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An entire planet, home to a nexus of productivity. A place where dreams can become a reality. Where empires are created and destroyed in the blink of an eye. Compared to the universe, its lifespan is infinitesimal. A mere speck among the cosmic dust of all that is.

And yet...so much more.

To those that inhabit it, Earth is the focal point of that which is righteous and pure. Ideologies sometimes clash but common agreements do exist. Even the worst of enemies have joined forces in times of need. Many species that have explored the known galaxies have agreed that Earth, while primitive, does indeed possess the potential to rival even that of the most advanced societies. All that is needed is time.

That time shall never come to pass. For a brief moment all that exists on Earth is engulfed in a great whiteness. There is no sound, no remarkable and deafening roar. There is no last second hesitation before the trigger is pulled. There was no impending savior coming to grant relief. There is only whiteness.

Then there is nothing.

Every minute fragment of intelligence, history, culture, and life was gone. Not a single scrap of matter was left in the void of space. One moment the Earth shown in all it's possible glory and the next moment it was gone. There was no one left to ponder the destructive event.

All of humanity was gone, save for one man, floating at the exact center of where the Earth used to sit, somehow immune to the vacuum of space.

Marvel 2000 proudly presents...



Issue #1

“The Beginning of the End”

Written by D. Golightly

“You shall not conquer these people today!” the Silver Surfer screamed.

Norrin Radd had been a man of peace. There was rarely any malice in his voice or anger in his sentiments. Among the people of his home world, Zenn-La, he had been happy and calm. He existed like so many others in this universe: relaxed and content. His wife was

beautiful, he was respected among his colleagues, and he had no worries concerning anything in life.

Then came Galactus, the great world-devourer. Within the blink of an eye, Zenn-La could have been decimated by Galactus' search for sustenance. It was at the pleading of Norrin Radd that Galactus finally gave in and left the peaceful planet. Norrin sacrificed himself to Galactus so that his planet may live, offering his services as a herald and harbinger known as the Silver Surfer.

"You are a fool to try and defy me!" replied the powerful once-ruler of the Balurrians.

The two titans of space clashed together, their energies mixing in the great void surrounding them. Just passed the farthest edge of the Milky Way, the man once known as Norrin Radd utilized his power cosmic to its fullest potential against the mad being called Blastaar. The two wrestled atop the Surfer's glistening board, neither willing to give ground.

"This pitiful race has yet to even begin," Blastaar continued. "They are but mere specks in the grand scheme of the universe. They need a firm hand to guide them, my hand to shape them!"

"In all my journeys across the cosmos I have very rarely met beings like you whose intentions were noble!" the Surfer countered. "A tyrant is forever a tyrant! I do not know how you escaped the confines of the Negative Zone but I shall end your blight upon this universe once and for all."

"Who are you to judge me?" Blastaar, as strong and impervious as he was, finally buckled slightly under the enormous pressure the Silver Surfer's power cosmic was forcing on him. The unique energy flowed out from the Surfer's palms and engulfed the conqueror, bathing him in purple waves of light. "You would be my executioner as well?"

The Silver Surfer paused. He was not a cold-blooded killer like the creature he was fighting now. In truth, his original purpose for becoming what he is today was to save lives. However, he found it difficult to ignore the past deeds of Blastaar and the millions of innocents he had murdered in his quest for power. It was a simple fact that while Blastaar lived, people died.

"A tactic – uh – I have found to be useful is keeping your mind on the battle at hand!" With a shift of his weight and impressive strength, Blastaar stood up from his imposed kneel and released his built up energy. Power crackled across the Surfer's angelic skin, forcing him to take a step back on the board as it continued to sail through deep space. "I have defeated entire armies! Even the Fantastic Four have licked my boots. The rumors I had heard of your strength were greatly exaggerated!"

The Surfer felt the weight of an entire star pelt him as Blastaar leaned into his assault, refusing to break the grasp they shared. Hand in hand, the two stellar titans wavered back and forth, each combatant trying to gain the upper hand.

“Galactus himself gave me a portion of his power,” the Silver Surfer responded. “While it is miniscule compared to his own, I still command the power cosmic! Mine is the will to reshape the very elements of matter. The physical laws of this universe cannot contain me! You, creature most foul, will be taught this lesson today!”

The rage of the Surfer increased exponentially as thoughts of Blastaar’s past deeds clouded his mind. His lust for control over those weaker than him would never be sated. He threatened to not only kill Norrin Radd, but once the task was finished he would turn his rage on the infant race below. The Surfer was on his way to his once adopted home, Earth, when he had arrived close to the newborn sentient people on a budding planet. He witnessed Blastaar destroy entire chunks of land in order to create fear and panic, a conqueror’s greatest tools. Swiftly picking the mad being out of the atmosphere, the Silver Surfer struggled with Blastaar on his own board. The battle had been joined and so far neither had gained the upper hand.

“I’ll kill you and then I shall eat the dead of that pitiful planet under us,” Blastaar taunted.

“No!” the Surfer commanded. “You. Shall. Fall!”

Calling all of the energy that was his to summon, the Surfer redoubled his assault on Blastaar, the power cosmic washing over his body like how blackness blanketed the deepness of space. Wave after wave of purple energy seeped into Blastaar, pummeling his flesh and internal organs. Blastaar screamed first in defiance and then in terror. Then, just as quickly as it had begun, it was over.

Blastaar dropped to the base of the board, slipping out of the Silver Surfer’s grasp, dead.

The Silver Surfer had often times been called a bringer of life. He had been one of Earth’s protectors, despite being trapped there against his will. He pitied the now deceased Blastaar but he also pitied himself. Death, in all its forms, was still a haunting sight to see. Even though he was justified in the execution, the Surfer would never see it as being so.

Blastaar’s motionless body gently fell off of the cosmic board, floating into empty space. Norrin Radd was admittedly unsure of what to do next. The newborn race resting under him, now safe, would not be a place he wished to visit. He had met countless civilizations that revered him as some sort of messiah and he knew these people would be the same. He felt that he should not be praised for taking a life, no matter how necessary it had been.

Raising his hand and again calling forth the power cosmic, the Silver Surfer incinerated the body of the once great destroyer called Blastaar. Spreading his atoms across the great void was as close to a burial as he felt that monster deserved.

Turning away from the scene, the Surfer hung his head in shame as he returned to his original course. Perhaps his old place of exile would be able to still his soul. Steadying himself on the board that was part of his namesake, the Silver Surfer rocketed back into deep space and passed the boundaries of the Milky Way galaxy.

One moment she was racing through the timestream, safely on her way to her destination. Then without warning fields of strange energy rippled across the delicate fabric of the stream, rocking her trajectory. Initially panic swept over her as she thought her life was now in danger. There must have been something at the other end of her time tunnel powerful enough to cause this kind of distortion. A person or an event was wreaking havoc on her journey and it may cost her life. Was history changing? She could try to abandon her mission before she reached into the past but that wouldn't solve whatever problem was causing this chaos. No, she was needed, possibly even more than before.

Next, panic turned to fear as she realized that her historical records might be incorrect. Perhaps she hadn't chosen her date carefully enough. Maybe she was arriving after the event she was trying to halt. Her long golden hair whipped behind her as she decided to charge through the chaotic energy and complete her journey. She could see the end of the tunnel where the timestream abruptly ended. One way or the other, she would have her questions answered.

The very fabric of reality tore open and birthed her back into the universe, spilling her into to empty space. If she had been in an atmosphere she would have pulled in a large breath of astonishment. She had expected to arrive on Earth. Instead she was greeted with absolutely nothing.

"This can't be right," she spoke into the vacuum of space, her aura protecting her. "Whatever caused that disruption must have either knocked me off course or put me in the wrong timeline."

Her thoughts tried to wrap around her predicament. What could be so powerful as to interrupt the flow of time? Judging from the position of the stars, she sadly realized that the time of her arrival was exactly what she had intended. She had arrived at the planet Earth but the entire globe had disappeared somehow.

Something glistened in the starlight in front of her. Something small and far away. Her own colorful and glossy uniform reflected the light in a similar fashion, causing her to think that maybe there was another here. It might even be the one responsible for the Earth's disappearance. She needed answers badly to calm her fears at the very least. The sinking feeling that she had arrived too late was becoming stronger with every passing moment.

Launching herself toward the target, Starhawk, member of the Guardians of the Galaxy, prepared herself for whatever she might find.

Her ability to create solid light constructs was her only defense although she had complete faith that it would prove more than enough. In her short career as a Guardian she had already proved herself on the battlefield, her allies putting their lives in her hands. As she sped through the empty space that used to house the planet Earth, however, she couldn't help but feel that everything was slightly over her head.

"Don't move!" Starhawk exclaimed as she came close enough to make out the object she was flying toward. It was a person, floating silently by himself. He did not move or show any sign of life, despite a blue radiance covering his body. He was covered in a close fitting body suit, most of which was white. From the shoulders up, the suit was a deep shade of blue, mixed with white dots that had the appearance of a starfield. She readied her powers as her hands began to glow softly, just in case this man proved to be a foe rather than friend.

Slowing her approach, she called out a greeting to him, ignoring the fact that in the vacuum of space sound could not travel. She pondered whether or not to extend her aura around him when she noticed that his chest was indeed moving, ever so minutely. Was he actually breathing? Perhaps his blue aura acted much like her own golden one and he had been able to hear him.

"Are you all right?" she asked, placing her hand on his shoulder. "Can you tell me what – ACK!"

The man's eyes flared open and his right hand grabbed Starhawk's wrist while his left reached for her throat. Even though he wasn't crushing her neck, Starhawk could tell his strength was incredible as her efforts to twist away proved futile.

"BEWARE!" he screamed, the sound augmented by his blue aura. "WHAT'S HAPPENING? WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?"

Starhawk struggled in his grasp, despite the fact he wasn't trying to kill her outright. "Let...GO!" Angling her free arm, Starhawk quickly built up and then released a stockpile of light-based energy aimed directly at the man's head. Most of it seemed to wash over him, not causing the slightest bit of damage. Her goal, however, wasn't to hurt him, but to blind him. The intense light assaulted his eyes, momentarily disorienting him.

"Back off!" Starhawk screamed as she kicked the man's midsection and pulled away from the reach of his arms. "I'm not looking for a fight here. I just have some questions to ask you, so calm down!"

"I-I'm sorry..." the man said, seemingly coming to his senses. "I just...I don't know what's going on. I can't..."

“Who are you?” she demanded. Her throat was fine but she felt the need to rub the skin. The man’s speed and strength had been incredible.

The man’s eyes, already a vast whiteness that seemed to go on forever, somehow glazed over. “I...can’t remember.”

Starhawk looked over the stranger, seeing something familiar about his appearance but not being quite able to place it. His uniform, with the dark blue hues, was definitely something she remembered seeing in historical records. She had no clue as to the man’s identity but she felt he wasn’t a real threat. For lack of anything better, however, this man was the key to this mystery.

“All I remember is some kind of shapely void,” the man spoke again. “A brilliant spectacle that engulfed everything all at once. And then...there was nothing.” He hung his head slightly, as if trying to concentrate on the visual memory in his mind’s eye.

Starhawk floated closer to him, slowly. The way he described this last memory sounded remarkably like that which she had traveled so far to stop. She felt a tiny tinge of guilt at having failed at her mission before it had even really begun. Perhaps there was still hope within this man; perhaps it wasn’t too late...

“Identify yourselves and answer for your affiliations!” a third voice roared from behind them. Starhawk whipped around in surprise to see the legendary Silver Surfer gliding toward them at an insane speed. “I detect the stench of Galactus on you! What have you done with the Earth!”

Starhawk erected a shield of light around herself and the confused man. She knew it wouldn’t do much against the power cosmic but maybe they could reason with the Surfer before his rage killed them both.

“We’re just as much in the dark as you are, Silver Surfer!” she responded, worry in her voice. “Chill out!”

The former Norrin Radd seemingly ignored her request, continuing his break-neck approach. His fists were barely containing the awesome energies at his disposal, the powerful rays fizzling out from between his fingers. Suddenly, the man beside her pushed through Starhawk’s shield, his own blue aura bulging with pent up energy. The man rushed the Surfer and they collided head on in a gigantic display of mixing energies. A wave of light pulsated out from them like rippling water, rocking Starhawk back and further away from the pair.

The energy explosion dispersed and she could make out the hammering fists of the stranger pummeling the Surfer. His fists cracked against the gleaming face of the Surfer, each hit powerful enough to shatter a continent. Blue light splashed over both of their

bodies as the man's assault finally halted when the Surfer blasted him in the face with pure cosmic energy.

"I recognize your uniform," the Surfer accused. He lowered his arms back to his sides and let the glow of power fade away. It was his way of laying down his offense and ceasing the fight. "You are one of Earth's more enigmatic champions, Captain Universe. There is no need for us to continue this. Tell me what has happened!"

"Captain...Universe?" the man queried. A blank and confused expression that had graced his face beneath his full mask up to this point was now swept away with one of familiarity. "Yes. I *am* the bearer of the Uni Power. I am...I...but there's more and I can't recall..."

"Relax," Starhawk said soothingly. "It will come back to you. Maybe the Surfer here can help you somehow. He's seen quite a lot from what I understand."

"You seem to know me but I have never met you before," the Surfer cut in, turning his attention to the blonde-haired woman. "Who are you and do you know what has happened here?"

"My name is Aleta Ogord. I'm a member of the Guardians of the Galaxy, although they won't exist for centuries. Call me Starhawk. And no, I'm sorry, I just got here myself. I came out of the timestream and stumbled onto Captain...what was it?"

"Universe," the Surfer answered. "His power is virtually unlimited although his memory seems to have been shaken. Galactus is no doubt at the core of our problem. If I remember correctly, however, the Uni Power was not meant to be contained within one vessel."

"How do you mean?" Starhawk asked.

"He means I'm not supposed to exist like this," Captain Universe answered, floating closer. "The Uni Power would grant itself to a user when a crisis arose, leaving them when things were set right. It was not a long term effect. Even with the disappearance of the Earth there is no immediate crisis currently. The Uni Power should have left me by now...whoever I am."

Starhawk looked over the man she had just met. It was sad but she did not pity him. He seemed to easily accept his situation for some reason, like he had complete faith that it would work out somehow. As she thought before, perhaps her mission wouldn't be a complete failure.

"You mentioned Galactus, Surfer?" Starhawk asked of the former herald. "Why did you think we were with him?"

The Silver Surfer, if it was actually possible in space, sighed before answering. “Galactus was my master, imbuing me with the power cosmic which I wield to this day. As much as it disgusts me, it links me to him. I can feel where he is and where he was. I am sure that was here recently and was more than likely the cause of the Earth’s disappearance.”

“How do we know the Earth wasn’t moved? It’s been done before,” Starhawk offered. Hovering in between two of the most powerful people she had ever met, Starhawk couldn’t help but feel slightly dwarfed in their presence.

“It’s possible,” the Captain said. “I can see various spectrums with my unique vision abilities. The Uni Power allows me to actually see molecular structures among other things. This place, where the Earth once stood firmly, is completely devoid of all matter except for us. If Galactus did feast on the world surely he would have left some trace behind.”

“Galactus isn’t prone to physically consuming a planet, either,” the Surfer offered. “He feeds on the energies and resources of the planet and then leaves it for dead. There would be an empty husk here if the world-devourer had done what he is known for.”

“Then why was he here?” Starhawk asked.

“Galactus does what he pleases!” a foreign voice roared from behind them. The trio whirled around to face the new visitor head-on, but they were bowled over as the owner of the voice charged through them. Starhawk quickly created light constructs to help the Captain and the Surfer regain their composure as she tried to catch a glimpse of whatever intense force had just plowed between them.

“By the stars!” Silver Surfer exclaimed as he gritted his teeth and prepared to strike back. “Captain! Starhawk! Leave now! I’ll provide you with cover! Get ba—GAH!”

A bolt of condensed, yellow energy that housed the fury of an entire planet slammed against the Surfer’s chest. The former herald was sent head over heels through space, separated from his board and only source of locomotion.

“Your warnings are futile and hollow at best, dissenter!” roared the new arrival. His skin was pink and covered in scars and boils. Madness was the only thing that could be seen in his eyes. His thin, wavy white hair trailed behind his crusty scalp as he hefted a large battle-ax over his head. His enormous stature would have intimidated even the most courageous of men. “I’ve killed millions all across the damned universe. Scrubs like you don’t stand a chance against Morg the Executioner!”

TO BE CONTINUED

“Find your center!” a tall and lithe woman commanded. “We must make haste, lest our foe become lost to us.”

A large brute floating a few meters behind her grunted in response, his aura keeping him safe from the exhausting depths of space. A large metallic hammer was gripped in his hand, humming softly as it poured energy into his very being. His features were grotesque by human standards, but for the woman he was merely another life form that had crossed her path.

“Our trail has led us across the galaxy,” the woman said. “From Titan to Earth, we will find the one who has so recklessly toyed with the cosmos.”

“I’m well aware of our duty,” the brute replied. “No need to preach to the choir, female.”

“Your time on Earth was apparently spent watching television.”

“Weren’t you born there? What was your time filled with?”

“Resistance.”

The brute allowed the uncomfortable conversation to lapse, choosing to focus on their flight path through the dark folds of space. His hammer, empowered by Odin himself, guided them through the void like a beacon of hope. As long as he stood, he would grip the weapon tightly and allow no other to possess its power.

With a mental command the eternal power of his warhammer lashed out ahead of them and opened a cosmic vortex. Its energies spun in dizzying circles, but they ignored whatever vertigo tried to overtake them as they passed through its aperture.

The pair, an unlikely set of allies, were both eager to find out the fate of the planet Earth.

Marvel 2000 proudly presents...



Issue #2

“Swift Revelation”

Written by D. Golightly

Beyond the ever-growing reaches of infinite space sat a creature so lumbering that its own body was larger than any moon. With one great eye it gazed between the stars, keeping a careful watch for any expected intruders within his territory. He was older than even some of the Elders of the Universe, or so he told them. Many thought his own arrogance would eventually be his undoing, but his concern did not rest with the Elders. Given his recent actions, he was more concerned with a minute battle raging light years away.

“And what progress have the Terrans made in seeking their beloved justice?” the deep and resonating voice of the planet-sized being queried.

Twin champions sheathed in golden light floated with blank expressions on their faces. “None, my lord,” the first of them replied, his blonde hair grown to shoulder length. The cape hanging from his shoulders flapped silently from the energy rippling forth from the trinkets around his wrists.

“They suspect Galactus,” the second added. Deep colors mixed together in his costume, its design a homage to his predecessor.

“Yes, his scent did taint the area,” the monstrous creature commented. “The use of the nullifier brought his despicable self out of hiding. The only weapon that the World Devourer feared peaked his interest, it seems. He couldn’t help but be present for the event, even if it was after the fact. That alone should confuse those stragglers, especially with the Surfer among them. His passion for Galactus’ end is unfounded and will surely distract them from me.”

“Yes, my lord,” both of the champions and former heroes said in unison.

Entire mountain ranges that comprised the lower portion of the creature’s face twisted and broke apart. His “skin” was comprised of various minerals and components of ethereal space, covering his planet-sized body in its entirety. Many had crossed his path over the eons, but few had come to know him for what he was.

“The Celestials will see their end before long. The wishes of Ego, the Living Planet, will be fulfilled and there is nothing those miniscule remnants can do!”

“Morg the Executioner will never bow to an inferior being!”

The stalwart titan reiterated his statement by slicing the very space in front of him open. The edge of his ax was sharper than any weapon the clumsily collected heroes had faced before, its tips dripping with the power cosmic. Together they waited for their attacker to move: the homeless Silver Surfer, the time-tossed Starhawk, and the befuddled Captain Universe. Each of them was ready to counter whatever force swept their way, but at the moment they were merely in a stand-off.

“Where is your master?” the Surfer demanded. Starlight reflected evenly off of his metallic hide, accentuating the brilliant form that so many races had confused for a messiah.

“Galactus does as he pleases,” Morg replied, “but I am indeed searching for him. You damnable excuse for a herald...what have you done with the master?”

“What are you talking about?” Aleta asked. The confusion was evident in her voice, although the rage pent up behind Morg’s eyes easily allowed him to ignore her.

“I followed Galactus’ signature to this spot, where a planet once bloomed. The planet you love so disgustingly, Surfer. Now I see that the planet is gone as well as Galactus, only to be replaced by a traitor and his underlings!” Power cosmic again flashed around Morg’s deadly axe, a visual queue for the pending battle to regain its momentum.

“Stand down!” Captain Universe ordered. His blue and white uniform shimmered with power, somehow righteous and pure.

Morg paused at the mystery man’s words, looking him over. Up until then he had only stared at the Silver Surfer, as if the other two heroes didn’t even exist. The feeling of surging power now wafting off of the Captain, Morg the Executioner’s attention had been caught.

“There is a strength in your voice, Terran,” Morg commented. “I can tell you are accustomed to leading the charge. Still, I’ll have answers from the Surfer or I’ll cut his board in half with my cosmic axe. It would be wise to heed my warning and stand down yourself...take that little blonde thing with you and leave us.”

Starhawk created several light constructs in the shape of orbs, placing them all around Morg. “Watch it, ugly,” she said. “I’m not above detonating these around you. I can contain the blast and keep us safe. Now, you had better start explaining yourself better, and definitely lose the attitude.”

“Worthless female!” Morg shouted.

The Executioner flashed his battleaxe once more just before tossing himself forward at Starhawk. His putrid pink skin, bubbled and scarred from countless battles, contrasted greatly against Aleta’s nearly flawless complexion. His speed was amazing, powered by the very energy that Galactus himself had graced him with. Starhawk, no stranger to the prose of battle, pushed away from his advance and exploded her spheres of collected light-based energy. The concussive force pummeled him back and forth like a pinball, disorienting the mad herald and halting his charge.

The Silver Surfer was the next to act. Placing himself between Starhawk and the Executioner, the former herald allowed his own power cosmic to ripple forth from his outstretched hands. He had already been tried that day, having been forced into a position

where he had to take a life.* The anger he felt from learning of Earth's disappearance was still fresh in his mind and now Morg had provided him with an outlet.

*** [The Surfer killed Blastarr in the last issue – Dave]**

“I will not allow you to act so recklessly!” the Surfer exclaimed.

Purple energy washed over Morg in a great flood, knocking him back. The Surfer's command over the power cosmic was practiced and second to none, as Morg soon found out. Even when he used his axe to deflect some of the rampant energy, he discovered that he would soon fall if such a barrage continued.

Swatting the energy away as best he could, Morg managed to slide under the Silver Surfer's assault long enough to launch his cosmic axe. Hurling through space with accuracy rivaling that of Thor himself, Morg's axe caught the Surfer just under his silver chin. Even in the vacuum of space the Surfer could hear his teeth chatter shut from the impact as his concentration was broken. The axe cut into his neck, scarring the nearly flawless silver skin that coated his entire body. Flinching, the Surfer ceased his power output and instinctively glided back on his board.

Morg took the opportunity to tackle the Surfer around his waste, making sure to catch his thrown axe along the way. Holding his foe in place, Morg twisted his arm back and slammed the tip of his mighty axe into the side of the Surfer. The Silver Surfer, a nearly perfect creation of Galactus, was not accustomed to such pain. Few times in his life had an enemy been able to pierce his defenses, which were fueled by an infinite power that outranked most in the galaxy. As Morg's blade slid into a freshly created crevice in his hide, the Surfer cried out in a mix of astonishment and pain.

“Let him go!” Starhawk cried. The time-tossed Guardian of the Galaxy created and then bent large rays of light, forming them with her awesome powers. The solidified light melded into a long spear, which she quickly gathered in her hands and launched at Morg.

Bringing his knee into the gut of the Silver Surfer with enough force to destroy a starcruiser, Morg discarded the former herald and turned his attention back to Aleta. The spear rushed toward him, defying the very laws of physics. The Executioner, who had vanquished his prey all across the universe, simply glared straight into the eyes of Starhawk, seemingly ignoring the rushing shard of focused light.

Hefting his regained axe, Morg sliced the spear in half right down the center. Starhawk looked on in shock, having never witnessed such brutal striking power before. Even in her short career as a Guardian the heroine thought her powers over energy absolute. Stunned by the display of ferocious ingenuity, Starhawk hastily readied a shield of solid light to protect her from the oncoming menace.

“Your little fireworks display won't save you, girl,” Morg taunted. “I'll remove that golden hair of yours before we're through, and then we'll have some real fun!”

Morg pointed the tip of his cosmic axe directly at the center of Starhawk's shield, expelling a massive amount of energy against it in a constant barrage of power cosmic. The edges began to fade and dim as the onslaught continued, each passing moment in the struggle proceeding to exhaust Starhawk of her reserves.

Just before her defenses gave out completely, a blur of motion removed Morg from his position. Starhawk opened her eyes, feeling the strain of maintaining her powers finally lifted. She saw the mysterious man that was only known as Captain Universe holding Morg back, his bluish aura surrounding them both. A small amount of tension left her as she thanked the celestial heavens that the Captain had finally joined the fray.

As he gripped Morg the Executioner uneasily in a full nelson head lock, Captain Universe tried to maintain his upright position in space. Morg was fast and fueled by a burning rage, possibly giving him a vicious edge over all of them. The Captain had been reluctant to join the battle so quickly, hoping that with every passing second his memory might be restored to him, explaining away their situation. But the appearance of Starhawk in dire need of his help had clicked something into place inside him. Whoever he was, he knew without a doubt that he was a hero.

"Unhand me, Terran!" Morg commanded as he twisted back and forth in the Captain's grip.

"Not until you learn to play nice," the hero replied.

The Captain's strength was intense, able to keep the grip locked in place despite Morg's buckling and pivoting. Morg screamed in defiance but was unable to free himself. Regardless, Captain Universe quickly realized that there was still no evident solution to their problem. There was no vanguard coming from Earth to aid them, there was no support mustering, and there was no place to deposit the mad herald.

There was simply nothing.

"Are you well?" the Surfer asked of Starhawk.

The blonde woman turned to see that the Silver Surfer had regained his footing upon his legendary board, although purple energy slowly seeped out of the wound on his side. Morg had done damage to a being thought invulnerable by many and that fact alone scared Starhawk.

"I...I'm fine. At least, I'll be fine once we get rid of that ugly beast."

"First he must decipher our conundrum," the Surfer stated. His fists were clenched tightly as the power cosmic radiated around his hands and wound. "I know he is hiding something."

“He seems just as confused as us, though,” Starhawk countered.

“DIE!”

Morg’s anger had bubbled up uncontrollably as he pitched to and fro against the vice-like grip of Captain Universe. Even though his strength was less than his captor’s, his frame was still much larger. The muscles covered by his pink and scarred skin tightened as he finally managed to sweep a leg behind the Captain’s. Shifting his body, Morg succeeded in leveraging his way out of Captain Universe’s grasp, yanking his bulky frame out from between the Captain’s smaller arms. Just as soon as he had broken the grasp, Morg whipped around and slammed the butt of his axe into the Captain’s head, knocking him head over heels into open space.

The blunt attack caught the Captain off his guard as he was still adjusting to his powers. The awesome energies of the Uni Power made sure that he remained unhurt, but his inability to utilize them to their full potential left him in a less than perfect state, a state that Morg would be able to capitalize on.

The Surfer and Starhawk both unleashed waves of their power, but Morg dodged their weakened attacks easily. He returned the volley of fire with his own, knocking them back the same as the Captain.

“I’ll litter the depths of space with your flesh, you resilient pugs!” Morg threatened.

“Like we haven’t heard that before.”

Morg turned at the new voice that had joined the choir of pain that he had been orchestrating, a smile sickeningly creeping over his face at the thought of fresh blood. As his head tilted, however, it was forced to spin back around from a foreign object crushing against his jaw. His eyes caught sight of the weapon that had been thrown so exactly and had rattled his teeth.

A warhammer, solid and familiar, swung through space and returned itself to the hand of its owner.

The strange features of Beta Ray Bill twisted into what his race would call a smile, eerily mimicking Morg’s own display of sick pleasure. Beta Ray caught his hammer, slapping its head into the open palm of his other hand rhythmically.

“The pug thing is new,” Beta Ray Bill said, “but you freaks all say the same thing. Isn’t that right, Moondragon?”

A bald female garbed in green armor that fit close to her thin body floated beside the hammer-toting alien. “I would not know,” she replied. She body was toned and in peak physical condition, a result of her extensive training under the martial arts masters that had raised her.

“Right, well, you’ll have to trust me then.”

“I am the Executioner!” Morg bellowed as he regained his senses. “My rage will not be denied!”

“See?” Beta Ray commented. “Typical villain-speak.”

Morg cocked back his axe and lunged for the Korbinite named Beta Ray Bill, righteous fury burning in his eyes. Beta Ray gladly accepted the challenge and flew forward, eager to take down a being he knew as evil. Bringing back his own weapon to strike, a mystic warhammer named Stormbreaker, Bill arced in at a trajectory that would surely result in an explosion of strength and power.

The two opponents slammed their weapons together, clanging against one another with a forceful impact that would be enough to shatter a mountain range. Holding Stormbreaker steady, Beta Ray leaned in to the attack and found himself deadlocked with the Executioner. Axe grinded against hammer, each utensil flowing freely with the power bestowed upon each bearer; Morg with his granted power cosmic and Beta Ray with his Odin-sent strength.

“Fall!” Morg commanded.

The Korbinite’s strange features twisted in defiance as he spoke, “Never!”

Moondragon loomed behind the struggling pair, her arms outstretched and her eyes closed. Her senses psionically reached out to Morg, penetrating his mind and searching through the dark corners within. Her years spent on Titan under the guide of the universe’s most powerful beings had given her enough tact and control over her powers that she knew exactly where to strike with mental precision.

“This ends now,” she muttered as she grasped a portion of Morg’s brain with her power.

The Executioner rocked back, suddenly stricken with convulsions brought about by Moondragon’s mental fooling. Ceasing the opportunity, Beta Ray Bill struck hard with his hammer, knocking the assailant back.

The fight had been rendered inert by their combined efforts. Moondragon opened her eyes, pleased at the site of an unconscious foe. Beta Ray Bill smiled as he reasserted his grip on Stormbreaker. Given their reluctant coupling, they were an unprecedented team in the heat of battle.

“I thank you, noble one,” the Surfer said as he glided toward the pair. “Your reputation, Beta Ray Bill, is one of utter respect across the vastness of space. Not many can raise the hammer of Thor. We are in your debt.”

Captain Universe rubbed his bicep, still adjusting to the Uni Power that was constantly flowing through his molecular structure. “Yes,” he said. “Even I know that you are trustworthy. Thanks for lending a hand.”

“Don’t mention it,” Bill replied. “We were...is she okay?”

The quartet looked at Starhawk, who seemed to be dumbstruck by the newcomers’ presence. She floated closer to them, but made sure to keep her distance, a motion that did not go unnoticed.

“Aleta,” the Silver Surfer said with a gesture, “it is all right. I know these beings. They can lend aid to our cause.”

“And what cause would that be?” Moondragon said brashly. “We followed Morg’s trail here after I sensed his presence in the far reaches of space, along with that of his feared master, Galactus. He brushed across Titan like it was a child’s plaything, looking for his master. Now we arrive to see him pummeling you like so much clay, and my own original home world of Earth is missing!”

“Easy, female,” Bill said as he raised a hand out to Moondragon. “We need explanations, not a brawl.”

Starhawk finally floated closer to the group, even though she was apprehensive about joining them. From her viewpoint in the future, she had been sent to stop these things. Now, after the adrenaline from Morg’s attack had begun to subside, she felt the pressures of her failed mission begin to crash down on her.

“We...we have no explanation,” Aleta said. “I journeyed here to find empty space where Earth once sat, completely void of life except for him.”

Captain Universe shifted his gaze from Aleta to the others, unsure of what to say. His memory had yet to return and he was fearful of what his past might tell him. Had he caused this tragedy?

“Morg arrived shortly after I did,” the Surfer said. “He was in search of Galactus, and I must admit that the World Devourer’s stench covers this place. If we are to find answers, we will find them with my former master.”

Moondragon looked out into the void that once housed Earth, a slight feeling of grief washing over her. “Fine,” she finally blurted out. “I have shut down the so-called Executioner. He will give us no further problem. I tracked that manic here; I can do so with the Devourer.”

“Wait,” Starhawk said. “How do we know this is what we’re supposed to do? The history from my time is so incomplete about all of this...I don’t know if—”

“What would you have us do, woman?” Moondragon exclaimed. “Tuck our tails between our legs and watch a dead space in the galaxy? There is nothing for us here!”

“No...I mean, I don't know. Just...wait a moment, okay?”

Passion swelled up inside Moondragon, adding volume to her voice. “Wait? We cannot wait while the Earth is in peril! There may be hope but not if we sit, afraid of our own actions!”

“Enough!” the powerful voice of Captain Universe exclaimed as his blue aura suddenly burned with a bright flair.

The Captain regarded each of them, his voice having commanded their attention. Was he sure of himself? He withdrew his aura, placing his arms at his sides in quiet, but stern, assuredness. Yes, he knew what they had to do.

“Galactus, if he does know what happened to the planet, *will* tell us. I may not recall the details of my own life, but I do know that there is nothing as heinous as defiling an entire civilization. The World Devourer has crimes that have gone unanswered. Even if not for this predicament, it would still be our duty to seek him out. Fate has joined us, and fate will guide us. This is our path and we leave for it. Now.”

The stern words of the Captain sank into each of them, filling them with similar feelings of their commission. Even though he was a stranger to each of them as his mask covered his face and kept his identity a secret, they would each rally behind him.

“So we're heading out again?” Bill questioned. “All of us?”

Captain Universe looked to each of the gathered heroes. “Our strength is great individually, but assembled, even the mighty Galactus will have to answer our questions.”

And with those words Beta Ray lifted his mighty hammer and opened another vortex of cosmic energy. The portal fluctuated with striking storms as the group of five collected heroes entered into its aperture. With Captain Universe at the head of their pack, they each now had faith that their course of action was the right one.

TO BE CONCLUDED

The primal forces of the universe often kept things in balance. From simple things such as the laws of physics, to the more metaphysical ideologies that resulted from centuries of collected pondering, it was typical for a balance to be found even within the apex of the various galaxies.

For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction.

At times the consequences of heinous acts were dubbed inconsequential to the beings that committed them. The universe is not just populated by minor creatures, but also by supreme cosmic beings that operate on a higher level. Acts deemed insane may indeed be prudent given certain circumstances.

As the bulbous planetoid known as Ego rumbled through dead space, he did not give a second thought to the crime he had committed. Earth, despite all its potential, was but a chess piece in the game he played. Its removal, while atrocious, he had seen as simply another step in his plan.

However, even as the giant cosmic entity made preparations for his coming onslaught, the scales were beginning to tilt back against him. The balance that the universe sought for itself would crash into being, despite Ego's disregard.

Marvel 2000 proudly presents...



Issue #3
"Boundaries"

Written by D. Golightly

"Impossible," the Surfer commented quietly. "There is nothing this side of the cosmos that could commit such an act."

"Even still," Beta Ray Bill responded from beside the Silver Surfer, "what you see is real. To all of us. Someone, somehow, has humbled the mighty Galactus."

The darkness of space enraptured them all: the Silver Surfer, Beta Ray Bill, Starhawk, Moondragon, and Captain Universe. The journey had been swift, but unrelenting in its toll. Only Beta Ray stood fully erect, the pressures of the cosmic vortex something he had grown used to over the years. As the tunnel whisked shut behind them, the heroes tried to pull their attention from what lie before them, but found it difficult.

Galactus, the World Devourer and bane to entire civilizations, floated lifelessly in the void of space.

“Are you sure your tunnel didn’t somehow catapult us to the wrong dimension?” the Captain asked.

“I’m sure,” the Korbonite quickly replied. “Stormbreaker doesn’t make mistakes. Odin himself empowered my warhammer. If anyone made a mistake here it was Moondragon.”

The celestial warrior squinted in irritation, but held her gaze on the stagnant Galactus. “Silence, fool,” she said. “I tracked Galactus here just as I tracked Morg. We did not escape our dimension, though I’m beginning to wish we had. This nightmare...it is never ending.”

A translucent yellow shell enveloped the group, closing in around them at the bidding of Starhawk. As a Guardian she had journeyed throughout most of known space and seen countless worlds that had been destroyed by Galactus. His power was supposedly comparable to none, although she had never been in his presence before. “We should stay together,” she said. “I’ll bring us closer. There must be some explanation for this.”

As Starhawk’s globe slowly drifted toward the body of Galactus, the Silver Surfer said, “I live in this state thanks in no small part to the power cosmic. Energy transferred directly from Galactus himself. I...I would have felt something like this.”

The usual ambience that accompanied Galactus was no longer present. As they came closer they could see his purple and blue armor had been scarred deeply in several places; evidence of a vicious battle. His massive form spanned nearly their entire field of vision as they came within a dozen yards of him. There was nothing surrounding him and nothing nearby to point them in the right direction of the assailant that had engaged him.

“Surfer,” the Captain began. “Your power is still connected to him, it must be. Can you feel even a spark inside his armor? Anything to indicate that Galactus might still be alive.”

Purple energy spilled out of the Surfer’s eyes as he gazed up and down at his fallen benefactor. There was a time when he would have been pleased to see Galactus’ downfall, but his ventures into the farthest reaches of space had squelched that anger long ago. Now, as he searched for any trace of familiar life within the husk of Galactus, the Silver Surfer felt only pity.

“There is nothing,” the Surfer finally answered. “Galactus is dead.”

Captain Universe suddenly looked up, alert and ready. His blue aura magnified as he looked both left and right, the energy beginning to build inside his closed fists. “Something’s coming!” he said. “Break apart before—”

A wave of invisible force washed over them, knocking them back. The bubble wavered before snapping open, spilling the heroes out into open space. Starhawk hastily tried to form a light construct that would protect them, but as she caught sight of their attacker she was unsure if she should retaliate at all.

“Genis?” she muttered.

The star field covering Genis-Vell’s face hid his reaction to his name being spoken. He floated silently over Galactus’ corpse, staring at the scattered collection of heroes. The red and blue hues of his costume reflected the power at his disposal, the same power that had broken apart the small gathering. Before Aleta knew what hit her, Genis had roared by her, his wake knocking her back even further.

Captain Universe followed after him, determined to extract answers from the son of the legendary hero. He intended to slam into the lower back of Genis-Vell, but just before impact the usurper to the title of Marvel spun around and landed a right haymaker across the Captain’s chin.

His momentum halted by a strike powerful enough to level a city block, Captain Universe quickly recaptured his balance and struck out with his leg, catching Genis in the stomach. “Should have known better than to sucker punch someone with cosmic awareness,” the Captain said as he threw a left cross at Marvel’s face.

Genis’ teeth rattled as his head shot to one side, his perceptions jarred by the devastating strike. The Captain struck again with his other closed fist, tilting Marvel back over with the transferred momentum. “Why did you attack us?” Captain Universe demanded. “What do you know of Galactus? Answer me!”

Just as he was about to grip Captain Marvel to shake the response out of him, the Nega Bands adorning his wrists suddenly flashed to life. Another wave of force, similar to the force one, swept over him and broke the pair apart. While the shockwave forced him away, the Captain felt a pang of pain in the pit of his stomach from the attack. Marvel had concentrated the force solely on him, causing his nerves to tighten.

Captain Marvel leaned forward to catch up to his new prey, his speed growing as he soared through the empty space. The bearer of the Uni Power righted himself easily, ignoring the pain in his stomach, ready to clash with his fellow titan.

“Betrayer!”

Purple energy cascaded over Captain Marvel, knocking him off course. The Silver Surfer, with rage incarnate upon his metallic features, dove into their enemy and caught him on the edge of his cosmic board. The Surfer’s vicious assault continued as he drove Marvel away, while the Captain watched his impromptu partner turn the tide of the fight. Bands

of white energy formed around the Captain's fists, encircling them with bristling power. He briefly paused to collect himself, and then launched down toward the dueling pair.

"Captain! We must not divide our ranks!" Moondragon called, but if he had heard her he made no move to answer. Within seconds he was a dozen leagues away, desperately catching up with the Surfer.

"Humans," Beta Ray huffed. "Are you both okay?" He clutched his warhammer tightly, as if expecting it to suddenly vanish from his side during his time of need.

"I'm fine," Starhawk said as she rubbed her wrists. The backlash of having her construct dispersed had felt unnerving. The refracting light had felt like shards of glass to her. "We should go after them."

"Let them beat the truth from each other," Moondragon replied. "We shall investigate here. There are answers to be gained from a more subtle approach. The power vested between those two is enough to harness a white dwarf star. They will make short work of Marvel, even with his lost faculties."

The pardoned celestial messiah that Moondragon believed herself to be turned her attentions back to the corpse of Galactus. The gargantuan body may indeed possess the secrets they sought, but even in death the fearful Galactus was not to be trifled with. She reached out to touch the armor covering his still form, but hesitated. Her fingers were inches from the plate mail, lingering for a moment as if caressing something unseen by the naked eye.

"Evidence," Beta Ray said. She pulled her hand back quickly, pulling in a breath of nonexistent air from within her aura.

"What are you talking about?" she said.

"I think he means that all-powerful interstellar destroyer of worlds or not," Aleta responded, "Galactus was killed. Murdered. Whether or not Genis has any connection to it or not remains to be seen. Even someone powerful enough to take down Galactus would leave evidence behind. Something. Anything."

Moondragon nodded in understanding. Even though she wouldn't admit it, she was glad for their verbal interruption. Had she felt something on the outskirts of her mind just before her hand graced the scarred armor? It was so small a presence it almost blended into the background, but she had definitely found something...and almost been pulled in by it.

"You're right," she finally agreed. "We have already determined that Galactus is not to blame for the Earth's disappearance. It would seem that our culprit, for some reason or another, has removed the World Devourer."

“Yeah,” Beta Ray Bill added. “But how do you do an autopsy on a guy like this?”

The towering giants, at least by the perception of most of the universe’s residents, barely moved but for subtle gestures that could only be seen by their own ilk. They had evolved passed things like speech and body language eons ago, yet that was not to say they did not recognize such means of communication.

Gender, another mark imposed by the burgeoning cosmos that they no longer had a need for, was a limit they deemed too distinct. Still...as markers went it was closer to their understanding than they let on. If such a mark were needed for the one in the center of the small cluster of lumbering giants, neither would be appropriate. Regardless, to the few races to which this one had appeared they had seen a powerful figure that was assumed to be male.

His colors seemed tipped toward green and blue. He tilted his head a minute fraction to one side. The gesture, unnecessary to convey concern to his brethren, but done to display the importance of the subject matter, was monitored and recorded by each of the half dozen others surrounding him. Silent communication that was several steps above simply telepathy passed between them all, led by the one in the center.

To even the most ignorant passerby, the attitude shift, however small and difficult to recognize, was still evident: unease.

“You *will* explain your actions, Marvel!” the Surfer commanded.

The silent and almost eerie Captain Marvel remained steadfast in his devastating attack on the pair of cosmic creatures. Genis-Vell was rarely one to speak out of turn, but the fact that he so recklessly pursued two beings that could, and possibly even should, be his allies went against the nature he was known for.

Golden photons of condensed light, their atoms filled with powerful energy, sliced through the open space like a javelin, cutting into the underside of the Surfer’s board, which he was able to raise as a mock shield just in time. Captain Universe, the enigmatic man who struggled with his own identity and the use of his strange powers, didn’t move as fast as his partner. The searing blast bathed him completely in a strong euphoria of pain. It was an odd sensation: even though the attack hurt him, he felt the pain, he seemed to acquire no actual damage.

As he pulled his hands away from his face, a primal instinct in response to the anticipated strike, he realized that he was only feeling what he had expected to feel. The moment it dawned on him that the limits of his power could quite possibly be more than that of this bastard son, the tinges of pain that had once seemed so evident quickly began to fade. He felt the strength return to him, empower him.

Captain Universe summoned the power he felt on the fringes of his mind, using it to simply create a barrier between the two of them. Marvel, noticing his quarry's sudden change in composure, focused all of his efforts solely on the blue and white garbed mystery man. What had been a blistering torrent of wild photons was now a steady stream of compacted energy, aimed directly at Captain Universe.

The invisible barrier that the Captain had formed didn't deflect the energy onslaught...it *bent* it. Treating the attack like simply light through a glass of water, Marvel's photon stream bent and contorted around the barrier and scattered off into space.

"We end this now," the Silver Surfer stated.

The Surfer collided with Marvel again, this time gripping him around the throat and holding him in place. The power cosmic, raging through the Surfer's veins, gave him the strength necessary to hold Captain Marvel in place long enough for Captain Universe to throw a left cross and catch Marvel just below the jaw.

The barrier that the Captain had formed began to take shape as his unconscious molded the ambient energy into place.

Captain Marvel lashed out with a pulse of photonic energy, wildly breaking free from the Surfer's grip. The Nega Bands on his wrists were humming with stored power, waiting to be unleashed by their master's command. Spinning head over heels, but righting himself quickly thanks to his legendary board, the Silver Surfer summoned the strength of his own near-infinite power to meet the anticipated attack by Marvel.

Captain Universe took in a breath through his blue aura as the floodgates of his mind opened. "Stand down," he said, nearly inaudible. As he snapped to attention, noticing what the Uni Power had created around his right forearm, his voice grew louder, and more competent. "Surfer. Stand down!"

Genis cocked his fists back, preparing to launch yet another assault against the Surfer. The former herald did the same, his purple clouds of energy already swirling around his hands. As the twin titans of lore brandished their awesome abilities to their fullest, ready to strike the other down to end the battle in a final test of mettle, their attention was finally caught by a slicing object that split the space between them.

A blue and white disc, spinning with exact precision, rocketed between Marvel and the Surfer. They stilled their powers as the disc circled around overhead, gracefully slipping back onto the forearm of Captain Universe. The colors of the disc radiated with the Captain's power, as it drew from the Uni Power just as he did. Like the Surfer's board, this construct was linked to the Captain and was under his complete control.

Blue and white rings graced the face of the disc, but as its exact center was a blazing star.

"Captain...?" the Surfer mumbled in confusion.

Genis also paused, the scolding power in his hands slowly dying away. He seemed transfixed on Captain Universe, his total attention focused solely on the glowing blue and white disc affixed on his arm.

“Genis-Vell,” Captain Universe spoke. “Your mind is shattered in pieces, just like mine was. I can sense it through this...*force* that’s been pushed on me. Relax, son. I’ll put this right.”

Captain Universe floated closer to Genis, who remained unmoving. The Captain placed his hand on Genis’ forehead, the Uni Power flowing freely from his palm. Genis suddenly arched his back before breaking the connection and moving away. He blinked several times as he looked both at the Silver Surfer and at Captain Universe again, as if for the first time.

“Where am I?” he asked. “What’s going on here? Where’s Wendell?”

“In due time, son,” Captain Universe replied. “First thing’s first: we need to meet back up with the others. Time is running out.”

“Wait,” the Surfer said. “Captain...that disc...it’s almost as if—”

“It’s not a disc, Norrin,” Captain Universe said. “It’s a *shield*. Getting overtaken by the Uni Power took a lot out of me, but I’m all here now.” Slowly, so as not to shock either man in his presence, he removed the full facemask covering him, feeling the cold aura touch his skin for the first time. “My name is Steve Rogers, and we have a lot of work to do, Avengers.”

TO BE CONTINUED

Author’s Note: Okay, so I know that the last issue said that I was going to wrap this all up here...but, after some encouraging words from Mr. Meriades Rai, I’ve decided to explore the characters a little but further. Put me down for at least one more issue after this, possibly two. What can I say? Ask and ye shall receive.

“Are you sure about this?” Beta Ray Bill asked uneasily. “If you get lost somewhere in...uh, *there*, then how are we supposed to find our way?”

Moondragon shot the Korbonite an irritated glance, only to refocus her attention back on the still and lifeless form of Galactus. The deep shadows of space surrounded them, an eerie grave for the former World Devourer. Beta Ray stood atop a golden platform provided by the powers of Starhawk, the time-tossed Guardian of the Galaxy. He did not look pleased at Moondragon’s recently announced decision.

“I already told you,” Moondragon said, a touch of scolding in her voice, “I felt something when I touched Galactus. There’s something, or possibly *someone* in there. I need to probe deeper to find it. Perhaps it will hold the key to all our fates.”

As Moondragon shut her eyes and concentrated on a chant taught to her by the masters that had raised her years ago, Aleta Ogard fought off a chill from overtaking her. Since returning to the past to save the future she hadn’t felt quite right. Maybe it was the gravity of the situation, or maybe it was the seemingly inevitable failure.

The Earth was destroyed by some unknown force, and now Galactus was dead. What hope could there possibly be?

Marvel 2000 proudly presents...



Issue #4
“Lost Hope”

Written by D. Golightly

The Silver Surfer had unwillingly created a persona for himself across the cosmos during his travels. Those that had crossed his path usually took his idiosyncrasies at face value, marking him as a quiet, reasonable, caring individual. For the most part they were right. The countless number of civilizations he had stumbled across while navigating the stars counted him among their legends, impressing upon his glistening image that of their savior.

That was not to say he could not be shocked.

“Captain...*America*?” the Silver Surfer blurted out in disbelief, his deep and hollow eyes opened as wide as they could go. He slumped forward atop his board slightly, dazed at the sight of a former ally thought dead.

The man adorned in a blue and white costume nodded in acknowledgement. His electric blue aura sealed his body off from the harshness of space, converting ambient light into the precious oxygen he needed to survive, as well as allowing communication with others through the unforgiving vacuum.

Captain Universe’s full facemask no longer hid his features. His memory, impaired as it had been, was now fully intact. He glared at the Surfer and a worn Genis-Vell, whom he had just fought to a standstill. The blue and white rings of his shield, created by the Uni Power, mimicking his own signature shield, complete with a shining star at its center. While not an exact duplicate, it was the best his awesome powers could manage.

Their initial brawl had catapulted them far away from the rest of their group, and the carcass of Galactus as well. The brutal fight amongst the stars had taken them so far away from the others that they could no longer see them.

“It’s me,” Steve Rogers replied as he felt the surface of his shield. “We need to get back to the others. It isn’t safe to be separated like this.”

“Could someone please tell me what’s going on?” Genis demanded. The star field around his face had dissipated when he had returned to his senses, revealing a confused face. “The last thing I remember was swinging by Titan and meeting up with Quasar. Where is he? Where the hell are *we*, for that matter? And why was I ready to kill both of you?”

“I got a glimpse inside your mind,” the Captain replied. “You were being manipulated by a force so powerful that I could scarcely save myself.”

“Wait...” the Surfer said feebly.

“That’s why we need to get back to the others,” Steve Rogers continued. “It’s not safe. Whoever overtook you could be plotting to do the same to them.”

“Wait.”

“But...but...no, something’s wrong. Something’s terribly wrong!” Genis stammered. His golden Nega Bands flashed as he closed his eyes and concentrated for a few moments. “The Earth! It’s gone! My cosmic awareness...what happened?”

“Cease this!” the Surfer lashed out, his eyes brightly illuminating the general vicinity before dying back down. He angled his board between the two captains, keeping a steady gaze on the unveiled Rogers. “I have undergone trials that the majority of sentient creatures have never even dreamed possible. I have drifted across the unending void and faced entities so powerful that they had shifted the very fabric of reality.”

He leaned in closer to Captain Universe, his stare penetrating the legendary hero. “To take you at face value would be a mistake. I have seen where the Earth once stood. The rest of your brethren are dead. What proof do you have that you are who you now claim to be? Explain yourself!”

The Captain sighed as he floated around to step onto the Surfer’s board. “I can’t pretend to have all the answers,” he said. “But I know who I am. The last thing I remember was standing in Avengers Mansion, monitoring the equipment while Tony and Hank ran some tests. Then there was a bright, white light. Then I found myself floating in vacant space.”

“The Earth,” Genis said. “It’s been destroyed, hasn’t it.”

Steve Rogers didn’t turn to face the son of Mar-Vell, but instead hung his head. “It has,” he answered.

“As much as it pains me to realize it,” Genis continued, “my cosmic awareness is telling me the same. Just as it tells me that you speak the truth, Captain. You are indeed who you say you are. I would bet my life on it. I would also have no other stand with me.”

“It is not a guarantee,” the Silver Surfer said, “but I shall accept that so far your intentions have been aligned with my own.”

“Good.” Steve Rogers slipped the cowl back over his face and took flight once more, hopping off of the Surfer’s board. He extended his shield in front of him and began to fly back in the direction their fight had initially carried them away from. “There are more mysteries here at play than my own. We’ll get to the bottom of this mess in due time. First thing’s first, though, Avengers. We need to assemble.”

“Our allegiance is not garnered easily!”

“I would disagree,” Ego, the Living Planet replied with a booming voice that could shake the foundations of a society. “Your position is not currently one of...negotiation.”

The planetoid rested precariously at the very edges of a swirling mass of photons that served as a gateway into another plane of existence. It was as if a hole had been punched into the fabric of reality, serving as a window into a pocket dimension.

The gathered forms on the other side of the gateway, which Ego had opened himself to extend a branch of communication, shifted uneasily in their angst. What Ego offered them was something they desperately wanted, but they were wise as to the price of the tyrant’s offer.

“My minions have been released from my grasp, as I knew they would be,” Ego continued. “The meddling of a few strays is beginning to interfere with what I am

planning. I would have your service in exchange for your freedom. I shall release you if you bind yourselves to me long enough to kill those I wish to see dead.”

The pair closest to the opening exchanged glances before one of them nodded cautiously. “Very well,” the strange entity told the Living Planet. “What remains of the Dire Wraiths will destroy those that oppose your efforts.”

The piercing scream that Moondragon unleashed was enough to snap Beta Ray Bill back to attention. She had been standing quietly on the platform provided by Starhawk, her mental powers boring deep into the body of Galactus.

The Korbonite moved to touch Moondragon’s shoulder, but Starhawk created a hard light barrier between them. “No,” she said. “We can’t help her like that. We have to wait.”

“What?” Beta Ray Bill scoffed. “Are you serious, lady? Take this flaky wall down before I have Stormbreaker remove it for me. I’m not going to stand here while—”

“Get away fro me!” Moondragon hollered, shocking both Beta Ray and Aleta. “Something...something’s pushing through!”

Her skin began to glisten as if intense sunlight was beaming down directly on her. Her head rocked back and her eyes flung themselves open impulsively as energy began to spill out of her pupils. Yellow and white light formed into beams generating from her eyes, rising straight up and melding into a ball high over them. Her screams wavered but still eerily continued.

Starhawk thickened the barrier she had erected between Beta Ray and Moondragon, hoping that her powers would hold out against whatever was transpiring before them. It was then that her attention was diverted from the awesome display of unbridled power flowing out of Moondragon to notice a thin strand of energy connecting her to Galactus’ body. The solid stream of melding energy forcing its way out of Moondragon looked identical to the thin strand attaching her to the World Devourer, almost like an anchor.

“Bill!” Starhawk shouted over the roaring torrent of energy as she pointed at the strand.

“I see it!”

The bulky Korbonite hefted his warhammer, Stormbreaker, which had been forged by Odin himself. He jumped off the golden platform and drifted to the strand, his hammer at the ready. “Galactus has taken a hold of her!” he declared. “I’ll sever the connection with one blow!”

The energy pouring forth from Moondragon was beginning to condense into a spherical mass. Her throat was becoming raw but she continued to expel whatever air she managed

to retain in her lungs. The energy washed over itself, growing larger and larger like a pulsating beast, fed by whatever invading force was being funneled through the heroine.

“It’s starting to take form!” Starhawk called out. Moondragon slumped back against the barrier she had created as the outpouring energy finally stopped, leaving her weakened and vulnerable. Aleta rushed to her side, breaking apart her own barrier as she went.

The strand began to waver as well. Beta Ray Bill raised his warhammer, preparing to strike directly at the strand anchoring Moondragon to the World Devourer. Just as his weapon was pivoted to the apex of his overhand swing, something stopped his arms from pulling the warhammer down. It pulled with all of his strength, but something had clasped around his fists.

He tilted his head back to see a strange pink orb encapsulating his hands, the grasped hilt of Stormbreaker included. “What the hell is this?” he swore.

“Easy, big guy,” a strange voice said from above him. “No need to get physical.”

The pink orbs around his clenched fists dissipated as Beta Ray Bill lowered his warhammer and turned to face the shocking specimen that had seemingly popped into existence. His massive jaw, alien to most races and distinguishingly unique, dropped as he looked at the glowing figure he began to recognize as a friend.

“Quasar?” Bill stated, unsure of how to gauge any type of response to seeing the glowing figure of his former ally.

“In the flesh, buddy,” the figure replied. “Well...sort of. There isn’t really any flesh involved here, but it’s a figure of speech anyway.”

Starhawk watched from where she kneeled, holding up Moondragon’s limp head. She was breathing, but barely. “What just happened?” Starhawk demanded. “Who are you?”

“The name’s Wendell Vaughn,” the glowing figure replied. “Most call me Quasar. Umm...is she okay?”

Moondragon opened her eyes again uneasily, staring at the newly arrived Avenger. “I will survive,” she stated coldly. “Although could you not have chosen to make you entrance a little less...dramatically?”

“Sorry about that,” Quasar replied. As he had implied, his ‘body’ was not wholly made of flesh and blood. His radiance died down as he concentrated on retaining his faculties, his entire body now composed of strange energy that glowed with a silent hum. From the tips of his frayed hair to the edges of his fingers, there was no solid matter within him. The only thing that was actually physical about his person were the glimmering Quantum Bands around his wrists. “I guess I have some explaining to do.”

“You and me both, Avenger.”

The group turned to see Captain Universe, the Silver Surfer, and Captain Marvel all approaching. Moondragon got to her feet, aided by the support of another hard light creation of Starhawk's. Beta Ray Bill shook his head, wondering how he had gotten caught up in so much confusion.

The group collectively looked to Wendell in an unspoken gesture for him to begin his explanation. The cosmic, yet humble, warrior cleared his non-throat to speak.

“It all started when Genis and I felt a mental summons,” Quasar said. He held out his arms so his bands were in front of him. “As much as people tend to separate us, our jewelry here keeps us connected in more ways than even we understand. From what I can tell they operate on similar principles, but that's not really the point right now.”

“And what would that point actually be?” Bill asked, the irritation in his voice evident.

“Umm, right. Sorry. The point is that we were manipulated through our bands.” The energy that mimicked his facial features formed to create a look of sorrow. “Ego, the Living Planet, overtook our minds and sent us to fulfill his dark mission.”

The Surfer clenched one fist tightly, already suspecting what the young hero was about to admit to. “What did he have you do?” Norrin Radd asked.

“We...we destroyed the Earth.”

The star field that served as Captain Marvel's mask flashed back into existence as he closed his eyes in anger. “No!” he said. “That's not possible! I would remember...”

“Easy, son,” Captain Universe said as he placed a hand on Genis' shoulder. “Keep it together. It's not going to do anyone a lick of good to lose it now.” He looked back at Quasar, his hand remaining to sooth Genis. “Please go on.”

“Ego had total control of us,” Quasar said in response. He sounded detached, as if he didn't want to recall the memories. “He sent us to Earth, why he did not say. We blindly obeyed him, unable to control our own actions. If I had been able to stop myself I would have. You have to believe me.”

“What happened to the Earth?” Starhawk implored.

“We assaulted Four Freedom's Plaza, striking down their defenses easily. The two of us combined overcame the Fantastic Four, restraining them while we accessed their vaults. We retrieved what Ego sent us to get, then activated it...”

The group waited silently for Quasar to continue, realizing how painful it must have been for him to relive the situation. After a long moment passed, he continued. “It was the

ultimate nullifier, the one device powerful enough to wipe out all of existence. But that was not what Ego wanted. He desired that the Earth be removed for whatever purpose that only he fully knows. We entered the outer atmosphere and used our powers to contain the entire planet, entrapping the white wave of destruction that the nullifier created.”

“Impossible,” the Silver Surfer stated. “No one could do what you say. The power of the nullifier—”

“Was rendered inert thanks to the power funneled through our bands by Ego. It’s the truth. I take it you’ve seen where Earth used to be, what other explanation could there be?”

“Then how is it you look like that?” Aleta asked. “And what happened to Galactus?”

“Another task set by Ego,” Quasar answered. “We both dispatched him at the Living Planet’s command. Galactus, drawn out by the use of the nullifier, appeared just as we finished obliterating the Earth. We contained him in the same manner as we did the planet, only for our controller to send us to be his executioners. During the battle Galactus...well, he ate me.”

“I’m sorry,” Beta Ray Bill said. “I don’t have ears like you Terrans. I must have misheard what you just said.”

“Galactus is the galaxy’s greatest parasite,” Quasar replied. “Or, more accurately, he’s the universe’s biggest eater. The guy eats entire planets, for crying out loud! So when we got him on the ropes he sort of...consumed me. I think it was a last ditch effort on his part.” He pointed at Moondragon, who was back on her feet and looking better by the second. “The Quantum Bands kept my energy signature alive inside his body until she started poking around in there. If it hadn’t been for her I might have been stuck in there forever.”

“That’s disgusting,” Moondragon said. “If I have known what I was going to be a participant in I never would have made the mental connection.”

Quasar shrugged as best as his energy form allowed. “Sorry. It wasn’t fun for me either. But, now that I’m back and Ego’s hold over me is apparently broken, along with Genis’ it seems, we can start working on making things right again. What’s our next step?”

“A good question,” Bill iterated as he turned to face the masked Captain Universe. “Captain? What do we do?”

The rest of the group looked to him as well, acknowledging his leadership in their time of need. Steve Rogers grimaced beneath his facemask, unsure if he should be the one to take charge, given that his own memories were still vague. Quasar’s description of what

happened to the Earth matched what he had been able to recall...the white light, the engulfing pain, and then nothingness.

Their ragtag group had been brought together by fate. A series of impossible events coupled with the dwindling hope of their race kept them from straying, almost as if an unseen hand was guiding their actions. Steve couldn't help but think of the first time the original Avengers banded together from an apparently chance encounter. If fate deemed the Avengers lived to fight one last time, then they would do so.

He would lead them, as was his duty since he had reawakened years after his first rebirth.

Captain Universe slowly removed his facemask, once more allowing the cool touch of his blue aura to grace his skin. "Now we take the fight to Ego," Rogers said, "and we avenge our world."

"Holy crap," Quasar muttered upon seeing the Captain's face for the first time. "You weren't kidding when you said you had some explaining to do, too."

"I've been all over the collected galaxies," Genis-Vell said, "and I can honestly say that I've never had my stomach lurch as much as it is now."

The vortex that Beta Ray Bill was so accustomed to traveling through carried the heroes between the folds of space and time. After hearing Steve Rogers out the group was more determined than ever to thwart Ego, and decided that the time for talking was over. Using the cosmic awareness of Captain Marvel as a guide, Beta Ray led them through the vortex tunnel toward their final enemy.

"You get used to it," Bill replied over his shoulder. "Thank Aleta for at least giving you something to stand on, otherwise you'd be bumping around in here."

Starhawk remained quiet. Since arriving in the past the doubts of her success in her mission had only grown. The cataclysmic event that had rocked her time travels apparently forced her to arrive too late to warn them, casting her own time into peril. There wasn't a moment that passed when she didn't wish that Major Vance Astro of the Guardians of the Galaxy had sent someone other than her on the mission.

"Okay, people," Bill hollered. "Here we go! Next stop: one planet sized monster!"

The end of the swirling vortex came into sight, a gaping wide hole that would deposit them directly in the path of their enemy. Starhawk felt her stomach tighten. Moondragon felt her burning rage strengthen. Genis-Vell felt his desire for righteousness redouble. The Silver Surfer felt the power cosmic be summoned at his mental call. Quasar felt the pangs of fear set in. Beta Ray Bill felt justifiably content before the coming battle. Captain Universe felt the calm order of the moment as he had so many times before.

The seven heroes spilled out of the vortex, rupturing space and the solitude of the cosmos. Captain Universe flew into position at the helm of their collection, preparing to lead the happenstance team into their final battle. What he saw shocked them all.

Ego, the Living Planet, and defiler of their claimed world, sat in all his bulbous glory looking directly at them, as if in waiting. Silvery wisps zipped around his gargantuan body, mimicking the movements of electrons around a single atom. The “face” of Ego begot their element of surprise as what would pass for a sinister smile greeted them upon their approach.

“Finally,” Ego bellowed, his deep voice resonating over them. “The time to end this pitiful squabble has come. My army! Destroy them!”

The silver apparitions in orbit around the planetoid formed into ranks at his command. Hundreds of creatures, an entire army of Dire Wraiths, obeyed their new master and swarmed toward the tiny contingent of heroes. Their war cries were swallowed up by the depths of space, but their intent was evident.

Captain Universe hefted his shield over his head and flew into the fray. The other heroes behind him hesitated until they heard the fateful cry of their leader, “Avengers assemble!”

TO BE CONCLUDED (for real this time...)

The large humanoid figures silently agreed that they must now take action. Normally content to drift amongst the stars while the courses of various races, the bulk of which they had created, played out their own versions of free will, the lumbering beings could no longer sit idly by while an entity worked so tirelessly against them.

There were seven of them in all, their numbers having dwindled over the last few centuries. An ageless war that mostly went unseen, the cosmos had paid several taxes due to the conflict already. Ego, the Living Planet, a monstrosity even by their standards had struck another blow and was preparing to strike another.

They were aware of the small contingent of heroes that had collected themselves to stand against Ego, and while their power was great there was still alarm. The leader of the group of giants, a being garbed in strange red and black body armor that ensured his entire person was sealed away, raised his hand and opened up a wormhole that would transport them to the final battle.

Earth was lost, but the galaxy yet remained.

For the Celestials interference on their part seldom arose, but the tide had shifted in their war, and to not interfere might have meant the extinction of their race.

Marvel 2000 proudly presents...



Issue #5
“Homeward Bound”

Written by D. Golightly

“The best defense is a good offense,” the bulky figure of the Korbinite Beta Ray Bill stated, repeating clichés he had picked up from his time on Earth, “but these things...their faces don’t really bash well!”

He swung his mighty hammer, Stormbreaker, at a pair of wispy Dire Wraiths as they swooped down on him. The head of his hammer connected with both of their skulls in one swing, colliding one with the other and sending them spiraling back out into space. For all his strength, even the Korbinite who had held aloft Mjolnir would need more than one strike to defeat these foes.

“Have faith!” the Silver Surfer hollered as he rocketed by atop his gleaming board. The power cosmic flashed to life inside his fists, spilling out purple energy over his body as he flew. “All is not yet lost and the villain that seeks to destroy us will surely find his end this day!”

Beta Ray smirked, contorting what most humans would call a grotesque mouth. He quickly regarded their ragtag group of so-called Avengers, the name that their impromptu leader, a revealed Steve Rogers, had given them. The Surfer, a powerful figure known across the cosmos as a new messiah, threw himself into a huddle of Dire Wraiths and let his normally still rage take over.

“Haaa!” Moondragon called out in a primal battle cry. Beta Ray watched her duck and weave between the limbs of four Dire Wraiths, successfully and impressively eluding all of their attacks. Out of their group he had spent the most time with her and knew that any adversary that crossed her path would surely be sorry for it.

The once stunned Starhawk caught his gaze next. His first impression of her was that she was a fish out of water, much like himself. Bounced back from a possible future Aleta had returned to their time to try and prevent the destruction of the world. The shockwave of cascading fury caused by the ultimate nullifier, the weapon that had obliterated the Earth, had also apparently disrupted her travels through the timestream, causing her to arrive mere moments after the catastrophe she had come to prevent. Now the apparent resentment of herself had formed into hatred of the enemy as she created solid light objects to pelt the Dire Wraiths with. She plunged into their numbers without a second thought.

Their two newest allies, one of which had tried to annihilate them on orders from Ego, had paired up again and were picking off the stray Dire Wraiths as they tried to flank the others. Captain Marvel, the son of the original galactic hero, used his augmented Kree strength to wring the necks of the Dire Wraiths that Quasar, now an energy being, would funnel over to him using the cosmic power at his disposal. Pink tubes were thrown around the Wraiths by Quasar, who dumped them in front of the enraged Genis-Vell.

Finally, Beta Ray Bill looked at the man leading their charge. Captain Universe, the sole possessor of the awesome Uni Power, blazed through the hordes of Dire Wraiths like a man who had nothing left to lose. In truth, it was possible that Steve Rogers no longer saw himself as having anything left to live for. He had told them that this was their last stand, their last chance to avenge the lost people of Earth.

Captain Universe swung his blue and white shield, a physical manifestation of the Uni Power, back and forth like a battering ram. The legendary shield he had been known for had been lost with the rest of the planet, making him feel like a part of himself had been torn away. He smashed through the Dire Wraiths, ignoring their feeble ranged attacks as

they were too frightened of his intense presence to engage him closer. Had it not been for his full facemask the enemy would have seen righteous conviction in his eyes.

Beta Ray Bill felt something stab into his back and turned to see a Dire Wraith behind him, wielding its powers to their fullest. He pushed the pain aside and channeled the Odin power through himself, preparing to strike back. He raised Stormbreaker and refocused his attention on his own actions, content that the battle would test his mettle.

Starhawk was already being tested to her extreme, as she spawned light construct after light construct, using them to deflect the seemingly never ending army of Dire Wraiths. What had amounted to her desire to save the past in order to ensure her future had been transformed into a need to survive. Everything was now in doubt. She wasn't the expert that some of her fellow Guardians were in the matters of time travel, but she knew enough to understand what a paradox was. If the past she had come back to protect no longer existed, what did that say for her present?

A claw suddenly swept into her view as it scraped across her face. The jagged fingers, belonging to a slim and animated Dire Wraith, drew back from her along with a few drops of blood. She panicked and pushed herself away, forming a light construct in the form of a thick wall between them. She felt the hot blood rushing down her face and nearly screamed, but she suppressed it, choosing to mimic the behavior of her more warrior-born comrades.

Bending the light to her will, she caused her created wall to twist around the Wraith and contain it. It struggled with fury but her powers altogether were stronger than its will. With a swing of her arm to dramatically cast aside the Wraith, her light construct rocketed off into deep space, bringing the space demon along with it.

"Don't worry," Moondragon told her as she flew beside Starhawk. "They have greater numbers, but we have something they never will."

"What's that?" Starhawk asked as she eyed up her next target.

"A riddle my instructors once plagued me with. We have nothing left to lose, and that is a mighty weapon in and of itself."

The bald warrior smirked as she ascended over Starhawk, charging into another contingent of Dire Wraiths. Aleta possibly understood the meaning of Moondragon's cryptic message more than Moondragon herself did. Starhawk no longer held doubt that her world was gone. Her future was gone. The act of a desperate woman was best left avoided, as the Wraiths would soon see.

At the center of the maelstrom sat the bulbous Ego, content to watch the battle unfold in front of him. The planet-sized monster, older than most of the Elders that the universe had to offer, stared at the rampant chaos that he had been the cause of. Nearly a hundred

Dire Wraiths, freshly rescued from the depths of Limbo, encircled Ego like the electrons of an atom. They were held back to be his last line of defense in case the heroes had been able to pierce his army.

The towering mountains and vast landscapes that made up his face rumbled from the displeasure he felt at witnessing the heroes dispatch his forces. The Dire Wraiths were known for their ruthlessness and ability to mimic the abilities of others, but at the moment they appeared to be nothing more than cannon fodder.

“Gthox!” Ego bellowed. “Approach!”

A lone Dire Wraith fell out of its orbiting path around Ego and centered itself in front of him. The pale skin looked worn and beaten, a result of its imprisonment and newfound loyalty to Ego. “Yes, my sire?” the Wraith, Gthox, answered. The Wraith quivered as it prepared itself for another harsh lesson from its master.

“I did not free the Dire Wraiths from Limbo to be totally useless! Explain to me, Gthox, why your brethren fall like worthless flies. Why do they not feed off of the powers of their targets, using that same force against their foes? Was I misled to believing that the mighty Dire Wraiths could do such a thing?”

“It was just so,” Gthox answered, “but having been stuck in Limbo for so long has deadened our powers. The vagrant known as Rom took most of our abilities from us when he imprisoned us, leaving only the husks you see now. We have a base understanding of matter and energy manipulation, a trait we drew upon to fend off the predators in Limbo, but our original powers have been shunted.”

“Did you think this information unimportant when I freed you?” Ego demanded. The Living Planet’s face, composed of a large landmass that was formed into a face, scrunched in agitation.

“My master—” Gthox began, but his words were falling on deaf ears.

Ego’s mouth opened and unleashed a torrent of energy that engulfed the feeble Dire Wraith, bathing him in destruction energy. As soon as Ego closed the breach in his terrain, cutting off the outflow of power, there was nothing left of Gthox.

“Insolent worm!” Ego roared. Had he known of the general worthlessness of the Dire Wraiths he never would have freed them to begin with. The pact he had made with them had resolved to become fruitless, meaning if he wanted to see a victory he would have to become more involved.

The swarming Wraiths around him dispersed and joined the fray, accompanying their quickly falling brethren. Ego lumbered forward, his massive bulk slowly gaining momentum.

“Ego!” cried Captain Universe. He slung his shield out, sending it spiraling around the clip the heads of several Wraiths before returning to his arm. While his right appendage waited for the weapon to return, his left unleashed a concentrated beam of Uni Power at the last remaining pack of Dire Wraiths that stood between him and the Living Planet.

“The last survivor of Earth,” Ego bellowed. “I shall squash out your life like I did your planet!”

Steve Rogers charged toward the gargantuan figure, leading the way with his shield. “We’ll see about that,” he stated coolly.

Ego opened his massive mouth once more, vomiting forth a thick stream of powerful energy. Captain Universe dove straight for the beam, taking up the challenge willingly. His shield, created and empowered by one of the strongest forces in the cosmos, deflected the blast. Captain Universe pressed against the back of his shield, feeling the intense impact but still holding his place in space. Ego poured more energy into his attack, relentlessly keeping up the onslaught against the Captain.

The Dire Wraiths were nearly defeated, leaving a few of the Avengers free to act upon the awesome sight they saw. “Captain!” Quasar screamed as he and Genis made a beeline for the struggle.

A cluster of regrouped Wraiths appeared in their path in a feeble attempt to divert them from their master. Quasar and Captain Marvel both readied the power emanating from their bracelets, fully intending to just plow through the barrier comprised of the pale bodies. The cluster would be enough to hold them from aiding Captain Universe, but they had no other option.

Twin blasts of purple energy suddenly cut through the pale swarm, chopping their numbers in half. The two heroes approaching at breakneck speed followed the dissipating trail back to its source, yielding a sight that brought a smile to both their faces: the Silver Surfer was charging the same pack of Wraiths from the side, flanking them. Crouched at the front of his metallic board waited Moondragon, whose face was etched with the anticipation of battle.

“Faster, Surfer!” she commanded. “If we divert enough of the remaining cretins then our friends there can join the Captain and add their power to his, ending this!”

“Rest your tongue,” the Surfer responded. The normally neutral expression on his face had been exchanged for one of battle-inspired rage. “Quasar! Marvel! Make haste and leave these foes to us.”

Swiftly moving around the conflagration, both Quasar and Captain Marvel moved to back Steve Rogers in his struggle against Ego. Captain Universe was slowly being

pushed back by the awesome outpour of Ego's raw and unbridled power, losing the metaphorical ground that he had gained.

The two heroes rallied behind the Captain, pressing their palms against his back in support of his struggle. They proceeded to channel their power through him, providing a stronger foothold in space. Captain Universe didn't visibly acknowledge the aid, but he redoubled his efforts and leaned into the back of his shield, pouring everything he had into his defense.

Entire continents around Ego's "skin" began to shift, forming a second mouth at the base of his first. While the top opening continued to unleash a torrential storm of cosmic energy upon the heroes, the second one openly mocked them. "Ignorant fools," Ego spat out, the voice from his new mouth slightly different in tone. "Did you really think to oppose me with power I granted?"

The pink energy swimming down Quasar's arm and into Captain Universe's back began to shimmer and fade, before it finally changed its hue. Before the others could react, Quasar exploded as he hovered right next to the two Captains. Just before Wendell Vaughn perished his last thought was that of pride, having stood against his would-be controller while next to the galaxy's greatest champions.

Steve Rogers and Genis-Vell were both overtaken by the resulting explosion colliding with Ego's assault, pummeling them with such intensity that they nearly passed out. Once the initial shock washed over them they were catapulted away from Ego at such a speed that had there been an atmosphere to pass through they would have ignited several sonic booms.

Beta Ray Bill slammed two of his enemies' heads together, causing their malleable bodies to mash like blobs of clay. He caught sight of the two Captains and followed their trajectory. Summoning his strength and gripping his warhammer from wear it dangled on his wrist, the Korbinite swung off to catch his allies. He merely misgauged their speed, but just as they almost slipped through his outstretched fingers a ball of yellow light engulfed them all.

"It's okay," Starhawk said as she descended to them. "I've got you."

The glowing sphere hummed with energy as she pierced its edge and joined them inside. "Are they..." she began to say but couldn't quite find the rest of the words to finish the question.

"They're alive," Bill said after looking them over. "Just knocked out it seems. Even those two have their limits, but they were our heavy hitters." The Korbinite looked toward the approaching Living Planet. "And Quasar... Wendell. We're in some serious shit here."

Aleta touched one of the Nega Bands around Genis-Vell's wrists. Her fingers brushed over the golden metal, which was cool to the touch even though the wielder had just been using them to their full potential. She suddenly had an idea, realizing that the concept of potential hadn't yet been reached in herself.

If she was right, she could end this right now. Seeing the Captains look helpless for all their might made her feel like there was no hope for the future, her future. She thought of Vance and all the others, finally acknowledging why it had been her that was chosen to go back. This was her moment to act.

She looked to the Korbinite beside her. "Keep him safe," was all she said. Beta Ray looked confused, but noticed that the light bending around them had sealed them off into separate chambers. The sphere split into two and he found himself pressing against the translucent bubble. He, Genis, and Steve Rogers were in one bubble and Aleta had contained herself in another.

"Tell them I don't regret this," she said to Bill. "Tell the Guardians that I know why it was me that was sent back. Vance knew what was happening the whole time, and he understood that while the others might have had a better shot in the beginning, if we had somehow missed our window of opportunity I would always be in my element."

Beta Ray Bill recognized the tone in her voice as belonging to a person who was ready to become a martyr. He pounded against his sphere but didn't dare pierce it for fear of letting the unconscious Captains fall prey to the vacuum of space.

"Tell them that a shining light never dies," Starhawk said.

A few tendrils of light flowed off of Starhawk and journeyed out into space, searching and feeling for something. She ignored the protests of Beta Ray Bill and continued to let her powers overtake her. Her entire body began to glow and hum with the same resonance as that displayed by her light constructs.

Aleta Ogard, the time-tossed Guardian of the Galaxy, was converting her own body to solid light.

The tendrils drifting out from her body latched on to something and stiffened. Small deposits of pink light formed at the tips of the tendrils briefly before rocketing back up them and into Starhawk. It had been a long shot, but Aleta remembered something that Quasar had said after they had rescued him from the bowels of Galactus. She wouldn't let his death be in vain.

Her powers enabled her to become a master of light, and by way of that, energy. Through the tendrils she found the last ebbs of Quasar's essence and pulled it into herself, thus empowering her beyond what she thought possible. Her solid light body floated toward

Ego and began to pick up speed. Within a blink of an eye she was moving at the speed of light.

She stretched out her arms as she flew and the residual light flowing off of her made her appear like a comet amongst the stars. Her arms formed a point, which creted a cone of energy running back over her body. As she aimed herself for Ego, she felt like she was doing the right thing. She knew that this really was the last bid for their lost world, and as one of its protectors it was her duty to avenge it no matter the cost.

She struck Ego like a harpoon, stabbing into his upper hemisphere without mercy. The Living Planet tilted back first from shock, then from unimagined pain. As one of the oldest living creatures in the universe, Ego had never experienced something that actually threatened his physical form in such a way. The upper portion of his face was smashed open, which meant an entire quadrant of himself had been obliterated. He screamed loud enough to cause tremors to rumble throughout the continents across the remainder of his body. A burning white light flared in the gigantic crater for a few moments before slowly dying down, its pink essence slowly diminishing.

Ego had survived, but barely. Where his eye had once been formed there was now a gaping hole. It appeared as if something had ripped a chunk of the Living Planet entirely out, leaving the globe that was his body ruptured.

It was easily the greatest blow ever struck against Ego, but it had come at a cost. Now not just one of the heroes' number had been take from them, but an additional one was gone as well.

The Silver Surfer approached Beta Ray Bill and the two Captains with Moondragon again sitting on the tip of his board. The reflective skin of the Surfer, once appearing polished and near perfection, now seemed dulled from the harsh battle they had underwent. A small crack ran up the side of his torso, which he held a hand over.

“This monster must be stopped,” was all the Surfer could manage to say.

“The Dire Wraiths won't keep us from him anymore,” Moondragon added. Her own green armor was tarnished and worn. “We wiped out the last of them, but I fear that we are too late to help save our friends.”

Ego looked just as furious as before and with the added destruction of his face he looked even more malicious. He drifted toward them at a growing rate, intent on finishing off the last of his opposition.

A circle formed behind him in space, which quickly filled in to create a humongous tear in the fabric of reality. Ego paused and spun on his axis to look at the portal that had been created, ready for whatever new foe would dare challenge him.

A giant foot nearly as large as Ego himself stepped out of the portal, planting itself on the nothingness of space. The rest of the giant's body quickly came through, revealing the glory that was a Celestial. The titans of the universe, strangers to nearly the entire cosmos, began to funnel out of the portal and surround the wounded Ego.

The first raised its hand, stretching its fingers out toward Ego. "You would dare?" Ego spat out contemptuously. "Are you so desperate and fearful of me that you must engage me directly now?"

The titan remained stoic, but its intent was clear. Invisible energy hummed to life between its lumbering fingers, noticeable only by the sheer presence of new force pressing against them all. The heroes watched in amazement as all seven of the Celestials made similar motions, apparently engaging the enemy in their own way.

"I am Ego! I am master of all and subject to no one! You are arrogant as always, content to sit back and do nothing while I engage myself in your imposed war. How dare you enter the conflict now! Was I unworthy of your notice before? Am I only now marked as an equal?"

The Celestials said nothing in return, letting their body language speak for them. The energy humming between them condensed together and entered Ego through the wound that weighed the Living Planet down. What was left of his face contorted in rage as the Celestial's power began to eat him from the inside out. Ego let out a death cry as his outer crust cracked and broke away, literally breaking him into pieces.

With a righteous explosion, Ego was shattered and finally destroyed. The watching heroes were bowled over, held barely in place by the efforts of Beta Ray Bill and his warhammer. The twin Captains awoke upon being shaken by the rioting shockwave, instantly seemed off from the deadly vacuum around them by their own auras. The opened their eyes just in time to see the last of Ego's huge body be vaporized by the Celestial's power.

Then, just as suddenly as reality had been shaken by the explosion, the stark stillness of space returned to its hollow silence.

"What just happened?" Genis-Vell demanded. "Are those seriously Celestials? We don't have to fight them, do we?"

"No," Norrin Radd answered. "No, Marvel. I think our conflict is finally at an end."

"Where in Titan have they been all this time if that was all they had to do then?" Genis proclaimed. "Would have been nice if they had showed up a little earlier!"

Steve Rogers looked at the towering giants and said, "You're right."

Moondragon looked at the revived Captain Universe, the Uni Power freshly brimming over his costume. “Be careful, Captain. It is unwise to challenge the Celestials on matters of conduct.”

“Even still, they’ve got some explaining to do.”

Captain Universe drifted away from the others and approached the closest Celestial. They all looked toward him, which was typically more notice than they ever gave anything. He didn’t say anything, but merely hovered in the center of their attention with his arms crossed. Then something happened that Steve Rogers never thought possible.

The Uni Power lanced out and connected with one of the Celestial’s foreheads, latching the Captain’s consciousness with that of the giant. There would be no way he could describe the experience to his fellow Avengers save that no words were spoken. Memories passed from the Celestial to the Captain in a fleeting moment before the connection was broken and Steve Rogers was left heaving.

The Celestials turned one by one and stepped back into the portal they had ripped open, and simply left.

“Captain!” Beta Ray screamed as the others swarmed around him. “Are you okay?”

Captain Universe struggled to catch his breath on the oxygen being supplied to him through his aura. “Fine,” he finally blurted out. “I...I understand what we’re been caught up in. The Celestials...Ego was trying to destroy them in the only way he knew how.”

“I don’t understand,” Moondragon said. “What did Earth have to do with his little feud?”

“Our home was much more than a place,” the Captain answered as he drew upon the information forced into his mind. Without the protection of the Uni Power he might not have survived the transfer. “It was an egg. More appropriately, there was a Celestial seed laying dormant deep in the Earth’s core. Ego destroyed the Earth to kill one of them, the unborn Celestial that was rooted inside the planet.”

The heroes floated in silence, shocked by the revelation. Earth had been home to all of them at one time or another and its memory now seemed somehow tainted by the implication that it had been an orbiting fetus. After a moment of allowing the information to sink in, Captain Universe continued to speak.

“Ego’s hatred of the Celestials ran so deep that the only way he could attack them and gain their notice was to do something so drastic. They finally intervened when we had taken up the challenge, appearing when they did because only after Aleta’s sacrifice could they actually kill Ego. Without her final blow rupturing his crust, they couldn’t assure his death.”

“So that’s it then?” Genis blurted out. “We lose a planet, not to mention two of our own out here, and they just show up at the last minute and take off?”

“The Celestials are known for their mysterious intent,” the Surfer answered. “I doubt they’ll ever see fit to provide a concept we deem as justice. Their interference in other races runs deep as I’ve seen in my travels.”

“They haven’t left us completely alone,” Captain Universe said as he gazed off into the void of space. “The last thing they told me before leaving was that they had provided us with a sanctuary. Regroup, Avengers. We have one last stop to make.”

Earth, once a small dot amongst the stars and a place of undeniable potential, would never be recovered. The laws of the universe typically saw to it that matter could never be fully destroyed; only reformed. But with the unique properties of the ultimate nullifier the renowned planet would never be reconstituted again. Despite the wishes of the remaining protectors of Earth, it was gone forever.

The Celestials did remain true to their word, however, providing the heroes with sanctity. It would never be a replacement for their lost home, but just as the Earth had served as a beacon of hope throughout the galaxy, so too would the floating satellite named rightfully “Terra Firma.”

Larger than a moon, the spaceship Terra Firma rested comfortably in the exact position where the Earth had once sat. It’s long and slender hull gleamed in the reflecting rays of the sun, which it orbited just as Earth had. Empowered by Celestial technology, the satellite housed a plethora of information gathered from the known reaches of space, providing all that was necessary to be a new home for lost souls.

A lone figure stood looking through the windows on the bridge of the huge vessel. His facemask was pulled back, revealing a strong jaw and blonde hair. Steve Rogers stared into the depths of space, watching the twinkling stars that had once seemed so far away. He saw Norrin Radd float near the base of the ship on his glistening board, looking over the impressive hull that contained the ship’s atmosphere. Everyone was keeping busy, admiring or inspecting their new home.

“Captain,” Beta Ray said behind him. Steve turned to face his comrade, pulling his gaze away from the distant nothingness and focusing on the interior of their craft. “I’ve finished evaluating the Terra Firma’s defensive capabilities,” Bill continued. “It will serve as a fine home and base. Any who come to us in need of retribute will have no problem finding accommodations.”

“The Terra Firma will stand for what the Avengers stood for, serving as a new light to the universe. I hope you’re in for the long haul, son, because we’re the last of the Avengers. We have a big job ahead of us.”

“I believe Moondragon has made the arrangements for the memorials as well, Captain.” Beta Ray hung his head slightly before continuing. “Also, Genis surmised that the use of the equipment on level three should be adequate to open a temporal portal large enough to aim a communication laser through. With hope we’ll be able to locate the Guardians that Aleta made mention of.”

“We’ll find them, son. Don’t worry. We’ll make sure that her death is honored by those that new her.”

Beta Ray nodded before returning to his post. The station, while vastly automated by the Celestial technology that ran it, was still a place of wonder that needed to be understood. The Captain had no doubt that their fledgling team would be up to the task.

The Captain regarded their situation, acknowledging silently once more just how difficult the road laid out before them was going to be. Having led groups of powerful titans into battle was something he was used to, but it had always been as a symbol, never as a near omnipotent being. He believed that many had followed him because of his conviction and ability to inspire others, but now that the Uni Power had chosen him as its last host for some reason he began to feel doubt. His relative humility simply wasn’t accustomed to such a large balancing act. Maybe that was why the Uni Power had picked him in the first place.

Genis had approached him not long after they boarded the Terra Firma, informing Steve Rogers that he would be relinquishing the title of Captain from his name. He had said while he respected his father’s memory that it was time to move on and look to the future, and that the ship should only have one captain. It was odd, but Steve respected the Kree’s decision. It was just another example of how the others regarded him.

The Terra Firma drifted through space, locked into its orbit around the sun. They knew that it would never be able to take the place of their lost world, but as the Captain remembered why Starhawk had come to them in the first place, to ensure that the future would survive, he realized that all that was needed to even fill a sliver of that void was time.

As long as there was a need for them, the Avengers would stand watch.

THE END