods Gang. You once attacked the Thing in a bank and stripped him of his outward appearance, transforming him temporarily into Benjamin Jacob Grimm. You even attacked Captain America but failed. This time, I implore you to succeed. You will succeed. Go, find him, and destroy him."

The Thunder Gods Gang gathered their weapons and departed.

The Red Skull turned to a man who was once a member of the Sinister Six and a hunter. Now, he wanted him to hunt Captain America.

"You are Al Kraven, the second one to wear the mantle of Kraven the Hunter. He are as good as your dead father who was killed by Spider-man. You have always hunted Spider-man. Now I have a new hunt for you. Go, Kraven, hunt Captain America, and destroy him."

Kraven the Hunter gathered his rifle and departed.

The Red Skull to a man who has been his partner and second in command for many years and a man, who was a duplicate of Captain America and created in a lab.

"Crossbones, Captain... there are two heroes I want you to encounter before you destroy Captain America. Yes, Captain, I know you shot Rogers but I also know that he still lives. You have failed. Now I feel you may be redeemed. The two heroes are a black super hero named Afrika and Kamikaze, who has just left Alpha Flight. Go, find them, and use them to destroy Captain America."

Crossbones and the Captain gathered their weapons and departed.

And when he was alone, the Red Skull laughed.

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Issue # 23

Along Came Afrika

Author's Note: This issue takes place before the events in Alpha Flight #43.

by [Gregg Epstein](#)

Brooklyn

Two young men, barely out of their teens, are dealing drugs in the middle of an alleyway with a third teen. The sun is shining bright above them to the teeming streets below that giant orb. But a lone figure darts out from the rooftops. This is a super humanly powerful man wearing a red, white, and blue garish costume, carrying an equally colorful weapon of defensive means. This man is Steve Rogers, whose alter ego is Captain America, the Sentinel of Liberty.

He sees the crime being committed and knows that only he can stop. The police have been busy lately and even though by his interference he will be doing the cops' job for them, he intervenes anyway.

He hurls his shield and that mighty projectile clips the two older men in the heads, knocking them out instantly. The third man is scared stiff, not sure if this defender of the weak will strike out at him next.

Cap lifts his hand out and catches the shield with a muffled thud. "Don't worry, citizen," Cap says. "I have no intention of harming you. But I should warn you that drug use is hazardous to your health. You may think it is fun now, getting a little high, but you will regret it in the long run."

"You don't have to says so twice," he says, running off. "I'm outta here!"

Cap frowns. "Some people just don't trust super heroes." Steve Rogers ties up the drug dealers with some hardware store type twine and makes a telephone call to the police, specifically Code: Blue.

"Hello, One Police Plaza, can you patch me to the Sarge? This is Captain America." Steve keeps one eye on the criminals and one eye on the telephone. "I would like to report a crime..."

But unbeknownst to Cap, in an adjoining alleyway, a black man in a long trenchcoat stands watching the whole scene with an evil smirk upon his otherwise dour countenance. This was a man who headed all of the drug operations in Harlem. A man known as the King Snake. And beside him are his entire entourage of Drug Mutants.

"Soon, my lovely Captain, o so very soon, your death will be upon my hands," the King Snake sneered to himself and his team.

Let's take our leave of that scene riddled with premonitions and join the Sarge at One Police Plaza, as he is in the middle of an interrogation of an unnamed girl, who was last seen fleeing the scene at Code: Blue's attack on the King Snake's HQ.

"We have kept you here for many months and you have not been very cooperative. You have not divulged your real name and what you have been doing to illicit the Snake's affairs," The Sarge said.

There was a rap at the door.

"Excuse me a second. This better be important."

On the other side of the door was a police lieutenant in uniform. "You have an urgent call. It's Captain America."

"All right. I'll take it." The Sarge leaned into the interrogation room. "Stay right here. Don't move a muscle." He then turned to the police officer. "Bring the one called the Pusher into here. Maybe seeing him will loosen her lips."

"Yes, sir."

The Sarge walked down the hall to where the phone was. He picked it up and answered the call. "What is it, Cap? I don't mean to be rude or crass, but I am in the middle of something here."

"I just stopped two young men from dealing drugs to a third. They may be part of a larger gang. I think I heard Crisis and Sonik fighting them before. The two men may know about the King Snake or the Pusher."

"Thanks, Cap. I'll have someone pick them up now. Where's the address?"

"It's in Brooklyn..." Cap relays the address over the phone in careful whispers.

"You have done me a humongous favor, Cap."

"You're welcome. I'll keep in touch."

Both hung up after the other and the Sarge walked back to the interrogation room when he got a not so pleasant surprise. There was an explosion heard there and smoke exuded from the door. When he entered the room, he saw that Crossbones had carried both the girl with no name and the Pusher out of a big hole in the wall to the parking lot in the distance.

"Freeze! You're under arrest for obstruction of justice!" the Sarge screamed, as he fired warning shots at the big man in the skull mask and bodysuit.

But it was too late! By the time he arrived, they were out of sight.

Back in Brooklyn

Captain America was walking home from his latest phone call to the Sarge, as his officers arrested the two drug dealers and brought them to a holding cell at One Police Plaza. He felt he did well. Now, all he wanted to do was go home to Sharon and his daughter Maria.

He started to change into his civvies and take a taxi home when he heard oncoming footsteps approaching him. He didn't think that it was a cry for help. And when he saw the pouncing figure, he knew it was nothing but trouble.

Cap pulled on his mask and held his shield up for defense, as the figure started to attack him. "Who are you?"

"My name is Afrika. I used to be called Captain Africa because I idolized you, but when I saw the news footage of you attacking the Pentagon and Iraq and your association with the criminal known as Crossbones, I knew that you must have turned over a new leaf. I cannot allow you to wreak your havoc. Now, I am called Afrika. I don't want to be associated with you anymore. Prepare to die, Fake America."

"I don't know who you are, Afrika, but you have me confused me with another criminal called the Captain. His association with Crossbones was true but he is a clone of me manufactured by the Red Skull, one of my oldest enemies. And if you notice carefully, he is wearing a black costume while I wear the colors of America, red, white, and blue. And for me attacking the Pentagon and Iraq, that was the Mad Thinker's Awesome Android dressed up as me."

"Why would there be so many duplicates of you, when you could so easily attack those places and team up with those people??" Afrika rebutted. "Anyway, I don't have time for words, only battle. Prepare to die!!"

Afrika launched into battle, hurling himself into the air, and when he arrived at Cap's body, he

thrust a punch at his foe's chin. Cap fell against a brick wall. Afrika was so fast that he didn't have time to erect his shield.

"You think just because you wear the patriotic colors of America, you own this country and can do whatever you want and choose. Well, I'm from a different place and I know better." Afrika hoisted Cap above his head and hurled him against a taxi cab parked in the street. The cabbie had by then fled the scene in panic.

Now, Cap saw why this man, obviously an international super hero, was acting so strangely. He had a hypno disc attached to his neck. With speed that belied his size, Cap hurled his shield, missing Afrika, and struck the disc, shattering it.

"I don't understand, what happened??" Afrika said in confusion. "The last thing I remember was a man with a white skull mask and his partner, a man that resembled you attack him in my home."

"I can gather the rest. They were Crossbones and the Captain, my recent enemies. They must have hypnotized you to attack me."

"Listen, it was great meeting you, Captain America, but I really have to return to my homeland."

"If you ever need help or want to team up, you know where to find me."

With this interruption out of the way, Cap knew he had to go to Harlem because that is where the drugs were being peddled.

Harlem

Captain America drove on his red, white, and blue motorcycle all the way from Brooklyn to the crime and drug infested streets of Harlem. The Sarge and Code:Blue were waiting with him in a special, bullet-proof van a block or two away.

Steve saw that Psi-bot and the rest of the Drug Mutants were attacking the kids in a crack house not far away. He was about to rescue the kids when another super hero intervened instead.

It was Kamikaze.

The last time he saw Harada was during the days of WWII, when he was just a child and Harada's father, the first and original Kamikaze, was his mortal enemy.

Kamikaze had a certain dance and fluidity to his moves when he attacked Psi-bot and Giganto. It was over in seconds. Cap was about to discover for himself how the ninja was about to defeat and capture all of Alpha Flight so effortlessly.

Code: Blue and the Sarge had thanked him for lending a hand and wished him on his way. Kamikaze walked down the street until he came to where Cap was standing.

"Long time, no see, Kamikaze?" Captain America asked.

TO BE CONTINUED...

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VOLUME 1
#24 – “Old Friends Forgot”
Written by Gregg Epstein

Author's Note: This issue takes place before the events in Alpha Flight # 43 and 44 .

Harlem

“Long time, no see, Kamikaze?” Captain America said, as he greeted his old friend in an alleyway in the drug-infested district of Harlem. “I heard that you've been looking for me. And that you left Alpha Flight recently and want to move from being a Japanese-Canadian superhero to an American one.”

Harada took off his mask, revealing his face underneath. “Yes, it has been a long time, Cap. Last time we met, I was just a child while my father, the first Kamikaze, was a ninja assassin/kamikaze pilot during the days of Pearl Harbor and the beginning days of WWII. You fought him, back then.”

“So, what do you want with me, Kam?” Cap asked.

“I just want some closure. To find out the kind of man my father was and how I can be a better man than he. I tried to be the super villain that my father was. It didn't work out. I guess my heart just wasn't in it. I don't know if I was a coward or what, but I wasn't very successful at it. Now, I'm a hero. A super hero. But my team, Alpha Flight, is not ready to accept me. Especially Madison Jeffries, the husband of the woman who tried to reform me properly.”

“That would be Diamond Lil, right?”

“Hai. She is some woman.” That garnered a smile on Harada's lips. Cap caught the smile and knew exactly what it meant.

“I hope your emotions aren't taking over. Sometimes love can get in the way of your emotions. Being on the Avengers for most of my adult life taught me that to properly be on a team, sometimes you have to guard the love you have for members of the opposite sex.”

Cap put on his helmet and the two men mounted the motorcycle, making the long trek from Harlem to Brooklyn . Kamikaze had never been on a vehicle of this kind and size before, but it was a thrill a minute ride.

“Do you think that I am in love with Lillian? Because you couldn't be further from the truth.”

“Don't lie to me, Kam. Guardian keeps me informed on the personal struggles of Alpha Flight. And he happened to mention the kiss you gave to Lil many months ago. That wasn't very appropriate and it must have caused tension between husband and wife.”

The conversation lasted until an hour or two later, after standing in gridiron traffic for the longest time, they arrived at Steve Rogers' apartment in Brooklyn . Cap parked the cycle in the rack, tied it up with a lock and chain, took off his helmet, and walked Kamikaze up the stairs to his apartment.

Cap opened the door to his apartment and bade Kamikaze to enter. “Honey, I'm back,” Cap said to his live-in partner and girlfriend. “I brought a guest.”

Covering his mouth with a hand, Harada whispered to his old friend, “I hope I'm not intruding or imposing.”

“Not at all. Relax on the couch. I'll make us some coffee.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Harada saw a perky, young girl come racing out of her room to embrace Cap. He had heard that Rogers had adopted a girl who had lost her parents. It was all over the news.

“Daddy, I'm so glad you're home. I missed you so much,” Maria said, giddy as a school girl. “Did you bring Auntie Sharon with you?”

Cap removed his mask, revealing his handsome face underneath. He was Steve Rogers again. “Where is Aunt Sharon? Don't tell me that she left you all alone in the apartment without a sitter.”

Maria giggled again. “She said she went shopping. To get me some food. I thought you were there with her.”

“Its okay, Steve. I'm here,” Agent Deborah Walker said, exiting the room that Maria was playing in.

“That's a relief,” Steve said, with a sigh. “Now, where could Sharon be?”

Suddenly, the door opened and a familiar blonde-haired woman entered with both hands full of groceries. It was Sharon Carter, Agent 13 of SHIELD.

“Auntie! You're home! What did you get me?” Maria asked, embracing her surrogate mother.

“I bought you plenty of ice cream. Vanilla, like you like it,” she answered, with a smile on her pretty face.

“Oh, there you are,” Steve said. “I was wondering when you'd get home.”

“Help me with the packages,” Sharon offered. “And then, you can tell us who your guest is and what he's doing here.”

“If you don't mind, Harada...” Cap said.

“This would be different,” Kamikaze answered.

After the packages were put in their proper receptacles, Steve Rogers sat with Kamikaze and Sharon Carter. Debbie Walker played with Maria in her room with the door closed so that they could have some privacy. Kamikaze had by now taken off his mask, pocketed it, and Captain America had removed his costume and changed into his civvies.

“So, Harada,” Steve said, staring into Kamikaze's forlorn eyes. “Tell me what you need to know.”

“I'll tell you what I already know about my father.” Suddenly, Harada donned his mask and stood up. “You killed my father, murderer!” He launched into attack mode, hurling Chinese Throwing Stars at Steve's prone form.

Steve used his shield which was by his side to block the stars dropping them to the floor. Sharon had taken out her service revolver and shot Kamikaze in the chest. Lucky for him he was wearing a bullet proof vest.

Steve had thrown his shield, grazing Harada on the forehead. But that only stunned him for the moment. Kamikaze was known for his resourcefulness and ability to bounce back from any attack. He wasn't known for capturing Alpha Flight for nothing.

Kamikaze was burning with rage. He wanted nothing more than to kill Captain America , or in this case Steve Rogers, because he was the one who killed his father back in the days of WWII.

Steve Rogers tore off his shirt, revealing his costume underneath. He donned his mask. Now he was Captain America . “I don't know what got into you, Kam, but I'm going to take you down now.”

“Why did you kill him?” Kamikaze screamed. “He was the only person I ever loved.” He unsheathed his samurai sword and swung at Cap's hurtling form, only hitting his shield instead.

“I had to kill him. He was threatening everything that America stood for. He was one of the few Japanese kamikaze pilots that survived the attack on Pearl Harbor . I was new at the game. I thought I couldn't bring him in peacefully. I'm sorry, he's dead, but there's nothing I can do to turn back time.”

Then, Cap saw it. A hypno disc attached to Harada's neck. The Red Skull must have gotten to him as he made his long trek to America . Before Kamikaze could end the fight, Cap ripped the disc off of him, making the ninja wail in pain.

“What happened?” Kamikaze asked, a little woozy. He seemed like himself again.

Captain America helped Kamikaze up. “Tell me the last thing you remember.”

The ninja touched his head, for that was what hurt the most. “Last thing...? I had hitch hiked all the way to America . When I arrived in New York , a man calling himself the Captain approached me. He said that he was your sidekick. A man learning from you. Then, everything went black. “

Cap extended a hand. “I'm sorry, Kam, that you had to be at the losing end of that. It seems that the Captain is my clone, manufactured by one of my old enemies, the Red Skull. He has a habit of using either people I don't know, like Afrika, or people I haven't seen in awhile, like you, to attack me. I have to put an end to it all.”

Kamikaze shook his hand. “Thank you, Cap. I don't know why I came to seek you. But my vaguest memory is of attacking a cyborg and a giant.”

“Maybe its better you don't know. I think that you should go back to Canada and forget about being an American super hero. You belong in Canada . You belong among your friends.”

“Thank you, Cap. Good luck in fighting this Skull guy. Wish I could help.”

The door to Maria's room opened slightly and the two who had been in there exited it. When they walked out, Kamikaze had been long gone.

“What was that all about?” Debbie asked.

“Nothing to concern you with,” Cap answered. “Just a slight misunderstanding. Right now, Sharon and I have to figure how to take down the Skull.”

The Skull's HQ

“You have failed me too many times, Captain,” The Red Skull screamed at his associate, the clone of Steve Rogers. “I told you to recruit those two new super heroes and you failed in that, too. Your first failure was in killing Captain America in his apartment.”

“It wasn't my fault, Skull. There must have been a malfunction in the hypno discs. They were fool proof.”

The Skull rubbed his chin. “Perhaps you are right. Now, I will employ real villains; the Red Skull Gang, the Thunder Gods Gang, and Kraven the Hunter. And if they fail, I may be forced to kill Steve Rogers myself.”

The Red Skull smoked his pipe, knowing a great war would soon be afoot.

Eager to serve his country during World War Two, Steve Rogers was transformed into a physically perfect man by the government's Super Soldier program, becoming the United States' Sentinel of Liberty! Armed with an indestructible shield and the physical prowess of an Olympic athlete, Rogers fought valiantly to uphold the ideals and principles of democracy. At the end of the war, he was accidentally frozen in a block of ice and preserved for decades until discovered and revived by the Avengers. Now a man out of time, he is ever-vigilant in his battle to protect the innocent and uphold the beliefs upon which America was founded. Willing to sacrifice his own life for the greater good, Steve Rogers is the physical embodiment of truth, justice, and honor.



VOLUME 1
#25 – “Blitzkrieg”
Written by Steve Crosby

From the helicopter, the city looked peaceful. Quiet. Captain America was standing up in the military vehicle, his free hand braced against the edge of the opening. In the pilot's seat was Sharon Carter, guiding the helicopter towards their destination.

“There's a storm coming,” she yelled at Captain America, over the noise of the rotors. “I may need to go around, or land farther inland!”

“You know we can't.” A note was held tight in Captain America's other hand. Strapped to his back was the shield. It was the note that mattered, that was the reason for those two being out in the New York City sky, flying towards Long Island. “There is a deadline.”

An address was scrawled on the note, along with a precise time and a threat. Recently Captain America had adopted a young girl, named Marie. Earlier that day she'd been taken from school by a man who had looked exactly like Steve Rogers, but Captain America hadn't been at the school. The note had been taped to Steve's door, discovered after he and Sharon had known Marie was missing. It was she that the threat pertained to.

“We're almost there Steve,” Sharon informed Captain America. Soon, sprawling mansions appeared on the ground below. Homes to the wealthy and powerful, one of these held Maria.

As per the note's instructions, it was only the two of them. Sharon's connections with SHIELD had acquired the helicopter as transport. Neither the military organization nor the Avengers knew of the situation. It was only up to Captain America and Sharon Carter to save Marie from the man who had taken her.

Both knew who the man was. He'd signed the note. J. S. Johann Schmidt, the Red Skull.

“That's the house,” Captain America yelled as they approached the next of many on the Long Island coast. From the distance, he could see that the roof tiles were discolored; creating a pattern that resembled a swastika. It wasn't long before they were directly overhead.

"Find a place to land," Captain America told Sharon. "I'll check things out." Then he stepped off the helicopter. Falling forward, Captain America went head-first towards the estate. Both his arms were straightened over his head, or below depending on the perspective. The shield slid along its straps, going from Captain America's back down his arms and into his hands. Only the shield would separate Captain America from the hard earth.

Impact was reached at an angle, with a great deal of the force absorbed into the Vibranium-based metal that made up Captain America's shield. His skill and natural ability provided the rest, allowing Captain America to roll as though from a fifteen foot drop rather than fifteen hundred. At the end of the roll, Captain America was crouched on one knee, the shield on only one arm and drawn back to be thrown.

On the way down, exceptional eyes had caught a glimpse of something. Brief as it had been, Captain America recognized the figure, and threw his mighty shield.

At a particular angle, the edge of the shield was as sharp as a sword, capable of cleaving metal with the right force behind it. Captain America's throw was more than powerful enough for the shield to decapitate a charging Brother Blood. Still higher the shield angled, until it struck the top of the door frame and bounced back into Captain America's outstretched hand. He caught it at a run, reaching Baron Blood just as his ashes disappeared into nothingness. He was running for the doorway, shield out front, in full expectation of additional obstacles.

Just inside the mansion's foyer, Captain America caught a glimpse of something large and heavy crashing down towards him. With nimble reflexes, Captain America leapt forward and dodged past the heavy arm. It crashed against the floor, claws leaving behind deep furrows. Rolling onto his feet, Captain America whipped around to see the mammoth Armadillo lumber towards him!

"You don't want to do this, Antonio," Captain America cautioned, using the often-times reluctant villain's real name. "Please, I don't want to hurt you!"

"Rrrraagghhrrr!" screamed Armadillo. Massive arms covered in a thick hide swept at Captain America. Large if dull claws raked at his shield, and Captain America knew that he was not facing a man. The Armadillo was now only an animal.

"Fine, if that's how you want to play it." Using his smaller and quicker frame to his advantage, Captain America easily avoided a second swipe. Turning his shield to the side, Captain America jabbed it at one of Armadillo's paws, trapping the shield between two claws. Almost without effort, Captain America shifted his weight, used the shield as a lever.

One of Armadillo's claws snapped off, while another very nearly did the same. The animal cried out, and came at Captain America as only a wounded animal could. Ducking down, Captain America rolled between Armadillo's legs. Coming up behind the creature, Captain America slammed his shield against Armadillo's backside and pushed forward. This, coupled with Armadillo's own charge, sent the massive shape crashing to the ground.

Captain America took the brief interlude to back away, shield positioned to cover as much of his body as possible. He'd caught a glimpse of Sharon Carter standing in the doorway, her pistol drawn.

"Shoot him in the eye!"

"What?"

"That's his most vulnerable spot!" Armadillo was getting up. The slow, lumbering thing was turning around. Alone, Captain America could overcome it, but the fight would be long. There just wasn't time. Sharon had to take the shot.

A sharp crack pierced the air. Hot metal entered Armadillo through his right eye, snapping the head back. Two paces forward moved the beast, and then it collapsed. Instead of the expected crash, Armadillo vanished before hitting the floor, as though it had never existed.

"What was that?" demanded Sharon.

Captain America didn't face her while speaking. They had to move fast, and he went for the stairs.

"Outside, I decapitated Baron Blood with my shield, and he also vanished. First, I had already decapitated Baron Blood with my shield years ago. Second, his body remained there and solid until I burned it. What I had killed outside wasn't Baron Blood, wasn't even real. I was betting the same was true about Armadillo. Though Antonio Rodriguez has made a number of mistakes in his lifetime, he has never been a murderous animal."

"Not real?" Agent 13 shot a perplexed look Captain America's way. "What, you mean those are hallucinations we're fighting?"

"No. That bullet you fired, it had lodged in Armadillo's skull and fell to the ground when he vanished. They're solid enough until killed or, I would imagine, otherwise disabled. My guess is that Red Skull managed to acquire another Cosmic Cube."

They had both gone down the stairs, made their way into the sub-level basement by the time Captain America had finished explaining. After the explanation, he asked the question.

"Tell me about the building."

Okay, more of a demand than a question. Sharon replied, in any case.

"Built about eight years ago, during the dot-com boom by an Internet billionaire. Like most everybody else, he went bust, and the place was sold to an oil mogul. There wasn't time to check all the records, but I think it's safe to assume that Red Skull is the real owner."

"Blueprints?"

"You know we can't rely on those. The plans submitted and the work actually done may be completely different. Fortunately I have satellite photos beaming directly into my watch. It's a damned good watch, even if it doesn't actually tell t-aagh!"

A scream cut off Sharon's remarks, the result of a knife that had flashed from the shadows to strike her in the upper left arm. Captain America turned around, his shield arm held back.

"Duck!"

Sharon Carter dropped to one knee just before the shield whooshed over her head. Behind her, a white cross with black eyes and mouth caught the blow of the shield. It veered up at the ceiling, bounced off that and towards the ground. Captain America caught it in mid-air, as he was leaping and in mid-turn.

No longer hidden in the shadows was Crossbones, his face concealed by the black and white mask. A shield to the forehead had only stunned his thick skull, but it was enough for Captain America to get the next strike in. He landed at full turnabout, chopping his free left hand with enough force to chip bark off a tree. Crossbones caught the attack on his neck, directly on the carotid artery.

An instant after Captain America landed on his feet, Crossbones fell hard to the ground. The force wasn't enough to rupture the artery. He would live, but for a time he wouldn't be getting up. An immediate threat seen to, Captain America turned back around and went to Sharon. She'd already removed the knife and applied a bandage to stop the bleeding.

"Only a flesh wound," she told him. "As I was saying, one of the satellites does sonar imaging. There's another basement under us, extending out to the edge of the property."

Captain America nodded. "To the beach. There'll be a launch bay for a submarine. We'll need to cut off that means of escape."

"I can make it straight there," Sharon insisted. "His attention will be focused on you."

"We'll need to access the sub-basement first."

This didn't prove difficult. One corner didn't measure right with Sharon's information, meaning there was a hidden elevator shaft behind the wall. Sharon blew the wall with a small explosive, and the two lovers jumped through the hole. It was a short drop, less than twenty feet to the bottom.

"Uh oh," gasped Sharon.

"What do you mean 'uh oh'," asked Captain America.

"Nothing." Sharon groped at the walls, quickly found the seam in the elevator doors. "Hurry, get your shield in there and force the door open."

Captain America obliged her, slowly wedging the shield into the seam. "We're at the bottom, meaning not on top of the elevator. That means the elevator is on top of us. So, with the press of a button, the Red Skull could lower the elevator and crush us."

"Could be worse," remarked Sharon. "If we'd landed on top of the elevator, then he could just send it up and crush us against the ceiling. At least this way we can hurry and get the doors open. So hurry." "No, that way we could have just cut the cables, forced our way into the elevator and then opened the doors."

"You want to cut the cables now? We can cut the cables now."

"Without the cables holding it, the elevator would drop on top of us."

"Sorry, Steve. I should have called the Red Skull and asked him to pretty please lower the elevator before we broke in, because that would have been more convenient for you."

No sooner had the words left Sharon's mouth, then the cables started moving and gears could be heard shifting from up above. Captain America refused to glance up.

"Please tell me the elevator isn't moving."

Sharon turned her gaze up. "Yup, the elevator is moving."

"I asked you to please not tell me that."

"You should have asked me with pretty please and sugar on top. But if you open the doors before we die I might forgive you."

"Might?"

"I like sugar."

"Okay, I'm getting it." The doors were opening a crack, sending in a faint light. "Hurry up and get your fingers in there."

"Me? You're the super-soldier."

"I'm going to hold the shield in front of your pretty face in case there's a shooter in the hall. As long as you ask me pretty please with sugar on top, of course."

"Stevie, pretty please, with sugar on top, would you hold the shield in front of my beautiful Bond-girl face so that a shooter in the hall won't mar it with a bullet?"

Again, Captain America obliged her, and Sharon began forcing the doors open wider.

"Stevie?"

"What, you prefer I call you Mr. Rogers? Sorry, but this isn't Thursday night role play." Sharon managed to get the doors open to just past her shoulders, at which point she stopped. "Okay, I'm drawing my gun and getting out."

"If you actually did that as you were saying it, I would be on my way out by now."

"And if you hadn't been talking," Sharon retorted as she drew her gun and stepped into the hallway, "I wouldn't have stayed there listening to you. That is the curse of being Captain America. People will always stop what their doing and listen to you, no matter how extreme the situation is."

"As of this moment I am now the strong and silent type."

In making a spectacular leap, Captain America got out of the elevator shaft just in time. The elevator landed with a soft thud. By the time its doors opened, Captain America and Sharon Carter were halfway down the door. Because they weren't looking back, they didn't notice the doors had opened. They didn't notice that three men were inside they elevator.

It wasn't until two men appeared at the end of the hall and they did a quick turnaround that Captain America and Sharon Carter realize that an additional three men were behind them. Three men were closing in from one end, and two more at the other end. Five men, all wearing red, white and blue, were bearing down on Captain America and Sharon Carter from opposite ends of the hallway.

"So what do you think," Sharon asked Captain America. "More constructs of the Cosmic Cube, or lackeys wearing your duds?"

"I actually hope it's the former," Captain America told her. "Rush the two at the end of the hall. With my help, you should be able to get past them."

"Sure, like I really need your help." Sharon ran away from Captain America; ran towards the two men dressed like Captain America. They even had the shields, though Sharon doubted those were as good as the real thing.

When Sharon was close enough to the two, Captain America threw his shield that way, low to the ground. Sharon leaped just before it got to her ankles then jumped again off the shield. This act nudged the shield against the floor, where it bounced up and struck the two Captain America look-alikes. The shield caught both men in the gut, doubling them over as Sharon Carter flipped over them.

As she flipped, Agent 13 of Shield drew two pistols. These were Walther P88, a fully ambidextrous gun that would be held in either hand. Both these guns Sharon Carter fired into the heads of the faux-Caps. They dropped dead to the ground the exact moment she landed on her feet. An instant later they vanished, and she was running out of sight.

So then, thought Captain America, fake. He didn't approve of what Sharon had just done, but at least now he knew. Against the other three, he wouldn't hold back.

The shield returned to Captain America's hand, and he turned around while bringing it to bear. Another discus bounced off of it, thrown by one of the three that had left the elevator. Captain America knew that they weren't just men dressed in the uniform. No, Red Skull would do better than that. At one time in each of their lives, the men behind those masks had *been* Captain America.

The two Sharon Carter had made it past were poorly trained, too reliant on their enhanced abilities. Captain America had been that it'd been those two, Johnny Walker and the other Steve Rogers. One was given enhanced strength by the Power Broker, while the other had taken an incomplete super-soldier formula that empowered the body but destroyed the mind. Both men had been erratic in their tenure as Captain America, easy to make mistakes.

Captain America knew that the other three wouldn't go down as easily. William Naslund and Jeffery Mace had served in costumes during WWII, were respectively known as Spirit of '76 and Patriot. Ironically, Johnny Walker had once called himself Super-Patriot before the

government chose to give him the shield. Naslund had been given the shield after Captain America was presumed dead, so that soldiers wouldn't lose morale. From what Captain America had heard, Naslund had done a good job up until he was killing defending John F. Kennedy during his first campaign for the Senate. Jeffrey Mace then took up the shield, put on the costume to stop the threat that had killed Naslund. After a few more years Mace retired, and died of natural causes only a few years ago. It was a luxury few men like Captain America were rarely afforded.

Certainly the third man hadn't been given that chance. An unnamed soldier, his name classified even from Captain America, he'd taken up the shield only because the original had tossed it aside. Captain America had lost faith in his country, and so had taken up the identity of Nomad. The name of Captain America was then in the government's hands to bestow, and just like so long ago they had given it to the best of their best. Sadly, that man hadn't been good enough against the Red Skull. It was his death that had compelled Steve Rogers to take up the shield again.

At that moment, Captain America was infuriated that Red Skull would create a caricature of a man he'd killed. Not brought back to life – these weren't the men who had died for their country. Captain America would destroy those false constructs; remove the insult to great men.

Shield held in front of him, Captain America rushed at the three men. There was no way of knowing who was who, or what specific fighting style belonged to what man. All Captain America knew was that all three were highly trained, more than capable fighters. That none of them had enhanced abilities was less of a disadvantage than one would think.

In such close-quarters fighting, the shield quickly became a liability, balanced out only by the equally awkward shields that the others had. His skill with it gave Captain America an edge though, so he strapped it to his arm and used it to bludgeon. One man had his face crashed against the wall. He vanished so suddenly that Captain America almost fell against that wall. His free hand Captain America used to grab at a shield one was holding horizontally, trying to drive it against his throat. Captain America pushed down, and the opposite edge of that shield snapped up against the man's jaw. He was staggered, not beaten, but Captain America took the breather to spin away from the wall and the other attacker. Getting caught between two opponents was not a good idea.

However, the second Captain America look-alike had anticipated this, and executed a perfect standing leap to flip over the true Captain America. As this faux Captain's shield was strapped to his back, both hands were free, and he used these to grab the real Captain's shield and yank at it. One of Captain America's fears was coming true, as his arm was now twisting painfully. A kick was driven into his unprotected ribs.

"You killed me," said the man holding Captain America's shield. The unnamed soldier, Captain America identified him as.

"I saved your life." That was Jeffrey Mace, who now had an arm locked around Captain America's throat and was driving a fist into his kidneys. Captain America was trapped, held down by two imposters and freely beaten. Worse, the Red Skull had them sounding off accusations, to drive the real Captain America off balance with a sense of guilt.

The accusations had an opposing effect.

"No!" Captain America lifted his right leg, locked the unnamed soldier's leg inside the crook of his knee. With his opponent momentarily off balance, Captain America drove his left arm out and up, delivering an upper-cut into the soldier's solar plexus with all his weight behind it. This managed to knock the air out of the soldier and caused him to release Captain America's shield.

With his shield arm free, Captain America drove it back, slamming his elbow into the face of Mace. As he let go and stumbled back, Captain America continued turning, and kicked his right leg into the man's kneecap. The joint reversed with a sharp splinter. Mace went down in pain.

Having dispatched the threat behind him, Captain America drove his shield arm forward to deal with the soldier. He had recovered and was rushing forward blindly. There was no chance for him to avoid the shield's edge smashing against his throat. No air could escape the soldier's crushed windpipe, and so he fell without a sound. Before he had even hit the ground, the soldier had vanished.

Captain America turned around, and saw that Jeffrey Mace had disappeared as well. The crippling effect of a disjointed knee must have served whatever requirements the Red Skull had with his Cosmic Cube.

For a brief moment, Captain America remained where he stood, caught his breath. Then he took off running, ready to face anything else the Red Skull had conjured up.

Methodically and silently, Sharon Carter had traversed the corridors of the Red Skull's bunker. So intent was she on reaching the submarine bay, she didn't even stop to consider the lack of obstacles encountered. Even if she had thought about it, Sharon would likely have guessed that the bunker contained few actual guards. That instead the Red Skull was simply using his Cosmic Cube to generate foot-soldiers, former foes of Captain America's for the specific purpose of harassing the hero.

Unquestioning and oblivious, Sharon Carter reached a large and fortified door, which she knew led into the submarine bay. Next to the door, building into the wall, there was an electronic keypad.

"Oh, that's clever," Sharon murmured as she approached the keypad. "The Red Skull is really going to remember an access code when he's running to escape Steve. On the Heli-Carrier we have card swipes." Quickly, Sharon managed to remove the cover, exposing the wires around the numbered keys. Reaching into one of her belt pouches, Sharon removed a small rectangular box with two wires leading out of it. At the end of each wire was a connector, which Sharon fixed to the wires of the keypad.

"Of course, I also have a piece of cardboard with magnetic tape on it, so the card swipe wouldn't have done any good either. A handprint or retinal scanner is out, because hey, your body was cloned from Captain America so he can access them too!"

A small screen on the face of the box flashed, showing a number of zeroes and four altering numbers. Rapidly, each number would become fixed as the computer learned each part of the access code. Soon all four numbers became fixed, and the door began to slide open.

"1, 2, 3, 4." Sharon rolled her eyes. "How original. The easiest codes are the first ones you forget when under stress. Hunh, and here I thought Red Skull was a ge- whoa!"

On the other side of the door wasn't the submarine bay that Sharon had been expecting. For one thing there was no water, and no vehicles of any kind. What Sharon saw instead were rows of computer consoles, as well as a massive screen above these. In the center of the room was a large table, covered with an array of papers. Off at the other end of the room, Sharon noticed an ascending staircase, most likely another means to reach the floors above. Standing at the bottom of these stairs, with Captain America's adopted daughter Maria at his side, was the Red Skull.

"By all means continue, Agent 13." That sickening red visage of Red Skull's had the curl of a smile on it. "You were about to call me a genius. A most accurate assessment, when you consider how effortlessly I lured you here." The Red Skull raised his hand, in which the Cosmic Cube glowed with otherworldly power. "Right about now, Rogers is facing the last and most devastating of my constructs. When he has narrowly triumphed, I shall be there, and at last our eternal combat will end!"

"Not if I don't shoot you in the head first!" Sharon Carter yelled. The gun was in her hand, the trigger was pulled. A bullet flew. The force-field which surrounded the Red Skull shimmered when the bullet struck. It bounced off, useless. Those disgusting red teeth parted, and the Red Skull laughed.

"Ah, a woman such as you would be a prize among the master race. Perhaps, after Rogers lies dead at my feet, I shall take you; fill you with my enemy's seed. Such a product would make a worthy heir to my new world."

"Over my dead body!" Sharon's words dripped with venom. The Red Skull just continued on.

"Oh, the miracles of science. All I need do is strap you down, extract what I require and place the results into a woman willing to carry my heir." The Red Skull then raised his other hand, which like the first was gloved. He liked to keep his body covered from the neck down, make everybody wonder if the rest of him was a red skeleton. In actuality it was all whole and strong, a perfect replica of Captain America's, but it that uncertainty the Red Skull desired. With his free hand, the Red Skull brushed Maria's hair. "Maybe this one. She is about the right age to bear."

"Stay away from her!" Sharon screamed. Much as she wanted to rush at the Red Skull, to wrest the Cosmic Cube from his hand and shove it down his throat, she dared not. In the time it would take her to reach him, the Red Skull would be able to snap Maria's head like a twig.

"But no," the Red Skull sighed. "She is unsuitable, merely another creation of the Cosmic Cube. In drawing Captain America here, she was already served most of her purpose."

"You lying son of a bitch!" This time Sharon did take a step forward.

In response, the Red Skull gestured at the table. "Educate yourself, cow. The information you require is all there. Birth certificate, medical history, all falsified. This child at my side is no more real than your concept of democracy."

Taking her eyes off Red Skull for the first time, Sharon quickly scanned over the documents. Every detail of Maria's life, up to her adoption by Steve, was laid out on that table.

"No." Sharon breathed. "This, it can't be." She turned back to face the Red Skull, her face livid. "You monster!"

"No, he was Frankenstein," said Maria sweetly. She stood alone on the staircase, the Red Skull nowhere in sight. "I'm the monster. Would you like you play with me, mommy?"

Then Maria drew a gun and fired.

Every maniacal villain seeking world domination has the big room. With Nazi villains, it's practically a given. You know the room. Auditorium sized; a string of catwalks about halfway up, with ladders and staircases to get on the catwalks. Hanging from the ceiling would be countless sandbags; maybe there would even be a curtain. Maniacal villains are very theatrical, but still they're smart enough to use the space. That much space, you have to store items there, hence the numerous large crates laid out in a vague pattern.

When Captain America walked into the room, he couldn't believe it. There'd had been no slant in the floor that he'd noticed, and the ceiling was so high that the room must go up into the first and second floors of the mansion itself.

"That Cosmic Cube again," said Captain America to himself. Because when you have an object of near limitless power, capable of warping time and space, it must be used to make a big room.

If there was any real purpose to the big room at all, it must have been to momentarily distract Captain America. And if so, then it had very nearly succeeded. Bullets struck the wall mere inches from Captain America's head. He brought the shield up just in time to deflect a bevy of rounds. Automatic rifle fire is capable of cutting a person in two. Somebody must have been actively trying to miss.

That somebody was up on the catwalk. When the firing ceased, Captain America risked a peek. His shooter was a younger man, light brown hair, dressed in a blue uniform and wearing a domino mask. Bucky was shooting at Captain America, and for the WWII veteran it was the line that Red Skull had finally crossed.

More automatic rifle fire. The shield was already in the air, but Captain America dived and found cover under a crate. The gunfire ceased, the rifle dropped as Bucky raised his hands and caught the shield. Captain America moved as soon as the shooting stopped, saw the rifle falling to the floor, its safety off. Too far away to catch, so Captain America turned to increase the distance.

Bullets spat out of the rifle as soon as it struck the ground, jolted into firing. Just in time Captain America dived behind a crate, hot metal singeing his uniform. Up on the catwalk, Bucky deflected stray bullets with the shield while running off. Captain America caught a glimpse of him disappearing through a doorway, into the mansion itself.

As soon as the gunfire abated, Captain America was on the move. Climbing up onto the crate, he ran and jumped for a ladder. Easily he caught a hold and climbed onto the catwalk within seconds. Like the devil he ran after Bucky, through the doorway and left in the hall outside. Cool air brushed against Captain America's face. He ran for the source, a pair of French windows thrown open. Out on the balcony stood Bucky. In his hands was Captain America's shield.

"The greatest invention of the century, made my accident," Bucky reflected. He glanced up at Captain America. "Just like you, it couldn't be duplicated. An indestructible metal used to make a shield, what a waste. Just like you."

Slowly, Captain America took a step forward. Bucky held the shield out over the railing, and dropped it.

"Without that you were nothing," he hissed. "I cleared the way, made sure there weren't anybody left but green soldiers that couldn't hit a target less obvious than that star. You sure knew it too, didn't you?"

Another step Captain America took towards the mockery of Bucky. He didn't say anything. Bucky grinned, though, entered into a fighting position. Yes, Bucky knew how to fight, of that Captain America was well aware.

"It should have been me, you damned skinny runt," the twisted creation of Red Skull spat out. "Born into the Army, taught to fight since before I could walk, it was me should have been the Super-Soldier. Instead the brass made me a mascot, cannon fodder for you made a mistake."

"There's nothing I need to say to you," said Captain America quietly. This thing he spoke to was not Bucky. "You're only another weapon of the Skull's."

Fighting began then. It was Bucky went first, jabbing out a fist to Captain America's face. The punch he threw in response could be seen a mile away, and Bucky dodged it with a laugh. He dodged it fancy too, jumping up and back so that his feet balanced on the railing. A leg kicked out, barely covering the distance but managing to catch Captain America on the side of his head. Bucky remained balanced, even hopped from one foot to the next, hoping to kick Captain America again. But the hero had backed up a step, out of reach.

Yes, Bucky was being fancy, showy. A lot of men Captain America knew fought like that. They could afford to be flashy, with their skills and training. In spite of what most people thought, Captain America wasn't the world's best fighter. Mostly he would just hop around, dodging, or use the shield. That had been the bulk of his training, aside from some boxing and judo. Throw a good punch, use his opponent's strengths against him, that was what Captain America knew, and only moderately well.

That was why Captain America didn't use fancy moves. All he was ever interested in was ending the fight as quickly as possible. If it meant a little extra effort to end the fight with little damage done, fine. Still, Captain America was a soldier, and when necessary he didn't go out of his way.

Bucky's flashy kick found only empty air. Captain America's hand found Bucky's ankle. The strength of a top Olympic athlete hefted the smaller man off of the railing with one arm. Without a word Captain America swung Bucky up against the wall like a rag doll.

It was loud, the sound of Bucky's neck breaking, of his head cracking open. No blood spattered. It just remained there on the wall, after Bucky bounced off. Captain America let go of the man then; watched as the mockery of his friend fell two stories. Bucky didn't vanish until after he'd hit the hard cement. The man on the balcony got to watch that.

"A rather cold display, Herr Rogers." The voice that spoke from behind Captain America dripped with hatred and was soaked in pure evil. At that moment Captain America thought something foul was filling his nostrils, trying to choke him in sewage. "I would have expected mercy from you."

Carefully, Captain America turned around. The Red Skull stood in the doorway to the balcony, unadulterated evil clad in a three-piece Italian suit. Only that red skull-like head lay bare, the mark of Johann Schmidt's own toxin. In one gloved hand, the Red Skull held a glimmering Cosmic Cube.

"All that power," Captain America said in a voice almost too soft to be heard, "and you're trying to goad me with dead men."

Without any real lips to speak of, it was hard to tell if Red Skull was smiling. Those sickening red teeth jut out a bit, and there was some curve at the ends of his jaw. "You should consider that a gift, Herr Captain. I allowed you to enjoy those physical gifts of yours one last time!"

That Cosmic Cube shimmered with power. Captain America felt its effects wash over him; knew what the Red Skull was using it for. Impossibly, mass shrank away from Captain America's form, and his bulk visibly decreased as a result. Soon, that uniform he wore hung off Captain America as though he were a child trying on his father's suit. Just like that, the Super-Soldier Serum had been expunged from Captain America's body.

The Red Skull, on the other hand, still wore that strong and powerful body cloned from Captain America's cells. Confident in his power, in his victory, Red Skull strode forward and took Captain America by the throat. Like a child, Red Skull lifted his enemy off of his feet. Sadistic pleasure radiated from that tainted body. Steve Rogers felt like retching.

Hot breaths stinking of foul evil poured into Captain America's face as the Red Skull spoke. "Beg, and I may simply leave you like that. One word, and you would be allowed to live the rest of your life in this weakling shell. Your strength is gone, Rogers, and with it your spine. Defiance will earn you only death, coward, so beg for your life!"

Steve Rogers did not beg, however. Nor did he simply stare at Red Skull in defiance. No, what Captain America did, now that Red Skull had brought it close enough, was place his own hand over the Cosmic Cube.

This time the energy shimmered over both men. It was the power of the Cosmic Cube to alter reality according to the wishes of its wielder. At that moment, two men wielded the Cosmic Cube, and so their wills clashed for control. Red Skull with his indomitable hatred for

all life he considered inferior. Captain America with his desire to make the world safe for those who wish to live free.

A loud noise filled the ears of both men, a long high-pitched whistle, that could almost be interpreted as a living thing being torn apart. In actuality it was the Cosmic Cube being torn asunder, ripped into unequal halves by the overwhelming desires to two sworn enemies.

When the light subsided, Red Skull no longer had Captain America by the throat. Both men stood several feet apart, facing each other. Red Skull without a Cosmic Cube in his possession. Captain America in a body once again at its peak because of the Super-Soldier Serum.

Maria had certainly moved as though she weren't real. Dives, somersaults, flips that shouldn't have been possible for an untrained girl her age. And all the while she was firing at Sharon Carter.

She didn't have any choice. The bandage in her arm was seeping. A bullet had grazed Sharon's head, not deep, but blood was getting in her eye. She had to end it.

Something was going on. Maria paused suddenly, looking as though she was about to vomit, as though a wave of sudden nausea had come over her. Sharon saw her chance, took the shot.

A wad of hot metal jabbed into the middle of the girl's chest. Blood blossomed from her bosom. Surprise and pain etched over her face. There was no great fling across the room, propelled by the bullet. No grand death. Maria just fell to the ground, lying sprawled there with blood pumping high out of her chest. Cautiously, gun in both hands, Sharon approached.

"Ahuh ahuh ahuh ahuh." The breaths came shallow and fast out of Maria's throat, and with each breath another gout of blood shot out of her body. Fear, confusion, disappoint and betrayal all showed on her face as Maria looked up at Sharon.

It wasn't the look of a killer, of an unreal thing created by evil. Sharon was looking down at a young girl, the same young girl she and Steve had been raising for the past few months. At that moment Sharon knew what it had meant when Maria stopped moving about.

"Oh my god," Sharon whispered. A glance at the table, at the papers on it. Fraudulent, yes, but only so the Red Skull could say that they were fraudulent. Once, he'd used the Cosmic Cube to warp Sam Wilson's mind. He'd just done the same thing again.

The only thing left for Sharon Carter to do was hold a little girl's hand as she died.

The first man to react was Captain America, with a bone-jarring punch to the center of Red Skull's face. Again the patriotic hero struck, throwing a hook that nearly took Red Skull's head off. Blood went flying, as did a red tooth.

"Where is my daughter?" asked Captain America as he drove his fist up into Red Skull's gut, doubling the Nazi villain over. His other arm was raised over his head like a club, and Captain America sent the hammer down against the back of Red Skull's neck. "Tell me!"

For perhaps the first time that night, there was heat in Captain America's voice. Even then, however, as he rained blows on the Red Skull, Captain America managed to keep his emotion in check. Killing the Red Skull would tell him nothing.

"Where is she!" Screamed Captain America. His hand was pressed against the back of the Red Skull's head, which in turn was pressed against the cracked wall. Blood dripped down from that broken red face, dripped down to stain those expensive shoes.

Once, twice, three times Captain America drove his elbow into the Red Skull's kidneys. Maybe there would have been a fourth time, had not a sharp pain just then jabbed into Captain America's back. A knife and struck. A long one, it had gone in deep. Captain America released the Red Skull, who crumbled to the floor in a heap. Staggering, Captain America rested a hand on the railing, looked down at the courtyard. That had been from where the knife came, by the angle in which it entered.

Crossbones stood there, the white in his mask shining like a beacon in the dark night. In his hand was a knife, long, the same kind that he'd just thrown into Captain America's back. He seemed to be waiting. Reaching over to finger the knife in his back, Captain America knew for what.

Only briefly did he glance at the Red Skull, at that broken, battered figure. Would he be able to escape? Could he even talk now, after what Captain America had done to him? He knew what Crossbones was playing for, attempting to give his employer a chance to get away. Should Captain America play into it?

Trust Sharon, Captain America decided.

His teeth grit, Captain America yanked the knife out of his back. Blood flowed, but it was okay. Soon the business at hand would be dealt with, and he'd get the wound tended. Leaping over the railing, Captain America landed in a crouch. The knife was in his hand when he ran at Crossbones.

Both men had a knife in their right hand. They ran at each other, collided, each gripping the other's right wrist with his left hand, holding the knife at bay. These two men stared into one another's eyes, saw that neither would give any quarter. Captain America was the stronger, the faster, but he'd been fighting non-stop for over an hour now, and Crossbones had had time to recover from the earlier encounter.

Below their feet, a beep could be heard. "Time's up," Crossbones growled. Too late, Captain America realized he was being held in place for a reason.

The explosion occurred barely a foot from the two of them. There wasn't much debris, but the sheer force of the blast lifted Captain America and Crossbones into the air. Somehow both managed to hold onto his knife, but in hitting the beach they separated.

Captain America rolled along the sand. His back, covered in salt water soaked sand, throbbled and burned. Still, he got up, staggered towards Crossbones. The other man also

got to his feet, went for Captain America, slashing. The knife Captain America avoided, then used the opening to swipe his own knife along Crossbones' arm. A long trail of blood seeped out.

If this affected Crossbones in the least, he didn't show it. His backhand nearly broke Captain America's jaw. But this in turn barely registered on the bruised and weary soldier. Again he swiped with the knife, stabbing at a bad angle into Crossbones ribs. It struck bone, broke at the handle.

With metal sticking out of his torso, Crossbones punched down with his knife hand at Captain America's head. The blade cut down at the mask, only barely breaking the skin but the remnants of the mask fell away. Then Crossbones brought his fist back up, jabbing the handle under Captain America's eye. The bone there broke, a splinter through the skin. Blood exploded out of Captain America's face, and he went down into the sand.

Not far down the beach, a celebrity gala was being held at the neighboring estate. Press and cameras were there, and the explosion drew attention. A crowd was moving down the beach. Photographers and cameramen were able to capture the battling shapes, even make out some of what happened.

Crossbones was on top of Captain America, one hand at his throat and the other hand holding a knife, poised to stab down. Captain America had both his hands at that wrist, struggling to keep the knife away. His back and face were large masses of pain, a fog was settling over his vision and Captain America could feel his strength fading. There was no way he could hold Crossbones back forever.

So Captain America lifted his leg up, driving the knee up hard into Crossbones' groin. Behind the full facemask this thug groaned. His grip on Captain America's throat weakened, and the knife fell harmlessly into the sand. Just as Captain America lifted his head up, to try and take advantage, Crossbones snapped his head down. The skulls cracked together, with Captain America taking the brunt. He fell back against the sand, gurgled blood as his back lit afire. Crossbones closed both meaty hands around his enemy's throat.

Pressure was brought down on Captain America's windpipe and on his carotid artery. Strength was fading, and the last of it Captain America used to bring his hands up to grab Crossbones by the head. Only one thing could save Captain America.

"Just lay down and die," hissed Crossbones. He closed his hands tighter. "That bitch Diamondback is in hell waiting for you. Oh yeah, I enjoyed doing her real nice."

Those words did something to Captain America. His eyes widened, something new and dark behind them. Rage fueled him more than desperation, and he used it to move his hands. One hand at the back of Crossbones' head, the other at his chin. A devil's strength was behind the push and the pull.

KRACK!

Hands at his throat went limp and lifeless. With no more strength left in his arms, Captain America couldn't hold the weight up. Crossbones fell onto him, dead. With some effort, Captain America rolled the body off, and slowly got to his feet.

Lights alerted Captain America to the cameras and reporters. There were witnesses to his act, people who would ask questions and perhaps twist what he had done. Composing himself, Captain America started towards the crowd. The first camera he saw he went for and, before the cameraman could do anything, Captain America took hold of the video camera and stared into the lens.

"My name is Steve Rogers." The mask was gone, his bloody visage was bared and ready to be captured in film. "Most of you know me as Captain America. Some of you may even want to take advantage of this new information."

Captain America shifted the camera to take in the body of Crossbones. After half a minute, he stared back into the camera. Blood from his face smeared onto the lens, bathing his face in red. "He tried to take advantage. If you won't follow my rules, then I will follow yours."

Behind Captain America, the Red Skull's mansion erupted in great gouts of flame.

Within half an hour, all the proper authorities had arrived. Not the local police or Sheriff, but virtually every Federal agency was on the scene, keeping the press back and documenting everything. An Army medical officer was tending Captain America's wounds, sewing the deep cut on his back as well as repairing the damage to his face.

"Burn those bandages as soon as you can," Captain America told the officer. "My DNA can't be out loose."

"I received a briefing, sir."

"Did anybody survive the explosion?"

"I can answer that sir." A tall man wearing a very expensive suit and sunglasses approached Captain America. He didn't bother to wonder about which agency this man was from. "One managed to get out in time. A woman. I can take you to her as soon as you're done here."

"I'm done now." Captain America rose to his feet, brushing the medical officer aside. "You've done enough, officer. The wounds will mend fine." Then he addressed the agency man. "Take me to her."

All through the short walk, Captain America was torn about whom he hoped to see. If it was Maria that had gotten out, then likely Sharon had died making sure of it.

Firetrucks formed a perimeter around the mansion. Seated near one of them was Sharon Carter. Briefly, Captain America told himself that it didn't mean anything, that Red Skull had likely escaped, and could have taken Maria with him. One look at Sharon's face, however, told Captain America that it was a false hope.

"I'm sorry, Steve," Sharon began. "She, she was never real. I saw rough drafts, the whole process Red Skull used to forge her documents. At first I didn't believe it, even when she attacked me. I-I held her off as best I could without hurting her. Then she, she just disappeared. I hadn't done anything, but she was gone, and I knew. Steve, I'm sorry."

The first words had struck Captain America like a physical blow. He staggered, not from his injuries, and had to be held up by two men. As Sharon continued talking though, it occurred to Captain America that she wasn't looking him in the eye. For some reason, she wasn't being entirely truthful with him.

What was Agent 13 leaving out, Captain America wondered. Could it only be that she fought Maria the way that she would fight any enemy? Or was there something more? Could Sharon have...?

"Don't say anything else," Captain America warned. Tears were starting to flow out of his eyes, stinging the wound on his cheek. "Please Sharon, don't you dare say another word."

Shaking off the two men who held him, Captain America turned away from Sharon Carter. Without another word, Steve Rogers walked away.

THE END
